

Nathanael Greene: An Unlikely General

Strength, cunning, pride: these are all attributes we assign to the heroes of American history. Nathanael Greene was by no means any of these. He was an asthmatic Quaker boy with a bad limp.^{4,7} However, in common American tale, it was his inquisitive mind and uncommon resolve that led him to being dubbed Washington's second-in-command.⁶ His story begins in 1742, born into a Loyalist family.

Nathanael Greene saw his life ruled by his father.⁴ Quakers, in the middle of their Quietist period, condemned any form of boisterous behavior.⁸ Not only was Greene denied the pleasures of dancing and parties, he was also denied the luxury of book learning. His mind ever curious, Greene beseeched his father for any form of education; a tutor was engaged who taught him about mathematics, the Enlightenment, and, most importantly, military science.⁷ Following the death of his father, Greene found new liberty in his education and entrepreneurship.⁴ Significantly, when the *Gaspée*, commanded by British Lieutenant William Duddingston, seized his ship under the Intolerable Acts, Greene began to feel disdain for the British Rule.^{2,3} Concurrently, his pursuits of books and battle led to his suspension from the Society of Friends.⁴ Ultimately, in 1774, Greene decided to shirk the rule of both the Quakers and the Crown by forming the Kentish Guards, a local militia.^{4,7}

At the war's onset, Congress appointed sixteen generals; among them was Brigadier General Greene.⁵ Quickly promoted to Major General for his excellence in support of George Washington in the invasion of Long Island, he was nonetheless threatened with removal after a long and rather fruitless campaign in the north.⁴ Although well-learned and charismatic, Greene lacked the experience and the opportunity to demonstrate his prowess as a leader. His fate turned when Washington appointed him Commander of the Southern Continental Army.⁵ With the "Southern Theater" in shambles after a series of strategic follies, Washington was taking a risk on Greene hoping he could change the tide.¹ Colonel Cornwallis had captured strategic coastal cities and was putting pressure upon the north; Greene, seeking to stop the procession of the invasion of the northern colonies, retreated.^{1,5} He was lambasted as a soft Quaker. However, being outnumbered, General Greene's only advantage was mobility. He took this advantage and lured Lord Cornwallis' forces away from the ports and the north; he implemented gorilla tactics to defeat the British forces that ventured too far from the coast and then used their absence of numbers as an opportunity to attack the captured cities.¹ In this brilliant display of premeditation and patience, General Greene earned himself a reputation as the preeminent general of America, second only to George Washington.⁶ This dramatic turn of events, which freed half the colonies, earned Greene the respect of said four-star general.⁵

The "Fighting Quaker" was one of the most influential and intelligent leaders of America and, as such, he earned the deep respect of his contemporaries on his way to becoming the first head general of the new United States.⁸ However, succumbing to sunstroke illness, he died unexpectedly in 1786 and was unable to assume this new role.^{4,7} His legacy as a trailblazer who followed his own compass is American in its very core and deserves to be remembered as one of the first and strongest examples of the American spirit.

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