



## America's Tiniest National Park—With the Hugely Unpronounceable Name

Let the crowds have Yellowstone. Real adventurers will be exploring this brick edifice. 'Who the hell is Thaddeus Kosciuszko?'

The Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial in Philadelphia is the tiniest unit in the National Park Service. Matt Rourke/Associated Press

By Scott Calvert  
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PHILADELPHIA—He is the Revolutionary War hero you've quite possibly never heard of, the trans-Atlantic freedom fighter whose name you probably can't pronounce. We're talking about Thaddeus Kosciuszko.

Thanks to a fish-stick magnate (more about that later), this Polish-born military engineer is heralded at a national memorial here—a onetime boardinghouse that at .02 acres is the tiniest of more than 400 units in the National Park Service empire, including parks, monuments and battlefields.

As travelers swarm rock-star parks such as Yellowstone this summer, a relative few will venture inside the brick edifice that served as an extended-stay hotel for a man endorsed by Benjamin

Franklin, backed by George Washington, extolled by Thomas Jefferson and jailed by Catherine the Great.

The good news is that you're probably not going to be jostling with many other tourists, at least according to Yelp reviews, which include, "Half an hour felt like enough time," and "Who the hell is Thaddeus Kosciuszko?"

First in on a recent rainy Saturday were Katherine and Brian Groth and their four children, ages 3 to 11, on an East Coast history tour. Like others at the no-charge, self-guided site, the Virginia family said they knew almost zilch about him.

### **'I had no idea'**

"Welcome to the smallest national park unit in the country," ranger Zack LoPresto said with evident pride.



The Groth family visited the Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial on an East Coast history tour.  
PHOTO: SCOTT CALVERT/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"Heard about that," Katherine Groth chuckled.

Stepping out into the drizzle 45 minutes later, 10-year-old Lucchese Groth shared her favorite new fact: Kosciuszko gave Jefferson the fur-trimmed coat he got from the Russian czar. The third president wore it for portraits, and it is on his bronze statue at the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C.

You won't find the coat here, but a replica of Kosciuszko's bedchamber has copies of artifacts, such as the combination peace pipe-tomahawk that Chief Little Turtle of

the Miami people gave him. You can also watch a movie in English or Polish.

Caleb Legnini lives around the corner from the site and popped in for the first time, curious about a figure he never learned about in school. "This name," he said, "does not ring a bell."

Boston, Chicago and other cities have Kosciuszko statues. New York City has a Kosciuszko Bridge. There is Kosciusko, Miss. (Oprah Winfrey's hometown), and Kosciusko County, Ind., both spelled with no "z." You can buy Kosciusko-brand mustard. All are named after Thaddeus. So is Australia's tallest mountain.

But a household name it is not.



Kasey Estenson shows off the Kosciuszko National Memorial stamp newly added to her book of stamps from National Park Service sites. PHOTO: SCOTT CALVERT/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“I had no idea who this was, but I just really like the national park system,” said Erin Sully, of Minneapolis, during her stop.

If he had a highlight reel, it would go like this: Born Andrzej Tadeusz Bonawentura Kościuszko in 1746, he studied engineering and military strategy. He sailed to America in 1776 after an ill-fated bid to marry a noblewoman. In Philadelphia, he impressed Franklin and became a colonel in the Continental Army.

In 1777, defenses he devised in Saratoga, N.Y., helped the patriots defeat the British.

Supported by General Washington—who spelled Kosciuszko’s name 11 different ways before getting it right—he masterfully fortified West Point. He later fought in the Carolinas, taking a bayonet to the buttocks.

He returned to Europe after the war and led Polish peasants in a failed revolt against Russian domination. Imprisoned by Catherine the Great, he was later freed by her son, gifted the fur-trimmed coat, and recrossed the Atlantic.

Back in Philly, he crashed at 3rd and Pine—now the memorial site—for five months starting in late 1797. He grew close to then-Vice President Jefferson, who dubbed him “as pure a son of liberty as I have ever known.” Congress belatedly paid Kosciuszko for his war service. With Jefferson’s aid, he wrote a will calling for his estate to help free slaves—a wish never granted. Back across the ocean he went, dying 19 years later in Switzerland at 71.



The site honors Kosciuszko, a Revolutionary War hero extolled by Thomas Jefferson. PHOTO: MATT ROURKE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

### Sneeze-worthy

With a bio like that, why isn’t he better known in the U. S.? Simple, says his biographer, Alex Storozynski: “No one could pronounce his name.”

“If his name was Smith or Jones, he would be in all the history books,” said Storozynski, author of “The Peasant Prince: Thaddeus Kosciuszko and the Age of Revolution.”

The Polish Embassy in D.C. offers this phonetic spelling: *Kosh'-tchoosh-ko*. Storozynski thinks *KOS-choose-KO* is easier for American English speakers, and that is basically the guidance given at the national memorial. The name sounds like a sneeze, says Park Service spokesman Andrew McDougall.



How do you pronounce Kosciuszko? Park visitors give it their best shot. SCOTT CALVERT/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Complicating matters, pronunciations in the U.S. are all over the map. Some New Yorkers go with *Kos-kee-oss-ko* for the bridge, while the Indiana county is *Kaa-see-aa-sko*, officials there note.

When the Groth kids took the junior-ranger pledge, LoPresto had them repeat: “I promise to never mispronounce Kosciuszko.”

LoPresto, 27, said the smallest-unit distinction of the “K House” makes it more memorable, and he doesn’t envy colleagues at Western parks with millions of acres and endless vistas. “I’m just kind of enjoying my work.”

Edward Pizek and a friend, John Paul, launched a frozen-seafood business: Mrs. Paul’s. The Polish American Pizek bought the dilapidated former boardinghouse and gave it to the park service.

The Kosciuszko historical site opened in 1976, but its roots arguably date to 1946. That year



Park ranger Zack LoPresto outside the 'K House.' PHOTO: SCOTT CALVERT/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Once open daily, it now operates only on weekend afternoons between April and October. Last year it had 2,218 visitors, half as many as 20 years ago, park service figures show. The [park service](#)’s most-[popular](#) attraction, the Blue Ridge Parkway, drew 16.8 million visitors last year.

LoPresto and fellow ranger Sean Stout said Polish groups often pay homage to a man revered in Poland. They may need no pronunciation tips, but some visitors sure do.

Kasey Estenson of Schwenksville, Pa., took a stab. “Ko-soo-ZEE-koo?” she asked. When she heard a ranger say the name, she laughed. “Oh wow, yeah, I was really off.”

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