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EAST HADDAM CELEBRATES AMERICA'S 250TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL

EAST HADDAM PATRIOT HIGHLIGHT – NATHAN HALE

By Susan R. Waide



(Photo Art Caption) Top: Photo Art rendering of the Nathan Hale Schoolhouse in East Haddam. Bottom left: Photo Art rendering of the inside of the schoolhouse today. Bottom right: Photo Art rendering of Nathan Hale's Bronze Bust in East Haddam. (Photo Art Rendering created by Susan R. Waide)

On June 6, Americans remember the birth of one of the Revolutionary War's most enduring heroes, Nathan Hale. Although Hale was born 271 years ago in 1755, his story continues to inspire generations through its themes of courage, sacrifice, and patriotism. Yet before he became a martyr for independence, Nathan Hale was a young schoolteacher in the quiet river town of East Haddam, Connecticut.

After graduating from Yale College at 18 years old, Hale accepted a teaching position in East Haddam during the winter of 1773. Here, he taught 33 students, both boys and girls, ranging in age from about 6 to 14, in reading, writing, arithmetic, and moral instruction.

At the time, East Haddam was a peaceful Connecticut River community shaped by farming, maritime trade, and colonial life. Hale taught in a one-room schoolhouse originally known as the First Society School. Built around 1750, the school stood on the town green at the junction of Main Street (Rt. 149) and Norwich Road (Rt. 82), near the site of today's Nathan Hale bronze bust monument near the historic East Haddam Swing Bridge. Sculpted by Enoch S. Woods, it was unveiled in 1905 to mark the original site of the one-room schoolhouse where the colonial patriot taught.

A small number of Hale's male students preparing for Yale also studied with Reverend Elijah Parsons, since Yale was the colony's only degree-granting college. Women were not permitted to attend college during this period.

The schoolhouse itself has a remarkable history. In 1800, the school was moved north on Main Street. Later it served as a private residence for Captain Elijah Attwood and his descendants. In 1899, Judge Julius Attwood presented the historic building to Colonel Richard Henry Greene of New York in trust for the Connecticut Sons of the American Revolution. The restored red schoolhouse was relocated in 1900 to the hill where it still stands today behind St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. It is now maintained by the Connecticut Society of the Sons of the American Revolution and furnished with period desks, tools, and tables by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

When Nathan Hale taught in East Haddam, schoolmasters were expected not only to teach academics, but also to shape the moral character of their students. Unlike many stern schoolteachers of the era, Hale became known for his kindness, energy, and compassion.

Historical accounts describe him as handsome, athletic, intelligent, and cheerful. He organized outdoor activities, encouraged curiosity, and treated his students with respect during a time when corporal punishment was common in colonial classrooms. One contemporary later recalled: "He was a happy and faithful teacher. Everybody loved him. He was sprightly, kind, intelligent, and so handsome."

Hale's athletic abilities were also legendary. At Yale, he became famous for his skill in broad jumping, high jumping, wrestling, and football-style kicking contests.

During Hale's stay in East Haddam, political tensions between Great Britain and the American colonies were rapidly intensifying. Taverns, churches, and homes buzzed with debate over liberty, taxation, and colonial rights. As a well-educated young man deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideals, Hale likely carried those conversations into both the classroom and community life.

For Hale, teaching was more than a profession, it was an act of nation-building. Colonial educators helped prepare the next generation of citizens, and many became outspoken supporters of independence. Hale himself reportedly believed that "every kind of service necessary to the public good becomes honorable by being necessary."

While teaching in East Haddam, Hale boarded at Captain James Green's tavern, known as the Blacksmith Arms, located near the upper East Haddam Landing within walking distance of the schoolhouse. The tavern was taken down in about 1900.

Colonial taverns functioned as the centers of community life. They served as post offices, news hubs, political meeting places, and lodging houses. Hale likely spent evenings listening to travelers discuss rising taxes, British policies, and growing tensions with King George III.

Life as a colonial schoolmaster was not easy. Hale taught long hours from seven in the morning until nine at night with only a brief midday break. Though he initially appreciated the position, surviving letters reveal his increasing loneliness and frustration with the town's isolation.

In a famous 1774 letter to his Yale classmate Ebenezer Mead, Hale referred to East Haddam as the "wilderness called Moodus." He wrote humorously about feeling completely cut off from friends, letters, and society.

His classmates often teased him about his remote teaching assignment. One friend jokingly wrote that if Hale died in Moodus, "you stood but a narrow chance for gaining a better" world afterwards.

Despite his frustrations, Hale remained devoted to his students throughout his six-month stay. By March 1774, however, he accepted a new teaching position at the Union Grammar School in New London, a larger and more active seaport community that offered greater intellectual and social opportunities.

When the Revolutionary War erupted in 1775, Hale left teaching and joined the Connecticut militia. He later became a captain in the Continental Army under General George Washington. In September 1776, Hale volunteered for a dangerous intelligence mission on Long Island behind British lines. Captured by the British at only 21 years old, he was executed as a spy.

Although his military career was brief, Nathan Hale's legacy endured. Connecticut later honored him as the state hero, and schools, monuments, and historic sites throughout the state now bear his name.

Yet Hale's time in East Haddam offers a more personal glimpse into the young man behind the legend not simply a soldier, but a teacher who believed deeply in learning, character, and civic duty.

Today, as Connecticut communities prepare to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, Nathan Hale's connection to East Haddam remains especially meaningful. Before he gave his life for liberty, he helped shape young minds along the banks of the Connecticut River.

His story reminds us that the Revolution was carried forward not only by generals and politicians, but also by teachers who quietly prepared a generation to imagine a new nation.

Nathan Hale was not born a hero. Born on June 6, 1755, in Coventry, Connecticut, he grew up in a deeply religious New England family that valued education, discipline, faith, and public service. Friends later remembered him as intelligent, athletic, cheerful, and deeply idealistic.

The qualities admired in Hale as an adult, patriotism, courage, intelligence, and kindness, were visible even during his childhood on the Hale family farm.

In East Haddam, Nathan Hale was simply a young teacher trying to inspire children and find his place in the world. His story remains a reminder that ordinary people can shape history through courage, learning, and service.

Residents and visitors are invited to celebrate America's 250th Anniversary during a day-long community event in East Haddam on Saturday, July 11, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Activities will begin at the Historic First Church Meeting House at 499 Town Street (Route 151). Admission is free and open to the public.

Afternoon programs include a cemetery tour of 20 revolutionary soldiers and town committee men buried at First Church Cemetery at 3:00 p.m. At the Old Town Hall and Grange Hall historical activities and educational programs for children and adults will be featured. "The Drama of Nathan Hale in Movies and on Stage" will be presented by Kandie Carle, Producing Artistic Director of the East Haddam Stage Company. Those interested in volunteering for the July 11th event are asked to contact the First Selectman's Office at (860) 873-5021 or email admin@easthaddam.org to sign up.

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