

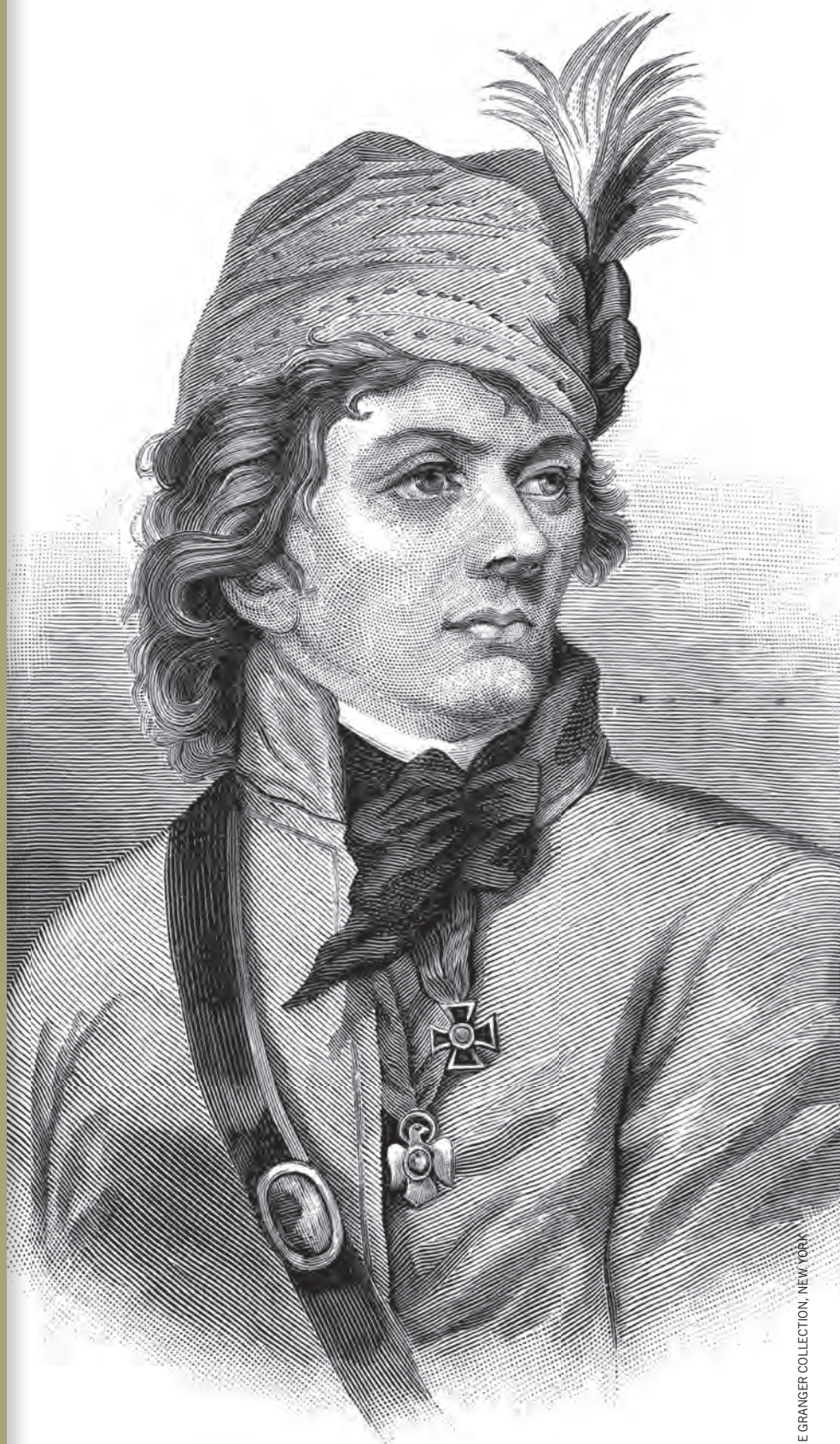


MASTER GARDENER OF WEST POINT

THADDEUS KOSCIUSZKO

by NANCY MANN JACKSON

FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS, the cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point, along with local volunteers and faculty members, have been restoring the campus garden overlooking the Hudson River. One of the oldest gardens in the United States, it was built in 1778 by Thaddeus Kosciuszko, the chief engineer commissioned by General George Washington to design and build the fortifications at West Point during the Revolution. Although he was on a tight deadline to design and build fortifications to protect the Colonies' supply chain along the Hudson River, Kosciuszko felt it was important to create a quiet place for "rest and repose," so he made the garden a priority.





© COURTESY OF KOSCIUSZKO'S
GARDEN AT WEST POINT

With his own hands, Kosciuszko built garden steps, a circle of rocks planted with flowers that reminded him of his Polish homeland, and a fountain built upon a natural spring. “The garden represented for this military man a place of contemplation in the midst of great pressure and chaos,” says Betsey Blakeslee, Ph.D., volunteer project manager for the restoration of Kosciuszko’s Garden at West Point. “And it has been used that way ever since by cadets and officers.”

While Kosciuszko’s Garden has been restored at various times over the past two centuries, it had fallen into disrepair in recent decades. For 20 years, erosion had blocked the garden’s connection to Flirtation Walk, a historic rocky foot trail that follows the bank of the Hudson River. “To have a

with The West Point Museum and the Department of Military History at the Academy. “Cadets, staff and faculty have their own ideas of what Kosciuszko’s Garden and Flirtation Walk mean to them, and there is no intent to take any of that away. The main goal of the renovations is the continued maintenance of the locations for the enjoyment of their visitors. Making the locations more inviting enables more people to share in their incredible story.”

Today, it’s not unusual to see cadets in the garden making phone calls, or to see professors and their students racing to hold class in the garden on sunny days, Blakeslee says. “Sometimes I go there in the early morning and see where someone has left cigars and an empty bottle of wine in the garden,” she says. “I think that’s neat, because it means the garden is being used again.”

While Kosciuszko’s Garden continues to provide respite for West Point cadets and officers, the garden



Left to right: View from grotto level, approximately 1870. • Cadet Flynn leads the recent restoration effort. • Cadets pitch in to clean up the garden.

place to sit uninterrupted and contemplate decisions, and to be connected with nature, was a very important function here at West Point that was being lost,” Blakeslee says.

So with the help of West Point cadets and others, Blakeslee has led a restoration that leaves the garden in full bloom, with fixtures repaired and the entire path of Flirtation Walk open again. “It wouldn’t have happened without the support of West Point Garrison Commander Colonel Michael Tarsa and his staff,” she says.

“Many groups and individuals have made their mark on the garden over the years, and this is what makes them so great,” says West Point Cadet Sean Flynn (class of 2012), who worked on historical research in partnership

is hardly Kosciuszko’s only contribution to American history. He lobbied hard for the establishment of a U.S. Military Academy in America and was instrumental in the Colonies’ victory in the Revolutionary War. Additionally, Kosciuszko took the ideas and practices he learned in America back to Europe, bringing democratic ideals to Poland, Lithuania and other European countries.

Early Life

A Polish-Lithuanian, Kosciuszko was born in Poland in 1746 and trained as a military engineer at the Royal Military Academy in Warsaw. He fled his home country when he was sentenced to die for falling in love with a

woman who was considered above his station. He was studying in Paris when the Revolutionary War broke out. As a student of the Enlightenment, Kosciuszko was enamored with the idea of freedom and liberty for all people, and he came to America with the intention of fighting for those ideals.

Unlike some foreign officers who came to America seeking higher-level military commissions from the Continental Congress, “Kosciuszko’s motivations [were] purely altruistic and solidly founded on ideals of the European Enlightenment, which proposed that men were born free and that governments ought to be founded by the will of the people and not the whim of the few,” says Anthony J. Bajdek, retired associate dean and senior lecturer in history at Boston’s Northeastern University and the national vice president of American affairs for the Polish American Congress. “Every aspect of his life substantiated the selflessness of his motivations, both in America and in Poland. Indeed, he may be placed properly among our nation’s earliest secular saints in company with George Washington.”

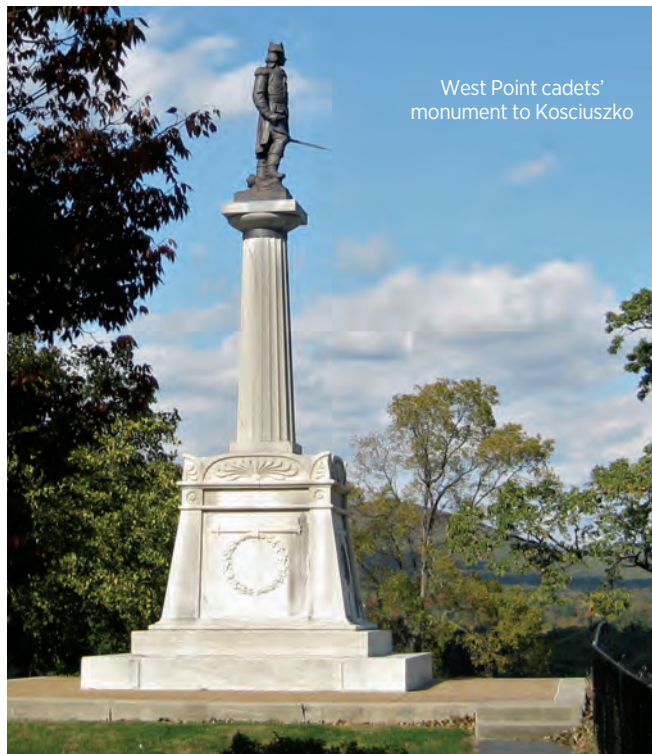
Serving in America

Kosciuszko arrived in America in 1776, “literally showing up on Benjamin Franklin’s doorstep with little more than a revolutionary spirit and a genius for engineering,” says Alex Storozynski, president and executive director of the Kosciuszko Foundation and author of *The Peasant Prince: Thaddeus Kosciuszko and the Age of Revolution*. He began serving in the Continental Army as a volunteer. But within a couple of months, Congress commissioned him as the Army’s head engineer. His first duties were in Pennsylvania, where he was tasked with the fortification of Philadelphia.

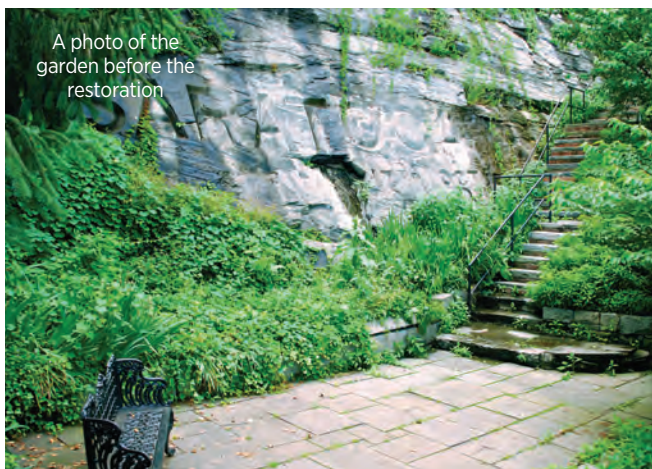
In Pennsylvania, Kosciuszko first read the Declaration of Independence. Moved by the document and its espousal of his own beliefs, he set out to meet its principal author, Thomas Jefferson. A few months later, when the two met in Virginia, they spent a day discussing philosophy and other common interests, and became good friends. On many occasions during his time in America, Kosciuszko was a guest at Jefferson’s Monticello.

Kosciuszko developed a reputation as an excellent engineer as he fortified military camps along the Canadian border, repaired Fort Ticonderoga in New York, and helped develop the strategy that led to the defeat of the British Army at Saratoga, N.Y. “Kosciuszko’s strategy won the Battle of Saratoga. Thus he was responsible for the turning point of the American Revolution,” Storozynski says.

After the victory at Saratoga, George Washington took notice and appointed Kosciuszko to improve the Continental Army’s defenses at West Point. He stayed



West Point cadets' monument to Kosciuszko



A photo of the garden before the restoration



A late summer shot of the garden after the restoration



West Point with its fortifications on the Hudson River. 19th-century steel engraving after a drawing made in 1780.

there from early 1778 until August 1780, and his plans for fortifying West Point were quite valuable, as protecting the Hudson River was crucial for the Continental Army. In fact, “it was Kosciuszko’s plans for West Point that Benedict Arnold tried to sell to the British,” Storozynski says.

Kosciuszko was instrumental in determining West Point’s future as the home of the United States Military Academy. “He planted the idea with both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson that the United States needed a national military academy to serve as an educational entity, not only for promoting study of state-of-the-art military science, but also for fostering advanced intellectual pursuit, both being equally necessary in our new republic,” Bajdek says. Although Sylvanus Thayer went on to become known as the Father of the United States Military Academy, during the Academy’s early years, Kosciuszko was known as the Patron Saint of West Point, Bajdek says.

“Proof of the admiration and reverence in which Kosciuszko was held by West Point’s Corps of Cadets occurred on July 4, 1828, when the Academy dedicated a monument to Kosciuszko’s memory for his service to America during our War of Independence,” Bajdek says. “Although George Washington had made West Point his headquarters at one point and went on to become known as the Father of his Country, the Academy did not raise a monument to him until 1913, some 85 years following the installation of a monument to Kosciuszko.”

After seven years of service, Kosciuszko was awarded the rank of brigadier general in the Continental Army. He also received American citizenship and a grant of land near Columbus, Ohio, and was admitted to both the prestigious Society of the Cincinnati and the American Philosophical Society. Along with Lafayette, Kosciuszko was one of only two foreign officers who served in the American Revolution to be honored with membership in the Society of the Cincinnati, Bajdek says.

His Lifelong Friendship With Jefferson

After the Revolutionary War ended, Kosciuszko went back home to pursue the same ideals of freedom and liberty for his own people. He became a “national leader and defender of Poland against Russia, Prussia and Austria, earning him secular sainthood among Poles as well [as Americans],” Bajdek says. “His life, in short, made him a role model on two continents. He was driven by a concern for the welfare of others, standing in America and in Poland as a believer in freedom, democracy and equality, and giving up comforts and personal pleasures in pursuit of those objectives.”

Kosciuszko’s lifelong correspondence with Thomas Jefferson, particularly concerning the immorality of owning African slaves, reveals his firm belief in freedom for all people, without exception. Some of his beliefs may have been influenced by his friendship with Agrippa Hull, a free black who served as his orderly and assistant during the war. (See related story on page 47.)

Kosciuszko's attitudes on slavery were radical for his time. When he left America, he left his salary from the Continental Army (about \$15,000) with Jefferson, instructing him to use the money to purchase and free slaves, Storozynski says. Kosciuszko even asked that Jefferson reserve some of the money to buy land, cattle and farming tools so former slaves would be able to support themselves.

"Kosciuszko fought not only for the freedom of the American Colonies, but also for black slaves, European serfs, Jews, American Indians, women and all people," Storozynski says. "Thomas Jefferson even called Kosciuszko 'the purest son of liberty I have ever known.'"

Kosciuszko died in Switzerland in 1817. Jefferson eventually withdrew from his promise to act as executor of the will after a bitter and expensive legal battle, and the money was given to Kosciuszko's descendants.

A Living Reminder

At West Point, Kosciuszko's Garden is a living reminder of the patriot and his contributions to a long history of American military strength.

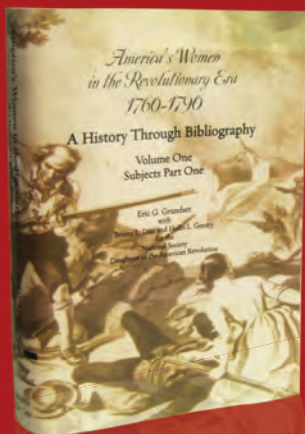
"Kosciuszko's Garden and Flirtation Walk, to me, represent an opportunity to grip hands with those members of the Long Gray Line that have gone before me," says Cadet Flynn. "While our lives, as any old grad will not hesitate to tell you, are certainly different in many regards, we all share our membership in the Corps. An opportunity to spend a few hours, or even minutes, in the garden or on Flirtation Walk, is an opportunity to reach into that nexus for guidance or reassurance. Taking a few moments of contemplation there before selecting branches, making a big personal decision or even before an exam allows us to place things in perspective.

"While [restoring Kosciuszko's Garden] is a great passion of mine, I understand that history is not for every cadet," he adds. "However, it is my duty to provide the opportunity for my peers to learn about the institution they are a part of, and if they choose, to use those resources to aid them." ☺

Nancy Mann Jackson wrote about how design students are giving life to Witness Trees for the November/December 2011 issue.

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