

General Nathanael Greene

One of the most trusted generals of the Revolutionary army was Nathanael Greene, Washington's friend and comrade-in-arms. The Greene family was among the earliest settlers in Rhode Island and helped establish the colony. John Greene was the founder of the family in the new colony. Nathanael Greene was born July 27, 1742 (old style, which is August 7, 1742 new style). His education was limited but he received a thorough training in the books which were available at his time, especially the Bible, upon which were built his habits of living, moral ideals and purposes.

In due course Greene used every possible moment to read books and saved his money to buy books so that eventually he acquired a large library. Greene had also been taught blacksmithing and the milling work. His father purchased a mill in Coventry which was assigned to Nathanael to manage. He took an active part in community affairs. He knew the value of education and helped establish the first public school in Coventry. He also added books on military science to his library which he studied diligently.

When the pacifist Quaker authorities discovered his interest in military affairs, he was called before the main committee for examination. Greene stated firmly that though he was a Quaker, he would not be turned from studies which interested him and the case was dropped.

Greene's friends and neighbors liked him, because they found him very dependable; consequently in 1770 he was elected to the General Assembly of Rhode Island. He was not an unusual debater, but his sound reasoning and common sense brought him to the fore in the Assembly. In committee work he was at his best and his judgement was sound and convincing.

Because of difficulties arising between England and the colonies, groups of men were formed, drilled and armed to meet emergencies. Consequently Greene became a member of a company known as the Kentish Guards.

In July, 1774, he married Catharine Littlefield, a young woman of a good family from Rhode Island.

When the news of the battles of Lexington and Concord reached Rhode Island, Greene was one of four men in his community who hurried to Boston to offer his services. In the meantime, the General Assembly of Rhode Island ordered a force of 1,600 men to be called into the service and Nathanael Greene was made commander with the rank of Major-General. His studies of military science helped to meet many problems but many had to be solved the hard way. He worked early and late to bring his force to a workable efficiency and good discipline. In June 1775 he had his troops in position around Boston.

When Washington arrived to command the armies around Boston in July, Greene welcomed Washington on behalf of the army. Almost from the beginning a life-long

friendship began between the two men. In a little while the armies were placed on the continental organization plan which resulted in the reduction of Greene's rank from Major-General to Brigadier-General, a demotion which he accepted in good grace. He was ready to serve his country under the leadership of Washington. In the earlier days of the war there were many who did not desire to serve beyond their own immediate area, but Greene pointed out such desires would never bring victory.

It would be necessary to realize that the struggle was national in character and scope and not local or provincial. Later Greene and his troops were ordered to Long Island to drive off the British if they attacked that area. Late in the summer of 1776 the British attacked the Americans around New York when the Americans were obliged to retreat. During this period Greene was made a Major-General. At Christmas time, 1776 and early in the New Year at Princeton, under the leadership of Washington two fine victories were won, diminishing British strength in New Jersey. American morale was restored.

Washington was not in a position to attack the British because of a smaller army and a lack of necessary supplies. Late in the summer Washington moved his troops below Wilmington and invited an attack from the combined British forces under Howe. But they did not desire to open a frontal attack upon Washington. Finally Washington met the British and Hessian soldiers in the Battle of Brandywine on September 11, 1777, southeastern Pennsylvania, and in the closing hours of the struggle Greene rendered conspicuous service by his indomitable courage. Again on October 3, 1777 with the British in possession of Philadelphia, Washington proposed an audacious attack upon the enemy forces at Germantown, Philadelphia. The British prevailed but realized that Washington was far from being a conquered man.

The continental army went into winter quarters at Valley Forge on December 19, 1777. The need of supplies of all kinds was evident from the beginning of camp. In order to secure food Washington appointed Greene to look after it. Finally, he appointed Greene Quartermaster-General. He was loathe to accept it, because he wanted to be in active service which Washington assured him he could have when the occasion would arise. Washington posted in the order of the day for March 24, 1778, the following statement:

"The Honourable Continental Congress have been pleased to appoint Major-General Greene, Quartermaster-General in the army of the United States — reserving his rank of Major-General in the same."

His work was efficiently and carefully done so that Washington was relieved of a heavy burden. Among the trials which faced Washington during part of the cantonment period were the efforts of some self-seeking officers to deprive Washington of his high command. They received some support from some of the members of Congress at York. The efforts were also directed against General Greene because of his devotion and

loyalty to Washington. However, they could not move Greene in his support of Washington and Greene's earnest loyalty was an important contributing factor in bringing the conspiracy to an untimely end.

In due course, Washington's supporters crushed the conspiracy in Congress and Washington stood out stronger than ever by the support of the army and the loyalty of the officers, members of Congress and the people generally.

Greene's fine support was likewise generally approved. That Washington approved of Greene's ability in the administration of the affairs of the camp is shown by Weedon's Valley Forge Orderly Book wherein General Greene's name appears many times almost from the beginning of the camp on December 22, 1777. On April 20, 1778, at Valley Forge, Washington sent a letter to the leading officers about a proposed campaign later in the spring; he raised three questions, should an attack be directed against Philadelphia, New York, or

"remaining quiet in a secure, fortified camp disciplining and arranging the army till the enemy began their operations, and then to govern ourselves accordingly, which of these three plans shall we adopt?"

Greene agreed that the best policy would be to keep the main body of the army in camp, drilling and making the soldiers more efficient, but he thought an attack could be successfully made on New York by a force of 4,000 regulars. However, the withdrawal of the British from Philadelphia in June 1778 changed the plan of campaign. At once Washington ordered the army from Valley Forge and started in pursuit of the British across New Jersey and in the battle of Monmouth, June 28, 1778, the Americans met the British in a hard struggle in which Greene rendered conspicuous service. During the night the British retired and eventually reached New York.

In the meantime Greene had resigned his position as Quartermaster General as he desired to give his entire time to his command. Eventually Washington agreed to the plan. Washington had also placed Benedict Arnold in command of West Point. Arnold felt he had not been properly rewarded by Congress for his services and he therefore entered into negotiations with André of the British to turn over West Point to the British as it was the most important strategic point along the Hudson and if the British held it, New York State would be open to complete conquest by the British. However, the plot was discovered with the result of the arrest of André, and Arnold escaped to the protection of the British forces.

In the meantime Greene was placed in command of West Point and since the betrayal of Arnold was checked, Greene felt the responsibility of his position and put the location in fine defense in order to be ready for a British attack. Washington made Greene the chairman of the commission to try André to determine within the categories of military law his exact position. André made his defense which was a confession which revealed his guilt as a spy. The decision of the court was unanimous that André

should suffer the death penalty. The findings of the court were sent to Clinton, the British commander, in New York. Immediately Clinton sent commissioners to Greene in order to save André's life. One of the British commissioners was General Robertson, who was permitted to meet Greene at King's Ferry. Greene represented Washington at the conference. Greene listened to the arguments of Robertson to save the life of André, but he pointed out that André by his own confession admitted he was a spy. It was a difficult and trying situation, but Greene met it carefully and capably. Thus for a time he continued at West Point.

For the third time South Carolina was invaded by the British and again they were successful. Georgia was under control of the enemy and they were resolved to conquer the south and then return and defeat Washington's army in the north. In order to help the south, Congress had ordered Gates to drive the British out of the country. Unfortunately, Gates was severely defeated at Camden, South Carolina. It was a tragic blow to the south and the country as a whole. Congress was stunned. However, Congress changed its attitude. Previously Congress passed over Washington's position as Commander-in-Chief and sent Gates south directly. Washington again proved his greatness and remained silent when Congress failed to consult him.

Now in the hour of tragedy and distress, Congress turned to Washington and asked him to name the successor to the defeated Gates. Washington knew the time was short if the British were to be restricted in their advance. Washington accepted the request of Congress and appointed Greene to go to the southern theater of war. Greene accepted the orders and proceeded at once to fulfill them. From reports only a skeleton of an army existed in the south. Congress had very little money and supplies for a new army were almost negligible. Greene moved south as rapidly as possible and placed key men as leaders in several states to secure supplies of all kinds and likewise recruits. He came to the army camp at Charlotte, North Carolina, December 2, 1780. Then in the weeks ahead Greene was busy building up his forces and endeavoring to have a workable army. However he was in no condition to confront the enemy. At last Cornwallis with his well trained army began to press Greene. However, Greene, by careful planning eluded him. Greene's force was much inferior, having a large number of prisoners, baggage and supplies. Nevertheless, he was able to escape Cornwallis's forces. Indeed Cornwallis could well be confused. Greene's strategy was to keep rivers and streams between his army and the enemy. It was the season when the rivers and streams could rise rapidly and these conditions were beneficial to Greene. Greene knew the time would come and perhaps very soon that he would be compelled to fight Cornwallis. After the American army crossed the Yadkin River, he held the British back for a time.

Greene now resolved upon the unfolding of his strategy, if he could lure Cornwallis to Guilford Court House, North Carolina, he would have a battleground of his own choosing for his inferior army and at the same time Cornwallis would be unusually distant from his main base of supplies at Wilmington. Greene sent word to all American

detachments to consolidate and meet at Guilford Court House. At this time Greene wrote to Washington that his retreating was almost at an end as he hoped to give battle to Cornwallis on ground of his own choosing. Washington wrote to Greene from New Windsor, New York, on March 21, 1781 (a few days after the battle of Guilford Court House and of course Washington had no word of the battle) in part as follows:

"I returned the last evening from Newport, to which place I had been upon a visit to Count de Rochembeau. Your last letter has relieved me from much anxiety, by informing me you had saved all your baggage, artillery and stores, notwithstanding the hot pursuit of the enemy, and that you in turn were following them. I hope your reinforcement may be such as will enable you to prevent them taking a part in the upper country, and hinder the disaffected from joining them. You may be assured that your retreat before Cornwallis is highly applauded by all ranks, and reflects much honor on your military abilities."

On March 14, 1781, Greene prepared his army for battle. His forces had been increased by militia and volunteers who were men without battle experience, although he had about 1,500 Continental soldiers. During these weeks Greene had kept up the morale of his army and his self-sacrificing spirit gave confidence to his army. On the other hand Cornwallis's troops were well disciplined and the majority were seasoned veterans. In this area amid forest and brush and hills and not much clearing, Greene made his stand to fight and the British were compelled to accept the ground or retreat. Cornwallis resolved to fight. Greene arranged his army in three lines. The first line made up of untrained militia gave way. The second line was also militia but under the command of seasoned officers. The third line was composed of continental soldiers. The second and third lines rendered good service but not sufficient enough to give Greene a victory. In the early part of the struggle Greene lost his artillery, but the artillery would not have helped much in the heavily wooded section. However, the British forces were stopped, crippled and in a serious situation. The British lost (killed, wounded and missing) 633 men. The American losses were much lower than the British. The enemy losses were so heavy because of the accurate marksmanship of the American riflemen. After the battle the British were in serious straits. Shortly after the battle Cornwallis began to retreat and Greene started in pursuit, but he was so short of ammunition that he could not accomplish very much. Consequently, he gave up the pursuit and his army was reduced in size since the terms of the militia expired. Cornwallis continued a rapid retreat to Wilmington in their march into Virginia. Greene had freed the State of North Carolina from the major forces of the British army and that he was able to accomplish this with an inefficient and poorly equipped army, reveals that a moral as well as a military victory was on his side.

Washington wrote a letter to Greene on April 18, 1781, from New Windsor in part as follows:

"Your private letter of the 18th ultimo came safe to hand. Although the honors of the field did not fall to your lot, I am convinced you deserved them. The chances of war are various and the best concerted measures, and the most flattering prospects, may and often do deceive us; especially while we are in the power of the militia. The motives which induced you to seek an action with Lord Cornwallis are supported upon the best military principles; and the consequences, if you can prevent the dissipation of your troops, will no doubt be fortunate. Every support, that it is in my power to give you from this army, shall cheerfully be afforded; but if I part with any more troops, I must accompany them or have none to command, as there is not at this moment more than a garrison for West Point, nor can I tell when there will be."

Greene now resolved upon a difficult undertaking in order to drive the British out of South Carolina. In the meantime Marion, Sumter and others had been carrying on a difficult struggle against British and Tory forces with indifferent success. The main British forces were under the command of Rawdon. Greene met Rawdon in battle at Hobkirk's Hill, in which the British won an empty victory as Greene withdrew his forces and established a well fortified camp, which Rawdon did not attack. The fact that Greene's army had not been destroyed by the British encouraged the patriots of South Carolina. Large numbers of men joined Marion's forces which caused the British much trouble. Several British strongholds were also captured. Later Greene began the siege of Fort Ninety-Six which was 147 miles northwest of Charleston. However, the approach of Rawdon's force compelled him to give up the siege. His troops had become veterans as a result of the fight at Hobkirk's Hill and at Ninety-Six. They were now resolved to fight on for victory. In the end Rawdon withdrew his forces from Ninety-Six. It was not long before Greene started to march after Rawdon and he offered Rawdon battle which he refused. Greene's army had grown in sufficient numbers, so that it needed reorganization, drill and new equipment. Greene ordered Marion, Lee and other leaders to take their bands of men and press the enemy from every quarter. The movement was successful. Morale was renewed in the military and among the civilian population loyal to the American cause.

Later, Greene prepared his army to attack the British at Eutaw Springs which was fought on September 8, 1781. Greene's forces numbered about 2,000 and the British 2,300. Greene had carefully prepared for a surprise attack and was well on his way when two deserters of his army informed the British of the approach of the American army. After a difficult struggle, the British were driven back but not destroyed as Greene had hoped. Greene recalled his forces, and in the end the British were compelled to retreat. This was the struggle that weakened the British so much and caused the breakdown of the morale of the Tories, that their control in South Carolina was almost ended. It was certain their time was fast ebbing away. It was not long before the only stronghold left to the British in South Carolina was Charleston.

Governor Rutledge then congratulated Greene upon his fine service under the most trying difficulties. The governor said:

"We have now full and absolute possession of every part of the state; and the legislative, judicial and executive powers are in the exercise of their respective authorities."

In attesting their appreciation, the legislature of the state voted him a gift of 10,000 guineas. Truly it was a gift which was very helpful to Greene as at this time his possessions were very meager. He was grateful and appreciative of the gift. In the meantime Greene kept his army in position ready to strike at the British in Charleston. However, the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, pointed the way that the British must evacuate Charleston. Finally the British withdrew from Charleston on December 14, 1782. The Americans under Greene took possession and now North Carolina and South Carolina were free of the enemy. Peace had come at last. Greene's determined struggle in North and South Carolina also aided in the American cause in Georgia. Once British power was broken in the Carolinas, a victory was assured in Georgia. North Carolina and Georgia likewise appreciated Greene's unequal struggle and the North Carolina legislature gave him 5,000 guineas and Georgia 24,000 acres of choice land.

In August of 1783, Greene could leave the southern theater since peace was established and as Congress was in session at Princeton, he went there and surrendered his final commission.

Congress gave him official recognition for the eminent service he rendered for his country. Washington also expressed his gratitude for the services of his friend and comrade-in-arms, as it was Washington who had sent Greene to perform the unusually difficult task. When he returned to Rhode Island, he was given a warm and hospitable reception. However, he determined to move to the south and develop his estate, "Mulberry Grove," located on the Savannah River.

Finally in the latter part of 1785 he settled on his plantation with his wife and children. He looked forward to a future of much happiness and contentment. He entered into the development of his plantation with much vigor and interest. In April, 1786, he wrote a letter to a friend in which he stated in part:

"The garden is delightful. The fruit trees and flowering shrubs form a pleasant variety. We have green peas almost fit to eat and as fine lettuce as you ever saw. The mocking birds surround us evening and morning. The weather is mild and the vegetable world progressing to perfection. We have in the same orchard apples, pears, peaches, apricots, nectarines, plums of various kinds, figs, pomegranate and oranges. And we have strawberries which measure three inches around."

Greene went to Savannah on a business trip, June 12, 1786, and on his journey home he stopped at the plantation of a friend to see his rice fields, as he had become interested in producing rice. During his visit at his friend's plantation he was exposed to the hot rays of the sun, and when he returned home he became very ill and on June 19, he died. When the news of his untimely death spread throughout the countryside and Savannah, shock and sorrow caused the suspension of all business. The entire nation mourned his passing. His highest tribute may be expressed in the fact that he was a man Washington always trusted, and history well records that he stood next to Washington in service for his country.

Bibliography:

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