



# COURAGOUS IN BATTLE, PROGRESSIVE IN POLICY

*Colonel Christopher Greene led the 1st Rhode Island Regiment composed mostly of ex-slaves who won freedom by going to war*

By Bill Hudgins

**C**hristopher Greene was born May 12, 1737, at Warwick, R.I., to Judge Phillip Greene and Elizabeth Wickes Greene. He was a great-grandson of Rhode Island founder Roger Williams and a third cousin of General Nathanael Greene. The cousins would serve together during the Revolutionary War.

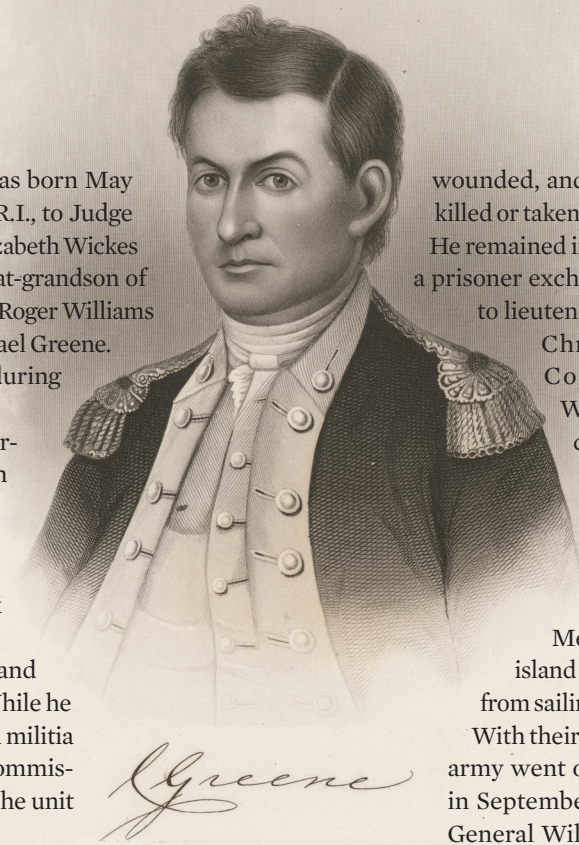
On May 6, 1757, Christopher married third cousin Anna Lippit, with whom he had nine children. When his father died in 1761, the 24-year-old Christopher inherited the family's mill estate and ran it until the outbreak of the Revolutionary War.

He also served in the Rhode Island General Assembly from 1772-1774. While he was in office, the legislature formed a militia called "The Kentish Guards" and commissioned him as a lieutenant in 1774. (The unit is still active in East Greenwich, R.I.)

In May 1775, he was promoted to major in the 1st Rhode Island Regiment, also called "Varnum's Regiment" after its organizer, Colonel James Mitchell Varnum. Christopher led an infantry company for the regiment when it fought in the eleven-month Siege of Boston.

During the siege, Christopher met General George Washington. As part of his planning for an attack on Canada, Washington assigned Christopher to lead a unit in the Army of Canada commanded by Brigadier General Benedict Arnold. The army marched north, suffering terrible hardships before meeting in Quebec with General Richard Montgomery's forces.

The combined armies assaulted Quebec on December 31, 1775, and were repulsed. Montgomery was killed, Arnold was



wounded, and hundreds of Americans were killed or taken prisoner, including Christopher. He remained in captivity until released during a prisoner exchange in 1777. He was promoted to lieutenant colonel while imprisoned.

Christopher returned to the Continental Army, where Washington promoted him to colonel. He ordered Col. Greene and 400 Rhode Islanders to help defend Fort Mercer on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River south of Philadelphia.

The Patriots had built Fort Mercer and Fort Mifflin on an island in the river to prevent the British from sailing upriver to attack Philadelphia.

With their water route blocked, the British army went overland and captured the city in September 1777. On October 22, British General William Howe dispatched a force of about 1,200 Hessians under Col. Carl von

Donop to drive the Patriots out of Fort Mercer.

But the Americans had learned of the impending attack and were ready. The Americans repelled the Hessians after an intense 40-minute fight, also called the Battle of Red Bank. Casualty figures vary: Killed were between 400 to 500 Hessians, including Donop, and 14 Americans. Congress bestowed a sword upon Col. Greene to honor the unit's victory.

## **A NEW KIND OF REGIMENT**

Colonels Greene and Varnum spent the winter of 1777 together at Valley Forge. While there, Col. Varnum proposed an idea: Combine two understrength Rhode Island units

into one and form a new regiment of enslaved African-Americans, according to Cameron Boutin in “The 1st Rhode Island Regiment and Revolutionary America’s Lost Opportunity,” a January 2018 article in the *Journal of the American Revolution*.

Since Col. Greene’s wife and children lived only about 19 miles from the British outposts in Newport, R.I., he readily endorsed Varnum’s idea, which made it to the Rhode Island General Assembly. In January, the assembly approved the “Rhode Island Resolution for Negro Recruitment of 1778,” which declared: “That every slave so inlisting [sic] shall, upon his passing muster before Col. Christopher Greene, be immediately discharged from the service of his master or mistress, and be absolutely free, as though he had never been incumber’d [sic] with any kind of servitude or slavery.”

Along with a number of officers from the existing units, Col. Greene returned to Rhode Island in 1778 to help organize the new regiment. Blacks already served in some New England units—either as freemen or with their masters’ permission. This unit was unique in that Rhode Island liberated the slaves who would make up a unit of their own, wrote Judith L. Van Buskirk in her book, *Standing in Their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2017).

Van Buskirk noted that the colonel faced a tough challenge. “The spirit required to repulse a determined enemy on the field of battle was one kind of courage,” she wrote. “The bravery it took to lead what was to be a very controversial endeavor was another.”

Many slave owners opposed the measure, and the assembly repealed it in June. While it was in effect, whites tried to discourage or intimidate blacks from enlisting. Nevertheless, 130 to 140 blacks eventually enlisted, along with about 100 whites and some American Indians, according to Boutin.

After some brief training, the regiment was swept up in preparations for a major battle with the British. Fighting on Gen. Nathanael Greene’s right wing at the Battle of Bloody Run Brook on August 28, 1778, the inexperienced troops stopped vicious Hessian charges, at times engaging in hand-to-hand combat.

The Americans eventually withdrew, but Patriot Commander Major General John Sullivan later commended the unit, saying, “by the best information the commander in chief thinks that

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Colonel Christopher Greene Monument in Red Bank Battlefield, at the site of Fort Mercer on the banks of the Delaware River

regiment will be entitled to a proper share of the honors of the day,” according to Boutin.

The 1st Rhode Island Regiment continued to serve with distinction, and the unit was part of the climactic Siege of Yorktown in 1781. In *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (University of Chicago Press, 2012) historian Alan Gilbert wrote, “Motivated by freedom and continually engaged in battle, the 1st Rhode Island Regiment developed its own spirit of militancy. It would become the most fearsome unit on the American side and inspire others throughout the war.”

### ATTACKED BY LOYALISTS

Col. Greene never made it to the Siege. In 1781, he and his men were sent to Westchester County, N.Y., to protect vital crossings on the Croton River.

These included the Pines Bridge—the same span Major John André crossed in 1779 using Benedict Arnold’s pass. The area was a hotbed of Loyalist sympathy and paramilitary groups such as Col. James De Lancey’s notorious Loyal Westchester Refugee Corps.

Early on May 14, 1781, while most of the Patriot camp was still asleep, around 400 of De Lancey’s Refugees fell upon the stunned and outnumbered Americans. The Tories killed 14, wounded about 100, and captured more than 20 prisoners, most of them African-Americans, who were later sold as slaves in the British West Indies.

The raiders rushed to the house that served as Col. Greene’s quarters. He had time only to grab his sword before being attacked. The Tories slashed and stabbed Greene and killed several of the soldiers who were defending him. Then they dragged him into the woods, beat and stabbed him, and left him to die. According to one account, “his body was found in the woods, about a mile distant from his tent, cut, and mangled in the most shocking way.”

Col. Christopher Greene was buried in the cemetery of the Yorktown, N.Y., First Presbyterian Church, where a monument marks his grave. A memorial was also erected in 1829 at Red Bank, N.J., to honor his role in the Patriot victory there. 🌿