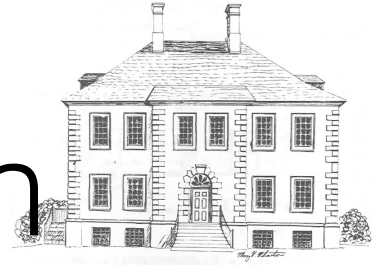


Carlyle Connection

“It’s a fine beginning.”



Spies and Secret Communications during the Revolution

By Mark Hill

This past Spring, some of you may have watched the AMC original series “Turn” which portrayed several key players of General Washington’s first espionage network (i.e., The Culper Spy Ring) during the Revolutionary War. That series and the book that provided the foundation upon which Turn was based (Washington’s Spies by Alexander Rose), and some encouragement from Helen Wirka, spurred me on to write this article (a few of the Carlyle House community even read and discussed this book recently during one of its book club sessions).

“Know Thy Enemy,” the aphorism made famous by Sun Tzu (author of *The Art of War*), is especially applicable to General Washington’s desire, and the fledgling nation’s dire circumstances requiring it, to obtain any intelligence on the intentions of the British military in North America throughout the Revolutionary War. While “spies” have been deployed by nations and militaries for thousands of years, you may be surprised at some of the surreptitious methods that were used by Washington’s spy network to gather and relay information back to enable the commander to make the best use of such intelligence.

One of the major events impelling Washington to ratchet up his intelligence activities was the advent of the British attack on New York City (then located in present day Manhattan). In September 1776, the supreme commander of British armed forces in North America, General William Howe, had amassed his superior military regiments (superior both in size and experience) across the East River from Washington and his troops. There were several different tacks the British general could take—land in the City then advance northward (through present day Bronx), land up north then move south to the City, or do both maneuvers and catch the Americans in a pincer movement. General Washington needed some intel, and in

THE UNTOLD STORY OF
AMERICA'S FIRST SPY RING

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a timely manner, on which way, or ways, the British leadership was leaning and needed to plan his troop allocation and positioning accordingly to stave off the inevitable attack. He had ordered Generals William Heath and George Clinton to establish a “channel of information” on Long Island, pointing to possible “friends” behind British lines that could both gather information and route it back to headquarters in a most expeditious manner. General Washington had already considered reliance on information extracted from deserters and prisoners, as well as from overnight forays behind enemy lines. But this intelligence often was of little use and Washington was feeling the pressure to obtain accurate information on the



Britishers' positions and movements.

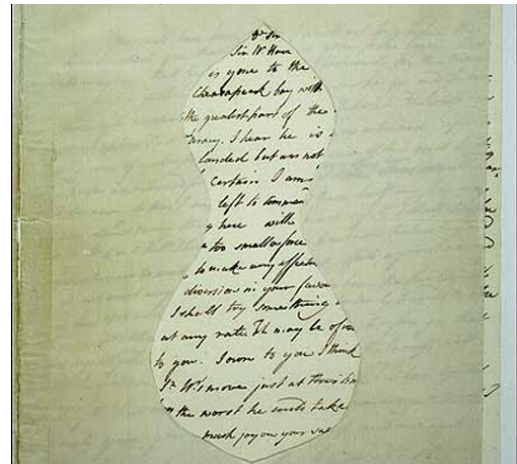
It wasn't until early 1777 when Washington was able to assemble a formal intelligence gathering apparatus—and one that included significant civilian participation. Enter Nathaniel Sackett, a member of New York's Committee for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies. General Washington, based on a colleague's recommendation, selected Mr. Sackett to manage the Continental Army's intelligence gathering efforts. Intelligence gathering behind the British lines in New York and Long Island basically consisted of both watching and listening for any clues that pertained to British troop movements or their numbers. Such information gatherers would need to be equally attentive as well as "chameleonic", i.e., blend in with the landscape and not attract attention through spoken word or deed. Seeing the need for the new intelligence head to have a deputy in order to assist in relaying messages from the "observers" to headquarters, Washington appointed Captain Benjamin Tallmadge of the Second Continental Light Dragoons to fill this role. Capt. Tallmadge, incidentally, was a Yale classmate and close friend of the high profile American spy, Nathan Hale. Later, in 1778, Tallmadge was instrumental, through his network of childhood friends from the Long Island town of Setauket, in setting up what has been designated as Washington's "first spy network", The Culper Spy Ring.

Modes of Secret Communications

To evade detection by the British, especially when persons were stopped at checkpoints going in and out of British-occupied areas (e.g., New York City, Long Island), Washington's spies would use some form of code, or even cloaked writing methods. Often, such operatives' correspondence would include either inverted initials (say, "J.G.", for "George Johnson") or had entirely different names ascribed to them. For example, in the Culper Spy Ring, the behind-the-lines spy, Abraham Woodhull, was given the "spy name" of "Samuel Culper." In addition, 3-digit numbers were used to represent things, places and names (e.g., "727" for New York city, "722" for Abraham Woodhull/Samuel Culper, "522" for ships, "711" for George Washington). If intercepted, the meaning of a correspondence from "Samuel Culper" would be nearly impossible to ascertain. Here is an example passage: "There [has] been no augmentation by 592 (ships) of 680 (war) or 347 (land) forces ... Every 356 (letter) is opened at

the entrance to 727 (New York) and every 371 (man) is searched, that for future every 356 (letter) must be 691 (written) with the 286 (ink) received. They have some 345 (knowledge) of the route our 356 (letter) takes."

Another approach used was to place a designated template in the shape of an hour-glass over a correspondence including secret messages. The letter, in toto, did not appear to convey any important information, but when read in the confines of the template would provide the hidden meaning.



Perhaps the most advanced espionage tool of trade used by Washington's intelligence arm, as well as American diplomats, during the Revolutionary War was invisible ink. The preferred method was for the secret information to be written in invisible ink in between the lines of the seemingly innocuous letter contents. The basic approach was to write in invisible inks such as lime juice, milk or, in the case of Silas Deane, one of the American diplomats in Paris, cobalt chloride mixed with glycerin and water. The receiver of the letter merely had to apply heat to reveal the secret message, but would need to exercise caution as application of heat would make the paper brittle. A more sophisticated approach was to use invisible inks that were impervious to heat and required application of a "reagent" (pronounced "re-agent") to reveal the cloaked message. Such inks would consist of, say, gallo-tannic acid, which was made out of powdered nutgalls (extraneous growths usually found on oak trees, created by parasites) diluted in water. The reagent would be an iron sulphate solution. By application of the ferrous sulfate over the invisible inked area, the reagent would react with the

diluted gallo-tannic acid to form ferrous gallo-tannate which would make the original writing visible. Washington procured his first batch of the invisible ink and reagent (which he referred to as a “counter-liquor”) from John Jay, the prominent statesman who served as President of the Continental Congress, whose brother, James Jay, a physician based in England, had developed such liquids and successfully communicated to the Continental Congress a hidden message about Britain’s intentions with respect to the North American colonies (“... reduce them to unconditional submission”) during the early days of the Revolution.

Relaying the Message

Intelligence gathering behind enemy lines is difficult enough; perhaps even more challenging was to get the

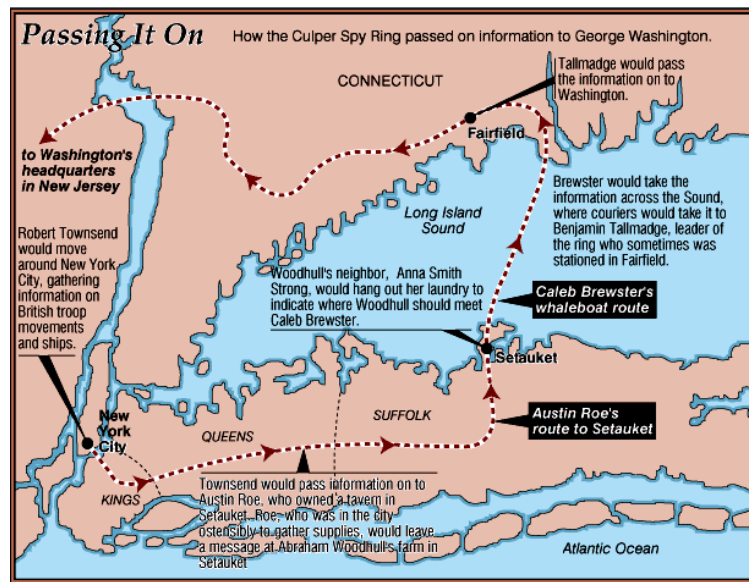


information back to Washington’s HQ, and in a timely manner. In several instances, General Washington issued grievances regarding the timeliness of the intel provided to him, as often it was of little use by the time he received it. Understandably, there were several checkpoints and circuitous routes that spies needed to take in order for the message to arrive at HQ without compromising the spy network.

In the Culper Spy Ring, the operators would have to go through sometimes more than one checkpoint to get intelligence out of New York City and route the information to the Long Island town of Setauket. Once delivered at Setauket (sometimes in the form of a “dead drop,” e.g., dropped in a box in Abraham Woodhull’s farm field), Abraham Woodhull (aka Samuel Culper), would add some notes to the correspondence, then determine if a boatman was ready to pick up the message at a designated cove. To effectively announce his arrival to “Samuel Culper,” the boatman would have a local woman hang a black petticoat on her clothesline. In addition, she would

hang a number of handkerchiefs to indicate which cove to find the boatman. After pick-up and transport over the Long Island Sound to Connecticut, the message was delivered via horse-borne courier to Capt. Tallmadge in the town of Fairfield, then to General Washington, via a “post” system (i.e., horse riders staged at intervals of, say, 15 miles, to speed up the transport time).

While no one from the Carlyle family served their nascent nation as one of Washington’s spies, it should be noted that being a courier of sensitive military information, whether gathered behind enemy lines or provided by



one’s own side, was a very important position and was fraught with potential dangers at every turn. In July 1781, young George William Carlyle (15 years old at the time) delivered very important letters, at least once, from the General Marquis de Lafayette and James McHenry (an aide to both Lafayette and Washington) to General Nathanael Greene, commander of all Continental Army forces in Virginia and the Carolinas. While these messages were not in cipher, they did include very sensitive information on American troop movements, troop strength and status of stores (e.g. arms, clothing) throughout the Southern theater of war, particularly in Virginia, as well as on the American perception of where General Cornwallis was moving his troops, the numbers ascribed to his command, and possible strategies to successfully defend against the British incursion within Virginia. At this juncture of the Revolutionary War, George Washington and his generals

particularly needed to practice the utmost caution in keeping the contents of their correspondences out of British hands. Nathanael Greene, with his dogged pursuit of the Carolina-based British forces throughout 1781, effectively had pushed Lord Cornwallis into Virginia. George Washington and French General Rochambeau were weighing military engagement options: attack the British stronghold in New York or Cornwallis' troops in Virginia. Correspondence among the patriot leaders had to traverse hundreds of miles and weren't all in cipher; at this crucial stage of the patriot forces' prosecution of the war, it was imperative that information leaks were shut off. Lafayette, in one of his letters to General Greene, stated firmly that "Every Confidential Communications Shall ever Be Sent By officers," which not only emphasized the importance of securing the communications lines, but also showed the level of consideration Lafayette placed on young Mr. Carlyle in being a courier of such messages. George William Carlyle carried the Lafayette and McHenry letters from Williamsburg to General Nathanael Greene's headquarters in South Carolina (about 60 miles northwest of Charleston), a trip of about 300 miles and through parts of the Carolinas that were, while not the bastions of Loyalism as seen in New York City and Long Island, at least sketchy as to where the inhabitants' loyalties lay. So the youthful soon-to-be cavalryman from Alexandria had to be ever vigilant with his precious cargo destined to one of George Washington's top generals!

Selected Sources:

Allen, Thomas B., [George Washington Spymaster: How the Americans Outspied the British and Won the Revolutionary War](#), 2007.

Conrad, Dennis M., [The Papers of General Nathanael Greene, Volumes 8 & 9](#), 1995.

Rose, Alexander, [Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring](#), 2006.

Nagy, John A., [Invisible Ink: Spycraft of the American Revolution](#), 2010.

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News from the Educator

Summer is coming to an end and children are returning back to school after spending their break from school at various summer camps. One of those camps was at Carlyle House, which held three successful sessions of Camp Carlyle this year, reaching the goal of at least 8 campers per session. The July 7-11 session had 12, July 21-25 reached the maximum 15 campers limit, and August 4-8 had 8. Each session was filled with a lively group who came back each day excited for what they would learn. Many exclaimed on the final day they would return next year which is all I need to hear to know it was a success!

The day trip to Mount Vernon did not disappoint, it was definitely a highlight of the camp and I am very grateful to their staff for putting together a fantastic day of activities for our group! Many of the campers had never been before and I was happy to provide them the opportunity to go and enjoy the home of our first President.



While Mount Vernon drew excitement, Carlyle House still remained the main focus of the camp and we had our own fun educational activities as well. Our campers learned about colonial foodways, even helped prepare a colonial meal complete with sugar cakes (sugar cookies) for dessert. They learned about the value of sugar at the Alexandria Archaeology Museum, learned about 18th Century medicine at the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Museum, and how to run a tavern at Gadsby's Tavern Museum. We even celebrated the War of 1812 by having a water balloon fight in the front yard!

I am looking forward to next year's camp sessions and am excited to see the camp continue to grow.

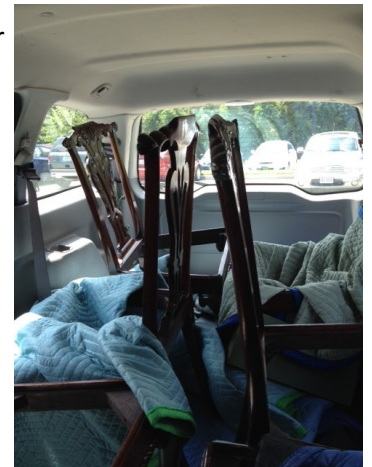


~Vanessa Herndon

News from the Curator

Summer has been a good time to accomplish many things! Our annual inventory was completed in July and sent to Headquarters. A few new curatorial projects surfaced during this process where the collection objects are examined and conservation concerns are noted. It is a healthy part of the museum life process to do this each year. Thanks to Board Member, Carole Smith, for her assistance and to Philippe Halbert, one of our curatorial assistants, for helping with this project.

The conservation work begun by Bruce Schuettinger was completed in early summer, and the Chippendale chair frames were delivered to Colonial Williamsburg in order to accompany the slip seats which were sent there earlier in the year. Leroy Graves is the upholsterer doing the work on the seats of the chairs. Having the frames with the seats in his workshop will ensure a proper fit when they return to Carlyle House. They will be picked up in late September, and the last batch of chair frames and seats will be delivered for conservation at that time.



Our Garden Audio Tour is set to premiere this fall after many, many drafts and many wonderful researchers working on it! Keep your eyes peeled for a special email to arrive in your inbox announcing when it goes "live."

Our War of 1812 Bicentennial programming concluded this past weekend on August 30 and 31 with the Signature Weekend of Events. The weekend culminated with a festival at Waterfront Park, commemorating this 200 year old conflict between America and Great Britain through family friendly activities such as a play, boat rides, a scavenger hunt, boat building, and much more. In December 2013, the Mayor of Alexandria had challenged the British (via their Embassy in Washington, DC) to a

friendly rematch to restore the good name of the citizens of Alexandria (since they had surrendered to the British in August, 1814) through three events: a cricket match, a yacht race (sponsored by the Old Dominion Boat Club) and a tug-of-war. Alexandria swept the British away in all the challenges and only lost ground, literally, in the first of the three tugs-of-war, but Alexandria's firefighters who made up the team for our side, were quickly back on their feet and had quite a triumphant day. Carlyle House was proud to be a participant in this city wide commemoration and to work with over a dozen partnering sites and organizations to plan the event.

Looking ahead, we have an exciting line up of programs for this fall and we hope to see you at some of them! Please feel free to contact us if you have an interest in volunteering or would like more information about any of these events. Thank you for your support!



Leroy, Helen, and Carole in Williamsburg

~Helen Wirka



Carlyle House

Upcoming Events

John Carlyle Deathbed with Attending Physician

Friday, October 17 & Saturday, October 18 – 7:00-8:30 p.m.

Footsteps to the Past guides will bring visitors through the front door of Carlyle House and they will proceed to the bedchamber where they will see the corpse of John Carlyle on his deathbed. An attending physician will explain the steps taken to treat Colonel Carlyle in his final illness. Visit www.footstepstothepast.com for more details. Fee.

Ghosts & Goblins Crafty Tea/Cauldron Tea

Sunday, October 19; 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.

Bring your little ghosts and goblins to our 11:00 a.m. crafty tea, where they will enjoy child-friendly foods, crafts, and a goody bag. Ages 5+. Our 2:00 pm is for adults, who are invited to tour the museum after the tea and learn about 18th century funeral and mourning practices . Costumes encouraged. Fee.

John Carlyle Funeral and Ghost Tour

Saturday, October 25; 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Visitors will experience firsthand this important but somber day in Carlyle House history. Meet Colonel John Carlyle's family and view his coffin from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. at the Carlyle House. After paying respects to the family, visit our dark, dank tunnels for a spooky experience. A ghost tour of Alexandria is also included in the price of admission. Fee.

A Soldier's Christmas

Saturday, December 6; 12:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

The "Soldier's Christmas" program features re-enactors and costumed interpreters who will highlight colonial life in Alexandria during the holidays at the time of the American Revolution. Some of the activities include demonstrations of military drill, fife and drum music, gaming, and cooking. The Regimental surgeon will discuss Continental Army medicine and demonstrate 18th-century surgical instruments in the basement, while officers and ladies entertain guests in the dining room. There will be activities and colonial games for children. The program takes place immediately following the annual Scottish Walk in Old Town Alexandria.

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Carlyle House Historic Park is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums

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News from the Site Director

You may have noticed that your fellow Board member, Mark Hill, wrote this issue's fascinating feature article. He actually wrote it for the August Docent Dispatch, but I liked it so much that I begged him to allow us to reprint it here. Enjoy!

This summer, NVRPA announced a new branding campaign. We are now Nova Parks, a much easier name to remember and to pronounce. Although our legal name is still the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, the world now knows us as Nova Parks. How do you like the new logo?



The new NVRPA logo

Be sure to tune your televisions to WETA on December 4th for the first of a two-part special on the history of Alexandria. The senior producer was captivated by Carlyle House, which will be prominently featured in both episodes. The second episode will air in 2015. On a related note, I am currently in talks with a producer from the Travel Channel, who would like to film an episode of "Castle Secrets and Legends" at Carlyle House. They are interested in the story of Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow, the Civil War spy who married Emma Green, daughter of the proprietor of the Mansion House Hotel, after the war. Speaking of Carlyle House's allure, a reporter from Northern Virginia Magazine paid us a visit this summer and wrote a glowing review. You can read it here: <http://www.northernvirginiamag.com/buzz-bin/2014/08/08/bringing-new-life-to-an-old-town-house/>.

Please bear with us as we work on streamlining and simplifying our membership renewal process. For the past several years, we have mailed membership renewals twice yearly, once in the spring and once in the fall. Fall membership renewals were often confused with the Annual Appeal, as the two mailings often arrived around the same time. We are shifting to a single spring membership mailing per year, with the Annual Appeal continuing to go out in the fall. In a related development, all Nova Parks will receive a new point-of-sale system this fall. This new system includes a membership database, which will allow us to more efficiently track your membership status and your donations. Thank you for your patience while we work out the kinks.

I'd like to close with a big thank you to Debbie Rudolph, who relinquished her presidency to Shelly Miller at the fabulous Annual Meeting party in June. Debbie did a fantastic job and was great to work with. I am in awe of how well Debbie runs a meeting. Shelly, you have big shoes to fill, and we're all looking forward to a great term under your command!

~Susan Hellman

Carlyle House Historic Park

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