

## Biography of Nero Hawley

By Steve Chapman of the Connecticut SAR

A Slave, soldier, patriot, entrepreneur, strong, intelligent, religious, these are just a few words to describe one man's legacy.

A man who worked in his master's clay pit, learned how to make bricks that would form the foundation of his life, the community and a nation.

Nero Hawley was born in 1742 here in Trumbull, which was at the time North Stratford.

He was one of 25 slaves in the area and was owned by Peter Mallet of Tashua.

In 1758, Peter Mallet's Daughter Phebe married Daniel Hawley and as a wedding gift, gave Nero to them. 17-Year-Old Nero took on the sur name of Hawley and began to live at Daniel Hawley's house, which is right up the hill here.

Who would have known that this would be the start of Nero's journey to freedom for himself and later his family.

For his new master owned a sawmill and clay pit which Nero began to work and learn new skills working timber and making bricks that would build his life's future. Nero walked on these grounds around us and the ground you stand on today.

He would regularly attend church services with the Hawley's, at the Church of Christ. One day while attending, Nero met his future wife Peg, who was the servant to Reverend James Beebe. Nero, 20 and Peg 18 married in June of 1761 with Reverend Beebe presiding. Through an arrangement with Daniel Hawley, Nero would live at the Reverend Beebe house with his wife Peg.

Reverend Beebe, a staunch patriot, who himself served in the revolutionary war for 8 months in 1776, gave frequent enthusiastic talks of the need for a continental army. Nero was present at one of these talks which was to encourage enlistments. That evening the community voted unanimously to give an additional bounty of 10 pounds to all who shall enlist into continental service for three years. Around the same time, a Resolution was enacted granting freedom to any slave that served.

With encouragement from Reverend Beebe, Nero enlists on 20 April 1777. He and other men of Connecticut were ordered to assemble in Danbury where he was placed in Captain Granger's Company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment as part of the new continental army. Nero soon went into camp at Peekskill N.Y and served under General Putnam during the summer and fall of 1777 along the Hudson. During this time, he was listed as "on Scout" and with his experience as a woodman and hunter, he certainly had the qualifications for this duty. It was believed he performed high risk scouting duty in connection with the advance of General Howe from Philadelphia and made preparations for Valley Forge, for which he received "extraordinary" pay.

On the 14 November 1777, the 2nd Regiment marched to Pennsylvania to join General George Washington's army. On the 8 December, Nero and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment engaged in heavy battle with General Howe's troops at White marsh, which is about 12 miles

from Valley Forge. After the battle, the 2nd Regiment continued to Valley Forge where they spent the infamous brutal winter of 1777-78.

Later that year Nero's 2nd Regiment formed part of the main line to repulse the redcoats in the battle of Monmouth New Jersey. After that battle, the regiment was assigned to the Second Brigade under General Huntington at White Plains, and later placed under the division commanded by General Putnam.

Under General Putnam, the division camped at Redding, Connecticut for the winter. During his time at Redding, Nero, having one axe, a saw, and no nails, made use of his timber and brickmaking skills by building log huts to serve as living quarters for the officers and soldiers.

In July 1779 Nero's regiment was encamped at Stony Point, New York opposite West Point at Robinson's Farm. While camped he stayed in a hospital due to illness that is described as a "War Originated Disability". He would stay in the hospital for 3 months before being healthy enough to return to his unit in January 1780.

In 1781, Nero served in Captain Stephen Betts' company until he received his honorable discharge on 12 April 1781.

At the end of the Revolutionary War, Reverend Beebe organized A Great Jubilee Day held on 26 May 1783, in North Stratford. It was a day of public rejoicing. The townspeople gathered at the church and joined in singing, followed by a prayer by Reverend Beebe. Nero participated in many of the musket volleys and toasts given to General George Washington, the Governor of Connecticut and many others.

On 4 Nov 1782, Nero, for his brave service to his country during the Revolutionary War, was granted full emancipation from his legal master, Daniel Hawley.

After the war and now a free man, Nero chose to stay on and work alongside Hawley at his saw and brick mills and in addition to the wage he would acquire, he also received a pension of \$8 per month for his military service. He saved this money and purchased land for his own brick-making business and to buy his children's freedom. He went on to become a successful businessman who worked diligently to emancipate his children.

In 1785, Nero would buy five acres of land known as the Clay Pit. This is where he would continue his brick making. He continued his interests in handling timber by purchasing a woodland area called Hedgehog, nearly seven acres near the Hawley sawmill on the Pequannock River and a three-acre wooded area west of Daniels Farm Road. Nero was unable to write his name on any documents, but instead used an 'X' as his signature.

Nero died on 30 Jan 1817 at 75 years of age; Peg would follow him 16 years later.

This historic cemetery has been here since 1807. 35 neighbors and friends, including Nero Hawley, joined and purchased the land for \$71.21 to be used as a burial ground. This cemetery is located next to the Daniel Hawley's mill property, where Nero had worked as a young man.

His gravesite is a stop on the Connecticut Freedom Trail.