
Nathanael Greene

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The early morning hours of 17 January 1781 were cold and damp as Brigadier General Daniel Morgan's wing of the southern army prepared to fight. They had reached the Cowpens the day before and were rested and well fed. Coming to meet them was part of the British army under the command of Colonel Banastre Tarleton. Drawn up in a single line of battle, Tarleton's legion was met first by fire from sharpshooters, then from militiamen, and finally from Continentals. The militiamen were under orders to fire three volleys and fall back to the Continental line. When the British reached the third line their numbers were shrinking but they still had enough to attempt a flanking maneuver. As Morgan's lines fell back he ordered them to do an about face and fire once more before chasing the enemy with bayonets. By the time the engagement was over "complete victory" belonged to the Americans. Upon receiving word, Nathanael Greene, the Commander of the Southern Armies, drank a toast to Morgan's army and fired a cannon salute.¹



Figure 1. Major General Nathanael Greene by Charles Wilson Peale, circa 1783.

Nathanael Greene was born 27 July 1742, the second son of Nathanael Greene, Sr. and his second wife, Mary Motte. The Greene family came to America in the 1600s as adherents of Roger Williams, ultimately settling in the Rhode Island colony. At the time of Nathanael Greene, Jr.'s birth, the family had become Quakers and was quite prosperous, owning a farm, sawmill, and iron forge. Nathanael Greene Sr. was not only a successful businessman but also the preacher at the East Greenwich Quaker meetinghouse. He raised his sons to value hard work and not formal education. They learned numbers in order to work the ledgers of the family business and letters so that they might read the Bible and a few other approved books. Nathanael Greene Jr. was resentful of his father's "prejudices against literary accomplishments," writing later that he was "digging into the bowels of the earth after wealth" when he "should have been in pursuit of knowledge."²

When Nathanael Greene Jr. was eleven his mother died and he began to immerse himself in the handful of books that were approved reading. Somewhere around this time he persuaded his father to hire a tutor who instilled in the young Greene a thirst for knowledge. From that point on, at any available opportunity, he could be found with a book in hand, reading. Ever aware of his lack of a proper education the young Greene sought out those from whom he might learn and on business trips began selling small anchors made at the family forge so he might buy books. By his twenties Greene had amassed a collection of around 250 books including works by John Locke, Sir William Blackstone, and Jonathan Swift.³

In 1774, as tensions with Britain intensified, Nathanael Greene joined the local militia, the Kentish Guards. As a founding member, he had hoped to be elected an officer but as he wrote a friend, "it is my misfortune to limp a little," which led his fellow guard members to pass him over. Settling for being a private was not easy for Greene but he persevered and kept up his avid reading, particularly of military tomes. In May 1775, the Rhode Island Army of Observation was formed and the state's Assembly offered him command of the army. The Assembly was not concerned with his limp or his lack of experience, for in Nathanael Greene they saw a capable, intelligent man with a proven ability to lead. As Major General Henry Knox would write, "His knowledge was intuitive. He came to us the rawest and most untutored being I ever met with; but in less than twelve months he was equal in military knowledge to any general officer in the army, and very superior to most."⁴

Within a few weeks, the now General Greene, was en route to Massachusetts to lay siege to British troops encamped at Boston. One month later the Continental Congress formally recognized the troops in Boston as the

Continental Army and named Nathanael Greene as one of eight brigadier generals, making him the youngest brigadier general in the army. Shortly thereafter, Greene was invited to General George Washington's headquarters where he met Washington for the first time and forged a friendship that would shape the course of his career.⁵

General Washington sent Greene to Prospect Hill and placed him in command of a seven regiment brigade under the direct command of Major General Charles Lee. Following the Boston siege Greene became the military commander in the city for a short time until Washington sent him to New York to command the American troops on Long Island. Here Greene proved what an asset he could be as part of the high command by keeping up with the steady stream of paperwork, maintaining order and discipline among his troops, and keeping them drilled and ready for action. During this time Congress promoted Greene to the rank of major general.⁶

Ultimately, New York was lost to the British and Greene was sent to neighboring New Jersey to command the state's defenses. This placed him in close proximity to Washington allowing the two men to work together and for Washington to witness his diligence and preparedness first hand. This prompted one of Washington's secretary's to write, "Greene is beyond doubt a first rate military genius, and one in whose opinions the General places the utmost confidence."⁷ Washington was also able to see the military mettle of his major general as they fought in engagements including Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Germantown from late 1776 through 1777.⁸

After Germantown, the army marched to Valley Forge to spend the winter months. Here it became apparent that supplies of every kind were seriously low with the troops "exposed to the severity of the weather . . . [with] nothing but bread and beef to eat morning, noon, and night, without vegetables or anything to drink but cold water."⁹ The supply situation only worsened as snow hampered the flow of necessities into the camp. As men and horses were starving to death, Greene was placed in charge of a foraging expedition that was forced to resort to sometimes brutal tactics to achieve its goals. Though he hated the work and the methods necessary for success, Greene proved himself up to the task helping to alleviate some of the hardship of the winter. His efforts did not go unnoticed. Soon Greene was appointed as quartermaster general to the Continental Army, a position he did not wish to take but felt he must. He was, however, able to retain his rank of major general.¹⁰

Greene held the position of quartermaster until September 1780 when the treasonous acts of Benedict Arnold were discovered. He was selected to head the

military tribunal of Arnold's British handler, Major John André, and then to assume command of West Point. This command did not last long. On 14 October 1780, Washington, with Congress' approval, appointed Greene Commander of the Southern Armies, which were then camped around Charlotte, North Carolina following their ignominious defeat at Camden in August.¹¹

Upon his arrival in Charlotte, Greene found the troops in "wretched and distressing . . . [circumstances] . . . starving with cold and hunger, without tents and camp equipage."¹² These conditions caused him to decide to move the army to Cheraw, South Carolina where there were better supplies. He also chose to divide the army by detaching Brigadier General Daniel Morgan into western South Carolina with a force of around six hundred men. In doing so, he forced the British commander, Lord Cornwallis, to divide his troops as well. Knowing that defeating Cornwallis was not possible with the resources at his disposal, Greene sought instead to be an irritant and frustrate the British. He ordered Morgan to raise militia while working with patriots in the area thus annoying and confusing the army under Cornwallis. Morgan succeeded admirably in the task sending out parties to raid and forage and communicating with other patriots to engage in actions to further disorient the British. Greene's forces were gaining the initiative with Morgan's daring taunts. Cornwallis dared not attack either division of the American army without exposing himself to attack in other areas.¹³

As Greene had predicted, Cornwallis divided his army—not in half but into three prongs with Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton in the lead with orders to hunt down Morgan. Baggage laden and hampered by swollen rivers and miry swamps, the British plan quickly went awry. The only hope they had was for Tarleton to catch up to Morgan and defeat him as the other divisions, encumbered as they were, would be of no help. Tarleton did catch up to Morgan but at the place of Morgan's choosing: the Cowpens. With no thought of defeat and with no assistance from the other wings of the British army forthcoming, Tarleton urged his troops forward. Within an hour they had been soundly defeated. Tarleton fled the field having lost eighty-six percent of his force. American losses were minimal.¹⁴

Morgan and his army, together with hundreds of British prisoners, retreated across the Broad River into North Carolina where a few weeks later they rendezvoused with Greene's troops. With his army once again united Greene began "the race for the Dan," attempting to beat Cornwallis to the Dan River. Greene won the race setting the stage for what would result in the British surrender at Yorktown, Virginia in October 1781.¹⁵

Congress declared the war to be over on 11 April 1783. Several months

later, Nathanael Greene officially resigned his commission as major general to build a new life. He returned to Rhode Island for a time but having received plantations in both South Carolina and Georgia in gratitude of his military service he and his family decided to make Mulberry Grove, the Georgia plantation, their permanent home. They arrived at Mulberry Grove, near Savannah, in November 1785. Eight months later Greene joined a friend in inspecting his plantation. Later that day he began to complain of a headache which only worsened. A doctor was summoned but to no avail. In the early morning hours of 19 June 1786, Major General Nathanael Greene breathed his last. He was buried in the confiscated vault of Tory Lieutenant Governor John Graham in Savannah's Colonial Cemetery with no marker placed on his tomb.¹⁶

In 1901, thanks to Rhode Island's Society of the Cincinnati, an organization for descendants of Revolutionary War military officers, Nathanael Greene's remains were discovered and disinterred. His bones were sent to Rhode



Figure 2. The monument to Nathanael Greene in Savannah's Johnson Square. Photo courtesy of the author.

Island until the family made the decision to have them formally reinterred in Savannah. Today his remains, along with those of his eldest son who drowned in an accident at age eighteen, are buried together beneath an impressive monument in Savannah's Johnson Square.¹⁷

Notes

1. Gerald M. Carbone, *Nathanael Greene: A Biography of the America Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 164-166; Lawrence E. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping: The Battle of Cowpens*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1, 55; Benson Bobrick, *Angel in the Whirlwind: The Triumph of the American Revolution*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 429. Historians differ over the number of volleys fired by the militiamen. The author has gone with Babits and Bobrick's number of three as it is derived from the memoirs of militiaman Thomas Young who was a participant in the battle.

2. Terry Golway, *Washington's General: Nathanael Greene and the Triumph of the American Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 15.

3. *Ibid.*, 21-23.

4. Carbone, *Nathanael Greene*, 17; Bobrick, *Angel in the Whirlwind*, 150.

5. Golway, *Washington's General*, 57.

6. Carbone, *Nathanael Greene*, 25, 32; Golway, *Washington's General*, 85.

7. Golway, *Washington's General*, 96.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 159.

10. *Ibid.*; Carbone, *Nathanael Greene*, 88-89.

11. Carbone, *Nathanael Greene*, 139-144.

12. Golway, *Washington's General*, 239.

13. John Moncure, *The Cowpens Staff Ride and Battlefield Tour*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1996), 23-24.

14. *Ibid.*, 28-31; William J. Hourihan, "The Cowpens Staff Ride: A Study in Leadership," The Army Chaplaincy (Winter 1998): accessed September 4, 2016, <http://www.web.archive.org/web/20070624212824/>

<http://www.usachcs.army.mil/TACarchive/Acwin98/Hourihan.htm>.

15. Carbone, *Nathanael Greene*, 175.

16. Golway, *Washington's General*, 312; Carbone, *Nathanael Greene*, 235.

17. Carbone, *Nathanael Greene*, xviii.

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