

Nathan Hale (1755-1776) *Hero of the American Revolution*

Captain Nathan Hale and the tale of his tragic spy mission of September 1776 has become an American legend, symbolizing the patriotic sacrifices made by so many Americans during the War for Independence.

A native of Connecticut, Hale was a Yale-educated schoolteacher who enlisted in the Continental Army as a 1st Lieutenant on July 5, 1775. After participating in the Siege of Boston, he was commissioned as a Captain in January, 1776. In the spring, when Washington's Army moved to Manhattan in defense of New York City, Hale led his company in building and manning fortifications in expectation of a British assault. However, when the attack came in the disastrous Battle of Long Island (August 27, 1776), it was focused on another sector of the American defenses and Hale's regiment was not engaged in the battle. After more than a year in the army, Hale had not seen combat, a fact that may have motivated his subsequent actions.



Captain Nathan Hale's Last Words,
The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT

Around September 1st Washington formed a new elite unit of New England Rangers under the command of Col. Thomas Knowlton, who had distinguished himself at Bunker Hill. Hale was invited to command one of the four companies, whose initial responsibilities were forward reconnaissance – to patrol the Westchester and Manhattan shorelines around Hell Gate in anticipation, once again, of a British invasion. To obtain better intelligence on the upcoming attack, Col. Knowlton asked for a volunteer to go behind British lines on Long Island and report on troop movements. Acting against the urging of his friend, Captain William Hull, Hale volunteered. In addition to being extremely dangerous, spying was, at the time, believed to be “dishonorable” and unworthy of a gentleman. However, Hale justified his mission by noting that any task necessary for the “public good” was honorable.

Hale crossed Long Island Sound from Norwalk, Connecticut, on the armed sloop *Schuyler*, landing on the shore of Huntington Bay, probably near Bay Road. Although unconfirmed, local legend tells that he spent the night at Mother Chick's Inn (a/k/a Widow Chichester's or Mother Chidd's Inn) now a private residence on Bay Road, before continuing on his spy mission disguised as an unemployed school teacher. Meanwhile, the British invaded Manhattan at Kip's Bay (East River at 34th St.), taking most of the island on September 15th and 16th. His mission negated, Hale decided to cross into British-occupied New York City, presumably to gain whatever intelligence he could for Washington, who was now entrenched behind the bluffs at Harlem Heights.

On September 20th, New York City was set on fire, causing confusion, rioting, and a heightened alert for anyone suspicious. By this time, Hale is thought to have returned to Long Island, probably trying to get back to LI Sound and a friendly boat. On the night of September 21, he was stopped (probably near Flushing Bay) by a company of Queen's Rangers led by Lt.Col. Robert Rogers. Hale was brought for questioning before the British commander, General William Howe, who had just moved into the Beekman Mansion (near 51st St. and 1st Avenue). Intelligence information was found on Hale and he freely admitted his identity and his mission. The next morning, Sunday, September 22, 1776 at 11:00 a.m., Nathan Hale was marched north, about a mile up the post road to the Park of Artillery. It was located next to a public house called the Dove Tavern, about 5 ½ miles from the city (at the NW corner of present 66th St. and 3rd Ave.). After making a “sensible and spirited speech” to those few in attendance, the former schoolteacher and Yale graduate was executed by hanging – an extremely ignominious and horrible fate to one of his time and class.

Whether Hale said that he only regretted having one life to lose for his country has often been debated. The quote comes from a British Engineer, John Montresor, who kindly sheltered Nathan in his marquee while they were making preparations for the hanging. Hale entered and appeared calm, asking Montresor for writing materials. He then wrote two letters – one to his brother, Enoch, and one to his military commander (these letters were probably destroyed by the provost marshal, William Cunningham, who later gained possession of them). Captain Montresor witnessed the hanging and was touched by the event and the patriot's last words.

As fate would have it, Montresor delivered a message from Howe to Washington that very afternoon and told Alexander Hamilton (then a captain of artillery) about Hale's fate. Hale's friend, Captain Hull, went with the delegation returning Washington's answer to Howe (under a white flag) and managed to speak with Montresor. The British engineer told Hull that Nathan had impressed everyone with his sense of gentle dignity and his “consciousness of rectitude and high intentions.” Montresor quoted Nathan's words on the gallows as “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.” This elegant statement, doubtless paraphrased from Addison's popular play, *Cato*, is the quotation best remembered from the execution of Nathan Hale. Hale was only 21 years old.

In Huntington, Hale is commemorated by the hamlet “Halesite,” and by several other memorials – a large glacial boulder with three bronze plaques on Mill Dam Rd., a marble pillar on Main St. near the Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Building, and a stone with bronze plaque near the entrance of the present Town Hall.

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