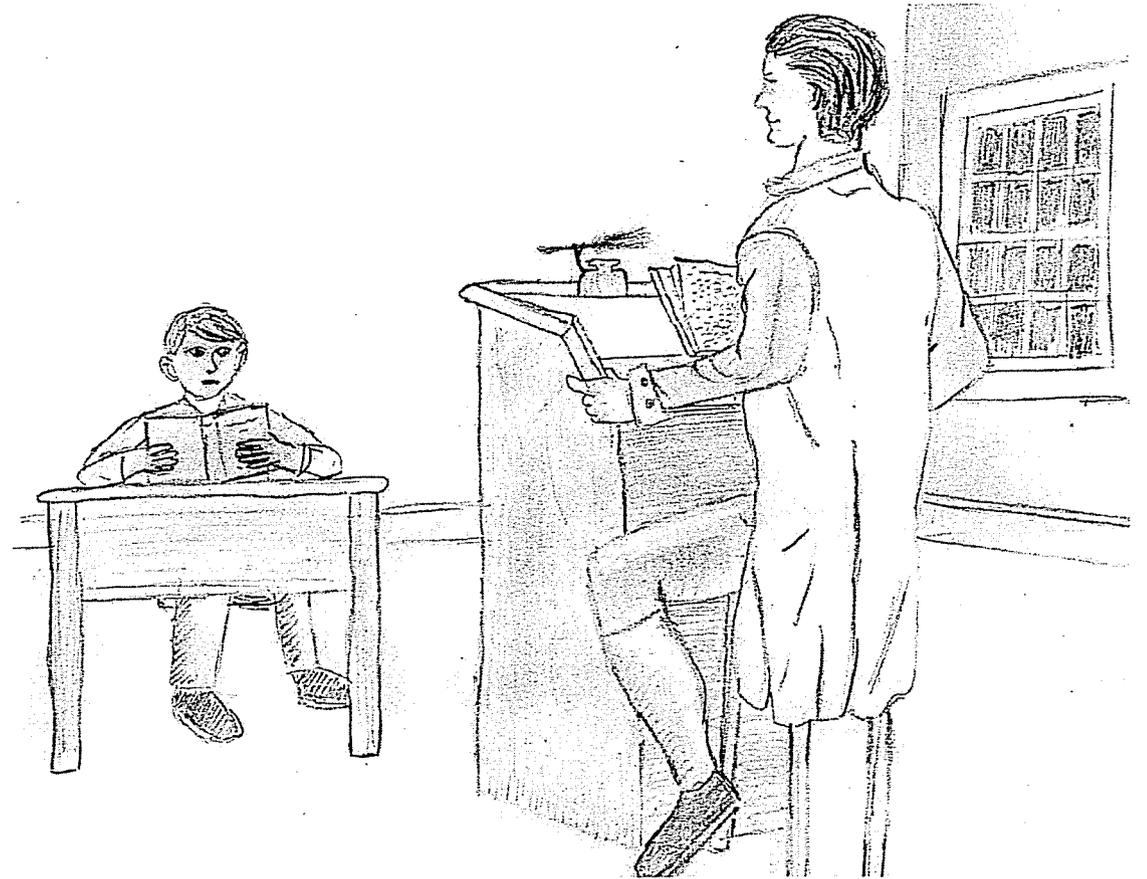


Captain Nathan Hale
of Coventry, Connecticut:
Teacher, Scholar, Patriot, Hero,
1755-1776



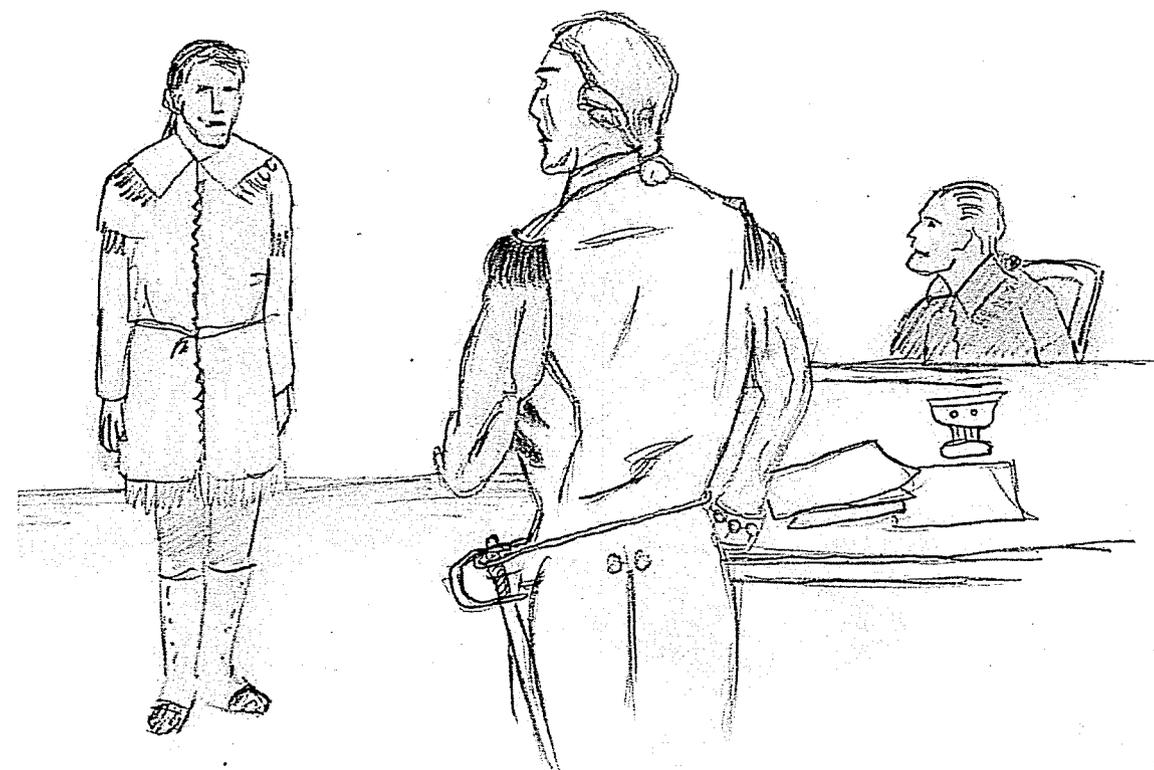
In the 18th century, the small town of Coventry, Connecticut, was part of British North America. Connecticut was only one of thirteen colonies in this area that stretched from New Hampshire to Georgia. Nathan Hale was born on June 6, 1755 in Coventry, to Richard and Elizabeth Hale. Nathan was the sixth of nine Hale children. At the time, Coventry, like so many other towns in North America, was a small, rural place filled with farms and fields. The Hales were originally from Massachusetts and were of strict Puritan stock. While growing up, young Nathan enjoyed the out-of-doors. He loved nature and spent many hours hunting and fishing in the woods and rivers of Coventry. He also loved running, leaping, throwing, playing ball and wrestling. He was very athletic. But Nathan Hale shared a fondness for learning as well. It was the hope of his father Richard Hale, a deacon in the Congregational Church, to see his son someday become a minister. Nathan, however, wanted to teach rather than preach. To this end, and as was the custom, young Nathan was prepared for college under the guidance of Dr. Joseph Huntington, the pastor of the local church. In those days, an instructor tutored students showing academic promise one pupil at a time. By the time Nathan was ready for college at sixteen years of age, the young scholar was just under six-feet tall, broad shouldered, ambitious, and very intelligent.



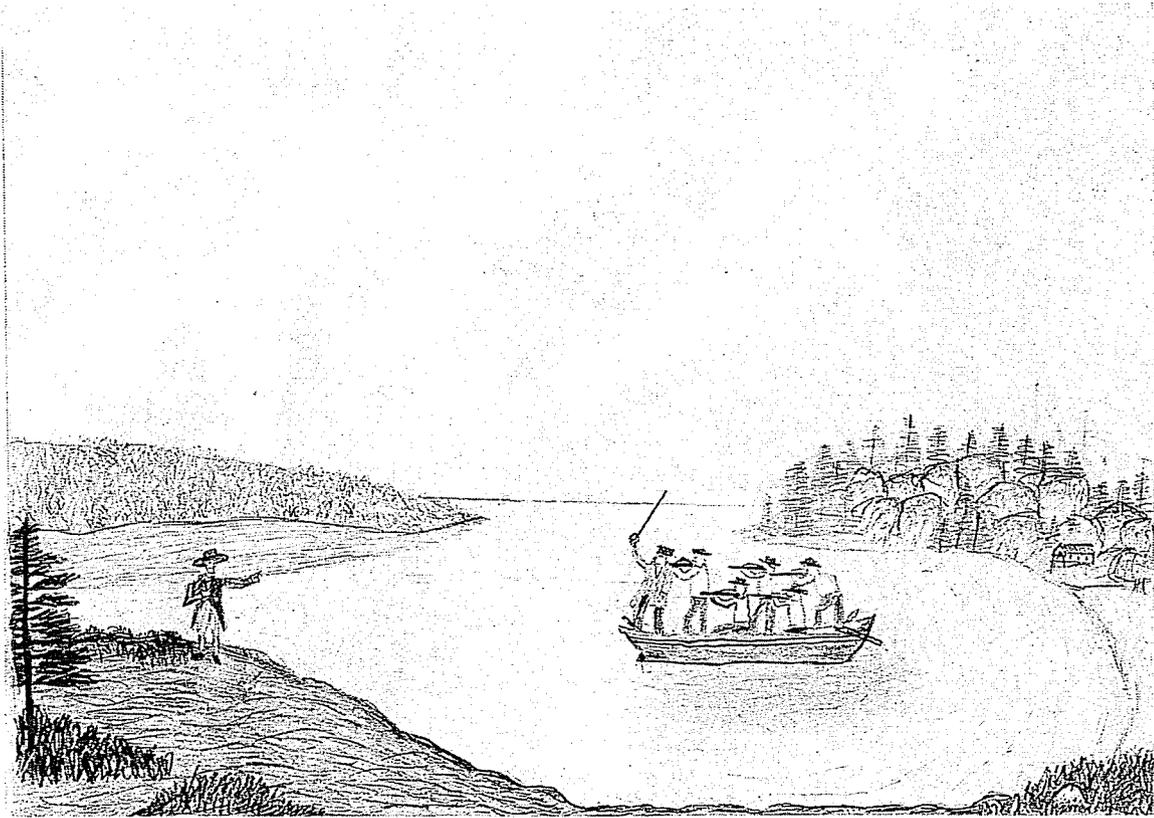
A very confident and energetic Nathan Hale entered Yale College located in New Haven, Connecticut in the southern part of the colony. Here he was provided with a Classical education. This included instruction in languages such as Greek and Latin. It also included coursework in astronomy, religion, rhetoric (public speaking), grammar, writing and mathematics. Dr. Huntington's preparation in Coventry had been very good, for young Nathan performed well in college. In addition to his stellar academic achievements, Nathan was well liked and highly respected by both professors and students alike. At Yale, young Nathan studied under the Reverend Timothy Dwight, an able theologian or teacher of religion. The Reverend Mr. Dwight would later become president of the college. According to Dwight, Nathan Hale was an ambitious student with a keen interest in both literature and science. While a student at Yale, Nathan became an active member of the Linonian Society, an organization devoted to teaching students to debate more effectively. When Hale graduated in 1773, he took a teaching position in East Haddam where he was required to instruct in English, Greek, and Latin. According to one East Haddam observer, "everyone loved" the youthful instructor. In 1774, Hale left East Haddam for a new position at the Union Grammar School, a "select" institution in New London, Connecticut.



By the end of April in 1775, word had spread throughout the colonies that trouble had erupted between British soldiers and American colonists at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. There had been military skirmishes and life had been lost on both sides. After these confrontations with the Americans at Lexington and Concord, the British decided to evacuate Boston and retreated to New York City. As elsewhere, citizens of New London assembled to discuss these happenings. Some gave fiery speeches, others challenged British policies, and still others called upon the militia to resist the British at every turn. Inspired by these speeches, Hale bid farewell to his students and enlisted in the Third Company of the 7th Connecticut Regiment under the command of Colonel Charles Webb of Stamford. The regiment had been raised by order of the General Assembly in 1775 for home defense and was subject to orders from the Connecticut Council of Safety. In January of 1776, Hale was promoted to the rank of captain. Shortly thereafter, he joined Knowlton's Rangers, a unit known for gathering military information. That same month Nathan visited his family's homestead. It was to be the last time he would see his beloved Coventry home.



By June of 1776, the British, under the command of Sir William Howe, had fortified New York City with some 25,000 "Redcoats" and a naval detachment. He soundly defeated the Americans at the Battle of Long Island. After this defeat, the American Patriots were faced with many problems. Militiamen deserted, supplies were low, many soldiers were sick, and few had tents and blankets. In short, the American army was unprepared for the long, cold winter soon to come. Many Americans were saddened by these circumstances. General George Washington wondered what the British might do next. Without this knowledge it could be disastrous for the American cause. Someone had to find out! Washington decided to ask Colonel Knowlton to find a volunteer to secure information on the British in New York. Knowlton made the proposal to his officers but no one came forward to undertake the mission. All was quiet. Suddenly, a voice was heard! "I will undertake it," said a young officer. It was the voice of Captain Nathan Hale. He continued, "I wish to be useful, and every kind of service necessary for the public good, becomes honorable by being necessary." Captain Hale departed for New York to spy upon the British.



Captain Hale went into action almost immediately. Shortly after arriving in New York, Nathan and a group of handpicked companions boarded a whaling boat and sailed it out of port around midnight. Their boat glided along the side of a British sloop that was anchored in the East River. This sloop was loaded with valuable supplies. Quietly, the Americans boarded the sloop, locked the crew below deck, and commandeered the ship back to Coenties Slip, a safe haven for American Patriots. Their arrival was met with hurrahs and cheers and the supplies were distributed to the beleaguered American army. But Hale's most important task still remained unfinished. Disguising himself as a Dutch schoolmaster, the spy absorbed information from his visits to military camps, drew illustrations of fortifications, and gathered information on British actions in Manhattan. After compiling all his information, he wrote everything down in Latin and promptly hid them in the soles of his shoes. After spending a night at "The Cedars," a boarding house, he walked to the rendezvous point where a barge would ferry him back to Norwalk, Connecticut. In time, a barge appeared and made its way toward Hale. As the watercraft neared the shore, Hale's blood froze. The barge was filled with British soldiers who ordered him to "Surrender or Die!"



Under heavy guard Captain Hale was brought before Sir William Howe, the British commander in New York. It was Saturday, September 21, 1776. General Howe had Hale searched and the drawings and Latin documents were uncovered. Howe examined them and questioned the American spy. "What have you to say for yourself?" asked Howe. Nathan realized that he was in a defenseless position and readily admitted to his role as a spy and the nature of his mission. Hale further added that he felt it was his duty to fulfill such a mission. The fact that Nathan was not in proper uniform prompted General Howe to dispense with a formal, military trial. The general then turned to the captive.

"What is your rank?"

Nathan responded, "Captain."

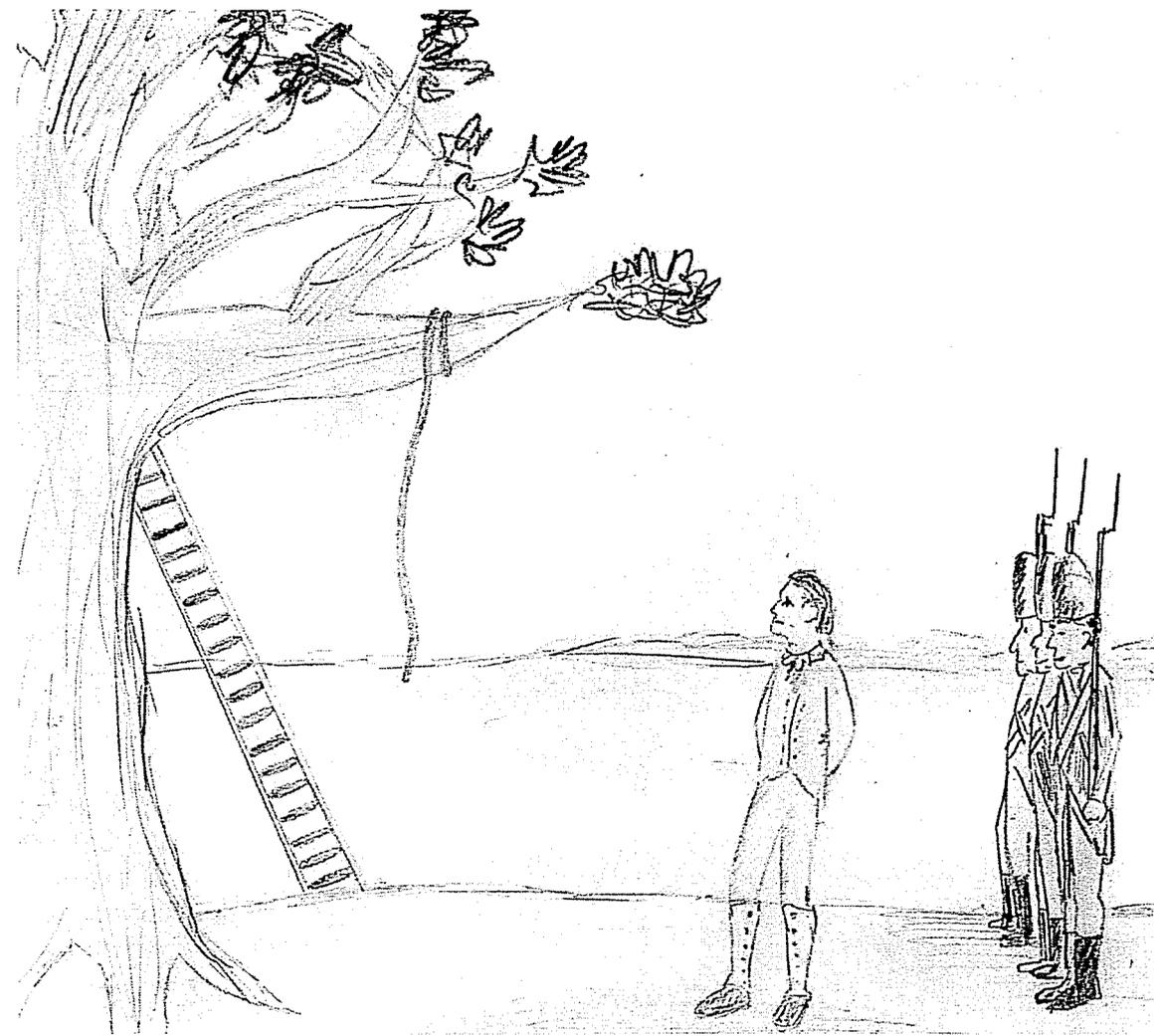
"Your name?"

"Nathan Hale."

Unmoved, Howe sentenced Hale to be hanged as a spy the following morning!



Following his speedy trial, Hale was escorted to his jail cell in the greenhouse at Beekman Mansion, a dwelling that had been converted for such purposes during the war. He was in the custody of William Cunningham, the British Provost Marshall who had a notorious reputation. Cunningham was mean-spirited and took delight in inflicting pain and watching others suffer. During his stay with Cunningham, Nathan had requested the services of a clergyman. He was denied. He then asked for a bible and was denied a second time! As the warm, night hours swept by, Nathan undoubtedly recalled his family and friends with tenderness. His thoughts brought back memories of hunting and fishing in the woodlands and rivers of Coventry—again with tenderness and deep sorrow. He remembered with fondness the faces of his young scholars. Finally, he thought of his perilous mission and the sacrifice he needed to make for his new nation. He felt certain that freedom from British tyranny was soon to be realized.

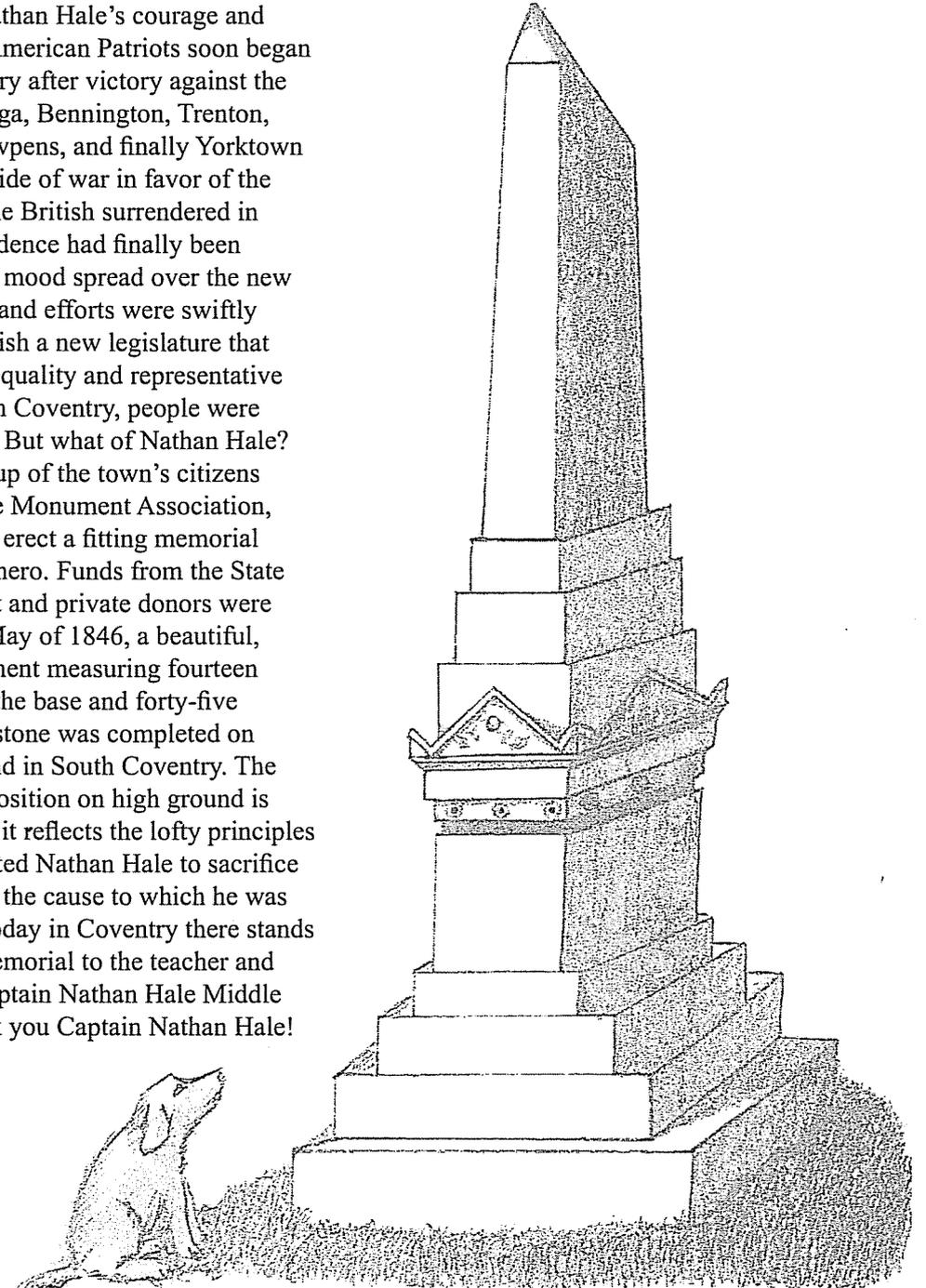


The next morning Captain Nathan Hale was marched to an apple orchard in the vicinity of East Broadway and Market Street. He was led to a ladder that was leaning against a tree. A rope was placed around Captain Hale's neck and he was then ordered to ascend the ladder. At that time Provost Marshall Cunningham asked the brave spy if he had any last words to say. With heady resolve and dignity Nathan reportedly spoke these words: "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." Truly, such an utterance must have angered the wicked Provost Marshall. According to several accounts, Cunningham was so incensed at the valor from one so young that he burst out "Swing the rebel off!" The ladder was immediately kicked out and suddenly all was still. Captain Hale's body was taken down from the tree and was buried in a nearby plot. Bystanders who had come to observe the execution that day later testified that the young captain remained strong and steadfast throughout the entire ordeal.



Word of Hale's execution spread through New England and the rest of the colonies. General Washington received the news with great sorrow. Nathan's family also grieved. Deacon Richard Hale, Nathan's father, was particularly saddened. His child, one whose life was so filled with achievement and future promise, had died a hero's death in service to his country. There were others who shared the grief as well. His students in New London were affected. One local historian of that town wrote, "Many a fair cheek was wet with bitter tears...." And Asher Wright, a Coventry resident who served as Captain Hale's attendant in the army, was so moved that for the rest of his life he could not retell the story of Hale's tragic death without weeping. It was Asher Wright who brought Captain Hale's personal effects back home to Deacon Hale.

Inspired by Nathan Hale's courage and sacrifice, the American Patriots soon began to mount victory after victory against the British. Saratoga, Bennington, Trenton, Princeton, Cowpens, and finally Yorktown all turned the tide of war in favor of the Americans. The British surrendered in 1781. Independence had finally been won. A festive mood spread over the new thirteen states and efforts were swiftly made to establish a new legislature that would insure equality and representative government. In Coventry, people were happy as well. But what of Nathan Hale? In 1837, a group of the town's citizens called the Hale Monument Association, was formed to erect a fitting memorial to their fallen hero. Funds from the State of Connecticut and private donors were collected. In May of 1846, a beautiful, granite monument measuring fourteen feet square at the base and forty-five feet at the capstone was completed on elevated ground in South Coventry. The monument's position on high ground is instructive for it reflects the lofty principles that so motivated Nathan Hale to sacrifice everything for the cause to which he was so devoted! Today in Coventry there stands yet another memorial to the teacher and patriot: the Captain Nathan Hale Middle School! Thank you Captain Nathan Hale!



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