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## FRAUNCES TAVERN® MUSEUM

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### A Transcript of Nathan Hale's Last Known Letter

New York, Aug 20.<sup>th</sup> 1776

Dear Brother,

I have only time for a hasty letter. Our situation has been such this fortnight or more as scarce to admit of writing. We have daily executed an action by which means, if any one was going, and we had letters written, orders were so strict for our tarrying in Camp that we could rarely get leave to go and deliver them, For about 6 or 8 days the enemy have been expected hourly whenever the wind and the time in the least favoured. We keep a particular look out for them this morning. The plan and manner of attack time must determine. The event we leave to Heaven. Thanks to God, we have had time for compleating our work and revising our reinforcements. The Militia of Connecticut ordered this way are mostly arrived. Col. Ward's Reg. has got in. Troops from the Southward are daily coming. We hope under God, to give a good account of the Enemy whenever they choose to make the last appeal.

(p. 2)

Last Friday Night, two of our fire-vessels (a Sloop and a Schooner) made an attempt upon the Shipping up the River. The night was too dark, the wind too slack for the attempt. The Schooner which was intended for one of the Ships had got by before she discovered them; but as Providence would have it, she run athwart a bomb-catch which she quickly burnt. The Sloop, by the light of the former discovered the Phoenix – but rather too late, - however she made shift to grapple her, but the wind not proving sufficient to bring her close along side, or drive the flames immediately on board, the Phoenix after much difficulty got her clear by cutting her own rigging – [Sergt. Fosdick and four of his hands of my company were in the above sloop. (this section crossed out)] Sergt. Fosdick who commanded the above Sloop and four of his hands were of my company, the remaining two were of this Regt. The Genl. has been pleased to reward their bravery with forty dollars each except the last man that quitted the fire sloop who had fifty. Those on board the Schooner receive the same. I must write to some of my other brothers, lest you should not be at home. remain Your Friend & Brother No. Hale –

Mr. Enoch Hale -

(Nathan Hale's last known letter, from the collection of Fraunces Tavern Museum / Sons of the Revolution in the State of New York. Gift of Christian A. Zabriskie, 1938.)

## Nathan Hale

The son of a prosperous farming family, Nathan Hale was born in Coventry, Connecticut. At the age of 14, Hale and his brother Enoch, two years his senior, entered Yale College as part of the class of 1773. Their classmate and close friend, Benjamin Tallmadge, was later to become spymaster to George Washington. After leaving Yale, Hale settled into a quiet life as a schoolteacher in New London, Connecticut, but the events of History would soon draw Hale far away from the safety of the classroom and into the thick of military action. In the summer of 1775, Benjamin Tallmadge sent Hale a letter describing the British siege of Boston, and reflecting on the need for military service; that was all Hale needed to prompt him to accept a lieutenant's commission in the Connecticut Militia.

This letter from Nathan Hale to his brother Enoch, was written a week before the largest battle of the Revolutionary War – the Battle of Long Island. It was most likely composed in the American camp surrounding the fortifications built by Hale's 19<sup>th</sup> Connecticut unit on Bayard's Mount, once the highest point on Manhattan, in present-day Soho, roughly in the area of Grand and Centre Streets. (Bayard's Mount was leveled in the nineteenth century to fill in the fetid Collect Pond and its surrounding swamp.)

Captain Nathan Hale had just become part of the newly formed elite unit called Knowlton's Rangers, organized the week before on August 12<sup>th</sup>. Knowlton's Rangers were charged with patrolling the Manhattan and Westchester shorelines, and gathering information on the movements of the British.

In this letter, Hale describes the fire-ship attack members of his unit made on the British ships the *Phoenix* and the *Rose* in the Hudson River off upper Manhattan. While the attack was largely unsuccessful, it sufficiently alarmed the British, so they recalled their ships which had been farther north on the Hudson near Tarrytown, back down to Manhattan to help defend the fleet.

A month after joining Knowlton's Rangers, Captain Nathan Hale, who had spent a little over a year in the army building fortifications, administering his unit, and never seeing any real military action, answered Washington's call for a volunteer to go behind enemy lines on Long Island to gather information about the location of the expected British invasion of Manhattan. This was a dangerous mission. In the honor-conscious 18<sup>th</sup> century, spying was considered dishonorable and ungentlemanly, but Hale resolved to do his duty, telling his friend William Hull that "any task necessary to the public good becomes honorable by being necessary."

On the evening of September 21<sup>st</sup>, Hale was captured by the British somewhere near the American lines on the island of Manhattan. Without a trial, he was hung as a spy by the British at 11 o'clock the very next morning. A British soldier who was witness to Hale's execution reported that Hale made "a sensible and spirited" speech before his death, and his honor and patriotism was impressive even to his captors. We don't know to a certainty whether Hale actually uttered the famous words so universally attributed to him, but his undeniable commitment to America may be what leads people to believe that just before his death, Nathan Hale said, "My only regret is that I have but one life to lose for my country." Nathan Hale was only twenty-one years of age.



*The Nathan Hale statue in City Hall Park was commissioned from Artist Frederick MacMonnies by the Sons of the Revolution in the State of New York and was dedicated by them on the 110<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Evacuation Day, November 25, 1893.*