

Lesson Nineteen

The Rhode Island Ironmaster

LESSON IDEA

To further highlight events of the Revolutionary War, and instill respect for the “hero image” its key figures, by recalling the courage, character, and heroic acts of General Nathanael Greene, one of the war’s most brilliant strategists.

PREPARATION

Make copies of the map on page 76 so each member of the family can see where the Southern battles described in this lesson were fought.

BORN IN RHODE ISLAND of Quaker parents, Nathanael Greene was taught to live modestly and labor long. Unlike many of his friends, he never knew the boyhood pleasures of hunting and fishing. At age six he was herding sheep, at ten he was digging ore for his father’s ironworks, and at 14 he was doing a man’s work at the forge. It was at the forge, while balancing on one foot when working the trip hammer, that he developed the limp that would characterize his gait throughout his life.

As he matured, he began longing for the education he had been denied by his father, a strict Quaker who considered “book learning” unessential beyond the three “R’s”: readin’, ritin’, and rithmetic. When Nathanael discovered a bookstore in Newport, he began saving money to buy books. Gradually, by making and selling miniature anchors and toys in his spare time, he earned enough to pay for the ones he wanted. He read about the law, absorbed literature and poetry, and studied the works of European military experts.

His family grieved that he had become so “worldly,” and became even more upset when, in his early 20’s, he became caught up in the colonial protest against English tyranny. Nathanael circulated petitions, served in the Rhode Island legis-

lature, and befriended state and local patriots.

Eventually, he headed one of the family ironworks, built a handsome two story home (which included a library for his treasured books), and married. As the colonies moved toward separation from England, his father died, leaving him to manage the family business. A dedicated patriot, he set other orders aside and began making heavy cannon and light fieldpieces. He knew they would be needed.

IN 1774 Nathanael Greene helped organize and train a local militia. He hired a British deserter in Boston to drill the unit, and smuggled a British musket back home so he could learn to shoot. Using his own money, he bought uniforms and arms for the men who marched on the village green. Yet when officers for the militia were selected, and despite his superior military expertise, he was not included. He was made a mere private because, it was claimed, he had “a blemish unbecoming an officer.” He limped.

What would your reaction have been to such of treatment? Would you have quit the militia or continued? [Ask each family member to express an opinion. Conclude the discussion by pointing out Greene was more interested in the principles of liberty than in nursing his own ego. He stayed in the militia and spent his time studying

British military maneuvers.] What does this tell us about Greene’s character? [Ask for opinions. Remind family members that he had learned to discipline himself with hard work as a boy, and had refused to feel sorry for himself when denied “worldly” pleasures and a proper education. Instead, he undertook to educate himself.]

The Rhode Island Assembly thought more high-



Nathanael Greene

ly of Greene than did the local militia. The legislators were not concerned with his limp, but with his ability to organize, direct, and discipline. Soon after the war began they appointed him a brigadier general, and placed him in command of the 1,500 troops mustered in the state.

When Greene joined Washington's army on the outskirts of Boston, he spent additional time studying the enemy. No detail escaped his attention: drills, fortifications, troop maneuvers, and the practical means of feeding, clothing, and housing an army. When the British eventually left Boston, civilians and soldiers alike began a jubilant celebration, but not Greene. The practical, young general instead busied himself gathering the horses, cannon, blankets, and provisions that the Redcoats had left behind.

With Boston secure, Greene moved on to New York as commander of Long Island, a key site which the British were expected to attack. The young ironmaster made careful preparations, but at a crucial moment was struck with a raging fever. Hit precise planning went for naught as his forces suffered a defeat that included more than 1,000 men killed, wounded, or captured.

Washington's fledgling army was forced from New York into New Jersey. Greene suffered one defeat after another — White Plains, Fort Mifflin, and Fort Mifflin. Only a harrowing escape across the Delaware River saved the American army from total disaster.

Understandably, the morale of both soldiers and civilians became seriously eroded. Nevertheless, Greene carried out his duties with a faith born of knowledge. He knew that wars could be won despite battles that were lost, so began planning his attack on Trenton in minute detail. He worked far into the night to put the pieces in place. He believed, as he had written in a letter to Washington earlier, that "great events depend upon little causes."

The result of Greene's meticulous planning was a welcome — and crucial — victory at Trenton that included the capture of 1,000 muskets, six brass cannons, many horses, and numerous military supplies. All were desperately needed.

There followed another victory at Princeton, but then a string of defeats at Ticonderoga, Brandywine, Paoli, and Fort Mifflin. Men began deserting and, as enlistments expired, few new

recruits volunteered to take their place.

BY THE WINTER of 1777–1778, Greene was no longer fighting the British so much as waging a battle for the survival of his men. From his makeshift headquarters at Valley Forge, he first asked, then demanded, and eventually begged for food, clothing, and medicine from the quartermaster, army supply chief, Congress — even war profiteers. His soldiers were barefoot, virtually naked, and starving.

Eventually, Washington — who was well aware of Greene's ability to organize and plan — appointed him quartermaster. The Rhode Island general regretted giving up his command, but he knew that a starving, ill-equipped army had no hope of winning. He commandeered crops and cattle, and found iron, guns, and ammunition where it was thought none could be found. When troops needed guns during a winter storm, he secured 300 horsedrawn sleds from farmers and delivered 3,000 men equipped with six cannon and two mortars. He accomplished what had seemed to be impossible.

Greene accepted a demotion when he became quartermaster. Why was he willing to do so? Was he thinking of glory for himself as a general, or of the practical needs of the army? What quality of character does his decision reveal? [Emphasize Greene's humility and practicality, and his belief that "great events depend upon little causes," which became evident in the battles to follow.]

With the quartermaster department well organized, and his successor trained, Greene resigned and returned to active duty. In October 1780, Washington offered the young ironmaster command of the Southern army, to replace General Gates.

The British had won victory after victory in the

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

If the August lessons on the Revolutionary War and its heroes are beyond the interest or understanding of younger children, you may wish to substitute boyhood stories about several of the American generals. Augusta Stevenson has written a series of books on famous Americans which may be readily understood by children as young as five. The titles include *Anthony Wayne*, *Israel Putnam*, and *Nathan Hale*. Though currently out-of-print, they may be available at a public library.

