

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Great Commanders: General Greene

Author: Francis Vinton Greene

Reviewed by Ann Calanni

Great Commanders: General Greene by Francis Vinton Greene, originally published in 1893 and reprinted in 2006, is a detailed account of General Nathanael Greene's service and undeniable contribution to the successful conclusion of the Revolutionary War. The list of fellow participants in the colonies' struggle for independence from England reads like nominations for Valhalla, but the major focus of this work is Nathanael Greene's accomplishments and his association with his commanding officer, General George Washington. Author Greene states (with some family pride?) that the only two officers who served continually throughout the eight-year conflict were Washington and Greene. They were, however, in very good company: the Marquis de Lafayette, Alexander Hamilton, Henry (Light Horse Harry) Lee III, and Anthony Wayne, to name a few. The war brought this illustrious band of brothers together and they became – and remained – lifelong friends.

Nathanael Greene was born in Rhode Island in 1742. He was a descendant of John Greene, an immigrant from England, who aided Roger Williams in the founding of the Rhode Island colony. Not much is known of young Greene's early life. What is known is that he was denied a formal education, not because of his family's financial constraints, but because of his Quaker father's beliefs. There was some home tutoring, but he was basically self-taught. He was determined to be an educated man. Although lacking a formal education, "...he overcame

this deficiency by his own unguided and persistent efforts, to such an extent that he was never considered by his associates as an uneducated man: he acquired a good style, barring certain errors of grammar and spelling which were almost universal; he wrote lucidly and concisely, and was agreeable in conversation." Young Greene was a voracious reader and began early in life to amass a substantial library.



General Nathanael Greene, 1783
Charles Wilson Peale

At age 27, his father placed him in charge of the family's mill and forge at Coventry and, by all accounts he was comfortably well situated. Greene was elected to the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1771, 1772, and in 1775. In 1774, he married Catharine Littlefield, she was 20, he 32; they had five children.

In 1774, as relations between England and the colonies deteriorated, the local military companies were formed. Nathanael Greene's military began in the Kentish Guards as a private, a rank which was to be of short duration. As events developed with lightning rapidity, he soon rose to the rank of general. He saw much action in the field, did a

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tour of duty as Quartermaster General (not his preference), then was appointed commander of the Southern Armies. A position he held through the climax of the war to its eventual end.

Author Greene meticulously describes battles and skirmishes planned by and fought in by General Greene. General Washington trusted him implicitly, deferring to him for vital on-the-spot decisions. Time was of the essence; waiting for written instructions carried by mounted couriers was not feasible, and Washington knew he could rely on Greene. To quote General Washington from a letter to Green in the field, *“Uninformed as I am of the enemy’s force in that quarter, of our own, or of the resources which it will be in our power to command for carrying on the war, I can give you no particular instructions, but must leave you to govern yourself entirely according to your own prudence and judgment and the circumstances in which you find yourself.”*

The deplorable conditions under which the war was waged are brought out in great detail by the author. The Continentals and states’ militias were starving (at times fortunate to feed on frogs and rice or less). They were threadbare (in rags and sometimes barefoot in all the elements – General Greene was unable to change his clothes for six weeks). The men suffered from smallpox and other maladies which took their toll. Conditions were raw and primitive and medical help was scarce. There were desertions: some deserters were caught and hanged. Enlistments ended and replacements were slow in coming, if they came at all. There were squabbles (some with the Congress), and occasions of envy. None of this is new news, but bears rereading.

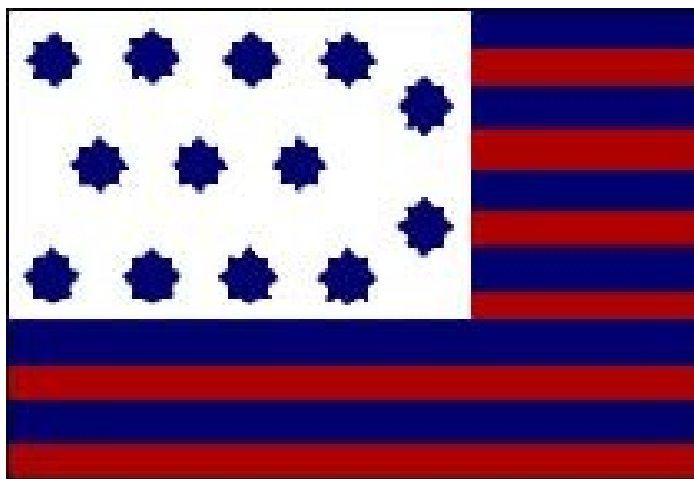
Of particular interest to Carlyle House is the account of the 1781 Battle of Eutaw Springs, South Carolina, in which, although he is not mentioned by name, the young Carlyle family scion George William Carlyle lost his life. In the author’s words: *“The battle of Eutaw Springs was the most hotly contested engagement of the war.”* This assessment was the crux of the report Greene sent to Washington. Greene’s own role was recognized by Washington, the Congress and the people generally. Congress passed a vote of thanks to Greene for his *“most signal victory.”*

At the end of hostilities and after a brief period in Rhode Island, Nathanael Greene and his family took up residence in 1784 at Mulberry Grove plantation in Georgia, which he owned by virtue of a gift from the state of Georgia for service rendered during the war. Greene died of sunstroke in 1786, not quite 44 years of

age. The accolades offered by George Washington and his fellow officers are fine testimonials to the greatness of this relatively unsung hero of the Revolutionary War. Many of these men went on to create or live through many more moments in history, but this was denied Greene by his early demise.

A few observations by the reviewer: In readability, the author’s niggardly use of paragraphing, written-out numbers (ninety-three killed, four-hundred and thirteen wounded, etc); lack of full names at first mention, and presentation style render the book ponderous. That being said, what seems archaic in this age, may well have been accepted form of writing in the late 1800’s. Purists may frown at “aids-de-camp vs. aides-de-camp, and an occasional slip, i.e...., Henry Lees’ wife was Matilda, not Mildred, but these “warts” should not detract from the work.

Many thanks to Ann Calanni for reviewing this book for the Docent Dispatch. Ann served as a State Department Officer for thirty four years, visiting fifty-eight countries in her travels. Her last five year assignment was as Editor for the Inspector General’s Office. Ann formerly was a docent at the Boyhood Home of Robert E. Lee before that museum was sold to a private owner. We are delighted that Ann is continuing her volunteering her at Carlyle House.



The flag pictured above was raised over the Guilford Courthouse in North Carolina on March 15, 1781 under the leadership of General Greene, whose militiamen halted the British advance through the Carolinas and turned them back to the seaport towns. This was one of the bloodiest battles of the long war, with the British losing over one quarter of their troops