



Nathan Hale: The Life and Legacy of the Revolutionary War's Most Famous Spy

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures *Includes some of Hale's letters during the war *Includes accounts about Hale's final words *Includes online resources and a bibliography for further reading “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 Hale’s statement to Captain William Hull prior to his spying mission, as quoted in *Captain Nathan Hale (1755 - 1776)* by Rev. Edward Everett Hale For over 230 years, American schoolchildren have been taught about the story of Nathan Hale, or at least a legend of it, and in the process the myth of Hale and his apocryphal final words have immortalized the young man as America’s most famous spy, despite his failed mission. After the siege of Boston forced the British to evacuate that city in March 1776, Continental Army commander George Washington suspected that the British would move by sea to New York City, the next logical target in an attempt to end a colonial insurrection. He thus rushed his army south to defend the city. Washington guessed correctly, but it would ultimately be to no avail. Unlike Boston, New York City's terrain featured few defensible positions; the city lacked a high point from which to launch a siege, as the peninsula of Boston was fortunate to have. In the summer of 1776, the British conducted the largest amphibious expedition in North America’s history at the time, landing over 20,000 troops on Long Island. Washington’s army attempted to fight, but Washington was badly outmaneuvered, and his army was nearly cut off from escape. To escape from New York, Washington led a tactical retreat across the East River and off Long Island in the middle of the night without British knowledge, but the withdrawal across New York City was enormously disorderly, with many of Washington's troops so scared that they deserted. Others were sick as a result of the dysentery and smallpox plaguing the Continental Army in New York. Washington’s army would ultimately be pushed west all the way through New Jersey the rest of the year, but shortly before the colonists had to leave New York, Washington tried to implement intelligence operations around New York City, and one of the early spies was young Nathan Hale. A young officer in the Continental Army from Connecticut, Hale was asked by Washington to go behind British lines on Long Island and bring back information on what the British were up to there. Unfortunately, Hale was quickly identified by Loyalists, found with incriminating papers on his body, and executed the morning after he was caught. The 21 year old Hale’s name may have very well been lost to history but for propaganda efforts to make him a martyr to the cause, most notably the reports of his last words about regretting that he had but one life to lose for his country. If Hale said anything like the quote he’s best known for, he was likely reciting an exchange in the play *Cato* by Joseph Addison or playing off of it, but regardless of what he actually said, the story and the legend of Hale aimed to cover up the fact that his mission was an abject failure, due both to bad luck and ineptitude. At the same time, however, Hale’s death convinced Washington of the need to develop a more properly-prepared body of secret service agents that could bring him the information he needed to make good military decisions. Thus, if anything, Hale’s lasting legacy, at least from a concrete perspective, lay in Washington’s formation of the Culper Ring after his execution. Without question, the relatively little-known clandestine actions of the patriotic men and women who participated in the Culper Ring contributed to the eventual victory in the long struggle for American independence. This book profiles the life of the young spy and his lasting legacy.

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