

Northmen in the War of Independence

COUNT FERSEN, WHO ACCOMPANIED THE FRENCH EXPEDITION TO AID COLONISTS.

SWEDISH KING WOULD NOT PERMIT THE WEARING OF DECORATION BESTOWED BY WASHINGTON.

AMONG the Scandinavians who fought for American liberty in the War of Independence was one who joined the French expedition under Count Rochambeau. He was of Swedish nobility, Count Hans Axel von Fersen, son of Field Marshal Count Fredrik Axel von Fersen and Countess Hedvig Catharina de la Gardia.

In 1770 he entered the French army as a lieutenant, but on his return to Sweden in 1775 he was appointed captain of the Light Dragoons.

Four years later, he re-entered the French service, became a welcome guest at the Court of Ludvig XVI. and a favorite of Queen Marie Antoinette, so much that it caused uneasiness to Count Creutz, the Swedish minister at Paris, who, in April, 1779, wrote King Gustav III. of Sweden and explained this strange friendship, at the sametime lauding Count Fersen for his modesty and particularly so for his intention to accompany the French troops to America, which was contemplated at that time.

Extract from Fersen's letter written to his father in Sweden explains (translated):

Paris, March 2d, 1870.

Here I am, my dear father, at the height of my ambition. A great expedition of 12,000 men is being organized, but I am assured it will be raised to 20,000.

I have obtained permission to join it as aide-de-camp to the general, who is M. de Rochambeau, but secrecy has been strongly impressed upon me, as it has been refused to many others.

Everybody wishes to join it, but a firm resolution has been adopted to send to it only such officers as belong to the marching regiments.

I owe my appointment to M. de Vergennes. He undertook to procure it for me. I am in a state of delight I can hardly express. When I spoke to M. de Rochambeau, he said a thousand kind things to me, and talked to me long of you, my father; he ended by saying that he would be delighted to have me near him, and to show you how much he esteems you, and how sincerely he is attached to you.

He was appointed first aide to the Commander-in-Chief of the French forces, Comte de Rochambeau, who left Brest May 4, 1870, after a voyage of 87 days arrived at Newport, Rhode Island. Fersen established headquarters there at 302 New Lane, and assumed full charge of the disembarkation and the establishment of camps, etc.

There was great curiosity displayed by the French officers to get a glimpse of "the hero of liberty," as they called the American chieftain, General Washington.

Fersen in one of his numerous epistolary testimonials, sums up the French impression of Washington as "illustrious if not unique in our age. His fine and majestic face, while mild and frank, reflects his moral qualities. He looks the hero; he is very cold, speaks but little, yet is polite and suave. An air of sadness over-shadows his countenance, which is not unbecoming and renders him yet more interesting."

Fersen, during the hazardous campaign lasting nearly two years was Rocham-

beau's first and chief aide in every sense.

It was Fersen who was ordered with quick dispatch to Providence to hasten the embarkation of the artillery and prepare for the departure of the fleet southward!

It was ever Fersen, in as much as General Rochambeau placed more confidence in him than in any of his other staff officers, as will be seen from extracts of Fersen's letters to his father, viz:

(Translated.)

Newport, October, 16th, 1871.

An officer is to go to France by this frigate to explain the state and position of this army and of our dear allies, both of which are bad enough. It is not known who will be entrusted with this commission; everybody says it will be myself; many of the general officers, M. de Chatellux and Baron de Viomenie, have spoken of me as one who could perfectly answer the wishes of the General in this regard.

I do not know what the end will be, but I shall take no step to obtain it, and shall not refuse it if it be offered me. But I would prefer not to be charged with such a disagreeable business. Something of interest might happen in my absence and I should be in despair not to have a hand in it.

(Translated.)

Newport, January 14, 1781.

There is a coolness between Washington and Rochambeau; the dissatisfaction is on the part of the American General; ours is ignorant of the reason. He has given me orders to go with a letter from him and to inform myself of the reason for his discontent, to heal the breach if possible, or if the affair be more grave to report to him the cause.

You see, my dear father, that I am in diplomacy; this is my first trial. I shall try to come out from it with honors.

Fersen, although a sincere aristocrat, was kind and sympathetic. The soldiers adored him and they would endure any amount of privation under his leadership. Is it then any wonder that he so magnificently distinguished himself in the final battle at Yorktown, where many of his Swedish soldiers fell.

His modesty and devotion to duty is gleaned from the following letters:

York, October 23, 1781.

All our young colonels who belong to the Court are leaving, so as to pass their winter in Paris.

Some will come back; others will remain, and will be greatly surprised not to be made brigadiers, because of having been at the siege of York; they think they have done the finest thing in the world.

As for myself, I shall remain. I should have no other reason for going to Paris but my amusement and pleasure; they must be sacrificed. My affairs will do without me. I should spend money there; I ought to husband it.

I prefer to employ it in making some campaign here and finishing that which I have begun.

When I took up the resolution to come over here I foresaw all the ennui I should have to endure; it is just that the instruction I may acquire should cost me something.

I am only afraid of peace, and pray that it be not made yet.

(Translated.)

Philadelphia, August 8, 1872.

The last letter I had the honor to write you, my dear father, was of the 16th of July, also from Philadelphia.

I was here with M. de Rochambeau, who had appointed a rendezvous with General Washington to confer together on the operation of the campaign. As a result of this conference I was sent on the 19th to York, in Virginia, on a mission then secret, but no longer so.

The army is to leave Baltimore the 15th to pass here and march to the North River. I shall wait its arrival here; I must have some rest, and I could not be in a place more agreeable and comfortable than this.

(Translated.)

Crompond Camp, October 3d, 1782.

The last letter I had the honor of writing you, my dear father, was of the month of August. Since then we have been constantly on the road, and I have not had an opportunity to send you any.

Although we have seen no enemy, the campaign has been very severe; we have suffered a great deal from the heat, and now the cold begins to make itself felt quite sharply. I sustain all these changes perfectly, and only find myself better for them. I have a tent this year and a mattress. I am not very well off for coverings, but my cloak takes their place.

In recognition of his valor, a farewell reception by Societas Scandinaviensis was tendered him, at the City tavern in Philadelphia, shortly before his return to France, at which all the leading men of the day were present, and where the president of the St. Andrew's Society, Rev. William Smith, D.D., praised Fersen's bravery and that of his men.

During the latter part of December, 1782, Fersen sailed with the fleet, on board "Le Brave," a 74-gun ship, Chevalier de Amblimont commanding. Comte Christian de Deuse-Ponts and the remainder (three companies) of his Elsassian regiment, were on board of the same vessel.

Upon his arrival in France, Fersen was appointed Chief of the Royal Suedois (a royal regiment of Swedes stationed at the Court of Louis XVI).

Subsequently General Washington honored him with the "Order of the Cincinnati," but the King of Sweden declined to permit him to wear it, regarding the institution as having a republican tendency, not in keeping with his government.

In a letter dated Mount Vernon, Virginia, August 20, 1784, to Count de Rochambeau, Washington, commenting on this, wrote sarcastically:

Considering how recently the King of Sweden has changed the form of government of that country, it is not so much to be wondered at that his fear should get the better of his liberality as to anything which might have the semblance of republicanism, but when it is further considered how few of his nation had or could have a right to the Order, I think he might have suffered his complaisance to overcome them.

Fersen proved himself the devoted friend of the royal French family. When their flight from Paris in January, 1791, was arranged he consented to play the part of coachman in disguise, and conducted them to the post of Bondi, whence they were sent on under the care of others.

He was disliked and suspected by the people at the same time, and when the Crown Prince, Christian of Augustenburg, suddenly died, in June, 1810, suspicions fastened on him and his sister, the Countess Piper, of having taken part with others in poisoning the prince.

At the funeral they were assailed by the mob; the Marshal sought refuge in a house, but was slain by the crowd, June 20th, 1810.

His sister succeeded in making her escape.

The complete innocence of Count Fersen and his family was established by a subsequent judicial inquiry.

This country has honored the memory of Count Fersen by placing a large oil painting of him among the foreign heroes of the War of Independence at Independence Hall, Philadelphia.

In the rotunda of the Capitol, Washington, D. C., hangs a large painting of the Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown (by Trumbull). Among the French officers will be found the portrait of Count Fersen.