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HIST 410

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George Washington’s Spies

When a person thinks of the American Revolution, the first thing that usually comes to mind is George Washington leading a bunch of farmers who pick up a musket and go to battle. This is certainly true but there is a side to the American Revolution that not many people know about. George Washington and the Continental Army were much more advanced than the average person may think. Washington led spy rings that gathered intelligence on the British Army’s location, number of troops, cannons, cavalry, etc. The Culper Spy Ring during the American Revolution is one of the major reason why the Americans were able to defeat the strongest army in the world. George Washington had many coded conversations with these spies throughout the war.

The Culper spy ring was the largest and most influential under George Washington. Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge would be in charge of enemy intelligence during the war. Tallmadge was raised in Setauket, New York, which is a small village on the coast of Long Island. His father Rev. Tallmadge, was ordained in Setauket and would build a church. Benjamin would have “an eager desire for learning”[[1]](#footnote-1) and would be given a liberal education. As stated in Tallmadge’s memoir, “When first American blood was shed at Lexington by the British troops, and again repeated much more copiously at Bunker's Hill, near Boston, the whole country seemed to be electrified. Among others, I caught the flame which was thus spreading from breast to breast, and mounted my horse to go and see what was going on near Boston.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In the early stages of his military career, he would fight a battle with General Woodhull, who he had known from his childhood. In this quote, Tallmadge describes his relationship with General Woodhull, “I also lost a brother the same day, who fell into their hands, and was afterwards literally starved to death in one of their prisons.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This relationship would later be a vital one regarding the Culper Spy Ring.

Caleb Brewster who played a major role in the Culper spy ring was also born and raised in Setauket. During his childhood, Brewster would develop a close friendship with Tallmadge and Abraham Woodhull. Brewster had a showed an adventurous personality, and often mentioning he wants a life at sea. At a young age, he was worked on a whaling boat, so he was an expert on the New England shoreline by the time of the American Revolution. His expertise of the New England shoreline and friendship with Benjamin Tallmadge made him a top candidate for recruitment of the Continental Army and later, the Culper spy ring.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Abraham Woodhull was born and raised in Setauket, New York. His father, Richard Woodhull, was the magistrate of Setauket. Abraham has a small cabbage farm where he lived with his wife, Mary and son Thomas. His family was mostly loyal to the Great Britain except for his cousin, General Nathanial Woodhull who died fighting in battle with Benjamin Tallmadge.[[5]](#footnote-5) Abraham was also friends with Caleb Brewster and Benjamin Tallmadge who would rope him into spying for the Continental Army.

Another key member of the Culper Spy was Anna Smith Strong. She was also raised in Setauket and was close to Abraham Woodhull, Benjamin Tallmadge and Caleb Brewster. Anna Smith Strong was better known was Nancy to the people whom she was close with. Anna Strong was married to Selah Strong who was the first elected trustee of Brookhaven Town in 1767.[[6]](#footnote-6) During this time, Brookhaven was populated heavily with loyalists with the exception to Selah Strong. According to Rivington’s Royal Gazette, Strong was held captive in New York for “Serendipitous correspondence with the enemy.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This gave Anna Strong motivation to help her husband’s cause by working in the Culper spy ring.

There were many letters written between Caleb Brewster, Benjamin Talmadge, Samuel Culper (Abraham Woodhull), and General George Washington. In the first letter written by George Washington to Caleb Brewster on August 8th 1778.[[8]](#footnote-8) In this letter, George Washington reassures Brewster of the intelligence mission at hand. Washington states, “Let me entreat that you will continue to use every possible means to obtain intelligence of the Enemy’s motions, not only of those which are Marching Eastward, upon Long Island”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Caleb Brewster’s mission was to gather intelligence on the location of British Warships off the coast of Long Island with the purpose of helping the French. It is also stated by Washington, “Let an eye also be had to the Transports, whether they are preparing for the reception of Troops”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Along with figuring out the location of British, Brewster was also to gather how many ground troops the British had and whether they were moving or staying stationary.

In a letter written by Caleb Brewster to George Washington, on August 27th, 1778, Brewster warns Washington of the whereabouts of a regiment of British soldiers. Brewster states:

When I left Long Island this morning, Governor Tyron was at Miller’s Place with about three hundred troops at the main body of Brookehaven about nine miles to the westward under the command of General Delancey. The whole party consists of a thousand men. The party under the command of Tyron are within a half a mile of the Sound. Those under the command of Delancey a mile and a half. The parties arrived there yesterday morning and pitched their tents.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Later in the letter, Brewster observes a group of troops at Huntington Harbor who planned on sailing out the morning of August 27th. The regiment was commanded to sail westward toward Rhode Island because of the rumor of the French Navy sailing to their location. Brewster also notices several regiments crossing from New York to Brookline Ferry and would set up camp.

Caleb Brewster would later write to Benjamin Tallmadge about another fleet of British soldiers in Long Island commanded by Admiral Byron. Brewster then states:

Keep Rhode Island and halifax, yesterday four battalions of Delaney Corps. Ordered to embark. Crogena Regt. was seen marching down to New York in Queens county are offered giant accountments to turn out as Minute Men but they have not accepted.

Orders given to draft 200 in Queens County to serve as Minute Men. Yesterday two flags was seen from New.York bound to Boston with French Prisoners.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In letter from Caleb Brewster to Benjamin Tallmadge written on stating the location the amount of troops, ships and cavalry in Southampton. Brewster observes General Eskrine and 2,500 men who are heading west. This regiment was also building a large number of flat bottom boats. Brewster also observes small villages near Setauket. Civilians in the area believe that they will cross over to New London to go after the Continental frigates. In Lloyd’s Neck, Col. Hewlett has yet to leave with “350 woodcutters”.[[13]](#footnote-13) He also provides the information that Col. John Simcoe remains in Oyster Bay with 300 foot soldiers with very few cavalry members.

Samuel Culper (Abraham Woodhull) was working secretively in Manhattan at his sister’s boarding house which gave him the perfect cover for gathering intelligence in New York City. According to Beverly Tyler, Culper was worried about the suspicion of a farmer traveling to New York City frequently.[[14]](#footnote-14) On occasions, Anna Strong would join Culper on these trips by posing as his wife to lower the suspicion of their mission. Culper is quoted in Tyler, “It seems it was easier for a man and wife to travel through checkpoints to Manhattan than for a single… I intend to visit 727 before long and think by the assistance of a 355 of my acquaintance, shall be able to outwit them all.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The numbers that are listed in this quote from Culper are from a code book that spies in the Culper spy ring used. The code 727 refers too New York City and 355 refers to lady. Some other examples of codes used are 711 which refers to George Washington, 729 refers to Setauket, and 722 refers to Samuel Culper.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In one of the most important letters wrote on July 30, 1781 by Caleb Brewster to George Washington with the intelligence found by Samuel Culper. Admiral Graves had planned to convoy with Lord Cornwallis in New York. General Riedesel was on board with 700 German troops heading into Canada. Culper also finds that 10,000 from Brent to Canada. This intelligence is vital because it may have played a huge role in an American victory at the Battle of Yorktown.[[17]](#footnote-17)

It is proven that the sophisticated methods of gathering intelligence during the American Revolution was vital in defeating the most powerful army in the world. The courageous acts by Caleb Brewster, Benjamin Tallmadge, Anna Strong and Abraham Woodhull have helped the Continental Army to victory in both small and large battles. George Washington had not only lead a Revolution on the battle field but also by introducing a completely new way to defeat more powerful enemy. Without these spies, the United States of America may still be just a group of colonies.

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