



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on April 22, 2019

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## Spies Who Helped Win Our Independence

***George Washington's Secret Six: The Spies Who Saved America***, by Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger, New York: Sentinel, 2014, 236 pages, softcover. To order the book, see page 1.



Six spies who were enlisted in the “Culper” spy ring as desired by George Washington — a Quaker merchant, a tavern keeper, a longshoreman, a Long Island bachelor, a coffeehouse owner, and a mysterious woman — may have saved the infant United States’ war for independence from the mighty British Empire.

And Washington did not even know all their names, the operation was such a well-kept secret. In fact, one of the six — the woman known simply as Agent 355 — is still not known, while another member of the ring’s identity was not discovered until 1929. Benjamin Tallmadge formed what was known as the Culper Ring, and it included a man who ran both a coffeehouse and a loyalist newspaper (James Rivington). Rivington’s intelligence, gathered in interviews with British officers, was critical to the winning of the Battle of Yorktown.

Other members of the ring were Robert Townsend, Abraham Woodhull, Austin Roe, and Caleb Brewster. While their names are largely unrecognized today, without them it is doubtful that America could have successfully seceded from the British Empire. And they signed on *after* the hanging of the unfortunate Nathan Hale, in which the British sent a clear message: You spy, you die. Among the group’s successes was the uncovering of the plot by British spy John Andre to turn Benedict Arnold — who intended to surrender both Fort West Point and General George Washington to the British.

### Why Spy?

Washington first recognized the need for reliable intelligence in the aftermath of the disastrous loss of New York. The British, with their own spy network, had learned that Jamaica Pass was guarded by only five men, and this led to Washington’s army being trapped in Brooklyn Heights. Only a stroke of luck (Washington gave the credit to the providential hand of God) in the form of a thick fog allowed the Continental Army to escape the trap.

After beating a retreat into Pennsylvania, and placing the Delaware River between his army and the Redcoats, Washington wrote to one of his brothers, using the ominous words, “I think the game is pretty near up.” But John Honeyman, one of America’s spies who was not in the Culper group, was able to convince Hessian Colonel Johann Rall at Trenton that the Americans were disheartened and unable to mount an attack. This disinformation caused the German soldiers to throw a big party on Christmas night, contributing to Washington’s victory at Trenton after the daring crossing of the Delaware River on Christmas Night.

Washington picked Tallmadge to lead the Culper spy ring, but the names of the others in the group



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were kept secret even from the commander-in-chief. Tallmadge had been a classmate of Hale at Yale, where they both were actors in the college's theater group. Now, Tallmadge had a role to play on a far more serious stage.

One of his agents, Caleb Brewster, passed on valuable information about the Redcoats on Long Island. "Genl. Erskine [quartermaster general of the British Army] remains yet at Southampton," Brewster wrote. "He has been reinforced to the number of 2500. They have three redoubts at South and East Hampton and are heaving up works at Canoe Place at a narrow pass before you get into South Hampton. They are building a number of flat bottom boats.... Col. Simcoe [of the Queen's Raiders] remains at Oyster Bay with 300 Foot and Light Horse."

Spy James Rivington was publisher of the pro-British *Royal Gazette*. His cover was so deep that the Sons of Liberty hung him in effigy during the war, believing the ruse that he was a Tory. Rivington was the employer of another member of the ring, Robert Townsend, who worked in Rivington's coffeehouse, which was often frequented by British officers, who were sometimes too loose with their tongues. Townsend's code name was Culper, Jr. His real identity was not known until 1929, when Long Island historian Morton Pennypack matched the handwriting of Culper, Jr. with Townsend.

One British officer who often visited the coffeehouse was John Andre. Andre was the chief intelligence officer for British General Henry Clinton, and during a stay in Philadelphia, he became friends with Peggy Shippen, a teenage beauty and daughter of a well-known Loyalist family, which turned out to be quite important when she later married Benedict Arnold.

In 1770, following the Boston Massacre, Arnold was devoutly anti-British, expressing anger not only at the British, but also at what he considered too-mild a response from his fellow countrymen: "Are the Americans all asleep and tamely giving up their glorious liberties or, are they all turned philosophers, that, they don't take immediate vengeance?"

But during the war, General Arnold came to Philadelphia, after Andre and the British had vacated the city, and the widower took a liking to young Peggy Shippen, despite the 20-year difference in their ages. Their marriage, and Peggy's existing friendship with Andre, no doubt helped in connecting Arnold with this key British agent.

Several factors went into Arnold's eventually becoming a turncoat, but his wife's Tory influence surely played a huge role. Too, Arnold had come to believe the American cause was lost, and he was also deeply in debt. Flipping to the British side not only could solve his financial difficulties, it would no doubt please the second Mrs. Arnold.

## **Tripped Trap**

But his plans were undone. Authors Kilmeade and Yaeger contend that the mysterious spy woman — Agent 355 — and agents Woodhull and Townsend picked up some valuable information that something was up with Fort West Point, of which Arnold had been given command, and that she was able to obtain this information by working her way into Andre's inner circle. Exactly how this information was obtained is still a mystery, which is often the way of espionage.

But regardless of how the information was obtained, it was passed on to Tallmadge, who struggled to connect the dots of his various pieces of intelligence.



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After Tallmadge reviewed some curious letters, including a note from General Arnold to British spy Andre (who was captured while going by the code name of Anderson), his suspicions seemed confirmed: Arnold had turned traitor.

Tallmadge knew Washington was set to spend the night at Fort West Point with Arnold, and Tallmadge was alarmed, suspecting a major betrayal was at hand. But Washington was already riding toward Fort West Point on Sunday before Tallmadge could alert him of Arnold's perfidy, September 24, 1780. (The original plan was for the commander-in-chief to be there on Saturday, which would have potentially placed him in the clutches of the British, owing to Arnold's perfidy).

But Colonial knowledge of the plan inadvertently foiled the betrayal anyway. Tallmadge had informed an American officer, Lt. Colonel John Jameson, that Arnold's loyalty to the American cause was now in question. Jameson could not believe that Benedict Arnold was a traitor, and he wrote a letter to Arnold, warning him that Anderson/Andre was a Loyalist agent (which, of course, Arnold knew all about), alerting the great traitor that his plot had been discovered.

Shortly after Washington's trusted aide Alexander Hamilton, who was sent ahead to prepare Arnold for Washington's arrival, arrived at the fort, Jameson's letter arrived, though, obviously, Arnold did not share the letter's contents with Hamilton.

To Hamilton's puzzlement, Arnold left abruptly, leaving behind his wife and their baby, Edward, at the fort. When Washington arrived not long after, he was surprised that Arnold was not there to greet him.

Washington soon learned the truth — Arnold had abandoned the American cause, and gone over to the British side. Had Arnold been successful in surrendering the fort without a fight, and the American's commander-in-chief along with it, it is likely the American cause would have been ruined.

Soon afterward, Washington received a message from Arnold asking him to allow his wife and son to come to him. Washington graciously allowed Mrs. Arnold and the baby to join the traitor. As it was, Arnold had not only betrayed the American cause, he had failed to deliver anything of value to the British.

Washington's Secret Six had saved the American Revolution.

While sticking close to the known history of the Culper Ring, Kilmeade and Yaeger present the story in an entertaining way, building tension at times, almost as though one is reading a mystery novel. They also provide some details of how the ring operated. While invisible ink had long been a useful device of spies, the American spy network had been able to obtain ink that was more difficult for the British to discover. In addition to the ink, the spies used code numbers written in between the lines in innocent-looking books.

The authors include a map, explaining how Robert Townsend and James Rivington gathered information in Manhattan. Then, Austin Roe and Abraham Woodhull would receive that intelligence in Manhattan and make, as the authors put it, "the dangerous journey to Setauket, where they would meet Caleb Brewster in a cove off Long Island Sound."

At this point, Brewster and his men would row across the sound between or around British ships to Connecticut (safely in Patriot control), where they handed off the letters to Tallmadge. Finally, Tallmadge would then have the information couriered to Washington. On average, the process took about two weeks.



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Certainly, the brave men of the Continental Army and those in the militias deserve all the credit they have been afforded in the history books for their role in securing our country's independence, but the story of these spies also deserves to be heralded. This book does an excellent job in telling that story.

*Photo credit: AP Images*



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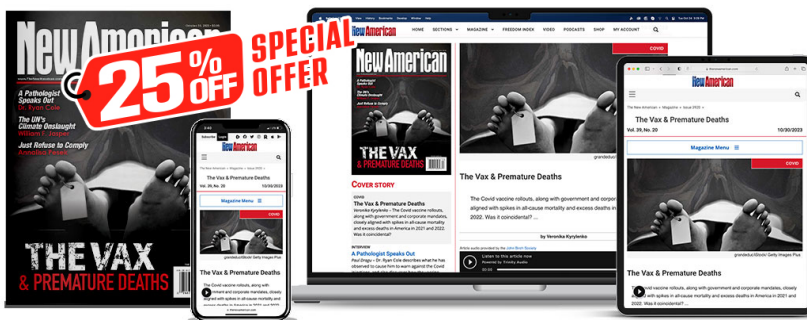
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