

Behind Enemy Lines: The Culper Spy Ring's Pivotal Role in the American Revolution

Alexander Sabat

Collegiate High School, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the little-known yet pivotal role of the Culper Spy Ring in the American Revolution, transforming espionage from simple reconnaissance to sophisticated intelligence networks. After a failure of conventional espionage methods, George Washington and Major Benjamin Tallmadge launched an innovative network of spies subsisting behind enemy lines. The network of agents relayed crucial information about the British and turned the tide in America's favor. This paper analyzes the Ring's tactics of secrecy, such as aliases, coded messages, and invisible ink, and how they contributed to its success. A notable success of the Ring was preventing a British ambush on the French fleet, ensuring continued French support in the war. Washington and Tallmadge's unorthodox innovation contributed significantly to the Patriot victory in the Revolutionary War and established a long-lasting legacy in espionage. The Culper Spy Ring's unique tactics transformed the practice of espionage, influencing future intelligence operations and cementing Washington as a key figure in espionage history.

A Revolution to Espionage

In the history of espionage, the Culper Spy Ring stands as a beacon of innovation, reshaping the landscape of covert operations. Unlike the European tradition of espionage characterized by straightforward scouting, the Culper agents pioneered an established network that resided in the enemy's territory, a feat that was unprecedented at the time and was integral to the patriot victory in the Revolutionary War.¹ The Culper Spy Ring revolutionized espionage tactics during the Revolutionary War, marking the transition from simple reconnaissance missions to sophisticated intelligence operations. As Washington's indispensable asset, the spy ring gathered and transmitted vital information, playing a decisive role in securing Patriot victory and altering the landscape of intelligence gathering.

Although George Washington initially employed the conventional espionage methods in the Revolutionary War, he would later realize that this approach was not effective at gathering intelligence. One of the most notable failures of traditional espionage, sending a scout to enemy lines to retrieve information, was Nathan Hale. Aware of General Howe's plan to attack Manhattan but uncertain of the strategy – Howe could land troops south and drive north, land north and drive south, or both – Washington commanded Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Knowlton, commander of the specialized scouting service known as the Knowlton Rangers, to gather this crucial information.² Captain Nathan Hale, a Knowlton Ranger eager to provide value to his country, volunteered to go on this dangerous mission. Hale met with Washington twice to discuss his route and cover story;

¹ Kate E. Sohasky, "A Conduct Incompatible with Their Character: Patriots, Loyalists, & Spies: Espionage in the American Revolution and the Underlying Social & Ideological Revolution in the American Colonies," *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal* 22, no. 2 (2010): 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.5070/B3222007671>.

² Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*, 2014 ed. (New York: Bantam Books Trade Paperbacks, 2014), 23.

instead of sending Hale straight through the front lines into fortified enemy territory, Washington directed Hale to go through Connecticut and land on Long Island to gather vital information regarding the future attack on Manhattan. After landing in Long Island, Hale learned that Howe had begun his invasion of Manhattan, leading Hale to rush back westwards, gathering information along the way. Robert Rogers, leader of Roger's Rangers, a loyalist militant force, almost immediately discovered Hale and began to follow him. Once he had incriminating evidence that Hale was a Patriot spy, Roger and his rangers captured Hale and had him hanged.³

This failure of traditional espionage moved Benjamin Tallmadge, assistant to the general in charge of espionage, to envision something new that he hoped would turn the tide for the Patriots. General Charles Scott had been in charge of gathering intelligence for the Continental Army and favored the traditional espionage approach, using quick in-and-out missions that employed one-mission disposable spies, like Hale. Tallmadge, a captain of the dragoons, had been appointed to assist Scott with his espionage work.⁴ Unlike Scott, Tallmadge was willing to break military and espionage conventions to best support his country.⁵ Incidents like the capture and execution of Hale led Tallmadge to increasingly disagree with Scott's approach and instead propose an established network of agents that would permanently reside in New York. Of course, a potential downside to this approach was the destruction of the entire network if any member's cover was compromised, rendering the idea controversial. With Scott's method, only the individual spy would be lost. But after more failed espionage attempts resulting in spies being captured and not returning, Washington determined that the traditional approach was not feasible.⁶ He decided to give Tallmadge's more radical idea a chance, diverging from the traditional approach of scouting by creating an intricate network of agents known as the legendary Culper Spy Ring, revolutionizing the practice of espionage.

Birth of the Spy Ring

By 1778, Britain was in a great position to win the Revolutionary War, achieving victories in battle after battle. Washington needed a way to turn the tables and kindle the Patriots' hope to win the war. Fearing a Franco-American attack, newly appointed Commander-in-Chief Henry Clinton along with British troops stationed in Philadelphia were forced to retreat to New York where Washington soon surrounded them.⁷ General Washington needed crucial information on British troop strength, numbers, supplies, and possible naval reinforcements. On August 7, 1778, Lieutenant Caleb Brewster, a classmate and friend of Tallmadge and a whaleboat captain operating in the Long Island Sound, offered to gather intelligence on Long Island.⁸ Washington agreed, swiftly sending a letter back to Brewster the next day ordering him "to use every possible means to obtain intelligence of the Enemy's motions—not only of those which are marching Eastward, upon Long Island, but others," to have a "strict watch kept upon the Enemy's ships of war," and to give him the earliest notice when Britain sails from the hook.⁹ Brewster, leveraging his sailing expertise and knowledge of the Sound, navigated and avoided British officials. Brewster would place his gathered information in a weighted glass bottle tied to his boat that could be cut loose and sunk in case an enemy vessel captured him.¹⁰ On occasion, Brewster and his crew would

³ Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 38.

⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁵ Sohasky, "A Conduct," 14.

⁶ Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 81.

⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁹ George Washington to Caleb Brewster, August 8, 1778.

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0282>

¹⁰ Bill Bleyer, *George Washington's Long Island Spy Ring: A History and Tour Guide* (Charlestown, SC: History Press, 2021), 54-55.

have to use their fighting skills against the British, once when on a courier mission killing two attacking British boatmen.¹¹ Tallmadge offered Washington a contact in Long Island so Brewster could gather information: Abraham Woodhull, a smuggler with a background in the illegal trade of British goods. Tallmadge called for Woodhull's release from jail after he was arrested in Connecticut for smuggling and assured Washington that Woodhull was reliable and motivated by the Patriot cause.¹² Woodhull's older cousin, General Nathaniel Woodhull, despite surrendering, was killed by the British after being caught on a mission to move livestock in Long Island that could be used by the British.¹³ Woodhull's hatred towards the British only intensified after they took his cousin's life. In October 1778, with a network of Woodhull, Brewster, and Tallmadge, the Culper Spy Ring began its operations. Because there was no agent in New York City, Woodhull would gather information in New York and then have to travel to Setauket to relay it to Brewster. Not only was the trip long and tedious but Woodhull was required to pass British patrols and show his passport to guards.¹⁴

The British sentries' suspicions, which incited fear in Woodhull and prevented him from completing future trips, along with Washington's persistent requests for more timely intelligence, prompted the necessity for an agent in New York. Washington sent a letter to Tallmadge on June 13, 1779, stating: "Should suspicions of [Woodhull] rise so high as to render it unsafe to continue in N—— Y—— I would by all means wish him to employ some person," and "a mode of conveying it quickly is of the utmost importance & claims much attention."¹⁵ Woodhull had already found a man: Robert Townsend, a close friend and purchasing agent in Manhattan. As a partner at a coffee house frequented by redcoats, Townsend provided rum, sugar, and other commodities to customers while gathering enemy gossip and information.¹⁶ After gathering intel, Townsend would write and deliver a letter to a courier, the most reliable being Austin Roe, who would relay the letters and information to Woodhull.¹⁷ It is widely speculated that Anna Strong, a close friend and neighbor of Woodhull, would hang her laundry on her clothesline in a pattern indicating where Woodhull would meet Brewster.¹⁸ Woodhull would add his own comments before giving the letter to Brewster, who then traveled across the Sound. Brewster would then give the reports to Tallmadge's dragoons, who would then relay them to Tallmadge.¹⁹ This intricate network assured the secrecy of the operation and allowed intelligence to be transferred efficiently, and is a primary reason for the Culper Spy Ring's significant success.

Tactics to Maintain Secrecy

One element vital to the Culper Spy Ring's success was its ability to remain incognito; if any member was caught or any letter was captured, the whole network would be compromised. By disguising identities with aliases, concealing and encrypting letters with invisible ink and a code system, and employing a complex communication network, the Culper Spy Ring was able to maintain secrecy and ultimately be the most successful espionage network of the Revolutionary War. The use of aliases added an initial layer of protection: Abraham

¹¹ Kenneth A. Daigler, *Spies, Patriots, and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 183.

¹² Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 76-79.

¹³ Bleyer, *George Washington's*, 58.

¹⁴ Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 91.

¹⁵ George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge, June 13, 1779.

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-21-02-0140>

¹⁶ Daigler, *Spies, Patriots*, 178.

¹⁷ Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 131.

¹⁸ Bleyer, *George Washington's*, 75-76.

¹⁹ Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 131.

Woodhull as Samuel Culper, Robert Townsend as Samuel Culper Jr, and Benjamin Tallmadge as John Bolton.²⁰ One distinct feature of the Culper letters was the use of a newly formulated invisible ink, which remained unreadable without a specific solution. In the eighteenth century, invisible inks were rarely used because they were made of organic liquids and could be unveiled easily by exposure to heat. James Jay, the brother of John Jay, invented an invisible ink that could only be revealed with a concocted solution that just Washington and his aide Alexander Hamilton could access.²¹ Woodhull and the rest of the spy ring began implementing this ink in April 1779. Washington was worried that if a letter was intercepted by the British and they saw that it was blank, they would become suspicious and suspect the use of invisible ink. To ensure further protection and avoid suspicion of invisible ink, Washington ordered the Culpers to write on the blank leaves of pocketbooks, almanacs, or other publications.²² When Washington ran low on the substance he sent a letter to Jay that displayed its effectiveness to the Culpers: "I have found it very useful, I take the liberty to request you will favour me with a further supply."²³ To further guarantee encryption, the Culpers utilized a code system. Tallmadge created a dictionary containing 710 of the most common words they would use in these letters, assigning each one a number. For example, Tallmadge was 721, Washington was 711, New York was 727, and "many" was 384. To cipher words that were not in the dictionary, Tallmadge used a coded alphabet and double-underlined those words to distinguish them from normal words. For example, A became E, 1 became E, and 2 became F.²⁴ These means of encrypting and disguising the letters ensured the confidentiality of not just the intelligence, but also the members of the Culper Spy Ring. These stealth tactics allowed the Culper Spy Ring to remain under the radar and provide value to the Patriot cause.

Operations and Accomplishments of the Culper Spy Ring

The Culper Spy Ring's specific operations and gathered intelligence were crucial to Washington and were responsible for many victories in the Revolutionary War. Washington and Tallmadge composed instructions for the Culpers, laying out exactly what intelligence they wanted to receive. Washington ordered Townsend "to remain in the City, to collect all the useful information he can" by "mix[ing] as much as possible among the Officers and Refugees" at the coffee house.²⁵ Townsend was to determine "how their transports are secured against an attempt to destroy them," "the number of Men destined for the defence of the City and Environs," where each particular corp is posted, "how many Redoubts are upon the line from River to River—how many Cannon in each and of what weight," "whether they have dug Pits within and in front of the lines," "the state of provision, Forage and Fuel to be attended to as also the Health and Spirits of the Army, Navy and City," and other specific inquiries Washington had.²⁶ Throughout the operations of the Culper Spy Ring, there are 193 known Culper letters relaying intelligence, while many more could have been lost.²⁷

²⁰ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "The Culper Spy Ring," Intel.gov, accessed March 13, 2024, <https://www.intel.gov/evolution-of-espionage/revolutionary-war/culper-spy-ring>.

²¹ Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 108.

²² Ibid., 173.

²³ George Washington to James Jay, April 9, 1780.

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-25-02-0236>

²⁴ Bleyer, *George Washington's*, 70.

²⁵ George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge, October 17, 1779.

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-22-02-0622>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Bill Bleyer, "George Washington's Culper Spy Ring: Separating Fact from Fiction," All Things Liberty, last modified June 3, 2021, accessed March 13, 2024, <https://allthingsliberty.com/2021/06/george-washingtons->

While there were many successful intelligence operations of the Culper Spy Ring, one of the most notable and successful pieces of intelligence gathered by the ring ultimately saved the French fleet and was crucial to keeping the French in the war. General Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, the commander of a French naval squadron, and the French fleet were nearing Rhode Island to aid the Americans and potentially attack the British in New York.²⁸ Washington told General Benedict Arnold, whom he trusted, the details of the French fleet. However, Arnold had betrayed Washington and reported all of these details to the British, informing them that “a that a F[rench]— fleet and army were expected to act in conjunction with the A[merican]— army.”²⁹ Clinton, being informed early, had enough time to gather troops to prepare for this ambush and could easily destroy the unsuspecting French fleet. A British victory here would be crucial to the war, as the French would be less likely to continue aiding America after a harsh defeat. Washington, hoping that Rochambeau would be open to a possible attack on the British troops in New York, asked the Culpers to retrieve intelligence on the enemy’s position in Long Island. The Culpers did not fail him. Townsend discovered crucial intelligence of the enemy, writing the information in invisible ink between the lines of a merchandise order.³⁰ However, Woodhull was too sick to leave his bed, so Roe took the direct trip to Brewster.³¹ In his letter, Townsend warned that the British had been informed that the French were near and were also aware of a possible French ambush. To prevent a British ambush on the unsuspecting French fleet, Tallmadge relayed this information to the French allies.³² In support of this effort, Washington additionally had operatives spread disinformation that he was to launch an attack on New York, causing the British to defend the city and refrain from attacking the French fleet.³³ Townsend’s intelligence played a pivotal role in the Revolutionary War, ensuring the safety of America’s French allies and likely securing their continued involvement in the war.

Although this is a prominent example of the Culper Spy Ring’s intelligence operations, the group achieved numerous smaller successes that greatly benefited the Americans. These included uncovering British efforts to destabilize the continental currency through counterfeit dollars, providing Washington with information on troop movements and fortifications for strategic decision-making, and boosting morale.³⁴ The ring’s ability to remain hidden in British-controlled Long Island and gather vital intelligence not only provided hope to Washington and Tallmadge but also propelled them forward in the pursuit of victory in the war.

Legacy of the Culper Spy Ring

The Culper Spy Ring’s vital intelligence and successes ultimately turned the tide of the war. Not only did the Culper Spy Ring shape America with the victory, but it also left a lasting impact on the future of espionage. According to the CIA, Washington’s management of agents in advanced networks, and in particular his most professional network, the Culper Spy Ring, solidified him as the “Founding Father of American collection of

culper-spy-ring-separating-fact-from-fiction/#:~:text=There%20are%20193%20known%20letters,in%20Stony%20Brook%20last%20year.

²⁸ Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 186.

²⁹ Benedict Arnold to John André, July 12, 1780.

<https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/spy-letters-of-the-american-revolution/gallery-of-letters/arnold-andre-letter-1780-07-12/>

³⁰ Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 186.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

³² *Ibid.*, 188.

³³ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “The Culper,” Intel.gov.

³⁴ Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 178.

foreign intelligence.”³⁵ Tallmadge’s innovative Culper Spy Ring revolutionized covert operations from simply scouting the enemy to creating intricate networks that infiltrate organizations, changing the game of espionage forever. None of the Culper’s identities were unmasked during the Revolutionary War, and the Culper Spy Ring itself wasn’t discovered until the twentieth century; a testament to Tallmadge’s brilliancy in covertness and espionage.³⁶ The Culper Spy Ring’s radical approach to espionage, combined with its ability to stay hidden because of its sophisticated network and methods of secrecy, allowed for momentous successes in the Revolutionary War, and was ultimately America’s secret weapon in its victory.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

References

- Arnold, Benedict. Letter to John André, July 12, 1780. William L. Clements Library.
<https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/spy-letters-of-the-american-revolution/gallery-of-letters/arnold-andre-letter-1780-07-12/>
- Bleyer, Bill. "George Washington's Culper Spy Ring: Separating Fact from Fiction." All Things Liberty. Last modified June 3, 2021. Accessed March 13, 2024. <https://allthingsliberty.com/2021/06/george-washingtons-culper-spy-ring-separating-fact-from-fiction/#:~:text=There%20are%20193%20known%20letters,in%20Stony%20Brook%20last%20year>
- Bleyer Bill. *George Washington's Long Island Spy Ring: A History and Tour Guide*. Charlestown, SC: History Press, 2021.
- Daigler, Kenneth A. *Spies, Patriots, and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2015.
- Office of the Director of National Intelligence. "The Culper Spy Ring." Intel.gov. Accessed March 13, 2024. <https://www.intel.gov/evolution-of-espionage/revolutionary-war/culper-spy-ring>.
- Rose, Alexander. *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*. 2014 ed. New York: Bantam Books Trade Paperbacks, 2014.
- Rose, P.K. "The Founding Fathers of American Intelligence." CIA.gov. Accessed March 13, 2024. <https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/4c28451b90165b446ac948e3dd47c972/The-Founding-Fathers-of-American-Intelligence-.pdf>.

³⁵ P.K. Rose, "The Founding Fathers of American Intelligence," CIA.gov, accessed March 13, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/4c28451b90165b446ac948e3dd47c972/The-Founding-Fathers-of-American-Intelligence-.pdf>.

³⁶ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "The Culper," Intel.gov.

Sohasky, Kate E. "A Conduct Incompatible with Their Character: Patriots, Loyalists, & Spies: Espionage in the American Revolution and the Underlying Social & Ideological Revolution in the American Colonies." *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal* 22, no. 2 (2010). <https://doi.org/10.5070/B3222007671>.

Washington, George. Letter to Caleb Brewster, August 8, 1778. National Archives.
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0282>

Washington, George. Letter to James Jay, April 9, 1780. National Archives.
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-25-02-0236>

Washington, George. Letter to Benjamin Tallmadge, "Instructions to Major Benjamin Tallmadge," n.d. National Archives. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-22-02-0622>

Washington, George. Letter to Benjamin Tallmadge, June 13, 1779. National Archives.
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-21-02-0140>