

Rise and Fight Again: Nathanael Greene

By DR. DANIEL S. MARRONE

Revolutionary War Major General Nathanael Greene's dogged persistence to "rise and fight again" helped ultimately win the American struggle for liberty. Greene was born to devout Quaker parents in the Rhode Island Colony on August 7, 1742. Raised in a religious pacifist community opposed to war, few would have imagined he would become a soldier, not to mention General George Washington's next-in-command. However, he joined other American colonists in fighting back against what they viewed as an intolerable rule and unjust taxes imposed by Great Britain. By his 32nd birthday, the Rhode Islander was determined to join the fight for self-rule and independence and enlisted as a private in the Kentish Guards, his local county militia. The decision led to his banishment from his Quaker community in 1774.

In 1775, Greene was elected to the Colony's General Assembly and appointed a brigadier general in the Rhode Island Army of Observation. He led troops in supporting the American siege of British-held Boston. Greene's leadership abilities were recognized by the Continental Congress, which on June 22 appointed him a brigadier general of the Army. Twelve days later, Greene first met with General George Washington, who left Greene in charge of military operations in Boston after the British evacuated the city in March 1776.

Greene Takes Command in New York

On August 9, 1776, Congress promoted Greene to the rank of major general and assigned him to the task of establishing Patriot defenses on Long Island, the strategic midpoint between the New England and Mid-Atlantic Colonies. Greene's military appointment could not come



too soon because the Americans correctly feared an impending massive invasion of New York City by the British. Through Greene's nonstop efforts, defensive fortifications were erected around the outer perimeter of the area called Brooklyn Heights. Unfortunately, just days before the British invasion, dysentery spread among the American troops, and Greene became seriously ill. He wrote to Washington, "I am confined to my bed with a raging fever." Nearly delirious from illness, Greene was prevented from leading his troops on August 26, 1776, the first day of combat of the Battle of New York.

Unlike the highly trained professional soldiers deployed by the King's forces, the American army consisted primarily of individuals who days earlier were farmers. Although these ill-equipped citizen soldiers would eventually become the formidable Continental Army, in the summer of 1776, they were no match against the British and Hessian juggernaut invading New York. Patriot defenses quickly crumbled, enabling a complete rout for the King's army. Washington, displaying equal amounts of insight and desperation, began an immediate, full evacuation from Brooklyn Heights to Manhattan Island. However, this strategic retreat from Brooklyn was only a temporary reprieve for the Americans; British commander General William Howe soon targeted Manhattan Island itself. After cannon fire emanated from British warships at Kip's Bay on September 15, the Americans once again were on the retreat.

Fortunately for the Americans, Greene had sufficiently recovered from his illness to resume command of his troops. The next day, he led the Continentals to a small but significant victory at the Battle of Harlem Heights. This battlefield success for the Americans did little to slow down the British invasion, however. Immediately after this skirmish, Howe was again in pursuit of Washington's army.

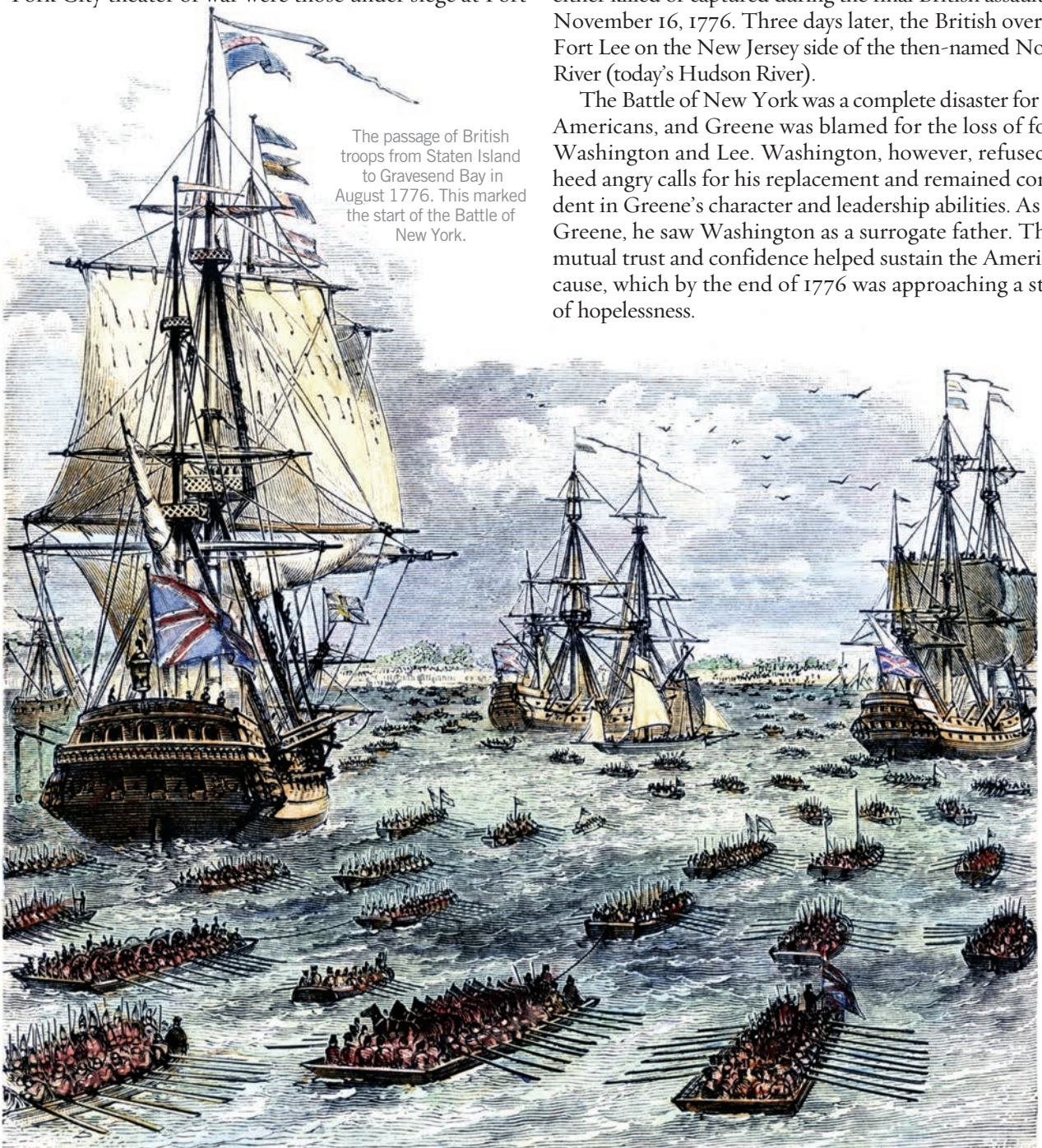
Misjudgments at Forts Washington and Lee

On October 18, the Continentals faced the King's forces at the Battle of Red Bank. Moving north from there, Washington's troops 10 days later engaged the British at the Battle of Red Bank in Westchester County, N.Y. Sustaining a major defeat in Westchester, Washington subsequently beat a hasty retreat south into New Jersey. By late fall, the only Patriot soldiers remaining in the New York City theater of war were those under siege at Fort

Washington, in upper Manhattan. Heated debate as to the viability of holding onto Fort Washington ensued between Washington and his generals. At first, Greene advised Washington to abandon it, then changed his mind and argued that the Americans could hold the fort by sending in additional troops. Unfortunately, Greene horribly misjudged the strength of the British and Hessian forces besieging the fort: More than 2,800 Americans were either killed or captured during the final British assault on November 16, 1776. Three days later, the British overran Fort Lee on the New Jersey side of the then-named North River (today's Hudson River).

The Battle of Red Bank was a complete disaster for the Americans, and Greene was blamed for the loss of forts Washington and Lee. Washington, however, refused to heed angry calls for his replacement and remained confident in Greene's character and leadership abilities. As for Greene, he saw Washington as a surrogate father. Their mutual trust and confidence helped sustain the American cause, which by the end of 1776 was approaching a state of hopelessness.

The passage of British troops from Staten Island to Gravesend Bay in August 1776. This marked the start of the Battle of New York.



Small Victories Add Up

By December, the Continental Army had retreated from New Jersey into Pennsylvania. With troop strength waning due to illness and desertions, Washington faced tough choices. Fearing his army, not to mention the cause for independence, would disintegrate when many enlistments ended on December 31, the American commander chose to act boldly. On December 25, Washington ordered an attack on a Hessian base in Trenton across the nearly frozen Delaware River in New Jersey. At the Battle of Trenton on December 26, Greene led one of the two main columns of troops into what turned out to be an astounding American victory. Ten days later, the Patriots defeated the British again at the Battle of Princeton. These victories, though relatively small, nevertheless spurred re-enlistments in the Continental Army.

On September 11, 1777, Greene displayed superb military leadership at the Battle of Brandywine, where the Americans lost the battlefield but were able to inflict major losses upon the British. But less than a month later, Greene's disorganized troops were unsuccessful at the Battle of Germantown. With these American losses in Pennsylvania, the British were able to capture Philadelphia in November 1777. Nearing exhaustion, the Americans set up camp in southeastern Pennsylvania in a plateau area known as Valley Forge.

With the bulk of the Continental Army, approximately 12,000 men, encamped at Valley Forge, Washington turned to Greene to serve as quartermaster general. Here, on the south shore of the Schuylkill River 18 miles northwest of Philadelphia, the Americans faced critical shortages of food and clothing as well as widespread disease. More than 2,000 died from dysentery, jaundice, pneumonia and typhoid. As the officer in charge of supplies, Greene did what he could to efficiently and equitably provide whatever food was available to the nearly starved soldiers.

Through the tireless leadership of Washington, Greene and recent émigré General Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Augustus von Steuben, the stalwart Patriot

Supporting Player

Catharine "Caty" Littlefield Greene (1755–1814) was not only the supportive wife of Revolutionary General Nathanael Greene, but she was also an active participant in the political scene of that time. Born on Block Island, R.I., she married Nathanael in 1774,

and they spent less than a year together before he left to join the Revolution. Unlike most wives who remained at home, Caty followed Nathanael and joined him at various encampments during the war. The mother of five children, she became close friends with many important Revolutionary figures and their wives, including George and Martha Washington, and even named their first two children after the Washingtons.

Even after her husband's death in 1786, Caty continued to create her own path and socialize with elite Revolutionary families. When her plantation was in financial peril, she took matters into her own hands and approached Congress for aid to recover the funds that Nathanael personally paid to Charleston merchants to supply his soldiers. Her petition, supported by Washington, Henry Knox and Alexander Hamilton, was approved and her estate was saved.

In 1792, she rented a room to and employed handyman Eli Whitney to help her on her Savannah, Ga., plantation Mulberry Grove. It was there that Whitney developed the cotton gin. (Some say she helped finance the patent for the device.) The Catharine Greene Chapter, Xenia, Ohio, is named after this influential early American woman.



army left Valley Forge in the spring of 1778 ready for a fight. They got their wish on June 28, 1778, at the Battle of Monmouth in New Jersey. Commanding the right wing of Washington's army, Greene led his troops throughout a daylong struggle. With more troops dying from the debilitating heat than from battlefield injuries, neither side could claim a clear victory. However, the King's forces were hammered at Monmouth to the point that, for the remainder of the war, their activities in the North were relegated to the confines of New York City. With the British at a stalemate in the North, their focus and invasion armies were redirected to the South.

A Pivotal Role in the Southern Campaign

During 1779 and 1780, the Southern Department of the Continental Army was in miserable shape. Lacking resources and effective leadership, the American army was on the verge of disintegration. In 1779, British General Henry Clinton led an invasion that conquered and



Nathanael Greene (waving hat) at the Battle of Eutaw Springs, S.C., September 8, 1781. The battle marked a decisive victory for his troops.

subsequently occupied Georgia's largest port city, Savannah. The next year, the British attacked an even larger American city, Charleston. The Continental Army there, under the command of General Benjamin Lincoln, was outmanned and under siege by the British navy and army. Surrounded, Lincoln surrendered Charleston, and more than 5,000 Continental Army soldiers were captured. Half of these Americans died during confinement. A few months later in 1780, American troops under the command of General Horatio Gates launched a failed attack on the British garrison at Camden in South Carolina. The Camden loss was so completely devastating that the Americans literally ran for their lives.

By late 1780, Washington feared that the British would not only capture the South but also move north to conquer what was left of the new nation. To stop the British juggernaut in the South, Washington appointed Greene commander of the Southern Department of the Continental Army. On December 2, Greene arrived in Charlottetown (present-day Charlotte, N.C.) where he assumed leadership of 1,500 bedraggled, dispirited and

starving troops. More than three times as many British and American Loyalists, under the leadership of Lord Cornwallis, faced Greene's troops. Vastly outnumbered, Greene knew that he could not directly confront Cornwallis. Instead, he astutely chose to buy time in order to organize and restock his Patriot army.

In what turned out to be a brilliant strategic move, Greene split up his already outmanned troops into two even smaller contingents. He placed 600 men under the command of Brigadier General Daniel "Old Wagoner" Morgan, a veteran frontier fighter from Virginia. Greene ordered Morgan and his men to head west. The 900 troops remaining under Greene's direct command marched south.

Sensing that Cornwallis would not tolerate Morgan launching an attack on his rear or left flank, Greene knew intuitively that the British general would be forced to divide his forces into two groups, thereby diminishing his numerical advantage. On New Year's Day, 1781, Cornwallis ordered his ruthless cavalry leader, Lieutenant Colonel Banastre "Bloody Ban" Tarleton, to suppress

Morgan's troops. After eluding Tarleton for more than two weeks, Morgan's men stood their ground at the pivotal Battle of Cowpens in South Carolina on January 17, 1781. At Cowpens, Morgan tricked Tarleton into believing that the retreating American militiamen were reflective of his entire force. Thinking Morgan's men were in full retreat, Tarleton ordered an all-out charge on the American line. However, Morgan's troops stood their ground and fired nonstop. More than 800 British soldiers—90 percent of Tarleton's forces—were killed, wounded or taken prisoner at the Battle of Cowpens.

Following this battle, Morgan stealthily evaded Cornwallis' army, a well-trained force more than eager to avenge Cowpens, and wisely withdrew to rejoin Greene's main army in North Carolina. The now recombined American forces became the prime target for Cornwallis.

Greene knew that his men were exhausted from constant hit-and-run skirmishes—all occurring in the winter of 1781—and judged his army unable to defeat the British in head-to-head battle. Instead, he concentrated on defensive moves that forced the King's army to pursue the Americans over hundreds of strength-sapping miles throughout North Carolina. Finally catching up with Greene's men, the British army was poised to attack on February 14, 1781.

Before this could happen, the Americans crossed the Dan River from North Carolina into Virginia. Greene instructed his engineering officer, Polish émigré Thaddeus Kosciuszko, and Quartermaster Edward Carrington to commandeer nearly every boat along the river. Unable to find a crossing, the British were once again thwarted from delivering a crushing blow in the South. Gaining some time to rest and rebuild his troops' strength, Greene was able to obtain recruits and matériel at Halifax Court House in Virginia. Ten days later, with a re-energized, larger force of 4,000 men, Greene ordered his troops to recross the Dan River. The Americans were now on the offensive.

Successful Strategies

On March 15, Greene's men faced Cornwallis' army at Guilford Court House (in what today is Greensboro, N.C.). As the battle raged, the Americans seemed to be headed for victory. In desperation, Cornwallis ordered a massive bombardment of the battlefield despite the knowledge that his men as well as the Americans would be hit by deadly grapeshot fired into the mélange of combatants. This heartless and risky maneuver by Cornwallis paid off—for the moment—when the Americans retreated from the battlefield. However, Cornwallis' forces sustained 500 casualties, representing one-quarter of the British army in the theatre.

Extended far inland from supply bases on the East Coast, the King's forces were becoming increasingly tired and vulnerable. As a result, three days after the Battle of Guilford Court House, Cornwallis withdrew his depleted forces to Wilmington, N.C., then moved them on to Yorktown, Va. Greene again utilized brilliant military strategy in allowing Cornwallis to move his waning army to Yorktown, believing that the British would eventually be bottled up at the eastern tip of Virginia.

In the spring of 1781, Greene's main goal had been to retake territory previously captured by the British rather than continually fight Cornwallis' army. While the Americans scored some minor successes in capturing British posts, they also lost a large skirmish at the Battle of Hobkirk's Hill on April 25. Shortly thereafter, Greene wrote to Washington that, "We fight, get beat, rise and fight again. We never have to win a battle to win the war."

The tide turned for the Americans by late summer. On September 8, 1781, Greene's men scored a decisive, though bloody, victory at Eutaw Springs in South Carolina. After this engagement, the exhausted British troops fled to Charleston, S.C. The British subsequently surrendered en masse at Yorktown on October 19, 1781.

While Greene's forces lost most of the battles in the South, he ultimately defeated the British through attrition, stronger leadership and determination. Given the dismal state of America's southern forces when he assumed command, his ultimate victory over the British was nothing short of amazing. In fact, Washington let it be known that if he were incapacitated, Greene should be named his successor.

After the War

At the conclusion of the war, Greene returned home to his family in Rhode Island. In tribute to his stellar military accomplishments in the Southern Campaign, the state legislatures of North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia voted to bestow land tracts upon Greene. Unfortunately, most of the land had to be sold to pay off massive debts, much of which he incurred by purchasing supplies for his troops before and during the war. In 1785, Greene moved his family to Mulberry Grove Plantation outside Savannah, Ga. He died of heat stroke on June 19, 1786, seven weeks before his 44th birthday.

Numerous cities, counties and streets across the country are named in his honor, and there are also two DAR chapters that bear his name: Nathanael Greene Chapter, Greenville, S.C., and General Nathanael Greene-Pettaquamscutt Chapter, East Greenwich, R.I. 📍

Dr. Daniel S. Marrone is a distinguished service professor at Farmingdale State College. He wrote about General Nicholas Herkimer for the January/February 2010 issue.