



Baron Johannes De Kalb
Courtesy Gerard Wm. Wittstadt

MAJOR GENERAL THE BARON JOHANNES DE KALB: A FORGOTTEN MARYLAND PATRIOT

Following the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord, the Continental Congress created the Committee of Secret Correspondence¹ and commissioned Silas Deane, Arthur Lee and Benjamin Franklin as its first Ministers.² Deane was ordered to France on March 3, 1776, to plead for help in the form of arms and financial assistance. He was also to seek an alliance with France. His arrival in France was to be discreet, and his welcome was therefore informal.³ Nevertheless, the responses in France to his requests were overwhelming. On March 13, 1777, just six days before Baron Johannes de Kalb left France for America, the Continental Congress, overrun with applicants from France for military appointments, directed the Committee of Secret Correspondence by resolution to discourage all "gentlemen of France" from coming to America with expectation of employment in the military service, unless they were masters of the English language and had the best recommendations.

On November 7, 1776, Deane was introduced to Baron de Kalb by Comte de Broglie, a close friend of King Louis XIV and a relative of the Marquis de Lafayette.⁴ On December 1, 1776, Deane contracted with the Baron and granted him the military grade of Major General in the Continental Army. On December 7, 1776, through the efforts of Baron de Kalb, Lafayette was granted the military grade of Major General in the Continental Army. Deane executed that contract as well. It should be emphasized that these contracts were executed prior to March 13, 1777, and were therefore not in violation of the resolution of the Continental Congress. Following the execution of the contracts, Deane wrote to Congress and stated that he had engaged the Baron and Lafayette even though he recognized that he was not specifically empowered by Congress to appoint officers. Deane described the Baron as one of the bravest and most skillful officers in France.⁵ On March 19, 1777, on the strength

of their contract with Deane, the Baron, Lafayette, and a dozen other French military gentlemen of noble rank, all with contracts for ranks of colonel or less, left France on the *Victoria*, a vessel owned by Lafayette. They arrived in North America on June 15, 1777, weighing anchor in the South Inlet, near Charleston, South Carolina.

The Baron's party journeyed to Philadelphia and arrived there on July 27, 1777. It was Sunday and the Continental Congress was not in session. Nevertheless, they were able to deliver their letters of recommendations and copies of their contracts to John Hancock, then the President of the Continental Congress. The following morning, the party was met in the streets in front of Independence Hall by Robert Morris and James Lovell, members of Congress. They were informed by Lovell that Deane had exceeded his authority and that although there was a need in 1776 for foreign military leaders, that was not the situation in 1777. He stated that it seemed that French officers had a great fancy to enter the Continental service without being invited. Morris and Lovell left the Baron's party in the street with the further advisement that they would in due course, hear from Congress regarding their "offers" to serve as officers in the Continental Army. The Baron at a later date described this reception as more of a dismissal than a welcome. Lafayette described the reception as being "received like dogs at a game of ninepins".⁶

By a resolution, dated September 8, 1777, the Continental Congress awarded Lafayette the rank of Major General. Lafayette's high noble rank and his influence at the Court of Louis XVI had indeed impressed the Congress. Lafayette did, however, have to agree to serve without pay and without the promise of a command.⁷ By that same resolution, the "offers" of the Baron and the other French gentlemen were rescinded. The Baron was selected by the other French gentlemen to negotiate a settlement of their claims for

damages. They insisted that the Continental Congress had a legal obligation to honor Deane's contracts. The Baron also decided to express his own position separately to the Congress. He wrote a letter in English in which he insisted that Congress fulfill its part of the contract written by Deane. He emphasized his thirty-four years of military service in the French Army, serving lastly as a General.⁸ He stated that salary was not important⁹ but that the rank was essential. He indicated no jealousy whatsoever of Lafayette, but made it clear that he could not serve under his young friend's command, since the two of them came with the same promises and the same purposes. He mentioned two instances which offended him, the alleged incompetence of Deane by exceeding his authority and the rude treatment accorded him and his party by Lovell. He further stated that if Congress did not want his services, he was ready to return to France — naturally upon reimbursement of his expenses. He indicated that a law suit against Deane, and by implication against Congress, in France would not help the American cause. There seemed to be an uneasy feeling in Congress that such a suit would have merit and that it would prove to be an embarrassment to America.

Congress reconsidered its rejection of the Baron and by a resolution, dated September 15, 1777, offered him a Major Generalship in its army. The Congress' reversal of its previous action was due in large part to the favorable impression the Baron had made on various members of Congress with whom he had been negotiating in regard to his own claims and those of the other French gentlemen. His ability to speak English, French, and German as well as his brilliant military career in the French army set him substantially apart from the other French gentlemen. Even Lovell was impressed. In a letter to another member of Congress, he praised the Baron and described him as resembling General Washington in looks and manners. Lovell even expressed concern that it would be America's loss if the Baron now refused the Major Generalship.¹⁰ In another letter from a member of Congress, the Baron learned that

the Congress intended to date his commission back to November 7, 1776, the date Deane first met the Baron, so as to give him seniority over Lafayette.¹¹ The Baron accepted the appointment on September 18, 1777. He insisted that his aide de camp, Chevalier Dubuysson, be commissioned a Lieutenant Colonel and that his own appointment be dated the same as Lafayette's. He also insisted on a pension for his wife in the event of his death.

On October 13, 1777, the Baron was inducted in the American army and was cordially received by General Washington. He was eventually placed in command of a division that consisted in part of the Maryland Line.

The Nobility of the Baron

De Kalb was born on June 29, 1721, in Hüttendorf, a village a few miles northwest of Nuremberg in central Bavaria, Germany. His parents were Johann Leonard Kalb and Margaretha, née Seitz.

It is believed that the Baron left Hüttendorf in his mid-teens to join the French Army. Records reflect that in 1743 he was serving as a Lieutenant in a German-staffed infantry regiment of France named Löwendel in the area of Nuremberg. For many years it was common belief in America that the Baron had been born into a noble family which had settled centuries earlier in the Franconia section of Germany, but that belief can now be discarded. His parents were freeholders, not aristocrats. That is not to say, however, that the Baron was not later a member of the nobility or that he merely assumed the title of "Baron" to facilitate his advancement in the French Army or his appointment to the Continental Army. He did acquire the title "Chevalier"¹² and the right to the use of "de" in front of his last name when, in 1763, King Louis XVI bestowed on him the Order of Military Merit.¹³ This award came in recognition of his outstanding bravery in the Battle of Wilhelmstal during the course of the Seven Year War. Thus, for more than a decade before the Baron was appointed a Major General in the American Army, he was a

member of the French nobility. The Baron married Anne Elizabeth Emile van Robais on April 10, 1764. She was the daughter of Peter van Robais, an aristocrat and a wealthy cloth manufacturer in Paris, who in turn was the son of a prominent citizen of Holland, who had settled in France and established a large cloth factory. The factory prospered and proved to be so successful that King Louis XIV awarded the family with a patent of nobility. In fact, the Baron's eldest son, Frederic de Kalb, died a victim of the guillotine during the French Revolution partly because of his nobility. Even later, descendants of the Baron enjoyed the privileges of nobility. The Baron's grand-daughter, Leonore de Kalb married Vicomte d'Abzac and his grandniece, Kuni-gunda Egelseer of Hüttendorf, married Johann Andreas Wirtstadt, a direct descendant of one of the oldest aristocratic families of Franconia.¹⁴ Although no documentation can be found, it is generally believed by descendants of the Baron that the baronage was an award for his acts of gallantry in the French army. In fact, no contemporary of the Baron, including the Comte de Broglie, the Marquis de Lafayette, and the French gentlemen who served with him, ever challenged the Baron's right to the title. Many of these gentlemen had noble titles of their own and knew of the various levels of nobility. Many historical works on the French army give examples of individuals who enlisted in the French army, rose to high ranks, and were subsequently awarded with patents of nobility. Some historians believe that France had accorded de Kalb the title of "Baron". These facts suggest a valid right to the title. Those who speak of the Baron as the "so-called Baron" or the "self-styled Baron" and otherwise allude to the title as a suggestion of dishonesty must bear the burden of proving that the title was not properly received.

Fighting with the Maryland Line

Although Baron de Kalb longed for a chance to gain glory, he was in the service of the Continental Army for nearly three years before he even so much as heard a gun go off. In the spring of 1780, when the British forces

were moving from New York south to Charleston, South Carolina, and it was obvious that the theatre of war was moving south, General Washington ordered Baron de Kalb to make preparation to move his division of Maryland and Delaware troops south to aid the Army of the South under the command of General Benjamin Lincoln. De Kalb's division, which was considered one of the best trained, was to be strengthened by the infantry and cavalry of the French "Armand Legion", commanded by Marquis de la Rouere, as well as by the militias from various southern colonies. When De Kalb arrived in Petersburg, Virginia, he was informed of the surrender of General Lincoln on May 12, 1780. General Washington had designated De Kalb the new Commander of the Army of the South. The surrender of General Lincoln's forces was judged by Congress to be one of the worst disasters of the war. On July 25th, Congress, in haste and without consulting with General Washington, designated General Horatio Gates to replace General de Kalb as Commander of the Army of the South. This was done with full knowledge that General Gates did not enjoy the complete confidence of General Washington. Baron de Kalb moved his division to Hillsboro, North Carolina. His immediate subordinate officers were General William Smallwood and General Mordecai Gist.

Disregarding the advice of de Kalb and others who knew local conditions, General Gates ordered the American Army to meet the British Army. Gates insisted on taking a route which could not supply the men or their horses with sufficient and proper food. The route led through desolate country, and the diet of the troops during their march to the enemy consisted of green fruit and unripened corn. This, as it turned out, had an ill effect. When the American Army met the British forces under the command of Lord Charles Cornwallis on August 16, 1780, a large number of the men and their horses were unfit for battle. The First Maryland Brigade was under the immediate command of General Gist and the Second Maryland Brigade was under the immediate command of General Smallwood.

Baron de Kalb, well seconded by General Gist, remained in the front lines of the First Maryland Brigade.

When the two forces met, the British, after firing only one volley, rushed forward in a bayonet attack. The militiamen that joined De Kalb's forces from the South had never been under fire and had not been trained in the use of the bayonets. Weak and terrified as they were, they cast away their muskets and ran for their lives. This action caused the French Legion also to retreat. General Gates was swept away in the rout of the militiamen and he did not stop his retreat until he reached Charlotte, some 60 miles from the battlefield. The Maryland Line, supported by the Delaware troops, was thrown into battle against the overwhelming British forces. De Kalb's troops engaged the British hotly. Not only did his troops hold the British off, but on several occasions, they broke through the British line and captured prisoners. De Kalb's troops were winning the fight initially and thought that the entire battle was going as well. De Kalb did not know of Gates' retreat or of the retreat of the rest of the Southern Army. He never received orders from General Gates to retreat, so his troops fought on. Indeed, it has been said that never had troops shown greater courage than those men from Maryland and Delaware. With the same unflinching resistance that the Maryland Line had shown at the Battle of Long Island in 1776, the Maryland Line and the Delaware troops contended with the superior force of the enemy in the summer of 1780.

De Kalb's horse was shot from under him and while he was directing the movement of his troops on foot, his head was laid open by a sabre stroke. Cornwallis, with a force nearly four times greater than De Kalb's surrounded De Kalb's forces, but De Kalb led his troops through the enemy's ranks. Finally, bleeding from eleven wounds, General de Kalb fell. His troops broke up and scattered for the woodlands and swamps; the battle came to an end. Chevalier Dubuysson threw himself on top of his General's battered body. Some of the enemy immediately pick up De Kalb, propped him against a wagon, and started to strip the

dying Baron of his uniform. There he stood, bleeding to death, when Cornwallis came by and rescued him from the despoilers. Cornwallis caused him to be cared for by the British surgeons. De Kalb died three days later. He was buried with military honors by his victorious adversaries. Before his death, he told the British officers who were consoling him in his misfortune, "I thank you for your generous sympathy, but I die the death I always prayed for — the death of a soldier fighting for the rights of man."¹⁵ Many years later, General Washington visited the grave of the Baron in Camden. After gazing sadly, he exclaimed, "So here lies the brave de Kalb, the generous stranger who came from a distant land to fight our battles and water with his blood the tree of liberty."

A Forgotten Maryland Patriot

Notwithstanding the fact that Baron de Kalb has been described as one of the most skillful and bravest soldiers in the American Revolutionary War and that he was the Commanding General of the Maryland Line, he seems to have been largely neglected by historians and has thus become a forgotten American hero.¹⁶ Perhaps as well as an unsung Maryland patriot The Baron de Kalb has been assigned a relatively insignificant place in the history of our country. Very few places have been named in his honor and even fewer monuments have been erected in his memory. It seems that he has always stood in the shadows of those generals who survived the Revolutionary War. Few Americans today recognize his name. Even fewer are familiar with any significant facts relating to his contributions to the American cause. Some historians will argue that his obscurity is undoubtedly the result of the anti-German feelings that existed in this country for many years flowing from Germany's position in the first and second world wars and, as a consequence, from the inability of German ethnic groups to have their voices heard for those many years. Even if this argument is valid, his obscurity must be based also on other reasons because the neglect existed even before World War I.

Only twice have historians been induced to write a serious treatise of his life. It was more than eighty years after his death before his first biography was written. This first work was written not in America but in Germany. In 1862, in Stuttgart, Friedrich Kapp authored *Das Leben des amerikanischen Generals Johann von Kalb*. This work was later translated into English and published first privately (1870) and then publicly (1884) in New York, under the title *The Life of John Kalb*. A more comprehensive study entitled *General de Kalb, Lafayette's Mentor* was written many years later by A. E. Zucker (see note 6).

In Camden, South Carolina, where the Baron is buried, his grave was marked for nearly half a century by nothing more than a tree. It was not until 1825, through the efforts of the citizens of Camden, that a monument was erected over his grave. General Lafayette laid the cornerstone for this monument on a journal through the United States. The inscription on this monument reads in part, "Here lie the remains of Baron de Kalb, a German by birth, but in principle a citizen of the world."

On October 14, 1780, the Continental Congress passed a resolution that decreed that a federal monument was to be erected to the memory of the Baron in the City of Annapolis. It is painful to know that this resolution was not carried into effect for well over one-hundred years. In 1886, on the anniversary of the Battle of Camden, an impressive larger-than-life-size bronze statue was unveiled and dedicated on the grounds of the State House in Annapolis.

At the time of the death of the Baron, there were certain arrears of pay due him. The family of the Baron petitioned the Congress for years for liquidation of their claims. Although these claims proved to be just even when subjected to the severest scrutiny, they were passed over from session to session. Finally, in 1855, seventy-five years after his death, an Act of Congress was passed authorizing the payment of \$66,090.67 to the descendants of the Baron de Kalb for his services and his ultimate sacrifice.

It was not until 1960 that any consideration

was given to memorializing the birthplace of the Baron. On May 22, 1960, in the City of New York, the Federation of American Citizens of German Descent gave tribute on "Deutschen Tag" to the Baron. Later, on July 9, 1960, in Huettendorf, the Federation dedicated a plaque to the memory of the Baron on the house that is now located on the site where he was born.

Portraits of the Baron can be found in Independence Hall in Philadelphia and in the museum of the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. The Philadelphia portrait was painted by Charles Wilson Peale; the Baltimore portrait is by James Lambin.

There are nine towns and villages in the United States named De Kalb. None are in Maryland. There are also six counties that bear his name. They are located in Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri and Tennessee. De Kalb, Illinois, is the only city named after him. In some major cities in the United States, there are streets named in memory of the Baron. Unfortunately none can be found in Maryland.

While it is incumbent upon every American to preserve the memory of those eminent Europeans who, like De Kalb, left their families and their homes to fight the battle for American liberty, it is particularly desirable that we of German descent here in Maryland should know and duly honor the memory of Baron De Kalb, who gave his life while leading the Maryland Line during our war of independence.

I am pleased to say that the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland is one organization which has not neglected nor forgotten the Baron de Kalb. On the occasion of the dedication of the De Kalb statue in Annapolis in 1886, the newly-founded Society made its first public appearance and took part in the festivities.¹⁷

In addition, the Society has published more articles relating to the Baron than any other publication.¹⁸

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¹The foreign affairs of the United States during the period of the Continental Congress were under the direction of Congress. In November 1775, seven months before the Declaration of Independence, a secret committee was appointed to maintain foreign contacts.

²The highest ranking officer in the American diplomatic service up to 1893 was a Minister. In 1893, Congress created the higher rank of Ambassador.

³Official reception of diplomatic representatives is regarded as formal recognition of the country which they represent. France, which was at peace with England, did not want to incur the wrath of England's might by formally receiving Dean. France had lost the Seven Years War (French and Indian War) and lost many of its holdings in North America to England. France was thirsting for revenge and was therefore eager to inflame the quarrel between England and its American colonies.

⁴Lafayette was a recently-married youth of nineteen years, a young man of high noble rank and enormous wealth. His military experience consisted of a summer of maneuvers without actually being in combat. He could not obtain his family's consent to go to America unless he went as a general officer.

⁵Lord Stormond, the English Minister to France, was informed by his spies that a prominent and experienced officer was being sent to America. In a letter to Lord Weymouth, Stormond describes the Baron as an officer of distinction and a man of ability.

⁶Adolf E. Zucker, *General de Kalb: Lafayette's Mentor* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1966), 132.

⁷Lafayette contributed over two hundred thousand (\$200,000.00) dollars of his own wealth to the Continental Army, but never requested repayment.

⁸The Baron was serving as an officer in the French Army as early as 1743. He attained the rank of Brigadier in the French Colonial Army. It has been suggested by historians that the Baron's further advancement in the French Army was blocked because of his Protestant faith and his German birth.

⁹The Baron's wealth was considered to be substantial.

The value of his properties and those of his wife amounted to approximately half a million francs. He owned the Chateau Milon-la-Chapelle, situated on spacious grounds outside of Versailles. It is still today owned by his descendants. He also owned a substantial mansion in Courbevoye, a suburb of Paris.

¹⁰Letter, dated September 17, 1777, to William Whipple.

¹¹Letter, dated October 9, 1777, from Henry Laurens.

¹²A chevalier is equivalent to a knight.

¹³This award was the highest honor that the King of France could bestow on a non-Catholic.

¹⁴The Wittstadt/von Wittstadt family can trace its ancestry to the sixth century. It includes among its descendants four Prince-Bishops of Würzburg.

¹⁵Zucker, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

¹⁶In the summer of 1980, many descendants of Baron de Kalb commemorated the anniversary of his death by attending a family reunion at Milon-la-Chapelle in France and later at his place of birth in Hünendorf, Germany. These and other descendants living in France, Germany and the United States strongly feel that American history has neglected their ancestor.

¹⁷R. Ph. Henninghausen, "The Report of the Secretary," *Report 1* (1887), p. 21.

¹⁸Dieter Cunz, "De Kalb and Maryland," *Report*, 20 (1942), 18-22; A. E. Zucker, "An Interesting Baron de Kalb Letter," *Report 31* (1963), p. 59-62.