

# The Setauket Spy Ring Story

by Beverly Tyler

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How did the Culper Spy Ring operation come about? To answer this question we must start at the beginning. Here is the story:

## Chapter 1

### Benjamin Tallmadge of Setauket Becomes a Revolutionary War Officer

Benjamin Tallmadge, was the organizer and leader of the Revolutionary War Setauket Spies. Tallmadge, the son of Benjamin Tallmadge, minister of the Setauket Presbyterian Church, was born in Setauket on February 25, 1754. The home where he was born is still standing in Setauket at the end of Runs Road. Tallmadge grew up in Setauket, attended school here with his close friend Abraham Woodhull and like many residents of Suffolk County he grew to have a healthy distrust for British authorities in New York. Tallmadge, a Yale College classmate of the Hale brothers, Enoch and Nathan, graduated from Yale in 1773 and, like Nathan Hale, taught school for a time in Connecticut.

Following the skirmishes at Concord and Lexington - On May 9th (1775) Tallmadge wrote to Hale. *“Brother Nathan...America, my friend, at the present period sees such times as She never saw before. It is a period truly interesting and important...The great wheels of the State and Constitution seem to have grown old and crazy; everything bids fair for a change; every Machine needs to be refitted or renewed. How soon a great, flourishing, and powerful state may arise from that now stigmatized by the Name of Rebels, God only knows. The prospect however for the same seems to be great; but that we ought at present to desire it is far from being clear.”*

Tallmadge's commission as a lieutenant was dated June 20, 1776 and he was assigned to Colonel John Chester's Connecticut regiment. He became a regimental adjutant on July 22, 1776 and kept the orderly book during July and August. His regiment was among those transferred to Brooklyn in time to take part in the Battle of Long Island on August 27, 1776. It was the first time Tallmadge took part in any engagement.

Tallmadge wrote in his graphic account of the retreat after the battle. *“On the evening of the 29th, by 10 o'clock the troops began to retire from the line in such a manner that no chasm was made in the lines...General Washington took his station at the ferry, and superintended the embarkation of the troops. It was one of the most anxious, busy nights that I ever recollect, and being the third in which hardly any of us had closed our eyes in sleep, we were all greatly fatigued...When I stepped into one of the last boats...I left my horse tied to a post at the ferry...The troops having now all safely reached New York, and the fog continuing as thick as ever, I began to think of my favorite horse, and requested leave to return and bring him off. Having obtained permission, I called for a crew of volunteers to go with me, and guiding the boat myself, I obtained my horse and got off some distance into the river before the enemy appeared in Brooklyn. As soon as they reached the ferry we were saluted merrily from their musketry, and finally by their field pieces; but we returned in safety.”*

As enlistments expired, Tallmadge was offered a captain's rank in the Second Regiment of Continental Light Dragoons commanded by Elisha Sheldon. He accepted his new appointment with a feeling of pride, for these commands were subject to Washington's approval. Tallmadge was promoted to the rank of Major on April 7, 1777. In June, Tallmadge's troop, all on dapple gray horses, left

their base at Litchfield, Connecticut and proceeded to New Jersey where General Washington reviewed the detachment and complimented Major Tallmadge upon the appearance of his horsemen. Washington gave the troops of the Second Regiment little chance to rest after they came to headquarters and Tallmadge wrote, *“Since my arrival at camp I have had as large an allowance of fighting as I could, in a serious mood, wish for. I have had here and there a horse and rider or two wounded, but have lost none from my troop as yet, though several Horsemen have been killed in the same skirmishes with me, from other regiments.”*

In September and October, Tallmadge took part in the battle of Germantown. In November of 1777, when the American army finally went into winter quarters at Valley Forge, Tallmadge was ordered, *“with a respectable detachment of dragoons,”* to act as an advance corps of observation.

It was during these maneuvers into the no-mans-land area between the American and British Lines around Philadelphia that Tallmadge first engaged in obtaining intelligence of the enemy’s movements and plans. No organization had yet been developed within the American Army to handle secret information.

In January of 1778, the Second Regiment of Light Dragoons was ordered to Trenton, New Jersey, where the other cavalry regiments were assembling to spend the winter under the command of Count Casimir Pulaski. After Pulaski resigned because of differences with Washington and with both Colonel Elisha Sheldon and Major Samuel Blagden in New England purchasing supplies for the regiment, Major Tallmadge was left as regimental commander. For a period of four weeks during the spring he acted as commander of both the fifth troop, which had served under Horatio Gates in the Saratoga Campaign, and the sixth troop, which had been attached to Israel Putnam’s command in the Highlands around Peekskill. Throughout the spring and early summer of 1778 Tallmadge waited for action.

Finally, in June, the Second Regiment left for General Gate’s headquarters in White Plains and was assigned to take up a position in advance of the American lines near Dobbs Ferry.

A good, easily readable, book about Benjamin Tallmadge and the Battle of Long Island is *By The Sword* by Selene Castrovilla, beautifully illustrated by Bill Farnsworth. This IRA Notable Book and Moonbeam Children’s Book Awards Gold Medal winner is published by Calkins Creek, an imprint of Boyds Mills Press, Inc.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Setauket Spy Operation Begins**

It was two years after the death of Benjamin Tallmadge’s Yale classmate and friend Nathan Hale that Tallmadge was able to form an organized spying effort for General Washington.

In June of 1778, Tallmadge’s Second Regiment of Continental Light Dragoons left for General Gates headquarters in White Plains and was assigned to take up a position in advance of the American lines near Dobbs Ferry. In a letter to Gates, Tallmadge wrote, *“I am at this time sorry to say that by the frequent Draughts from the Regiment (men removed for courier service) we have but a very few fit for service, being much in want of Arms and Accouterments.”*

In July, Washington returned to the Hudson Valley with most of his army. With the arrival of the French fleet under Count d'Estaing, just outside New York Harbor the same month, the pressing need for organized military intelligence could no longer be ignored. Officers and especially dragoon officers, were encouraged to find intelligent correspondents who could furnish reliable information to American headquarters.

Now Tallmadge had the reasons and the support he needed to set up a network of Patriot spies. During the summer of 1778, Benjamin Tallmadge was able to establish a chain of American spies on Long Island and in New York that not only transmitted information on the strengths and deployment of the British forces in New York, but prevented the British from attacking the French fleet when they arrived in Newport, RI in 1780, and led to the detection of Benedict Arnold's treason. Despite Tallmadge's important role in the formation of the secret service, his duties as field officer of the Second Regiment took most of his time during the summer and fall of 1778.

Tallmadge, wrote in his memoir, published in 1858, *"This year (1778) I opened a private correspondence with some persons in New York (for Gen. Washington) which lasted through the war. How beneficial it was to the Commander-in-Chief is evidenced by his continuing the same to the close of the war. I kept one or more boats continually employed in crossing the Sound on this business."*

To conduct this vital undercover operation on Long Island, Tallmadge chose his boyhood friend Abraham Woodhull. They also choose other friends and neighbors from Setauket; men and women who could be trusted and who proved to be so discreet in all their contacts. Major Tallmadge not only led Washington's secret service, but was also in most of the battles involving the Continental Army in the northern states.

Tallmadge did his work well and was rewarded time and again by General Washington with expression of support and encouragement. On August 25, 1778, Washington wrote to Tallmadge, agreeing to his choice of Abraham Woodhull as spy leader in Setauket, the point at which correspondence would cross the Sound from Long Island to Connecticut.

*"Sir; I shall be glad to say yes upon the business mentioned in yours of this date. If Col. Heldon is acquainted with W— and the circumstances as you have related them to me, let him come also— You should be perfectly convinced of the integrity of W— previous to his embarking in the business proposed—this being done I shall be happy in employing him—but there will be an impropriety in his coming with you to headquarters, as a knowledge of the circumstances in the enemy might blast the whole design. You will let me see you this afternoon—if you can come to dinner at three o'clock I shall be pleased of your companies. I am sir your very obedient servant, G. Washington."*

Abraham Woodhull did not, as far as we know, ever meet General Washington during the War. It was simply an unnecessary risk and Washington, in fact, was pleased not to know the names of the spies recruited by Tallmadge.

As detailed by Morton Pennypacker, in his book *General Washington's Spies on Long Island and in New York*, Woodhull, appointed by Tallmadge as chief of the Setauket spies and assigned the code name Samuel Culper, would travel to New York City to obtain the intelligence. He would pass the information to either Stony Brook general store owner Jonas Hawkins or Setauket tavern owner Austin Roe, who would carry the messages from New York City to Setauket. Caleb Brewster, another friend of Tallmadge, an officer in

the Continental Army and an effective whaleboat captain, was also from Setauket. Brewster brought many of the messages across the sound by whaleboat to Tallmadge. Brewster would meet Abraham Woodhull at one of a number of secret locations near Setauket, retrieve the message and guide his whaleboat and crew back across the sound to Connecticut. These were the people involved and this was how the correspondence started in 1778.

When the regiment encamped for the winter of 1778-79, General Washington left the management of the correspondence entirely to Tallmadge's discretion. The result was one letter a month on the strength and disposition of British forces around New York. However, by March Washington wished to receive more regular reports from his secret service to prepare for the active campaign of the spring and summer. The stakes were getting higher and the need for information was becoming more critical. However, Woodhull was becoming more concerned about his safety in New York and this would lead to expanding the spy operation to include Oyster Bay as well as Setauket. It was also during this time that Sir James Jay, a brother of Washington's first chief of intelligence John Jay, arrived in America and delivered to Washington a chemical formula for invisible ink.

The biography of Tallmadge by Charles Swain Hall, AMS Press, Inc., New York, 1966; as well as his memoir, published in 1858 are two of the many secondary sources of information about George Washington, Benjamin Tallmadge, the Setauket Spies, and about the Revolutionary War. Both books are in the reference section of the Emma S. Clark Memorial Library.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Setauket Spy Operation Develops**

1778 was the first year of operation for the Setauket Spies, and the year came to a close with Woodhull still operating as the spy in New York City and Jonas Hawkins and Austin Roe carrying messages to Setauket to be delivered to Caleb Brewster for transporting across Long Island Sound. Woodhull also carried messages himself on his regular returns to Setauket. The following year, 1779, was one of important changes for the spies and for the way in which they conducted their operations.

The last month of 1778 saw Benjamin Tallmadge moving his regiment of Light Dragoons to winter quarters in Durham, Connecticut. Tallmadge spent the winter of 1778-79 getting his regiment up to strength for the campaigns that he knew would begin in the spring. During these months he traveled to Boston and Philadelphia, probably to try to get men and supplies and to appear before the Board of War in Philadelphia. At the same time he kept a firm hand on the information that was being gathered by his spy in New York City, Abraham Woodhull. Tallmadge also often went to Long Island himself to talk to his spies, a dangerous but necessary practice.

*“Setauket, Feby. 26, 1779 - Sir. No. 8 - Your No. 4 and 5 came to hand. The former forgot to acknowledge the receipt of in my No. 7. The latter have carefully observed and will follow your directions. I shall endeavour to give you as an authentic of affairs and transactions that hath past since my No. 7 (together with the state of the enemy) as I possibly can. The troops within these lines have not been augmented by any arrivals from Europe. The number consequently remaining the same, save two companies of light infantry from Rhode Island landed on Long Island and marched immediately for*

*Southampton....I cannot bear the thoughts of the war continuing another year, as could wish to see an end of this great distress. Were I to undertake to give an account of the sad destruction that the enemy makes within these lines on Long Island I should fail. They have no regard to age, sex, whig or tory...SAMUEL CULPER”*

Woodhull reported, in this his longest letter, on all of the British troops, as well as on everything else he heard concerning the war, the British Parliament, the King, the French, and British and Tory attitudes toward the war. He also noted, toward the end of his letter, the conditions for the residents who remained on Long Island. It was two months later however, that Woodhull received one of a series of frights that led to changes in the spy network. By April 1779, Washington had forwarded a vial of invisible ink to Woodhull in response to his concern that his letters might be intercepted, leading to his discovery. The vial itself almost led to his discovery, as detailed by Tallmadge.

*“Fairfield, April 21, 1779 - Sir - Agreeable to your Excellency's instructions I have forwarded the vial delivered me and the directions for C-----s future conduct....I must now relate an anecdote respecting the Vial which I forwarded Cr. Much pleased with the curious Ink or Stain and after making some experiments with the same, he was set down to answer my letter which accompanied it. He had finished the enclosed when suddenly when suddenly two persons broke into the room (his private apartment). The consideration of having several officers quartered in the next chamber, added to his constant fear of detection and its certain consequences made him rationally conclude that he was suspected, and that those steps were taken by said officers for discovery. Startled by so sudden and violent an obtrusion he sprang from his seat, snatched up his papers, overset his table and broke his Vial. This step so totally discomposed him that he knew not who they were, or even to which sex they belonged--for in fact they were two ladies who, living in the house with him, entered his chamber in this way on purpose to surprise him. Such an excessive fright and so great a Turbulence of passions so wrought on poor C. that he has hardly been in tolerable health since. The above relation I had from his own mouth. He is much pleased with the ink, and wishes if any more can be spared, to have a little sent him. By this he thinks he could frequently communicate intelligence by persons permitted to pass the lines....BENJ. TALLMADGE.”*

Then, in June Woodhull related, in a letter to Washington, how he was almost captured in Setauket by Colonel Simcoe of the Queens Rangers. In another letter he wrote that his handwriting may have been identified. These were some of the incidents that led Tallmadge to agree to replace Woodhull in New York with a spy whose identity was not discovered until the 1930s, when Morton Pennypacker did the research and the handwriting analysis that led to the discovery of Robert Townsend as one of Washington's Spies. Townsend sent his first letter to Washington on June 20, 1779. The following week, Tallmadge was almost captured in an attack on an American outpost near Bedford, New York.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Spy Ring Takes its Final Form**

The Setauket Spies began a new and more organized phase of their operation in the second half of 1779. The all-important contact in New York City, beginning in June was Robert Townsend, code name Samuel Culper, Jr. Abraham Woodhull, Samuel Culper Sr., would now base in Setauket, with occasional trips to New York, to coordinate the operations of the Culper Spy Ring.

Washington's letter to Tallmadge at this time included specific instructions for gathering information that would be of use to Washington. "*C--- Junr, to remain in the City, to collect all the useful information he can--to do this he should mix as much as possible among the officers and Refugees, visit the Coffee Houses, and all public places. He is to pay particular attention to the movements by land and water in and about the city especially.*" Washington went on to describe in detail the military information he was looking for and then noted, "*C--- Senior's station to be upon Long Island to receive and transmit the intelligence of C--- Junior.*" Finally, Washington noted, "*There can be scarcely any need of recommending the greatest Caution and secrecy in a Business so critical and dangerous. The following seems to be the best general rules: To intrust none but the persons fixed upon to transmit the Business. To deliver the dispatches to none upon our side but those who shall be pitched upon for the purpose of receiving them and to transmit them and any intelligence that may be obtained to no one but the Commander-in-Chief.*" Tallmadge devised a simple code in the summer of 1779 to be used by his spies in Setauket and New York City. Tallmadge, whose code name was John Bolton, assigned himself the number 721, Abraham Woodhull, code name Samuel Culper Sr., 722, Robert Townsend, Samuel Culper Jr., 723, Austin Roe 724, and Caleb Brewster 725. He designated Rivington 726, New York 727, Long Island 728 and Setauket 729. He also gave Washington the designation 711.

James Rivington published "Rivington's Loyalist Gazette" a New York City newspaper which supported the British occupation. Robert Townsend was a writer for the 'Loyalist Gazette' and this probably helped him keep up the pretense that he was loyal to the British. At some period during the war Rivington seems to have changed sides and became a supporter of the Patriot cause. Whether Rivington was a Loyalist or a Patriot when Tallmadge included him in his spy code list as 726 is unknown.

For the remainder of the War it was these codes that were used in correspondence to and from Washington, Tallmadge and the Culpers. On November 29th, 1779, Woodhull wrote to Tallmadge concerning the problems associated with having British and Tory soldiers in Setauket, especially when they were taking needed supplies from the residents without payment or compensation of any sort. The letter also details how the spy network operated in Setauket and the dangers inherent in the spy operation.

*"...It is now late in the evening and just received the dispatches have hardly time to write any thing as I would, as I greatly desire to send 725 off from this place of danger. I cannot tell the sheets that are written with the stain and agreeable to your desire have requested the same from C. Junr. This place is very distressed...Their coming was like death to me at first but have no fears about me at present and soon intend to visit N.Y. There's about 400 in the town and following the wagons. They take all the forage and oats. I forbear to write any particulars for want of time and to avoid danger. I expect the enemy will leave us about next Monday and have the pleasing hope they will not visit us any more this winter. I have directed 725 to come on the 12th December, say the 11th. Hope the way will then be clear and safe. I expected the express on Saturday last. Excuse me at this time I cannot serve you better. I am, &c.  
SAMUEL CULPER."*

The "sympathetic stain" or invisible ink mentioned in Woodhull's letter was first used by the spies during 1779 by Woodhull himself in New York City and its use continued for the remainder of the Revolutionary War.

In addition to his conduct of the various spy operations, Tallmadge had his duties with his regiment that kept him busy. In spite of this he was always on the lookout for weaknesses in the British lines that he

could exploit. In September of 1779, Tallmadge led an expedition across Long Island Sound and attacked a small force of British troops at Lloyd's Neck. They surprised the British, and despite continuous small arms fire, Tallmadge wrote, *"We took our prisoners and after destroying all the boats we could find, returned to our own boats, and embarked without difficulty or the loss of a man."*

Tallmadge spent most of the winter of 1779-80 in Weathersfield with his regiment recovering from their exhausting campaigns of the summer and fall. In the spring, Tallmadge worked on a military committee that worked with the Connecticut Assembly. At the same time, Tallmadge had to deal with a number of problems with the Setauket spies that threatened their very existence.

Tallmadge initially suggested to Washington that with the reduced military activity in the severe weather months of 1779-80 that they suspend the Culper messages. General Washington did not agree; however, he was dissatisfied with the time it took for messages to get from New York City to Setauket, across to Connecticut and finally to his headquarters at Morristown, New Jersey. Washington instructed Tallmadge to develop a shorter, quicker route for the messages. Sending messages directly from New York City to Washington's headquarters, as detailed by Abraham Woodhull (Samuel Culper Sr.) in his February 27<sup>th</sup> 1780 letter, was extremely dangerous. The courier had to cross the no-man's land between the British and American lines with patrols on both sides on the lookout for spies or deserters.

*"Sir, Late last night I returned from 727 (New York), where I had the pleasure of seeing C. Junr. (Robert Townsend, alias Culper, Jr.) And many other good friends-I have nothing to enclose you from C. Junr. He assuring me that Coll. Ramsay and some other gentlemen that left 727 on Wednesday last on their way to Head Quarters, was furnished with all the intelligence that he could informe..."*

## Chapter 5

### 1780, A Year of Spying Progress Begins

Robert Townsend tried again, about April of 1780, to transmit messages to Washington by the more direct route from New York City north to Washington's headquarters. This time he relied on his cousin James Townsend to carry the message. Townsend set off, but along the route aroused the suspicion of two men, and after trying to convince them that he was a Tory, he was taken prisoner by the men who posed as Tories and the contents of his pockets were forwarded to Washington. The unremarkable letters he was carrying turned out to be "stain" messages (invisible ink) that Washington was able to decode. However, to keep from exposing the spy network in New York Washington had to keep Townsend detained. This incident was so distressing to Robert Townsend, as he thought that James had been captured by the British and it was only a matter of time until he was uncovered, that he decided to resign as noted by Woodhull in his May 4, 1780 letter.

*"I have had an interview with C. Junr. And am sorry to find he declines serving any longer, as hinted in my last. If any person can be pointed out by 711 (General Washington) at N.Y. who can be safely relied on to supply C. Junr's place, I will make myself known to him..."*

Washington replied on May 19<sup>th</sup> to Tallmadge. *"Dear Sir: Your favr. Of the 8<sup>th</sup> reached me a few days ago. As C. Junior has totally declined and C. Senior seems to wish to do it, I think the intercourse may be*



*dropped, more especially as from our present position the intelligence is so long getting to hand that it is of no use by the time it reaches me. I would however have you take an opportunity of informing the elder C. that we may have occasion for his services again in the course of the Summer, and that I shall be glad to employ him if it should become necessary and he is willing. I am endeavoring to open a communication with New York across Staten Island, but who are the agents in the City, I do not know. I am &c. - Go Washington."*

General George Washington's letter of 19 May, 1780 to Major Benjamin Tallmadge suspending the Culper spy ring did not sit well with the spy chief in Setauket Abraham Woodhull. In a letter to Tallmadge written June 10, 1780 Woodhull let Tallmadge know the strength of his commitment. *"...I am happy to find that 711 is about to establish a more advantageous channel of intelligence than heretofore. I perceive that the former he intimates hath been but of little service. Sorry we have been at so much cost and trouble for little or no purpose. He also mentions of my backwardness to serve. He certainly hath been misinformed. You are sensible I have been indefatigable, and have done it from a principle of duty rather than from any mercenary end--and as hinted heretofore, if at any time there's need you may rely on my faithful endeavors... You speak with some assurance that the French is hourly expected to our assistance--hope they may not fail us."*

Woodhull ended his letter with information on British and Patriot actions on Long Island and in New Jersey. These few weeks of inactivity for the Culper spies was enough to convince Washington that the services of the Setauket Spies were indispensable. Washington's letter to Tallmadge dated 11 July 1780 set the stage for the events that were to follow.

*"Dear Sir. As we may every moment expect the arrival of the French Fleet a revival of the correspondence with the Culpers will be of very great importance. If the younger cannot be engaged again, you will endeavor to prevail upon the older to give you information of the movements and positions of the enemy upon Long Island... I am, &c. - Go. Washington."*

Washington had no way of knowing, but the very same day he wrote to Tallmadge, the large French naval force with 5000 troops under Count de Rochambeau arrived in Newport, Rhode Island. Intelligence on the movements of the British Army in New York was now critical to Washington. At this same time, British reinforcements under Admiral Graves were arriving in New York. The target was the French troops the British knew were headed for New England to support Washington.

Tallmadge, at the front lines with his regiment, was contacted by Washington to reopen the Culper network. Tallmadge replied in a letter to Washington on July 14<sup>th</sup> and the next morning he rode to Fairfield, Connecticut, contacted Caleb Brewster and sent him across the Sound with letters for Abraham Woodhull and Robert Townsend. By this time, Washington and Tallmadge both knew that the French had arrived. There was now an immediate urgency for reopening the Culper route.

Brewster contacted Woodhull, and finding him ill, took the message directly to Austin Roe who at once left for New York, 55 miles away. Brewster, in the meantime, concealing his whaleboat and crew, waited for the return message. Roe reached New York and delivered his message to Robert Townsend, just ahead of the British courier who informed the British generals that the French had arrived at Newport. Roe, not needing any supplies for his tavern, made himself as inconspicuous as he could and waited for the return message.

To prevent any messages leaving New York concerning the preparations they were being made to attack the French, the British posted guards detaining anyone carrying messages out of New York. Townsend, acting in his role as a successful merchant and reporter for Rivington's Gazette, began a rapid search for information along the waterfront and in the taverns and coffeehouses. Townsend soon found out what he needed to know, as well as learning of the security measures imposed by the British. His next step would prove to be a crucial one.

## Chapter 6

### July 1780, Setauket Spy Ring Reactivated

In a July 11, 1780 letter, the Culper Spy Ring was reactivated by General Washington after two months of inactivity. They were now poised to complete their most valuable contribution to the war effort. Washington's letter to Benjamin Tallmadge was written the same day the French fleet arrived in Newport, Rhode Island to support the American patriots.

Robert Townsend, feeling somewhat more secure since learning his cousin James was not a prisoner of the British and that General Washington again needed his services, resumed his spying efforts in New York, especially noting the buildup of British troops and naval ships.

Townsend completed his work and came up with a simple plan to conceal the messages in a note to a prominent Long Island Tory, Benjamin Floyd, who had recently been robbed and needed to obtain many of the items stolen. Townsend wrote a letter, supposedly directed to Floyd and used the "stain" (invisible ink) on the same letter to provide the spy information to Washington.

*"New York, July 20, 1780. Col. Floyd. Sir, I recd your favor. by Mr. Roe and note the contents. The articles you want cannot be procured, as soon as they can will send them. I am, Your humble Servant, SAMUEL CULPER."*

With the message, Austin Roe could now leave New York almost empty-handed without being questioned. Roe must have set a record for his ride to Setauket, for he arrived there the same day and delivered the message to Woodhull who then included a note of his own to Caleb Brewster and a letter to Tallmadge outlining what Roe had communicated to him. Woodhull's note to Brewster reflects the growing feeling in America that events were beginning to favor American independence.

*"Sir. The enclosed requires your immediate departure this day by all means let not an hour pass: for this day must not be lost. You have news of the greatest consequence perhaps that ever happened to your country. John Bolton must order your return when he thinks proper. S.C."*

To Tallmadge and Washington he writes, *"Your letter came to hand and found me very ill with a fever, and still continues. All that I could do was to send Austin Roe with directions, who returned this day in great haste with the enclosed dispatches from Culper Junior. Also assures of the arrival of Admiral Graves with six ships of the line and is joined by three more our of New York, also one of 50 and two of 40 guns and has sailed for Rhode Island and is supposed they will be there before this can possibly reach you. Also 8000 Troops are this day embarking at Whitestone for the before mentioned port. I am told for certain that the French have only seven sail of the line. I greatly fear their destination. We hourly expect*

*a number of the enemy in this quarter, for what end I know not. You must excuse all imperfections at this time on the account of my before mentioned fever. Nevertheless you have perhaps all the needful--and pray for your success and exertions. And am yours sincerely, SAML. CULPER."*

Caleb Brewster and his whaleboat crew probably left Setauket just after dark and made their way across Long Island Sound without being detected. It appears that Brewster did not find Tallmadge, but found another trusted officer to take the message and deliver it to Washington's headquarters where, in Washington's absence, Alexander Hamilton received it and wrote the details in a letter to General Lafayette dated "21 July 1780 4 o'clock P.M." Hamilton sent the information by special messenger to General Lafayette, then en route to Newport.

Washington, on his return to headquarters, found that the British were already loading troops on ships to sail to Newport. He knew he needed a diversion to keep the superior British forces from attacking the presently vulnerable French, not yet disembarked at Newport. Washington devised a brilliant plan. He used his spies to plant a fake set of plans for the invasion of New York where it would be quickly discovered and forwarded to the British generals. The plan worked. The British ships, by then already en- route to Newport were notified, by signal fires along the Long Island coast, to return to New York. As a result, the French landed without opposition and the American Revolution took another decided turn toward independence.

A new children's novel about this July 1780 event is *Upon Secrecy* by Selene Castrovilla. Beautifully illustrated by Jeff Crosby and Shelly Ann Jackson, this engaging book will delight both children and adults.

## **Chapter 7**

### **August 1780, A Dangerous Month**

The Setauket spies continued their activity during August and September of 1780, with Austin Roe making trips between New York City and Setauket carrying messages between Samuel Culper Jr. and Samuel Culper Sr., and with Caleb Brewster carrying the messages across Long Island Sound to Major Benjamin Tallmadge in Connecticut. Abraham Woodhull, suffering from both illness and a great deal of concern over the closeness of British troops stationed in Setauket, still carried on his vital work as chief of the Spy operations.

*"6 August - Sir, Your several dates of the 23d and 26<sup>th</sup> of July came to hand on the 4<sup>th</sup> inst, and observe the contents. Being still in a feble state (but mending) was obliged again to have recourse to Austin Roe, and dispatched him the same evening with such directions as thought proper He this instant returned with the enclosed from Culper, Junior. I hope it contains all the needful. Roe hath on verbal account worthy of notice...I purpose to go to 727 for the benefit of our 115, and have 130 ready for you, em. SAML. CULPER."*

When Washington replied to Woodhull, he cautioned him not to go to New York (727). *"Dear Sir: ...With respect to the proposed incursion I do not think it advisable under present circumstances. Although the Enemy appear to be small, dispersed parties, yet the risque in an attempt more than counterbalances the advantage which might be obtained. G.W."*

Woodhull made the trip to New York anyway and as a result provided Washington with valuable information dated August 16, 1780. The dangers associated with these efforts on Long Island and on Long Island Sound were also evident in a letter to Major Benjamin Tallmadge from Caleb Brewster following one of his excursions to Long Island.

*“Fairfield, Aug 18<sup>th</sup>, 1780. Sir. I came from Long Island this after noon but have got no dispatches. Culper has been down to New York. I waited til this morning and he was to send them by two o'clock, but before he sent them I was attacked by Glover and Hoyght. I left one man taken and one wounded. We killed one on the spot. The man that was taken went after water. I shall want two men before I come across again. I have got two boats in fine order. I wish you send me seven men and I engage to take some of their boats. Mister Muirson will give you a particular account of our cruse. Austin told me that Sir Henry Clinton went down to the east end of the Island on the sixteenth. Don't fail to let me have two crews if you can of Continental soldiers. With respect, your friend and humble servant, CALEB BREWSTER.”*

General Washington replied to Tallmadge that he hoped that Woodhull's information would be coming soon and that Lt. Brewster could have whatever Continental whaleboat soldiers were available. Brewster made a number of trips to Setauket over the next month and noted in one letter that he was cautioned by Austin Roe not to come back for a week as Setauket was filled with British troops. In another letter Brewster makes a reference to his location and to the British officers in the area.

*“Fairfield, August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1780. Dear Sir: I returned this morning from the Island. I crossed on 22d. inst. And was detained by Culper until last night. I did not see Culper, he is sick. He did not appoint any time for me that I know of. It was with great difficulty that I got the dispatches. The troops are very thick...I lay up back of Esqr. Strongs yesterday and there came a Lieutenant of 17<sup>th</sup> Regiment within gun shot of us, looking for Esqr. Strong's hounds afoot...C. BREWSTER”*

This letter alone does not establish any connection between Brewster and Anna Smith (Nancy) Strong, however it does put Brewster right there in her backyard as he waits for the dispatches from Woodhull to take back across the Sound.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Anna Smith Strong, Culper Spy**

Folklore is an important ingredient in local history and can often provide insight into the character of the people who the stories are about as well as the character of the people who pass down these stories. Folklore almost always has some basis in fact as well.

The story of Anna Smith (Nancy) Strong and the clothesline she used to tell Abraham Woodhull where Caleb Brewster was waiting with his whaleboat to carry messages back to General Washington, is an example of folklore. What we do know of “Nancy” and her husband Selah Strong paints the picture of the Strongs as ardent patriots and dedicated, strong-willed community leaders, just the sort of residents who would not hesitate to be involved in clandestine work for the Patriot cause.

Morton Pennypacker was the first to write down a description of how Nancy Strong operated. Pennypacker, in his 1939 book *“General Washington's Spies On Long Island and in New York,”* also describes “A somewhat similar method” in the Newport, Rhode Island area, written in a book by Arthur A.

Ross, pastor of the first Baptist Church of Newport about 1830. This was, of course, long after the events occurred. Pennypacker shared his notes with historian Kate Strong and she became convinced that the story was almost certainly true. Strong wrote that the story was not family tradition and that Pennypacker was the first one to detail the story.

Miss Kate Strong, Long Island historian and writer, and descendant of Nancy Strong, told the story in more detail in the Long Island Forum in 1940, and the records she found of purchases made for “Nancy” Strong in New York City were significant. According to Strong, *“News must be gotten from New York and Austin Roe...had to give some reason for his hurried trips to the city. As the old account books show, Madam Nancy found need for many things and needed them at once. Yards and yards of table-cloths and other expensive things were ordered in haste...”*

The 1913 edition of Mather's *“The Refugees of 1776 from Long Island to Connecticut”* details that *“Rivington’s ‘Gazette’ of Jan. 3, 1778, states that, Selah Strong was captured and confined in the sugar house, in New York, ‘for surreptitious correspondence with the enemy.’ It is commonly reported in the family, that he was afterward confined on the Jersey prison ship. It is family tradition, that his wife was in the habit of taking produce from the farm, to him on the ship, which she was enabled to do through the influence she had with some of the Tories.”* According to Kate Strong, “Nancy” Strong was also able to arrange for her husband’s release and he went immediately to Connecticut for safety.

A copy of the actual newspaper says: “SATURDAY, January 3, 1776 THE ROYAL GAZETTE New-York: *Publified* by JAMES RIVINGTON - Laft Monday Selah Strong, of Suffolk County, was committed to the care of the provoft of this city, on a charge of treafonable correpondence with his majesty’s enemies.” (NOTE: In colonial writing the first s in a work is written as f.)

When Caleb Brewster wrote to Benjamin Tallmadge on August 27th, 1780 that, *“I lay up back of Esqr. Strongs yesterday,”* he gave us one of the few clues to where he and his whaleboat crews hid while waiting for messages to take back across Long Island Sound to General Washington. There is no mention of Anna Smith Strong or her husband Selah Strong by name, however “Esqr. Strongs” undoubtedly refers to the Manor house on Strong's Neck which was, in 1780, occupied by British officers as well as by Anna Smith Strong her two youngest children . Abraham Woodhull noted in a September 1st letter to Tallmadge that, *“there's in Setauket the 17th Regiment Dragoons, Some Huzzars, Some Rangers, about 20 wagons, 300 horses, 250 men, 220 mounted...”*

Another piece of the puzzle comes in the form of a letter from British spy William Heron who wrote in a letter dated February 4, 1781, that *“Private dispatches are frequently sent from New York to the Chieftain here (General Washington) by some traitors. They come by way of Setalket, (sic) where a certain Brewster receives them at, or near, a certain womans.”*

A deposition taken in Fairfield Ct. By Captain Caleb Brewster and two other officers, was filed by Nathaniel Roe and Selah Strong, that about March 15, 1781 men from two or three whaleboats came across from Connecticut and, “after plundering Mr. Roe they proceded to Mr. Selah Strong's of Setauket...Mr. Strong absolutely refused letting them in and repeatedly questioned if they had any orders from his Excellency Governor Trumbull. They gave him no satisfactory answer. He told them if they had any orders to enter his house he would instantly open his doors. They told him they were *determined to get into his house and immediately began to stave the doors with large billets of wood, but finding that*

*ineffectual they fired a number of shots into the house one of which went through Mrs. Strong's hair and lodged in the wall. Mr. Strong by their threats and violence was compelled to open the door to save her life. After they had entered the house Mrs. Strong demanded what authority they had to break her door. One of the party presented a bayonet to her breast and told her that; that was his authority. They began to ransack the house and not finding any English goods took furniture to the amount of about 10 pounds and demanded Mr. Strong's money. The militia assembling they were obliged to quit Mr. Strong's before they could get it."*

This letter indicates that Selah Strong was in Setauket in March of 1781. Selah and "Nancy" Strong may have been living in the manor house even though they did not own it. The entire neck had been sold to Andrew Seaton on June 18, 1768 by Anna Smith Strong's father William Henry Smith who died October 2, 1776. He is buried in the Smith/Strong Cemetery on Strong's Neck. Selah Strong was actually back on Long Island no later than May 2, 1780 when he was elected president of the Town of Brookhaven Trustees, a position he then held through 1797. Selah was familiar with Andrew Seaton, a Loyalist, as he received an IOU from Seaton in 1783 and issued him a Certificate of Protection in 1784. Selah Strong purchased Seaton's Neck at auction on February 16, 1785.

The chief of the Culper Spy Ring in Setauket, Abraham Woodhull was known to historian Benjamin Franklin Thompson. In Thompson's History of Long Island, published in 1839, he wrote, "[Benjamin Tallmadge] opened, this year [1778], a secret correspondence (for General Washington) with some persons in New-York, and particularly with the late Abraham Woodhull, of Setauket, which lasted through the war. He kept one or more boats constantly employed in crossing the Sound on this business." Many known and unknown Patriots in Setauket probably assisted the Setauket Spies as it was a small community and everyone knew each other. It seems clear that Anna Smith (Nancy) Strong contributed in a substantial way to the success of the spy ring and its many connections.

Young people (of any age) should read *By the Sword: a Young Man Meets War* by Selene Castrovilla; illustrations by William Farnsworth. The book, available through the Three Village Historical Society and at the Emma S. Clark Memorial Library, follows Benjamin Tallmadge's participation in the first battle of the Revolutionary War on Long Island.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Spy Codes and Invisible Ink**

The Setauket Spy network's need for secrecy and General Washington's need for security led them to extensively employ the use of both invisible ink and codes during the undercover operations that took place between 1778 and 1783. Abraham Woodhull began a simple code in April 1779 using the figures 10 for New York, 20 for Setauket and 30 and 40 for post riders. By July, Benjamin Tallmadge had prepared a more complete code which he distributed to Woodhull and General Washington. This code designated numbers for specific, often used words. It also designated General Washington and others with three-letter designations; General Washington was 711 (however 711 was not included on the complete code list), John Bolton (Tallmadge) 721, Saml. Culper (Woodhull) 722, Culper Junr. (Townsend) 723, Austin Roe 724, Caleb Brewster 725, and Setauket 729, among many others.

The use, by the Culper spy ring, of invisible ink was more extensive. It employed a chemical formula that was discovered by James Jay, brother of John Jay, an early chief of Intelligence for General Washington and the first Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court. James Jay wrote to Thomas Jefferson explaining his use of invisible inks.

*“The curious experiments in Sympathetic Inks, fluids with which if one writes on the whitest paper the letters immediately become invisible, are generally known; and so is likewise the facility with which the writing with any one of them may be rendered visible. For this reason I presume the subject has been considered as a matter of mere curiosity and entertainment, and has never been applied to any use in Politics or War. When the affairs of America, previous to the commencement of hostilities, began to wear a serious aspect, and threatened to issue in civil war, it occurred to me that a fluid might possibly be discovered for invisible writing, which would elude the generally known means of detection, and yet could be rendered visible by a suitable counterpart. Sensible of the great advantages, both in a political and military line, which we might derive from such a mode of procuring and transmitting intelligence, I set about the work. After innumerable experiments, I succeeded to my wish. From England I sent to my brother John in New York, considerable quantities of these preparations...In the course of the war, General Washington was also furnished with them, and I have letters from him acknowledging their great utility, and requesting further supplies.”*

The invisible ink or “stain” as it was referred to, was first proposed to General Washington in a letter from John Jay. *“Fish Kill 19th Nov. 1778 - Sir, This will be delivered by my brother, who will communicate & explain to your excellency a mode of correspondence, which may be of use, provided proper agents can be obtained. I have experienced its efficacy by a three years trial. We shall remain absolutely silent on the subject. I have the honor to be - with the highest esteem & respect - Your Excellencys most obedient servant - John Jay.”*

Abraham Woodhull first placed his “stain” messages on a blank sheet of paper placed in a package of the same blank paper. Later he followed General Washington’s instructions, as written in a letter to Benjamin Tallmadge, for writing his messages in a method also suggested to Washington by James Jay. *“C-r, Jr. should avoid making use of the stain upon a blank sheet of paper(which is the usual way of its coming to me). This circumstance alone is sufficient to raise suspicions. A much better way is to write a letter in the Tory style with some mixture of family matters and between the lines and on the remaining part of the sheet communicate with the stain the intended intelligence.”*

To learn more about spy codes and invisible ink, check out the following books: *The Dangerous Book for Boys* by Gonn Iggulden and Hal Iggulden, pages 64 and 149. *Sneakier Uses for Everyday Things* by Cy Tymony, pages 84 and 85.

The story of the Setauket Spies does not end here. The story continues.

To take a walking tour with Setauket farmer and spy Abraham Woodhull see the Three Village Historical Society Calendar of Events and School Field Trip Programs.

The information is posted on these web sites:

[www.tvhs.org](http://www.tvhs.org)

[www.ThreeVillageHistoricalSociety.org](http://www.ThreeVillageHistoricalSociety.org)

[www.HistoryCloseatHand.com](http://www.HistoryCloseatHand.com)

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