

DEKALB AND MARYLAND

By DIETER CUNZ

The splendid and distinguished figure of General Steuben has always placed the former peasant boy and pseudo-aristocrat, Johann DeKalb, a bit in the shade. Only rarely has he induced historians to write his life. As late as eighty years after his death there appeared the first well-rounded biography of DeKalb written by one of the most famous "forty-eighters," Friedrich Kapp. His *Leben des Amerikanischen Generals Johann Kalb* appeared in 1862 in Stuttgart. It was translated into English and published in New York. At first (1870) privately published, then publically (1884) under the title *The Life of John Kalb*. Up to the present day this is the only monograph of DeKalb. To be sure, DeKalb's name appeared in all general works on the Germans in America; the most important epoch of his life was treated in a French publication by Ludovic de Colleville, *Les Missions Secrètes du Général-Major Baron de Kalb et son Role dans la Guerre de l'Independence Americaine* (Paris 1885). Aside from Kapp's book there has not been down to the present day a complete biography of DeKalb. It would certainly seem to be a worth while task for an historian to gather into a new modern presentation all the material that has been collected in the last eighty years since Kapp's first effort.¹

The man who later in life became known as Baron DeKalb was born June 29, 1721, simply as Johann Kalb, son of a peasant at Huettendorf not far from Bayreuth. He did not receive more than the customary elementary education, became a waiter and as such he went off into foreign

countries. From this period there is no trace of him whatever until in the year 1743 he bobs up as Jean de Kalb and as a lieutenant in the French infantry regiment, Loewendal. Nothing whatever justified him in assuming the title of nobility—except perhaps the prejudice of the military class which barred an army career to every bourgeois, or at least made it very difficult. His title of nobility rested on a very weak and uncertain foundation. All the more solid and thorough, however, was DeKalb's knowledge of mathematics and strategy; rarer too were his gifts for army organization and his talent for foreign languages. By these means his career in the French army progressed very rapidly. After the year 1764 he retired for some time from military life but his energy and restless temperament did not permit him to remain idle for long. Therefore in 1767 he undertook a diplomatic mission to America in order to report on the happenings in the British colonies. Upon his return to France he resumed his old military career and ended his services in the French army as brigadier general, when in the year 1776 he sailed for America for the second time, on this occasion to place himself at the disposal of the cause of the American Revolution.

An American representative in France, Silas Deane, had promised him the rank of a major general in the American army, thereby exceeding his prerogatives because Congress hesitated for considerable time to make good this promise. However, since it wished to assure itself of the services of DeKalb, he was finally ap-

¹ At the beginning of this century there appeared a small popular biography of DeKalb written for juvenile readers, Percy K. Fitzhugh, *The Story of General Johann DeKalb* (New York, 1906), which, however, makes no claim whatever to scientific treatment.

pointed major general and as such in the year 1777 DeKalb entered the American army. He commanded a division of New England regiments, took part in the military operations in the vicinity of Philadelphia during the autumn of 1777, and spent the winter in camp at Valley Forge. An opportunity for special distinction, however, was not given him. Only as late as April 1780 he was accorded his first and final important mission: he was to relieve Charleston, South Carolina, which at that time was being besieged by the British. He was placed in command of the Maryland Line, consisting of Maryland and Delaware troops, and in the summer of 1780 he moved to the South with this command.²

The entire expedition from its very inception was an unfortunate and hopeless undertaking. No one knew this better than DeKalb; everything was lacking: soldiers, munitions, provisions—and above all, a good supreme command. General Gates, who directed the entire military operations of the southern division, was an incapable soldier and a stubborn and incompetent person. Without due preparations and in great haste he sent his troops on August 16, 1780 forward to attack Camden, S. C. (very much against DeKalb's advice). Exactly what DeKalb had prophesied took place; the British won a splendid victory, the Maryland Line was put to flight with heavy losses and DeKalb himself became a prisoner of the British and died from wounds August 19 in Camden.

Nonetheless, the name of DeKalb did not disappear from American politics with this date. Congress had not made the payments for DeKalb's stipulated pay and soon afterward his heirs pressed their demands.³ The demands which DeKalb's widow made in 1784 were refuted because of a

technicality. However, in 1819, the grandchildren of DeKalb came forward with similar demands and asked for half-pay for seven years, in addition to the landgrant decreed for all Revolutionary generals to which they were entitled according to an act of Congress. The second half of this demand was immediately met when in 1822 the heirs were accorded a strip of land in the then military district of Ohio. The other part of their request, however, dragged on for thirty-six years until it was met in a satisfactory manner, when, after endless debate in Congress, the heirs of DeKalb in the year 1855 received a sum of \$66,000 in full settlement of all their demands. It is the merit of the senators and congressmen of Maryland and Delaware, whose troops fought under DeKalb, and of the congressmen of South Carolina, in which state DeKalb met his heroic death, that this final settlement was honorably achieved.

Side by side with the monetary affair, there ran through more than a full century the business of the official monument which Congress was to erect in honor of DeKalb.

It was through General Gates, who too late realized DeKalb's military ability, that Congress heard of the disaster in Camden. "Here I must be permitted to say how much I think is due to the Baron DeKalb," General Gates said in his letter to Congress, "and I am convinced Congress will declare to the world the high estimation they have for his memory and services." And in another letter to George Washington, "He was everything an excellent officer should be, and in the cause of the United States has sacrificed his life. Too much honor can not be paid by Congress to the memory of the Baron DeKalb." Accordingly, the Continental Congress in Philadelphia decreed,

²J. G. Keys: Baron DeKalb, *The Patriotic Marylander*, I (1915), 30 ff.—Christopher L. Ward, *The Delaware Continentals 1776-1783* (Wilmington, 1941), pp. 325 ff.

³DeKalb's adjutant, Du Baisson, tried in 1781 to obtain from the Maryland Legislature some aid for the General's widow, but nothing is reported regarding the result of this request. *Maryland Archives*, Vol. 47, pp. 131, 234.

October 14, 1780, that a monument be erected to the memory of the late Major General the Baron DeKalb in the City of Annapolis in the State of Maryland.⁴ The very inscription which the monument was to bear was proposed textually and accepted by Congress.

For the time being nothing was done beyond this decree. Current worries pushed the plan into the background. At the end of the war the treasury was empty and consequently for a long time no one gave thought to the monument of DeKalb in Annapolis.

On the spot in Camden where DeKalb had been buried there stood for a long time only a tree. At the beginning of the twenties in the nineteenth century, the inhabitants of Camden, particularly the Free Masons to whose society DeKalb had belonged, decided to erect a monument over his grave. General Lafayette on his journey through the United States in 1825 laid the foundation for this monument. The inscription read "Here lie the remains of Baron DeKalb, a German by birth, but in principle a citizen of the world."

This, however, was not yet the official monument which Congress had decided to erect to DeKalb in the city of Annapolis. It wasn't that it had been completely forgotten; during the forties and fifties there is frequent mention of it in the proceedings of Congress and of the legislature of Maryland. On the 28th of March, 1848, the Maryland Legislature repeated officially the Congressional decree of 1780. The senators and representatives were instructed by legislature to demand that Congress carry out this plan. Nevertheless, this effort of the legislature remained just as ineffectual as those of 1850 and 1855.⁵

In the year 1858 the Maryland Historical Society appeared on the scene.

In a memorial directed to the thirty-fifth Congress, they referred again to the decree of 1780.⁶ They continued further: "The adoption of this resolution by the members of that Congress could scarcely have been a mere expression of approbation of the gallantry of the Baron DeKalb, but carried with it, as must be supposed, the higher purpose of testifying their homage to his eminent service in an enduring form. . . . The omission to execute the resolution arose from the momentous exigencies of the public service. . . . After the adoption of the constitution of 1787, the whole mind of the statesmen of that day was directed to putting the new machinery into motion. . . . Now, however, all these impediments to its execution have ceased, and it would seem that no more appropriate period than the present can be found for discharging this long-neglected but no less sacred duty. . . . With these considerations, and with the knowledge that the resources of the country are of undoubted abundance, your memorialists would most earnestly, yet respectfully, pray that the patriotic resolution of 1780, directing the erection of a monument in gratitude to the zeal, services, and merit of the Baron DeKalb may be now executed."

Even this energetic appeal did not have the desired effect. The following decade, the period of the Civil War, brought other and more urgent demands. For many years no mention was made of DeKalb's monument.

Probably it was due to the various centennial celebrations of the great Revolutionary happenings that recalled the name of DeKalb. At the session of the Maryland Legislature in 1878 Col. J. Thomas Scharf, a member of the House of Delegates from Baltimore City who became well-known as a Maryland historian,

⁴ *Journal of the Continental Congress 1774-1789*, Vol. XVIII (Washington, 1910), pp. 849, 917, 923.

⁵ *Miscellaneous Documents* Printed by Order of the House of Representatives of the United States, Washington 1848, Documents No. 69—Washington 1859, Document No. 55.—*Miscellaneous Documents* Printed by Order of the Senate of the United States, Washington 1850, Document No. 92.

⁶ *Miscellaneous Documents*, House of Representatives, Washington 1858, Document Nr. 98.

introduced joint resolutions in the legislature requesting our representatives in Congress to secure an appropriation to carry out the original resolution of 1780. The resolutions were adopted and a bill was introduced in the United States Senate by Senator J. B. Groome appropriating \$10,000 to erect the monument.⁷ The bill finally became law in March 1883. In the year 1884 the question of the monument was repeatedly aired in both houses of the Maryland Legislature.⁸ A committee was appointed which was to confer with the United States authorities in Washington, and above all, with the Secretary of State, concerning DeKalb's monument. For some time the plan was to erect it on the campus of St. John's College, and on one occasion Baltimore was considered as its setting. A petition of a hundred citizens of Annapolis demanded that the state should purchase a suitable location in the city of Annapolis for this monument. All of these proposals were ignored for the legislature decided to cede to the Federal Government a bit of ground in the State House Circle in Annapolis in order that the monument might be erected there. This decision, which underlines the official character of the recognition of DeKalb, became final.⁹ Hereupon the erection of the monument was actually begun and it was unveiled on the anniversary of the battle of Camden, August 16, 1886.¹⁰ It bears the inscription: "Sacred to the memory of the Baron

DeKalb, Knight of the Royal Order of Military Merit, Brigadier of the Armies of France, and Major General in the service of the United States of America. Having served with honor and reputation for three years, he gave a last and glorious proof of his attachment to the liberties of mankind and the cause of America in the action near Camden in the State of South Carolina, on the sixteenth day of August, seventeen hundred and eighty, when leading on the troops of the Maryland and Delaware Lines against superior numbers, and animating them by his example to deeds of valor, he was pierced with many wounds, and on the nineteenth following expired, in the forty-eighth years of his age. The Congress of the United States of America, in gratitude to his zeal, services and merit, have erected this monument."

Obviously this inscription makes no reference whatsoever to DeKalb's German descent. This is explained by the fact that it is the original inscription which Congress had designed and accepted in 1780. At that time probably no one was aware of DeKalb's European origin. Few people of that time were at all interested and he himself very likely did not care to discuss his childhood and youth because of the improperly assumed title of nobility. This explains why the inscription on the monument at Annapolis, which to be sure was accepted in 1780 but which was inscribed only in 1886, makes no reference to the German origin of the general.¹¹

⁷*Journal of Proceedings* of the House of Delegates of Maryland, 1878, pp. 589, 666, 875.—*Journal of Proceedings* of the Senate, 1878, pp. 347, 368, 413.

⁸*Journal of Proceedings* of the Senate of Maryland 1884, pp. 46, 221, 240, 731, 761, 793, 826, 832, 858, 1038. *Journal of Proceedings* of the House of Delegates of Maryland 1884, pp. 463, 1255, 1280, 1347, 1453.

⁹This proposal was accepted in the Senate unanimously and in the House with fourteen votes to one.

¹⁰Programme of Ceremonies preserved in the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore. Cf. *Baltimore Sun*, August 14, 16, 17, 1886" Edward T. Schultz, *History of Freemasonry in Maryland*, Vol. IV (Baltimore 1888), pp. 324 ff. The monument was the work of a Baltimore sculptor of German descent, Ephraim Keyser, 1850-1937, who had studied in Germany and Italy (Appleton's *Cyclopedia of America*, New York 1887, III, 530 f.). At the dedication ceremonies in Annapolis, the speakers were the Secretary of State Thomas F. Bayard and Col. J. Thomas Scharf. The United German Singing Society of Baltimore took part in the festivities. On the occasion of this ceremony the newly founded Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland made their first public appearance (*First Report of the Society*, 1887, p. 21).

¹¹On the 16th of August, 1930, the 150th anniversary of the battle of Camden, the Sons of the American Revolution arranged a celebration in honor of DeKalb at the site of the monument. Cf. National Society, S. A. R. *Quarterly Bulletin*, October 1930, pp. 229 ff. The memorial address delivered by the president of the Maryland Society of the S. A. R., Mr. T. Scott Offutt, was published in the *Quarterly Bulletin of the S. A. R.*, October 1930, pp. 232 ff.

The historians may have neglected DeKalb. In the history of the American nation, however, he has a secure niche as one of the few Revolutionary generals who gave their life for the ideas of 1776.¹² In the state of Maryland, whose troops he led, no

other German has received such official distinction as the former peasant boy from Franconia, whose memory the American people has preserved in a monument erected "*In gratitude to the zeal, services; and merit of the Baron DeKalb.*"

CARL HEINRICH SCHNAUFFER:

Die Freiheit ist ein Diamant,
Der nie wie Glas zerschellt,
Wie oft er auch der zagen Hand
Des armen Volks entfällt.

Freedom is a diamond pure,
Not glass to break or shatter.
Though oft the folk with hand unsure
May let it fall, what matter?

Carl Heinrich Schnauffer, poet and journalist, liberal German refugee, well-known forty-eighter, born in Heimsheim, Germany (1823), died in Baltimore, Maryland (1854).—English translation of the stanza by Lois Zucker.

¹² DeKalb's name has been preserved in many other ways. There are today numerous DeKalb Streets in various American cities. In six states (Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee) there are DeKalb Counties. In Illinois there is also a City of DeKalb.