

# BARON FRIEDRICH VON STEUBEN

## Gay Prussian American Revolution Military Strategist (1730-1794)



The United States might never have become a nation were it not for the services of one particular gay general in the first difficult years of the American Revolution. In 1777, the rebellion was going badly. Thirteen disparate and mutually suspicious colonies were not yet one unified and disciplined force. The army desperately needed training and, in Paris, Benjamin Franklin found the one man he believed could save them: Baron Friedrich von Steuben. Steuben was a particularly valuable aide to the greatest military genius of his era, King Frederick II of Prussia. Steuben's acceptance in Frederick's all-male court was the first historical suggestion of his homosexuality as Frederick was Europe's most notorious gay ruler at the time. Though it is unknown whether Benjamin Franklin knew of Steuben's homosexuality, he was convinced that the Prussian penchant for order and discipline was precisely what the American forces needed to prevail in their uphill fight against the well-trained British army. At first Steuben declined Franklin's entreaties. But when it became clear the Prussian clergy intended to prosecute him for homosexual activities the pending scandal proved a convincing argument for him to accept Franklin's offer. Since the reason for Steuben's self-imposed exile did not become widely known until after the Revolutionary War, it is unlikely the Americans were aware of it when Franklin concluded his negotiations with Steuben. Since the Continental Congress was unable to pay for even Steuben's travel expenses, let alone a salary for his services, the French government secretly agreed that it would compensate him. Steuben arrived in America in the company of a handsome 17-year-old French nobleman who served as his secretary and translator. Unfortunately, his teenage protégé quickly proved so ignorant of military ways that he was an inept interpreter. General George Washington intervened by assigning two French-speaking colonels from his own staff – the 20-year-old Alexander Hamilton and the 24-year-old John Laurens – to assist Steuben. The assignment proved prescient in that Hamilton and Laurens have been surmised by historians to have been lovers. After his initial review of the troops presented to him, Steuben set about writing a drill book and Washington ordered 100 top soldiers selected from the infantry to form a model training brigade. The uniform drills of the Continental Army began on the morning of March 19, 1778. Steuben led them himself – a fact that greatly impressed the enlisted men who saw him not as an effete European adventurer, but as a military man who was going to win battles. Three days after the first drills were performed a duly-impressed George Washington ordered Steuben's training be extended to his entire command. Five weeks after the first drill Washington appointed Steuben the first Inspector General of the Army. A year later Congress enacted his "Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States." In 1780 he received his coveted field appointment as a division commander in the war's final siege at Yorktown. Steuben's impact on the Revolutionary cause was incalculable. Indeed, some historians have counted Steuben, along with General Washington himself, as the only two men whose services were "indispensible" to the success of the Revolution.

## Lesson Plan

### Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: What do you know about Baron Friedrich Von Steuben?
2. Read the biographical information on the plaque and the information at [http://legacyprojectchicago.org/Von\\_Steuben.html](http://legacyprojectchicago.org/Von_Steuben.html)
3. Group Discussion: Describe the contents of the drill book Von Steuben created for the troops during the American Revolution. Read this link at [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Revolutionary\\_War\\_Drill\\_Manual](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Revolutionary_War_Drill_Manual)
4. Extend knowledge: How do the regulations of his time for the military adapt to the present standards?

### Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Describe your understanding of being gay in the military today.
2. Website Investigation: Go to <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced> and search for another LGBTQ military figure and describe any similarities or differences in comparison to Von Steuben.
3. Discuss your reactions to the following "Why America Owes Its Existence and Military to a Gay Man" at [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/american-military-history\\_b\\_1606530](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/american-military-history_b_1606530)

### Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Describe how Von Steuben rose to such prominence in his military career in America. View <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/baron-von-steuben-180963048/>
2. At the dawn of the American Revolution, Von Steuben created the training program for the military. Review [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Revolutionary\\_War\\_Drill\\_Manual](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Revolutionary_War_Drill_Manual) and describe the components of his training methods. In your opinion, how/why did these particular training exercises transform regular citizens into America's first official military force?
3. Von Steuben also forged close relationships with other men. Review <https://www.history.com/news/openly-gay-revolutionary-war-hero-friedrich-von-steuben> and describe what you have learned.

### Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Von Steuben has been recognized as being the "Father of the Military". Describe the type of recognition in [http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2012/10/baron\\_von\\_steuben\\_washingtons\\_dont\\_ask\\_dont\\_tell\\_c.php](http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2012/10/baron_von_steuben_washingtons_dont_ask_dont_tell_c.php)
2. Given the U.S. military's historic position on gay people serving prior to the ban being lifted in 2011, would you advocate for others to know that Von Steuben was gay? Why or why not?