

“Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe: A Life Of Selflessness, Generosity, and Bravery”

By Monty Singer

Born in a time in need of help, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe was first and foremost a helper. A fervent supporter of Greek Independence, Howe dedicated his life to protecting others. Whether he was administering medical first aid on the front line of war or personally collecting and delivering supplies to people in need, Howe put himself in harm's way to protect the causes he cared about and was proud to call himself an American supporter of Greek Independence or American Phillehene. For his bravery, leadership, and enthusiasm, he was awarded the nickname “Lafayette of the Greece Revolution.”¹ Almost thirty years prior to his birth in 1801, America had fought for its independence.² While Howe didn't have a chance to fight for the downtrodden then, he looked abroad to another country bravely fighting for their right to self-governance. After years of minor revolts, Greece finally had a chance at independence from the Ottoman Empire, and Howe wasn't going to sit idly by.³ As the 200th Anniversary of the Greek War for Independence arrives, it is of paramount importance to examine the life of a man who so selflessly dedicated himself to that noble cause.

Howe served valiantly during his time in the Greek military, devoting his life from an early age to furthering Greek independence and contributing to the war effort. After graduating from Brown University, he secured his medical degree at Harvard Medical School, learning

¹ Perkins.org, "Samuel Gridley Howe Collection Finding Aid," Perkins School For The Blind, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.perkins.org/history/people>.

² James W. Trent, Jr., "Samuel Gridley Howe," Britannica, last modified November 6, 2020, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Gridley-Howe>.

³ *The Greek Revolution | How Did Greece Get Its Independence?*, produced by Look Back History, Youtube, 2020, accessed December 15, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApceqsS5tQE&t=23s&ab_channel=LookBackHistory.

invaluable skills that would help him and many others in the future. Howe, buoyed by his admiration for Greek culture and the prominent Philhellene Lord Byron, left the safety of Massachusetts to volunteer in Greece as a soldier and a surgeon.⁴ During his years of active military service, he fought on the front lines of battle, tended to wounded soldiers, and served as the Surgeon-In-Chief to the Greek armada. While fighting for Greek freedom, he sent home letters describing his exploits to his parents.⁵ These letters, some of which were published, did a great deal to foster American support for the war effort.⁶ In one letter written in the March of 1825, Howe writes, “It astonishes me much that young men of fortune do not come to Greece; that they do not enlist heart and soul in this most sacred of all causes, and gain for themselves the gratitude of a nation and a place in history.” Evidently, his time fighting for Greek independence cemented a love for Greece that would persist throughout his life.

Even after fighting for several years, Howe wasn’t finished, now focusing on rehabilitating the war-torn country. After returning to America on a mission to incite further American support, he published “An Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution,” which described modern Greek culture and why the western countries needed to preserve it.⁷ From this book and the efforts of fellow Philhellenes, like Daniel Webster and Edward Everett came an outpouring of aid, which Howe personally distributed to Greeks. He distributed the supplies

⁴ Amphso.com, "History - Samuel Gridley Howe," American Philhellenes Society, <https://www.amphso.com/history/samuel-gridley-howe>.

⁵ Samuel Gridley Howe, "Greece In Revolution," *Hathi Trust Digital Library*, last modified January 9, 2019, [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b54194&view=1up&seq=46&q1=It%20astonishes%20me%20much%20that](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b54194&view=1up&seq=46&q1=It%20astonishes%20me%20much%20that).

⁶ James W. Trent, Jr., "Samuel Gridley Howe," *Britannica*, last modified November 6, 2020, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Gridley-Howe>.

⁷ Amphso.com, "History - Samuel Gridley Howe," American Philhellenes Society, <https://www.amphso.com/history/samuel-gridley-howe>.

freely to those in need, but requested that the able-bodied men worked for theirs'. With Howe's oversight and supplies, these men constructed a medical center in Aegina and an agricultural settlement for refugees on the Isthmus of Corinth called, "Washingtonia."⁸ In a letter sent to his colleague and educator, Horrace Mann, Howe writes "I applied to the Government, and obtained a large tract of land upon the Isthmus of Corinth, where I founded a colony of exiles. We put up cottages, procured seed, cattle, and tools, and the foundations of a flourishing village were laid."⁹ From a war-torn land, he constructed an agricultural community comprising even a school and orphanage. For his efforts, King Othon awarded Howe the Cross of the Order of the Savior.¹⁰ Once Greek independence was assured, he moved back to America. Still pursuing public service, he founded The Perkins School For The Blind, the first school for the blind in America. He received special acclaim for his work teaching Laura Bridgman, a seven-year-old who was deaf and blind, to learn the alphabet using her sense of touch under Howe's instruction. His contributions to Greece were not yet completed. In 1867, when the independence of Crete was up for stake, he supported the Cretian in their revolt against the Ottoman Turks. Howe once again turned to his oratory and penmanship to reignite American support for the Greek war effort, traveling throughout the US preaching about the women and children left without food and clothes from the war. With the monetary assistance from American Philhellenic communities in tow and his extensive knowledge of the Greek islands from his time serving as the Surgeon-In-

⁸ Kostis Kourelis, "Washingtonia," Objects-Building-Situtations, last modified September 19, 2016, accessed December 14, 2020, http://kourelis.blogspot.com/2016/09/washingtonia_19.html.

⁹ Kostis Kourelis, "Finding Washingtonia," Objects-Building-Situtations, last modified September 26, 2016, accessed December 14, 2020, <http://kourelis.blogspot.com/2016/09/finding-washingtonia.html>.

¹⁰ Eefshp.org, "The American Philhellenism and Philhellene Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe," Society For Hellenism And Philhellenism, last modified April 6, 2019, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.eefshp.org/en/the-american-philhellenism-and-philhellene-dr-samuel-gridley-howe/>.

Chief of the Greek fleet, he directed a fleet of U.S. Navy ships through the Turkish blockade of Crete, saving women and children from starvation and exposure with food and clothing, giving Cretians further assistance in their war. Whether in active service or not, Dr. Howe not only fought for Greek's independence but worked to rebuild Greece for a better future.

Dr. Samuel Howe, through his altruism and selflessness, dedicated his life to the betterment of others. In Greece, he fought valiantly as a soldier and surgeon. In America, he toured city after city, spreading awareness about Greek independence. To every place he ventured, he improved their situation. Even though he devoted much of his life to Greek independence, he never accepted any financial compensation from the Greek government.¹¹ He believed that no person should be a "mere object of pity," and lived his life following this doctrine.¹² Howe cared for the downtrodden, disenfranchised, and the people without a voice. For his life, devoted to the service of others, he deserves to be remembered.

¹¹ Eefshp.org, "The American Philhellenism and Philhellene Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe," Society For Hellenism And Philhellenism, last modified April 6, 2019, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.eefshp.org/en/the-american-philhellenism-and-philhellene-dr-samuel-gridley-howe/>.

¹² Nps.gov, "Samuel Gridley Howe," National Park Service, last modified December 10, 2020, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/people/samuel-gridley-howe.htm>.

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