

*French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota*

# ARTICLE TRIMESTRIEL QUARTERLY ARTICLE

WINTER / HIVER 2023



## **Washington Reviewing Our Ally—the French—1781**

Painting by Henry Alexander Ogden (1856-1936)

Commander of Lauzun's Legion, Seen at Right-Hand Side, Saluting

  
French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota

Mission Statement: To foster a greater understanding of the rich history and heritage of French-speaking people who helped form what is now Minnesota. Website: [fahfminn.org](http://fahfminn.org). YouTube: FAHF Minn.

## A TALE OF TWO IDENTITIES: THE STORY OF FRENCH-SLOVAK-AMERICAN PATRIOT JAN LADISLAS POLERECZKY

His grandfather was a revolutionary. His father had an affair with the noblewoman he was supposed to guard. He lived in his more successful older brother's shadow. His military colleague tried to make him a criminal scapegoat while his boss was away. His pension request was not granted by Congress until after he died. His inheritance was confiscated by Napoleon.

Life threw a lot of obstacles in the path of French-born Major Jan Ladislav Polereczky, the first person of Slovak heritage to become a naturalized U.S. citizen, on November 12, 1788, in Maine. That was just five months after enough states had ratified the U.S. Constitution to make it law.

Polereczky's French cavalry unit, Lauzun's Legion, contributed to a new nation's victory at the Battle of Yorktown, at a concurrent conflict known as the Battle of the Hook. This was in Gloucester County, Virginia, across the Chesapeake Bay from where the British were under siege.

A senior officer in a 600-man multinational unit in October 1781, that led the largest cavalry engagement of American Revolution, Polereczky was a part of a French military unit that defeated the infamous British Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton's cavalry, and the victory cut off British commander Gen. Cornwallis' last escape route.

As a member of the post-Revolutionary War generation in Maine, Polereczky gave up his family fortune in France to build a new life and identity within Maine's Huguenot community as a public official and

lighthouse keeper on the New England seaside, raising eight children with his French-heritage wife, Nancy Pochard.

Polereczky was a regional assistant marshal for the first United States census in 1790, when Maine was still part of Massachusetts, where he was assigned to cover three towns and count 1,893 people. He also would become a county and town clerk for what today is Dresden, Maine.

Yet today Polereczky's public service legacy is remembered only with a small sculpture at Trinity Plaza Park in Yonkers, New York, erected in 1977 by the Slovak community. That was near where Lauzun's Legion would encamp as it marched from Lebanon, Connecticut, to Virginia in



**Seguin Island Light Station**  
Seguin Island, Gulf of Maine  
Source: Maine Tourism Website

July 1781, after George Washington and French General Rochambeau decided not to attack New York.

### **From the Mountains to the Seashore**

Born in 1748 in Molsheim, France, and raised in a family whose roots were in the landlocked Tatra Mountain foothills of what is now Slovakia, Polereczky's life path would take him from Virginia to Seguin Island two miles off Maine's coast at a time when France was in an undeclared war with the U.S. at sea, from 1798 to 1799.

At the time, Congress had stopped paying back loans the French crown had made to help finance the American Revolution. An unhappy France decided to harass U.S. shipping and trade because they thought the U.S., a country that appeared to be reneging on its debt, was helping France's archrival at the time, Great Britain.

Legend has it that in 1791 Polereczky also participated in a plan with a Maine sea captain, Stephen Clough, which aimed to help Marie Antoinette escape the guillotine, and bring her to a Huguenot town via Clough's sailing ship the Sally, as the French Revolution unfolded. (Source: Rufus Sewall, Maine Historical Society, 1894.) However, Marie was imprisoned en route to Switzerland, and only some of her luggage immigrated to America, later winding up in the private collections of Boston area families.

### **A Refugee Family**

Overall, the Polereczky family history is a refugee and emigration story, a journey from Banska Bystrica, a town that two centuries later that would be the home of the 1944 Slovak National Uprising, to the decadent court of King Augustus II in Poland during the waning days of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, to France, where another Slovak emigre would help the family build new lives.

Polereczky's life also illustrates the problems of hybrid identity, and class rivalry. To Anglo-Americans, he was French. When his Lauzun's Legion first arrived in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1780, the troops had to overcome lingering anti-French prejudice in the aftermath of the Seven Years War, as well as anti-Catholic bigotry.

"Many residents had fought in that war and harbored bitter memories. The English had made the French seem odious to the Americans by describing them as the meanest and most abominable people on earth. They said that they were dwarfs, pale, ugly specimens who lived exclusively on frogs and snails—and a hundred other such stupidities," wrote French allied officer Jean François Louis Clermont-Crèveœur in his Journal.

To some native French, particularly his superior officer and rival Lt. Col. Claude Étienne Hugau, who had risen from the enlisted ranks in Burgundy, Polereczky was not really one of them, but instead an Eastern European would-be aristocrat, or worse, a supporter of French royalty at a time when the nation was on the eve of its own revolution, one that targeted individuals based on wealth and birth.

Even the Legion commander, the Antonin-Nompar de Caumont, Count and Duke de Lauzun would fall victim to the mob's blade. (November 19, 2023, is the 300th anniversary of his execution by guillotine.)

Over the course of 90 years, the Polereczky family climbed the social ladder in four countries by networking with folks "above their station." The Polereczkys built professional relationships at a time when a military career was a primary way a man of non-noble birth could distinguish himself, most notably in France between Jan and the Duke de Lauzun, and his father Andrej with French Army Marshal Ladislav Berceny, also from Slovakia.

History shaped Jan's family. Had an uprising succeeded in Slovakia and Hungary between 1704 and 1711, a fight known as Rákóczi's War of Independence, Polerczky's father Andrej, and grandfather Matej, would have likely stayed in an area that would have been a new Hungarian royal court led by Francis II Rákóczi and his wife, Charlotte Amalie Heesen-Wanfried, a German noble.

However, Rákóczi's ambitions of freedom, and Charlotte's ambitions of being a queen, died at the decisive Battle of Trencin in Slovakia in 1708, won by Habsburg crown forces. So began a journey that would lead the Polerczkys to France and America. Matej was one of Rákóczi's senior officers and his son Andrej was a freshly commissioned lieutenant assigned the task of guarding Charlotte, as the Polerczky family migrated to Warsaw, Poland, on February 21, 1711, as the uprising fell apart.

### **Farewell from Warsaw**

For Charlotte, this apparently was an opportunity to have a queen-like lifestyle in the court of Polish King Augustus II, a friend of Peter the Great of Russia. Augustus had allowed Russian influence in Poland during its Great Northern War with Sweden, and was regarded as a playboy who gave lavish parties. He had nine mistresses and fathered eight children out of wedlock with five of them.

Circumstantial evidence suggests Rákóczi and Charlotte, Calvinist Protestants, argued over Charlotte's lifestyle and her relationship with the young Andrej, 18. Rákóczi left her in Poland and went to Constantinople in 1717 per the invitation of the Ottoman Sultan to help organize an army against the Austrians. While on the road in the Balkans, however, a peace treaty was signed.

With Warsaw under threat from the Swedes, the power of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in sharp decline, and Rákóczi's leadership

prospects gone, Charlotte, 38, left him and moved with Andrej Polereczky to German-speaking Molsheim in Alsace, France, in 1719. Rákóczi, then 43, lived out his life in exile in Turkey.

Charlotte would die three years later from a tooth infection, and doctors' bloodletting quackery. Andrej married a French wife who gave birth to Jan in September 1748, baptizing him a Catholic.

### **Andrej's Patron—Ladislav Berceny**

Andrej's military career thrived after Charlotte's death. Fellow Slovak Ladislav Berceny got Andrej an officer's commission in the French Army. Then, in the War of the Polish Succession after Polish King Augustus II's death, Andrej got promoted to captain and then major after leading troops in battle in the Rhineland, Flanders and the Main river basin (1733–1735). In October 1736, the chief inspector of the French cavalry states in a report: "Major Andrej Polerecký is one of the most admirable commanders of hundreds in the regiment."

This is the legacy that a young Jan Polereczky had before him as he followed in his father's Hussar footsteps. But ahead of him was his older and more successful brother François Phillippe, who would eventually become a general in the French Army. In 1778, recruitment begins for Lauzun's Legion following the new French alliance with the United States (the 245th anniversary of this alliance was February 6, 2023). Jan sees his chance to shine, and signs up.

Lauzun's Legion was the original French Foreign Legion, and it sails for America in May 1780 at a low point in the war that followed a December 1779 defeat at Savannah of combined French and American forces, and the subsequent loss of Charleston, South Carolina, a week after the Legion was at sea.

"Among them they spoke eight tongues, but by tradition and heritage the unit cursed in Hungarian. They were part of the French armed forces, yet by ordonnance of the Ministere de la Marine their language of command was German. They were light infantry and cavalry, but took their orders from the naval minister," writes American Revolution historian Dr. Robert Selig.

### **Avoiding the Savannah Mistake**

Lauzun's Legion, the main French Army under Gen. Rochambeau, and George Washington's Continental Army, would meet in Westchester County in July 1781, where after series of skirmishes and a joint surveillance mission known as the Grand Reconnaissance, the allied force determined that, with the help of the French Navy, it would better to attack Cornwallis in Virginia than attack New York, and risk another repeat of the December 1779 defeat in Savannah, which cost the life of the Continental cavalry commander Gen. Casimir Pulaski.

Lauzun's Legion arrived in Gloucester, Virginia, during the Siege of Yorktown. On October 4, 1781, French and British cavalry skirmished. The British cavalry commander, Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton, lost his horse, and Lauzun's Legion drove the British within their lines, before being ordered to withdraw by the Marquis de Choisy. (Tarleton's character is fictionalized in the movie *The Patriot* starring Mel Gibson).

### **Victory, and Career-breaking Charges**

After the British surrender at Yorktown, the Duke de Lauzun heads back to France to report the good news. For Polereczky, this is bad news because he has left Lt. Col. Hugau in charge, as the other most senior officer Lt. Col. Robert Dillon (no relation to this article's author) was wounded at the battle and preoccupied.



Polereczky asks for family leave on November 11, 1781, to care for his ailing father back in France, (Andrej is now 81 and will die in 1783), but instead Hugau has him arrested on 20 charges of pilfering civilian property in Virginia. The most serious of allegations against him was that he ran a horse-theft ring. The indictment also accused Polereczky of having stolen a table from a house at Gloucester and stripped a library of its books.

When Polereczky produces a letter from Lauzun granting him leave, the charges get dropped but Hugau's bad-mouthing continued, later saying in his memoirs that Polereczky really wanted to return to Europe because "there was nothing left for him to glean (steal) in this country." Hugau also says Polereczky was disliked by his fellow officers, and didn't want to eat with him.

Contemporary reports show Hugau also didn't get along with Dillon, who was the son of a prominent business leader in Ireland, and senior to Hugau. Reports from other officers at the time said the two colonels bickered until Lauzun's return in September 1781.

## **A Fresh Start in Maine**

After making arrangements for Andrej's care with his brother, Polereczky was back in Boston by in late 1784, having left the army. Polereczky had made friends and connections with American officers, and he called on this network to get a fresh start in Maine.

Maine was considered frontier territory at the time, and had lost population as British Loyalists relocated to Canada. After the American Revolution, Maine attracted those who couldn't afford to move west. Maine was part of Massachusetts until 1820, when it was admitted as a free state as the other half of the Missouri Compromise.

With the help of retired Continental Gen. Benjamin Lincoln, whom he had befriended before Yorktown, Polereczky purchased a farm in Dresden, Maine, in 1785. Dresden is a place with a hybrid identity, founded as Frankfort in 1752 by Huguenot settlers who self-identified as German, in part because of British prejudice on the eve of the Seven Years War. The Huguenots had found religious freedom they did not have in France.

“France had opened her own veins and spilt her best blood when she drained herself of her Huguenots, and everywhere, in every country that would receive them, this amazing strain acted as a yeast,” wrote author Ester Forbes in *Paul Revere and the World he Lived In*, in 1942.

As a newly minted United States forged a new union, Polereczky meets and marries Nancy Pochard. Polereczky had left his first wife, Margaurite Antoinette D’Hausen, and three children, in France.

When Gen. Henry Dearborn, another friend from Yorktown, became military governor of the District of Maine in 1790, he appointed Polereczky assistant census marshal for the first U.S. census in Maine. It was first in a line of civil service positions that would include Seguin Island lighthouse keeper at the pay of \$300 per year beginning in March 1796. Margaurite also died in 1796.

By the turn of the century, Polereczky was part of the Huguenot community in coastal Maine. In 1799 he paid \$57, about two months’ wages, to sponsor a pew at the Dresden Congregational Church.

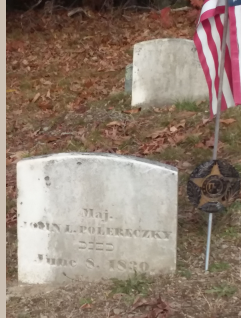
## **A Farewell to Arms**

Polereczky would finally sever his French ties following the death of his brother François Phillipe, in 1811. François had no spouse and was childless when he died, so Polereczky stood to inherit the family chateau and wealth what they had built in Molsheim for nine decades.

Napoleon then demands that Polereczky (and all ex-patriot officers) return to France and join the Grande Armée, as he makes plans to invade Russia in 1812, or else forfeit the entire estate.

Valuing the new life and career he has built as a U.S. citizen, Poleczecky says no. In 1825, retired at age 77, in the era where is no Social Security, no veterans hospitals and in waning health, and while supporting Nancy's brother's widow's family, he writes to Congress for reimbursement of the cost of his horse and supplies while a Lauzun's Legion soldier.

In June 1830, two weeks after Polereczky dies, a pension of \$240 arrives for Nancy.



**Maj. Jan (John) L. Polerecky's Gravesite**

Pine Grove Cemetery  
Dresden Mills, Lincoln County, Maine  
Source: findagrave.com

Sources used for this article: Dobbs Ferry Historical Society; Friends of Seguin Island, Gloucester County; Virginia Historical Society; National Park Service website, Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route; Maine's Dresden Historical Society; American Revolution.org; The History of Dresden, "The Duc de Lauzun and his Legion Rochambeau's most troublesome, colorful soldiers," by Dr. Robert A. Selig, Wikipedia; "Journal of a French Quartermaster on the March to Yorktown June 16-October 6, 1781," translated and annotated by Norman Desmarais; U.S. Census Bureau; Site Documentation and Preservation Plan for the Battle of the Hook, October 3, 1781; Gloucester County Parks, Recreation and Tourism; Bas-Rhin Department baptismal archives, in France.