

Hussar Hero

Michael Kovats, Father of the U.S. Cavalry

By GWEN SOLYOM

Benjamin Franklin received a letter, written in Latin, dated January 13, 1777. It began, “Most Illustrious Sir: Golden freedom cannot be purchased with yellow gold.” The writer went on to identify himself as a “Nobleman” offering his services to the American cause of freedom. He signed it with the phrase, “faithful unto death.” Michael Kovats de Fabricy, soldier on horseback, would become an American Revolutionary hero far from his hometown of Karcag, Hungary.

Michael’s father, Imre, and mother, Sara, lived in Karcag, a market town on Hungary’s Great Plains, where horses and horsemanship were prized. The town had been devastated by the Ottoman invasion and 160-year occupation.

Born in August 1724, Kovats grew up to be well-educated, versed in Latin and German. He later described him-



self as a nobleman. His wife, Franciska Merse of Szinye, would build a chapel in his honor after his death.

His Experience

Like other Hungarian volunteers, as well as the many other foreigners and immigrants who aided the cause of American freedom, Kovats brought years of previous military experience to the forces of General George Washington. A cavalryman by age 20, he had already served in the Hapsburg army during the war against Prussia, then in the French army, and also in the Austro-Hungarian army.

After 18 years of military service, he retired around 1776 as a hussar, or light cavalry, major and lived in Upper Hungary (now present-day Slovakia). There he trained troops who were organizing for Polish independence. He met and trained a young Casimir Pulaski, who would go on to become his superior in the American Army.

The Letter

In his 1777 letter to Franklin, written while in Bordeaux, France, Kovats offered his services to the cause of American freedom. "I am now here, of my own free will, having taken all the horrible hardships and bothers of this journey, and I am willing to sacrifice myself wholly and faithfully as it is expected of an honest soldier facing the hazards and great dangers of the war ... for the freedom of your great Congress."

Kovats' letter was not immediately forwarded to America. Nevertheless, Kovats set sail aboard the ship *Catharina of Dartmouth* on February 26, 1777.

Making His Mark

Thanks to a letter of introduction from Major General Joseph Spencer of Rhode Island, Kovats met Washington at his headquarters in Philadelphia. His initial application

for service was rejected because of translation difficulties.

However, Kovats eventually joined the newly formed military unit of the German community of Philadelphia. He soon met Brigadier General Pulaski, whom Washington had charged with the establishment of a cavalry. Kovats became the cavalry's training officer in January 1778, teaching them Hungarian hussar tactics.

In February 1778, Pulaski recommended that Kovats become commander of a permanent legion. On



A statue of Colonel Kovats was dedicated on October 11, 2003 on the grounds of the Hungarian Embassy in Washington, D.C. It depicts Kovats and his horse at the moment they were mortally wounded in battle.

April 18, 1778, Congress appointed Kovats colonel of the Cavalry Legion, to be headquartered in Baltimore. He thus was the first commander of what would eventually become the U.S. Cavalry.

For the rest of the year, the cavalry served successfully in numerous battles along the East Coast. In February 1779, the legion was ordered south to the defense of Charleston, S.C. Despite losing some horsemen to smallpox along the way, the legion arrived to meet up with General Benjamin Lincoln on May 8, 1779.

On the battlefield, riding ahead of his troops, Kovats and his horse were both mortally wounded and died on May 11, 1779. They were buried where they fell.

Hometown Accolades

Today Karcag, Hungary, is a town of about 23,000. The community, which contains a natural thermal bath, is located near a United Nations World Heritage Site—the nature preserve Horotobagy National Park.

Residents are proud of their connection with America and their hero, Kovats. In 1992, the elementary-middle school was named in his honor. The American flag and the Hungarian flag hang side by side in the entrance hall, and children learn about the role Kovats played in the American Revolution in history class.

There is also a symbolic house gate at the site of the house where he was born. Both of these places were dedicated after the fall of communism in 1990.

Kovats' sacrifice is honored in commemoration ceremonies in America and Hungary every May 11, the anniversary of his death. On October 11, 2003, a statue titled "Fidelissimus ad Mortem," or "Faithful

Unto Death," was dedicated on the grounds of the Hungarian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

The life-size statue depicts the moment Kovats and his horse gave their lives for American independence. A smaller replica of the statue was presented in Karcag on May 11, 2004. The Citadel Military Academy in Charleston honors him with a plaque and a field named after the hussar hero. 🇵🇸

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Situated on a high embankment overlooking Middle Street in Portsmouth, N.H., the Rundlet-May House is a classic early 19th-century, Federalist-style home.

Built in 1807 by James Rundlet, a successful textile merchant and manufacturer, the elegant 14-room mansion features a white clapboard exterior, expansive windows, black shutters and a hip roof trimmed with railings. Flanking the back of the stately residence are numerous connected outbuildings and gardens with meandering paths designed by Rundlet himself, a farmer's son.

Rundlet, who grew up in Exeter, N.H., and was among the first to attend Phillips (Exeter) Academy, was intimately involved in the planning and design of his home. An etching that maps Rundlet's original vision for his estate still hangs in the front hall. There are also ledgers detailing expenses for construction, furnishings and plantings. Regardless of the cost, the home was clearly designed to draw admiration from passersby and show off Rundlet's stature and wealth in his adopted community.

"James Rundlet built the house on a natural rise and owned all of the surrounding property; it was on the outskirts of town back then," explains Elizabeth Farish, regional site manager for Historic New England, which owns the home. She notes that the entrepreneurial Rundlet accumulated much of his fortune during the War of 1812 thanks to government contracts for the cloth for soldiers' uniforms. "The home gives the impression of sitting on top of a terrace. Rundlet could open his front door and look everywhere around him and see land he owned."

"Modern" Kitchen Appliances

Inside, the home displays Rundlet's elegant taste, as well as his practical interest in the latest technology. In fact, Rundlet installed one of the country's first Rumford kitchens before official plans for such kitchens were

commercially available. The original kitchen remains in such good condition that it was a focal point for the recent "Year of the Kitchen" exhibit sponsored by Historic New England, formerly the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

"The kitchen was utterly modern for its time," says Farish, pointing out that most cooking during this era was done on big open hearths. "In the Rumford kitchen, there are separate chambers for different types of cooking."

Among the most innovative components of a Rumford kitchen was the Rumford Roaster, located in the wall to the left of the fireplace. It features a round, cast-iron door behind which lie two racks for roasting meats and vegetables. Below the oven, also built into the wall, is a firebox for fuel and an ash pit to collect remnants of the fire. A system of knobs helps to regulate air and steam in the chamber.

"The idea of the Rumford Roaster was to cook at a moist temperature for a certain length of time and then suck out moisture to give whatever you were roasting a crispy crust while the center remained juicy," Farish explains.

Another key component of a Rumford kitchen was the Rumford Range, or stew top. Rundlet installed the range along the side wall to the right of the fireplace. In some respects, the stew top can be considered a precursor to the circular burners of today's stovetops. However, in a

Rumford Range, the three burners are actually carved masonry holes into which the cook could lower and rest a pot during cooking. Each hole had its own firebox and ash pit for customized heat control. A sophisticated venting system allowed smoke from all the cooking devices to escape through a chimney to a smoke room on the top floor where meats were cured. Later generations covered the stew holes with the flat, removable, wood countertop that now hides them.



The original 1812 plan for the house shows the complex of connected outbuildings that housed two privies, space for agricultural needs, a carriage house and stables. The expansive grounds included pear and apple orchards.

1800s-Style Energy Efficiency

By past and present-day standards, the Rumford kitchen was energy-efficient. It could be fired by either wood or coal, depending on which fuel source was most available, affordable or efficient based on how hot the fire had to be and how long it needed to burn. Since each cooking device had its own firebox, the Rundlets conserved energy by using only what they needed when they needed it. The shallow kitchen hearth was also more energy-friendly than the more customary deep hearth.

Although Rundlet was a wealthy man who employed several servants, it's likely that his wife Jane was fairly involved in homemaking and cooking, according to Farish. She also surmises that because of its novelty and newness, "there would have been a lot of interest in a kitchen like this and a lot involved in learning to use it."

From a practical standpoint, "the Rundlets had 13 children, and this property was a working farm with vegetable gardens, orchards, a pig sty and a barn with animals to



The home was built with a scullery where household staff prepared food and did laundry. The room contains a unique set-kettle (left) fitted with a drain so it could be emptied to the outside instead of indoors.

than the kitchen, mainly for boiling large vats of water for household use. It also featured another of the home's technological innovations—a copper set-kettle on a masonry block with a firebox and ash pit below. This feature made it possible to have hot water readily available, which "was amazing for the time period," Farish says. Set-kettles didn't come fully into vogue until the 1840s.

Rundlet's pragmatic nature and innovative leanings also prompted him to install three sources of water for the house. Not only was there an indoor well situated near the scullery, but there was also a hookup to the Portsmouth aqueduct system. In addition, Rundlet collected rainwater from the roof in a large cistern in the basement.

Descendants Proud of the Past

It is notable that four generations of Rundlets lived in the house, and that they demonstrated a reverence for keeping the house and its belongings authentic. The first-floor front rooms are very much a living example of the past. Many of the furnishings and decorative items that Rundlet handpicked more than 200 years ago were still there when his great-grandson, Ralph May, a scholar and Portsmouth historian, bequeathed it to Historic New England.

"The home came to us in 1971, and it is one of the finest examples of our preservation philosophy because we received the house intact," Farish says. "It's how the family left it, and it's how we keep it today and talk about it to visitors."

The parlor is among the home's most well-appointed rooms. Located to the right of the front hall entryway, the room features the peach damask wallpaper Rundlet and his wife imported from England. One of two red settees Rundlet purchased for the room is also on display, although it has been reupholstered in black. The walls are heavily decorated with portraits of Rundlet's descendants, as well as Girandole mirrors from the era.



The kitchen was outfitted with this complete Rumford Roaster and Range. The roaster allowed the user to control heat and moisture like never before. All of the cooking fires were vented through a sophisticated hood.

care for. Everyone had to pitch in, even if servants were ultimately responsible for certain jobs," Farish says. She estimates that the Rundlets had anywhere from two to five servants working for them at any given time. Servant bells can still be found in the kitchen and other rooms in the house, including the scullery.

Located in convenient proximity to the kitchen, the scullery was a center for food prep, washing clothes and warming bath water. It housed a much larger fireplace