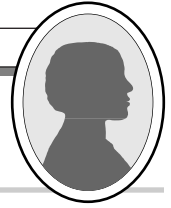


BIOGRAPHY



Catherine Littlefield Greene

One often hears stories about “the woman behind the man,” usually a wife who inspires her husband to great deeds and encourages him in his work. Catherine Littlefield Greene was such a woman, and the man she supported and encouraged was a friend, Eli Whitney. The deed Greene inspired was the invention of the cotton gin.

As you read the passage below, think about how Catherine Littlefield Greene helped to change the history of the South.

Catherine Littlefield was born in 1755 into a leading family of Block Island, in Rhode Island. Little is known of her childhood, but in 1774, she married Nathanael Greene, who would soon become one of George Washington’s most trusted generals.

When the Revolutionary War began, Catherine Littlefield Greene remained in Rhode Island. During the brutal winter of 1777–78, however, she joined her husband at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania. There, “Kitty” Greene’s vivacity, charm, and courage in the face of danger cheered the beleaguered forces and won her the admiration and gratitude of General Washington.

Following the war, in appreciation for General Greene’s service to the nation, the state of Georgia awarded him a plantation that had been confiscated from Loyalists. In the fall of 1785, the Greene family moved to Mulberry Grove and set out to return the plantation to production. Nine months later, General Greene died, leaving his wife with five small children and a mountain of debts.

Against all odds, Mrs. Greene and her plantation manager, a young Yale graduate named Phineas Miller, succeeded in making the plantation profitable. In 1792 Miller arranged for another Yale graduate, Eli Whitney, to take a teaching post near Mulberry Grove. When that job fell through, the hospitable Kitty Greene invited Whitney to stay at her plantation. Whitney’s mechanical ability

inspired great confidence in Mrs. Greene. A born tinkerer, he could fix anything. One evening, at a social gathering at Mulberry Grove, a group of planters complained that there was no way to clean the seeds out of cotton bolls quickly and thus make cotton a profitable crop. “Gentlemen,” Kitty Greene proclaimed, “tell your troubles to Mr. Whitney. He can make anything.”

Whitney was intrigued by the challenge, and for the next six months, he labored away in a locked room in the plantation basement. The room was kept locked because both Whitney and Mrs. Greene were concerned about patent rights to such an important invention. All the while, Mrs. Greene kept encouraging her protégé. Legend has it that she even showed him how to improve his first flawed model by adding a hearth brush to it, to sweep away the cotton seeds.

Finally the cotton gin was perfected and it proved a great success. One person operating the gin could clean as much cotton as 50 people working by hand. Unfortunately for Whitney and Greene, however, the gin was simply too easy to make. The patent could not be protected, even though Mrs. Greene committed all her resources to fighting for it in the courts. Although she never profited personally, Kitty Greene’s encouragement and backing of Eli Whitney opened up a new chapter in the history of the South. She died in 1814.

Questions to Think About

1. What role did Catherine Littlefield Greene play in the Revolutionary War?
2. What role did she play in the invention of the cotton gin?