

Nathanael Greene and the Legacy of the “Fighting Quaker”

Nathanael Greene’s role in the American Revolution is often forgotten or relegated to a footnote in history. Greene’s contemporaries, however, were well aware of the “Fighting Quaker” and his impact on the war. Alexander Hamilton said of Greene, “I indulge an expectation that the name of Greene will at once awaken in your mind the images of whatever is noble and estimable in human nature” (Hamilton). And yet, the name Greene does not inspire the same recollection that it once did. Today, Greene’s rise to prominence through self-education, service under Washington, and successful command against Cornwallis, in which he embodied the never-give-up attitude, is lost in the minds of many Americans.

Nathanael Greene was the second of six children, born into a highly structured Quaker house. The Bible was the primary mode of education for young Nathanael Greene. In later childhood, Nathanael Greene began to develop a large collection of military history books. His fascination with the military began to earn admonishments from the uncompromisingly pacifist Quakers. Despite this, Greene continued to learn about military strategies and tactics through personal studies. When Greene attended a military parade and publicly endorsed war against Great Britain, he was expelled from his Quaker church. (Simms 13-17)

In 1774, Greene’s opposition to the pacifist views of the Quaker church became a practical reality—Greene helped form the Kentish Guard (Simms 27), a militia unit in Rhode Island. Due to a lack of formal education, Greene was relegated to the rank of private. Greene’s chance to prove himself came shortly. After the battles of Lexington and Concord, Rhode Island established a small army of militia forces to travel south to Boston. Nathanael Greene was given

command of the force and had a first introduction with the future commander of the combined Continental militias, George Washington.

Greene was a member of Washington's first war council during the siege of Boston. Due to his insight, and despite lacking the wealth and more prominent names of his peers, Greene quickly became one of Washington's closest confidants. Greene followed Washington in the early years of the war and accrued practical military knowledge. At the Battle of Brandywine, Greene led a heroic rear guard action, saving the Continental Army (American Battlefield Trust).

In 1777, Greene and the Continental Army settled into winter camp at Valley Forge. The ailing Americans were aided by Baron von Steuben from Prussia and Marquis de Lafayette, who famously trained the Continental Army into a cohesive European-style fighting force. Nathanael Greene's contribution to Valley Forge is less known. Washington, instead of relying on Congress for supplies, finally recognized the need for extensive foraging. Nathanael Greene was named Quartermaster General of the army and was entrusted with scouring the surrounding areas (O'Reilly 193). Nathanael Greene regretted the necessity; he wrote to Washington, "Like a pharaoh, I harden my heart," referring to the daily sight of citizens crying over lost food and supplies (Greene). The hardship of Valley Forge soon turned to a new dawn for the Continental Army.

The Continental Army emerged from Valley Forge as a new fighting force. American soldiers no longer buckled in the face of sustained British fire in the North. However, after the British withdrew from Philadelphia and returned to New York, the focus of the war shifted southwards. By 1779, Georgia had fallen to the British. General Henry Clinton and Lord Charles Cornwallis were emboldened by the British success in the southernmost American colony and sailed South with a large force, eventually managing to capture Charleston. Clinton soon

returned to New York, where a stalemate existed between the armies. At the same time, large groups of Loyalist militias in the South further weakened the American position. Washington, trapped in a standoff with Clinton, sent his most trusted subordinate, Nathanael Greene, to prevent the collapse of the South. (English 14)

In December 1780, due to his consistency and loyalty, Greene took charge of the ragtag Southern army. In Greene's own words, the army was "wretched beyond description" (Greene). In addition to having little food and supplies, Greene's army was inferior to the British numerically. However, Greene would not give up easily. Amidst poor odds against a highly disciplined enemy force, Greene did the unthinkable, the General divided his Southern Continental Army into two forces. One smaller detachment of men under Daniel Morgan was sent to counter Banastre Tarleton, infamous for taking no prisoners. Greene personally commanded the other contingent to counter Charles Cornwallis. Learning of Tarleton's advance on Morgan in mid-January, Greene wrote to his subordinate, "Col. Tarleton is said to be on his way to pay you a visit. I doubt not but he will have a decent reception and a proper dismissal" (Greene). The stage was set for decisive engagements.

At the Battle of Cowpens in early 1781, General Morgan effectively employed a double envelopment strategy to crush Banastre Tarleton's forces (American Battlefield Trust). Meanwhile, Greene and Cornwallis did not exchange direct blows for some time. Instead, Greene relied on the Continental Army's speed and knowledge of the terrain to engage in favorable skirmishes against the British. Greene knew the Continental Army was outmatched by the British; he was determined to weaken and tire Cornwallis before committing to a large-scale battle. The true genius of Greene's strategy was the conscious baiting of Cornwallis ever

northward, away from British supply depots and bases, and towards areas with larger American militias.

At Guilford Courthouse, Greene was ready to battle Cornwallis. Greene arranged the army in a three-line defense in depth. Militia forces made up the first two lines, and well-trained Continental regulars composed the final line. A formation reminiscent of Hannibal's at the Battle of Zama (Polybius Book XV), the defense in depth was designed to tire the Redcoats through combat with the militia forces. After the Redcoats reached the third line, they were depleted in the face of Greene's crack troops.

Although the battle did not end favorably for the Continentals, as the British held the field in the end, Guilford Courthouse was a pyrrhic victory for the British. Cornwallis lost nearly 25 percent of the Southern British army, and Nathanael Greene slipped away from the battlefield with the Continental Army intact. Greene was defeated, but kept up the fight. Furthermore, after Guilford Courthouse, Lord Cornwallis pushed onward to Virginia and set up a base of operations in the port of Yorktown—a fateful decision thrust upon Cornwallis by the maneuvers of Greene. Cornwallis would soon surrender in Yorktown to a combined Franco-American land and sea force.

Greene, however, did not revel in the American victory. Instead, while Washington, Rochambeau, and Lafayette dealt the final blow to Cornwallis and the British at Yorktown, Greene pressed South with his army to mop up remaining British forces in South Carolina and Georgia. Thus, Greene secured his legacy in the Revolutionary War. In addition to the “Fighting Quaker,” Greene also became known as the “Savior of the South.”

Despite multiple memorializations, nicknames, and famed exploits, Nathanael Greene is an oft overlooked figure of the American Revolution. Regardless, Greene's influence on history

remains profound no matter the popular perception he inspired after the war. Greene's persistent spirit—shown in his self-education, loyal service under Washington, and vigorous command in the Southern Theater—is best exemplified by a quote from Green himself, “We fight, get beat, rise, and fight again” (Greene).

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During the past four years, James has been a member of the Lutheran High School Academic Team. He has been captain of the team for two years and helped the team secure 2nd place in the statewide academic competition. James has received all-district and all-state honors in Academic Team. James co-founded the Chess Club at his school and won the first club sponsored tournament. James also participates in athletic extracurriculars. James was a member of his high school varsity soccer team all four years, and he was captain for his Junior and Senior years. James participated in Cross Country for four years and participated in Basketball, Track, and Baseball for several years each as well. James also participates in Student Council, having served as a representative for two years and is currently serving as Treasurer.

James has several academic accomplishments and awards. He has a 3.89 unweighted GPA and a 29 composite ACT score. James is a member of the National Honor Society. James' love of learning manifests with his interest in History and Languages. On the topic of languages alone, he has taken 8 classes throughout High School (Spanish 1-4, German 1-3, and Sign Language).

Outside of school, James has been a member of his church's youth group throughout High School. His youth group has Bible classes every Sunday and hosts events. In 2019, he attended the LCMS National Youth Gathering and will do so again in 2022. He went on a mission trip with his youth group to a Native Alaskan Tribe in the summer of 2018 to lead a Basketball camp and a VBS. At his Church, James also volunteers time to the music program, specifically the handbell choirs.

James hopes to attend Hillsdale College where he will study History and Spanish.