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The Eyes and Ears of the Nation

America's First Spy Ring

by

Eric Topolewski

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of History
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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the early and smaller espionage tactics during the American Revolution and compare them to the established Culper Ring. George Washington, the American general and later president, and Benjamin Tallmadge, the Director of Military Intelligence during the war, looked for a way to revolutionize espionage at the time. Prior to the Culper Ring, espionage was done on a small scale. Single spies were the most common form of espionage. Washington and Tallmadge knew they needed something new and worked to create something that would last and become sustainable. They were able to create an organized spy ring that remained hidden and proved to be very fruitful to the war. The ring challenged the concept of traditional British honor that was the cultural norm at the time. They found their success by employing the use of agents that fell outside of this cultural norm. They shaped the future of spying in the United States. The work done by this ring laid a foundation for espionage agents to build on in the future. The methods used by the Culper Ring were top notch for their day and kept their secrets safe throughout the course of the war. The Culper Ring was vital to the success of the American Revolution; without the intelligence they gained, the war might have ended differently. This thesis examines how they were able to find as much success as they did while comparing them to other American espionage units as well as British espionage units.

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Timeline of the American Revolution

1775

April 18: Rides of Paul Revere and William Dawes

April 19: Battle of Lexington and Concord and the Shot Heard Round the World

May 10: The Second Continental Congress meets in Philadelphia

June 15: George Washington named Commander in Chief

June 17: Battle of Bunker Hill

1776

July 4: Congress adopts the Declaration of Independence

August 2: Delegates sign Declaration of Independence

August 27: Redcoats defeat Washington's army in Battle of Long Island

September 8: Nathan Hale sent into New York

September 15: British occupy New York City

September 22: Nathan Hale hanged as a spy

December 25: Washington crosses the Delaware

December 26: The Battle of Trenton

1777

April 27: Benedict Arnold's troops force a British retreat at Ridgefield, Connecticut

July 27: Lafayette arrives in Philadelphia

September 26: British under Howe occupy Philadelphia

December 19: Washington's troops retire to Valley Forge

1778

February 6: The United States and France sign the French Alliance

March 7: General William Howe replaced by Henry Clinton

June 18: British leave Philadelphia in favor of New York

June 19: Washington's army leaves Valley Forge

1778

August 25: Washington impressed by Tallmadge's find of Woodhull

October 29: Benjamin Tallmadge promoted to Director of Military Intelligence

October 29: First Samuel Culper Letter from Woodhull

1780

September 23: John Andre arrested, Benedict Arnold's plan to cede West Point exposed

1781

March 2: Articles of Confederation adopted

October 19: Cornwallis surrounded on land and sea by Americans and surrenders at Yorktown

1782

November 30: British and Americans sign preliminary Articles of Peace

1783

September 3: The United States and Great Britain sign the Treaty of Paris

November 25: British troops leave New York City

December 23: Washington resigns as Commander in Chief

Introduction

Espionage in the American Revolution began as an unorganized mess. It underwent a shift midway through the war that resulted in the genesis the Culper Ring. Created in 1778, the Culper Ring represented a new age of espionage in the American Revolution. This thesis looks at different aspects and characteristics of the ring that set it apart from other espionage efforts during the war. This paper also compares and contrasts the Ring with other American espionage agents as well as the British espionage effort during the war.

The best resource I have found on the Culper Ring is *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* by Alexander Rose. Rose analyzes the Culper Ring and presents the case that this Spy ring was the first of its kind. This claim is common in academic circles. While there are many claims that the Culper Ring holds the title of America's first spy ring, Rose presents his argument in a clear and concise manner that is easy to understand. I believe that Rose misses the crucial step that this thesis examines. While the Culper Ring was the first spy ring in America, it also represented a shift in theory and thought process about espionage itself. At the beginning of the war, espionage operations typically consisted of lone agents placed in their locations with no help or support. Their primary goals were to obtain information on the British and relay that information back to the Continental Army. By 1778, it was clear this was not an effective form of espionage. It found limited success with an abundance of failure and death. When George Washington established the Culper Ring, he did so out of the necessity to create a more successful and reliable operation.

In order to examine how espionage in the American Revolution experienced a shift in thought process, it is first imperative to examine the existing espionage units prior to the Culper

Ring. The first section of this thesis examines the success and failure of different American espionage agents during the early years of the war. Not only does the first section serve as an introduction to the covert operations of the war, it provides an overview of how each success and failure played a role in the eventual change in process that Washington implanted with the formation of the Ring. This section introduces key players that caused this change and how each downfall brought Washington one step closer to the formation of the Culper Ring. This section concludes prior to the formation of the Culper Ring, which is the focus of the next section.

The second section of this thesis looks at the Culper Ring itself. This section provides an overview of how the Ring functioned and how it was an improvement over the spies in the previous section. The Culper Ring was revolutionary, as they had members stationed in different locations throughout New York and provided support to each other. The formation of this Ring represented a shift in how the leaders of the American forces saw espionage and how they took steps to ensure a better process in terms of espionage. This section examines the key members of the Culper Ring, their background and motivation, and how they worked together to pass information from New York to General Washington.

The third section of this thesis discusses honor and espionage. During this period in history, honor was very important to both British and American societies. However, both parties bent the traditional rules on honor in order to participate in espionage. This section provides background and insight on why honor was such an important factor to society and the reason behind each side bending the rules. This ability to overlook honor at times, even by some of the most honor bound individuals in history, reflects the ongoing shift taking place at this time. Washington was able to participate in espionage because he had to do something to overcome his

British adversaries. Washington bending the rules in order to secure intelligence against the enemy shows how important espionage became to the Americans.

Something that made the Culper Ring as successful as they were was their use of gender roles and social stances. The Culper Ring utilized both women and slaves in their espionage operations, as these particular demographics were severely overlooked by those in charge. The use of these people by the Culper Ring, as well as other intelligence operations during the war, reveals that these demographics found it easier to get away with espionage. Changing the way the Army looked at espionage included understanding how people outside of the cultural normal of the time could be useful. This section views how the Culper Ring used and pushed these cultural boundaries and provides examples from the war on how women and slaves impacted the espionage effort.

The fifth section of this thesis focusses on the methods of the Culper Ring. Recognizing the methods used by the Ring is imperative in understanding how the shift in espionage physically occurred. The first half of the chapter examines the Culper Ring's Codebook and the invisible ink they used. These two are important as they show the technological advances the Culper Ring had at their disposal and how it was important to provide espionage agents with proper equipment to successfully carry out their mission. The second half of the chapter looks at how the Ring itself functioned. Understanding this is important to understanding the overall shift from singular espionage units to the more complex Culper Ring. This section is key in revealing the physical evidence of this thesis claim.

The Culper Ring owed its success to how George Washington and Benjamin Tallmadge looked at espionage. The sixth section looks at the Ring's success throughout the war and

examines some of its major victories. This section shows how the Ring was successful on at least four separate and important occasions. This section really gauges how imperative the shift in thinking was to the success of intelligence during the war. Instead of the limited success and high failure from the beginning of the war, the Culper Ring was able to pass accurate information successfully to Washington.

The seventh section of this thesis examines British espionage during the war. While they had limited success and a few minor victories, it is clear that the British intelligence during the war was not functioning at the same capacity as the American intelligence. This shows how the superiors in charge of both parties were different. Washington put a lot of thought and energy into the American espionage effort while the British effort existed and functioned only as a necessity to try to keep up with Washington. This contrast is important in understanding the role espionage played on the war and how not changing and evolving was detrimental to the British.

These sections function as a key to unlocking the change that Washington instituted during the war. Each section plays an important part in understanding the overall goal of espionage during the war and how things like honor, race, and gender played into that goal. As Nathaniel Greene said in a letter to John Clark, "Intelligence is the life of everything in war."¹ While traditional and early intelligence efforts did not yield much fruit, Washington was able to learn from his mistakes. He created one of the most revolutionary organizations in American history. By challenging the traditional stance on espionage, Washington created one of the best spy rings to exist.

¹ Nathaniel Greene to John Clark. November 5, 1777.

Espionage Background

The purpose of this section is to outline espionage activities prior to the formation of the Culper Ring. Examining these activities gives insight into why the Culper Ring was necessary and how the Culper Ring transformed espionage during the war.

Espionage had many faces during the American Revolution. Prior to the start of the war, secret organizations met to determine the future of the colonies. The first of these organizations was the Loyal Nine. As a response to the Stamp Act, a group of nine patriots came together in 1765 to operate against the British. As these nine patriots gained support and momentum, they formed the Sons of Liberty. The Sons of Liberty sparked a resistance movement against the British and laid important groundwork for covert operations. The Sons of Liberty, and its sister organization, The Daughters of Liberty, was incredibly influential in the colonies prior to the start of the war. The Sons of Liberty carried out the famous Boston Tea Party and began uniting colonists against the Crown. These organizations were not solely focused on espionage and intelligence. Rather, their main goal was to recruit members to their cause and support the residents of the colonies that stood against the tyrannical acts of the King. They operated in secrecy and maintained many characteristics and practices that espionage agents held dear. Not only were these organizations precursors to a free and independent nation, they were precursors to the espionage rings and organizations that brought that freedom to the United States.²

Perhaps one of the most famous spies of the American Revolution was Paul Revere. Gaining fame for his Midnight Ride, Revere was influential in early intelligence before the war.

² Ramsbey, Thomas W. The Sons of Liberty: The Early Inter-Colonial Organization. *International Review of Modern Sociology*. Vol. 17, No. 2 (Autumn 1987). Page 313-335.

As the British planned to move out of Boston and capture Samuel Adams and John Hancock, Revere was given the task of warning the revolutionary leaders. Because the Battles of Lexington and Concord marked the beginning of the American Revolution, Paul Revere's ride is one of, if not the, earliest acts of intelligence during the war. While Paul Revere typically gains all the credit for his midnight ride, he did not carry out his task alone and in fact was captured during the night. Two other men, William Dawes and Samuel Prescott, accompanied Revere on his mission to warn the colonial leadership. En route to Concord, Dawes and Revere encountered Prescott. He offered his services to help the pair and the trio pressed on to Concord. They ran into trouble on the way there and both Dawes and Revere were not able to continue the journey. Revere was captured, detained for a time, then let go, while Dawes was thrown from his horse and had to walk back to Lexington. Prescott, originally not even a part of the mission, eventually became the sole hope for warning Concord of the impending British doom. He recruited others to help spread the word on the way and eventually made it to Concord successfully. While only Paul Revere is remembered for this heroic mission that sparked the war for independence, he had help and support from countless individuals. These individuals were able to successfully pass along important information to aid the rebellion.³

John Brown of Pittsfield, Massachusetts was an important individual during the first year of the American Revolution. He was part of a delegation sent to Montreal and was able to observe the status of the area around Lake Champlain on his way to Canada. While it was determined that Canada was not joining the Continental Congress, he was able to report on Fort

³ Fischer, David Hackett. *Paul Revere's Ride*. Norwalk, CT.: Easton Press, 1996.

Ticonderoga off of Lake Champlain. He made it clear that the fort was an important feature and had to be taken as quickly as possible following the outbreak of war.⁴ Following the battle at Fort Ticonderoga, Brown accused Benedict Arnold of being a traitor. The two had their share of differences and whether or not the accusation was true at the time, it was a bold statement to make. Arnold, of course, would turn out to be the most infamous traitor in American history. It might have even been this accusation that planted the thought of treachery in Arnold's head. While Brown's name will not go down in history as the most prominent figure in American espionage, he was key for certain aspects of the intelligence flow during the war.

The Committee of Secret Correspondence, The Committees of Safety, and the Committee on Spies were created in the early years of the American Revolution. The main goal of the Committee of Secret Correspondence was to provide Congress with foreign contact and aid.⁵ The Committee of Secret Correspondence became the Committee of Foreign Affairs in April 1777. The Committees of Safety existed in different colonies as a form of assembly to give citizens a voice during the revolution. These committees were influential in assisting local espionage agents such as Enoch Crosby.⁶ The Committee on Spies was not created to spy, instead it was created to punish spies. Congress appointed leading members to decide the fate of those giving intelligence and aid to the British. On August 21, 1776, the Committee on Spies outlined the parameters of espionage activity and the punishment of those found guilty. "RESOLVED, That all persons not members of, nor owing allegiance to, any of the United States of America, as

⁴ Cruger, Van Schaack Henry. *Memoirs of the Life of Henry Van Schaack, Embracing Selections from His Correspondence during the American Revolution*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1892.

⁵ *Journals of the Continental Congress*, Volume 3. November 29, 1775. Library of Congress.

⁶ *The Committees of Safety of Westmoreland and Fincaste. 1774-1776*. Virginia State Library. Page 9-11.

described in a resolution to the Congress of the 29th of June last, who shall be found lurking as spies in or about the fortification or encampments of the armies of the United States, or of any of them, shall suffer death, according to the law and usage of nations, by sentence of a court martial, or such either punishment as such court martial may direct.”⁷ Alexander Rose briefly discusses New York’s Committee for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies. He describes it as “the enforcement arm of the political revolutionaries.”⁸ The creation of these committees was imperative to the Continental involvement in espionage.

A handful of singular agents filled the role of American espionage agents from 1775 to 1777. One of the earliest spies for Washington’s army was William H. Dobbs. In 1775, Dobbs was a boat captain in New York. He was tasked as a lookout and gathered intelligence on the British naval movements to report back to Washington. His service in intelligence ended following a confusing incident between Continental troops and a British man under the supervision of Dobbs. While not much is known of the incident, both Dobbs and the man under his supervision ended up in custody as the Continental troops were alarmed and upset by their presence.⁹

George Washington faced one of the best armies in the world during the American Revolution. With failures in New York, his Continental Army was slowly, but surely fighting a losing battle. The fall of New York in 1776, a huge British victory, was one not forgotten by Washington. In Barnet Schecter’s *The Battle of New York; The City at the Heart of the American*

⁷ *Journals of the Continental Congress*, Volume 5. August 21, 1776. Library of Congress.

⁸ Rose, Alexander. *Washington’s Spies: The Story of America’s First Spy Ring*. New York: Bantam Books Trade Paperbacks, 2014. Page 42.

⁹ *Minutes of New York Committee of Safety*, items 21-25 January 1776, in NDAR III, 902-903, 979. Library of Congress.

Revolution, Washington's tactics during the battle are applauded, "Washington's flawless evacuation of Brooklyn is one of the greatest moments in the annals of warfare." British-occupied New York quickly became the focal point for British activity in America. The ingenuity displayed by Washington during his evacuation of New York continued to be shown through his plans to gain insight into the city. Now, more than ever, Washington needed eyes in New York.¹⁰

Perhaps the best-known American spy during the Revolutionary War was perhaps one of the most unsuccessful. A bright and eager young man ready to serve his country, Nathan Hale is immortalized as "America's first spy." Hale grew up in Massachusetts and attended Yale University. He joined the army after his good friend and confidant, Benjamin Tallmadge, wrote him on the importance of service to their new country. Unbeknownst to the two at the time, these men would go on to change the course of the war. Hale answered General Washington's call for an espionage agent, saying that he "owed to his country the accomplishment of an object so important and so much desired by the commander of her armies."¹¹ Washington now had a spy to send into New York. Although he was one of the most widely known and celebrated spies of the Revolutionary War, Hale's operation was a complete failure. He gathered very little information and made crucial mistakes that directly led to his capture and execution on September 22, 1776.¹² While his famous line "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my

¹⁰ Schechter, Barnet. *The Battle for New York: The City at the Heart of the American Revolution*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2003. Page 154.

¹¹ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 17.

¹² Howe, William. *Orderly Book*. January 6, 1776-September 4, 1777. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

country,” was not his last words, nor were they his at all, these words immortalized his image as the founding father of American espionage.

A British Loyalist, Consider Tiffany, wrote of Hale’s capture, “But in the height of their conversation, a company of soldiers surrounded the house, and by orders from the commander, seized Capt Hale in an instant. But denying his name, and the business he came upon, he was ordered to New York. But before he was carried far, several persons knew him and called him by name; upon this he was hanged as a spy, some say, without being brought before a court martial.”¹³ Hale acted brave and absolute in the face of death while remaining loyal to his country to the end. Eventually Washington learned from his mistakes, however, espionage agents worked as lone operatives or in pairs for the next few years. While organizations like the Committees of Safety provided these agents some form of relief, they were still very much alone playing an incredibly dangerous game with mixed degrees of success.¹⁴

Throughout 1776 and 1777, espionage agents came and went with more failure than success. Operatives and agents for the revolution were placed under constant scrutiny, especially in New York. Individuals such as Haym Salomon found British occupied New York to be rather unfriendly and unwelcoming. Arrested multiple times for giving support and intelligence to the Continental Army, he eventually had to flee to the side of the rebels. He was initially arrested around the same time Nathan Hale was caught in New York.¹⁵ Another spy was arrested and put to death in New York in June of 1777. Abraham Patten was caught by British authorities, tried,

¹³ Tiffany, Consider. *Manuscript History of the American Revolution*. Library of Congress.

¹⁴ Hutson, James. *Nathan Hale Revisited*. Library of Congress.

¹⁵ Schwartz, Laurens R. *Jews and the American Revolution: Haym Salomon and Others*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1987.

and convicted of espionage acts against the Crown.¹⁶ Word of his death was posted in the local New York newspaper and is discussed in a correspondence between John Hancock and George Washington. Washington wrote, “You will observe by the New York paper, the execution of Abraham Patten. His family well deserves the generous notice of Congress. He conducted himself with great fidelity to our cause rendering Services and has fallen a sacrifice in promoting her Interest. Perhaps a public act of generosity, considering the character he was in, might not be so eligible, as a private donation.”¹⁷

Hercules Mulligan and his slave Cato began their intelligence mission in 1776. Hercules Mulligan was a tailor and ran a successful shop in New York. He opened his shop in 1774 with the city on the brink of war. This clothing shop went on to house one of the more successful espionage operations of the war. Mulligan served the British in his shop; however, he bore the Crown no love and affection. He was a member of the Sons of Liberty and attacked the British through literature as a member of the Committees of Correspondence and Observation. Mulligan met with many distinguished individuals prior to the war, including Alexander Hamilton, the future Aide-de-Camp of Washington. Mulligan stayed in New York after its fall to the British and this made him a perfect candidate to gather intelligence for the Continental Army. On Hamilton’s recommendation, Washington began to use Mulligan for espionage purposes. Mulligan utilized his slave Cato in his espionage operations, and they created an effective system for gathering intelligence. As the British officers in New York came to Mulligan’s shop for their

¹⁶ “*Spy Executed.*” *New-York Gazette: and the Weekly Mercury*, June 9, 1777. Founders Online.

¹⁷ “From George Washington to John Hancock, June 13-15, 1777,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.

clothing needs, Mulligan took detailed notes and accounts from the officers. He used the times they needed their uniforms back as a frame of reference for troop movements.¹⁸ Cato was then dispatched to Washington's camp in New Jersey carrying the information for the commander in chief. While Mulligan was ultimately successful throughout the war, his operation was small and dangerous. He worked with the Culper Ring towards the end of the war, as he could no longer transfer intelligence to Washington safely on his own. Woodhull wrote about an "acquaintance of Hamilton," that passed along information from New York.¹⁹ His involvement in espionage was instrumental in the successful transfer of information out of New York and into the hands of General Washington. This being said, the necessity of an actual ring and a support system proved vital to the espionage efforts during the war.

Other notable spies during the early years of the Revolution included figures such as John Honeyman, Enoch Crosby, John Clark, and Lydia Darragh. John Honeyman found success in Trenton, New Jersey during the Christmas season of 1776. Honeyman served Washington as a double agent. He played the role of a butcher and was passed off as a Tory helping the Hessians around Trenton. He had free rein to roam the area to provide meat and supplies for those loyal to the Crown and even fed false information to them. Leading up to Christmas of 1776, Honeyman was "captured" by Washington and met with him to report on the status of the Hessian troops guarding Trenton. He "escaped" back to Trenton and told the Hessian commander of the bad shape the Continental Army was in. With this reassurance, the Hessians proceeded with their

¹⁸ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 224-225.

¹⁹ Abraham Woodhull to Benjamin Tallmadge, August 12, 1779. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 965, 966, 967, 968.

Christmas plans and opened the door for one of the most memorable American victories of the war. George Washington was able to defeat the unsuspecting Hessian soldiers at Trenton and claimed a pivotal victory in the war. This victory over the German mercenaries boosted Continental morale, helped increase reenlistment, and proved that Washington's Army was able to hold their own against European soldiers.²⁰

Enoch Crosby was an individual who happened upon espionage by chance. In 1776, Crosby was en route to White Plains to join the Continentals. He was mistaken for a British Tory by loyalists in the area and was invited to join their meeting. Crosby gathered information on the British loyalists and made an excuse to leave. He then traveled to the Continental camp and reported what he learned. John Jay ordered men to arrest the Tories, as he was a member of the local Committee of Safety at the time and had the power to give such an order.²¹ Thus began Crosby's career as an espionage agent. He used the same tactic multiple times: he infiltrated the British circles in the areas surrounding Lake Champlain, allowed himself to be captured by the Continental Army, passed along information on the British to the Continentals, and escaped from his captors back into the arms of the British.²²

John Clark and Lydia Darragh both served the rebellion in Philadelphia. John Clark came the closest to providing Washington with an actual organized espionage unit. He was not one singular man carrying out the task of espionage by himself. Clark organized couriers and operatives throughout Philadelphia, however, due to complications from a shoulder injury Clark

²⁰ Falkner, Leonard. "A Spy for Washington." *American Heritage* 8, no. 5 (August 1957).

²¹ Miller, Harry Edward. *The Spy on Neutral Ground*. The New England Magazine, 1898. Page 313-314.

²² Barnum, H.L. *The Spy Unmasked; The Memoirs of Enoch Crosby*. 1828. Library of Congress.

received during the war, the post was retired within a year. He began his espionage service for Washington in the early months of 1777. Overseen by Benjamin Tallmadge, Clark started his spy career serving Washington in Long Island. Not much is known of Clark's time in Long Island, as he was very secretive about his expedition. His service in Philadelphia came in the latter half of 1777.²³ Lydia Darragh was a woman living in Philadelphia during the British occupation. She was allowed to remain in her home, provided she keep a room for the British to use for meetings. Listening in on a meeting detailing an attack on the Continental Army, she made plans to transfer the information to Washington. Darragh was able to pass along the information and aid Washington's army.²⁴

Espionage between 1775 and 1777 faced a lot of challenges. The spies involved constantly lived in a state of danger. Oftentimes, these spies experienced failure and defeat, which could mean death. With the exception of John Clark, the majority of agents between these years faced their challenges alone. Prior to 1778, intelligence was mainly processed by singular operatives with no support or organization. The entire art of espionage would change with the formation of the Culper Ring in New York. Washington eventually found success through this operation and it would go on to change the course of the war.

²³ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 47-60.

²⁴ Boudinot, Elias. *Journal or Historical Recollections of American Events During the Revolutionary War*. Library of Congress, 1894. Page 50.

The Culper Ring Background Information

The purpose of this section is to explore the background and history that specifically led to the formation of the Culper Ring. This section examines the members of the ring, their introduction to the ring, and how they formed a cohesive espionage unit.

By 1778, it was clear that single espionage units were dangerous and unstable. The already unpredictable nature of espionage proved fatal to many of these small organizations. Washington knew that something more than just singular espionage agents was needed, as these small operations would only result in the loss of more men, something the Continentals could not afford. Washington desperately needed to get intelligence from New York, and he needed a reliable and safe way to do it.

General Washington appointed Benjamin Tallmadge as the Director of Military Intelligence in 1778. Benjamin Tallmadge grew up in Setauket, New York, a place that would be vital to American espionage. He attended Yale along with Nathan Hale, where the two became close friends.²⁵ Following his time at Yale, Tallmadge went on to become a school teacher. After the rebellious events of 1775, Tallmadge began to seriously contemplate joining in the war effort. He did so in 1776 when offered the position of lieutenant. Tallmadge rose to the rank of captain quickly, gaining command of the 2nd Regiment of Light Dragoons.²⁶ By 1777, Tallmadge gained the status of major and the attention of his superiors. Tallmadge's cunning,

²⁵ Stiles, Ezra. Diploma from Yale University. 1770. Archived Letters, Fraunces Tavern Museum.

²⁶ Hancock, John. *Commission of Benjamin Tallmadge*. December 14, 1776. Archived Letters, Fraunces Tavern Museum.

determination, and loyalty earned him a spot at Washington's table. By the end of 1778, Tallmadge was appointed as the new Director of Military Intelligence as Charles Scott, the man who held the position prior to Tallmadge, lost interest and had other matters to tend to.²⁷

Intelligence up to this point in the war was often inaccurate and dangerous to come by. The use of smaller espionage units proved fatal on multiple occasions. Washington and Tallmadge needed a more elaborate and delicate form of espionage. The two used Tallmadge's past and connections to form an espionage ring, an organization with multiple operatives serving in different locations and engaging in different tasks. Washington and Tallmadge began forming one of the most successful spy rings in American History. Tallmadge assembled the Culper Ring, an organization stationed in Setauket and New York City. Washington oversaw the Ring and acted as the spymaster, while Tallmadge became the main handler for the Ring. He took the name John Bolton and received reports from his contacts throughout the war. Tallmadge's dedication to his spies was important. He was their only point of contact and no one else aside from Washington knew the identities of the ring. Washington wrote to Tallmadge on November 20, 1778, "You will be pleased to observe the strictest silence with respect to C— as you are to be the only person entrusted with the knowledge or conveyance of his Letters."²⁸ This dedication and devotion held the Ring together, even in the face of danger.²⁹

The Culper Ring consisted of key members residing in New York during the British occupation. One of the first members of the ring was Caleb Brewster. The spark that lit the fire

²⁷ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 71.

²⁸ George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge. November 20, 1778. *Founders Online*, National Archives.

²⁹ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 154.

that was the Culper Ring, Brewster began his service with the Continental Army long before the Culper Ring came to fruition. Brewster was born and raised in Setauket. He became a Nantucket whaler and lived his early life on the sea. He served on both whale and merchant ships prior to his service in the war. Brewster joined the Suffolk County Minute Men and started serving as soon as the war began. His early efforts in the war revolved around the transportation of patriot refugees escaping British-occupied New York. Brewster joined the Continental Army in 1776 as a lieutenant and continued to serve the patriot cause on the water. On August 7, 1778, Brewster wrote a letter to George Washington, offering his services in intelligence. Washington replied with very specific instructions on how to go about espionage. He wrote, “do not spare any reasonable expense to come at early and true information; always recollecting, and bearing in mind, that vague and uncertain account of things ... is more disturbing and dangerous than receiving none at all.”³⁰ Washington’s acceptance of Brewster and the instruction he provided on espionage sparked one of the most successful spy operations of the war. He began his espionage missions alone, working along the coast to report any troop movements or ship movements in New York. He initially reported directly to Charles Scott, the man Washington had originally charged with heading up the intelligence operation, although the work was passed on to Tallmadge when he took over for Scott. The Culper Ring utilized Brewster’s mastery of the waters and his willingness to cross enemy lines to help carry intelligence. Brewster was vital in the transportation of intelligence from the ring in New York to Tallmadge in Connecticut.

³⁰ George Washington to Caleb Brewster. August 8, 1778. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 3g Varick Transcripts, Letter book 6 Image 107, 108.

Abraham Woodhull was one of the most important figures of the operation and eventually took the codename Samuel Culper Senior. Residing in the city of Setauket on Long Island, Woodhull was pivotal in the success of the ring. Woodhull was born in October of 1750 to Judge Richard and Mary Woodhull. He also bore a relation to the New York militia Brigadier General Nathaniel Woodhull, whose death at the hands of the British only helped push Woodhull into the war. Woodhull was first brought to Washington's eye when Tallmadge reported him as a potential contact for Caleb Brewster. Woodhull had been detained in Connecticut due to his involvement with illegal trading. As a farmer, Woodhull had access to certain plants and foods as well as livestock and animals that proved valuable on the black market. Tallmadge met with Woodhull before the latter was released from his detainment. The two discussed the possibility of Woodhull joining Brewster in gathering intelligence in New York. Washington was delighted with the new prospect Tallmadge found and helped developed code names for both Tallmadge and Woodhull. While Tallmadge was given the name John Bolton, Abraham Woodhull took the alias of Samuel Culper. The name Samuel Culper was carefully crafted by George Washington, Charles Scott, and Benjamin Tallmadge. This name referenced Culpepper County; the area Washington surveyed in his youth. The initials SC were the inverse of Charles Scott's initials, CS. The name Samuel was a direct reference to Tallmadge's younger brother. Thus, Samuel Culper and the Culper Ring were born.³¹ Woodhull lived in Setauket and used this town as his primary base and location. In the earlier parts of the operation, there was no operative inside of Manhattan, a task which fell to Woodhull. He constantly had to make the dangerous journey from Setauket to the city and oftentimes this resulted in slow moving information. Abraham

³¹ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 67-99.

Woodhull eventually brought in help in the form of Robert Townsend, a merchant who resided within New York City. This allowed Woodhull to remain home in Setauket to conduct his spy business.³²

Woodhull received help and support from Amos and Mary Underhill, the latter being his married sister, as they resided in Manhattan. The fact that Amos and Mary lived in the city gave Woodhull reason to visit. They provided him shelter through the boarding house they owned; however, they were not there to provide their own intelligence. They were involved solely to provide Woodhull with a place to stay and keep him safe during his time in the city. Austin Roe and Jonas Hawkins acted as couriers for the espionage ring. They made the 55-mile journey from Manhattan to Setauket to pass along information collected in the city to the contacts in Setauket. At the start of the organization, Woodhull gathered intelligence in the city while the couriers brought this information to Brewster, who was waiting in Setauket. This allowed Woodhull to spend more time gathering intelligence in the city and avoid having to constantly make the journey to Setauket every time he received new information. After the introduction of Townsend to the Ring, Woodhull was able to remain in Setauket to collect information brought by the couriers.³³ (However, in September of 1779, Hawkins left the Culper Ring and left much of the courier duty to Roe.³⁴) While Roe, Hawkins, and the Underhills were reliable assets to Woodhull, it was still incredibly dangerous for him. Woodhull constantly faced the stress of being discovered. On his way to New York in the spring of 1779, Woodhull was mugged by

³² Ibid. Page 131-132.

³³ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 67-195.

³⁴ Robert Townsend to Abraham Woodhull. September 11, 1779. Taken from Rose's *Washington's Spies*. Page 172.

local privateers. Later that year, a privateer prisoner of the British named John Wolsey gave his captors information on Woodhull. While Woodhull was not captured by the British, he had to have a loyalist friend vouch for him to clear his name of any Continental connections.³⁵ As no permanent agent in New York City had yet been procured and his life was constantly being threatened, Woodhull was ready to get out of the espionage game. In 1779, Woodhull wrote to Tallmadge on his fear of traveling to New York and wanting out of the Ring. His only condition for staying was finding someone else to gather intelligence in Manhattan.³⁶

While Woodhull was scared and wanted out, he would remain in Setauket and continue his espionage work for Washington, as long as someone else gathered intelligence in Manhattan. In the letter Woodhull wrote to Tallmadge, he said,

I dare say you will be filled with wonder and surprise, that I have had the good fortune to escape confinement. And I am sorry to inform you that it hath rendered me almost unserviceable to you ... I am now a suspected person I cannot frequent their camp as heretofore, I [propose] quitting 10 (New York) and residing at 20 (Setauket). I shall endeavor to establish a confidential friend to step into my place if agreeable.³⁷

His letter expresses his fear and desire to get out of espionage, but it also reveals his dedication to Washington and the patriot effort. On June 8, 1779, Woodhull met with his New York replacement on what he hoped would be his last trip to New York City. His trip was successful and as of June 1779, Washington officially had an agent within New York City. Woodhull

³⁵ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 128-129.

³⁶ Abraham Woodhull (as Samuel Culper Sr.) to Benjamin Tallmadge (as John Bolton). June 5, 1779. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 565, 566, 567, 568, 569,570.

³⁷ Ibid.

related this information to Tallmadge in a letter on June 20, 1779.³⁸ Washington was relieved and happy with the outcome. He sent Woodhull money to cover what was lost in his mugging and to reassure his agent of his support.³⁹

Robert Townsend was the missing piece of the Culper Ring puzzle. He was the son of Samuel Townsend and hailed from Oyster Bay. Born November 25, 1753, Robert Townsend was raised in an interesting home dynamic. His father was Quaker by birthright, although he never entirely fit in with the Quaker way of life, while his mother was Episcopalian. Robert Townsend did little to aid his father's "shenanigans" and altogether tried to avoid the rampant politics of the area.⁴⁰ Instead, he focused on developing his professional career as a merchant in New York City. He worked at mercantile House of Templeton and Stewart in his teen years and eventually opened his own business in 1773. While he had some initial involvement with the patriot forces at the start of the war, Townsend quickly washed his hands of any official dealings with the Continental Army and began catering to the British needs in New York. He came to work closely with James Rivington, a local journalist and respected loyalist businessman. Townsend even owned a share of Rivington's coffeehouse, a place that was favored by many of the British officers in New York City. He took lodging with Woodhull's brother-in-law, Amos Underhill, who also came from a Quaker family in Oyster Bay. Townsend, a secret patriot such as Woodhull, resided fulltime in the city. Woodhull spent time getting to know Townsend and his

³⁸ Abraham Woodhull (as Samuel Culper Sr.) to Benjamin Tallmadge. June 20, 1779. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 795, 796, 797.

³⁹ George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge. June 27, 1779. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 3b Varick Transcripts, Letter book 9, IMAG 128, 129, 130.

⁴⁰ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 143.

loyalties while staying with the Underhills. While Townsend played the part of British loyalist, he had a passion for patriotism. In one of his surviving letters, he explains that often times actions and beliefs tend to be two different things. He uses this to justify his espionage activities. “The gravest persons betray an inward esteem for a statesman, who has been the contriver of a very notable piece of political management, at the same time they are . . . obliged outwardly to censure the immorality of the action.”⁴¹ Townsend had a tough time in New York; he faced economic hardship, an unhappy working relationship with Henry Oakham (a former partner of Townsend), and business struggles due to the war. Despite these hardships, he still supported the Patriot cause and became a vital part of the Culper Ring.⁴² Townsend considered dropping his job to focus on providing intelligence full time, however, Washington thought it better for him to remain in his employment. Washington sent a letter to Tallmadge explaining why he thought this was not a great idea. “It is not my opinion that Culper Junr. should be advised to give up his present employment. I would imagine that with a little industry he will be able to carry on his intelligence with greater security to himself, and greater advantages to us — under cover of his usual business, than if he were to dedicate himself wholly to the giving of information.”⁴³ The fact that Townsend was willing to quit his job and dedicate himself full time to the Patriot cause reflects how dedicated he, along with the rest of the Ring, was to the espionage effort.

The Culper Ring had other important agents as well. Anna Strong, born April 14, 1740, was one such member. She was married to Selah Strong and supported his patriotic sentiments in

⁴¹ Personal notes by Robert Townsend, in the Townsend Family Papers, Raynam Hall Museum on loan from East Hampton Library.

⁴² Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 125-164.

⁴³ George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge. September 24, 1779. Stony Brook University Library.

the beginning of the war. Following his departure to Connecticut, she remained as the sole caretaker of their property in Setauket. She was neighbors with Abraham Woodhull and helped in his espionage activities. Her status and gender helped disguise her espionage activity. She was essential in signaling the arrival of Caleb Brewster to Woodhull. The system of signaling they used was not seen as out of place for a woman tending to the duties of her household.⁴⁴ While Hercules Mulligan and Cato had their own operation, they eventually came to work with the Culper Ring as well. Following the arrest and release of Mulligan from British custody, he passed along information to Townsend, as opposed to sending it directly to Washington. This alleviated the suspicion from him and allowed him to continue gathering intelligence. Other people and informants were used by the Ring. The identity of Agent 355, while unknown, gathers speculation that another female was involved and vital to the Ring's success. Whether or not Agent 355 existed, it is clear that the Culper Ring utilized people that sat outside of the cultural norm of society. The Ring constantly used the boundaries of cultural norms, pushed class boundaries, and evaded societal expectations in order to create a successful espionage operation. This use and push of boundaries is what made the Ring as successful as it was. The Ring exploited individuals that sat outside of those that had power and standing in British and American society.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Olsen, Kirstin. *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017. Page 13-30.

⁴⁵ Polluck, Linda. "Honor, Gender, and Reconciliation in Elite Culture, 1570–1700." *Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 1 (January 2007): 3–29.

Honor and Espionage

The purpose of this section is to look at how both European and American societies viewed espionage in terms of honor. Honor played a large part in society at this time and things like guerrilla warfare, espionage, or anything sneaky, were held in low regard. This concept is important to note as those engaged in espionage literally risked everything, even their honor, to fight for something they believed in.

Merriam-Webster defines honor as “a keen sense of ethical conduct.”⁴⁶ Honor was incredibly important during the 1700s. Historically, honor came to represent one’s “manliness” or a person’s standing in society. If one were to violate their honor, they would lose their standing and all respect due to them. Honor and integrity played key roles in life during the eighteenth century. Both of these words represent someone good and upstanding. This person would never do anything to violate the laws or fair play of society. Because society looked at warfare in a certain way, honor and war went hand in hand. There was an honorable or upstanding way to fight. There were rules that needed to be followed, and if violated, a person would lose their honor and standing. The American Revolution was a war centered on honor. Throughout the war, honor, and the traditional form of warfare that the British were used to, were overlooked at times. Continental tactics involved guerrilla warfare and espionage, as opposed to the traditional formed lines firing back and forth at each other that the British had practiced for so long. Even though the new country was based on honor, leaders of the revolution found it necessary to bend the rules at times. The Founding Fathers declared, “and for the

⁴⁶ Webster, Noah. *New Collegiate Dictionary. A Merriam-Webster*. Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1963. Page 510.

support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”⁴⁷ Upholding honor was important to the foundation of the United States; however, violating this honor was a necessity in order to beat the giant this new country found itself facing. Craig Bruce Smith examines the formation of honor as an American ideal. He writes, “One’s honor and virtue depended on right or proper conduct. How that was judged was a matter of each person’s own ethical and cultural understandings.”⁴⁸

To better understand the role honor played in British and American society, it is imperative to first examine Great Britain’s history in terms of honor. The Code of Chivalry played an important part in the foundation of how Great Britain came to look at honor in the eighteenth century. Chivalry, as defined by Edgar Prestage, was “the moral and social law and custom of the noble and gentle class in Western Europe during the later Middle Ages, and the results of that law and custom in action.”⁴⁹ Edgar goes on to explain that this code had three principle factors: war, religion, and the love of ladies.⁵⁰ This code laid the groundwork for the rules and regulations that warfare came to have. Prior to the establishment of Chivalry, there was little honor on the battlefield. Death and destruction reigned supreme with little consequence and no order. The eventual order came with the introduction of Chivalry in the late 1100s/early 1200s. Chivalry reached its height between 1250 and 1350. Chivalry, and the honor that went

⁴⁷ Jefferson, Thomas. *Declaration of Independence*. 1776. Library of Congress.

⁴⁸ Smith, Craig Bruce. *American Honor: The Creation of the Nations Ideals during the Revolutionary Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Page 3.

⁴⁹ Prestage, Edgar. *Chivalry: A Series of Studies to Illustrate Its Historical Significance and Civilizing Influence*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and C^o, 1928. Page 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

along with it, became important themes in Medieval life.⁵¹ This gave way to a more modern sense of honor that transformed rules of warfare the British, as well as the rest of Europe, came to fight and die by.

While today, people view Chivalry as a way to treat women, it was originally created as a way to control the violence and destruction of Knights during the Middle Ages. An epic poem written in the late 1000s entitled *The Song of Roland* outlines what Chivalry looked like in the Middle Ages. The Chivalric Code was based highly on honor, calling for the knights to live their lives on and off the battlefield with integrity. Listed among the items on the Code of Chivalry found in the poem is “to live by honor and glory.”⁵² Other things such as “to guard the honor of fellow knights” and “to avoid unfairness, meanness, and deceit” are also listed among the rules Knights were supposed to follow.⁵³ Prestage describes Chivalry as “an imperfect discipline, but it was a discipline, and one fit for the times.”⁵⁴ Chivalry transformed the scope of Medieval life. It gave a sense of morality and honor to the people of the Medieval period. This morality and honor became cemented in their way of life and would persist well into the modern age. Because these two characteristics were highly sought after during the Middle Ages, anything that directly violated those characteristics were looked down upon. The sneaky and deceitful nature of espionage had no place in a society so enraptured by honor and virtue.

By the eighteenth century, changes had occurred that had a profound effect on honor on the battlefield. Advances in technology allowed the widespread use of guns to transform the

⁵¹ Ibid. Page 17.

⁵² Goldin, Frederick. *The Song of Roland*. New York: Norton, 1978.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Prestage. *Chivalry*. Page 28.

battlefield. While the technology changed, the forces that fought during this period did not. They still lined up in an honorable manner and shot at each other in lines. They were trying to uphold morals and ideals from an old and dying style of warfare. In this period, it was expected that participants in a battle would give the other side fair warning before an attack began. These battles were very formulated and regulated. Deceitful attacks and tactics were frowned upon. The old-world rules of the early modern warfare period quickly became outdated. Nonetheless, they were the rules of the day and had to be obeyed. These rules were so centered on publicly upholding integrity that anything sneaky was seen as disrespectful.⁵⁵

Espionage by its very nature is dishonest. It is secretive, cunning, and sneaky. These characteristics violated the code and morals that eighteenth century warfare held so dear. However, the need for intelligence was imperative. While public opinion of espionage was not very high, intelligence networks began exploding across Europe during this period. Jeremy Black, in *British Diplomats and Diplomacy, 1688-1800*, outlines the activities of British diplomats stationed in different capitals and their aid to intelligence. Even this form of intelligence beheld more honor than the outright espionage used in the American Revolution.⁵⁶ Those involved in these early British intelligence efforts were official diplomats and representatives of the Crown. While they did partake in procuring intelligence covertly, they were more focused on the nature of their diplomatic missions and lives. Throughout the history of England, clandestine and covert espionage activities were only truly utilized in times of

⁵⁵ Stewart, Richard. *American Military History Volume 1, The United States Army and The Forging of a Nation, 1775-1917*, Vol. 1. Page 17-44.

⁵⁶ Black, Jeremy. *British Diplomats and Diplomacy 1688-1800*. Exeter: Univ. of Exeter Press, 2001.

extreme crisis. There was no permanent espionage organization, as people did not see any honor behind it.⁵⁷

Honor was an important part of everyday life in Great Britain. After founding the colonies, this honor was passed over into America, as both Great Britain and her colonies were founded on the ideals of honor and integrity. American life adhered closely to honor and virtue. Craig Bruce Smith describes how Americans, typically white males, looked at honor at the country's birth. "From America's infancy, honor and virtue had been stereotypically the domain of white males. From the elites to the middling class, these ideals were often the bar to which all men were held. They governed their beliefs, their careers, their social interactions - their entire lives."⁵⁸ While upholding honor was important to retain good standing in both British and American societies, both parties were okay with putting people in the position of spies for their success. As the colonies became more distant and less dependent on Great Britain, they seemed to shift their way of looking at things. Exposed to an entirely new world, the colonists had to figure out a new set of rules to play by. Americans came to value their freedom more than the old-world rules they had been founded on. While they still valued honor and integrity, they were able to partake in activities such as espionage and guerrilla warfare with more ease than their British enemies. Leaders like George Washington realized that if America was going to survive, they had to make up their own rules. While Washington was a man dedicated to honor, he was able to utilize espionage as it was essential to the success of the war. Washington spoke on the absolute necessity of standing against the British, no matter the cost, in a general order from July

⁵⁷ Andrew, Christopher Maurice. *Her Majesty's Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community*. New York, NY, U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 1987.

⁵⁸ Bruce Smith, Craig. *American Honor*. Page 3.

2, 1776. “We have therefore to resolve to conquer or die: Our own Country’s Honor, all call upon us for a vigorous and manly exertion, and if we now shamefully fail, we shall become infamous to the whole world.”⁵⁹ His focus on intelligence paid off. He became an excellent spymaster during the war.

The British turned to the world of espionage in order to keep up with Washington and his new set of rules. Leaders like Henry Clinton were the product of an age that frowned upon covert espionage operations. Historian Alexander Rose describes this as “a conventional military establishment, where spies were regarded with distaste.”⁶⁰ Major John André became one of the leading British espionage agents in the War for Independence. He oversaw the intelligence effort in the New World and came head to head with the Culper Ring during the war.⁶¹

Washington understood that espionage was not the most glamorous thing a person could undertake. His agents knew that becoming spies came with the possibility of dishonorable actions. However, these men knew that they were fighting for something much bigger than themselves and therefore took the risk of losing that standing among their peers. Nathan Hale understood the risk associated with engaging in espionage. In a biography written by Henry Phillips Johnson, Hale is quoted as saying “I am not influenced by the expectation of promotion or pecuniary reward; I wish to be useful, and every kind of service, necessary to the public good, becomes honorable by being necessary. If the exigencies of my country demand a peculiar services claims to perform that service are imperious.”⁶² While honor was important to society in

⁵⁹ Washington, George. *General Orders*. July 2, 1776. *Founders Online*, National Archives.

⁶⁰ Rose. *Washington’s Spies*. Page 198.

⁶¹ John André to Joseph Stansbury, May 10, 1779, Clinton Collection, Clements Library.

⁶² Phelps Johnson, Henry. *Nathan Hale, 1776: Biography and Memorials*. Kessinger 2007. Page 106-107.

the eighteenth century and espionage was not seen as something honorable, this did not stop both parties from engaging in espionage during the American Revolution.

Social Norms and Espionage

This section explores the structure of British, and later American, society. It explores cultural norms that the Culper Ring were able to use to their advantage. In a letter to her husband John on March 31, 1776, Abigail Adams wrote, “That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute”⁶³ British and American men held complete and total dominance over not only the women, but the slaves of their societies. This dominance gave them a blind eye that allowed women and slaves to engage in acts of espionage.

In the eighteenth century, life in England was distinctly divided by wealth and status. According to a report by Joseph Massie, an English economist, the aristocracy sat at the top of the socio-economic chain. Gentlemen, merchants, manufacturers, and tradesmen sat below them earning significantly less. The lower income bracket held the most members. Those earning below 200 pounds annually far outnumbered the aristocracy. The most common of these low wage earners were laborers and seamen. This low-income bracket made up the traditional workforce in England.⁶⁴

There was also some distinction between women and men. Men were in control during this period. They had jurisdiction over the affairs of state while women were responsible for affairs of the home. The common law idea of coverture, or the absorption “of a married woman’s legal and financial identity under that of her husband,” gave men superiority over women.⁶⁵

At common law, the husband and father had nearly absolute authority over his wife and children, including the right to administer physical correction. A wife

⁶³ Abigail Adams to John Adams. March 31, 1776. Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁶⁴ Massie, Joseph. *Population Estimates*. 1759. Taken from *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*, Page 14.

⁶⁵ Finn, Margot. “*Women, Consumption and Coverture in England, c. 1760-1860.*” *The Historical Journal* 39, no. 3, 1996. Page 703-722.

was unable to make contracts or to own property unless she negotiated a premarital contract, and she could not make gifts or write a will without her mate's consent. She owed her husband total obedience, and he could do what he wished with any property she bought unencumbered to the marriage or that they accumulated together. He also controlled the management and took the profits of any property in which she had a life interest, and he could appropriate any wages she might earn.⁶⁶

Men had complete dominance over their wives during this period. Because of this dominance, woman held different status than men did.

English common law granted women two different statuses. Feme sole referred to single women while feme covert referred to married women. These positions were long established in British society and common law. Common law is described by Patrick Glenn. He wrote, "the concept of common law is thus preceded by the practice, and the practice is an infinitely varied process of adjustment of expanding laws to recalcitrant local, legal resistance, everywhere in Europe."⁶⁷ Women historically had few rights. They were legally submissive to first their fathers then their husbands. Because coverture was cemented in society through ages of practice, overlooking women and their lives was easy to do in the 1700s. Some colonies had laws set in place to allow women limited rights, although they were severely disregarded at the time. Women were seen as inferior to men and were treated as such.⁶⁸

Historically, many different cultures and societies throughout the world practiced gendered dominance. Even in matriarchal societies such as some Native American tribes, the

⁶⁶ Walsh, Lorena. *The Experiences and Status of Women in the Chesapeake, 1750-1775. The Web of Southern Social Relations, Women, Family, and Education.*

⁶⁷ Glenn, Patrick. *On Common Laws.* 2007. Page 8.

⁶⁸ Evans, Sara M. *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America. "But What Have I to Do with Politicks?": The Revolutionary Era.* New York Free Press 1997.

men were in charge of the public affairs while the women were in charge of the private and household affairs.⁶⁹ Women blended into the background of everyday life while men took center stage. Men in England held offices, owned property, and dictated much of what occurred in social and political settings.⁷⁰ As colonies tend to reflect the ideals and values of its mother country, the Thirteen Colonies held much of this in the same regard. Arthur M. Schlesinger writes, “The colonists unhesitatingly took for granted the concept of a graded society.”⁷¹ He describes the American aristocracy, or gentry, as the members of an upper middle class with no noble heritage. The British aristocracy consisted of a more royal background while that of America consisted of mercantile craftsmen and plantation owners. According to Gordon Wood, “The American aristocracy, such as it was, was not only weaker than its English counterpart; it also had a great deal of trouble maintaining both the desired classical independence and its freedom from the marketplace. Few members of the American gentry were able to live off the rent of tenants as the English landed aristocracy did.”⁷² The fact that the American gentry did not have the same status of the British aristocrats shows a growing divide between the mother country and its offspring.

The cultural normal for this period was that a white man owned land and was in charge. White men fought the wars, made the laws, and ran the government. Because of this cultural norm, slaves and women were able to observe and report while evading punishment or notice,

⁶⁹ Calloway, Colin G. *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, Macmillan Learning, 2019. Page 152.

⁷⁰ Olsen, Kirsten. *Daily Life in 18th Century England*. “Not Created Equal” Class and Race.

⁷¹ Schlesinger, Arthur. *The Aristocracy in America*. Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Third Series, Vol. 74 (1962). Page 3-21.

⁷² Wood, Gordon. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. Page 113.

solely because it was unexpected of them. As the population of the colonies grew and plantations began to boom, slavery became much more crucial to the American way of life. Slaves provided the needed labor force for most tasks while women typically took care of and oversaw the home life. Margaret Ellen Newell discusses the origins of slavery and how the colonists used them in her book *Brethren by Nature*.⁷³ Throughout eighteenth century, women and slaves were treated almost like nonexistent beings. Generally, they could not vote, own property, or testify in court. Because slaves and most women lacked political, social, and economic identity, things could be said or happen in front of them with almost no repercussions. Years of living in these conditions made women and slaves invisible to their owners and husbands.⁷⁴

The white land-owning males who held all the power were often dependent on their slaves and their women. Without servants and slaves, the day-to-day operations of colonial life would have failed. Without women around to keep the household moving and functioning, offering their support and guidance, and helping cultivate future generations, the home life would have been abysmal. Kristin Olson discusses the role of women in the household during this period. “Within the normative heterosexual marriage, procreation and the raising of children took center stage for most women.”⁷⁵ Utilizing both women and slaves, the Culper Ring, as well as other intelligence operations during the American Revolution, was able to sneak pertinent and useful information under the noses of those they were taking it from.⁷⁶

⁷³ Newell, Margaret Ellen. *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery*. Cornell University Press, 2015. Page 45-65.

⁷⁴ Olsen, Kirstin. *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017. Page 13-30.

⁷⁵ Olsen. *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*. Page 3-32.

⁷⁶ Demos, John. *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*. New York: Oxford University Press., 2000.

One of the key members of the Culper Ring was a woman. She was able to participate in the Ring because rather than let her gender role limit and define her, she used it to her advantage. As mentioned previously, Anna Strong signaled Abraham Woodhull when Caleb Brewster was in town. Anna Strong was neighbors with Woodhull and shared his patriotic sentiment. She played the part of the good and faithful wife. She supported her husband and looked after her home and kids. Her husband, Selah, was a devout patriot and supporter of independence. This landed him in trouble with the British and he was imprisoned for a time on Jersey, a British prison ship. Being the good wife she was, Anna fought for her husband's safety. She brought him food aboard the ship and eventually got him out on parole. After he was released, he traveled to Connecticut with their children, where he spent the remainder of the war. His departure left Anna Strong to look after their residence alone. Anna insisted on remaining in Setauket, under the guise of caring for her home and residence in her husband's absence. She used this as a cover to hide her espionage activities.⁷⁷ Strong was able to use this cover well. She looked after her household, tended to her chores, and did little to arouse suspicion. Yet, her primary goal was to signal the operatives in Setauket. Whenever Caleb Brewster arrived and was ready to make contact with Woodhull, Strong would signal Woodhull via the laundry. As laundry was an expected task for women during this period, it was not out of the ordinary that Strong would be hanging laundry. It was not questioned, nor was there any suspicion regarding it. She hung the laundry in a certain way that was visible to Woodhull. If she hung a black petticoat on the line, it signaled that Brewster was in town and ready to meet. Based on the

⁷⁷ Hunter, Ryan Ann. *In Disguise!: Undercover with Real Women Spies*. New York: Aladdin, 2013. Page 124-126.

number of white handkerchiefs in her wash, Woodhull was able to determine the location of Brewster's boat, as they corresponded to different coves where he hid his boat. Using Strong was brilliant. Because she was simply trying to take care of her household and look after her family, she was not arrested for espionage. While a woman in Setauket was suspected of espionage, there was no incriminating evidence that pointed to Strong as the culprit. She simply went about her daily routines and did nothing out of the ordinary for a woman at this time. These actions gave her the perfect cover for her work with the Culper Ring.⁷⁸ There was another woman that potentially worked with the Culper Ring. While it is unknown exactly who the letter refers to, Abraham Woodhull explains that he thought "by the assistance of a lady of [his] acquaintance, shall [they] be able to outwit them all."⁷⁹ Woodhull and the rest of the Ring knew that women could more easily pass through the British defenses. Women were also used outside of the Culper Ring. Lydia Darragh, a woman residing in Philadelphia during the war, is an example of how women were able to participate in the war effort without being suspected. Her story, discussed in the earlier section on espionage prior to the Culper Ring, explains how she used her status as a woman to get away with covert acts.

The British intelligence movement also utilized women. Peggy Shippen, the wife of Benedict Arnold, was instrumental in his defection, and was even compensated by the British government. Interestingly enough, she was paid more for her involvement than Arnold was.

⁷⁸ De Lancey to British Intelligence, February 4, 1781, "Private daily intelligence," *Magazine of American History*, X, Page 410-417.

⁷⁹ Abraham Woodhull (as Samuel Culper Sr.) to Benjamin Tallmadge (as John Bolton), August 15, 1779. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 1021, 1022.

Arnold was given a one-time payment of 6,350 pounds for his espionage activities while she was paid 1,000 pounds a year for life. She was also given money for her children and their upbringing.⁸⁰ The British received information from a woman named Ann Bates. She infiltrated Continental camps and reported her findings back to the British. A letter from the British says, “a woman who Craig has trusted often came to town last night ... I will return whenever she may have learned anything that shall be desired to be known.”⁸¹ A deposition from the British describes one Miss Jenny, a woman that infiltrated French and American camps to secure intelligence reports.⁸² While the British were hesitant to fall into the depths of espionage, they were willing to embrace support where they could find it. Therefore, women were essential to both American and British espionage.

Slaves sat outside of the “cultural norm” at this time and were regarded as lower class, almost nonexistent beings. Slaves during the war were just another feature of the property. They were there to do the bidding of their masters, nothing more. Because slaves were seen as property and practically invisible in society, they made the perfect eyes and ears for spies. They were present for conversations that others were not privy to. Slaves were able to blend into the background and gather information easily. In New York, Hercules Mulligan and his slave Cato proved invaluable to the war effort. As a tailor to the British officers in New York, Hercules Mulligan was able to gather information on British troop movements. He used his slave, Cato, to transport that information to the Continental Army. As a slave, Cato was able to travel through

⁸⁰ Arnold, M. and Goodfriend, J. *Notes and Documents: The Widowhood of Margaret Shippen Arnold: Letters from England, 1891-1803. The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 115, no 2, 1991. Page 221-255.

⁸¹ Unsigned manuscript on Ann Bates. Henry Clinton Papers. Clements Library.

⁸² Dietrich, Nicholas. *Deposition of Miss Jenny*. Henry Clinton Papers. Clements Library.

enemy lines to transport the information gathered by Mulligan. Eventually, Mulligan and Cato came to work with the Culper Ring, helping to supply information on New York to Washington. The effectiveness of this was due in part to Cato being overlooked by the British. He was often-times able to slip through, completely unsuspected. The British initially did not think Cato was capable of espionage activities. As the slave to a man the British were familiar with, the British had no reason to suspect him. However, after Mulligan was eventually arrested on suspicion of espionage, the pair came under surveillance from the British.⁸³

Another spy that owed his success to the color of his skin was James Armistead. Armistead was an African-American slave who worked under William Armistead, a Virginia patriot. He was selected to serve Marquis de Lafayette as a spy in 1781. He posed as a runaway slave and began working for Benedict Arnold and General Cornwallis. They tasked him with spying on the Continental forces. Because he was assigned to spy on the Continentals, he was easily able to relay information on the British to Lafayette. Armistead was able to blend in to the background of life and walk such a fine line, he was able to effectively gather and report on intelligence. He worked as a double agent, “spying” for the British while reporting information on their movements to Lafayette.⁸⁴ He later petitioned for his freedom, and both Lafayette and William Armistead came to his aid. In a letter brought to the general assembly, Armistead’s actions during the war were outlined. “That during the time of his serving the Marquiss he often at the peril of his life found means to frequent the British Camp, by which means he kept open a

⁸³Daigler, Kenneth A. *Spies, Patriots and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014. Page 189.

⁸⁴ White, Deborah Gray. *Freedom on my Mind: A History of African Americans*. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin’s 2013. Page 154.

channel of the most useful communications to the army of the state: That at different times your petitioner conveyed inclosures, from the Marquiss into the enemies lines, of the most secret & important kind; the possession of which if discovered on him would have most certainly endangered the life of your petitioner: That he undertook & performed all commands with cheerfulness & fidelity, in opposition to the persuasion & example of many thousands of his unfortunate condition.”⁸⁵

While women and slaves were able to use their position to their advantage, this did not mean that they were completely above suspicion. While Strong was never arrested, there was a woman suspected of espionage in Setauket fitting her description.⁸⁶ Her work was done low key, however, it still proved to be a dangerous game, even as a woman. Cato was captured and beaten once following a trip to Washington’s camp. He remained under suspicion for the remainder of the war, one of the leading reasons Mulligan and Cato began working with the Culper Ring.⁸⁷ Women and slaves involved in espionage were in just as much danger as their white male counterparts.

Both women and slaves were vital to life in the eighteenth century. However, cultural traditions in England, and later America, dictated the status in which these people were treated. Men disregarded both their wives and their slaves, as historically they had little to no standing in society. This poor standing allowed women and slaves to get away with much more than the

⁸⁵ *Legislative Petition for James, Slave Belonging to William Armistead*, November 30, 1786. Library of Virginia.

⁸⁶ Welch, Richard F. *General Washington’s Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014. Page 37.

⁸⁷ Misencik, Paul R. *The Original American Spies: Seven Covert Agents of the Revolutionary War*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014. Page 116.

white males in charge. Invisible to the people making the rules, women and slaves were excellent candidates for espionage.

Methods Used by the Culper Ring

The Culper Ring used a variety of techniques to successfully smuggle intelligence under the noses of the British. The spies of the eighteenth century unlocked a whole new arsenal of spy techniques to utilize. This section looks at the different methods and techniques used by espionage agents in the eighteenth century, with specific examples from the Culper Ring. The Culper Ring made magnificent strides and utilized different techniques to successfully launch an intelligence assault on the British.

The most important thing used by the Culper Ring was their code book. The code used by the Ring allowed them to send letters and updates to each other while maintaining their secrecy. Codes were nothing new, intelligence networks and diplomats had been using them for years. An early original code used during the Revolution was based off the Ave Maria code created some two hundred years earlier by a priest.⁸⁸ However, the Culper Ring needed a more simplified code, as these codes could become long and confusing.

The code created by Tallmadge for the Culper Ring consisted of a list of numbers that held specific meanings. For example, the number 10 was code for “absent” while the number 20 meant “affair.” In total, there were seven hundred and sixty-three numbers that represented words, names, or places the Culper Ring found vital to their operation. The code was simple, as Tallmadge did not have the time or means to train all of the agents involved in something more complex. Tallmadge arranged his code alphabetically. Words that started with “A” came first in the code. These words had numbers 1-47. Words that started with Z (there was only one - zeal) came at the end of the code. Zeal was assigned number 710. Numbers 711-726 represented

⁸⁸ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 114.

specific people the Ring discussed. For example, number 711 was code for Washington, while 725 was code for Caleb Brewster. Numbers 727-763 represented specific places and locations the Ring needed to discuss. 763 was code for “headquarters” and 729 was code for “Setauket.” For things not listed in the code, Tallmadge created a jumbled alphabet and numeric system. For example, both “a” and “1” were represented by “e” and “b” and “2” were represented by “f.” This was an easy way to include numbers and letters not assigned a numeric value in the code. There is a discrepancy here, as Woodhull used 10 to represent New York and 20 to represent Setauket. This was an early code consisting of only four numbers. These numbers were replaced by Tallmadge’s full code dictionary in July of 1779.⁸⁹

Another technique utilized by the ring was invisible ink. The invisible ink was developed by James Jay, brother to John Jay - a leading member in Congress as well as a diplomat and the eventual first attorney general. James was a chemist by hobby and doctor by trade, thus he had the perfect cover to experiment with different solutions. He created the invisible ink in 1775, a feat that gave him the ability to send word to his brother about what the British were up to. It was called “sympathetic” ink, the words written in the agent only appeared when the reagent was applied. John Jay wrote to Washington in November of 1778 about the use of invisible ink and how it could be utilized. “This will be delivered by my Brother, who will communicate & explain to your Excellency a mode of Correspondence, which may be of use, provided proper agents can be obtained.”⁹⁰ This invisible ink finally made its way into the hands of the Culper

⁸⁹ Tallmadge, Benjamin. *Culper Ring Codebook*. Online Edition, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/the-culper-code-book/>.

⁹⁰ John Jay to George Washington, November 19, 1778, *Founders Online*, National Archives.

Ring the following year. Woodhull was overjoyed when he received the invisible ink, and was ready to use “a vial for a purpose that gives me great satisfaction” for his letters.⁹¹ While the introduction of the invisible ink proved an exciting new addition to the Culper Ring’s arsenal, the Ring oftentimes found the ink in short supply. James Jay created the ink and kept the recipe to himself. The letters written using this ink are too old to run tests on; however, according to Alexander Rose, the invisible ink more than likely consisted of gallic acid and gum Arabic. The reagent more than likely consisted of ferrous Sulphur and distilled water.⁹² The invisible ink was so vital because of the way it was made. Typical invisible inks during this period could be revealed by heat. The ink created by Jay could only be revealed by applying the reagent, a factor that allowed the Ring to completely hide their secrets from British eyes. The Ring did what they could to preserve the ink, even when they received a heftier supply of it. Because of the shortage they faced, they were careful to use it even when they had a larger supply, for fear they would again find themselves short of the ink. The invisible ink proved vital to the Ring, however, the dread of losing the ink caused the Ring’s progress to slow. Tallmadge dispersed a supply of the ink to at least Woodhull, if not other members of the Ring such as Townsend, however, they used it very sparingly. A letter from Washington in November of 1779 describes how limited the supply of ink was. He wrote, “I send you a part of the very small quantity of the stain, which I have left, to be forwarded to C---- jun., as he says he is in want of it. He should be directed to use

⁹¹ Abraham Woodhull (as Samuel Culper Sr.) to Benjamin Tallmadge, April 12, 1779, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 613, Image 614.

⁹² Rose. *Washington’s Spies*. Page 110.

it with the utmost frugality.”⁹³ Washington claimed that the Ring could have been producing way more intelligence than they were with the invisible ink, and he stated that “what I have sent for him at different times would have wrote fifty times what I have read from him.”⁹⁴ While it caused some tension for Washington, the invisible ink created by Jay did wonders for the Culper Ring.

The way the Culper Ring functioned was perhaps its greatest strength. The Ring became a well-oiled machine, with each member doing their part to aid in the safe passing of intelligence. In a letter to Tallmadge on October 9, 1779, Washington was adamant about having a trusted person carry the Ring’s letters. “Should a certain operation take place, it will be necessary to establish a very regular communication with Long Island. These things are better settled personally than by letter, I shall therefore be glad to see you at Head Quarters. After leaving some person who can be trusted with the rect. Of C’s--- letters, and who can forward them and any observations upon the sound, be pleased to ride over.”⁹⁵ Establishing permanent contact with New York was vital. Woodhull, and later Townsend, provided insight into the British activity in New York City. During Woodhull’s time in New York City, he observed the British activity throughout and was able to transmit that information back to Brewster in Setauket via the couriers. Townsend was permanently stationed within the city to gather intelligence. He utilized his place as a merchant and businessman to familiarize himself with the

⁹³ George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge, November 1, 1779, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 3b Varick Transcripts, Letter book 10 Image 225.

⁹⁴ George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge, February 5, 1780, Benjamin Tallmadge Papers, Princeton University.

⁹⁵ George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge, October 9, 1779, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 3b Varick Transcripts, Letter book 10, Image 123.

local British forces and observe their actions and movements. He was an established presence in the city, and he was able to use this to cover his espionage activities. Townsend was able to send information to Woodhull in Setauket via the same courier that Woodhull used while stationed in New York City. Austin Roe acted as a courier that transported information from the city into Setauket. He made his dangerous journey possible by claiming to have business as a merchant. From there, Woodhull gathered any information from Townsend in the city and waited to relay the information to Caleb Brewster, who brought his whaling boat over the Long Island Sound to meet with Woodhull. Anna Strong was able to signal the arrival of Brewster and let him know where Brewster was going to be by using her laundry as a signal. Brewster then took the intelligence back to Tallmadge who then eventually transmitted the information to Washington. By breaking up the tasks as such, it was easy to slip through the British defenses. While they had their hiccups, the Ring operated much smoother than had a single man been stationed in New York City with the same task. After Hercules Mulligan and Cato fell under suspicion by the British, they also began to transmit information to the Culper Ring. The Ring often utilized dead drops to reduce the amount the Ring operatives had to meet face to face. These also proved invaluable in times when the members found it unsafe or dangerous to meet and had to leave the area quickly.⁹⁶

The Culper Ring became essential to the success of the American forces, especially in terms of New York. They provided key insight into the functions of the British army and gave Washington valuable information. The fact that they were an actual ring that consisted of

⁹⁶ George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge, Memorandum, October 14, 1779, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 3b Varick Transcripts, Letter book 10, Image 139, 140, 141.

multiple people was revolutionary in itself. The earlier years of the war and the early intelligence effort proved that spying could not be the work of a single person stationed in their location, but rather a group of people working together. The Culper Ring quickly turned the tables on the British and were very successful at their craft. The next section analyzes the success the Culper Ring found and how the Ring itself factored into the overall success of the Continental Army. This success would not have been possible without the different techniques found throughout this section. These methods and techniques set the Ring apart from other espionage units during this time.

Success of the Culper Ring

American espionage came a long way from its humble beginnings with Nathan Hale. By the end of the American Revolution, the Culper Ring became one of, if not the, most successful spy operations of the war. They also were able to remain in anonymity for years to come. Some of their impressive feats include exposing a planned attack by the British on French forces, revealing William Tryon's raid to Tallmadge even though the information was delayed, uncovering a major counterfeiting plot, finding a notable American officer was going to turn on the Continental Army, and even saving Washington's life, although this has no official record. This section examines the success of the Ring and how they shaped the espionage game for years to come.

The day-to-day successes of the Ring were immense. The Ring was able to provide Tallmadge and Washington with updates on the status of the British in New York and give them insight into what was happening in the city. A letter from Woodhull on December 12, 1778 reads, "Since my last have endeavoured to discover wheather I had errd in my No. 3 & 4 concerning the State and conduct of the Enemy on the two Islands And am happily convinced that I have given you a very particular account. Or at least as exact one as is possible for anyone to obtain without discovery. The enemy that went up the River, Were the Granedeers Light Infantry from Jamaica, & the Guards from the City & Lord Rodens Regm. that is Cantoned in the Bowery all Said Commd by G. Clinton, Who Since their return have bene very Silent."⁹⁷ This early letter by Woodhull shows how the Ring was able to transmit information from within

⁹⁷ Abraham Woodhull as Samuel Culper to Benjamin Tallmadge. December 12, 1778. *Founders Online*. National Archives.

New York. Woodhull gave another update on March 17, 1779 regarding troop movements and transports by General George Clinton who hoped to raid the Connecticut coast.⁹⁸ This information gave Washington a chance to prepare for any possible attacks from the enemy. He instructed his generals to reinforce their positions and prepare for anything that Clinton might throw at them.⁹⁹ Clinton did not attack and eventually returned to New York. This might have been due to the high alert the Continentals were on thanks to the work done by the Ring. In any case, Washington and his men stayed vigilant for any potential movements from Clinton. Much of the success the Ring found was in its ability to pass on small-scale information to the Continental Army. The Culper Ring was vital in giving Washington eyes and ears in New York. Simply providing updates on troop movements allowed Washington to prepare for the worst. Had Washington not known of Clinton's movements and prepared for a potential raid, the end result might have been catastrophic. Any information, even small updates such as troop movements, proved invaluable to the war effort.

The Culper Ring uncovered a raid by William Tryon that was meant to divide Washington's forces, allowing Clinton to easily defeat his adversary. Townsend sent his first report to Washington on June 29, 1779, outlining some odd behavior from the British. The British were preparing to make a journey into Connecticut soon after the letter was written.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Abraham Woodhull (as Samuel Culper Sr.) to Benjamin Tallmadge (as John Bolton), March 17, 1779, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 936, 937, 938.

⁹⁹ George Washington to Israel Putnam. March 27, 1779. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4, General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 955, 956.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Townsend (as Samuel Culper Jr.) to Benjamin Tallmadge, June 29, 1779, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 958, 959.

General Horatio Gates confirmed the movement of British troops for Washington. Washington wrote on this British movement in a letter to Congress, “a number of vessels with troops had left Rhode Island and directed their course up the Sound.” Instead of dropping the soldiers on the coast, the British troops were brought into Manhattan. It was clear that the British were up to something.¹⁰¹ Woodhull backed up this information with intelligence of his own in a letter to Tallmadge. He told Tallmadge to watch the Connecticut coast, as it was in danger.¹⁰² Unfortunately, Tallmadge was unable to heed the warnings of the Culper Ring, as his camp was attacked by the British. During this attack, a letter from Washington and money for Woodhull was stolen, an act which caused Tallmadge to fear for the Ring’s safety.¹⁰³ This attack was an advance of Tryon’s force, meant to divide the Continental Army. Although the Culper Ring moved quickly and efficiently, the information did not reach Washington until July 7, 1779, six days after it was sent. This was in part due to Tallmadge’s camp coming under attack as well as Washington being away from his headquarters. Once he received the news, Washington sprang into action and alerted his generals, although Tryon had already landed.¹⁰⁴ Even though Washington could not stop Tryon’s raid, he was able to remain calm and not divide his forces. By not dividing his forces, Washington avoided Clinton’s trap. Clinton was not able to attack as he had planned. This gave Washington an opening to plan an attack on Clinton, one that was ultimately a success.¹⁰⁵ While the information provided by the Culper Ring did not arrive in

¹⁰¹ George Washington to the Continental Congress. July 9, 1779. Library of Congress.

¹⁰² Abraham Woodhull to Benjamin Tallmadge, July 1, 1779, taken from Rose, *Washington’s Spies*, Page 166.

¹⁰³ Rose. *Washington’s Spies*. Page 166.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Page 167.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Page 168.

Washington's hands as quickly as they might have hoped, the Ring did their job well. The Ring was able to gather accurate information and pass it on to Washington. While the Continental Army was not ready for Tryon's raids, they were ready for Clinton. Through months of work and support from the Culper Ring, Washington knew Clinton had something up his sleeve and did not divide his forces. Tryon's raids did little but scare the Continentals. Washington remained steadfast in the face of Clinton's plans, all thanks to work done by the Culper Ring.¹⁰⁶

Townsend uncovered a scheme in November of 1779 that would have large ramifications on the Continental Army if left unchecked. Rose describes his find as "the British campaign to undermine the American war effort by destroying the Continental currency."¹⁰⁷ Townsend explained that the British had a large supply of paper and were intent on exhausting American currency. He wrote that "[the American's] currency will be entirely depreciated, and that there will not be provision in the country to supply an Army [for] another campaign. That of the currency I am afraid will prove true, as they [the British] are indefatigable in increasing the quantity of it, Several reams of paper made for the last emission struck by Congress have been procured from Philadelphia."¹⁰⁸ Woodhull passed along his own account to Tallmadge in a separate letter.¹⁰⁹ Previous attempts at British counterfeit needed a thicker substitute, as the

¹⁰⁶ Townsend, Charles. *The British Invasion of New Haven, Connecticut, together with some account of their landing and burning the towns of Fairfield and Norwalk, July 1779*. Tuttle, Morehouse, and Taylor, 1879.

¹⁰⁷ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 181.

¹⁰⁸ Robert Townsend (as Samuel Culper Jr.) to Benjamin Tallmadge (as John Bolton). November 27, 1779. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 954, 955, 956.

¹⁰⁹ Abraham Woodhull (as Samuel Culper Sr.) to Benjamin Tallmadge. November 29, 1779. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 1019, 1020, 1021.

British could not procure the exact paper used for the Continental bills. However, after Townsend discovered the British had the blank paper used for Continental bills, it was imperative to translate this information to Washington. Washington was able to pass this intelligence along to Congress, an act which ultimately led to them recalling and retiring all of its bills.¹¹⁰

The Ring found success in July of 1780, following issues with Washington and their operation. Washington grew frustrated at the close of 1779. He urged the Ring to move intelligence quicker, even in the face of heightened British security. Throughout the early months of 1780, Washington continued to press his operatives to find a quicker way to deliver intelligence. This caused Tallmadge to experiment with other ways to reach Washington. He used his younger cousin, James Townsend, to travel through New Jersey to reach Washington. The younger Townsend was captured by Patriots who thought he was a British spy and had him arrested. Washington was frustrated at the situation and the fact that he had to get the younger Townsend released.¹¹¹ His frustration grew as he faced tension from both Townsend and Woodhull. The fact that neither Townsend nor Woodhull found a quicker way to get information to him caused Washington a great deal of grief. Having to deal with getting the younger Townsend released caused Washington further annoyance. The last straw was when the Ring failed to provide any new information to Washington for a few months following these issues.

¹¹⁰ George Washington to the Continental Congress. December 7, 1779. Library of Congress.

¹¹¹ Deausenberry, John. *Deposition*. March 23, 1780. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress.

This led to Washington shutting down the operation of the Ring.¹¹² He reactivated the Ring again when the French were approaching Rhode Island, and his timing could not have been more perfect.¹¹³ The Culper Ring uncovered a plot by the British to ambush and destroy the French forces coming to the Americans aid. Townsend relayed the information to Woodhull through invisible ink via Austin Roe. Townsend included a letter with Roe to give him an alibi should he be stopped en route to Woodhull.¹¹⁴ This intelligence brought Woodhull out of his sick bed, as he had fallen rather ill at this time, and into action. He left Townsend's letter for Brewster to transport back to Tallmadge, with a note of his own stressing the urgency of the matter. "The enclosed requires your immediate departure this day by all means let not an hour pass for this day must not be lost you have news of the greatest consequence perhaps that ever happened to your country."¹¹⁵ While Townsend's original letter does not remain, Woodhull left a summary of its contents. He warned that General Clinton not only knew of the French landing in Rhode Island and was planning an assault on them with an impressive naval force.¹¹⁶ While Clinton ultimately did not attack the French in Rhode Island, the ability to move intelligence at the speed the Culper Ring did was impressive. While Washington was initially frustrated by the slow

¹¹² George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge, May 19, 1780, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 3b Varick Transcripts, Letter book 11, Image 340.

¹¹³ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 189.

¹¹⁴ Robert Townsend (as Samuel Culper Jr.) to Richard Floyd, July 20, 1780, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 422, 423, 424.

¹¹⁵ Abraham Woodhull (as Samuel Culper Sr.) note to Caleb Brewster, July 20, 1780, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 421.

¹¹⁶ Abraham Woodhull (as Samuel Culper Sr.) to Benjamin Tallmadge, July 20, 1780, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 419, 420.

transfer of intelligence by the Ring, this instance was evidence that the Ring was able to work together and move information quickly. They were able to get word of a potential tragedy and make the correct moves to set up proper defenses to it. The Culper Ring proved essential in the matter.

While the Culper Ring did not outright expose Benedict Arnold as a traitor, their work in New York helped uncover his treacherous ways. It was, in fact, their intelligence handler Tallmadge that made the catch. Based on the constant reports on and surprises from the British troops, Tallmadge was already on edge. His suspicious nature proved vital to uncovering Arnold. Tallmadge received reports from the Culper ring on troop movement from New York City and knew that something was amiss. When Major John André, the British counterpart to Tallmadge, was picked up in civilian clothes heading towards British territory, it was clear his intentions were no good. André was in American held territory meeting Arnold to discuss the possession of West Point. This was a big target for the British and one that was worth the risk of meeting Arnold in American territory. André, fully clad in his military uniform, met with Arnold on September 21, 1780. They met on the west coast bank of the Hudson River to discuss the plans to capture West Point. André's boat was spotted by American troops and was fired on. From there, André decided to change into civilian clothes and journey back to British territory on foot. He was given a pass from Arnold and traveled towards British held territory at White Plains.¹¹⁷ As he was traveling towards safety, he was stopped by a patrol. Thinking they were British, he announced where his allegiance lay. They discovered he held the secret plans to West Point and

¹¹⁷ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 204-205.

immediately marked him as a spy. Though André tried to bribe his captors, they brought him in anyway.¹¹⁸ Tallmadge came to assess the situation as soon as he learned of it. The officer that held André, Colonel Jameson located at North Castle, sent both André and a letter explaining the situation to Arnold. General Arnold was Colonel Jameson's superior officer and he felt he needed to inform him of what happened.¹¹⁹ He sent his findings to Washington as well. Tallmadge, however, insisted on bringing André back, instead of sending him to Arnold. André was interrogated by Tallmadge and eventually confessed. André was sentenced to death and was executed for espionage while Arnold escaped. Thus, the infamous career of John André came to a close. Although Arnold escaped, the work done by the Culper Ring, and ultimately Tallmadge, made it clear that the British operation was not a success. The Continental Army was able to put André's, and in fact the British, espionage activities to a halt.¹²⁰

Towards the end of the war, the Culper Ring did not provide as much key intelligence. Rose writes, "From 1781 onwards, a new breed of spy had emerged, men like William Heron whose allegiances and motives were distinctly murky."¹²¹ The new breed of spy lacked any kind of virtue or dedication that made the members of the Culper Ring true patriots. Rose argues that espionage was becoming a more professional, cynical, and backstabbing way of life. While these new spies cared more for currency than for country, they still experienced a shift in how their

¹¹⁸ Doren, Carl Van, André, John, and Clinton, Henry. *Secret History of the American Revolution; an Account of the Conspiracies of Benedict Arnold and Numerous Others, Drawn from the Secret Service Papers of the British Headquarters in North America, Now for the First Time Examined and Made Public*, Cby Carl Van Doren. New York: The Viking press, 1968. Page 341.

¹¹⁹ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 207.

¹²⁰ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Chapter 8.

¹²¹ Ibid. Page 258.

superiors looked at espionage. While the Culper Ring's days came to a close, they impacted the thought process on espionage. They had proven successful in their mission. While oftentimes their information was slow, or even came too late, they had given Washington eyes and ears in New York when he needed it most. The Ring was able to provide information in one of the most vital areas of the war. Of course, following the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, there really was not much need for espionage. Peace talks began and the war was all but over. The next two years really did not see much espionage. The Culper Ring helped on an "ad hoc basis," coming to Tallmadge's aid when he truly needed them.¹²² The war effort by the Continental Army owed its success, at least partly, to this Ring. They provided key intelligence up until 1781 and were paramount in securing decisive information for the new found country. Their success was found in their ability to work together. As stated in the section on their methods, the Culper Ring was able to work as a cohesive unit to transmit intelligence. The Ring was able to do what singular agents struggled to do: maintain a good and effective intelligence gathering operation. Without the Culper Ring, the war very well might have ended differently. Had Clinton's plan to divide Washington's troops been a success, Washington might have fallen in 1779. Had Congress not recalled their currency in 1780 because of the Culper Ring's warning, the Continental Army might not have been able to continue fighting the war. The Culper Ring demonstrated its efficiency and speed which helped Washington avoid potential disaster. Tallmadge had enough experience with espionage to help uncover Benedict Arnold as a traitor and expose John André

¹²² Abraham Woodhull (as Samuel Culper Sr.) to Benjamin Tallmadge, June 27, 1781, George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799, Image 69, 70.

as a spy. Had things gone differently in any of these situations, the end result could have been catastrophic.

British Espionage

The purpose of this section is to examine the British stance on espionage. The majority of this thesis deals with the American espionage in the war, specifically that of the Culper Ring. However, the Americans had intelligence counterparts in the British Army. This section dives deeper into what exactly that looked like.

British intelligence was not as adept as Washington's was. Early in the war, a doctor serving the Continental Army as Chief Physician and Director General was caught sending information to the British. Dr. Benjamin Church was corresponding with General Thomas Gage. Rachel Revere wrote to her husband following his midnight ride in which she trusted to Dr. Church. She wrote, "My Dear by Doctor Church I send a hundred and twenty-five pounds and beg you will take the best care of yourself..."¹²³ Instead of bringing the letter to Revere, he brought the letter to Gage. This was caught early in the war and Church was arrested. David Farnsworth was another notable British espionage agent during the war. He was part of a plot to counterfeit American currency and help ruin the American economy. He was caught with over \$10,000 in forged American currency.¹²⁴ He was tried and executed for his espionage involvement.¹²⁵ The British were constantly falling behind the Americans in terms of espionage and were not as skilled as the Continentals proved to be. This is in part due to their leadership. George Washington and Benjamin Tallmadge were wholeheartedly invested in their covert operations. The British generals typically did not care for espionage. The British had a tendency

¹²³ Rachel Revere to Paul Revere. May 1775. Thomas Gage Papers, Clements Library.

¹²⁴ Scott, Kenneth, and David R. Johnson. *Counterfeiting in Colonial America*. Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. Page 258.

¹²⁵ Horatio Gates to George Washington, October 9, 1778. *Founders Online*. National Archive.

to use military scouts to gather information on their enemy. For a time, the only one that handled any intelligence was General Clinton himself. Clinton also utilized small, private intelligence networks to gather information, although they were not entirely accurate or helpful. For ages, men like Clinton were honor bound to do the right thing. They did not have the freedom to do what was necessary as the Americans did. America presented an odd problem for British intelligence. The tough land was filled with difficult people and flimsy loyalty. The British found themselves at a disadvantage in the world of espionage while America proved successful. The greatest army in the world was up against the home team, and they had the advantage.¹²⁶

Another leading figure in British Intelligence was the leader of the Queen's Rangers, Lieutenant Colonel John Graves Simcoe. Intelligence was not his primary goal. He did, however, have spies of his own and even hunted members of the Culper Ring at one point. Born in 1752, Simcoe rose through the ranks of the British army. He took control of the Queen's Rangers in 1777.¹²⁷ While Simcoe was not primarily in charge of intelligence, his spies were able to provide him with top notch information. In his military journal, he describes how successful his spies were. "Lt. Col. Simcoe understood that Niham, an Indian chief, and some of his tribe, were with the enemy; and by his spies, who were excellent, he was informed that they were highly elated at the retreat of Emmerick's corps, and applied it to the whole of the light troops at Kingsbridge."¹²⁸ Simcoe was able to gather good intelligence; however, he was not focused on espionage during the war.

¹²⁶ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 199.

¹²⁷ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Page 129.

¹²⁸ Simcoe, John Graves. *Simcoe's Military Journal: A History of the Operations of a Partisan Corps, Called the Queen's Rangers, Commanded by Lieut. Col. J.G. Simcoe, During the War of the American Revolution. 1752-1806*. New York Public Library. Page 83.

In May of 1779, Clinton appointed Captain John André as the new director of British intelligence. André became the equivalent of Tallmadge for the British Army. It was this move that changed espionage for the British. André's first move in his new role was to organize the intelligence and keep track of all the information he was receiving. While André made decisions that helped the British intelligence effort, he was still not very proficient in terms of espionage. Rose compares André to Nathan Hale, as the two shared many striking characteristics. Their biggest similarity, according to Rose, is that both were unsuited for espionage. In a letter written to Washington, André examined his time in espionage and came to the conclusion that he was "too little accustomed to duplicity."¹²⁹ While he was not as well suited for espionage as his American counterparts, John André quickly became the backbone of British intelligence in the war. André's status reflected the status of British intelligence: both were inexperienced, understaffed, and outsmarted. André did his best and even acquired a defector, Benedict Arnold. However, in the end, he made fatal mistakes that cost him his life.¹³⁰ André describes his end days in a letter to his superior, General Clinton. "The Events of coming within an enemies post and of Changing my dress which led me to my present Situation were contrary to my own Intentions as they were to your Orders; and the circuitous route which I took to return was imposed (perhaps unavoidably) without alternative upon me. I am perfectly and tranquil in mind and prepared for any Fate to which an honest Zeal for my Kings Service may have devoted me."¹³¹ André was devoted to his cause till the end of his life, even in the face of death.

¹²⁹ John André to George Washington. September 24, 1780. Taken from Rose, *Washington's Spies*, Page 201.

¹³⁰ Ronald, D. A. B. *The Life of John André: the Redcoat Who Turned Benedict Arnold*. Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2019. Page 236.

¹³¹ John André to Henry Clinton. September 19, 1780. Clinton Papers, Clements Library.

Benedict Arnold reflected a darker side of espionage. Willing to betray his post for money and recognition, he has gone down in history as one of the biggest traitors to America. He began feeding the British intelligence by at least 1780, as he was instrumental in the Rochambeau affair.¹³² General Jean Baptiste Donation de Vigneur, Comte de Rochambeau, landed his French forces in Rhode Island. Arnold had given this information to the British in order for them to prepare an attack on the French forces. The plan ultimately never came to fruition, as Clinton lacked the proper means to successfully launch an assault against those in Rhode Island.¹³³ A letter from Arnold explains the French arrival in America and explains his desire to work with the British. “General Washington expects on the arrival of the French Troops to collect 30,000 Troops . . . I can render the most essential Services, and which will be in my disposal,”¹³⁴ Most important, Benedict Arnold planned to surrender the plans to West Point. In return, he was to be rewarded handsomely. Before this deal completely went through, André was captured, and Arnold had to flee to safety with the British.¹³⁵

After André’s death, intelligence fell to Major Oliver De Lancey and his two aides. American espionage focused on the individual efforts and set ups of each spy. For example, Benjamin Tallmadge was in charge of the Culper Ring. He looked after his own agents personally and did not have to worry about espionage efforts in other areas. He created his own code and intelligence network. De Lancey made sure his aides shared codes, procedures, and operatives. One of his aides could meet with an operative one week, and it could potentially be

¹³² Benedict Arnold to John André. July 12, 1780. Clinton Papers, Clements Library.

¹³³ Rose. *Washington’s Spies*. Page 189-191.

¹³⁴ Benedict Arnold to John André. July 12, 1780. Clinton Papers, Clements Library.

¹³⁵ Rose. *Washington’s Spies*. Page 209.

different the next week. While this might seem dangerous or foolish, by doing so, De Lancey ensured no one in his organization was indispensable and that one single person did not prove vital to his operations. De Lancey kept tabs on the enemy forces and had some of his men spying on the French. He kept track of their naval movements through one of his agents, Captain Nehemiah Marks.¹³⁶ He was not as personal as the Americans were in terms of their operatives. Because of this, he was not able to win the trust of his men as Tallmadge had. He was so removed from his agents, he even fell for a hoax regarding one of his men, William Heron. William Heron acted as a double agent. He gave information to De Lancey while reporting what he knew to the Americans. While he fed the British lower level information, the information he gave the Americans was valuable. He gave the British false reports of defection and led British intelligence astray. De Lancey did not do much else to aid British intelligence.¹³⁷

While this thesis primarily centers on American espionage in the war, it is important to understand the position the British were in. They were a step behind their American counterparts. Their leaders did not know how to effectively use espionage to their advantage. While men like George Washington and Benjamin Tallmadge thrived in the espionage world, General Clinton, John André, and later Oliver De Lancey were subpar. They continuously played catch up and never quite caught up to the American spies.

¹³⁶ Nehemiah Marks to Oliver De Lancey. June 29, 1781. From *Private Daily Intelligence, Magazine of American History*, XI. Page 440.

¹³⁷ Rose. *Washington's Spies*. Chapter 9.

Conclusion

The Culper Ring was incredibly effective during the war. Without the work the Ring did, the outcome of the war might very well have been different. They pushed the boundaries on what espionage meant, in a time when espionage itself was not something to be proud of. The men and women involved in the Culper Ring knew that being a spy was neither glamorous nor incredibly rewarding. They were not in it for the money. Although they often asked to be reimbursed, this was not their main concern. Their main concern was fighting for what they believed in and doing so in a way that they were able to. While they could not, or would not, necessarily be on the frontline fighting the war, they found their own ways, at times reluctantly, to do their part for the war effort. The men and women involved in the Culper Ring risked everything for the belief in their country. They should be regarded as heroes for what they did; they willingly endangered their lives and well-being for something much bigger than themselves.

Prior to the establishment of the Culper Ring, espionage in America was a mess. Washington utilized mostly singular agents that often turned out poorly. While some singular agents, like Hercules Mulligan and Cato, John Honeyman, and Enoch Crosby, found limited success throughout the war, theirs did not measure up to the constant triumph found in the Culper Ring. By just having an organized unit with a support system, the Culper Ring was able to accomplish much more than its predecessors. The Culper Ring transformed the face of American espionage.¹³⁸ No longer did the United States place singular agents in the field with no support or backup, instead, they began to focus their efforts on actual rings and organizations.

¹³⁸ Mickolus, Edward F. *The Counterintelligence Chronology: Spying by and against the United States from the 1700s through 2014*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015.

The dedicated agents of the Culper Ring were able to create an effective intelligence supply chain for Washington. The Ring functioned as a cohesive unit. Each person played their part in order for the whole Ring to succeed. Washington oversaw a great spy ring. He sat as a spymaster over the most revolutionary group of people in espionage history.

The Culper Ring was able to push and use the boundaries of social norms at the time, which made espionage easier for its members. Women and slaves were almost invisible during the American Revolution. Anna Strong's involvement in the ring, and potentially the mysterious 355, were important. While these members were not the driving force of the Ring's activity, it was their involvement that made things easier for the Culper Ring. Anna Strong could do her part for the Ring easily, because she was doing tasks expected of her as a woman. The women in espionage used their gender roles as a cover for the activities they were involved in. The same can be said for slaves during the war. While not directly involved with the Culper Ring, at least at first, Cato used his status as a slave to sneak intelligence around. Slaves were often overlooked because of their social standing. This made them a perfect conduit for transmitting information. It was not often that a slave was questioned in depth. Things were said in front of slaves that would not be said in front of other people, simply because the slaves were invisible to the "superior" white men. This false sense of superiority was easily exploited in the espionage effort. Utilizing members that sat outside of the typical white, landowning male who held all the power was key in the success of the Culper Ring, as well as espionage as a whole.

Honor played a large part in the everyday lives of both British and American citizens. Honor and standing in society went hand in hand with each other. If a person did not have great honor, they often did not sit well in society. The way one was viewed by their peers was

important in this day and age. Trickery and deceit were not popular qualities to exude during the late 1700s. While the British maintained this view well into the war, Washington had no problems with a bit of trickery. This was solely out of necessity, as Washington understood he was up against a bigger and better trained enemy. He was completely on board with allowing Townsend to play the part of a loyal British subject in order to gather intelligence in the city. He supported the Ring falling in with the enemy to bring back information for him. Washington was able to establish an organized ring of operatives that were willing to risk their honor for their country. The fact that being a spy was not the honorable thing to do made the sacrifices by the Culper Ring that much more impressive.

The Culper Ring used some impressive methods to complete their task. They created a codebook that was used throughout the war. While this code was not the most unbreakable code to ever be made, it served their purpose well. It was easily understood by the agents in the Ring and made their work a bit more secure. They also utilized invisible ink developed by James Jay. Their most effective method truly was their approach to espionage. Simply having a support system greatly helped their cause. The Culper Ring's methods bore results. Multiple different plots by the British stationed in New York were discovered by the Ring. The Ring provided Washington with much needed eyes and ears in New York City.

The British espionage paled in comparison to that of the Culper Ring. John André became the head of British intelligence during the war. He was inexperienced and not as adept at spy work as Tallmadge was. His General, Clinton, was a product of Old-World honor and did not appreciate the art of espionage. The British did not really find success until they turned Benedict Arnold as a traitor. Interestingly, both the British and Americans utilized women. These

women were able to manipulate their gender roles and use them to their advantage. The Culper Ring was superior to the espionage effort made by the British.

The Culper Ring was vital to the American war effort. They transformed intelligence and made important strides during the war. The Culper Ring was able to use individuals that sat outside of the cultural norm and social class. In a letter to Charles Scott, Washington wrote, “Vague and idle stories therefore, which have no foundation in fact, ought not to be communicated by the person employed because false intelligence may prove worse than none; he should therefore examine well into and compare matters before he transmits accounts, always distinguishing facts of his own knowledge from reports.”¹³⁹ The Culper Ring achieved exactly what Washington wanted. The efforts made by the Ring changed espionage forever. Prior to the establishment of the ring, American spies were typically alone. George Washington and Benjamin Tallmadge created an effective Ring that was organized as a whole unit. Not only did this Ring change the course of the war, it changed the course of American espionage as a whole.

¹³⁹ George Washington to Charles Scott. September 25, 1778. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 3b Varick Transcripts, Letter book 6, Image 235, 236.

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