

Nathan Hale: Courageous and Patriotic Spy of the Revolution

“I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country” (Commager 476). Many Americans are familiar with this quote of Nathan Hale, but know little else of this great patriot. Much can be gained by a deeper look into his background, his courageous patriotism, and his final hours.

Richard Hale, Nathan Hale’s father, said of his birth on June 6, 1755 “... He shall be called after... my kinsman Nathan, and I shall be well pleased if he have as high a sense of duty”(Phelps 13). One historian records, Nathan “was feeble in body at the beginning of his life,” (Phelps 13) and was not expected to survive. But, during the “critical second year, he rebounded..., physically and mentally” (Phelps 13). Before Nathan turned eleven, his mother died. Overcoming these early obstacles must have contributed to Hale’s fortitude, and at the age of fourteen, Nathan was accepted to Yale University. While there, his father gave him this warning, “... [I] would by all means desire you to mind your studies and carefully attend to orders of college. Attend not only prayers in the chapel but secret prayer carefully. Shun all vice...” (Phelps 21). Nathan took his father’s advice and became known as a man of great integrity. A Yale physician said of him, “He was quick to lend a helping hand to a being in distress, brute or human: was overflowing with good humor, and was the idol of all his acquaintances” (Phelps 27). He also said of Nathan, “That man is ... calculated to excel in any situation he assumes. He is a gentleman and scholar - and last though not least of his qualifications, a Christian” (Phelps 27). Nathan Hale graduated from Yale on September 8, 1773. In the spring of 1774, at the age of eighteen, he acquired a school in New London, Connecticut. On a normal school day, he would teach 33 students in one room from 7:00 A.M. until 9:00 P.M., with only one free hour at lunchtime (Koestler-Grack 21). One of his students said of him,

“He was a happy and faithful teacher, everybody loved him” (Koestler-Grack 21). But, his career as a school teacher would be short lived.

The late 1700’s was a time of great unrest in the English colonies that would eventually erupt into the Revolutionary War. When the news of the battle of Lexington and Concord reached New London, Nathan felt the call of duty to protect freedom. He said in a speech at Miners Tavern, “Let us not lay down our arms till we have gained independence” (Koestler-Grack 58). On July 7, 1775, he wrote a letter to the school, in which he stated, “Gentlemen, having received information that a place is allotted me in the army... I am constrained to ask... to be excused from keeping your school any longer. School-keeping is a business of which I was always fond... but at present there seems an opportunity for more extended public service” (Phelps 75). Hale was showing the depths of his patriotism in his willingness to put aside his own ambitions for the good of his country.

Nathan joined the Connecticut army on July 17 and by September 1 became captain of the Nineteenth Continental Company (Koestler-Grack 62). Within a year of Hale’s enlistment, the British had gained total control of Long Island and began to fortify it with large numbers of troops (Phelps 137). General Washington needed to know the specifics of General Howe’s plans. He commissioned Hale’s commanding officer, Captain Thomas Knowlton, to find a spy (Phelps 138). Knowlton did not want the burden of choosing a spy, so he assembled a meeting of soldiers expressing this need, hoping that one of them would volunteer. Almost immediately after hearing the need, Nathan, although battling the flu, stepped forward and said, “I will undertake it, sir” (Phelps 142). His fellow officers tried to convince him otherwise. Hale said to them, “I think I owe to my country the accomplishment of an object so important and so much desired by the commander of her armies... I am fully sensible of the consequences of discovery and capture in

such a situation, but for a year I have been attached to the army and have not rendered any material services while receiving compensation for which I make no return” (Phelps 143; Rose 17).

Dressed as a Dutch schoolmaster, Nathan Hale made it to Long Island on the morning of September 17th (Rose 19). Returning from the secret mission, less than a week later, he stopped at a Tory tavern where he met Robert Rogers. Rogers was, as one of his men said as “subtle and deep as hell itself” (Rose 19). He had heard that there was a peculiar newcomer asking questions of the townspeople. After watching Nathan Hale for several days, Rogers joined Hale at the tavern and introduced himself as a “fellow American soldier,” in hopes of getting some answers (Phelps 173). He told Hale, “I myself am upon the business of spying out the inclination of the people and motion of the British troops” (Phelps 174). The owner of the tavern stated in his journal, “This intrigue not being suspected by the Captain, made him believe that he had found a good friend, and one that could be trusted with the secrecy of the business he was engaged in” (Phelps 174). Nathan agreed to Rogers’ invitation to breakfast the next morning and fell into the fateful trap. As soon as Hale had disclosed his mission, Rogers ordered a waiting Tory company to bind Hale and take him to General Howe (Phelps 181). After questioning Hale, Howe immediately ordered his execution for the next morning, and placed him in the care of his provost marshal, William Cunningham (Phelps 187). Seeing much loyalty in Nathan, Cunningham offered him a “full pardon” if he would join the British Army (Koestler-Grack 92). Hale replied, “Nothing makes me more loyal to my country than a temptation to forsake her” (Koestler-Grack 92). Nathan requested two things of Howe: a chaplain and a Bible and was denied both. Howe’s chief engineer John Montrésor, however, offered Hale the “protection of his tent” (Phelps 187). Later, Montrésor said of Nathan, “He was calm; he bore himself with gentle

dignity, the consciousness of rectitude and high intentions” (Phelps 188). The engineer granted Nathan’s request for writing supplies so that he could write letters to a family member and his commanding officer. However, Cunningham refused to send the letters, reasoning “that the rebels should not know that they had a man in their army who could die with so much firmness” (Bennett 28). On the morning of September 22, Nathan made his way to the tree that had been chosen for his fate. His parting words were, “You are shedding the blood of the innocent. If I had ten thousand lives, I would lay them all down if called to do it in defense of my injured, bleeding country” (Phelps 192). He then gave warning that everyone there should be prepared to meet death in what ever shape it may come. Nathan Hale, unwilling to save his own life, showed his concern for the well being of his fellow man, even his enemies.

Nathan Hale’s acts of courageous patriotism and selflessness can be a lesson to us all. Even his enemies noticed his bravery and integrity. He showed his selflessness as he laid down his life for his country. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”(John 15.8)

Works Cited

***Works are cited according to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers Seventh Edition*.**

Bennett, William J. *Our Country's Founders: A Book of Advice for Young People*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1998. Print.

Commager, Henry S, and Richard B. Morris. *The Spirit of 'seventy-Six: The Story of the American Revolution As Told by Participants Volume 1*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967. Print.

King James Bible. Place of publication not identified: Thomas Nelson, 1991. Print.

Koestler-Grack, Rachel A. *Nathan Hale: Courageous Spy*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2006. Print.

Phelps, M W. *Nathan Hale: The Life and Death of America's First Spy*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2008. Print

Rose, Alexander. *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*. New York: Bantam Books, 2006. Print.