Nathan Hale, Revolutionary War Hero Hanged by the British for Spying on September 22, 1776


In early September 1776, the Continental Army was enduring some of the darkest days it would ever encounter in the entire Revolutionary War. George Washington and his troops had just been soundly defeated in the Battle of Brooklyn, and had just barely escaped annihilation during their retreat. It looked more and more likely that the Americans would have no choice but to abandon the strategically critical city of New York to the British Army.

Desperate to find any sort of advantage he could use, Washington issued a call among his officers for a volunteer who would go behind enemy lines, undercover, in order to obtain intelligence on the size, strength, and intentions of the British Army. At first, no one stepped forward; spying was thought to be among the most disgraceful and dishonorable activities a man could undertake. Then Nathan Hale, a 21-year-old captain serving in an elite army group known as Knowlton's Rangers stepped forward to volunteer.

As a well-educated, likeable young man with a sterling reputation and promising career as an officer, Hale shocked his comrades when he volunteered to spy for the Continental Army. Born and raised in Coventry, Connecticut, Hale graduated from Yale College in 1773 and, after working as a schoolteacher in East Haddam and New London, joined the Continental Army as a

Second Lieutenant in July of 1775. However, after spending over a year in the army and having seen little to no direct action, Hale was eager and willing to undertake a mission that, in spite of its social stigma, could prove to be immensely useful to the American cause.
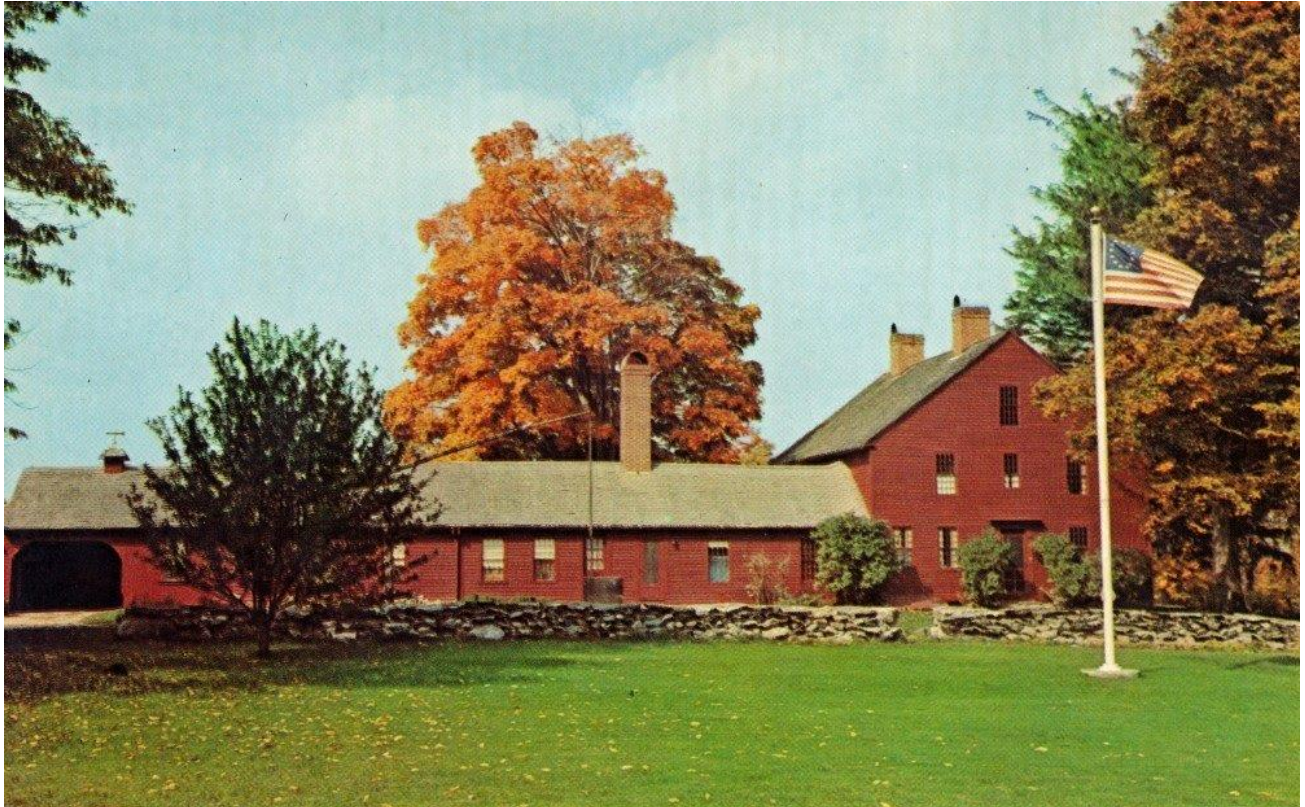

Depicted here in a mid-20th century postcard, the homestead where Nathan Hale grew up in Coventry, CT is open to the public as a history museum.

In their rush to gather intelligence as soon as possible, Hale's superior officers boated him across Long Island Sound, almost certainly without the benefit of any training, explicit instructions, or list of friendly contacts. Once he was on British-occupied territory, Hale roamed the countryside under the guise of a schoolteacher looking for work. Little is known about the extent of Hale's mission or precisely how he was captured, but many historians believe that Hale, as an untrained agent, aroused suspicion by asking too many questions and may have even been outed as a spy by the ranger Robert Rogers (of French and Indian War fame). Hale was taken before British General Howe in New York City, who promptly sentenced him to death by hanging without the benefit of a court martial, in spite of Hale's status as a military officer.

On the morning of September 22, 1776, Hale was hanged in front of a small crowd in New York City, near the southern end of where Central Park stands today. While tradition holds that Hale declared "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country" before he died, the exact phrasing of Hale's last words is unknown. Those words would have certainly fit other contemporary descriptions of Hale's last moments; many eyewitnesses, including British officers, noted the dignity and courage Hale displayed moments before he died. Later that same

day, British officer Frederick Mackenzie wrote in his diary: "[Hale] behaved with great composure and resolution, saying he thought it the duty of every good Officer, to obey any orders given him by his Commander-in-Chief; and desired the Spectators to be at all times prepared to meet death in whatever shape it might appear."
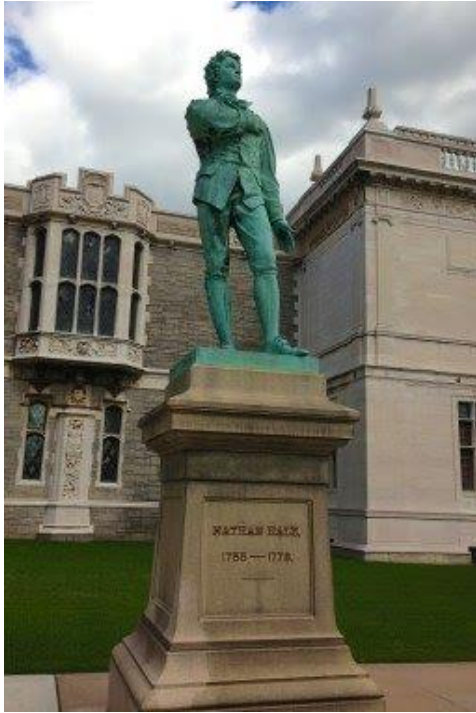
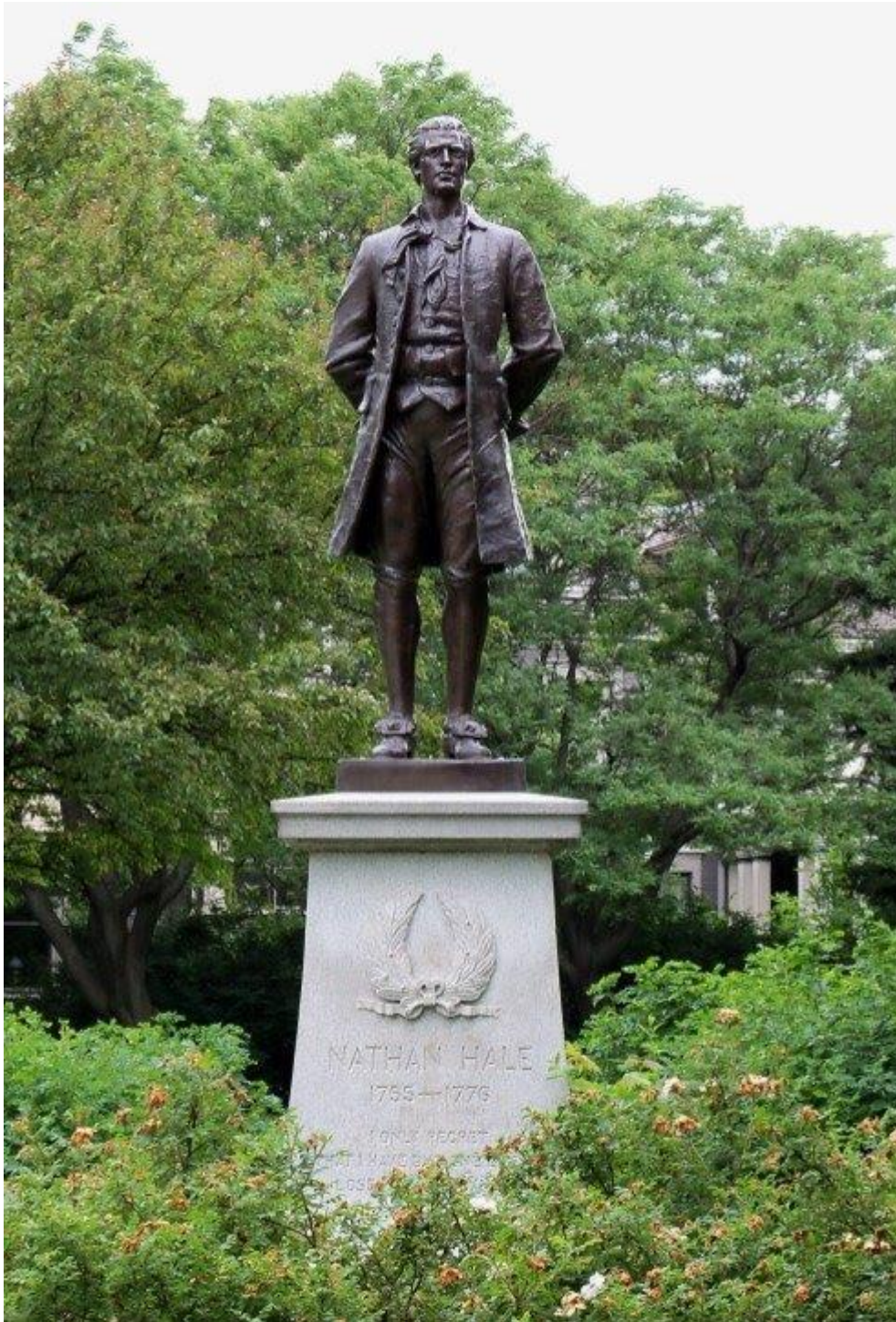*Nathan Hale Statue outside the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.*

Nathan Hale Statue at CIA headquarters in Langley, VA.

Nathan Hale Statue outside the Tribune Building, Chicago.

A World War I soldier stands beside a Nathan Hale statue in New York City.

Nathan Hale Statue in St. Paul, MN.

Today, even though he didn't succeed in his spy mission, Nathan Hale is remembered as a selfless patriot hero. Statues of Hale can be found across the country, even though no contemporary image of him exists. Hale's other namesakes include several school buildings, hotels, a coastal fort in New Haven, Connecticut, and even a nuclear submarine (the *USS Nathan Hale*, SSBN-623). In 1985, the Connecticut General Assembly voted to make Nathan Hale

Connecticut's official State Hero. A brave and patriotic young man became an American legend, on this day in Connecticut history.

Further Reading

Richard E. Mooney, "Nathan Hale: Yale 1773″ Yale University Library online exhibit

Mary J. Ortner, "Captain Nathan Hale, 1755 – 1776," Connecticut Society of the Sons of the American Revolution

Nathan Hale Homestead museum website