

## Washington's Spy Ring

General George Washington faced many challenges facing him in the Revolutionary War. He had untrained soldiers, lacked money and supplies, and faced a strong, well-trained army. Washington knew to overcome these daunting obstacles he would need to gather intelligence on the enemy.

In order to gather intelligence, General Washington knew that he needed spies. "Espionage was not a new activity to Washington. He had served as a spy during the French and Indian War and knew how important it was to have advanced information. At this stage in the war, with the troops he had, it was his only hope (Kilmeade 6)."

General Washington needed someone who could get behind enemy lines and pass as a Loyalist. Twenty-one-year-old Nathan Hale was one of the first to attempt the task in September of 1776. Hale went to Long Island and three days later the British captured the lower end of Manhattan, giving Hale little chance to establish his identity. A week later, Hale was arrested, tried, and hanged all in a span of 12 hours. (Kilmeade 33-34). The loss of Hale bothered Washington deeply and this failure made Washington realize he needed more than just one brave person, he needed a network of spies. Washington also realized using officers might not be the way to go. He decided to use what the Sons of Liberty did in Boston - civilians who would be able to gather information while pretending to be Loyalists (Allen 43).

In November of 1778, General Washington enlisted the help of Benjamin Tallmadge. He appointed Tallmadge the director of military intelligence and instructed him to construct a spy ring in New York City. This ring became known as the Culper Ring.

The Culper Ring consisted of several different people, each with their own strengths and ways to communicate. One member was Robert Townsend, who posed as a columnist for a loyalist newspaper and would hang around cafes talking to British officers (Baime, 2020). Another member of the ring was Anna Strong. She would relay signals to couriers using laundry on a clothesline to send messages. A black petticoat on the line meant a message was ready to be picked up by a courier. She would hang a number of handkerchiefs on the line to indicate the pick-up location (Allen 56).

This spy ring was very successful. They were able to uncover many plots of the British, including a plan to crash the economy by printing large amounts of counterfeit currency. Another plan stopped the ambush of the French fleet as it arrived in Rhode Island to provide support for the American cause. The same spy ring discovered that Benedict Arnold was a traitor (Baime 2021).

General Washington's use of the intelligence gained from the spy ring was very valuable. Washington's leadership skills were instrumental in the Patriots' victory. Washington led his Troops and the nation through a difficult time and the spy ring that he created was critical to this success.

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