
Petticoats, Passes. And Propaganda: The Role of Female Spies During the American Revolution 1775-1783

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Emily McInerney, from Chicago, Illinois, is a graduate student in the History Department with an option in Historical Administration. Her paper "Petticoats, Passes and Propaganda: The Role of Female Spies during the American Revolution, 1775-1783" as an independent study under the supervision of Dr. Charles Foy in the spring semester of the 2014-2015 academic year. Emily expects to complete her Master's Degree in December of 2016.

While every conflict shares similar characteristics, there has always one constant: the desire of combatants to have information regarding the opposing side's intentions. Spies, while called a variety of names, have proven to be one of the most successful means of acquiring intelligence. A "spy" is a person who takes information intended to be private and passes it along to a third party for means of creating a tactical advantage. During the American Revolution, both British and American forces regularly used spies. While scholarship and popular culture tends to highlight male agents, women had more means of gaining and transporting information effectively.⁵⁰ Viewed as the secondary sex, women were frequently overlooked, and therefore could observe and gather data in an unobtrusive fashion. As a result, during the American Revolution female spies were often more effective than their male counterparts, whether they sought out information while in their towns, travelling, or operating in a disguise. In each of these three types of spying women were able to operate in ways not open to men, thus provide critical information to both British and American forces.

During the Revolution the region between New York City and Philadelphia was highly contested. From Washington's retreat following the Battle of Long Island in 1776 to Evacuation Day in November 1783 British forces controlled New York City. During the same period, with the exception of British occupation in 1777-78, the rebels' capital was in Philadelphia. American and British forces regularly moved through the area between these two cities seeking to inflict harm upon their enemy and to assert control over an area that from the Battle of Trenton to the end of the war neither side was able to dominate. Because the lines of influence were so fluid, spies did not need to travel great distances to obtain information. This situation also allowed for easier travel, when necessary. Passes enabled women "to move freely between the lines."⁵¹

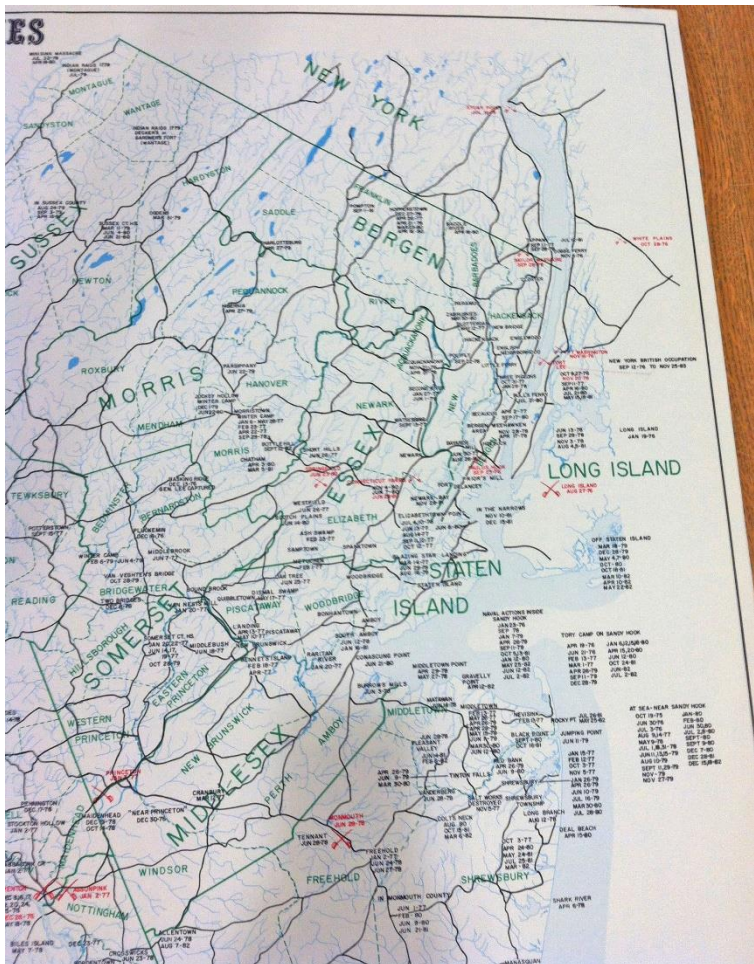
Because women were seen as caregivers of their families, they had the ability to travel greater distances without being noticed. Men would have had a more difficult time moving between states because they would have to have had an alibi for doing so. Women, on the other hand, could tell officials they were going out of town to help with an ill relative without raising questions.⁵² Since areas within this contested space where British and American forces might be located were so close to one another, it would not be unusual for a woman to ask for a pass to cross from a British locale

⁵⁰ John A. Nagy and Judith L. Van Buskirk have demonstrated the use of spies, both male and female, during the American Revolution. John A Nagy, *Invisible Ink: Spycraft of the American Revolution*. (Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westholme Publishing, 2010); Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). The TV series *Turn* depicts spies living in New York working for General Washington. In doing so it shows different methods of spying and the strains placed on families because of the secrecy involved in spying.

⁵¹ John A Nagy, *Invisible Ink: Spycraft of the American Revolution*. (Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westholme Publishing, 2010), 12.

⁵² Women's movements between enemy lines did vex officials on both sides. As Governor William Livingston of New Jersey observed, it was difficult at times to draw "distinction between who would and who would not injure their country," when given passes. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 65.

to an American locale, or vice versa, to visit a family member.⁵³ Thus, the cheek-to-jowl location of enemy forces combined with gender attitudes created a circumstance where information could be transmitted orally, eliminating the possibility of written communications that could prove to be the death of a spy.



Map 1. John Douglas Alden, “Battles and Skirmishes of the American Revolution in New Jersey” (1877).

The map shows just how close New York City was to the New Jersey border. The multiple waterways in the region allowed for a multi-frontal military assault, as well as provided several routes for spies to quickly transmit critical information. The lack of modern formal roads allowed spies to move undetected and avoid roadblocks where they would have been searched by opposing forces.

Though there has been a good deal of scholarship regarding the use of spies, there is not much primary documentation of who was actually a spy during the Revolution.⁵⁴ Because spying was a treasonous act, often punishable by death, identities were largely kept secret through the use of code names. As a result, there remains limited documentation of Revolutionary spies’ lives. This circumstance forces historians to contextualize spying and the types of people who would have the ability to pass along information easily to develop educated hypothesis as to who were spies and how they operated. By looking at gender roles, a cohesive picture can be constructed about the lives of female spies. Women were expected to maintain the home and maintain a conservative public

⁵³ At the same time, military officials on both sides did not subject correspondence to and from their husbands with the same level of scrutiny that letters between men received. Thus, when the British intercepted a packet of Washington’s letters they opened all but sent his letter to Mrs. Washington on to him assuming it was a private matter. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 63.

⁵⁴ Although John Nagy has been able to successfully identify several spies from letters and journal entries, much of the original documentation regarding spies had been destroyed during the war in order to protect the spies’ identity. The constant fear of information being intercepted forced men, like Washington, to take precautions regarding physical evidence of spies working for them.

image, since freedoms for women were often seen as “threatening.”⁵⁵ These socially constructed ideologies of how each sex was supposed to behave in the late eighteenth-century were reinforced early on in women’s lives. Each family member was classified in specified ways, whether by age, gender or skin color creating “ideal relationships.”⁵⁶ This meant that children grew up knowing men would be the heads of households while women were to remain in their husbands’ and fathers’ shadows.⁵⁷ During the Revolution, these rigid conceptions of gender roles allowed some women to move about unquestioned as their gender caused them to be viewed as non-threatening.

When spying, the rewards women would receive had to surpass the risks. “Patriotism” could only motivate an individual so much; especially when there were no guarantees the newly formed nation would be granting any rights to women. Spying was based on a mutual trust of each party protecting the other. Because women were supposed to be “virtuous, pious, tender, and understanding,” they made ideal spies.⁵⁸ When passing information women would not have been suspected early on. War had always been viewed as a male-dominated affair, something women were meant to stay out of. It would not have been out of the ordinary for a tavern wench to walk up to a table of redcoats discussing strategy. A man would not have been able to get that close unnoticed. Traditionally, women were seen as being “less rational, less capable of controlling emotions than men” which explains “their subordinate parental status.”⁵⁹ This perspective helped women work undetected, as it would have been inconceivable to many men that a woman could compose herself enough to be a successful spy.

One way some women chose to step out of their traditional role was to aid the war effort was through cross-dressing.⁶⁰ By simply changing clothing to be seen as a man, women opened up to a whole new world of possibilities. They no longer lived unnoticed, but had to be mindful of their actions. By stepping into the public sphere, the risks of being caught as a woman, not to mention a spy, increased. It can be inferred men would be more outraged by a woman dressing as a man than discovering she was spying. In the maritime community, women were rarely welcomed on board a vessel. If one were caught cross-dressing they could have been “ducked from the Yard-Arm and then ‘tarr...all over,” as was a woman who attempted to sail on the New York privateer *Castor* in 1743 by disguising herself as a man.⁶¹ Because few would know about the true identity of a cross-dresser there would be few who would defend a woman for dressing as a man. Women had their place in society; by placing themselves in a man’s sphere, cross-dressing women were disrupting the balance of roles. Since women were seen as being “the conservators of old values...men can perceive female freedoms as threatening.”⁶² The Revolution was a period of great change. However, such change was often viewed and shaped from a singularly male perspective. If women began acting like men, society would be turned upside down as they knew it to be. A woman taking on a male role was received less favorably than a woman who was aiding Washington in the war, whether as a nurse or a spy. The eighteenth century without a doubt was heavily male-focused. Men and women “did not take the same roles, but the presence of females blurred all the dichotomous

⁵⁵ Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 113-114.

⁵⁶ Ruth H. Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 62

⁵⁷ Joan R. Gundersen and Gwen Victor Gammel, “Married Women’s Legal Status in Eighteenth-Century New York and Virginia,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 39, no. 1 (Jan. 1982), 116-120.

⁵⁸ Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture*, 58.

⁵⁹ Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture*, 64.

⁶⁰ Similar to a modern definition, “cross-dressing” refers to wearing the clothing of the opposite sex and developing the mannerisms of that sex. While some chose to live the rest of their lives as the other gender, not all did so because of sexual preferences.

⁶¹ Charles R. Foy, “Ports of Freedom: How Slaves Used Northern Seaports’ Maritime Industry to Escape and Create Trans-Atlantic Identities, 1713-1783”, (PhD. Diss., Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, 2008), 201.

⁶² Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 113-114.

distinctions.”⁶³ Because it was so important to preserve the image of what men and women were supposed to be, women had limited options to aid the war in their true identities.

While there is not much information about a woman cross-dressing in order to be a spy during the Revolution, we do know there were several women who dressed as men to serve in the Continental Army, an indication that this tactic would have been one available to females who wanted to spy.⁶⁴ A Sam Gay enlisted in the Continental Army for three weeks before being “outed” as a woman, Ann Bailey.⁶⁵ Even though Bailey proved herself as a useful soldier, leading to her promotion to corporal, her sex resulted in a warrant for her arrest and eventual imprisonment.⁶⁶

Unlike Bailey, Deborah Sampson was a much more effective cross-dresser and remembered better than other female soldiers. Unfortunately, her most popular biography⁶⁷ asserted “myths, false statements and fictitious adventures” as truth.⁶⁸ Thus, like female spies, Sampson’s life is a bit of a mystery. It is generally accepted Sampson first got the idea to cross-dress while working at Sproats Tavern on Cape Cod, where men frequently talked about the war. On May 20, 1782 Sampson volunteered as Robert Shurtliff before being sent to West Point for training.⁶⁹ Sampson was able to serve through the war without being detected as a woman



Sampson was not considered to be an especially attractive woman, which would have helped conceal her true identity.

Plate 1. Jane Keiter, National Women’s History Museum, Education & Resources, “Deborah Sampson (1760-1827)” <https://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/biography/biographies/deborah-sampson> (accessed April 12, 2015).

While cross-dressing was not a formally recognized method of spying or being a spy, Sampson was able to step out of her customary female gendered role and step into the male sphere. She was able to successfully attain information not meant for non-military personnel, not to mention women. As rebellions began, women had limited options of showing “masculine’ forms of virtue by making public sacrifices for the patriot cause, including boycotts of Loyalist shops and fund raising for the war effort.”⁷⁰

⁶³ Ibid., 116.

⁶⁴ Patrick J. Leonard notes there is little information of who these women were. Because they lived under an alias records were only kept while they were serving in the army. The large gap in time between the war and the interest in the memory of the troops has kept a veil over these women’s true identities. Patrick J. Leonard, “As Private Robert Shurtliff, Deborah Sampson Served 18 Months in the Continental Army,” *Military History* 18, no. 1 (2001): 16-21.

⁶⁵ Leonard, “As Private Robert Shurtliff, Deborah Sampson Served 18 Months in the Continental Army,” 16.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁷ Herman Mann *The Female Review, Memoirs of an American Young Lady*, (2012).

⁶⁸ Leonard, “As Private Robert Shurtliff, Deborah Sampson Served 18 Months in the Continental Army,” 17.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Judith Hiltner, “She Bled in Secret,” *Early American Literature* 34, no. 2 (1999), 196.

Cross-dressing allowed women to engage experiences that were quite different from those they typically engaged in during the late eighteenth century. There were instances of women who were entered the public domain, especially if their husbands died or went to war. The most common instances of women working publicly were as tavern owners and shopkeepers.⁷¹ Widows would be able to support themselves and any children without the aid of the state. This was limited, however, to a limited number of women, mainly in urban areas, who could not afford to keep them on public welfare. When men dressed as women, they were forced to pay attention to their appearance. Hairstyles and makeup had to be a certain way to show not only their class, but also their submission to society. The modern way of “keeping up with the Jones” was always in play; neighbors pushed one another to better themselves for fear of being left socially behind. When women cross-dressed as men, other challenges opened up. While they did not have to worry as much about their physical appearance, mannerisms had to drastically change. How they walked into a room, spoke to one another and even how they shook hands had to change.

Established women who had husbands and children did not have the physical ability to cross-dress to help the war effort. Women in the upper and upper-middle classes had the ability to become spies without changing their lives or routines. Individuals who spied in their local communities proved to be just as helpful to the war effort as those who traveled tens of miles to find camps. The Revolution became a time when loyalties were taken into question and the royal government began watching residents closely. In-place spies were able to gather intelligence while maintaining a guise of loyalty to either the crown or the American rebels’ cause. One of the simplest ways a spy female spy could learn about troop movements was through quartered soldiers in their home. Because families were forced to take in and feed British soldiers, a perfect opportunity developed to ask questions about the war. As mentioned before, women were not viewed as a threat, making any inquiries a way to obtain gossip for the next dinner party. Though not a spy, Elizabeth Drinker wrote in her diary on January 25, 1777, there were “5 American Soldiers quartered upon us by order of the Counsel of Safty—two stay’d 2 or 3 days with us, the rest went of in an hour or two after they came.”⁷² Even though the soldiers were not in Drinker’s home for a relatively long time, there would have been opportunities to have a conversation. Similarly, soldiers being quartered may have had an interest in learning which side of the war the family supported and would have welcomed inquiries. This is where spies had to develop the skill of lying. Being able to play to both sides of the war determined their success. Women especially had to adapt to her community’s loyalty while proving her worth to the Continental Army as a spy. During the war spies had to worry as much about private opinions of themselves as well as the public opinion.

Social classes affected all aspects of a woman’s life in later eighteenth-century British North America, from what a woman was supposed to wear, to the kind of home they should own, to the family their children married into. Largely, those in the lower class had the ability to be invisible, in a sense, whereas they would not be missed if they left home for a period of time. Newspapers often reported on the social elite and social functions, making the upper class a type of celebrity. The most common way such a woman could pass information along with the least amount of risk was moving from establishment to establishment under a guise. As mentioned previously, passes to travel into a neighboring state were easily accessed by women. When spying, passes could be obtained under a false pretense in order to bring a message to a camp:

⁷¹ Serena Zabin, “Women’s Trading Newtworks and Dangerous Economies in Eighteenth-Century New York City,” *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 291-321.

⁷² Elaine Forman Crane, ed., *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker: The Life Cycle of an Eighteenth Century Woman, Abridged Edition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 59. Elizabeth Drinker provides one of the most complete diaries of the late 18th to early 19th century. Her detailed accounts of her daily life helps form an accurate image of what a woman of the time would experience.

Yet the hundreds of women who crossed the military lines did not think of themselves as professional information gatherers. Most crossed the military lines with a set agenda that had to do with relatives and friends. But while in enemy territory, their eyes and ears were at work, taking in what was happening around them, and returning home with the latest news from town or country.⁷³

While many women would not have the luxury to spend several weeks following camps to gain information, the ability to cross state lines without being noticed was a major accomplishment. Whether they were bringing information to a general or looking to overhear information about troop movements, passes were essential to spying.

Literacy also became a major aspect of spying. Women who were able to read and write could pass along information easier than those who could not. Being able to write notes lessened the risk of being caught as a spy, but increased the chances of information being seen by the enemy. Washington in a letter to Benjamin Tallmadge wrote, “This new agent should communicate his signature and the private marks by which genuine papers are to be distinguished from counterfeits.”⁷⁴ The specific spy mentioned *had* to be able to write in order to pass along intelligence. It is clear how important it was to Washington to receive accurate information. If a spy was not literate they had limited spying options because they had to verbally pass intelligence to their person of contact. When moving through checkpoints spies had to ensure the safety of the messages they were carrying. If the opposite side caught spies they could have been executed for treason, in the worst scenario. Maintaining concealment was key. One method was sewing pieces of paper into the seams of jacket buttons. If a woman, or a child, were searched it would not be thorough enough to check all seams and fabric. Officials would want to move quickly through the process, overlooking any paper that may be sewn into a button.

Similarly, carriages would be searched for contraband. If any notes were found containing information about the war, other than a personal letter with common knowledge, it would be taken and the individual(s) would be dealt with appropriately. False bottoms would be created in compartments, such as under seats or in chests, where incriminating messages could be hidden. When an official would search a carriage and the luggage they would not take the time to check every piece that closely to look for any secret compartment. Shoe heels were also hollowed out to hide notes.⁷⁵ Concealment while moving through areas of contention was key to remaining a spy. Unless a spy was able to remember a message while traveling, they had no other option other than hiding notes on their person or in a hidden compartment.

Messages were able to still move from city to city without putting a spy in direct risk was through drop-off zones. “In the dead drop a spy places a message in a prearranged location—in a tree or under some rocks—and leave it unattended. It remains there until an agent retrieves the correspondence from this agreed-on location and sends it to its final destination.”⁷⁶ By leaving notes in a wooded area spies were able to stay out of direct danger because the only risks came when leaving messages and picking them up.

⁷³ Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 52.

⁷⁴ Washington Papers, Letter from George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge, June 27, 1779, VI, 278. Tallmadge was an officer in the Continental Army who is known to have had his own “spy ring.” Several spies reported to him throughout the war, allowing him to then give intelligence and advice to Washington.

⁷⁵ Nagy, *Invisible Ink*, 101-102.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

While hiding messages could be done by both sexes, camp following was largely the province of women and children.⁷⁷ Whether women followed troops across the region because of family connections or for the excitement of being close to war, they naturally could overhear conversations intended to be private. The Molly Pitchers of the Revolution could have ulterior motives when volunteering their services.⁷⁸ As the women walked around the camp with water or in “hospital” tents, it would have been a relatively easy to eavesdrop on officers talking about strategies. By allowing women into camps, Washington and Howe were taking a great risk. Both sides needed medical aid, but there were no guarantees of competency or loyalty. On August 19, 1775 General Washington wrote to Thomas Gage about the treatment of wounded or ill soldiers. Washington notes different motivations for going to war and the uncertainty of fate:

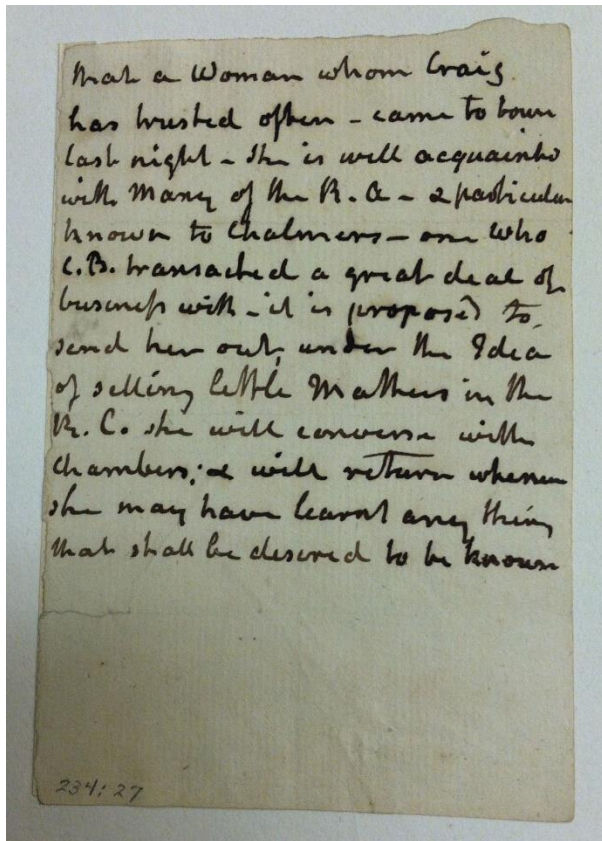
Whether British, or American Mercy, Fortitude of Patience are most preeminent; whether our virtuous Citizens whom the Hand of Tyranny has forced into Arms, to defend their Wives, their Children, and their Property, or to the mercenary Instruments of lawless Domination, Avarice, and Revenge best deserves the Appellation of Rebels, and the Punishment of that lord....⁷⁹

Washington recognized each man had different reasons for joining either side, but that God would judge everyone in the end. He knew nurses and doctors would do what they could to help soldiers, but ultimately it was out of their control. By trying to eliminate spies within camps, the deaths and wounds are slightly more justified. Because officials hopefully did everything in their powers to win the war, women would have been watched carefully while in camp. Effective female spies would have been careful, practiced and open to opportunities to gather information.

⁷⁷ Camp followers included wives, lovers and well as other women who saw economic opportunities in following the Revolutionary armies. In addition, men, often as wagoners, also were among army camp followers. Holly A. Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 209-10; A.J. Schenkman, *Washington's Headquarters in Newburgh: Home to a Revolution* (Charleston: The History Press, 2009), 72.

⁷⁸ Molly Pitcher, whose true identity is debated, became a camp follower after her husband joined the Continental Army aiding injured and sick soldiers. She stands out from other women because she took her husband's post at a cannon during battle after he was killed. “Molly Pitcher” became a term of endearment for women who were able to fill in for men during the war. Esther Pavao, Revolutionary-War.net, “Molly Pitcher”, <http://www.revolutionary-war.net/molly-pitcher.html> (accessed April 21, 2015). See: “The Heroine of Monmouth... June 28, 1778” for a depiction of Pitcher's bravery at the Battle of Monmouth.

⁷⁹ The George Washington Collection, Clements Library.



It reads: "...a Woman who, Craig had trusted often—came to town last night—she is well acquainted with Many of the R. A. [Rebel Americans, probably]—2 particularly known to Chalmers—one who C.B. ... a great deal of... with—it is proposed to send her out under... Idea of selling...in... R.C. she will converse with Chambers: & will return whenever she may have learned anything that shall be deserved to be known"

Plate 2. Clements Library Collection, Sir Henry Clinton Papers Vol. 234: Codes, Cyphers, Intelligence.

The importance of female spies and their cleverness in operating unseen is made evident in an undated letter among Henry Clinton's Paper in the Clements Library (Plate 2). While the writer is unknown except that it was from a British Loyalist, the letter proves that spies were not only used, but they did not waste time relaying unnecessary information. The letter also clearly evidences that military officials believed women could be and were utilized as spies and that these women used false pretenses to get intelligence. The writer's reference to "a Woman, who Craig had trusted often" denotes the regular practice of British forces to utilize females as spies. The writer's reference that the unidentified female spy was "particularly known to Chalmers" and "will return" to him "whenever she may have learned" intelligence, indicates the woman's connections and ability to move between American and British lines on more than one occasion.

That the unidentified female spy referenced in Plate 2 was not the only female spy working for the British is made apparent by the experience of Ann Bates. Bates would go into American camps under the guise of selling things like "thread, knives, and combs," where "she listened for military plans."⁸⁰ Bates was able to listen to what soldiers said while walking through camps posing as a merchant. This allowed her to be visible enough to not be suspected as a spy, but still often invisible because of her sex. Regardless of how Bates or other camp-following spies obtained information, they still had to find a way to give it to a superior.

Cyphers were incredibly common and the easiest way to code information. The downside, however, was each major officer had their own code for spies working for them. Trust had to be established before keys were exchanged. Personal relationships and opinions mattered and determined who would serve as a spy. As did the British officials discussing the unidentified female

⁸⁰ Michael Burgan, *Great Women of the American Revolution*, (Minneapolis, MN: Compass Point Books, 2005), 29.

spy in Plate 1, Washington recognized this issue and knew how important it was to find spies. In a letter to Elias Dayton he wrote, “As I am very anxious to learn what they are really doing in New York, you will oblige me by obtaining and finding me an accurate intelligence...”⁸¹ The way Washington formed the sentence suggests he received inaccurate information about what was going on in New York, reinforcing the importance of trust from both parties. If Washington could not trust a spy, he could make potentially deadly mistakes. If the spy could not trust Washington or their contact official, they would be apprehensive to obtain information. The fear of being caught as a spy became a major driving force that influenced how often they relayed intelligence. Cyphers were one form of security for spies because often only one person knew their true identity; others would only know them as a code name.

Historians often have a difficult time cracking the codes because there were so many different cyphers used. One of the more common cyphers was “Reversing the alphabet” in a monoalphabetic manner, so each letter represented a different one.⁸² Similarly, spies did not always use a different name when sending intelligence. “Some just used their initials or their initials in reverse order. Using one’s initials was not ideal, but it was better than having one’s full name on treasonous documents.”⁸³ Changing a few letters would not have been the most secure system because it is simple to crack. Washington and Tallmadge knew this and with the help of John Jay a new code system was created that required either a key or the memorization of coded names.⁸⁴ Instead of changing each word, certain names, cities and meeting places would be written as a different name. Instead of writing “Washington”, “Philadelphia” or “Wallace’s House” the spy would write “James”, “Jerusalem” and “Peter”, respectfully.⁸⁵ Using names and places from the Bible would have not drawn as much attention to letters if they were intercepted. The context of the letters would appear to be truly religious in nature or about another person, since James, John, etc. were popular male names. The code could have been cracked if British officials kept letters and figured out what each name represented after the Continental Army made a tactical move. The effectiveness of cyphers during the Revolution cannot be stated with complete certainty due to the nature of the question. However, the lack of known cases spies were caught due to cyphers being broken indicates they probably were very useful in passing information.

Both the Continental Army and the British Red Coats used a pigpen cypher. Instead of using substitution to change words, each party had a paper with cut out boxes. When placed over a letter the words inside the boxes created a coherent sentence. Washington also used a numbered system, similar to code names. A different number represented each word, name or place.⁸⁶ By far this was the most difficult to crack, but posed the most risks if either key was lost.

⁸¹ Letter, May 28, 1781 (The George Washington Collection), Clements Library. Dayton was a colonel in a New Jersey Continental Army regiment, who was also an officer during the French and Indian War. Since he began in New Jersey and would have stayed around the area, the letter would not have been unusual for Washington to be inquisitive about the neighboring state, New York. See: National Park Service, “Colonel Elias Dayton”, <http://www.nps.gov/yonb/learn/historyculture/daytonbio.htm> (accessed April 24, 2015).

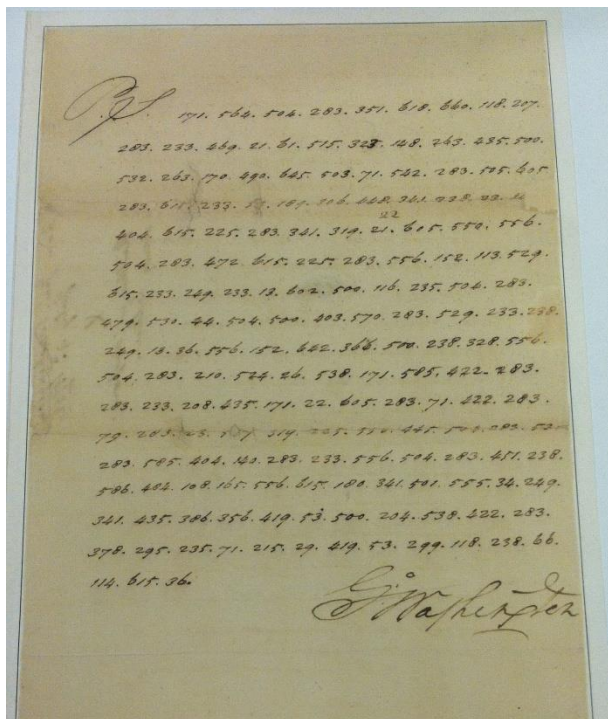
⁸² Clements Library Collection, Sir Henry Clinton Papers Vol. 234: Codes, Cyphers, Intelligence.

⁸³ Nagy, *Invisible Ink*, 9.

⁸⁴ Jay was a member of the First Continental Congress who would later become the governor of New York. See: History, “John Jay”, <http://www.history.com/topics/john-jay> (accessed April 30, 2015).

⁸⁵ Clements Library Collection, Sir Henry Clinton Papers Vol. 234: Codes, Cyphers, Intelligence.

⁸⁶ Nagy, *Invisible Ink*, 57-59.

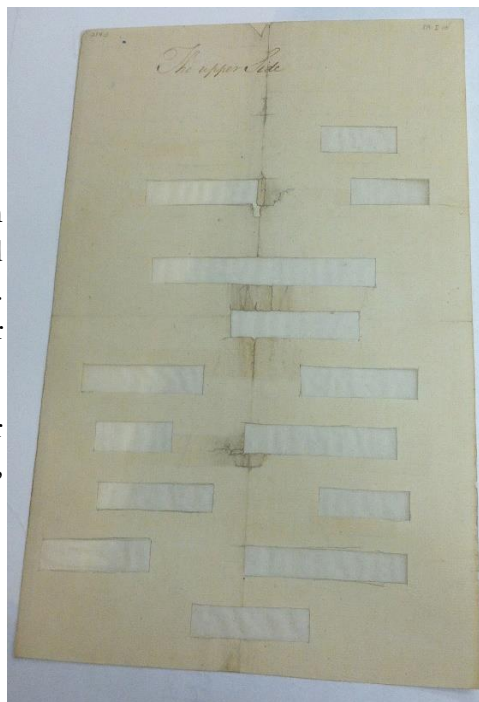


In the undated letter, Washington used a numbered code to relay information. Each number represented a different word, being separated by a period to avoid confusion. Whoever he was writing to, probably a spy or another officer based on the use of initials, would have a book devoted to the key. They then would rewrite the letter with the actual words to read the message. The new letter would then be destroyed.

Plate 3. The George Washington Collection, Clements Library

The image shows an example of a pigpen cypher. The boxes revealed the intended message within a normal-appearing letter. Sir Henry Clinton used this specific cypher during the war.

Plate 4. Clements Library Collection, Sir Henry Clinton Papers Vol. 234: Codes, Cyphers, Intelligence.



A different, keyless method of securing intelligence within letters gained popularity as the war continued. Using “invisible ink” made of lemon juice, grapefruit juice, or vinegar, sometimes combined with egg whites or quicksilver, allowed notes to be written, unreadable to the naked eye.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Nagy, *Invisible Ink*, 27. Quicksilver is a type of mercury.

One of the top corners of letters would have an A, B, C or F to indicate if the secret message could be read by using acid, burn/heat, code/cypher or fire.⁸⁸ So the paper did not appear to be blank, a “normal” letter would have been written in between the invisible message. Since the traditional postal service did not exist, mail could be read and then censored or destroyed. Because concealment was the goal, letters would have to seem boring enough to not raise suspicion—another aspect literate women would have an easier time than men. Women would naturally gossip about the war and what was going on in their towns. Using invisible ink ensured the protection of the message until after it was read. A wrong guess of how to read the letter could mean destroying it and the intelligence. Acidic keys required rubbing a solution on top of the paper, revealing the letter. Heated papers showed the invisible writing once the ink became hot enough. Letters that required fire had to be handled carefully; they were thrown onto a fire, making the letters burn white. Once the letter was gone so was the intelligence. Since each method, with the exception of cyphers, essentially destroyed the letters not many original copies exist today.⁸⁹

One spy was able to maintain her identity so well she is simply known as “355” per the Washington code system. 355 was said to be “able to outwit them all’ [and] became one of the net’s most valued agents.”⁹⁰ Even though she was able to use her femininity to get into the company of Major Andre, it was believed she had long-term relations and a child with Robert Townsend Jr., another spy for Washington.⁹¹ This relationship is different than others because both knew the other to be a spy and suggests they either confided in one another early on in the war or had met in one of the camps when relaying intelligence. Although her exact methods are unclear, 355 became so devoted to Washington she continued to spy through pregnancy until she was captured by British soldiers in 1779. As punishment, she was placed on board the prison ship *HMS Jersey* where she died during childbirth.⁹² 355 is a case that proves spies were interconnected to one another. She not only was directly connected to Washington, but she also knew another spy. The chart below shows direct relationships that would not have been unusual for a spy system. Washington ultimately received intelligence after going through at least one officer, typically. Most spies reported to one person, who would have access to several other types of spies in different areas.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁹⁰ Edmund R. Thompson, *Secret New England: Spies of the American Revolution*, (Kennebunk, Maine: The David Atlee Phillips New England Chapter Association of Former Intelligence Officers, 1991), 56.

⁹¹ Ibid. Townsend Jr. went by the code name “Culper Jr.,” as his father was called “Culper”. It is believed Townsend Jr. fell in love with 355, but she refused to marry him because she wanted to continue to spy for Washington.

⁹² Ibid., 60. The Jersey was notorious for its unhealthy conditions and imprisonment that was viewed by American prisoners as essentially a death sentence. For 355 to be sent there, not only as a spy but also as a woman, was sending a major message to Washington. She either had to have discovered severely harming intelligence against the British or angered an officer so much he did not want to send her to a prison on land where she would be able to receive better aid in giving birth. See: History, “The HMS Jersey”, <http://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/the-hms-jersey> (accessed April 30, 2015).

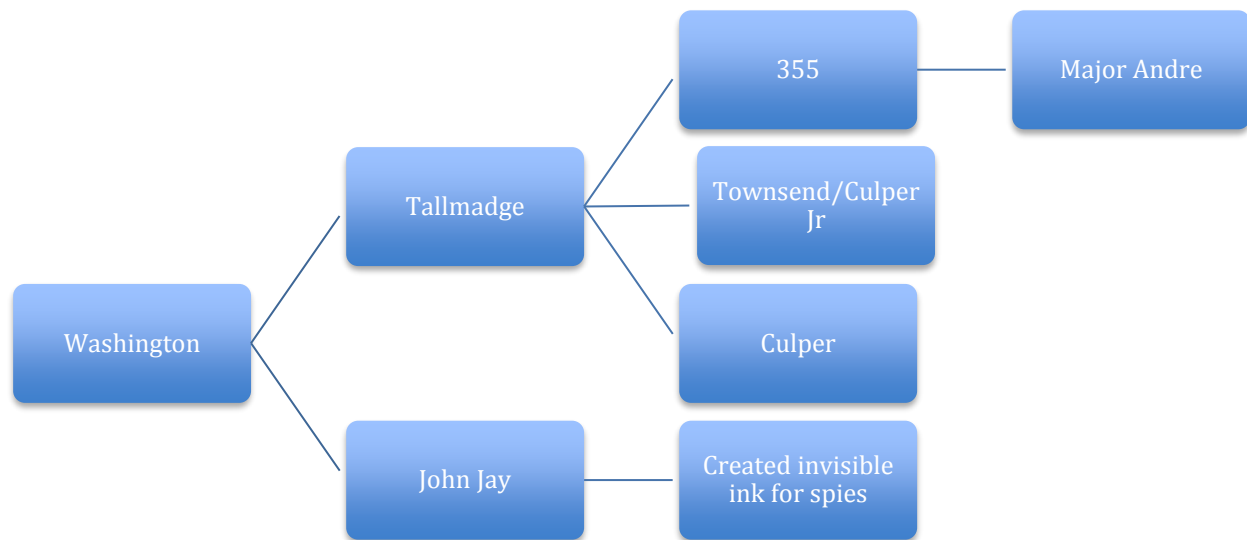


Plate 5.

Because the spy system was so exclusive, Washington had to be careful about drawing attention to his spies. Early on in the war, illegal trade became a major problem in ports. The black market allowed goods to be bought to aid the war, but also served as an ideal setting to gain intelligence for spies. Black market traders could easily make a profit while gaining intelligence for an officer, though they were risking much more than other spies. If they were caught they were not only charged with illegal trade, but also treason. Washington did not do much to stop illegal trade that favored the British “because he and his generals did use spies whose cover was black market trading with New York” and his own spies would then be at risk.⁹³ Both Washington and Howe decided to turn blind eyes to the black market, since both sides were benefitting from it. Ports always had an abundance of information, since ships could come in from around the world. On May 26, 1775, Thomas Gage wrote that a “Serjeant McDonald” obtained “intelligence of the arms and ammunition being on Board the King’s Fisher” while in port.⁹⁴ A simple inspection of goods gave the British an idea of what the Continental Army would have at their disposal. This not only hurt the Rebels but also gave the British an advantage. Ports offered an array of spying possibilities, for both sides.

Regardless of the method, the spy system overall helped end the American Revolution much sooner than it would have if both sides did not have intelligence. While one side would have prevailed if no spies were used, it would be based on pure luck. Scouts would have been able to locate the enemy, but since the New England area consisted largely of wooded areas companies could have moved almost anywhere. Spies proved to be essential to the Revolution and wars afterwards. It is known spies were utilized in the American Civil War and the Great War. If spies had not been so useful in the American Revolution, the following wars probably would not have used them as early on or had initial faith in their services. The methods used during the Revolution created a model for later spies, that would have been adapted as technology and society grew. In each war women were used as spies because of their ability to move through the public and private

⁹³ Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 119.

⁹⁴ The Clements Library, *The Papers of General Thomas Gage, 1721-1787 English Series Vol. 30*.

spheres with ease. Although they were viewed overall as the lesser gender in the eighteenth, nineteenth and into the twentieth century, women continually proved to be successful spies.

War is more than a physical battle; officers had to have some mental intelligence in order to be successful. Spies became a perfect outlet to gather information about troop movements, battle strategies and overall private conversations. Women had the ability to be around conversations about the war without being noticed right away. Because of the gendered roles women society expected to be constricted to, they were not suspected of spying. Their sex allowed them to do things men could not, especially when it came to getting physically close to other men. Whether a spy moved from place to place, was able to remain at home or had to change their identity, each played a major role in the war. Spies definitely helped the Continental Army win the Revolution; though they do not receive the credit they are due. If women were not used as spies the war would have dragged on, resulting in many more casualties. Because Washington recognized women's true worth, he was able to gain useful intelligence, enabling him to win the war. As has been proven, women overall were better spies than men. By using their sex to their advantage, women were able to continue with their normal day-to-day lives, travel across state lines with little to no hassle, or be able to take on a completely new identity in ways men could not.