

Edward Pinkowski

General Pulaski's body

When I received your invitation to take part in this conference and to talk about the bones found in a brick-lined vault under the Pulaski Monument in Savannah, Georgia, I asked Dr. Karen Burns, an anthropologist at the University of Georgia, if she would like to come to Warka and discuss the challenge she faced when she took the bones, one by one, out of a small iron box on September 27, 1996. I am sorry to state that I received no reply. After that, I sent her pictures and historical evidence to use in her work, and still have not heard from her. As a result what I have to say today about General Pulaski's body which I have seen twice is uncensored and unauthorized.

The purpose of the present forensic study in Savannah is to prove by DNA and other tests that the bones from the iron box of 1854, inscribed with the name Brigadier General Casimir Pulaski on the cover, are Pulaski's remains. The scientific findings, of course, will not be disclosed to the public until the famous coroner of Savannah, Dr. James C. Metts, who is in charge of this work, is ready to issue a report.

Because so much inaccurate information on the remains has already been reported to the Polish people, Dr. Metts was irritated by the confusion and unfounded reports from Poland. For one thing, he wrote to me: *I know you are aware that the Pulaski remains are, and at all times have been, treated with the greatest respect, care, and security. At the present time the remains are in a locked, guarded, and secure area under my direct authority. No one may enter that area without my specific authorization.*

It is often difficult, if not impossible, to know everything about a person's past life from a rusted box of old bones — at least, without a great deal of study. In this case, working with Dr. Metts, not officially but independently, I know that a long chain of physical and historical evidence will fill in many gaps in the story of the most famous Polish name in American history.

At the same time, on a second front, I have also arranged to send blood samples of likely maternal Pulaski descendants to the laboratory which has General Pulaski's DNA results for analysis. By coming to Poland, I hope not only to tell Pulaski's countrymen more about the discovery of his body in Savannah but also to track down other women, living or dead, who have a direct link to General Pulaski's mother. Beginning in 1992, when I found a copy of Sławomir Górczyński's work *Pułascy Herbu Ślepowron* which appears in this book, I looked for church records,

family histories, and other documents to correct the mistakes made in previous years in General Pulaski's biographies. When I began to search for the graves of Pulaski's mother and her daughters, Górczyński's study proved invaluable to me. Finding one of them might be like finding a needle in a haystack. Hopefully, in the coming months, when the quest is publicized, someone may get in touch with me. I look forward to your cooperation. Possibly that is one way we'll end the false claim of Pulaski's burial at sea, which as it was repeated in newspaper articles perpetuates a lie.

Looking back, if you want to know exactly where the Polish general of the American War of Independence died and trace his body from then on, imagine yourself on a dirty, smelly, 14-gun privateer, known as the *Wasp*, that was owned by Joseph Atkinson, a merchant of Charleston, South Carolina, and privately manned under Captain Samuel Bulfinch, who took up sailing the seven seas in Boston at an early age. Sit back and forget most of what you have heard of the ship (no *USS Wasp*, please).

For at least two days the black-painted *Wasp*, sails furled, was tied up at the wooden pier of the Bonaventure plantation in Georgia, where Vice Admiral Charles-Henri d'Estaing, who commanded a French squadron of forty-three ships and an army of 4,456 men, set up a field hospital and based his artillery in September, 1779. His engineer called the place, separated from old Savannah by a few miles of woods, Thunderbolt Bluff after the river of the same name. Today the river is known as Wilmington. When the *Wasp* arrived there to load the French artillery guns used in the siege of Savannah and to transport sick and wounded bodies to Charleston, South Carolina, the evacuation of the American and French army camps at Savannah was almost done. There were no doctors left at the Bonaventure pier and „only one lad,” as Captain Bulfinch called him, to take care of the sick and wounded on his brigantine. One of the last two hospital cases to reach the *Wasp* was Pulaski.

By the afternoon of October 15, 1779, Captain Bulfinch had no room to take any more passengers. When another wounded officer, Lt. Cornelius Van Vlieland, who had lost an arm in the siege of Savannah, asked him for passage to Charleston, Bulfinch arranged to send him on another ship. In the sequence of events, it looked as if the visit of Lt. Van Vlieland came before the death of Pulaski. Otherwise, Pulaski's death created a vacancy on the *Wasp*, and had the young lieutenant waited, Bulfinch would have had space for him.

Partly because of his occupation with the one-armed officer, Bulfinch was not entirely aware of the preparations on the *Wasp* to make a coffin out of pine boards either at hand or on the plantation for Pulaski's body. From the evidence of their work, as was seen in 1853 and 1996, the officers and crew of the *Wasp* prepared to bury Pulaski's body in his military uniform with a flag draped over it.

What happened next?

Historians didn't pay much attention to Pulaski in America until Jared Sparks, who left the pulpit of a Unitarian church in April, 1823, to edit the *North American Review* in Boston, received a 38-page pamphlet from Paul Bentalou, a French captain in the Pulaski Legion. In reviewing it, Sparks quoted sections from the pamphlet and tied it with General Lafayette's return to America at that time¹. For the next two decades, until he completed the biography of Pulaski in 1844, Sparks picked up where Bentalou left off, questioned survivors of the American Revolution, visited Europe on several occasions in search of documents on Pulaski, and repeated Bentalou's rendition that Pulaski was buried at sea.

Significantly, the two misled generations of Pulaski's friends and admirers. I was misled, too. For more than a century and a half Bentalou and Sparks were the authors from whom many writers drew a great deal of their information on Pulaski's would-be grave. They also stated that the *Wasp* was a United States warship. Many newspapers, magazines, and books, including speakers at anniversary programs, still perpetuated the lie as well as the manufactured date of Pulaski's birthday.

For some reason, partly because of working in bootleg coal holes in Pennsylvania during the Great Depression of the 1930s to keep body and soul together, I learned that I had to dig and dig, not in coal veins, but in mountains of paper work, in order to find out what I wanted to know about Pulaski's grave. After years of nibbling at historical records and not finding a certificate of burial, I turned to a large body of official records, letters, logs, and other material left by the French expedition under Admiral D'Estaing in Georgia. Among the depositories, the Library of Congress in Washington had microfilm records of the expedition.

When I called for part of the French collection, a staff member there told me that someone in the reading room already had loaned it, and I was introduced to a Hungarian expatriate, Mrs. Ellen Szaszdi, who offered to help me with the story of a Polish freedom fighter.

As a result of our conversation, she immediately found the owner of the *Wasp* in a French letter dated September 12, 1779. In it, J. Plombard, the French consul at Charleston, wrote to Count d'Estaing:

*M. Atkinson, a businessman of this town and owner of the brigantine Wasp, Captain Bulfinch, leaves this morning to be at the orders of M. le Comte. This brigantine is armed with fourteen cannons and it will help to fulfill the object of M. d'Estaing for some small armed craft*².

The French consul's letter was like a guided missile. Of all the officers and men who served on the *Wasp* in the fall of 1779, only three have been identified – Captain Samuel Bulfinch, Lt. William Main, and Eleazar Phillips, the purser and

¹ Jared Sparks, Count Pulaski, „*North American Review*”, April, 1825, vol. 20, p. 388.

² Plombard to Count d'Estaing, Sept. 12, 1779, Archives Nationales (France), Marine B4 168, p. 120.

steward, who was in peacetime a carpenter and cabinet maker. The first two died within thirteen years of each other, Bulfinch in Philadelphia on Feb. 27, 1813, and Main in Charleston on April 15, 1800, none of them leaving published accounts of their services in the disastrous siege of Savannah. Lt. Main was second in command, a position of such rank and importance that only ships with a fair sized crew were entitled to one. In his two responsibilities, Phillips not only relayed orders to the crew and transmitted signals to other ships but also received money from the Navy Board of South Carolina to provide stores for the captain and officers of the *Wasp*.

At some point, Bulfinch dispatched an officer to open a recruiting station in Charleston, South Carolina, to enlist a crew for the *Wasp*. Each one who enlisted to serve on the masted ship at least six months got a bounty of \$100, and prior to that time it was \$30. Slaves were not entitled to any money. Their owners hired them out to the *Wasp* and received the pay of forty dollars a month for each slave. Other sailors received five dollars more a month. The petty officers, from the boatswain to the gunner, each received sixty dollars a month. The captain was paid four dollars a day and two dollars for his table.³

Little did this crew know that some of them probably would become pallbearers for General Pulaski. Were slaves pallbearers? No one knows. They were in the pool from which pallbearers and gravediggers were taken. At that time, when most of the people of African descent in the South were held in bondage, they had no interchange with purveyors of news.

The more I probed, the harder it was to find recollections of the General Washington's generation to unlock the gates of Pulaski's Valhalla. If Bentalou were the other officer who was brought to the *Wasp* on October 15, 1779, he was unable to follow the body away from the ship. Still hidden in the dusty files of the National Archives were the papers of Martha Miller, who was married to Eleazer Phillips in 1786. After her husband died in November, 1826, she applied for a government pension, and in her papers I discovered that Eleazer Phillips, the purser of the *Wasp*, made the coffin for Pulaski's body⁴.

I did not find evidence that Pulaski was not buried at sea until 1971, after years of searching for the *Wasp's* logs, which I did not find, and other records, I found a letter that Bulfinch wrote by candlelight to General Benjamin Lincoln, who commanded the American forces in the South, on October 15, 1779, at Thunderbolt Bluff. Lincoln made no fuss over it. He stuck the letter into a leather pouch. If Lincoln tried to hide Pulaski's death from the British, he wasn't successful. Within three days Prevost knew of Pulaski's death. Not until Lt. Col. Charles-Frederic Bedaulx,

³ „Journal of the Commissioners of the Navy of South Carolina”, July 22, 1779; March 23, 1780, vol. 2, pp. 14-15.

⁴ Chovine R. Clark, Count Cassimir Pulaski, „Transactions of the Huguenot Society of South Carolina”, No 82, 1977, pp. 114-116; Pension Application R 8205, Roll 1927, National Archives, Washington, DC.

whom Pulaski appointed second in command of his independent corps on Nov. 13, 1778, mention it, did Congress know of Pulaski's death. Less than two months later, Bedaulx, a tall, blonde, 25-year-old Swiss soldier of fortune, died in a hospital at Charleston of a lingering illness. Prior to that time, and even later, the word was that he was killed in action helping Pulaski in the siege of Savannah. Unlike Pulaski, however, the register of St. Phillips Church in Charleston showed that Bedaulx was buried in the parish cemetery on December 8, 1779.

When Lincoln left the army in 1781, Bulfinch's letter was stored in his farmhouse at Hingham, Massachusetts. The large bulk of his papers, preserved during his life, and kept out of strange hands for over a century and a half, were taken out of the Lincoln homestead and deposited in Boston where they were microfilmed in 1963 by the Massachusetts Historical Society. As soon as this treasure trove of primary source material was available, I spent endless hours going through it, by means of a rather poor microfilm reader, to look for the activities of Pulaski at or near Savannah. As was his habit, Lincoln kept rough drafts of letters that he wrote to Pulaski and d'Estaing, but none to lesser figures. The day I found Bulfinch's letter to him from Thunderbolt, or Tunder Bolt as he spelled it, was especially important. I made a major discovery. I marked it in red on the calendar. With or without a magnifying glass, I could not make out certain words in the letter. Thirteen years later, with improved copy machines in use, I made a positive copy and enlarged sections of the letter until the murky words were clearer.

On October 15, 1779, Bulfinch wrote:

Sir,

I beg leave to acquaint you that agreeable to your orders I took on board nine pieces of the artillery which was the most I possibly could take on. Mo'over, I even was obliged to put some of the carriages on board the Schooner that carry the French wounded. I likewise took on board the Americans that was sent down — one of which died this day and I have brought him ashore and buried him. They have put only one lad on board to attend the sick. I should be glad your Excellency would order some others on Board to attend them. Capt. Vlyanland (sic) came down this afternoon. There was no place to put him. The Eagle whom he was to have gone on board, went away this morning and left him. I made interest with the French Gentleman who has the directions of putting the wounded on board the other schooners for Charleston and got him on board one of them. I am with the highest esteem,

Sir, your most Re Obdt Sevt

*Sam Bulfinch*⁵

⁵ Benjamin Lincoln Papers, Massachusetts Society, Boston, Mass, Film 1673, Roll 4, frame 743.

Immediately after the Wasp left Thunderbolt Bluff at high tide the following morning, quite possibly the only remaining people who knew where Pulaski's body was buried were the denizens of Greenwich plantation, across the road from Bonaventure, holding Mrs. Jane Bowen, her four children, her brother, and their servants. At the time Bonaventure was not occupied by the plantation owners. During the British occupation of Savannah, the Tattnalls and the Mulrynes, who owned the plantation, fled to Savannah or one of the British islands in the Atlantic for safety.

Samuel Bowen, who bought Greenwich plantation in 1765, planted on it between marshes and tidal streams soy beans which he smuggled out of China and started a whole new industry in the country. Within a short time he married a member of Georgia high society, Jane Spencer, daughter of Savannah's Collector of Customs, acquired many slaves, and trained them to press oil and vermicelli from soy beans and boil sweet potatoes to make sago powder. He found the Thunderbolt River – so named because a thunderbolt fell and left a smell where James Oglethorpe, in 1733, went for a drink of spring water – more pleasant and convenient than the sandy road to Savannah and built a landing dock on the river for his own use. He crossed the Atlantic many times in his own ships to sell his new foodstuffs in England.

As a result of his death in London December 30, 1777, it was Jane Bowen's fate to become involved, with far reaching consequences, in running the Greenwich plantation during the second battle over Savannah. The French used the equally beautiful neighboring plantation, Bonaventure, for a hospital, but Count d'Estaing truly favored Greenwich and a large tent in the midst of the surrounding camp for official business. Two of his naval officers boarded with the Bowen family during their stay in Georgia.

Up to December, 1853, Pulaski's body laid in a beautiful setting along the river and in a moment you'll get a better description. At night, while slaves held burning torches to shine light on the proceedings, Mrs. Bowen showed her slaves where to bury the body between her mansion and the river and later her family and servants and those who succeeded them took care of the grave. When Jane Bowen died in 1782, she left 26 slaves to four children, 15 cows and two oxen, pigs and calves, iron boilers and sago machines, sage to make starch, sago powder to make pudding, but nothing more important than memories of General Pulaski and Count d'Estaing to enrich the historical lore of Greenwich. New recitals of the legends continued to grow. It could not help but grow if you multiply 26 slaves by four children and ponder the number of times the anecdotal history was passed on from one generation to the next.

Because of Bentalou, Jane Bowen's grandson, Major William P. Bowen, who opened the grave and moved the remains to Savannah, had an increasingly difficult time to convince most Americans that he rescued Pulaski from oblivion. The reality was, though, that had he and his associates not placed the bones in an iron box,

21 inches by 11 inches in size, and hid them and two cornerstones in a brick vault in Monterey Square, no one would have known he had a better knowledge of Pulaski's first grave than Bentalou.

Shortly after the cornerstone of the Pulaski Monument was laid, Bowen heard that a 66-year-old Jewish cotton dealer, Jacob Clavius Levy, who had moved from Charleston, South Carolina, to Savannah in 1848, knew a Polish Legionnaire named Boguslawski who had visited the grave in 1803 or 1804. Back then, when Bowen was just a tot, his aunt, Elizabeth Ann Beecroft, an eye-witness to Pulaski's burial, owned Greenwich plantation and always kept flowers on the grave until her death in 1816. The oldest daughter of Samuel and Jane Bowen, she was married to a British army surgeon, Dr. Samuel Beecroft.

Levy spoke in French to Captain Jacob Ferdinard Boguslawski, who posed as General Pulaski's nephew and prior to that time, served in a grenadier company in the French expedition to Haiti.

I remember him well – Levy wrote to Bowen – and we became intimate, as far as a boy of fourteen or fifteen could be with a man past the meridian of life. After some time he took leave of us for the purpose, as he said, of visiting the grave of his uncle. He returned to Charleston and mentioned that he had accomplished the object of his visit⁶.

General Kazimierz Małachowski, who led a demibrigade in the ill-fated French expedition to keep Negro slaves from declaring their independence in Haiti, also wrote about Boguslawski and other Polish legionnaires who visited Savannah in his memoirs and a character in one of Henryk Sienkiewicz's was based on Boguslawski. Who exactly told him of Pulaski's grave is, up to this point, a mystery.

Jumping ahead to twiddle your Polish price, on June 1, 1858, just before he died, Bowen, the father of the Pulaski Monument in Savannah, rode back to Greenwich plantation with a Polish sculptor, Henryk Dmochowski, who had just arrived in Savannah to exhibit his marble bust of Pulaski in the library of the Georgia Historical Society. Now, for the first time in 139 years, Dmochowski's letter, which I found in an obscure collection in your National Library, pinpointed Pulaski's gravesite.

Yesterday – Dmochowski wrote on June 2, 1859, from Savannah – I went with Major Bowen to the place where Pulaski's grave was. The place is four miles from here on the banks of a little river, which empties into the Savannah (River), where the admiral's headquarters was and where the French landed. The house is splendid and still kept in good condition. For many years it belonged to Major Bowen's ancestors. At present, Mrs. Gilbert, a widow with tuberculosis, is the

⁶ Henry Williams, An Address Delivered on laying the Corner Stone of a Monument to Pulaski in the City of Savannah, October 11, 1853, Savannah 1855, pp. 43-44.

owner of the house. A handicapped sister lives with her. Major Bowen showed me the trunk of a palmetto tree and an English holly bush, which were growing close to the grave, and were the markers he used to locate the grave where Pulaski was buried. The place was thick with bulrushes and bushes. It was so beautiful, very close to the river. On all the trees there was hanging moss and different shapes and festoons decorating them. The house was beautifully kept. The maid was polite and gracious. I saw a few big magnolia trees. Major Bowen planted them. I took a few branches from a magnolia tree, leaves from a holly bush and the grave site, other momentous, including bark from a palmetto tree and moss. All this should be sent to Poznań or elsewhere. They are going to be rare souvenirs⁷.

Incidentally, despite his biography in *Polski słownik biograficzny*, Dmochowski did not do any of the stone carving on the Pulaski Monument in Savannah.

In the steady flow of articles on Pulaski, certain parts of the story were often overlooked. Very few, quite possibly only Major Bowen and his medical friends, mentioned what was transferred from the grave at Greenwich to the brick vault in Monterey Square in Savannah. In fact, when the remains were first dug up, parts of the coffin that Phillips made on the Wasp were not entirely rotted away. Some of the wood and nails he used were found again in the iron box under the Pulaski Monument in 1996. Dr. Metts allowed James Wermuth, the chief restorer of the 142-year-old monument, to take the pieces with him to Rhode Island for analysis.

Souvenir hunters had a field day the first time the body was exhumed. Among items that suddenly disappeared were the metal buttons which indicated that Pulaski was buried in his military uniform. Beads, quite possibly parts of a rosary, and coins of 1779 were stolen. The lamented hero of Savannah had a full set of teeth when he died. All but a few molars were missing when the iron box was opened last year, but luckily one of the remaining teeth provided DNA results.

In the first ceremony to honor Pulaski in Savannah in 1825, General Lafayette laid a cornerstone in Chippewa Square. Because it was a solid block of stone, the committee in charge of the affair put coins, paper currency, historical documents and other valuables of that day in a box of some kind. The contents were never transferred to the new tomb in 1854. Only the heavy cornerstone was. No one knows what happened to the other valuables.

Most people, I would guess, would be more interested in the skull and gracile bones than in the pieces of metal, glass, pottery, or whatever, that clung to Pulaski's body. If you were to put him side by side with Bulfinch, one of the last persons to see him alive, Pulaski was several inches shorter and four years younger than

⁷ Letters of Henryk Dmochowski to Henryk Kałusowski (in Polish), letter dated June 2, 1859, RPS sygn. III 8322, National Library, Warsaw, Poland (copies in the collection of Edward Pinkowski, Philadelphia, PA).

Bulfinch. He had a small head and narrow shoulders. The captain of the Wasp stood five feet, five inches, in height, and had dark brown hair and a dark complexion.

Edmund Strzelecki would have to climb higher than the tallest mountain in Australia to keep up with the historical and physical evidence piling up with General Pulaski. For one thing, on January 13, 1770, when Pulaski was ambushed by Russian forces at Grab along the southern border of Poland, he broke his right hand and couldn't write a letter for weeks. The broken hand was documented in two letters. X-rays of the right hand of the remains in Savannah also coincide with this evidence. It also denoted, as is true of every child who ever learned to write in Poland, that he was right-handed.

It was easy to connect the bones in the rusted iron box with Pulaski because, burying his body in a coffin, the spine began to take the same shape as a flat bottom from 1779 to 1853. No body that was laid to rest without the benefit of a pine box only a generation before could assume such flatness as one that was in a coffin for 74 years.

The study of other bones, though mostly quietly, suggest, from pure speculation, that Pulaski slept so much on his saddle rather than face ambush in a lonely farmhouse that he developed a crooked neck. Somewhere in a biography of the Polish hero of two continents I read that Franciszka Krasińska gave him a medallion with an image of St. Casimir, known in Poland as a *ryngraf*, to wear around his neck for good luck. If so, it could have saved his life on one occasion, for under the spot where the medallion would normally hang Pulaski suffered a slight wound.

I have asked the caretakers to check red specks I saw on the bones for vestiges of dyed material, and I suppose the color was a sign of an American flag that had rotted away. Under the beads found in 1853 on the body, there were very small bones, quite possibly the ends of fingers, and it is not certain that they were saved. The beads were not – someone no doubt added them to a private collection. Could it be that gloves were stretched over Pulaski's hands?

The answers are not easy to come by. Each time the body was exposed the press devoted little attention to it. Right after the iron box, which the press called a metal container in 1854, was taken out of the brick vault, the „Savannah Morning News” devoted only nine paragraphs to the story, and even less in 1853 when workmen left shovel marks on the bones at Greenwich plantation. One person in Georgia, and perhaps others, thought it was morbid when „*Życie Warszawy*” showed in its issue of October 13, 1996, a photograph of Dr. Karen Burns with part of General Pulaski's leg in her hands and in front of her the skull and other bones on top of a pile of iron-filled rubbish. Naturally the anthropologist didn't like it and the photographer who took the picture and sold it to the Associated Press was virtually ostracized from Savannah.

The remains, however, opened a new challenge to the scientific community, and Dr. Burns drove as often as necessary more than 100 miles in an old car from her campus to Savannah to examine the bones by herself and with others, includ-

ing a bone doctor from Arizona, Dr. Charles F. Merbs, who has a Pulaski connection in some way but doesn't know the details.

While they kept mainly quiet on their work, the press had reports of the search for a female descendant of Pulaski's mother for comparison. The bones of Pulaski's nephew, Józef Suffczyński, who died of yellow fever May 17, 1803, were reported in Les Cayes, Haiti, and the death of his grandniece, Josephine Jarocka, took place in Brooklyn, New York in 1896. With increasing frequency, the Pulaski family tree is still growing. Let no man think for a moment that Pulaski isn't the most popular Polish name in America. At last count, there were nearly 21,000 telephone listings with Pulaski in them.

Of fully as much value to Savannah as identifying Pulaski's body was the monument Robert Launitz designed for him in Monterey Square. Had Launitz built it better, it would never have deteriorated as fast as it did. Unquestionably many a reader of this story, wanting to contribute to the restoration of the monument but not knowing where to send the money, was influenced by the progress in the historical and physical end. No one knows when all is said and done whether or not the body, or what remains of it, will be lowered again into the brick vault and twenty tons of marble laid and cemented over it, block by block, as straight as a tapered arrow, to the height of 55 feet. No one knows how many people have visited the Pulaski Monument in Savannah with the lady of liberty on top of everything and never knew the incredible story that Pulaski's body was underneath it.