



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on September 3, 2008

## Son of Liberty

He was hanged for espionage 232 years ago this September 22.

He was one of those gifted-all-around people who succeed at everything they try, born on June 6, 1755. The sixth of 12 children, he came from a distinguished family. His great-grandparents John and Sarah Hale helped end the Salem Witch Trials, and his parents descended from long lines of preachers, the *crème de la crème* of ancestries in Puritan New England.



That godly influence molded all the Hales. Folks said of Nathan's farming father, "No man ever worked harder for both worlds than Richard Hale." And indeed, Richard was generally called "Deacon," though we don't know whether he actually held that office in his church or whether the honorific merely marked his piety. Nathan's mother, Elizabeth Strong, bore nine sons and three daughters. Ten of the dozen survived to adulthood. Losing two babies was a milder agony than families usually suffered: many had buried more children than sat around the dinner table. Elizabeth herself died when Nathan was 12 years old. Motherless families were another common tragedy in the 18th century.

Nathan matured into a man so handsome that his looks were one of the first things people remembered about him. Colonel Samuel Green was a child when he knew Nathan; he described him as "full of intelligence & benevolence ... a face & appearance that would strike any one anywhere — face indicative of good sense & good feeling — warm & ardent." Nathan was also an athlete of rare ability in an age that prized physical strength. Green recalled that he could "jump from the bottom of one hogshead [barrel] up and down into a second and from the second up and down into a third like a cat.... [He] would put his hand on a fence high as his head, and jump over it." Another acquaintance marveled at Nathan's kicking a football over the treetops.

### College and Career

His mind was as strong as his body. He enrolled at Yale when he was 14, an average age for matriculating in those days, where he continued studying Greek and Latin. He was already fluent in each: that was required for admission. The Classics and the Bible were scholarship's *sine qua non* in colonial America. Whatever else a man knew, he must boast a thorough knowledge of those ancient



texts to call himself educated.

After settling in at Yale, Nathan joined Linonia, one of its debating societies. These organizations were a forerunner of fraternities as far as providing college kids with lifelong friends — and with beer. No colonial college would have tolerated the orgies for which modern fraternities are notorious, but they did assuage students' thirst. With the 19th-century crusades against "demon rum" still decades in the future, colonial and Revolutionary Americans drank in amounts that would stagger abstemious moderns. Colleges served beer at meals; the hypochondriac John Adams claims to have drunk a tankard of hard cider every morning while he was still abed; unpaid armies that hadn't eaten for days nevertheless mutinied when rum rations ran short. Heavy drinkers probably burned off the liquor as quickly as they imbibed it thanks to the physical exertion required to get through the day without electricity or machines. And the diseases water often carried made alcohol a safer choice.

Nathan no doubt enjoyed his share of beer, but even so, he eventually became Linonia's secretary and, finally, its president. At the society's weekly meetings, the teenaged members argued topics ranging from when "the Latin Language arive[d — sic] to the greatest perfection in the City of Rome" to "the Reason that the Moon is not always Eclipsed every Opposition of the Sun and Moon." They also resolved that "As Persons very commonly in Conversation use bad Grammar it is determin'd that in the Meeting free liberty be taken by all present to criticise upon each other's Language."

Yale's curriculum fit a boy for the ministry, but Nathan may have planned to teach, not preach. He and three classmates debated "Whether the Education of Daughters be not without any just reason, more neglected than that of Sons?" at their commencement ceremony. We don't know which side Nathan defended, but since he was teaching girls a year later, it is likely he spoke in favor of the question. On the other hand, many graduates taught school while casting about for their life's work, and that may be the spirit in which Nathan accepted his first job in Haddam, Connecticut.

If Master Hale fell into teaching, he quickly came to love it. Whippings were then considered as integral to education as reading and writing, but he eschewed such cruelty. Not surprisingly, the "children all loved him for his tact and amiability." Colonel Green was one of Nathan's students; he recalled that "scholars old & young [were] exceedingly attached to him.... [He] taught the classics and English." Haddam had him for only a year before parents in New London hired Nathan for their "Union School" — "so called because about twenty gentlemen united & built a fine school house to accommodate thirty or forty scholars." There the gentle teacher inaugurated his class for "20 young ladies," as he wrote his uncle, "for which I have received 6s [shillings] a scholar, by the quarter."

They met from 5:00 to 7:00 a.m., before the boys' school day began. Perhaps Nathan and his "young ladies" were grammatically declining "libertas, libertatis" when the shots that revolutionized the world rang out one morning in the spring of 1775.

## **To War**

Several regiments of the British Army had policed Boston since 1768. That prompted Patriots in nearby towns to stockpile cannon, ammunition, and even rations in case of war. On April 18, 1775, a British detachment marched overnight from Boston to steal that cache, even as Paul Revere and William Dawes alerted the countryside with their famous ride. The colonists the soldiers hoped to disarm converged on Lexington and Concord to thwart that disarmament. They weren't entirely successful: the Redcoats dumped the rations in a pond and ruined some of the guns. But the owners of that damaged property took their vengeance during the Redcoats' retreat to Boston, firing on them so fiercely that 273 of 1,600



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troops fell as casualties.

Over the next weeks, Patriots from all over New England poured into Massachusetts to surround Boston.

Nathan joined both the growing ring and Connecticut's militia later that summer after regretfully resigning from the Union School in July: "Schoolkeeping is a business of which I was always fond.... I have thought much of never quitting it but with life." He missed the bloody battle of Bunker's Hill on June 17, when the Redcoats tried to break through the Patriots' lines and lost almost half their force, killed or wounded.

Also missing the slaughter by a few weeks was the tall Virginian who would transform these enthusiastic militiamen and their sloppy, straggling camp into the Continental Army. Nathan's contingent probably appreciated the reforms General George Washington had already instituted: militiamen were using the privies, for one thing, rather than relieving themselves where they pleased.

Nathan's espionage has eclipsed all else in his military career, but spying wasn't his only exploit. He earned a captain's commission in the Continental Army within a few months. And for good reason, if his leadership that December was any guide. Most of the troops had enlisted through the end of the year — surely more than enough time to whup the Redcoats after the early triumphs. But the optimism faded as months of picket duty and obeying orders crawled by. Worse, the Congress commenced a habit it continued throughout the war: not paying its troops. Washington faced the disintegration of his Army and of the siege lines imprisoning the Redcoats if his soldiers went home. But Yankees to whom a deal was a deal refused to sign up again, given that Congress had reneged on its end of the contract. Some officers, such as the eccentric General Charles Lee, threatened and harangued their troops, trying to force them to stay. Not Captain Hale. He paid his men out of his own pocket, far more effective persuasion than tantrums.

Enough Continentals remained that the Redcoats finally quit Boston in March 1776. They withdrew by sea while incredulous Patriots rejoiced. Former farmers, shopkeepers, and schoolmasters had driven one of the world's most professional armies from its base! Still, everyone knew the transports boarding His Majesty's forces would only deposit them elsewhere along the American coast. Figuring the likeliest spot was New York City on the strategic Hudson River, Washington moved the Continentals there.

The Patriots ate better at the beginning of the war than at almost any other point. But whether his men were in Boston or New York, Washington had a tough time feeding them. Captain Hale helped fill bellies that summer when he led a detachment in swiping a British supply sloop from under the 64 guns of a man-of-war in the East River.

Then, in August 1776, an enemy far more debilitating than the Redcoats decimated Continental ranks: typhus. Though antibiotics now cure the disease if modern hygiene doesn't prevent it, typhus then afflicted armies, prisoners, and other masses of unwashed people. It killed 10-60 percent of them, too. Victims suffered severe headaches and muscle pain, fever and chills, rashes, delirium and stupor, coughing fits, and sensitivity to light. Nathan may have fallen ill, or he may have fought in the disastrous Battle of Brooklyn at month's end.

Washington left half his disease-ravaged army to protect Manhattan, sending about 9,000 Continentals across the East River to the western end of Long Island. There they confronted twice as many Redcoats and hired German troops — with more in reserve. Thanks to an undefended pass and their lethal professionalism, the British encircled the Patriots, killing, capturing, or wounding 2,000 of



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Washington's "brave fellows." Nightfall saved the rest from annihilation as they huddled in their fortifications. But morning would come and with it, defeat. The British were already digging siege tunnels; the Continentals, with the East River behind them, were trapped.

Washington later credited "the Successful termination" of the Revolutionary War to the "patronage of Heaven" and the "interposition of Providence." Perhaps he was thinking of that desperate summer night when his soldiers faced certain doom at dawn — and of the rain that fell for the next three days. Eighteenth-century cannon and muskets would not fire in wet weather because rain or snow easily penetrated their mechanisms to dampen the gunpowder. The deluge kept the Redcoats from doing anything but squelching in the mud of their siege lines.

It also gave Washington time to concoct a daring rescue. He spent the third night silently ferrying his troops from Brooklyn to Manhattan's relative safety in anything that would float. But the boats were still gliding back and forth across the East River at sunrise. The British would soon see their quarry's ongoing flight and attack — except that a fog rose, unusual for that season. It obscured the last of the Americans as they hurried to the dock.

This first and very bitter defeat taught the Continentals the value of reconnaissance. Oarsmen were still rubbing their blistered hands when Washington deputized 36-year-old Colonel Thomas Knowlton to establish an intelligence unit. A scout during the French and Indian War, Knowlton recruited those soldiers he considered most skilled and conscientious from the Continentals' ranks. He asked Captain Hale to join his Rangers.

### **A Spy's Life**

Despite the nigh-miraculous escape from Brooklyn, defeat still seemed inevitable. His Majesty's navy could shell the Continentals as it pleased from the waters surrounding Manhattan while it transported His Majesty's army from Brooklyn to Manhattan — the same cruise Washington's troops had recently taken. Once the Redcoats disembarked, they would sweep overland, mopping up rebels as they went. The only questions were the time and place of their beachhead.

Defending Manhattan's entire coastline would have required thousands more men than Washington commanded at any point during the war. But if he could learn exactly when and where the Redcoats would come ashore, he could post his scarce numbers there.

He needed a spy. And so he turned to Colonel Knowlton and his new Rangers — though spying differs vastly from scouting.

Because they deceived people into trusting them and then betrayed that trust, spies were loathed in the 18th century. People detested them much as we do child molesters now. Though all armies used spies, they enforced the general contempt by hanging those they caught — a shameful death reserved for criminals.

No wonder Knowlton's Rangers recoiled in horror from Washington's proposal. One retorted, "I am willing to go & fight them, but as for going among them & being taken & hung up like a dog, I will not do it." No decent person spied, certainly not a man as honorable as Captain Hale. Nevertheless, he alone agreed to go.

He was probably the worst of the Rangers for this mission. Not only was he "unwell ... , not having recovered from a recent illness [perhaps typhus?]," according to one friend, he was unsuited for espionage according to all. Captain William Hull had known Nathan at Yale; he thought that "the



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employment was not in keeping with his character. His nature was too frank and open for deceit and disguise." Asher Wright, a childhood buddy, agreed: Nathan "was too good-looking to go so. He could not deceive. Some scrubby fellows ought to have gone. He had marks on his forehead so that anybody would know him who had ever seen him — having had powder flashed in his face."

We lose sight of the valiant captain shortly thereafter. A sergeant in his company notes that he "changed his uniform for a plain suit of citizens brown clothes" before leaving "our Camp on Harlem Heights" for British lines. We don't know where he went, what he learned, nor the sources to whom he talked. History doesn't record exactly where and how he was captured. The next glimpse we catch is of his interrogation before British General Sir William Howe. "A person named Nathaniel Hales ... was apprehended as a Spy last night upon Long Island; and ... this day made a full and free confession to the Commander in Chief of his being employed by Mr. Washington."

After this "full and free confession," General Howe may have offered to spare the 21-year-old agent's life if he would turn his coat. Though today we would not condemn a boy's efforts to save his neck by switching sides and then deserting, no 18th-century gentleman would even consider something so dishonorable.

Still, the captain's integrity is breathtaking. From his vantage, the Revolution was over: the Redcoats had invaded Manhattan earlier that week. They would surely finish Washington's panicked army and American liberty. Only an idealistic fool dies for a dying cause.

At 11:00 a.m. on Sunday, September 22, 1776, Captain Hale faced the handful of Redcoats gathered to watch a rebel hang. He saw no friendly faces, no one to carry his words back to family and friends, to report that he died bravely and well. He was as defeated as his cause.

Yet as he stood with the noose clutching his neck, Captain Hale shone as few heroes before or since. First, he preached the Redcoats a sermon, for their impiety was legendary throughout America. And then he delivered his famous line about regretting that he had only one life to give.

By a fluke and against all odds, news of his brilliant bravery reached the Continental Army. British Captain John Montessor attended the execution; later that day, he approached the Continental lines under a flag of truce on another matter. He met with some Patriot officers, including William Hull, Nathan's college chum. Montessor was obviously still shaken, and Hull asked why. Though he must have grieved at the answer, Hull repeated Nathan's last words until they resounded through the frightened, fleeing Continental Army.

But those terrified soldiers heard a different version than the line we know. In 1782, the *Boston Chronicle* published an anonymous account of Nathan's death; Hull probably wrote it. There he reports the line as, "I am so satisfied with the cause in which I have engaged, that my only regret is that I have not more lives than one to offer in its service." The sentiment assumes its final, more memorable form in Hull's memoirs half a century later: "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

It's too bad Hull didn't stick with his earlier, awkward phrasing. His changing "cause" to "country" became significant: ever since, nationalists have perverted Nathan's sacrifice while their victims dismiss it. John Knowles captures this in his superb novel, *A Separate Peace*, when a minor character pressures his son to be a "good American" and enlist during World War II. The boy finally yields, but he tells a friend, "I'm going to 'serve' as [my father] puts it, I may even get killed. But I'll be damned if I'll have that Nathan Hale attitude of his about it." Yet "that Nathan Hale attitude" was all about living free of government butchery and imperialism.



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Nathan's "attitude" bolstered his fellow soldiers as they fled the superior Redcoats all that discouraging fall. News of it spread to hearten Patriots everywhere, bidding them to persevere, reminding them that liberty is worth any price. Even life itself.

**Becky Akers** is an expert on the American Revolution.



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