

the  
Black  
Islander  
who  
Captured  
General

*by Katherine Patricia Tucker*







1774 was not all men marching and drums beating. Young, happy hearts were also beating. While the colonies were contemplating separation from the Mother Country, two particular colonists were seeking union. It had been a gay courtship, a merry round of parties and dances.

Nathanael Greene while visiting his Uncle William Greene (who later became Rhode Island's second Governor) met the pretty and vivacious Catherine Littlefield - the charming girl with the grey-blue eyes who was island-born and island-bred.

When she could not visit her island home, her thoughts and memories sustained her, for the sea had always been her anchorage and her refuge. Her courage and spirit would always see her safely into port.

Born on Block Island on February 17, 1755, Catherine Littlefield was the daughter of John Littlefield and Phoebe Ray. Her maternal grandfather, Simon Ray, was one of the chief magistrates of the island, and a wealthy Newport merchant. Her father was elected to the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1757 and many times thereafter. He was frequently a member of the Block Island Town Council and served as an ensign in the Newport County Regiment. On January 7, 1775, he was appointed a member of the Committee on Correspondence under Article II of the Association formed by the Continental Congress on September 5, 1774.

Catherine Littlefield had two sisters, Phoebe and Nancy, and two brothers, Simon who was commissioned Lieutenant in the second Rhode Island Regiment, and William Greene who served as a captain under his brother-in-law, General Greene.

Following the death of her mother, young Catherine went to the mainland to live with her Aunt Catherine Ray Greene, the wife of Governor William Greene, at their lovely home near East Greenwich. A vivid memory of Catherine's was the time they all stood on a hill watching a glowing sky reflecting a burning ship by the name of *H.M.S. Gaspee*.

From their very first meeting, Catherine and Nathanael were very happy together. Friends and relatives gathered at William Greene's home on July 20, 1774 to witness their marriage at three in the afternoon. The ceremony was performed by elder John Gorton, a Baptist minister in the southeast parlor where Benjamin Franklin liked to chat during his visits.

Following the reception, the bride and groom left for their new home, the gracious house Nathanael had built in Coventry.

The following October, Nathanael Greene, under a charter granted by the Rhode Island General

Assembly, organized the Kentish Guards, a voluntary militia unit. All that year, the young bride watched these soldiers drilling with muskets her husband had smuggled from Boston, and being trained by a British Sargeant, a deserter whom her husband had persuaded to join their cause.

On the nineteenth of April, 1775, "*The Shot was Fired that was Heard Around the World*" and the news of Lexington and Concord reached the Greens in Coventry by nightfall. Nathanael Greene rode off on his horse to join his guards in East Greenwich in response to his country's call. For the next eight years, the Greens were only together for short and infrequent intervals. At the head of the Rhode Island troops, General Nathanael Greene welcomed George Washington as Commander-in-Chief on his arrival in Cambridge.

Catherine Greene, too, responded to her country's call, and that winter when smallpox raged in Boston she opened their home in Coventry as a hospital so that soldiers could recover from their vaccinations against that dreaded disease.

That same winter of 1775-76, Catherine Greene journeyed to Cambridge with their baby boy who was christened George Washington Greene at a ceremony held in camp. That winter also witnessed the beginning of a strong and lasting friendship between Martha Washington and Catherine Greene.

The wives of the officers often came during winter encampments. They visited the sick and wounded soldiers. Their very presence was a great source of comfort and encouragement. They met at Mrs. Washington's quarters to knit and make new garments.

Catherine Greene studied French during her winter at Morristown. It was at this point that Baron Von Steuben's young French secretary, Deponceau, wrote of Catherine that she "*was a handsome, elegant and accomplished woman whose home was the resort of Foreign officers because she spoke the French language and was well versed in the French literature.*"

During the bitter cold of the Valley Forge winter of 1777-78 the warmth of Catherine Greene's hospitality was the spark that held that gallant band together. There was a great rejoicing when the French Alliance was signed. The Colonists were grateful that at long last they had secured the aid of another country.

The summer of 1778 was spent at Coventry where Catherine was happy with the brief visits from her husband, whose presence was required in the area during the Battle of Rhode Island. The following winter the encampment was in the Hudson River area and the living was easier than



it was at Valley Forge. Officers were quartered in farmhouses rather than little huts. Dancing afforded much needed and welcomed pleasure. On one occasion the lovely Catherine Greene danced with General George Washington for over three hours. "A pretty little frisk," General Greene described it in a letter to a friend.

After Benedict Arnold's treason in the autumn of 1780, General Nathanael Greene was given command of West Point and arranged for Catherine to join him there. General Greene ably served as quartermaster general and accomplished what had once seemed an impossible undertaking. He secured food, clothing and supplies. Dissatisfied colonists became patriots of their new land and were transformed into a unified American Army. Although General Greene faithfully carried out his assignments in the quartermaster corps, he longed for a field command again.

The opportunity came when General Washington realized that the American retreat under General Gates must be reversed and he appointed his second-in-command to undertake the campaign in the South to achieve victory against the British. Because of this urgent order, there could be no delay and General Greene was unable to wait for Catherine. He wrote her an affectionate farewell and a long separation followed.

She therefore finally decided to join her husband, enduring a long, arduous journey to Morristown, New Jersey, to be with him. There, during a blizzard, at the end of January, 1780, their second son, Nathanael, was born. The soldiers rejoiced and brought little gifts and tokens to the baby. The happy occasion was a welcome change of pace from the grimness of camp and awakened fond memories of their own homes and families.

To and from all camp visits, Catherine faced the dangers and endured the hardships of the long hazardous journeys by carriage.

Her reward was the joy of reunion and the cheer and encouragement that her visits brought to the officers and men. Her visits were symbolic of their own future reunions.

Catherine remained in the South until the British marched out of Charlestown, South Carolina, over a year after Lord Cornwallis had surrendered his sword to General Washington.

The end of the War meant home to Rhode Island. Mrs. Greene did not feel strong enough to endure the long journey by coach in the heat of summer so she, returned by ship while the General departed somewhat later on August 15, 1783. His one thousand mile overland ride by horseback was a triumphal march as bands played, flags waved and the people of each city, town and village turned out to greet the hero who freed the

South from British rule. A grateful Georgia and South Carolina rewarded the victorious General with gifts of beautiful plantations, confiscated from their former Tory owners. Greensboro, North Carolina, was named in commemoration of his victory there at the Battle of Guilford Court House.

That summer the Greenses leased a house opposite the "Old Stone Mill" in Newport. It was a happy time to again be near family and close friends and it was the first time General Greene was with all his children.

During the war, General Greene had personally guaranteed payment for food, clothing and provisions for his soldiers. Following the death of Mr. John Banks, the merchant who had furnished these supplies, his creditors pressed General Greene for payment.

While Congress eventually voted reimbursement, the long, long delays, necessitated in part by the forging of a new government, proved too costly to the Greenses. They were obliged to sell their South Carolina estate.

In 1785, the Greenses went to live in Georgia on their beautiful plantation, Mulberry Grove, on the banks of the Savannah River. General Greene engaged Mr. Phineas Miller, a graduate of Yale College, as a tutor for his children. The Greenses were impressed with the young man's wide knowledge as well as his teaching ability. He was also a great help to General Greene in reactivating and managing the estate.

General Anthony Wayne was also rewarded by the Georgia Legislature with the gift of an adjoining plantation and the future looked bright for the two former comrades-in-arms.

Catherine Greene received a special gift from her husband when he purchased Cumberland Island, off the Georgia coast, for his island born wife.

The plantation was prospering, the long war years were over and the spirit of peace and hope prevailed. The Greene family was together and happy. They felt the ordeal of separations was over forever. Little did Catherine Greene realize that she would soon face the longest separation. Under the blazing Georgia sun, Nathanael Greene toured the rice plantation of a friend. He felt weak and ill and, with Catherine, returned to Mulberry Grove. His years of peace in his beloved country in whose cause he fought for freedom were too brief. On June 19, 1786 Nathanael Greene died from a sunstroke.

General Greene was undefeated on the field of battle but his heart was captured by the charming Catherine Littlefield from Block Island. She enchanted him at their first meeting and the enchantment lasted all his life. Their strong bonds of love endured through the dangers, hardships, sorrow,

sufferings and separations of the Revolution. Their just reward should have been many happy years together with their children in a peaceful new country. Of their twelve years of marriage, Nathanael Greene spent eight in the Revolutionary Army.

In General Greene's honor and memory, Savannah erected a monument over his grave and his friend, General Lafayette, laid the cornerstone in 1823.

Catherine Greene, a young widow with five children, had to struggle with the maintenance of the plantation and the burden of still unpaid bills because the sale of the South Carolina estate did not cover the entire debt owed to Mr. Banks and Congress still had not approved reimbursement. It was not until 1792, seven years after General Greene's death, that Congress finally paid the balance of the bill.

Phineas Miller, the children's tutor, who had also helped General Greene with the plantation, became the manager of Mulberry Grove.

General Lafayette requested Mrs. Greene's permission to educate and care for young George Washington Greene. He would be happy and honored to have his dear friend's son with him. George Washington had also offered to have the boy live with him but General Lafayette had requested first so Catherine sent her oldest son to France.

Having lived through one Revolution, Catherine worried about the dangers her son might face as revolt spread and France entered her own revolutionary period. She asked that her son return home. Soon after his arrival, Catherine experienced another great sorrow when he was drowned in the Savannah River.

While Catherine was living at the plantation, Aaron Burr went South after his duel with Alexander Hamilton. *"He requested permission to stop at the house. She could not refuse the demand upon her hospitality, but Alexander Hamilton had been the close friend of her husband and herself and she would not meet him. So she ordered her carriage and quitted the house until Burr had come and gone."*

On a return trip to Georgia from a visit to Rhode Island, Catherine and the children met a young man who was journeying to begin a position as tutor on a Savannah plantation. He befriended the Greene children and mended their toys during the long trip. Disappointed with the low salary offered, the young man, a graduate of Yale College, without resources or friends, regretfully planned to return home. Mrs. Greene invited him to visit at Mulberry Grove. It was at the Greene plantation that this young man, Eli Whitney, invented the cotton-gin and revolutionized southern economy.

In April 1793, Eli Whitney invited Catherine Greene to witness a demonstration of his new machine. As the seeds were separated from the cotton, the fibres unfortunately clung against the wires and clogged the machine. Catherine Greene *"snatched up a hearthbrush and brushed the wires clear of the clogging fibres."* Following Mrs. Greene's suggestion, Eli Whitney made another cylinder with a brush attachment and perfected his machine.

Eli Whitney secured a patent in March 1794 and formed a partnership with Phineas Miller. Unfortunately, copies appeared and the partners faced a lengthy and expensive struggle to establish their rights. In 1795, the firm was threatened with bankruptcy and, as General Greene had personally pledged his support to merchants supplying the army, Mrs. Greene now committed her entire resources to aid the inventor and Mr. Miller.

Phineas Miller, respected and loved by the Greene children as a loyal and trusted friend, married Catherine Greene on June 28, 1796.

Beautiful Mulberry Grove had to be sacrificed in 1800 to satisfy the expenses incurred by lengthy lawsuits involving patent infringements. The family then moved to Dungeness, the Greene estate on Cumberland Island. There the Millers and the Greene children lived and there Phineas Miller died in 1803 at age 39 from fever and the exhaustion brought on by financial worries.

Born on Block Island, sustained throughout her life by her love of the sea, Catherine Greene Miller died on Cumberland Island in 1814 at age 59.

With her marriage to Nathanael Greene, Catherine Littlefield stepped onto the stage of American history. Gallant, fascinating Catherine in her own special way will always hold a unique place among the famous women of the country.

*This is Katherine P. Tucker's third successive contribution to the Yearbook. She maintains active membership in many organizations including the Rhode Island Historical Society, World Affairs Council and as President of the Rhode Island Short Story Club.*