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The Spies that Founded America:

How the War for Independence Revolutionized American Espionage

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Continental Spy Nathan Hale, standing below the gallows, spoke to his British captors with nothing less than unequivocal patriotism: "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."[1] American History idolizes Hale as a hero. His bravery as the first pioneer of American espionage willing to sacrifice his life for the growing colonial sentiment against a daunting global empire vindicates this. Yet, behind Hale's success as an operative on British-controlled Long Island, lies a narrative buried under the glorified heroism of warfare. Was his skill an exception to most early American spies? How did Commander-in-Chief George Washington protect the successors to Hale's work? Why was espionage so vital to the Patriot military strategy?[2] Although the first American spy met a sorrow end, his sacrifice brought a learning experience for the Continental army's use of espionage; his work ignited a military interest in espionage that presupposed the first colonial spy networks. Despite early American Revolutionary War spies being inexperienced, inept, and counterproductive, their limited success in acquiring invaluable intelligence still induced a political desire for the Continental Army to improve professional espionage networks into a military weapon vital to overcome British imperial forces.

The American War for Independence was as ideological, as it was physical.[3] The first signs of colonial animosity came as complaints to the Westminster Parliament for providing little representation for the thirteen colonies. Amid a frenzy of failing royal dominions and laws

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[1] L. Edward Purcell and Sarah J Purcell, *Who Was Who in the American Revolution* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1999), 206-207.

[2] Patriots were colonists in favor of American Independence. This paper uses the terms "American Colonist," "Colonist," and "Patriots" interchangeably.

[3] Harry T. Dickerson, "Magna Carta in the American Revolution" *Magna Carta: History, Context and Influence*, (2018): 79-100, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv5136sc.13.

restraining westward expansion instituted by King George III, American colonists used English Common Law to argue against such regulations, referring to the Magna Carta's guaranteed justice to all subjects in a colonial charter.[4] The role of taxes in sparking conflict extended far beyond artificially bloated sugar and paper costs. Before the revolution, most poll and property taxes were mandated by municipal governments; people voted directly on local ballots where their opinions were well-represented. These regional taxes often led to tangible improvements.[5] Near the start of the war, a sudden increase in Parliamentary imposts led Colonists to demand a greater representation in the British government, especially on colonial policies. Unsatisfied with the subtle role that Parliament was willing to offer, many Colonists developed a grave distrust with their rulers.[6]

As distrust evolved into violence, Britain sent imperial soldiers to sequester the American Patriots attempting to undermine imperial rule. In response, a coalition of colonial governments known as the Continental Congress appointed George Washington to lead military forces against the British army. Washington's tenure as a British Major during the Seven Years' War had taught him how stark miscalculations could prove detrimental in battle.[7] At Fort Duquesne,

[4] Harry T. Dickerson, "Magna Carta in the American Revolution" Magna Carta: History, Context and Influence, (2018): 79-100, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv5136sc.13.

[5] Great Britain imposed the 1764 Sugar Act & 1765 Stamp Act on the Thirteen Colonies prior to the revolt.

[6] John Gilbert McCurdy, "Taxation and Representation: Pennsylvania Bachelors and the American Revolution," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129, no. 3 (2005): 283-315, www.jstor.org/stable/20093800.

[7] A global war between European powers from 1756 to 1763. Washington fought in the North American front against the French and Native American tribes.

British spies informed his fellow officers that incoming French forces were small and

ill-equipped. The reports, being widely inaccurate, almost resulted in his own death. As a result,

Washington emphasized "[t]he necessity of procuring good [i]ntelligence"[8] in developing a

military strategy intended to evade and tire the enemy. He established several intelligence circles

during the revolutionary war to track incoming British forces, drawing from political diplomats,

soldiers, and smugglers to conduct espionage. In addition, Washington involved himself in

communication between independent spies, eventually transferring this responsibility to a formal

military organization in the United States[9]. The British expected a short conflict; but the Patriots'

new espionage capabilities extended the war by several bloody years, gradually shifting

momentum towards the rebellion.

Washington began constructing a system for American espionage near the onset of the

first Revolutionary War battles. However, his vision would not truly come to fruition before

years of costly blunders. In 1777, The Battle of Brandywine exemplified how poor

communication and inexperienced strategy made early American spies problematic and

unreliable. The task was simple. Washington stationed his soldiers across the Brandywine Bank

to prevent any British forces from crossing the river. The bank presented an optimal natural

defense and was only believed to be crossable through two small bridges capable of trapping the

incoming British regiment. Washington tasked his spies to analyze the natural landscape, observe

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[8] Christopher M. Andrew, "Intelligence and American Independence," in *The Secret World: A History of Intelligence* (London: Yale University Press, 2018), 301-302.

[9] "George Washington, 1789-97," CSI Publications, Central Intelligence Agency, last modified July 7, 2008, https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-mon ographs/our-first-line-of-defense-presidential-reflections-on-us-intelligence/washington.html.

British troop movements, and track any flanking forces. He would soon learn, however, that they were incapable. Colonel Theodorick Bland, who "[had] the duty of ascertaining where the creek could be forded, . . . performed it ill,"[10] missing shallow routes along the river that allowed the British to stage a surprise attack. As the enemy approached, Washington received contradictory letters from both Colonel Hazen, claiming that the northern bridge was empty, and John Sullivan, urging Washington to redirect forces to meet a significant northern threat. Several Continental officers also disregarded the timeframe of when certain spies reported information as it was soon discovered that Colonel Hazen's report was outdated from the prior morning. What resulted was a disastrous showing from the Continental Army with Washington and his military division nearly being captured. While the loss may seem to fall on Washington who, using the inaccurate intelligence, failed to reinforce his vulnerable right flank from a surprise British attack, many historians have analyzed the severity of the colonial spies' mistakes. Ultimately, the battle itself had not been comparatively devastating with most American soldiers successfully retreating.[11] However, the psychological toll on Washington must have been dramatic. In the commander's eyes, witnessing his spies mislead the military officers and jeopardize the rest of the army would build significant distrust with future espionage reports. These espionage failures likely brought memories of Fort Duquesne, where many of his men had died from avoidable misinformation. Just as Nathan Hale's successful reports inspired Washington to further invest in

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[10] Stanley Pargellis and Douglas Southall Freeman, "Intelligence Service Goes Astray," in *George Washington: A Biography*, vol. 4, *Leader of the Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 471-489.

[11] Not "devastating" in considering lives lost. The battle did prove costly when the British marched on to capture Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

espionage, it would seem that these dramatic failures would emphasize the need for better spies

as well.

Unfortunately for the Continental Army, the incident at Brandywine became a norm than

an anomaly. Reporting errors and miscommunication would prolong well into the first half of the

war. Many of the first independent Colonial spies were citizen volunteers with an interest in an

independent United States. As amateur espionage artists inexperienced in military tactics, their

impact is often diluted in modern history books by the achievements of a few knowledgeable

exceptions.[12] Washington expresses his overt frustration with these early spies in several

classified letters which likely prompted his concerted effort to find more capable spies. As a

locum tenens to an intelligence organization that could sift between inaccurate reports,

Washington was originally the executive interpreter of spy reports, relying on his own military

experience to verify estimations on British troop sizes and battalion movements. He shared this

avid doubt about one particular spy's report in a 1779 letter to the then-Second Continental

Regiment Major Benjamin Tallmadge, writing:

> The enemy's force up the River as now exceed-
> ing 8000 men, but as I know he is mistaken if
> he comprehends their whole force, I should be
> glad if his successor was cautioned against
> giving positive numbers by guess.[13]

At the end of the letter, Washington notes of a "successor" to the current era of independent spies

which reveals why Tallmadge was the recipient. This letter prefaced the development of

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[12] Nathan Hale was one of few early spies with renowned success.

[13] Letter to Benjamin Tallmadge, June 27, 1779, Henry Clinton Papers, UM Clements Library, University of Michigan, https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/spy-letters-of-the-american-revolution/gallery-of-letters/washington-tallmadge-letter/.

Tallmadge's Culper Spy Ring, which would replace the nebulous reports of independent spies with an elaborate system intended to better identify and enumerate British forces across the northern and central colonies. In his writing, Washington does not describe the successor in detail, leading many historians to believe that he was not entirely sure what would supersede the current system. The letter does, however, reveal several emerging realities. As the war progressed, Washington likely stopped using his own judgement in interpreting intelligence as his decisions could not prevent the Patriot's early losses at Philadelphia and New York.[14] Yet Washington believed that good intelligence was paramount to turn the war around. Therefore, the early spy reports, barring their issues, had been valuable enough to maintain his political support. This would have fueled his desire to seek skilled professionals and plead with sceptics that a successful spy network would reap dividends to the struggling Continental army. Of course, this would be no easy task as the early battles provided a grim outlook for a general hoping to outsmart a superior enemy.

Where Washington struggled early as a general, he excelled as a political diplomat. Establishing elaborate professional spy rings was difficult, as the level of secrecy would pose spies as both traitors to the Patriotic public and enemies to the empire. Prior to 1778, Washington's original spies were typically too amateur and stationary to infiltrate far past enemy lines. He was also burdened with Loyalists[15] consistently infiltrating previous networks, resulting in the deaths of several American spies. In response, Washington ensured that new spy rings

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[14] John A. Nagy, *George Washington's Secret Spy War: the Making of America's First Spymaster* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 1.

[15] Loyalists were American colonists in favor of remaining under British rule. Though they were also "colonists," this paper does not consider them in the use of the term.

would operate unknown to local governments and prepared a plan in the case that his men were discovered. This proved critical in New Jersey, where American spies were determined to hunt down smugglers of British goods attempting to undermine a public boycott. Early in the war, Lieutenant Lewis J. Costigan, posed as a Loyalist 1st New Jersey Regiment soldier to spy on smuggling operations near the coast. The state government, which had previously discovered Washington's spies, despised their services for complicating the state's effort to combat the issue. The spies needed the smugglers to remain operational to discover who was responsible, while the New Jersey government wanted to eliminate the illegal trade due to its economic consequence of inflating the local currency. Faced with this conflict, Costigan had to leave his operations because state officials could "detain [him] as a prisoner of war." However, Washington continued operations in New Jersey, with Colonel Elias Dayton's ring of spies posing as smugglers supplying British ships, "running so many undercover missions and dealing in such abundance of provisions and goods that their activities became suspicious to the local authorities."[16] Eventually, the New Jersey government uncovered their operations and arrested them. Washington quickly negotiated with the New Jersey governor to take the spies into Continental hands without compromising their identities. Prior to this conflict, there were few cases of spies being saved during the war. In fact, the early Continental Army would not have had the talent or resources to extract a spy in hostile territory. Washington actively sought to keep his men from the state courtroom, the first instance where the national government successfully protected their espionage networks. Whether Washington was protecting spies for his grand vision for an espionage network is unclear. Perhaps, it may have been to keep the

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[16] Nagy, *Secret Spy War*, 123-148.

operation hidden or out of compassion to ensure his men would not share a similar fate to Nathan Hale. Although Washington's true motive remains unknown, his political investment in protecting his spies transformed American espionage into a federally supported network spanning across all thirteen colonies.

However, Washington was not the only major political figure aware of these spy circles. A proponent of espionage, Benjamin Franklin conducted intelligence responsibilities in Europe which became vital in turning French sentiment towards the American cause. Printing European newspapers propagating the long, costly investment of the war, Franklin was able to sway public opinion on the revolution. His work not only turned the British citizens against Parliament's determination to capture the Patriot rebels, but exaggerated the atrocities committed on the colonists to incite French support against their historical adversaries.[17] Franklin's foreign success certainly could have developed favoritism toward Washington's spies. A polymath to new ideas, Franklin would have understood the benefit that an advanced American espionage network could contribute during the war; his willingness to use extreme tactics in Europe, some of which considered immoral in contemporary eyes, taught him the potential of advanced espionage. His direct relationship with George Washington greatly influenced wartime decisions, and it would be completely plausible that he offered political guidance to the Commander's vision for American spy networks. How much Franklin knew about the individual colonial spies is relatively unknown, however, his conversations with state governments in permitting federal spy operations later in the war shows an overt support for the espionage organizations that had already existed. Franklin provided additional political advocacy and potentially may have

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[17] Andrew, *A History of Intelligence*, 295-300.

encouraged Benjamin Tallmadge's spy ring to use false propaganda to convert Loyalists to favor independence.

By 1779 when the Culper Spy Ring evolved into the primary espionage network across New England, the stifled British attack in Saratoga left the war in a prolonged stalemate.[18] Military generals along with Tallmadge were desperate for momentum. Coincidentally, the Culper Spy Ring's rapid success in the later half of the war happened as the course of the war shifted toward Patriot resilience. How the Culper Ring came about was from a selective recruiting method that sought the most capable colonists, regardless of an incriminating background. This was the drastic extent that the Tallmadge was willing to take in building his network.

Abraham Woodhull, more famously known undercover as Samuel Culper, was an early example of the talent Benjamin Tallmadge strenuously sought in building the Culper Spy Ring. Once a farmer who smuggled his crops "across Long Island Sound to British-held New York to sell his farm's produce"[19] at a higher price, Woodhull developed his elusiveness and deception for profit, supplying the British with a source of food. Ironically, Woodhull would be caught by Patriot state officials and imprisoned for treason. This was where Benjamin Tallmadge, impressed with Woodhull's sly crime, asked him to join his spy ring. Woodhull would take the name of Samuel Culper and become a successful American spies, publicly taking oath in

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[18] "Revolutionary War," History, A&E Television Networks, last modified October 29, 2009, https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/american-revolution-history#section_4.

[19] Michael Schellhammer, "Abraham Woodhull: The Spy Named Samuel Culper," People Archives, *Journal of the American Revolution*, last modified May 19, 2014, https://allthingsliberty.com/2014/05/abraham-woodhull-the-spy-named-samuel-culper/.

Setauket to fake his devotion to King George III. Tallmadge and Woodhull would go on to recruit other talented candidates to the circle such as Robert Townshend. For historians, characterizing people in espionage history is difficult as truth can easily be lost in the evidence. American history books treat Woodhull as a hero to the American cause. Yet he still committed a serious crime and had his true work never been revealed, he would have been remembered as an opportunistic smuggler. Tallmadge understood the risk of recruiting criminals, but he wanted the Culper Spy Ring to be a momentous force against the British. Utilizing skilled colonists who smuggled goods to avoid British taxes before the war produced an organization with a prowess for espionage. Ultimately, he was able to build a talented weapon for Washington to use in changing the tide of battle.

The Culper Ring did not only improve through talent. Tallmadge also implemented a system that used unique identities to extend the circle's outreach to different communities. Robert Townshend fabricated a life as a Loyalist coffee shop owner; Anna Strong acted as a neutral wife who relayed messages through hanging clothing; Austin Roe posed as a horseman who brought messages over long distances.[20] The entire spy circle worked as an elaborate communication line to bring information swiftly back to Washington. As the organization became increasingly sophisticated, Washington brought new investments and technologies such as invisible ink and coded schedules to improve communication.[21] This was the final step that improved the Culper Spy Ring into the effective weapon Washington envisioned. The swift,

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[20] Victoria Williams, "Culper Spy Ring," *The Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington*, George Washington's Mount Vernon, https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/culper-spy-ring/.
[21] Williams, "Culper Spy Ring," https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/culper-spy-ring/.

professional coordination in the Culper Spy Ring fared better than the problematic reports of independent spies from several different sources. As shown by the conflict in Brandywine, a small system that could only provide reports from close proximity was dramatically less helpful to Washington. Now that he had access to rapid information even for incidents as far as New York, Washington could organize larger surprise attacks, draw British soldiers into a perpetual pursuit, and eventually trap them in Yorktown to end the war.

Even before the tragic hanging of America's first spy, Nathan Hale, in 1776, Washington's military strategy was clear: to "outmaneuver and outperform superior British forces."[22] This strategy, built on deceptive movement instead of brute strength, drew a demand for effective spies that proved integral to the colonists' victory. From an objective perspective, the American victory was close to miraculous. The Continental Army had fewer guns, men, funds, and ships, the initial public sentiment in Britain deeply favored smothering the rebellion, and less than half of the colonists demanded independence. In the context of Western History, there was little statistical difference between the American Revolution and other colonial revolts such as the Battle of Plassey or the British Annexation of India; but what became the first successful colonial rebellion against a European empire was ideologically and politically distinct from its predecessors.[23][24]

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[22] Quinnus G. Caldwell, "The Importance of Spies to Washington's Success," NCO Journal, Army University Press, last modified July 9, 2018, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2018/July/Washington-Spies/ .

[23] The 1757 Battle of Plassey in Bengal Subah & the 1818 British Annexation of India brought multiple failed resistance movements against British and British Corporate Rule.

[24] Mortimer Chambers et al., "1789: The French Revolution," in *The Western Experience*, (United States: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1999): 693-694.

The inexperienced, inept, and counterproductive colonial spies that served early in the war were rarely successful; but their intelligence reports, though often inaccurate, provided enough benefit to spark a desire among political and military commanders to establish and improve advanced espionage networks that shifted the war in favor of the American Patriots. From the disaster in Brandywine to the successes of the Culper Spy Ring, the potential of American espionage was always present in the eyes of George Washington, encouraging him to further invest in espionage and use political power to protect his spies. His initial reliance on "subordinates to scout and report back with information" resulted in many "inaccurate reports [and] early defeats."[25] However, that same reliance, when shifted to professional spy circles, aided in his cunning military prowess, elusive techniques, and diplomacy with France. His feat was impressive, both in the eyes of Loyalists astonished that "he with his banditti [could] keep General Howe dancing from one town to another . . . with such an army as he has"[26] and modern historians who label the first President as a spymaster. Of course, this unfairly undermines the deserved credit to the spies who mastered eighteenth century espionage in one rebellion. With the growing discoveries of letters and codebooks, historians have developed a better understanding of the spies who relayed information to and from Washington's command. These artifacts which remain far rarer than Washington's personal records have shifted the interest of the modern field towards how the first American spies, as citizens or volunteer militia, conducted their work. After all, the Culper Spy Ring rose through the acts of individuals, rephrasing the

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[25] Caldwell, "Spies to Washington's Success," https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2018/July/Washington-Spies/ .

[26] Nicholas Cresswell, "On General George Washington," in *The Annals of America*, vol. 2, *Resistance and Revolution*, *1755-1783,* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1968), 486-487.

collective American identity by shifting the art of deception from smuggling trade to gathering information. Individual bravery breeds collective innovation at the cost of sacrifice. As Nathan Hale has shown, it is this sacrifice that moves people, organizations, and countries forward.

Figure 1: Map of Brandywine Creek and potential crossing points
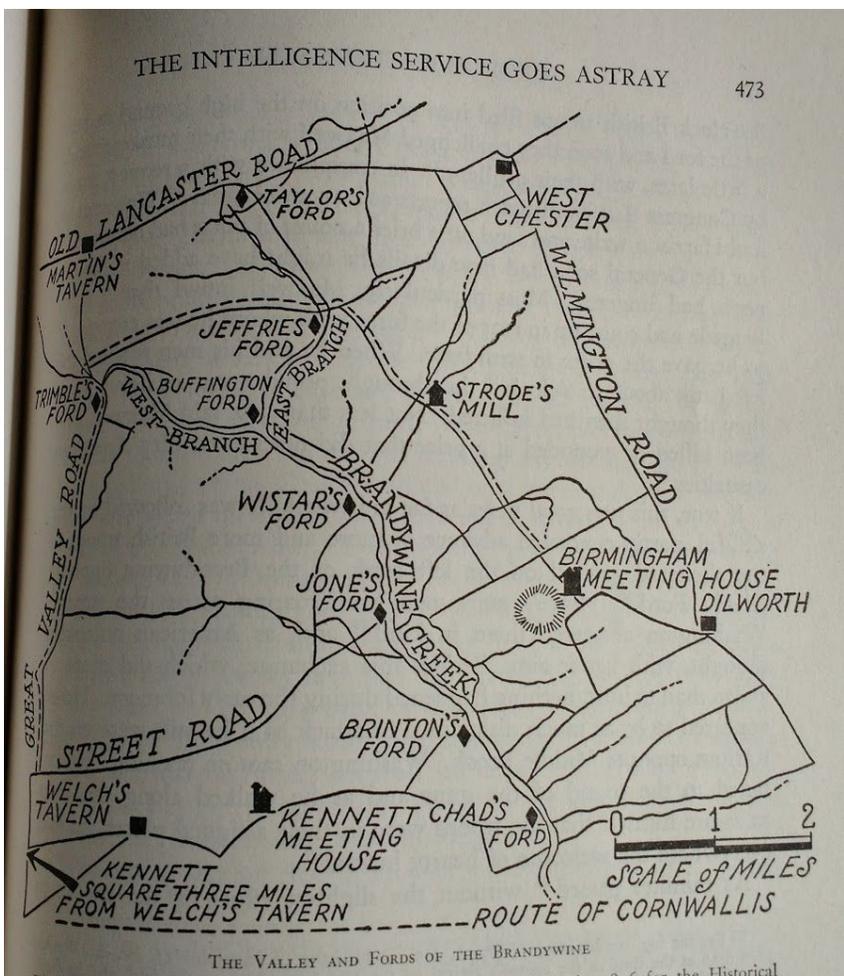
Source: Stanley Pargellis and Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography*, vol. 4, *Leader of the Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 473.

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