

Nathan Hale:

Teacher, Patriot, Soldier, Spy

by Kimberly Fletcher



On September 22, 1776, the Redcoats hanged Captain Nathan Hale, a 21-year-old Patriot spy. His last words – “I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country” – became a rallying cry for the Continental Army. The British gave Nathan Hale no trial, and after his death, buried him in an unmarked grave like a common criminal. But, just who was Nathan Hale?

Nathan graduated from Yale University in 1773 at a time when less than 1% of the male population attended college. He almost became a Christian minister, as his brother Enoch did, but instead became a Grammar School teacher.

When the Revolutionary War began in 1775, Hale left his teaching position to enlist in the Continental Army. He accepted a commission as first lieutenant in the 7th Connecticut Regiment under Colonel Charles Webb of Stamford. Over the ensuing year, Hale proved an effective commanding officer. He held his unit together despite steady military setbacks and inconsistent pay that shattered morale and prompted mass desertions in other regiments of the Continental Army. A fellow soldier of Nathan Hale, Lt. Elisha Bostwick said of him, “when any of the soldiers of his company were sick he always visited them and usually prayed for and with them

in their sickness.”

In the Spring of 1776, Hale’s unit joined the Continental Army’s effort to prevent the British from taking New York City. According to tradition, Nathan Hale was part of a daring band of patriots who captured an English sloop filled with provisions from right under the guns of a British man-of-war.

That summer, as British troops and Hessian mercenaries advanced on New York City, General Washington sought a spy to penetrate the British lines at Long Island to get information. Nathan Hale was the only volunteer.

Fellow officer Captain William Hull attempted to talk him out of it, but Hale responded, “I wish to be useful, and every kind of service necessary to the public good becomes honorable by being necessary. If the exigencies of my country demand a peculiar service, its claim to perform that service are imperious.”

Nathan barely had time to infiltrate New York before the Redcoats seized and burned the town. On September 21, 1776, Hale was captured by the “Queen’s Rangers” commanded by an American loyalist, Lieut. Col. Robert Rogers. General William Howe ordered him to be hanged the next morning.

Hale wrote a letter to his mother and brother, but the British destroyed them, not wanting it known a man could die with such firmness. He asked for a Bible but was refused. Nathan Hale was marched out and hanged from an apple-tree in Rutgers's orchard, near the present streets of East Broadway and Market in New York City.

His executioners reported that the young man "bore himself with gentle dignity, great composure and resolution."

The Essex Journal stated of Nathan Hale February 13, 1777, "At the gallows, he made a sensible and spirited speech; among other things, told them they were shedding the blood of the innocent, and that if he had ten thousand lives, he would lay them all down, if called to it, in defense of his injured, bleeding Country."

On November 19, 1863, Nathan Hale's nephew, Massachusetts Governor Edward Everett, spoke at the dedication of the Battlefield right before Abraham Lincoln gave his Gettysburg Address. Nathan Hale's grandnephew was well-known author Edward Everett Hale, who wrote, "We are God's children, you and I, and we have our duties...Thank God I come from men who are not afraid in battle."

Nathan Hale's final words are a testament to the patriot he was. His life, cut short so young, is immortalized as an extraordinary example of public virtue.

"I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country"

—Nathan Hale, September 22, 1776

Discussion Questions

- ★ *Which example of public virtue from the article stood out to you the most?*
- ★ *Who among your family and friends are good examples of being Liber and practicing public virtue?*
- ★ *Overall, what does this article inspire you to do, starting today?*
- ★ *Do you find these principles empowering? How?*

Candy Carson Shares



Video Exercise

Watch the following video featuring Candy Carson, and discuss the questions below:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhXJgSjwKLs>



Discussion Questions

- ★ *What about Nathan Hale's story inspires you?*
- ★ *What are your thoughts on how little known the story of Nathan Hale is compared to how valuable his contribution was?*
- ★ *What would you say are his most important characteristics and what set him apart from his peers?*
- ★ *How can we build those characteristics in ourselves and our families?*
- ★ *What are specific ways that we can exercise "Nathan Hale" courage today, in our political climate?*