

George Washington's Secret Six: The Spy Ring That Saved the American Revolution Study Guide

George Washington's Secret Six: The Spy Ring That Saved the American Revolution by Brian Kilmeade

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Summary

Long before the days of unmanned drones and Internet hacking, countries still found ways to spy on each other during wartime. George Washington's Secret Six, by Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger, tells the little-known story of half a dozen ordinary citizens who quietly conducted espionage for General George Washington to support his goal of retaking New York City from the British.

In the early days of the Revolutionary War, a young patriot named Nathan Hale volunteered to conduct a spy mission on Long Island for the Continental army. He failed miserably and was hanged, but his death left an impression on General George Washington, who commanded the troops. He knew that he needed to outwit the British in order to win the war, especially since his army was outmatched in every way, but he also realized that he needed not just individual spies but a network of them. This was particularly important in the New York area, where British troops had taken Manhattan with its all-important port and economy, as well as Long Island. Washington was desperate to reclaim them.

The spy ring began in 1778 when Washington appointed Benjamin Tallmadge, a major in his army, as the head of his secret service and charged him with recruiting a team. Tallmadge tapped Abraham Woodhull, his Long Island neighbor, as the primary man-on-the-ground, and gave him the code name Samuel Culper. Woodhull proceeded to recruit other Long Island friends including Caleb Brewster, who had an intimate knowledge of the waterways and coastline, Austin Roe, whose tavern was an ideal place for meeting and passing along messages, and Robert Townsend, whose Manhattan store and column in a Loyalist newspaper gave him ample opportunities to gather information without arousing suspicion. The group was rounded out by James Rivington, who owned a coffeehouse and print shop in Manhattan, and a woman known only by the number 355.

Using devices that included a code system, letters written in invisible ink and messages tucked into books, the group began gathering information and using a carefully crafted courier system for passing information from one person to another and finally to Washington in the field. They had a number of successes, including uncovering information in time to thwart a scheme to counterfeit American money, but they also survived many close calls. Washington considered the ring a great help, particularly in misdirecting the British troops as the French navy was arriving to support the Patriots' cause and later in narrowly stopping Benedict Arnold's plan to turn Fort West Point over to the British in exchange for money.

Although Agent 355 apparently perished in a British prison, when the war ended the other five ring members went back to their ordinary lives, never seeking or accepting recognition or reward for their service.



Preface - Chapter 2

Summary

George Washington's Secret Six, by Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger, recounts a little-known aspect of the American Revolution -- the fact that George Washington was aided by the efforts of a small, secret group of spies known as the Culper Spy Ring. Its members, by all appearances, led ordinary lives in Manhattan and on Long Island, but in fact they were gathering information on the British army and navy, and their work was instrumental in turning the war toward the Patriots' cause. In the book's Preface, the authors note that historians long knew about the Culper Spy Ring that helped the Americans win the Revolutionary War, but not the name of its most valuable member. In 1929, Long Island historian Morton Pennypacker received some papers from the Townsends, an old and important Long Island family, and by matching the handwriting to letters between the spy ring leader and George Washington, identified him as Robert Townsend. The other members, all of whom had been identified earlier, were Abraham Woodhull, Austin Roe, Caleb Brewster, James Rivington and a woman known only as Agent 355. They were ordinary citizens doing extraordinary things and the book was written to honor them. A half-page Introduction describes the hanging of Nathan Hale in September 1776. The British accused him of going behind enemy lines on Long Island to spy for Washington, and his death sent the message to New Yorkers that if you spy, you die.

Chapter 1 is entitled Hold New York, Win the War. Hale's hanging was one of many low points for Washington at that time. Although the Patriots had held Boston, the British, led by General William Howe, had taken New York City and Long Island, which were important to the colonies both strategically and economically. Colonists were enthusiastic about the independence effort and supportive of the troops, but Washington's troops suffered a defeat on Long Island when they were betrayed by two men who, under threat of death, led the troops through Jamaica Pass, and they narrowly escaped being slaughtered in Brooklyn when they were able to sail away under the cover of night and a heavy fog the next day. Knowing he was overmatched in terms of manpower and arms, Washington realized they would have to defeat the British in a battle of wits.

In Chapter 2, The Need for a Spy Ring, the authors say that Washington knew the value of spies, having briefly been one himself during the French and Indian War. Young Nathan Hale volunteered and was accepted to conduct espionage on Long Island, but he failed miserably and was hanged. This bothered Washington and made him realize he needed a network of spies. Just before Christmas of 1776, he recruited John Honeyman, who successfully misdirected the enemy into thinking Washington had no plans to attack Trenton, NJ, and the Continental army was able to catch them unaware and take the city, reinforcing Washington's belief that he needed a spy ring who could blend in and protect each other.



Analysis

The book's early chapters set the scene and give the reader a sense of what the initial portions of the Revolutionary War were like. The colonial army was significantly overmatched in every way – men, weapons, experience – but the American troops had enthusiastic support and were often cheered as they passed through various towns. General George Washington was highly respected by his troops and was considered a fair and honest man, and the loss of young Nathan Hale was a blow to him. In hindsight, according to the authors, he realized that sending someone so young and green into a dangerous situation was not the best move. Hale was a Yale graduate who had spent his entire life in Connecticut, and admitted that he had little knowledge of Long Island, so his effort probably was doomed from the start. Washington realized that he needed to create a network of people who could easily blend into their environment rather than standing out as Hale had done, because having Loyalists and Patriots living side-by-side obviously led people to be on the lookout for anyone who seemed suspicious.

Vocabulary

anonymous, counterfeit, attribute (verb), attest, relentless, crucial, pseudonym, ascent, intricate, prominent, intrigue, espionage, coherent, acclaim, compilation, covert, fortifications, cornerstone, recoup, fledgling, tactical, fervor, imposing, dissenting, bespoke, belligerent, linchpin, ideology, daunting, moxie, amass, impending, stoic, decimated, endeavor, temperate, eradicate



Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

In Chapter 3, Launching the Ring, the authors say that during the year after Hale's death, Washington focused most of his efforts on regaining Philadelphia from the British, but in the summer of 1778 the focus moved back to New York. Eventually a young officer named Benjamin Tallmadge came to Washington's attention. He was the son of a pastor, grew up in Suffolk County, Long Island and attended Yale with Nathan Hale. After a short career as a teacher, Tallmadge joined the army after the battles at Lexington and Concord and rapidly was promoted up the ranks, eventually becoming a major. He became interested in espionage after a brief encounter with a young woman who had gathered intelligence in Philadelphia and after impressing Washington during the winter of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge, was tapped to act as spymaster on Long Island.

In Chapter 4, Crossing the Sound, the authors note that Abraham Woodhull had been a neighbor of Tallmadge's and had an intimate knowledge of the Long Island landscape. After the death of his brothers, he stood to inherit his family's property and he made frequent trips to Manhattan to visit his sister, eventually using the opportunities to smuggle goods into the city and earn a nice profit. Tallmadge recruited Woodhull to be his man-on-the-ground and the two took on the pseudonyms John Bolton and Samuel Culper, respectively. This chapter also describes life in Manhattan, where British officers lived well, but the city was crowded and filled with disease, stink and vice. On Long Island, the British occupiers tightly regulated the sale of fresh food and the troops were often undisciplined.

Analysis

These chapters introduce the first two men recruited for the New York spy ring. Benjamin Tallmadge's background did not appear to designate him for a military career, but like many colonists, the "shot heard round the world" struck a chord with him and prompted him to enlist. A subsequent encounter in which he helped a young woman flee on horseback after she had brought back intelligence for the Continental army stuck with the young officer. Although he never learned her name and did not see her again, he greatly admired her bravery, so he eagerly accepted the opportunity to head up Washington's new operation and immediately reached out to his Long Island neighbor Abraham Woodhull. Woodhull was a particularly good choice because his sister had married and moved to Manhattan, where she and her husband ran a boarding house, and Woodhull often traveled into the city to visit them – and to conduct a smuggling operation. The fact that he was known to make such trips on a regular basis meant that his travels back and forth would not attract undue attention from British officers or his neighbors.



Vocabulary

divert, culminate, ragtag, rustic, logistical, abrasive, precocious, rigorous, requisite, proficient, lackadaisical, indelible, pious, autonomy, tedium, rhetoric, topographical, relish (verb), familial, perilous, chastise, treatise, errant, subside, pragmatism, idyllic



Chapters 5 - 6

Summary

In Chapter 5, *The Ring Springs into Action*, the authors note that Woodhull recruited Caleb Brewster, who had a whaling boat and knew all the coves and waterways in the area, and Austin Roe, a tavern owner, and they devised a system for passing information from one person to another and eventually to Washington. Washington was pleased with Woodhull's detailed reports, which were supplemented by excellent reports by Brewster on the state of the British fleet, but Woodhull soon became very nervous about being caught. A supply of invisible ink sent by Washington helped a little, but after someone reported him as a person of interest, British Lt. Col. John Simcoe took some soldiers to Woodhull's home and learning he was away, beat his father as a warning. Learning of this, Washington offered to let Woodhull find a replacement for himself.

Chapter 6, *Townsend Joins the Fight*, introduces a mild-mannered, bookish young man named Robert Townsend, one of several children of a prominent Long Island family. His father apprenticed him to a merchant house in Manhattan, after which he opened his own small dry goods store in the city. Returning home for a visit in the fall of 1778, he found that Lt. Col. Simcoe had taken over his family's home as his headquarters and treated the family rather badly, which haunted Townsend when he returned to Manhattan. In the early summer of 1779, Woodhull approached him about joining the ring and he agreed, taking on the pseudonym Samuel Culper, Jr. He was able to use his store as a place to meet Woodhull and his trips to the harbor to receive shipments gave him an opportunity to assess naval operations. Always a good writer, Townsend met James Rivington, who owned a coffeehouse and print shop near his store, and signed on to write a column for the Loyalist newspaper Rivington printed, giving him a natural excuse for asking questions and writing down details about the movement of troops and materials. Ironically, Major John Andre of the British Army also frequented the coffeehouse and arranged for the paper to publish his poetry. It is unknown how he met her, but in August 1779 Woodruff reported to Washington that a "lady" had been recruited for the ring, but her identity was never recorded. Instead she was known only by the number 355.

Analysis

Chapter 5 introduces the next two recruits, Caleb Brewster and Austin Roe. Brewster's primary value was his tremendous knowledge of the coast of Long Island and his skills as a seaman, but his bravado also made him a good choice, as he was known for shouting taunts to British soldiers as he eluded them in his whaling boat. Roe seemed a good choice because his tavern was a natural meeting place for local Long Islanders and visitors alike. Roe was understandably hesitant at first because his business depended on the patronage of both Loyalists and Patriots, so discovery could potentially destroy his livelihood, but he agreed to participate. A longtime friendship between the



Woodhull and Roe families meant that little suspicion would be raised if people saw them together frequently.

The recruitment of Robert Townsend was a particular coup because it provided eyes in Manhattan, which was firmly in British hands. Townsend was in a perfect position for the mission because he owned a small store that sold a wide variety of items, meaning that virtually anyone might be expected to stop by for various supplies. This gave him the opportunity to pick up information that might be dropped by customers, but also the excuse to visit the docks on a regular basis to inspect and purchase goods that were arriving, and observe the comings and goings of British vessels.

The addition of James Rivington was another tremendous asset for a number of reasons, but Townsend's new role as a newspaper columnist gave him a natural excuse for asking questions and gathering information from all kinds of sources. His proximity to Major John Andre, which was a pure coincidence, will later prove pivotal in the discovery of a significant act of treason.

Vocabulary

audacity, laden, taunt, evade, vigor, jovial, pretense, proximity, nascent, askance, archetypal, unnerved, privy, surreptitious, duplicity, allure, zealot, ribald, tenure, atrocity, wanton, trepidation



Chapters 7 - 8

Summary

Chapter 7, *Creating a Code*, notes that after a couple of close calls, Tallmadge got nervous about the security of communications and the danger of revealing names, so an elaborate numerical code was created using numbers in place of names, places and other words, and letters in place of some numbers. The authors also speculate about the identity of the “lady” who was participating, concluding that she likely was a young woman living a fashionable life in New York as part of a Loyalist family. Other methods used to avoid detection included writing messages on blank pages inside books and hiding a letter using invisible ink inside a packet of blank writing paper.

Chapter 8, *Mounting Tensions and Double-Dealings*, describes the growing suspicions that plagued the Patriots and the spy ring in late 1777. Jonas Hawkins, a young man who occasionally served as a courier for the ring, destroyed two letters when he became frightened that he was in danger and was replaced by Amos Underhill, Woodhull’s brother-in-law, who ran the Manhattan boarding house where Woodhull stayed when he was in town. Meanwhile, the British were busy counterfeiting Continental money and Townsend somehow uncovered the fact that they had gotten their hands on several reams of the special paper the Continental mint had begun using to print money, and the information came in time to stop a potentially devastating attack on the country’s currency. The information might have come from James Rivington, the coffeehouse owner and newspaper printer, who had secretly come over to the Patriots’ side and become the newest member of the spy ring.

Analysis

This section provides fascinating insights into the mechanics of the system eventually set up by the group now known as the Culper ring. After some personal papers, including letters from Tallmadge to Washington, fell into British hands on two different occasions, Tallmadge narrowly escaped capture and determined that more care should be taken to disguise the nature of the group’s written communications. The system they devised was simple but effective, replacing names with numbers and numbers with letters. For example, Tallmadge became 721, Woodhull 722, Townsend 723 and so on. Entire letters were not written in code, but rather only the most pertinent words or numbers – dates, for example – were replaced, thus saving time in both writing the messages and decoding them while still making it difficult or impossible for the enemy to decipher the meaning should they intercept the communication. It is also interesting to note the use of invisible ink, making a piece of paper appear to be blank until a particular stain was applied to bring up the writing. Chapter 8 notes the first time that the spy ring had a significant success that made a real difference in the war effort. Although it is unclear exactly how the information about the counterfeit plot came to Townsend’s



attention, its discovery likely kept the country's fragile economy from collapsing completely.

Vocabulary

precarious, covert, intercept, lexicon, cryptography, pertinent, intercept, flourish, quirk, prominence, compile, coquette, demure, scrutiny, warrant (verb), discern, innocuous, circumspection, timidity, composure, trepidation



Chapters 9 - 10

Summary

Chapter 9, *Washington Demands More*, begins by noting that the counterfeiting victory encouraged Washington enormously, but he also asked his spy ring to find ways to speed up the delivery of information to him because often it simply confirmed things he already knew. Townsend recruited his teenage nephew James as a courier without telling the exact nature of his business, but the boy bungled the situation badly and was dropped. A rift began to develop within the ring and Woodhull informed Tallmadge that Townsend had decided not to continue. Because of the mounting problems, Washington decided to abandon the Culper ring and try to develop a new network, perhaps with connections in Staten Island, but he also realized that part of the issue was that there simply was little information to be had at the time.

In Chapter 10, *The French Connection*, the authors say that rumors emerged that a fleet of ships was on its way from France to help the Patriot cause. In the spring of 1780, Washington received intelligence that the fleet would land soon in Newport, RI and he decided to reorganize the Culper ring, immediately bringing Tallmadge, Brewster, Woodhull, Townsend and Roe back into the loop to gather and deliver information about the British reaction to the arrival of the French fleet. The British army sent most of its troops to Rhode Island, but Washington reluctantly realized he still could not take back New York, so he arranged to have false documents fall into British hands outlining a plan to attack the city. When the British troops raced back to defend New York, the French reinforcements were able to land and organize without interference and Washington was happy with the contributions of the Culper ring.

Analysis

Despite the ring's success in uncovering the counterfeit plot, it fell apart shortly thereafter. One of the group's biggest problems was its inability to deliver information as quickly as Washington needed it, in part because they needed to be exceedingly careful not to draw attention to themselves. If Woodhull made too many trips into Manhattan, for example, or Townsend altered his routine too much, their activities could easily be discovered and since travel was slow and cumbersome in those days, it might take a week or two to deliver a message to Washington. While recruiting additional couriers seemed like a logical solution, it proved problematic because of the critical need for secrecy. In addition to finding it difficult to know who could be trusted, it was also necessary to use only those who were calm under pressure.

These issues became evident in the case of young James Townsend, who not only bungled his mission but managed to get himself arrested in the process. Washington's unhappiness at having to personally intervene to get the young man freed, along with Townsend's growing nervousness – a problem that would persist throughout the mission



– caused him to abandon the ring temporarily. However, he always appreciated the group's loyalty and value, even more so when the Culper ring was instrumental in misleading the British about the Patriots' plan to attack New York as the French fleet was arriving. The authors point out that although school children are taught that Washington could not tell a lie, throughout the war he was quite skilled at doing exactly that when it proved an effective strategy.

Vocabulary

insurmountable, afoot, reprieve, abate, accelerate, derive, hitherto, conveyance, tumultuous, thwart, debacle, feign, inscrutable, fissure, incumbent, glean, complacent, credible, squander, astute



Chapters 11 - 12

Summary

Chapter 11, Benedict and Peggy, discusses the background and activities of Major General Benedict Arnold of the Continental army. Arnold was plagued by a big ego but many insecurities, and after successfully running a pharmacy and bookshop in New Haven, CT, he joined the militia because he was angered by the Boston Massacre. Although he advanced in rank and distinguished himself in many respects, he also was known for disputes with superior officers and other acts of defiance. During his tenure as military commander of Philadelphia, he married Peggy Shippen, a Loyalist socialite 20 years younger than himself and tried to rebuild his poor finances. While living the high life among the Loyalists in Philadelphia, he made overtures to General Clinton of the British army about becoming a spy and his subsequent activities often involved having his wife carry coded messages back and forth. After successfully navigating a court martial about his questionable business dealings, Arnold found himself faced with a large bill from Congress resulting from undocumented expenses from an unsuccessful invasion of Quebec in 1775, prompting him to reach out again to the British. Since he was of little use in Philadelphia, he began pressing for an appointment as commander of Fort West Point just 55 miles north of Manhattan, which he planned to turn over to the British in exchange for 10,000 pounds. In July 1780, he increased his price to 20,000 pounds and threatened to stop the deal if his demands were not met, unaware that Clinton was spying on him because he did not entirely trust him.

In Chapter 12, Negotiations and Treachery, the authors note that Arnold received his appointment to Fort West Point in August 1780 and immediately began making repairs and stocking it with provisions. He also asked Washington and others for the identities of the New York spy ring, saying he wanted to employ them to help him keep his fort secure, but no one provided the information. Meanwhile in New York, 355 was keeping her ears open at social events, where Arnold's name often came up because of his social connections through his wife and his new post. She also might have picked up on small hints of activity as British plans to take Fort West Point proceeded. As Arnold and General Andre finalized their plans, Townsend began to notice unusual activity along the docks and Tallmadge, who was now charged with deciphering Townsend's reports to Washington, felt that something was not right but could not put his finger on it.

Analysis

This section goes into great detail about the background, personality and career of Benedict Arnold. The authors portray him as a man who felt superior and craved recognition, but always fell short and felt that he never received the accolades and respect he deserved. They also point out the financial difficulties he faced on many occasions, most of which were apparently of his own making. Even after marrying the wealthy socialite Peggy Shippen, he was living beyond his means in Philadelphia, so his



eventual treason is attributed to a genuine need for money combined with a desire to be seen as an important figure.

Arnold's appointment as commander of Fort West Point was a moment of tremendous danger for the Culper ring. As a high-ranking officer in the Continental army, Arnold was aware of the group's existence, but even Washington did not know the identity of most of its individual members, by his own choice. This proved to be a wise decision because even if he had been willing to provide Arnold with their names, he could not do so because he did not have the information himself.

The authors also take this opportunity to point out the differences between the Culper ring and the spy operation being conducted between Arnold and Andre. Although they used similar techniques – invisible ink, codes based on books, and writing between the lines of seemingly-ordinary documents – the Culpers had an advantage because not all the members knew the identities of the others in the group, providing an added layer of secrecy. In addition, the Culpers' network was more complex, enabling Woodhull, Brewster and Roe to add information to a report before it reached Washington, and the fact that the members were from all walks of life gave them access to information from a wider range of resources.

Vocabulary

hiatus, apothecary, mercantile, prudent, miscreant, garner, accolade, polarize, prophetically, meteoric, defiance, valor, abhor, peril, cuckold, nefarious, audit, guise, ruse, ensnare



Chapters 13 - 14

Summary

Chapter 13, *The Deal Is Done*, notes that Arnold made a couple of attempts to rendezvous with Andre, who was traveling as a civilian under the name John Anderson, and they finally were able to meet. However, Andre's ship was damaged so he had to travel by land back to New York. At one point, he was stopped by three militiamen who were guarding the road and when they found letters hidden in his socks, they assumed he was a spy and took him to Lt. Col. John Jameson at North Castle. Jameson was perplexed because "Anderson" had a letter from General Arnold guaranteeing him safe passage through Patriot territory. Meanwhile, Tallmadge returned to North Castle from a scouting mission and when he heard about the prisoner he became suspicious that something was amiss. In the correspondence that accumulated during his absence, he found a letter from Arnold informing him that a man named John Anderson would be passing through and asking him to bring him safely to him. Adding everything up, Tallmadge asked to see the prisoner, but Jameson had already sent him back to West Point to meet Arnold.

In Chapter 14, *Another Spy at the Gallows*, the authors say that Jameson was afraid of upsetting Arnold, who was still not suspected of any wrongdoing, and insisted on sending a letter to him to let him know about the Anderson situation. Realizing the spy ring was in danger, Tallmadge knew he had to act quickly but carefully. Meanwhile, Washington was traveling to West Point, but when he arrived, he was surprised to find that Arnold had left on an urgent mission. A few hours later, as Washington was inspecting the fort and still waiting for Arnold to return, a rider arrived to deliver the papers that had been taken from Andre's boot. They contained the plans for taking the fort, but in the meantime Arnold had escaped. Anderson was recaptured and identified as Andre and eventually hanged, and although Arnold was now safely tucked away on a British ship in New York, Tallmadge feared he still spelled danger for the spy ring.

Analysis

This section takes on the tone of a spy novel as Arnold's treasonous plot nears its conclusion. The first efforts for Arnold and Andre to rendezvous failed, and there were several opportunities for suspicion to be aroused; however, even as Andre was eventually captured, no one was aware of Arnold's involvement. In fact, it was his own reputation that nearly enabled him to succeed because Lt. Col. Jameson, to whom Andre was taken after his capture, was afraid of incurring Arnold's famous wrath, prompting him to let Andre go rather than follow up on any suspicious he might have had.

There were a number of other instances on which the plot could have either succeeded or failed. Despite sending Andre back to Fort West Point, Jameson also sent a letter to



Arnold to alert him about the matter. Tallmadge arrived at North Castle at the right time and, being practiced in the art of spying, knew something was amiss. He also happened to read his accumulated mail, which revealed the name of John Anderson. Washington was delayed arriving at Fort West Point. The rider sent to find Washington and deliver the papers Andre had been carrying was persistent in pursuing the general despite a number of setbacks. In short, everything fell into place, albeit at the last minute, or the war might have gone in an entirely different direction.

Vocabulary

Auspices, vigilant, tantalizing, agitated, confidant, embark, proximity, vindicated, ostensible, infallible, trivial, countenance, perilous, chagrined, rescind, acutely, benevolent, peruse

Chapters 15 - 16

Summary

Chapter 15, The Ring in Peril, finds the members of the Culper ring in great fear after Arnold's defection and they backed off their operations, with Townsend withdrawing entirely. Word came from Woodhull that some "dear friends" had been imprisoned, likely including 355. Arnold wrote to Tallmadge in an attempt to persuade him to defect, but Tallmadge ignored it. Meanwhile, Arnold received far less money than he had hoped since he had been of little use, but he did receive a commission as a brigadier general in the British army. Washington enlisted the help of Sgt. John Champe in a plan to try to capture Arnold. Champe defected and was placed in the force Arnold commanded, but his plan to kidnap him failed when their unit was shipped off to Virginia, taking Champe along. Townsend's spy activities ceased and his business activities also slowed down considerably, but the Patriots received a morale boost when Tallmadge successfully led a contingency that recaptured a small piece of Long Island.

Chapter 16 is entitled The Beginning of the End. The British put in place Major Oliver DeLancy as the new spymaster and in the spring of 1781 the Culper ring began to operate again, but cautiously. Townsend refused to write anything down but agreed to give oral reports and the group failed to recruit new members who were willing to write things down as well. Meanwhile, the Continental forces got a stroke of luck when a copy of the entire British naval codebook somehow ended up at Rivington's print shop and was delivered into the hands of the French navy, proving an invaluable tool for ensuring a victory at Yorktown. In New York, packets of Patriot dissidents grew bolder and rumors of peace negotiations circulated, but Washington knew the British would not let the city fall without a fight. In September 1782, Townsend personally delivered his last recorded letter to Tallmadge, delivering several pieces of news indicating that the war was almost over, but more remained to be done to rid America entirely of foreign occupation.

Analysis

The authors again lament the fact that the identity of the ring's lone female member probably never will be known. While left vague, it is presumed that she is one of the "dear friends" who were captured and imprisoned, and although her fate is unknown, it is unlikely that she survived the horrific conditions on the British prison ships, which were known as death ships.

As the war began to wind down, so did the operations of the Culper ring, in part because of the Arnold situation. While Washington and others failed to provide the information Arnold had requested about the group's members, there was still reason to fear that he knew and revealed something about their identities, so all the members scaled back their activities and Townsend, as he had done several times in the past, said he would no longer participate in any capacity. The strain of his espionage activities



clearly had a detrimental effect on Townsend, causing him so much anxiety that records indicate that he essentially abandoned his business at this time. Even when he reluctantly agreed to rejoin the group late in the war effort, his fear of discovery had reached such a point that he would only give reports orally lest his written communications be intercepted.

The Culper ring's last significant contribution was also perhaps its most important with the exception of the Arnold discovery. Somehow a copy of the British naval codebook found its way to Rivington's print shop but it is not known whether someone left it there by mistake, or by a stroke of good luck he was asked to print more copies. In any case, the victory at Yorktown, the war's last major battle, was in large part due to this advantage.

Vocabulary

cahoots, apprehensive, rigor, dissipate, rampant, inexplicably, convey, mollify, explicitly, ingratiate, sporadic, forage, unify, breadth, adamant, feint, decipher, beleaguered, dissident, ardent, traverse



Chapters 17 - 18

Summary

Chapter 17 is entitled Retaking New York at Last. By early 1783, Woodhull continued to send an occasional note to Washington but there was little to report and in July he sent his final invoice for expenses he had incurred. The war officially ended in September but Tallmadge worried about the safety of his spies since they had pretended to be Loyalists to avoid suspicion. In November, Tallmadge was among those who rode into Manhattan with Washington and they were enthusiastically greeted by large crowds. Washington visited Rivington's shop and met privately with him, then a few days later had a final meeting with his officers before leaving for retirement at Mount Vernon and Tallmadge returned home to Long Island. After becoming president in 1789, Washington toured Long Island and visited Roe's tavern and other areas where the Culper members lived, but there is no record that he met any of them. He had hoped to spend time with Townsend, in particular, but there is no indication that he ever learned his identity.

In Chapter 18, Life After the Ring, the authors describe the lives of the Culper members after their espionage days ended. Brewster married and moved to Bridgeport, CT. Rivington's shop was protected against burning and looting, but his business eventually failed, he made a number of bad investments and spent time in a debtors' prison. Roe, unlike the other ring members, enjoyed telling others about his adventures although he protected the identities of his fellow spies. Tallmadge moved to Connecticut and served in the U.S. House of Representatives. Townsend became increasingly reserved and reclusive, never married and developed strong abolitionist views. Woodhull married and spent the rest of his life in his home community on Long Island, where the DAR later erected a marker recognizing his role as Samuel Culper, Sr. The fate of Agent 355 is unknown.

Analysis

The spy ring's work was essentially completed by the time the war wound down, although a few final communications took place. Unlike Benedict Arnold, none of the Culper members tried to enrich themselves through their connection to Washington and the war effort. Instead, when Woodhull sent his final invoice, which was done at Tallmadge's request, it was accompanied by a note ensuring Washington that he had been as frugal as possible. It is also remarkable that, although it is assumed that Agent 355 did not survive, no member of the spy ring was identified, arrested or killed during the course of their dangerous mission, even though there were a number of close calls.

Although Roe appears to be the only member who spoke openly about his own activities, it is noted that he did not identify the others and none of the other members sought recognition for their service. In fact, they carefully avoided it and apparently were happy to return to their private lives when their job was completed. Washington, to his



credit, never sought to learn their identities even though he wanted to meet Townsend, in particular, who was probably the least likely of the group to reveal himself or seek recognition or praise. While Washington's papers note his visit to Roe's tavern and the "obliging people" he encountered there, it is not clear whether those people included any of the ring members, all of whom lived very near that location.

Vocabulary

preliminary, designate, insurrection, daunting, frugal, aftermath, propriety, emissary, respective, prevail, tranquility, abode, avocation, bestow, notoriety, obscurity, prodigious



Important People

Morton Pennypacker

Morton Pennypacker is a Long Island historian who discovered that Robert Townsend was one of the two leaders of the Culper spy ring.

George Washington

George Washington was the commander of the Continental army during the Revolutionary War and was responsible for putting together the spy ring. He later became the country's first president.

Robert Townsend

Robert Townsend was a native of Long Island who ran a store in Manhattan. He was recruited for the spy ring because of his acquaintances on Long Island and his ability to pick up information in New York City and was considered by Washington to be the key member of the group.

Major Benjamin Tallmadge

Major Benjamin Tallmadge was a top-ranking officer in the Continental army and Washington's spymaster. He was responsible for recruiting the spy ring members and managing the operation.

Abraham Woodhull

Abraham Woodhull was a Long Island native recruited by Tallmadge to be the primary man-on-the-ground for the spy ring.

Austin Roe

Austin Roe was recruited for the spy ring because he ran a tavern on Long Island, making his place of business a good place for meeting or dropping off information.

Caleb Brewster

Caleb Brewster, another member of the spy ring, was important because of his knowledge of the Long Island coastline and ability to observe the operations of the British fleet.



James Rivington

James Rivington ran a print shop and coffeehouse in Manhattan. After coming over to the Patriot side, his establishment became central to gaining and passing along information.

Agent 355

Agent 355 was the ring's only female member. Her identity has never been learned and it is likely that she died while a prisoner of the British army.

General William Howe

General William Howe was commander of the British forces during the Revolutionary War.

Nathan Hale

Nathan Hale was famously hanged for spying on the British forces on Long Island early in the Revolutionary War. The failure of his mission convinced Washington that he needed a different kind of espionage effort.

Benedict Arnold

Benedict Arnold was a major general in the Continental army who conspired to commit treason by turning over Fort West Point to the British army. Information gathered by the Culper spy ring was instrumental in the failure of his plot.



Objects/Places

Long Island

Long Island is an area adjacent to New York City and home to the members of the Culper spy ring. Its capture by British forces early in the Revolutionary War was a major defeat for the Continental army and it is the site through which the spy ring conducted its activities and communications.

Brooklyn

Brooklyn is one of the five boroughs of New York City and the site of an important battle during the Revolutionary War.

Manhattan

Manhattan is the most highly-populated borough of New York City, the center of its economy and an important port. It was considered vitally important to both the British and Continental forces and the center of information-gathering by the spy ring.

Long Island Sound

Long Island Sound is a body of water separating Long Island from Connecticut and other parts of the mainland. It was used frequently by the spy ring in carrying messages back and forth.

Invisible Ink

Invisible Ink was a type of ink that left no trace on paper until a special stain was applied to reveal the writing. It was an important part of the spy ring's effort to maintain secrecy.

Codes

The spy ring devised an intricate series of codes such as replacing numbers with letters and letters with numbers in order to keep the enemy from deciphering their messages, should they discover them.



Fort West Point

Fort West Point, located 55 miles from Manhattan, was the location of Benedict Arnold's attempted act of treason. After being named commander of the fort, Arnold planned to turn it over to the British in exchange for money.

Treaty of Paris

The Treaty of Paris is the agreement that ended the Revolutionary War.

British Naval Codebook

The British Naval Codebook contained all the codes the navy's fleet used to signal each other during battles. The spy ring was instrumental in obtaining a copy, which led to the defeat of the British at Yorktown.

Austin Roe's Tavern

Spy ring member Austin Roe owned a tavern on Long Island where members of the ring met and exchanged information. Washington visited the tavern during a trip to the area after becoming president and it is possible that he met with members of the ring there.



Themes

Patriotism

The overriding theme of George Washington's Secret Six is patriotism. The six people who comprised the Culper spy ring did what they did for a single reason -- love of country and a desire to see their nation gain independence from Britain. The authors note that Benjamin Tallmadge, for example, had little interest in a military career and was teaching school when the "shot heard round the world" took place in Lexington, Massachusetts. That incident, and the subsequent Battle of Concord, rankled Tallmadge and prompted him to join the army, where he rose quickly up the ranks. The young officer so impressed General George Washington that he named Tallmadge as the head of his secret service and mastermind of the espionage operation. His neighbor, Abraham Woodhull, was not an outspoken Patriot when the war broke out, but as his family's only surviving son, he felt that his primary obligation was to take care of his aging father and sisters, and he resented the British for the taxes and trouble they imposed on his efforts to make money. By all accounts, he signed on eagerly when Tallmadge approached him about becoming a spy for Washington. Tavern owner Austin Rowe took a huge chance in joining the ring because his business depended on both Loyalist and Patriot customers. If his role in espionage was discovered, his business and family would have been ruined. Caleb Brewster had been in correspondence with Washington even before he joined the spy ring, reporting on the state of British warships in New York Harbor and troop movements around Long Island. Robert Townsend's father made no secrecy of his allegiance to the Patriots' cause and his son shared his feelings, albeit a bit more quietly. All six members of the Culper spy ring had a great deal to lose, but they stepped up when asked because they believed in the Patriots' cause and wanted to do what they could to advance it.

Trust and Loyalty

The concepts of trust and loyalty are woven throughout George Washington's Secret Six. The Culper spy ring was small for a reason -- it was essential that each of its members be completely trustworthy and loyal to the Patriots' cause and to each other. That they were able to maintain this level of trust and loyalty is especially remarkable because not all of them knew each other or even the identities of the other members of the group. At times, this system made their jobs more difficult because they soon learned that it was not wise to bring others into the fold, even in more mundane roles as couriers with limited information, because not everyone could be counted on to remain cool under pressure and keep sensitive information secret.



Secrecy

The heart of any espionage operation is the need for secrecy and that held true even in colonial times. The members of the Culper group took enormous pains to keep the information they gathered from falling into enemy hands. For example, they employed the use of invisible ink that appeared to leave no mark on a sheet of paper until a special agent was applied to reveal the writing underneath. They used the blank pages at the beginning and end of books to write their messages. They often used ordinary documents such as order forms and innocuous-appearing family letters, writing messages between the lines in invisible ink. They devised a code for disguising names, numbers and other information, including their own names. In short, they employed any means at their disposal to keep the content of their communications under wraps. The group's commitment to secrecy extended to their own identities. General Washington did not want to know the identities of most of the spy ring for their own safety, a practice that proved wise when Benedict Arnold tried to learn their names and addresses, and the members, particularly Robert Townsend, did not want to be identified to their commander. This secrecy extended even after the war ended and Washington wanted to thank the people who had proven so valuable to him, but by all accounts did not meet them or learn who they were, and they were happy to keep it that way.

Styles

Structure

George Washington's Secret Six is divided into 18 chapters of approximately equal length. Each chapter is numbered and named, and most are divided by a handful of subheadings. There is also a Preface that describes the background for the book. Since this is a work of nonfiction concerning events that took place more than 200 years ago, most of it consists of expository text. However, in a few cases, the authors take the liberty of creating dialogue between two characters, which they admit is purely fictional but they say it is based upon letters and other papers written by the subjects. While the book's primary purpose is to describe the events surrounding the activities of the Culper spy ring, the authors take the opportunity to expound on other items of interest such as the lifestyle in Manhattan and on Long Island at that time and the complicated life of Benedict Arnold.

Perspective

Tone



Quotes

This book recounts the methods, the bravery, the cunning, the near misses, and the incredible successes of the Culper Ring, which helped to save our nation and shape our future. Most of all, this is a story about ordinary citizens doing extraordinary things, people whose fears and hopes and lives were not much different from our own, and how they changed the course of history. Their humility stopped them from seeking fame or fortune because their love of country sparked their exploits.

-- Authors (Preface paragraph Page xviii, paragraph 2)

Importance: This passage from the book's Preface provides an excellent summation of the book's premise and content.

As New York slipped from his grasp, Washington saw that the Patriots would need to outmaneuver, not overpower, the enemy. And, by learning the enemy's secrets, spies would play a crucial role in undermining British attacks through anticipating the redcoats' next moves. It would be the only way to counter the superior numbers, training, supplies and equipment of the British army and navy.

-- Authors (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 19, paragraph 3)

Importance: This explains the critical need for espionage during the war.

Tallmadge looked Woodhull in the eye. "You have a good estate with a good farm and a good income. Now, I know your sister Susannah is still living at home, but there are no wife and no children waiting at home for you whose welfare may cause you to check your daring. You know the countryside, the best places to pick up gossip, which roads to use. I've been away for some years but you've stayed on at home, building a life and building relationships. I know things have been difficult since the British landed and I don't envy what you have had to endure watching the redcoats loot and burn the places you love most. You know (God forbid) the escape routes. But, most important, I know that no matter what mask you may wear in public right now, you believe that this war must be won for the sake of human dignity. And New York must be had if that is to happen.

-- Authors (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 50, paragraph 6)

Importance: Here the authors take poetic license to imagine the conversation between Tallmadge and Woodhull, laying out all the reasons Tallmadge thinks his old neighbor would be a good leader for the group.

It was a stroke of brilliance on Townsend's part. He now had the perfect excuse for asking questions, jotting down details, and querying various movements of troops and materiel into, out of, and around the city. What was more, Rivington's Tory politics would help deflect any suspicion that Townsend might be harboring Patriotic sentiments.

-- Authors (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 84, paragraph 3)



Importance: This passage explains the importance of Townsend's plan to begin writing a column for Rivington's Loyalist newspaper.

The British were being played, and from the least likely of corners. But they remained oblivious to the double-dealings in their midst. The parties went on. The coffeehouse debates continued as the officers went about surrounded by their circles of admirers. Major Andre's silly love poems were composed and published in Riverton's Royal Gazette. The wine and the words flowed freely as they bantered about their plans. The army was in garrison -- comfortable, amused, and completely oblivious to the fact that any shopkeeper, newspaperman, or charming lady in their midst was listening, remembering, and plotting.

-- Authors (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 108, paragraph 2)

Importance: This passage explains how the spy ring members in Manhattan were able to gather information as the troops stationed there relaxed and became complacent.

George Washington, whom generations of schoolchildren would later know as a man who "could not tell a lie," couldn't help but be pleased.

-- Authors (Chapter 10 paragraph Page 126, paragraph 2)

Importance: This brings up the irony in Washington's reputation as opposed to the duplicity with which he was willing and able to employ as part of his war strategy.

While Arnold was reveling in his newfound prominence and respect, Peggy was throwing grand parties that helped to raise her husband's social profile -- and his debts. The Arnolds enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle in Philadelphia, living well beyond their means, which may have contributed to Benedict's wandering eye in terms of his Patriotic allegiances.

-- Authors (Chapter 11 paragraph Page 133, paragraph 2)

Importance: This explains the most likely reason for Arnold's subsequent act of treason.

Even more urgently, Arnold began to inquire about the names and addresses of Patriot spies he claimed might be of importance to him in defending the fort against any planned attacks by the British. Of particular interest to Arnold was the ring operating in New York, upon whom Washington had relied so heavily in the recent incident with the French fleet as well as in previous matters of significant intelligence, such as troop movements on Long Island and the foiled counterfeiting plan.

-- Authors (Chapter 12 paragraph Page 142, paragraph 3)

Importance: This demonstrates how close the Culper ring came to being discovered and turned over to British troops as Arnold planned the final stages of his defection.

Tallmadge rushed to Jameson and demanded to see the prisoner, but the colonel informed him it was impossible. John Anderson was gone from North Castle on Jameson's orders, escorted by a lieutenant with a letter explaining the situation, through



the open country back to General Arnold at West Point.
-- Authors (Chapter 13 paragraph Page 161, paragraph 2)

Importance: This passage demonstrates how close Arnold and Andre came to completing their plan, as well as the impact the spy ring had on the situation.

All that remained now between Washington and his spies was the settling of some small monetary debts; the larger debts -- the intangible kind that helped to protect a fledgling nation -- could never be fully repaid, nor did the remaining members of the Culper Ring seek out such payment. A return to an open, honest, and simple life in an independent nation founded on their native soil would be reward enough.

-- Authors (Chapter 17 paragraph Page 198, paragraph 3)

Importance: This succinctly sums up the life the spies hoped for and the paucity of their expectation in terms of reward for their service.

He approached Setauket on April 22, 1790 and made a stop at "the House of a Capt. Roe, which is tolerably dect. with obliging people in it.

-- Authors (Chapter 17 paragraph Page 206, paragraph 1)

Importance: This passage from Washington's papers indicates that he did, in fact, spend time at Austin Roe's tavern, even though it is not known whether the people he refers to include any of the Culper ring or if he even knew of Roe's involvement.

He had sincerely hoped to have some time with the mysterious Culper Junior, who had risked his life, health, and well-being for so long, passing in and out of the lion's mouth every day, seeking to still the monarch's roar within American borders. But no matter the greetings sent the general's way and the invitations extended, Townsend never stepped out of the shadows to meet with his commander in chief. It was a great honor, to be sure, but not one that Townsend sought.

-- Authors (Chapter 17 paragraph Page 206, paragraph 2)

Importance: This demonstrates the humbleness of all the Culper members, and Townsend in particular. Although they could have sought recognition and compensation for their heroic efforts, none of them did so.



Topics for Discussion

Nathan Hale

Discuss the importance of Nathan Hale. Why was he selected for the Long Island espionage mission? What indicators existed that he was a bad choice? Why did he fail and how did his failure impact Washington's decisions regarding future espionage protocol?

Abraham Woodhull

Describe Abraham Woodhull's general background and personality. What elements made him an ideal candidate for the newly-formed spy ring?

Information Delivery System

Describe the system the group devised for passing information along the line and delivering it to Washington. What elements made it a good system? What potential dangers were present and how did the group plan to counter them?

Townsend Family

How did Townsend's family history influence his decision to join the spy ring?

Methods of Secrecy

Describe the various methods the Culper ring devised to keep their communications secret. Do you think they would be effective today? Why or why not?

Agent 355

Describe the lifestyle the authors assume was led by the woman identified as Agent 355. Why would someone like that be valuable to the espionage effort?

French Involvement

Why was Louis XVI of France happy to help the Patriots' cause? What value did he see for himself and his country in defeating Britain?



Obstacles to Recruitment

Describe the obstacles to recruiting new members to the spy ring, even in the role of courier.

Benedict Arnold

Describe Benedict Arnold's personality. What clues were there that might indicate someone who would commit a treasonous act?

Arnold's Escape

How did Arnold escape after he realized his plot had been revealed? What factors enabled him to get away?

British Codes

What was the importance of discovering the codes used by the British navy during battle? Describe the role of the Culper ring in securing the codes.

After the War

Discuss the lives of the Culper spies after the war ended. How did their experience affect their later lives? Why do you think they never sought recognition from Washington or others?