



**BRIAN  
KILMEADE**

*AND*  
**DON YAEGER**



**GEORGE  
WASHINGTON'S  
SECRET  
SIX**

***THE SPY RING  
THAT SAVED  
THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION***



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SENTINEL

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) LLC

375 Hudson Street

New York, New York 10014



USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China

penguin.com

A Penguin Random House Company

First published by Sentinel, a member of Penguin Group (USA) LLC, 2013

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Collection of the New-York Historical Society: Insert [4](#): no. 1940.16; [9](#), top: no. 87315d; [10](#): no. 45397; [11](#): no. 87312d; [12](#): no. 87311d.

Credits for other illustrations appear adjacent to the respective images.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Kilmeade, Brian.

George Washington's secret six : the spy ring that saved the American Revolution / Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-698-13765-3

1. United States—History—Revolution, 1775–1783—Secret service. 2. New York (State)—History—Revolution, 1775–1783—Secret service. 3. Spies—United States—History—18th century. 4. Spies—New York (State)—History—18th century. 5. Washington, George, 1732–1799—Friends and associates. 6. Townsend, Robert, 1753–1838. I. Yaeger, Don. II. Title.

E279.K55 2013

973.4'1092—dc23

2013032285

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This book is dedicated to my Fantastic Five—wife, Dawn; son, Bryan; daughters, Kirstyn and Kaitlyn; and my incredible mom—who have heard me talk about this story for years, spent countless hours researching it, and urged me to write this book. Finally, it's done.

—B.K.

Tiffany: You are a pro's pro, one of the best writers I've ever worked with. I'm honored you're on my team.

—D.Y.

---

Washington did not really outfight the British, he simply outspied us!

MAJOR GEORGE BECKWITH,  
BRITISH INTELLIGENCE OFFICER 1782–1783

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## AUTHORS' NOTE

Much of the dialogue contained in this book is fictional, but it is based on conversations that did take place and, wherever possible, incorporates actual phrases used by the speaker.



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## PREFACE

**H**ow do you discover the identity of a spy—someone whose main concern is remaining anonymous—who has been dead for nearly a century? That was the mission of Morton Pennypacker, Long Island’s premier historian, during the 1920s. He knew the Americans would not have won the Revolutionary War without the Culper Spy Ring, but he didn’t know the identity of the ring’s most valuable member.

The spies’ contributions included uncovering a British counterfeiting scheme, preventing an ambush of French reinforcements, smuggling a British naval codebook to Yorktown, and (most important) preventing Benedict Arnold from carrying out one of the greatest acts of treachery in American history: his plan to surrender West Point to the enemy.

Although these events were recorded as part of Revolutionary War history, none of them were attributed to any individual or group. No plaques attested to the brave work of the men and women responsible for alerting George Washington to the plots; no statues were erected in their honor. The six members of the Culper Spy Ring had served Washington under one condition: their names and activities were never to be revealed. Washington kept his promise, but he also kept their letters.

By the 1920s, the passing years had revealed the identities of most of the spies, but two—including that of the ring’s chief spy—were still in question. Pennypacker, a relentless, solemn archivist, made it his personal mission to identify the principal spy, the unknown man who fed George Washington crucial information about the British presence in New York City and helped turn the tide of the Revolutionary War. He needed a name to finally solve the mystery of the man Washington had lauded in his letters but never met. Pennypacker believed that if he could give a name to the man known only by the pseudonym “Culper Junior,” then this citizen-spy and all those who served in the ring with him could ascend to their rightful, prominent place alongside Paul Revere, Patrick Henry, Betsy Ross, and the rest of America’s most famous Patriots.

Pennypacker was no stranger to intricate historical detective work, but for years his efforts brought him no closer to solving the mystery. And then a phone call in the summer of 1929 changed everything.

Whenever the telephone rang at Morton Pennypacker’s house, the call was almost always about the history of New York, not a social event—and this particular call was no exception.

“We’ve found some Townsend family papers,” a voice crackled on the other end of the line. “Do you have any interest in sifting through them?”

A few days later, the yellowed sheets of paper were piled high on his desk. Pennypacker handled each one gingerly, as if it were made of spun gold. Anything with the name Townsend dating to the eighteenth century was considered historically significant by Long Island historians. The Townsend family had been on American soil since the sixteen hundreds, and a prominent family in Oyster Bay, Long Island, since before the Revolution. Any scraps of ledgers or old bills would help create a more complete picture of the family’s history, and Pennypacker was eager to see what new details he might learn.

Townsend papers were fairly ordinary finds, but something about these particular discoveries intrigued Pennypacker. They were not just isolated receipts or bills of sale; they were letters and account books dated during the Revolutionary War and immediately afterward. The handwriting seemed oddly familiar. Pennypacker adjusted his glasses to get a closer look at the distinct way the fourth son of Samuel Townsend, Robert, had hooked his *D*'s and arched his *C*'s. It almost reminded him of—!

Pennypacker rushed to the archives where he stored several letters of espionage that had been signed by members of Washington's secret service during the war. He took a sample from the stack of Robert Townsend's papers next to him and placed it side by side with the Culper Junior letters, peering through a magnifying glass until he was convinced he had a match. Was he holding in his hands clear proof of the identity of the New York spy Washington trusted with his secrets? The reserved, bookish Robert Townsend—perhaps the most private of all the Townsend brothers of his generation—was the daring and courageous Culper Junior!

Of course, Pennypacker needed a professional confirmation of his hunch, so he sent the samples to the nation's leading handwriting analyst. Just a few weeks later, he received a reply. There was no doubt: Oyster Bay, the home of President Teddy Roosevelt, had another hero to celebrate.

With Townsend's identity confirmed, the pieces of the Culper puzzle began to fall into place. The previously disconnected spies now formed a coherent ring, with Townsend at its center. Under the command of Major Benjamin Tallmadge, these five men and one unidentified woman—Robert Townsend, Abraham Woodhull, Austin Roe, Caleb Brewster, James Rivington, and Agent 355—never received the acclaim they deserved in their lifetimes. Together, these men and one woman who had no formal training in the art of espionage, living in Oyster Bay, Setauket, and Manhattan, broke the back of the British military and helped defeat the most powerful fighting force on earth.

One agent remains unidentified: a woman mentioned in the Culper Ring's correspondence by the specific code number 355, "lady." The pages that follow present a compilation of the various activities associated with 355, what history tells us about her probable contributions to the efforts of the Culper Ring, and what resulted from her work. Though her name cannot be verified, and many details about her life are unclear, her presence and her courage undoubtedly made a difference. She represents all covert agents—those men and women whose true identities are never revealed and whose stories are never told, but who offer their service and their lives on behalf of their country. To each of them, we owe an inexpressible debt.

This book recounts the methods, the bravery, the cunning, the near misses, and the incredible successes of the Culper Ring, which helped to save our nation and shape our future. Most of all, this is a story about ordinary citizens doing extraordinary things, people whose fears and hopes and lives were not much different from our own, and how they changed the course of history. Their humility stopped them from seeking fame or fortune because their love of country sparked their exploits.

All Americans owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to George Washington's secret six. This book is written to honor them and the groundwork they laid for our future of freedom.

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## *Introduction*

SEPTEMBER 1776

**H**e was twenty-one years old and knew that in a matter of moments he would die. His request for a clergyman—refused. His request for a Bible—refused. After writing a letter or two to his family, this Yale grad uttered, with dignity, the famous statement “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

A noose was placed around his neck, and the ladder he had climbed was ripped away. On September 22, 1776, on the island of Manhattan in an area now located at Sixty-Sixth Street and Third Avenue, Captain Nathan Hale was hanged for being a spy. He had volunteered to go behind enemy lines on Long Island for George Washington, and the British would claim that he was caught with sketches of British fortifications and memos of their troop movements. Without a trial, he was sentenced to death. The message sent to all New Yorkers was clear: You spy, you die.

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## CHAPTER 1

### *Hold New York, Win the War*

New York, without exaggeration, is the pivot on which the entire Revolutionary War turns.

—John Adams

**T**he execution of Nathan Hale on September 22, 1776, was the lowest point in a month of low points for General George Washington. First, the British had taken New York City and Long Island—the cornerstones of Washington’s strategy because of their valuable geographic and economic positions at the heart of the North American colonies. Now, Washington’s attempt at building an intelligence network to recoup that loss had failed spectacularly. Just two months after the fledgling country’s declaration of independence, there seemed to be no future for the new nation.

And yet there had been so much hope just a season ago, in spring. After successfully sending the British packing from Boston in March after a prolonged siege, Washington had begun ordering troops toward New York City, whose harbor was of tremendous tactical—and psychological—importance. If the Patriots could hold that other great port of the Northeast, victory might be within reach.

As Washington left Massachusetts on April 4, 1776, to begin his own march southward to rejoin his men, the cheerful reports sent back by the advance parties were confirmed: Farmers and tradesmen were greeting the American troops as they passed through rural villages, pressing gifts of food and drink on the soldiers who had displayed such courage and pluck fighting the redcoats.

“Enjoy this bacon,” urged local butchers, heaving slabs of salted meat onto the supply wagons.

“Fresh milk!” announced the housewives who scrambled out of their cottages wielding buckets and dippers.

Gaggles of little boys wearing homespun blue jackets gathered to parade in front of the men as they traversed through town—one child held up a twig as if playing a fife; another pretended to beat drum in a marching rhythm; the rest chanted the popular refrain “Join or die!” as they reveled in the Patriotic fervor and holiday atmosphere.

Even the sophisticated city crowd, usually much more reserved in their displays of celebration than the country folk, had cheered in the streets as Washington crossed into Providence, Rhode Island. In roadside taverns and stylish urban coffeehouses across Connecticut, toasts were raised to the unlikely homegrown heroes and their quiet but imposing leader. As word spread up the Hudson Valley that the Continental Army was on the move, settlers who now considered themselves Americans, rather than Dutch or German or British subjects, had whispered prayers for the protection and advancement of the cause of independence.

Throughout his nine-day journey spanning four states and nearly three hundred miles of forest roads soggy with springtime mud, Washington had seen increasing hope among the people. There were dissenting voices—those whose closed shutters and drawn shades as the Continental Army passed bespoke their loyalty to King George III and the motherland. But it was clear that there was a sense of growing excitement that this wild, untested experiment in personal freedom and individual rights just might prove more powerful than the most disciplined and well-equipped fighting force on earth.

Despite the buoyant spirits of the people, Washington's own hope was kept in check by a sober view of facts. While the Patriots had enjoyed some early victories in Massachusetts, these wins came at a high cost when compared with their tactical significance. The Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775 however, had gone to the British, though with heavy loss of life and limb on both sides. The Siege of Boston, which ended the following March, had been a win for the Patriots, but their success was due more to the position and strength of the American fortifications than any great offensive maneuvers to rout the enemy. In the end, the British gave up on the city, leaving voluntarily rather than fleeing in an all-out retreat. General William Howe, commander in chief of the British army in North America, had his sights set on a much bigger and more agreeable prize than belligerent Boston.

New York, tenuously held by a few American troops, was desired by both sides. In the north, the Americans had secured Boston for the moment. To the south, the action had not yet reached a critical point, though its time was coming. Right now, the most pressing concern was in the middle states, where Philadelphia and New York lay vulnerable. Philadelphia was the largest city in the colonies at the time and held great symbolic status as a seat of innovation, boasting one of the first hospitals and public libraries, as well as hosting the meetings of the Continental Congress. Capturing the seat of the fledgling nation's government would be a great victory for the British. And New York City was the linchpin—if the British won it they could bring the colonies to their knees.

As the second-most-populous city in the colonies, New York was their northern economic hub. But even more significant was New York's location and situation—right in the center of Britain's North American settlements and home to both a large deep-water harbor and access to the Hudson River. The army that held New York City and its waterways had a strategic advantage not only in controlling the import and export of foodstuffs and dry goods (which, in turn, affected the economic stability of the region) but also in securing a key foothold for transporting troops up and down the coast.

Maintaining control of New York would give the American fighting corps and the colonial populace a tremendous boost in confidence. Failing to capture and hold New York City and New York Harbor would certainly be an embarrassment to the British army and navy, but they would survive the blow. For the Americans, however, losing the region would be a tragedy, destroying morale, cutting off trade, and drastically lowering the odds that the Patriots would win the war.

New York's strategic significance, from a trade perspective, was not lost on General Howe. The loss in Massachusetts was a disappointment, but Boston was not the ultimate prize for the British. Howe wanted to choke off the Revolution by isolating the northern colonies from the southern ones. If the political radicals in the somewhat geographically clustered northern cities were segregated from their counterparts in the more spread-out south, they could not cross-pollinate ideologies, and the various factions might be more easily eliminated. It was a classic case of divide and conquer, with New York City as the essential element in creating the chasm.

After regrouping in Halifax, Nova Scotia, following their defeat in Boston, the British set out for New York. On June 29, 1776, three British ships sailed into lower New York Harbor, with General

Howe aboard one of them. Both sides knew a battle was imminent.

~~As Washington marched south in anticipation of Howe's attack, he must have nursed the hope that the Continental Army's muscle and moxie were enough to outfight the British and hold Manhattan. Being a seasoned fighter and a brilliant strategist, he would have understood, perhaps better than anyone else in North America at the time, that control of New York City was essential for the cause of liberty—and that keeping the city would be a daunting task.~~

Washington and his men arrived in New York in mid-April 1776 and settled in Manhattan. That summer news arrived that both cheered and sobered them. Fifty-six delegates had convened in the midst of stifling July heat in Philadelphia to form the Second Continental Congress, and had forged the Declaration of Independence. If ever there was a point of no return, this was it.

Knowing the attack on New York would not be long delayed, Washington made a short trip to New Jersey and Pennsylvania to meet with his generals. They discussed New York's defenses and supplies—all while trying to anticipate the exact mode of attack. The British, meanwhile, began amassing troops on undefended Staten Island in advance of storming the American positions just across the water in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

As August dragged on, tensions mounted. A copy of the July fourth declaration had been put before the Crown, which meant that King George finally understood the seriousness of the colonists' determination to fight. No longer would King George order his generals to show restraint in their efforts to squelch the rebels or maintain that a mere show of force would be enough to subdue the Revolution. He would not hold back. He would not show mercy. Of this Washington felt sure, and the weight of the "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor" pledged in the name of freedom rested heavily upon his shoulders.

Across the river from Washington, General Henry Clinton had arrived to help lead the attack upon the American positions in New York. As August waned, the British ships loomed large in the harbor, the growing number of redcoats on Staten Island intimidating the sparse American troops.

Faced with an impending attack, Washington sighed one August day as he surveyed the undisciplined, ragtag army at his command in lower Manhattan; his aide-de-camp shifted nervously behind him. The general cleared his throat. "General Howe is rumored to have more than thirty thousand men in the Royal Navy assembled offshore, and twenty thousand men amassed on Staten Island. And we have . . . ?"

His aide was reluctant to reply: "Ten thousand."

If the number was a blow to Washington, he did not show it. Ever the stoic, he refused to allow this dismal news to throw him into despair. Washington was famed as a man who never lost his nerve in battle. The sound of musket fire, the crash of cannonballs, the smell of smoke—none of that seemed to shake his calm, measured way of surveying the chaos and keeping his wits about him as he led his men forward.

But despite Washington's steely nerve, the Americans were in grave trouble. Even substantial numbers of troops meant little without proper training and equipment, and Washington's men lacked both. Washington had the utmost confidence in his officers, but to say that the rank and file of the Continental Army was rough around the edges was an understatement. City men who had never before wielded a rifle stood with country folk who had never had a day of formal schooling. Hardy homesteaders struggled to cooperate with young men of landed wealth who had never known a moment of discomfort or hunger in their lives. Old men lined up with boys who had lied about their age to join the rebels in pursuit of adventure. They came from all over the country: from as far north as the mountains of New Hampshire and as far south as the swamps of Georgia. Many of



Washington's men had never before been more than fifty miles from the place of their birth, let alone met anyone with such a strange accent as could be found in the hills of Virginia or the Puritan settlements of Massachusetts. They were all on the side of liberty, but there the unity ended.

Most were brave, to be sure, and loyal—perhaps to a fault. And they were all passionate about their liberty. Washington knew he had the hearts of his men, but whether the passion of an undisciplined few could hold New York against the meticulously trained British forces was another question.

“Hang together or we all hang separately,” Washington mused, reciting one of the familiar mantras of the Patriot cause, as he caught a few strains of a bawdy pub song led by the Marylanders sitting around a campfire. All possible preparations against the British onslaught had been made, and he and his men would have to trust it would be enough.

Knowing that an attack was imminent, Washington had made the strategic decision to divide his men into five groups. One had already crossed the harbor to Long Island, and another was stationed in northern Manhattan to fend off a British encroachment from that direction. The other three groups were situated to defend the lower end of Manhattan. There were several land routes the British might take, but Washington felt confident that all but the least likely and somewhat untraveled route, through Jamaica Pass, were secure. And now . . . they waited.

## BETRAYAL AT JAMAICA PASS

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The battle was swift and devastating.

Tipped off by someone—whether a spy within Washington's own ranks or a disgruntled Loyalist in New York was unclear—the British learned that Jamaica Pass was guarded by only five men and sent out in that direction.

William Howard Jr., a young Patriot who ran a tavern with his father near Jamaica Pass, Long Island, woke about two hours after midnight on the morning of August 27 to a British soldier standing beside his bed. The soldier ordered him to get up, dress, and go downstairs. He quickly obeyed and found his father cornered by three redcoats pointing their muskets with fixed bayonets at him. A glance out the window revealed that a whole fighting unit stood at the ready upon the grounds.

General Howe waited for the two men in the barroom. Sipping a glass of commandeered liquor, he attempted, rather absurdly, to make small talk with the terrified father and son before finally getting to the point. “I must have some one of you to show me over the Rockaway Path around the pass,” he remarked, setting down his empty glass.

“We belong to the other side, General,” the father replied, “and can't serve you against our duty.”

Howe's reply was kind but curt. “That is all very well; stick to your country or stick to your principles when you are free to do so. But tonight, Howard, you are my prisoner, and must guide my men over the hill.”

The senior Howard began to protest, but Howe cut him off: “You have no alternative. If you refuse, you will be shot.”

Shaking, and unaware of just how damaging their compliance would prove, the Howards directed General Howe safely up the winding footpath. Behind them marched ten thousand men through the vulnerable pass, arriving at the other side in time to effectively flank the Patriot general Nathan Woodhull and his men, who were occupied with the frontal assault waged against their defenses in Manhattan when daylight came. As the battle continued throughout the day, Washington recognized his miscalculation that the full contingent of British troops would storm Manhattan—the redcoats

were also bringing heavy force to bear on Brooklyn. Washington shifted more men and matériel to Brooklyn, but it was too late for the Americans to recover and hold their ground. By day's end, Brooklyn and the surrounding area was largely in British hands, with the retreating Patriots trapped in Brooklyn Heights. Manhattan alone still held, but Washington was sure it was only a matter of time until the British overtook it, too.

Washington's troops were decimated. All told, the Americans had lost more than 300 men that day, in addition to nearly 700 wounded and 1,000 captured. The British (and their German mercenaries, the Hessians) had lost a mere 64 men, with 31 reported as missing, and 293 wounded.

## A MIRACLE IN THE MIST

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Things could not have gone more badly for the Continental Army, and both sides knew it. And it wasn't over, though the cannons had ceased to fire. The fighting had taken Washington across the East River, but now he was essentially trapped in Brooklyn Heights, surrounded by the British and with no way to escape. If his troops pursued a retreat by land, they would walk directly into the British camp and be either shot on sight or captured and hanged for treason. If they took to the water to escape to Patriot-held Manhattan, they would be sitting ducks as the British fired cannonballs into the rowboats. Then again, that was likely too messy—the British prided themselves on their extreme pragmatism. No, they would probably take the more gentlemanly route of allowing their marksmen to pick off the retreating Americans one by one.

Just like that, the Revolution was all but over. Washington must have reeled at the turn of events. Maybe it was inevitable; after all, who were the colonists to think they had a chance against the mighty king of England and an empire that encircled the globe? Washington had been entrusted with the hopes, dreams, lives, and futures of every American Patriot—and he was standing on the brink of failure.

The Americans needed to get out and get out fast. If the bedraggled and punch-drunk Patriot soldiers could somehow manage to escape, they could regroup with the friendly troops waiting in American-controlled territory. It was a big "if."

"We have no other options?" Washington asked the officers assembled with him at his makeshift headquarters in Brooklyn Heights.

There was a pause as each man looked around the table with raised eyebrows, as if asking his comrades, "Have *you* got any miracles to spare?"

But Washington already knew the answer. Unless he could somehow ferry nine thousand men undetected across New York Harbor, currently patrolled by the might of the Royal Navy, he would be forced to surrender or ask his men to die in a siege from which there was no foreseeable escape. And with the betrayal regarding their vulnerability at Jamaica Pass, and no individual able to convey intelligence from the British positions, there was no way to anticipate what the redcoats' next move might be.

Washington was near despair, but he was also a man of faith. No one knows what prayers passed his lips during those tense two days as he faced almost certain defeat. As night fell on the evening of August 29, he peered over New York Harbor and knew he had no other hope. Escape by water was the only chance—and even that would take a miracle. Ordering a hasty retreat, Washington oversaw the efforts to ferry his army and their possessions—every man, beast, cannon, and rifle—safely across the water under the cover of darkness. To his relief, the British sentinels failed to spot the shadowy silhouettes of the escaping soldiers. But as the sky began to lighten, there were still men to move—

and it was then that Washington's prayers proved effective. A thick fog began to roll in, like the benevolent breath of God, providing cover and protection until every last soldier and piece of equipment reached safety on the other side. Washington's boots were the last to leave the Brooklyn Heights side of the harbor, and the last to alight in Manhattan, which the Patriots still held.

By the time the fog had fully lifted and the British realized what had happened, the Americans were already out of the reach of British cannons. They were down, but not out—though just barely. Washington knew it would be only a matter of days before General Howe ordered an attack on the remaining American fortifications in Manhattan, which would surely fall.

Moving north to Connecticut, Washington and his men rejoiced in their escape, though the all-but-complete loss of New York was a serious blow. Gone was the optimism created by the Boston victory. Troop morale was low. Backed into a corner, Washington now realized what every small child comes to recognize when faced with the brute strength of a school-yard bully: He could not defeat his foe with manpower, arms, or any other show of force. He would have to beat the British in a battle of wit

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## CHAPTER 2

### *The Need for a Spy Ring*

**A**s if the loss of most of New York weren't bad enough, Washington's autumn was about to get worse. While the defeat at the Battle of Brooklyn had been a blow, the retreat had gone better than planned. Washington's next endeavor would not be so fortunate, ending instead in disaster.

The few American troops still holding Manhattan were hanging on by a thread, and Washington was desperate to strengthen their position. To do so, he would need a spy to collect information on British plans. Espionage was not a new activity to Washington. Having fought in the French and Indian War and served as a spy himself, he understood the roots of the present conflict—an insight that would frame his use of an intelligence network in the Revolution.

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#### THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR

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Two decades earlier, in 1754, the British army (consisting of both soldiers from the motherland and local colonial militias) had launched a war in North America against the French army and native tribes who were attacking British citizens in regions granted in previous treaties to the British government. For the next nine years, the continent was embroiled in battles to control the various outposts and fortifications sprinkled across the wilderness regions of the Ohio River and Appalachian Mountains.

The previous year, Washington, just twenty-one years old, volunteered to engage with the French soldiers and learn whatever he could about their intentions and fortifications through leading conversations, as well as whatever was carelessly shared over wine bottles. As it did throughout his life, Washington's temperate nature had served him well on that mission; he maintained his sobriety and clearheadedness so that he could report back to his superiors that the French had no intentions of quitting the country without a fight.

This conflict, in which Washington came of age, was part of the international unrest rooted in ancient rivalries and grudges resurrected by modern ambitions. But world attitudes had changed following the Treaty of Paris in 1763, and Washington's role would change, too. France's claims to its overseas colonies were devastated. Britain gained several of France's North American colonies along the northern Atlantic and in the Caribbean, as well as the Florida territory held by Spain. People suddenly found themselves subject to a new crown and a new flag—sometimes even those of a former enemy. For the American colonists, who had long been subjects of the king of England (despite their Dutch, German, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, or West African ancestry) and necessarily viewed his enemies as their own, the expulsion of the French and Spanish from bordering regions lifted much of their fear of invasion and need for protection. Now they could focus more on their own interests. Recognizing that their rights and freedoms were being neither defended nor advanced by the king they had faithfully served, they began to rebel against the very government they had once relied upon for

security.

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## ACTS OF AGGRESSION

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In 1764, the British Parliament determined that the cost of the French and Indian War had been too high. Troops remained stationed in the colonies, adding to the financial strain, so additional revenues were needed to pay for their presence, as well as to tighten trade restrictions on the colonies. Over the next few years, Parliament voted to levy a series of taxes against the American colonists. The Sugar Act and the Currency Act restricted trade and the issuance of colonial money. Then Parliament expanded its reach in 1765 with the Stamp Act, which required that all printed matter—newspapers, legal contracts, pamphlets—must be produced with paper from London and embossed with a seal of verification.

This action was, in itself, not unreasonable—the colonists could be expected to help pay for their own defense. But the independent-minded colonists reacted angrily because of the act's broader implications. All English citizens were supposed to be afforded the right of representation in Parliament, but there were no members of Parliament for the American colonies to agree to the taxation and insist that it be reasonable. The cry of “no taxation without representation” was sounded and a Stamp Act Congress convened in New York City in October 1765 to protest the measure. The Stamp Act was eventually repealed, but others followed in its wake as King George continued to expand the power and grasp of the Crown, while simultaneously diminishing the rights of his colonial subjects.

In March 1770, the so-called Boston Massacre illustrated just how high tensions were running. British soldiers fired into a crowd of protesting Americans, killing five and wounding six. After the grassroots Sons of Liberty staged their famous Boston Tea Party in December 1773, dumping 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor, London responded the following spring with harsh laws designed to make an example of Massachusetts as a warning to the other colonies not to challenge the Crown's authority.

The warning was heard loud and clear, but it did not quell the fires of rebellion as Parliament had hoped. In fact, it had the opposite effect. In response to the Intolerable Acts, as the laws had been dubbed by the Americans, the First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in September and October of 1774. Fifty-six men representing twelve of the thirteen colonies (Georgia opted not to attend) voted to unite in a series of boycotts against British goods; prominent Patriots, including Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and Henry Lee, were among the outspoken dissenters. They also resolved to send a petition of their grievances to King George in a last effort to prevent an escalation of hostilities.

The petition went unanswered. In April 1775, combat broke out between colonists and British troops at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts; the following month, the Second Continental Congress convened to prepare for a full-scale war. Among the delegates from Virginia was the tall, soft-spoken surveyor, farmer, and former spy widely regarded for his valor in battle and exemplary leadership in the militia during the previous war: George Washington.

## HOW TO WIN A WAR

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Following his brief stint as a spy, Washington had led thousands of troops into battle, riding tall and remaining calm through even the heaviest bombardment. Later myths grew up around Washington—

that he was spoken of in native prophecies as a man favored by the gods, that no arrows could touch him. If not actually invincible, he was at least regarded as unflappable by his peers, a sober-minded man of vision, wisdom, humility, and experience. For these reasons Washington was asked to serve as the commander in chief of the Continental Army. Now, two decades after his first spying mission, he would be engaged in a battle of his own to drive from that same land the British government he had once faithfully served. Who could have imagined such an outcome? But life was a strange pageant; he understood that well enough. And Washington knew that espionage would play a more important role in this new war.

In traditional wars that pitted monarch against monarch, there was a mutual respect for the authority of the crown even if there was a deep hatred for the person who wore it or the land claims he or she recognized. In those battles, it was all about might; the armies fought until someone was finally overpowered. Or, as had happened so often in new territories, one army fought with weapons, manpower, disease—whatever they had—until the other population was simply eradicated. Washington quickly realized that this revolution was different. King George respected no one and recognized no authority, certainly not whatever makeshift government the colonies could cobble together. His increasingly oppressive laws and his silence in the face of organized protests had made that clear. Yet the king would not seek to completely decimate the population of the colonies; dead subjects cannot pay taxes.

No, this war would be different from any other that had come before it. Of that Washington felt sure. It would not be a fight to the death, nor could it be simply a clash of armies. If the Americans wanted to emerge victorious from this conflict, they would not try to overpower their enemy; they would simply refuse to back down or go away. They didn't need to be conquering heroes—they just needed to survive.

As New York slipped from his grasp, Washington saw that the Patriots would need to outmaneuver, not overpower, the enemy. And, by learning the enemy's secrets, spies would play a crucial role in undermining British attacks through anticipating the redcoats' next moves. It would be the only way to counter the superior numbers, training, supplies, and equipment of the British army and navy. This was especially true in the more populous cities, where the enemy had stationed large pockets of troops. There was little hope of defeating the British in head-to-head combat unless their battle plans and their weaknesses were already known.

Unfortunately for the rough-hewn Patriot army, spying required far more accuracy and delicacy than simply aiming a cannon, and it also took more time. Unlike waging a traditional battle, wherein two armies took to a field and fired at each other for several hours or days until one side declared victory, gathering useful intelligence might take weeks or months before combat even began. Developing the sophistication and buying the time necessary to grow an effective spy ring would be difficult—especially in the locations where it mattered most.

Recognizing the difficulty of setting up a good espionage network, Washington began converting his wartime strategy from relying on nonexistent combat strength to placing his trust in intelligence gathering even before the catastrophic loss of New York was complete. To begin, he needed one good man.

## **NATHAN HALE STEPS FORWARD**

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Captain Nathan Hale felt his heart leap when he learned of General Washington's request that September. The general needed a man to venture behind enemy lines disguised as a Loyalist. He



would make casual inquiries and investigations into the troop movements and supply stores and report back to Washington. His work would inform the general's plans to take back New York City, its harbor, and the neighboring areas.

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Knowlton had assembled a select group of officers to inform them of the need. Each was brave, each was trustworthy, and each was silent as he stood before them asking for a volunteer. Finally, twenty-one-year-old Nathan Hale stepped forward.

"Are you a native of Long Island?" Colonel Knowlton questioned the eager young man as they met in Knowlton's makeshift office to discuss the particulars of the mission.

"No, sir. Coventry, Connecticut, and from there to Yale College."

"Then you must have visited Long Island as a boy?"

"No, sir. I have never been, though I do have some distant cousins there." Hale neglected to add that those cousins were Loyalists, rightly assuming such information would give no boost to his petition.

"Have you even a passing familiarity with the land? Perhaps from studying its geography or the surveyors' charts?"

"Well, sir, my good friend from college, Lieutenant Benjamin Tallmadge, often urged me to visit his family there during the summer and sometimes showed me on maps where his home was located and which were the best coves for watching the ships come in."

"Nothing more?"

"No, sir."

The colonel shifted in his camp chair. This interview was growing uncomfortable. "How did you occupy your time at Yale?"

"With my studies, astronomy, debates—and theatricals, sir."

Theatricals. Well, that was something, Knowlton thought. At least Hale would have some ability to assume a role and play it convincingly. Then again, he also knew that college plays tended to be either overwrought classical dramas of the Greeks and Romans or else hilarious farces featuring boisterous young actors more interested in laughing as their friends donned ladies' dresses and wigs than in conveying any part of an intelligible story.

"I see that your unit of the Connecticut militia participated in the victorious Siege of Boston last year; am I correct to assume, then, that you are a seasoned soldier acquainted with the deprivations of supplies and the stress of battle?"

Hale blinked rapidly and color rose in his face. "No, sir. I was a schoolmaster in New London and my teaching contract did not end until that July. The siege was already over by the time I was released from my obligations. I have been involved in some small actions, but nothing of much significance. However"—he fumbled in his pocket and drew out a letter—"Lieutenant Tallmadge took it upon himself to write to me last summer when I was preparing to leave the school and join up with the Seventh Connecticut Regiment, and his words . . . well, they inspired me, sir."

The older man eyed Hale warily. That Tallmadge was a rising star in the Continental Army was undeniable, but Tallmadge's own shrewdness and ability did not automatically transfer to his idealistic young friend. "What did he say that could have possibly stirred your soul so much that you would volunteer to be the lone operative in a dangerous mission?"

"With your permission, sir?" Hale held up the letter.

Knowlton nodded.

"I am informed that you are honored by the Assembly with a Lieutenant's commission," Hale began reading in a clear, strong voice that both surprised and impressed his lone audience member.

Maybe the young man had been a promising thespian on the Yale stage after all. “I think the more extensive Service would be my choice. Our holy Religion, the honour of our God, a glorious country, & a happy constitution is what we have to defend. Some indeed may say there are others who may supply your place. True there are men who would gladly accept such a proposal but are we certain that they would be likely to answer just as good an end? . . . We all should be ready to step forth in the common cause.”

The taper on the wax candle atop Knowlton’s desk sputtered a little as tiny flecks of ash fell onto the wood; otherwise, the room was silent. He weighed the conflicting thoughts in his mind. Hale certainly seemed intelligent, if wet behind the ears, and his conviction was undeniable and moving—inspiring, even. True, he knew nothing of Long Island, but a quick study on local geography and customs would be sufficient. Besides, who else had stepped up? There were no other volunteers as far as he knew, and Washington needed his man as quickly as possible. “You truly believe you can do this?”

“I have no doubt, sir, that I am the right man.”

“And you have no concerns about espionage being a breach of honor?”

Hale took a deep breath, then voiced a sentiment he had clearly been mulling for some time: “I wish to be useful, and every kind of service necessary to the public good becomes honorable by being necessary. If the exigencies of my country demand a peculiar service, its claims to the performance of that service are imperious.”

Knowlton hid a smile at the earnestness of this prepared speech but had to admire Hale’s seriousness. “How soon can you travel, Lieutenant?”

Hale grinned. “Right away, sir.”

“I shall inform General Washington of the fact, and of your eagerness to undertake the task at hand.” Colonel Knowlton rose to his feet, closing the interview. “Speak to no one of our meeting. You will be called upon in due time if needed. You are dismissed.”

With a sharp salute, Hale turned on his heel and strode buoyantly out the door.

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## AN ARMY OF ONE

Washington immediately approved Hale’s assignment. On September 12, the young man was ferried across the water from Stamford, Connecticut, to Long Island. He would pose as a schoolmaster looking for work, a cover that would give him an excuse to meet leading townsmen and ask questions about the area.

But the move was too late. As September advanced, so had the British troops, capturing the lower end of Manhattan on September 15, just three days after Hale landed. The defeat had been inevitable and Washington was prepared for the blow, but the timing could not have been worse.

Hale had little chance to establish his identity, let alone transmit any helpful intelligence to Washington, before the attack came and changed the entire purpose of his mission. Instead of gathering clues for how the Americans might defend their last stronghold, he now had to equip them with the knowledge of how they might win back the city. Washington feared the fledgling spy would not be able to adapt.

Not that Washington hadn’t been impressed with Hale. Quite the opposite, in fact. The passion, boldness, and just a touch of cockiness that Hale had demonstrated seemed to Washington to perfectly encapsulate the Patriot movement. But just as many questioned the wisdom of the Americans’ challenge to the British Crown, Washington, too, found himself wondering whether Hale’s fervor,

while certainly admirable, was not also a little naive. Did he really know what he was getting into? Then again, did any of them? The Americans had yanked the lion's mane, and now Hale had walked into one of its lairs.

Washington felt keenly the responsibility for Hale's safety, having had the final say on whether or not the mission would go forward. There was no way of knowing how the young man was coping, and this concerned Washington even more. Where was he staying? With whom was he speaking? Had he stumbled into any situations that might put him in harm's way—more so than the mission itself, that is? Every time he heard the rapid hooves of a post-rider's horse, he had to fight the urge to run out and seize the letters from the courier's hands. Just as much as he craved the information Hale would be sending, Washington wanted the assurance that the young lieutenant still maintained his cover and felt confident in his ability to quietly exit Long Island when the right moment came.

Long Island was enemy territory. Its farmland crawled with soldiers determined to hold on to the slice of land and eager to arrest anyone who might threaten their prospects of gaining more. Because the British were so firmly entrenched in their prize real estate, it was a perfect holding pen for the British army awaiting the next offensive strike, and the troops poured in. By the time Hale landed, the island was full of redcoats armed and itching for a fight with anyone who had even a whiff of Patriot sentiments about him.

But just as potentially damning to Hale's mission was the civilian population. While a few Patriots suffered through the occupation, the sympathies of most Long Islanders lay with King George. Even if a farmer was a Patriot, with a British military officer taking quarter in his house he was very likely to shout "God save the king!" if it kept his children safe and his fields unscathed. For this reason alone, Washington worried that a seemingly trustworthy contact might be tempted to report a suspected spy, whether out of true loyalty to the Crown or in the hopes of procuring some additional protection for his own family and property.

Any number of innocent situations could blow Hale's cover to a suspicious local: an ignorance of the proximity of one town to the next, the mispronunciation of a word peculiar to that region, a slip of the tongue that betrayed him as a mainlander. The flimsy nature of Hale's cover story might easily be blown as well—what school would be looking for a teacher this far into September? Perhaps he might be spotted by an old friend and hailed with a familiarity that would be impossible to deny. A Loyalist relative might do the same thing, but with less innocent intentions. Or maybe even Hale's own Patriotic zeal would do him in, were he unable to remain silent in the face of insults to his cause or so trusting that he shared his true feelings with someone masquerading as a sympathetic ear.

A week passed with no disaster, and Washington breathed a sigh of relief. While the danger was still intense, he hoped Hale had established a solid cover and was out of direct suspicion. Unfortunately, his relief was premature.

## FAILURE

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On September 21, Washington spent most of the day studying maps and potential battle plans and, in the evening, writing a few letters. He had no way of knowing that at the tip of the peninsula, Nathan Hale was, at that very moment, being arrested, charged with spying, and sentenced to "be hanged by the neck until dead" the following morning.

As if to highlight Hale's lonely experience on Long Island, no one can say with certainty exactly where he was detected and captured, or even what activities he was engaged in before that fateful event. Somehow he made his way westward to Brooklyn, then crossed over into lower Manhattan,

though no records show exactly when or how. Perhaps he only made that crossing later, as a prisoner. By some reports, he was recognized by some Loyalist cousins and reported to the British; by other reports, he mistook a British boat as the ferry sent to return him to safety; by still others, he was lulled into a false sense of security and shared the details of his plans with some Loyalist locals at a tavern and they turned him in. Whatever the case, he was captured, tried, and hanged all in the span of roughly twelve hours.

Shortly after Hale's body ceased to swing like a pendulum in the Park of Artillery, Captain John Montresor of His Majesty's army set out for the American camp under a flag of truce. He was granted an audience with a young Patriot captain and aide to General Washington named Alexander Hamilton to explain the purpose of his visit and inform the Americans of the execution of Lieutenant Hale. The visit was not only a formal courtesy but also a thinly veiled warning that their sad little attempt at espionage had been an embarrassing failure.

The news cut Washington deeply. Casualties were an unavoidable part of the ugly business of war but had the general not known the futility of the effort even before sending Hale on his mission? Had he not immediately detected a dozen problems with the plan? Did he not sense, deep down, that it had been doomed from the start when one brave but untried young man had taken all of the responsibility upon himself? Hale's death was a tragedy for its own sake, for the fact that Washington now had no agent to feed him the information he desperately needed from Long Island, and because of how unnecessary it was. Had there only been a more knowledgeable, less conspicuous ring in place whose members could not only gather the necessary information but also protect one another even as they operated in anonymity, things might have gone very differently.

Hale's attempt to gather and convey information had been an utter failure, but he had given his beloved general something just as valuable: the recognition that Washington needed more than just one brave man on Long Island; he needed an entire network.

## A TURN AT TRENTON

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As the autumn of 1776 progressed to winter, General George Washington found himself marching from New York to New Jersey to Pennsylvania in a series of disheartening campaigns. His troops were demoralized and the civilian population even more so, as many who were formerly enthusiastic supporters of the Patriotic cause took oaths of fidelity to the king or else simply quietly withdrew their support for liberty. In October, Washington met up with reinforcements, but found their number a mere half of the five thousand troops he had anticipated. Supplies were low and he could no longer count on the local populace to show their support by selling food and other necessary supplies to the Continental Army. The British troops, on the other hand, were well supplied and their numbers bolstered by the Hessians, German mercenaries with a reputation for being boulders of men and unflappable in battle.

Just before the celebration of Christmas, Washington was eyeing a return to New Jersey. He had to regain control of the mid-Atlantic after the disappointing autumn or lose the war, so he began to formulate a plan to attack the Hessian encampment at Trenton—a daring raid requiring yet another treacherous ferrying of men and supplies across water. Braving large masses of ice and winter winds that could easily overturn the small boats, his men would cross the river and capture the city in an attempt to break a stronghold of British control in the region.

“We are in a very disaffected part of the Province,” Washington wrote to his brothers John and Samuel in two telling and very nearly verbatim letters. Samuel's version, dated December 18, 1776,

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