

Men of Royal Deux-Ponts:  
What They Thought of the American People

Nathan Schultz

Dr. Ferrell

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## Abstract

This paper is a study on what four individuals from the Royal Deux-Pont regiment wrote down about the people of the United States of America in 1780-1783. This paper argues that they say the American people as admirable and unique. The goal is to seek a truer understanding of the American people through the lens of foreigners. That since these foreigners saw the American people as admirable it brings truth to how the American people acted in the late 18th century. As with being unique, it shows that the American people were something different from the countries of their ancestors. That in fact, they were something uniquely American acting as the primordial soup of the American identity. The Royal Deux-Ponts was a regiment of German-speaking soldiers serving with the French army during the American revolution. The four accounts range from members of most social status in the 18th century. Featuring a member of a ruling family of a duchy to a son of a butcher. The four individuals are Vicomte Guillaume Deux-Ponts, Baron Ludwig von Closen, Jean-Baptiste Verger, and Gregor Flohr who all left memoirs and journals of their time in America with the French army in 1780-1783. Through quotes and stories within their accounts, this paper seeks to prove that the people of the United States of America were admirable and unique through the more correct view of foreigners.

There lies a story in the American Revolution which is seldom told and seldom heard of. A few fish-out-of-water stories of foreigners in foreign lands with unique opinions and special insight on the American people. This story is the story of the Royal Deux-Pont regiment's experience with the French army in the United States during the American Revolution. To tell the story of the Royal Deux-Ponts regiment and to glean an idea of what Americans were like in the 18th century in 1780 through 1783 during the American Revolution, the best source is foreign. The Royal Deux-Ponts regiment was composed of Germans that served with the French army in America during the American Revolution. They were a collection of German soldiers that served faithfully and gallantly in America. Fortunately, they left accounts behind their experiences. Particularly, four primary accounts ranging from the commander of the regiment to a private soldier tell this story. These individuals are Vicomte Guillaume de Deux-Ponts, Baron Ludwig von Closen, Jean-Baptiste Verger, and Gregor Flohr.<sup>1</sup> Through these accounts and the authors' insights on the American people, one can better understand the American people of 1780-1783. That in fact what these foreigners thought of Americans as admirable and unique. Describing Americans as admirable means that they were worthy of praise and support. Even so far as to say that the cause that they fought for was just. This idea of them being different or unique from other nations adds to the idea of the distinct shared American identity.

The American Revolution was not just a war fought by the scrappy American army against the great might of the British professional army, it was something more, a world war. The largest engagements of the American revolution did not accrue on American soil. That battle was the great siege of Gibraltar in southern Spain where mostly Hanoverian troops led by British

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<sup>1</sup> A note on Deux-ponts, Closen and Verger's names, they all are of noble birth and have extensive titles and additional names that change throughout their lives as these simple last names are what they refer to in the paper for simplicity sake.

officers defended against an army of almost 60,000 Spaniards and Frenchmen.<sup>2</sup> The American cause of liberty and independence acted as a reason for war with Great Britain to take them down a peg. Spain, Netherland, and France actively engaged in a direct war with England. While countries such as: Russia and Sweden engaged in armed neutrality against the British. American acting as the pawn to the great European powers of the time.<sup>3</sup>

By 1779 when ships launched from Brest, France with around 8,000 French troops among them the Royal Deux-Ponts they were part of a larger game for the French.<sup>4</sup> The fulfillment of alliance obligations with America, these troops were sent under the seasoned hands of the Comte de Rochambeau. While in the United States the French expeditionary force did little. After landing in Newport Rhode Island in 1780 from a terrible voyage across the Atlantic they did not engage in any military action until September 1781. The French army wined and dined their way through American. Visiting with the wealthiest member of American society and paying for everything in excess. Paying grossly inflated prices in gold for all their supplies for their troops. Their contribution to the war effort in America was mainly through supply and harassment of British garrisons all around the world. What they did on the continental US was contained to the Yorktown Campaign and Savannah by supplying with: experience in army command, the heavy artillery for the siege of Yorktown VA, more than half the troops at the battle, and Cavalry to contain the British in Gloucester country.<sup>5</sup> When French forces left the United States in 1782 they had only engaged in two engagements and one campaign, but they were vital to the American cause for independence. Simply put, without the French America would never have had a chance to claim independence.

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<sup>2</sup> Lesley Adkinsm Roy Adkins., *Gibraltar: The Greatest Siege in British History*. (United States: Penguin Publishing Group, 2019) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Flohr, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Flohr, 24..

<sup>5</sup> Jerome A. Greene, *The Guns of Independence the Siege of Yorktown, 1781*. (New York : Staplehurst, U.K. Savas Beatie ; Spellmount, 2005), 192.

Background on the Royal Deux-Ponts regiment needs to understand how to see these four men in the correct context. The Royal Deux-Ponts regiment was a regiment of around a thousand soldiers part of Rochambeau's French expeditionary force in 1780 during the American Revolution.<sup>6</sup> What makes them different from other French regiments of the expedition is that they were composed mostly of German-speaking soldiers from the Duchy of Palatinate-Zweibrücken. The Duchy is in the modern-day Bundesländer of Rhineland-Palatinate. The Duke of Zweibrücken signed a treaty of alliance with the king of France to provide aid in the event of war; he fulfilled his treaty obligation by sending the Royal Deux-Ponts.<sup>7</sup> They served along with the main French army during their campaigns and in 1780 through 1782, they participated in the Yorktown campaign. The French army also spent time in Rhode Island, New York, and Virginia. As part of the Yorktown campaign, they proved themselves by manning the trenches at the siege of the town and digging the trenches. The Deux-Ponts earned glory and prestige by being half of the forces that attacked redoubt number 9, a famous action at the siege of Yorktown. The Vicomte Deux-Pont was in command of the attack on redoubt number 9.<sup>8</sup> The Royal Deux-Ponts regiment represents an aspect of the world of the 18th century being an interconnected one. That a unique story exists within the journals and memoirs of the members of this regiment

As for the subjects to study backgrounds. Their experiences vary greatly from the bottom of the military command structure to the very top. Viscount Deux-Pont or Gilliam Christian Forbach served as second Colonel in the Royal Deux-Ponts or second in command. A noble by birth, he lived with his uncle, Duke of Zweibrücken. This means that he was a member of a ruling

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<sup>6</sup>Grégoire Binois and Daniel Fischer, *Account of the Land and Sea Expedition in America of the Acclaimed Deux-Ponts Regiment from 1780 to 1784 Annotated Edition*, (Andre Malraux Multimedia Library, 1787) 19-21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Guillaume Des Deux-Ponts and Samuel A. Green *My Campaigns in America: a Journal Kept by Count William De Deux-Ponts, 1780-81* (Washington: NCR Microcard Editions 1975) 145.

family of a duchy in the Holy Roman Empire which makes his background one of wealth and the social construction of nobility. Deux-Pont had prior military experience as he had served in the military during the Seven Years War as a sous-lieutenant fighting in the Battle of Rossbach before he arrived in America. His account has a critical perspective of Americans due to being a member of aristocratic European royalty.<sup>9</sup>

Baron Hans Christoph Friedrich Ignatz Ludwig von Closen-Haydenburg, or Closen for short, served as one of Rochambeau's aide-de-camps during the campaign in America. He also held rank as a captain in the Deux-Ponts. He came from middle nobility and being a baron which indicates German nobility but, he came from a lesser status than the Vicomte Deux-Pont. Closen's account is the best and most detailed account of the French army in America. Numerous times throughout his account he includes his personal thoughts on his surroundings and the people he meets. Included, when he visits an American city he comments on four things, food, wine, manners, and the women. He goes into such extraordinary detail as to include the type of silverware used in a different meal while in Newport, Rhode Island among many other examples of studious cataloging.<sup>10</sup>

Jean-Baptiste-Antoine de Verger served as a sous-lieutenant in the Deux-Ponts. Coming from the lower nobility of the bishopric of Bern he was not ethnically German but served with the regiment and other German sovereigns throughout his life. His account is a simple chronology of the French army in America but does include stories about General Washington. What Verger is most known for is a famous set of sketches that represent one of the only 18th

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 75.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Closen *Revolutionary Journal, 1780-1783: Translate and Edited with an Introduction* (Chapel Hill 1958) xi-xx.

century sketches of American troops in hunting shirts. While in his sketches he includes maps of his surroundings and a convenient self-portrait.<sup>11</sup>

Gregor Flohr, a German peasant from Zweibrücken served as an infantry private in the Deux-Ponts. Flohr's account is a unique view of the experience for French in America; he includes stories that the rest of the accounts do not, such as experience with the average person. Flohr's account is unique to the rest of them as he is not of nobility, that in fact his father was a simple butcher in Zweibrücken and he enlisted in the Army at the age of eighteen. Flohr also is the only member of the study that, later in life, returned to America and served as a Lutheran minister in Wytheville Virginia.<sup>12</sup> The backgrounds of the subjects of study allow one to understand exactly each person though within the correct context. As to not understand the context in a vacuum as they have different opinions on Americans and that can be understood by their backgrounds.

These four individuals that served during the American Revolution with the French encountered hundreds if not thousands of American people through interactions of diplomatic and personal manners as they lived with Americans for years. While they were garrisoned in Newport, Rhode Island or it was them operating in the field fighting the British forces. These men were exposed to Americans enough that they wrote about their experiences down with their personal accounts. Fortunately, some of the men recorded what they thought of the American people in their writings. They cumulatively viewed the American people to be admirable and unique.

The most vocal of these individuals was Closen. He cataloged everything, there is even a chapter within his journal about the different animals that he found in America and comparing

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Baptiste Verger *The American Campaigns of Rochambeau's Army, 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972.) 103.

<sup>12</sup> Flohr, 12.

them to ones in metropolitan France. To describe how he saw the American people and their government he offered this comment in his memoirs “The passage of time has proven that it was as wise as it was good very well adapted to the national character and bringing happiness to these people, so admirable in every way.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore describing American as admirable in every way when speaking on their representative government. Closen describes it as being well adapted to the national character and bringing happiness to these people meaning that the American people contained a national character that is different from other nations. As the government that the United States uses is because of the people of the nation. Closen memoirs also mention the American people as they fought for independence. During the climatic surrender ceremony at the siege of Yorktown Closen reflected on the experiences of seeing the continental army ragged state he records, “These people are much more praise-worthy and brave to fight as they do when they are so poorly supplied with everything.”<sup>14</sup> The statement describes the Americas as praiseworthy and brave the fight that even though they lack proper supply relative to the French army. By saying this comment on the American people he shares what he thought in the climax of the American Revolution at Yorktown, that the American people were to be admired for their stiff resistance to British rule. The idealized figure of the American soldier during the American revolution, of being a soldier that fought for liberty with nothing seems to be what this German saw. He saw a set of people who had nothing, fighting for the liberty of their new nation for the sake of the government which fit their character so well.

Jean-Baptiste Verger also had something to say, not about the American people but their leader George Washington. In 1781 Verger recorded a story about General Washington. When the army was taking time to establish an encampment about a a long march Washinton did not

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<sup>13</sup> Closen, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Closen, 153.



seek a home to quarter for the night, as was the custom of generals in the 18th century. Washington instead of resting in a cozy and warm home, instead, he decided to make an example to his troops by living in a tent. Verger shares his and others opinions about this symbolic act saying “He is so much adored that even the foreigners who see this extraordinary man cannot resist according to him their admiration and respect he is so much and adore that even the foreigners who see this extraordinary man cannot resist according to him their admiration and respect [sic].”<sup>15</sup> So in this case Verger is saying that the Americans are admirable and respectful though their leader General Washington. Verger even shares the opinions of other foreigners that were present for the moment. What this informs us is that the French officers viewed Washington with the utmost respect and admiration. It is a popularly held notion of the virtue of George Washington and the revolutionary soldiers. With these foreigners’ accounts of the admirable trait of the American people that the stories of them are true. These two accounts support the idea that both Verger and Closen saw Americans as admirable; they should have deserving respect and admiration from foreigners that the cause that American fought for war amira be or should be emulated.

The idea of the uniqueness of the American people is codified in the account of the men of study by how they use the word American and stories of how Americans are different. The studious Baron von Closen shares that during an expedition out to the fortress at West Point, New York one General Heath was a ” very good American thoroughly acquainted with the resources of the country.”<sup>16</sup> The use of the word American to directly describe somebody provides a definition of what it means to be an American. When he is describing something as American this indicates that being an American meant something unique and that other

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<sup>15</sup> Verger, 152.

<sup>16</sup> Closen, 34.

descriptions would not fit. The descriptive word of being an American is a unique aspect that there are no others like the Americans, is defined as being well acquainted with the resources of the country is something that quintessential American and part of a larger theme of identity. The idea that the American people were the rough and tough people seems to be true to an extent as commented on by Closen. This is to say that what Closen observed is possibly the beings of the American identity in the 1780s.

Geroge Flohr, the private, experiences events that the other men barely mention, he actually interacted with ordinary people. Flohr has the perspective of being a peasant of humble beginnings and his travels in America show that by his interpersonal interaction with the American people. Flohr shares that Americans have unique aspects of multi-ethnicity in the United States. While marching through the city of Philadelphia with the Royal Deux-Ponts on parade on their way to Yorktown VA something special happened. The French army was marching through the city with all the pomp and circumstance of a victorious army when soldiers of the Royal Deux-Ponts noticed something, family. Flohr accounts that many members of the Deux-Ponts noticed long lost family members, cousins, uncles, and some soldiers even reunited with lost fathers. Flohr comments as this being uniquely American event, that there is no place else in the world or one can find events such as this.<sup>17</sup> Flohr even believed American to be such a unique and interesting place that he later on in his life he leaves Europe and becomes a Lutheran minister in Wytheville Virginia.<sup>18</sup> Taking the idea of American being a nation of immigrants to the understanding of a peasant in military service during the American Revolution in the form of Flohr's account of his experience. By saying that one was able to find relatives in a foreign land

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<sup>17</sup> Flohr, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Flohr, 12.

in the city of Philadelphia this Story show the multi-ethnic reality of the American nation and its people show a unique style to its people.

Not always spoken in words, but through the sketches, these men recorded their experience in America. Verger shares his view of the uniqueness of the American people in drawings. A sketch of the American soldiers dated 1782 shows an American rifleman wearing a unique dress, the hunting shirt.<sup>19</sup> Described as a uniquely American garment this was seen by Verger as something noteworthy and worth recording.<sup>20</sup> The simple act of sketching a uniform tells a story of noteworthiness. This matter as to view the American people as unique reaffirms popularly held notions about the American people and gives hints to American identity. With the descriptions and stories, they are closer to the truth than other more biased American sources. What this means is that those who saw the United States as this unique multi-ethnic land where there is nothing else like it in the world. What these Deux-Ponts are saying is that there was an American identity in this uniqueness. Wherever it was describing a man as an American or sketching the look of the American people, there is a common trend of how these foreigners write about the American people, as being something different. The people of the United States were not members of the cultures and nations of where their families were from, they were something different they were Americans.

Not all of the accounts of the Deux-Ponts were all in agreement. The Viscount Deux-Ponts stated something different which seems to be countering what the rest of the Deux-Ponts' observed about the American people. He recorded during the welcome reception as the French army landed in Newport Rhode Island, with a sense of disgust "We did not meet with

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<sup>19</sup> A hunting shirt is a usually linen split open shirt with fringed fabric laced on it and a cape of fringe on the top of the garment. It is related to the riflemen as frontiersmen of America. Some continental army regiments were equipped with them.

<sup>20</sup> Verger, xxi, xxiv.

that reception on landing, which we expected and which we ought to have had. A coldness and reserve appear to me to be characteristic of the American nation."<sup>21</sup> This comment seems to be counterintuitive to the idea of admiration as the rest of the men of the study share. Deux-Pont describes the Americans as cold and reserved but this statement is misleading. Other individuals that were at the event share a counter account. Such as the American liaison officer to the French army, General Health. He found that it was a great celebration for the French landing at Newport.<sup>22</sup> This view is most likely due to Viscount Deux-Pont's high noble background that generated such a statement. But that being said Deux-Ponts does come around and respect the American soldier. Later on in 1781 after the attack on redoubt #9 at Yorktown, he compliments Americans on the attack at redout #10.<sup>23</sup> As only then did the American people earn respect in Deux-Ponts eyes. Regardless, not all of the Deux-Ponts saw the American the same, but the majority saw them with the lens of their background and through each background, it contextualizes their accounts.

Finding out what people from 200 years ago thought of other people 200 years ago seems counterintuitive as if it does not matter. The purpose is to seek a true understanding of what the American people were like in the 18th century. To this end one must acquire the most unbiased and truthful source, this being from foreigners. With the Royal Deux-Ponts in the study, they represent a swath of individuals that saw the American people in a similar light of being admired, and unique. Whatever it is from Vicomte Deux-Pont's misguided view of Americans and eventual respecting of Americans as equals in military. Or wherever it is Cloven's studious accounts of the aspects of American life or it is Vergner's sketches on the American people. Or it is by Flohr's personal and human accounts of an average man's

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<sup>21</sup> Deux-pont, 91.

<sup>22</sup> Deux-pont, 91.

<sup>23</sup> Deux-pont, 149.

experience in America. What these accounts say is that the American people were admirable for their action and unique by character. It matters that they were admirable as it confirms the idea of the American soldier that fought for liberty and independence for a just cause. Uniqueness is a trait that only a distinct people can exhibit as with the general ideas of the American uniqueness is the beginning of the American identity. That the American people were not just distant members of the nation where their relatives came from, but something different and unique. Only through foreigners, who do not have a vested interest in making America look better can one truly understand and more accurately depict the people of the 18th century. What their stories tell is the American story, a story that the American people indeed were unique and admired. We know this thanks to these foreigners.

**I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work. NGS.**

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