

Lesson Nineteen

The Rhode Island Ironmaster

LESSON IDEA

To further highlight events of the Revolutionary War, and instill respect for the “hero image” its key figures, by recalling the courage, character, and heroic acts of General Nathanael Greene, one of the war’s most brilliant strategists.

PREPARATION

Make copies of the map on page 76 so each member of the family can see where the Southern battles described in this lesson were fought.

BORN IN RHODE ISLAND of Quaker parents, Nathanael Greene was taught to live modestly and labor long. Unlike many of his friends, he never knew the boyhood pleasures of hunting and fishing. At age six he was herding sheep, at ten he was digging ore for his father’s ironworks, and at 14 he was doing a man’s work at the forge. It was at the forge, while balancing on one foot when working the trip hammer, that he developed the limp that would characterize his gait throughout his life.

As he matured, he began longing for the education he had been denied by his father, a strict Quaker who considered “book learning” unessential beyond the three “R’s”: readin’, ritin’, and rithmetic. When Nathanael discovered a bookstore in Newport, he began saving money to buy books. Gradually, by making and selling miniature anchors and toys in his spare time, he earned enough to pay for the ones he wanted. He read about the law, absorbed literature and poetry, and studied the works of European military experts.

His family grieved that he had become so “worldly,” and became even more upset when, in his early 20’s, he became caught up in the colonial protest against English tyranny. Nathanael circulated petitions, served in the Rhode Island legis-

lature, and befriended state and local patriots.

Eventually, he headed one of the family ironworks, built a handsome two story home (which included a library for his treasured books), and married. As the colonies moved toward separation from England, his father died, leaving him to manage the family business. A dedicated patriot, he set other orders aside and began making heavy cannon and light fieldpieces. He knew they would be needed.

IN 1774 Nathanael Greene helped organize and train a local militia. He hired a British deserter in Boston to drill the unit, and smuggled a British musket back home so he could learn to shoot. Using his own money, he bought uniforms and arms for the men who marched on the village green. Yet when officers for the militia were selected, and despite his superior military expertise, he was not included. He was made a mere private because, it was claimed, he had “a blemish unbecoming an officer.” He limped.

What would your reaction have been to such of treatment? Would you have quit the militia or continued? [Ask each family member to express an opinion. Conclude the discussion by pointing out Greene was more interested in the principles of liberty than in nursing his own ego. He stayed in the militia and spent his time studying

British military maneuvers.] What does this tell us about Greene’s character? [Ask for opinions. Remind family members that he had learned to discipline himself with hard work as a boy, and had refused to feel sorry for himself when denied “worldly” pleasures and a proper education. Instead, he undertook to educate himself.]

The Rhode Island Assembly thought more high-



Nathanael Greene

