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Major-General Nathanael Greene & His Contributions to the American Revolution

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“We fight, get beat, rise, and fight again.”
Nathanael Greene

In the litany that depicts the great heroes amongst the American Revolution, you see the names of famous heroes such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and John Paul Jones. The British also held a list of those they considered to be their heroes, like Henry Clinton, William Howe, and Charles Cornwallis. However, there is one man that is not appropriately remembered for his accomplishments. Major-General Nathanael Greene, a Quaker from Rhode Island, was one of George Washington's closest advisors and probably the most ingenious commander on the Continental side. He was a brilliant strategist, an efficient quartermaster, and a resourceful commander. From his service in the Kentish Guards in the beginning of the Revolution to his command of the Southern Army, Nathanael Greene epitomized the underlying idea of America: opportunity through perseverance.

Nathanael Greene was born on July 27, 1742 in the small colony of Rhode Island. Nathanael's great-great grandfather, John Greene departed from England in the mid 1600s (probably to avoid what would become the English Civil War), making his family one of the original Puritan families on the continent. However, by the time Greene was born, his family had converted from Puritanism to Quakerism and had moved from Providence to Warwick. Nathanael spent most of his childhood working in his father's local company forges and mills, learning the valuable skills of business management and economics. Nathanael's formal education was not very extensive as was his contemporaries', mostly because his father, a devout Quaker, strictly enforced the idea that knowledge is corrupt and unnecessary. However, Nathanael would become increasingly curious in the wonders of knowledge, especially in military history and the Enlightenment (Leckie 144). Throughout his business travels, Nathanael would also befriend several worldly gentlemen that would assist him in his quest for knowledge, some of which became his closest friends, like Sammy Ward and Henry Knox.

These friends and acquaintances of Nathanael, as well as his local peers and colonists of Rhode Island would have a tremendous influence on Nathanael's political outlook. Rhode Island, infamous for its democratic self-government and revolutionary population was a very annoying colony to deal with, according to the British. Even his firm of Nathanael Greene & Company

was affected by the increasingly hostile British government, which took upon itself the task to increase trade regulations in order to prevent these freedoms which Rhode Islanders held so dear. Nathanael became increasingly involved in local affairs, contradicting many of his Quaker beliefs. Such as when one of his ships, the *Fortune*, was seized by the British ship, the *Gaspee*, under the command of Lieutenant Dudingston. In retaliation, a group of revolutionaries led the *Gaspee* aground and scorched and destroyed it while the crippled ship lay there vulnerable (Golway 33-36).

Two years later, in 1774, Greene married Catherine (Caty) Littlefield, one of his extensive family's cousins, as well as a sociable, charming young lady. Greene also joined a new local militia group known as the Kentish Guards. To his dismay, he was denied a captain's position in the unit because of his slight limp, which others deemed as unprofessional and out-of-place. However, in his short term of service in the Kentish Guards, he showed the politicians of Rhode Island that he was qualified to lead a new fifteen-hundred man army to defend Rhode Island from the enemy.

During the siege of Boston, Greene reported to General Ward's headquarters and presumably offered to serve under Ward's command (Golway 49). This action contradicted all other state philosophies of a confederacy of independent states, which in fact would last until after the Civil War. Greene, from his readings of military commanders, knew that this fight for independence would require the participation of every state in a united force. Each state would have to lend its support to a common cause of liberty and independence for America; the entire 13 colonies, as one entity.

This philosophical act was only just the beginning of the true revelation that was the genius of Nathanael Greene. However, Greene's genius was constantly negated by the ineffectiveness and ill-preparedness of the American army from 1775-1779. From the siege at Boston to the Pennsylvania and New Jersey campaigns, Greene consistently obeyed his superior officer, Washington (who was unanimously selected as Commander-in-Chief), but was unable to clearly defeat the British. Even in the early days of the United States there existed a fine line between the motives of government and of the military. The military, severely depleted in supplies and manpower, consistently requested for material they needed to win the war. However, Congress, having other diplomatic and social objectives to complete, could not sufficiently provide the material requested by the Army. Even as Quartermaster General, Greene was hard-pressed to find any extra resources of food and clothing, because there was no money to repay the suppliers with! Congress, short on cash, was not able to sufficiently support the Continental armies until the arrival of French aid in 1778.

In addition to the problems that the Revolution faced, Greene was also trying to solve a dilemma of his own. Greene, having been separated from Caty for several years, would constantly write her letters of comfort and affection, to somewhat bridge the gap that emerged between them. Another objective of Greene's was his thirst for recognition, which would be somewhat quenched after the sack of General Gates, the "hero" of Saratoga, who lost decisively at the Battle of Camden. Now Greene, who had been indignantly requesting a transfer to a battlefield position, was appointed as Commander of the Southern Army.

There was no time to lose; and Greene worked diligently to restore the Southern army. He quickly appointed trusted patriots to key positions in the army and told them to retrieve any recruits willing to fight and any supplies they could muster in order to stand a chance against Cornwallis (Golway 238-239). Being able to anticipate your enemy and effectively plan strategy is essential in warfare and Greene definitely knew how to. Greene knew for sure that his

'reformed' militia army could not stand up against Cornwallis, so he decided to divide his forces in the face of his enemy: a very odd, yet daring move on Greene's part. However, innovation is what truly wins battles, not the common textbook maneuvers; and that's why Greene was a military genius.

Then, Cornwallis made his fatal decision to pursue Greene's army through the Carolina wilderness, thus abandoning all of his heavy equipment and material, and most importantly, his navy. Greene had forced his enemy into removing some of his numerous advantages that eventually gave Greene the upper hand (Hibbert 303). For two years, Greene led Cornwallis on a 'wild goose chase' around the Carolinas', harassing Cornwallis with hit-and-run tactics, with the exceptions of the Battles of Cowpens and Guilford Court House (one a victory, the other defeat for the Americans). But with Greene's knowledge of supply from his position as Quartermaster General and his innovative strategy, he was able to accomplish his overall objective: to liberate the South and drive the British back towards the coast. Without General Greene, all of the southern states would have probably been taken by the British, and the war lost, leaving an uncertain future for the American continent and the subsequent generations of American patriots.

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Biography

J.P.H. Christopher Joseph Raborg's full name honors his Revolutionary War ancestor and his two great-grandfathers. Chris is an active learner in the Harford Technical School Computer Networking and Technology (CNT) program. He attended the Gilder Lehrman Saturday Academy for American History at the University of Maryland taking a course on Imperial Democracy. Chris' academic schedule includes honors courses, AP courses and classes in the CNT program. He also participates with the Jazz Band, French Club, Skills USA and the National Technical Honors Society. Chris plans to attend college upon his high school graduation.

