

# George Washington's SECRET



WHILE THE DECISIVE PART PLAYED BY ESPIONAGE during World War II has come to light over the past 40 years, its crucial role in our own War of Independence still leaves most historians in the dark. But a new book re-illuminates the American Revolution to reveal that struggle's hitherto unrecognized turning points, which pivoted upon the covert operations of just half a dozen spies. Most of their names are unfamiliar, and one—belonging to a woman—is still unknown. Be that as it may, interest in the subject has spawned a new television series on mainstream TV that mixes plenty of fiction with the facts. This issue, TBR's Marc Roland sets the record straight on George Washington's "Secret Six."

By Marc Roland

**H**istorians now know it would have been next to impossible for the American colonies to have won the Revolutionary War without the aid of spies. We are all aware of Nathan Hale, the famous amateur American spy who was hanged by the British after his capture in Queens, New York. But the names of some of the most important spies that Gen. George Washington employed during the war to provide vital intelligence and help the nascent United States achieve its freedom are little known to the vast majority of Americans—lay and expert alike—even today. Neither alabaster statues nor full-size monuments were raised to commemorate these covert operatives, save weathered, largely forgotten tombstones of one or two of them.

This all changed late last year, however, when a memorial more enduring than bronze or marble was unveiled by authors Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger in *George Washington's Secret Six: The Spy Ring That*



**BENJAMIN TALLMADGE**  
Chief intelligence officer.



**JOHN SIMCOE**  
Heavy-handed Brit.

*Saved The American Revolution.*

In the process of narrating the influential success achieved by Colonial undercover agents, they incidentally and definitively answer a question many students of U.S. history and even professional scholars have difficulty



clearly understanding or explaining: namely, precisely why did the Revolution take place? Britain's excessive taxation without political representation, the Boston Tea Party, the Stamp Act, the rise of republican principles against benighted monarchism, the rights of private property and similarly economic or political causes are usually, if not entirely, convincingly cited as the mainsprings of revolt. But would decent, ordinary, God-fearing farmers, tradesmen, mechanics, students and their fellow citizens really have been willing to risk their lives for eight years under deplorable conditions on behalf of such high-minded, if nebulous issues?

While these matters certainly made up the intellectual atmosphere of the time, they were over the heads of most Colonists, who were not stirred to life-threatening action by principles or even rights. What made them mad enough to fight—to kill and be killed—were the British themselves, not the oppressive taxation or civic restrictions the London authorities imposed. Had the minions of King George III behaved differently, Washington would never have had enough volunteers for an army. His invaluable recruiters were the Crown's officers and men, whose

## The Hanging of Nathan Hale

**This is historical artist Don Troiani's depiction** of the hanging of Nathan Hale just before the execution. According to Troiani, "While some authors contend Hale was hanged at about 66th Street and First Avenue, a British officer states he was hung in front of the Royal Artillery Park. Period British maps prove this was at Turtle Bay (present 45th Street) just south of Howe's headquarters in the Beekman House and across from the Dove Tavern at the fourth mile marker. The British had pre-war artillery magazines established at the Turtle Bay site so this makes a great deal of sense." (To see more of Troiani's historical works or to buy them, see [www.allenscreations.com](http://www.allenscreations.com).)

consistent, ubiquitous atrocities became so intolerable that expelling the British was the overriding purpose of rank-and-file patriots. They would have continued to endure the economic oppression and political heavy-handedness of London empire-builders if such schemes had not been enforced by beatings, thefts, rapes, public humiliation, imprisonment without trial and a host of de-

monic actions less becoming of civilized Europeans than barbarous Tartars.

“A number of British officers considered anti-British sentiment so ingrained into the colonists’ spirit,” reports historian Robert Leckie, “that they believed ‘it should be thrash’d out of them [because] New England has poyson’d the whole.’ This led to numerous incidences of violence and pillage directed at colonists.”<sup>1</sup>

Kilmeade and Yaeger offer examples of British abuses as outrageous as they were commonplace. On flimsy (if nevertheless correct) evidence, Lt. Col. John Simcoe, a royal cavalry officer, rode out with his rangers to arrest a Colonial spy at the suspect’s home, on the north shore of Long Island. But the wanted man happened to be out of town. “Furious that the opportunity to catch a suspected spy red-handed had been squandered,” Kilmeade and Yaeger write, “Simcoe ordered the suspect’s father beaten in his stead. The rangers fell upon Richard [Woodhull], bludgeoning him while the rest of the family looked on in horror. Once the old man lay crumpled on the ground, the troops rode off.” The elderly man survived, but needed the better part of a year to recover from his ordeal. If his encounter had been an isolated or irregular incident, it might

be dismissed as just one of the excesses carried out by war criminals common in every military conflict. Instead, Mr. Woodhull’s encounter was part of the occupiers’ policy and emblematic of their behavior before the outbreak of hostilities, which only accelerated the same kind of brutality with which the Americans were all too familiar for years prior to the outbreak of the revolution.

“All around the British-occupied areas of New York and New Jersey,” according to Kilmeade and Yaeger, “reports of attacks upon local women by both individual soldiers and groups of the garrisoned troops were made with startling regularity as early as the summer of 1776. Many cases were handled with a casual nonchalance as simply part of the collateral damage of war.”

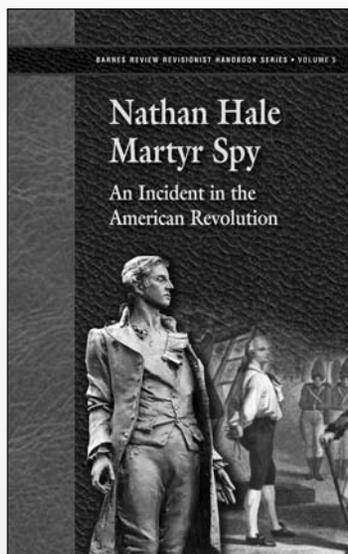
The authors continue, “On August 5, 1776, Lord Rawdon, a cavalry officer stationed on Staten Island, wrote a rather cavalier letter to his good friend, Francis Hastings, tenth Earl of Huntington, back home in England, in which Rawdon declared, ‘The fair nymphs of this isle are in wonderful tribulation, as the fresh meat our men have got here has made them as riotous as satyrs. A girl cannot step into the bushes to pluck a rose without running the most imminent risk of being ravished, and they are so lit-

NEW BOOK FROM TBR BOOK CLUB . . .

## NATHAN HALE MARTYR SPY

### AN INCIDENT IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By Charles W. Brown. Here’s a brand new edition of the long-lost book—first written in 1899—now back from the memory hole. Hale, of course, is most famous for his willingness to give his life in the service of his country, uttering, on the gallows, words that were once taught to school children before political correctness dictated that more time in public schools be dedicated to liberal, queer, minority and feminist studies. According to one British officer at the scene of his hanging for espionage, Hale “behaved with great composure and resolution, saying he thought it the duty of every good of-



ficier to obey any orders given him by his commander-in-chief; and desired the spectators to be at all times prepared to meet death in whatever shape it might appear.” Here is the story of how Hale came to find himself at the end of a hangman’s noose and an accurate rendering of his famous last words, plus poetry and prose about Hale created by some prominent Americans—plus more. A fascinating read. Softcover, 100 pages, #672, \$12 plus \$5 S&H inside U.S. Add \$24 S&H outside U.S. Order from TBR BOOK CLUB, P.O. Box 15877, Washington, D.C. 20003 or call 1-877-773-9077 toll free to charge. See also [www.barnesreview.com](http://www.barnesreview.com).

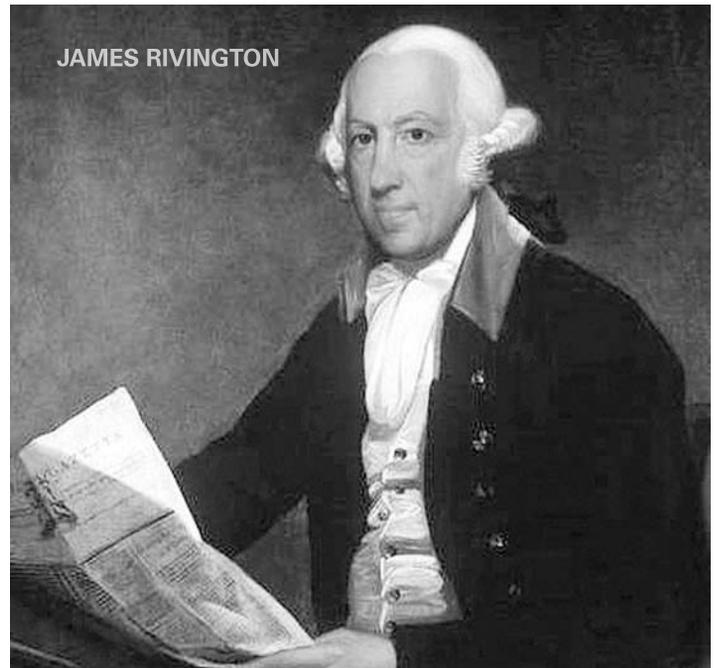
tle accustomed to these vigorous methods that they don't bear them with proper resignation, and of consequence we have the most entertaining courts-martial every day'."

The husbands, fathers or brothers of these women who tried to defend them were beaten into submission, arrested on charges of assaulting the King's men, and thrown into the holds of prison ships—"often called 'death ships' for their deplorable conditions"—anchored in Wallabout Bay, off the shore of Brooklyn. "Disease and vermin ran rampant among the starving prisoners," write Kilmeade and Yaeger. "The bodies of inmates who died might not be recovered for a week or more, left to rot in the cramped, airless hulls in which the unfortunate passengers were forced to spend 24 hours a day. By the end of the war, approximately 8,000 people were estimated to have died aboard prison ships in New York alone."

Clearly, British misbehavior was the fuel that stoked revolutionary fervor. And it was super-heated by Gen. George Washington's frustration in the face of enemy military superiority. But he hoped to compensate for his insufficient numbers of men and arms by installing an espionage network that might enable his less powerful if nonetheless determined forces to take the redcoats by surprise. Lone spies, like Nathan Hale, had proved vulnerable and ineffective, while inter-connected chains of command unraveled with the seizure of a single agent. Selecting Benjamin Tallmadge to follow a more efficacious middle course in the summer of 1778 was among Washington's most important decisions.

Tallmadge had been a high school superintendent before becoming a major in the 2nd Continental Light Dragoons. But as chief intelligence officer for Washington, he was promoted to the rank of colonel. Together, the two men took personal charge of an undercover system limited to a handful of operatives unknown to each other and even to Tallmadge and the general. Their ingenious organization was ahead of its time, so much so that "the methods used by these citizen spies—the dead drops (burying messages in a box at a pre-arranged location), the well-crafted back stories, the compartmentalizing of intelligence, the secret encrypted code—are many of the same methods still used today by secret agents the world over."

The Americans developed "the sympathetic stain," an invisible ink for writing reports in the margins of books or between the lines of what appeared to be an ordinary letter. Unseen words were intended for the colonel and the general penned in gallic acid—extracted from gallnuts—and appeared only when doused with iron sulfate, a secret method discovered by British counterespionage only late in the war.



JAMES RIVINGTON

## Rivington: The Tory Publisher Who Was an American Spy

**James Rivington** was the last man anyone would suspect of being a spy for the patriots. He published an infamous tory newspaper, notorious even among tories for the liberties it took with the truth, and extremely critical of patriots in general and George Washington in particular. However, in the 1950s, historians determined Rivington had not been what he appeared. It seems he had a change of heart and secretly became a member of the "Culper ring," spying for the patriot cause, passing along secrets of the British navy to Colonial leaders. Once he helped crack a British military code—doubtless saving patriot lives as a result. The Culper ring was so named by George Washington after Culpeper County, Virginia. It was started by Lt. Caleb Brewster and grew to include some 20 members, operating between British-held New York City and Setauket, New York, some 55 miles away. Notable members were Abraham Woodhull, code named "Samuel Culper Sr.," Robert Townsend, "Samuel Culper Jr.," Col. Benjamin Tallmadge of the 2nd Connecticut Light Dragoons, "John Bolton," Anna Strong (possibly) and couriers James Hawkins and Austin Roe. When New York City loyalists were finally evacuated in Nov. 1783, Rivington chose to remain behind, to the surprise of most people. The above portrait of Rivington is by Gilbert Stuart.

## THE CULPER RING

The Culper Ring derived its name from aliases taken by two covert leaders in the field: Abraham Woodhull and Robert Townsend, known respectively as “Samuel Culper Sr.” and “Samuel Culper Jr.” They and four other operatives—Caleb Brewster, James Rivington, Austin Roe and an unknown female agent—were identified only by numbers, as were Tallmadge and Washington. Their task was to send information describing activities of the British army in New York City, the royal headquarters, and the enemy’s base of operations. Once these papers reached Setauket, Brewster ferried them in his whaleboat across Long Island Sound, where Tallmadge’s dragoons were waiting to carry the messages to Washington’s headquarters.

Townsend’s mercantile background made his inquiries about British troop movements and shipping seem natural enough, but the Ring went into high gear when he was employed as a reporter for the city’s most rabidly loyalist newspaper. It was the work of an English-born publisher, who had so relentlessly vilified the patriots during the previous four years, the Sons of Liberty hanged him in effigy, then burned his home to the ground, then stormed into his office and destroyed his press, converting its lead type into bullets. “If James Rivington is taken,” vowed Gov. William Livingston, who had been singled out by the newspaper for special attention, “I must have one of his ears. Gov. Clinton is entitled to the other, and Gen. Washington, if he pleases, may take his head.”<sup>2</sup>

Evading such dismemberment, Rivington fled to England, where he was appointed King’s printer for New York, at £100 per year. In 1777, after the secure British occupation of that city, he returned with a new press and resumed publication of *The Royal Gazette*, emblazoned on every front page with the legend, “Printer to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty.” Its premises were often crowded with British army and naval officers, who spoke freely with the jovial Rivington about the latest troop movements or fleet maneuvers. These important acquaintances grew in number and volubility after he opened a convivial coffee shop, where his star reporter, Robert Townsend, found himself in the midst of an intelligence-gathering buffet. Rivington’s invaluable information was written in “the sympathetic stain” on thin paper, bound inside the covers of books, then conveyed to the American camp by Tallmadge’s agents. Rivington was not what he seemed, and became a priceless asset to the American spy ring camouflaged by his apparently ardent love for King George.

## A DANGEROUS NEMESIS

The Culpers’ dangerous nemesis was Oliver DeLancey, a native New York Jew and staunch loyalist, appointed to head up counterespionage after Benedict Arnold’s failure to hand over West Point and George Washington to Crown authorities. Major DeLancey “immediately set about to reorganize the British intelligence system, unifying codes and bringing a number of independent elements together, so that information could be more easily shared, analyzed and acted upon.” His measures severely damaged the Culper Ring, snaring one of its most important operatives, Number 355, the lady spy. DeLancey cast her into the fetid bowels of a prison ship, *HMS Jersey*, which “had a reputation for being the worst of the worst, earning the nickname, ‘Hell,’” where the unfortunate woman disappeared. Long Island legend associates her with Anna Strong, a local resident, who supposedly flashed variations of laundry on her clothesline as a visual code for passing

“Rivington became a priceless asset to the American spy ring camouflaged by his apparently ardent love for King George III.”

along confidential information to patriot observers, but Kilmeade and Yaeger, along with most historians, discount this version. More likely, Agent 355 belonged to some prominent loyalist family with personal access to British commanders.

## CRUCIAL VICTORIES

Before the onset of DeLancey’s effective countermeasures, and even, if less frequently, after their implementation, the Culper Ring scored some of the Revolutionary War’s most crucial victories. The group’s single greatest triumph was foiling an enemy plot that would have otherwise utterly bankrupted the fledgling United States just when the patriot cause was at its most vulnerable. To forestall such subterfuge, the Americans had earlier “developed a special paper of a very precise quality and thickness that would be used to produce the bulk of the money minted in Philadelphia, and, it was hoped, would be extremely difficult to replicate.”

On Nov. 27, 1779, Townsend reported that “several reams of the paper made for the last emissions struck by Congress have been procured [by the British] from

Philadelphia.” As Kilmeade and Yaeger write, “the one safeguard upon which the Americans were counting to protect their currency had been breached . . . the paper and possibly even the printer plates were on their way to New York, where the British could use them to churn out perfect counterfeits. Distribution in New York would drive down prices and sink the economy of the colonies right in the heart of their main trading hub . . . the fact that the worthless bills would be undetectable before it was too late made this intelligence of no small significance. With word from the Culpers delivered swiftly, Washington was able to alert Congress to the scheme.”

That they later turned the tide of war at its most decisive engagement is equally unrecognized. During late August 1781, 3,000 French men at arms were *en route* to join the siege at Yorktown. Without the timely assistance of their allies, understrength American forces would inevitably lose their grip on the critically important target and, with it, the entire campaign. No less aware of what was at stake, the British rushed their invincible navy to intercept the flotilla of Adm. François-Joseph de Grasse. Earlier that same month, agent Rivington made one of the single greatest intelligence coups in history, when he obtained a copy of the entire British naval codebook, with all of its latest signals. This he rushed to Tallmadge, who immediately forwarded it to de Grasse just in time for the admiral to anticipate, outmaneuver and soundly defeat the royal fleet at the Battle of the Chesapeake on Sept. 5.

After landing his vital troops, he handily drew away enemy naval forces and blockaded the coast until Yorktown fell, ensuring the independence of the United States of America. Given England’s unrivaled primacy at sea during the late 18th century, a French victory would have been far less likely without foreknowledge of the British signal codes made available by James Rivington.<sup>3</sup>

He and his fellow spies are ably served by *George Washington’s Secret Six*, which is written in a lively, well-documented style. As such, it is highly recommended to BARNES REVIEW readers interested in the undercover story of the American Revolution. ♦

#### ENDNOTES:

1 Leckie, Robert, *George Washington’s War: The Saga of the American Revolution*, NY: Harper Perennial, 1993.

2 Crary, Catherine Snell, “The Tory and the Spy: The Double Life of James Rivington,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 16.1, January 1959.

3 When New York was evacuated in November 1783, Rivington remained in the city, where, after his newspaper and coffee house went out of business that same year, he passed the remainder of his life in obscurity and near poverty.

MARC ROLAND is a prolific author and book and music reviewer for the PzG Inc. website ([www.pzg.biz](http://www.pzg.biz)).

## Could We Have Won the Revolution Without Them?



### George Washington’s Secret Six: The Spy Ring That Saved the American Revolution

When General George Washington beat a hasty retreat from New York City in August 1776, many thought the American Revolution might soon be over. Instead, Washington rallied—thanks in large part to a little-known, top-secret group called the Culper spy ring.

Washington realized that he couldn’t beat the British with military might, so he recruited a sophisticated and deeply secretive intelligence network to infiltrate New York. So carefully guarded were the members’ identities that one spy’s name was not uncovered until the 20th century, and one still remains unknown today. But by now, historians have discovered enough information about the ring’s activities to piece together evidence that these six individuals turned the tide of the war.

Drawing on extensive research, Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger have painted compelling portraits of George Washington’s “Secret Six”: Robert Townsend, the reserved Quaker merchant and reporter who headed the Culper ring, keeping his identity secret even from Washington; Austin Roe, the tavern keeper who risked his employment and his life in order to protect the mission; Caleb Brewster, the brash young longshoreman who loved baiting the British and agreed to ferry messages between Connecticut and New York; Abraham Woodhull, the curmudgeonly (and surprisingly nervous) Long Island bachelor with business and family excuses for traveling to Manhattan; James Rivington, the owner of a posh coffeehouse and print shop where high-ranking British officers gossiped about secret operations; Agent 355, a woman whose identity remains unknown but who seems to have used her wit and charm to coax officers to share vital secrets.

In *George Washington’s Secret Six*, Townsend and his fellow spies finally receive their due, taking their place among the pantheon of heroes of the American Revolution.

*George Washington’s Secret Six* by Brian Kilmeade (hardback, 256 pages, #685, \$28 minus 10% for TBR subscribers) is available from TBR, P.O. Box 15877, Washington, D.C. 20003. Add \$5 S&H inside the U.S. Outside U.S. email [sales@barnesreview.org](mailto:sales@barnesreview.org). Call 1-877-773-9077, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. PT, Mon.–Thur. to charge. Purchase online at [www.barnesreview.com](http://www.barnesreview.com).