



Unit

**American
Revolution**

Topic

Espionage – The Culper Spy Ring

Lesson Plan

Aim

To evaluate how the Culper Spy Ring helped to define the spirit of the American Revolution by learning of its members and functions.

Rationale

Many stories of those who made a difference in the course of American history go untold, or receive little acknowledgement. When learning about espionage of the American Revolution, and other time periods, it is not a topic just to gloss over a few facts and move on; rather, these stories must be heard, felt, and brought to life. Those who risked their lives for this country are among the nation's, and the world's, greatest heroes. Without the efforts of Major Benjamin Tallmadge, farm-keeper Abraham Woodhull, seaman Caleb Brewster, home-maker Anna Strong, slave James Armistead Lafayette, merchant Robert Townsend, tavernkeeper Austin Roe, Nathan Hale, and many more, the country that stands for freedom may have never had a chance to rise. This lesson takes students on a journey through the past to empathize with what it means to serve one's country and how one small act can make a world of difference.

Student Learning Objectives

Students will be able to analyze the development of espionage efforts during the American Revolution by reading about the creation and function of the Culper Spy Ring and other spies.

Students will be able to create an exhibit for one spy of the American Revolution to showcase his/her accomplishments, symbols, and actions.

Civics Connection

- How can one change, strengthen, or improve upon a social, political, or economic standing?
- How does this history influence the present?
- How do the values of a nation unite its citizens?
- How have people in power affected political, social, and economic developments regarding the freedom and protection of their people?

*See the *Civics Connection Through Questioning* guide in *Civics* for more ideas.



Vocabulary

Espionage	Robert museum Townsend	Anna Strong
Culper Spy Ring	Abraham Woodhull	James Armistead Lafayette
George Washington	Caleb Brewster	Nathan Hale
Benjamin Tallmadge	Austin Roe	Hercules Mulligan

Materials and Resources

1. Text: Teacher's notes for mini lesson
2. Text: Biographies
3. Handout: Model on Hercules Mulligan
4. Handout: Museum Exhibit Planner
5. Handout: Museum Exhibit Journal

Suggested Sources:

About the Culper Spy Ring

<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/culper-spy-ring/>

Culper Spy Ring Code Book

<https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/the-culper-code-book/>

James Rivington is another spy who could be included. Find information about him here:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1918851?seq=1>

Procedure

Do Now:

Wordstorming activity for "espionage": List letters A-Z and come up with one word each letter relating to espionage. For example, for "R" students may write "risk." For "I" students may write "Invisible Ink." (This will allow students to gather information they already know about the topic.)

Lesson:

The teacher will review the notes about the development of the Culper Spy Ring (see provided) and discuss the need for espionage during the war. The teacher will introduce the main spies who will be studied in this lesson. Suggestions are provided, but are not limited to the following: Nathan Hale, Hercules Mulligan (see model), Benjamin Tallmadge, Abraham Woodhull, Caleb Brewster, Anna Strong, Austin Roe, James Armistead Lafayette, and Robert Townsend.

The teacher will model the work activity in which students will create questions for the interview, write out the interview, and prepare the museum exhibit. The model provided is for Hercules Mulligan.



Collaborative/Independent Work:

First, students, in groups, will create a list of questions that they would ask any of these spies. Students will be timed (2-3 minutes) and the recorder of each group will write down every question he/she hears without judging it. Groups should aim to have at least 10 questions to work with.

Then, the teacher will assign students a patriot spy to interview.

After receiving their assigned spy, students should use digital resources to research the answers to their questions, and add more questions as they arise. (If digital resources are not available, the teacher should rent books from the school library for the day, or bring in pre-printed biographies of each spy.) Students should complete the interview worksheet by highlighting key points and questions to share with their classmates during the gallery walk of the museum exhibits.

After the interview is completed, students will complete the museum exhibit by selecting at least 3 pieces that represent their spy. A picture/object may be displayed, a brief biography or note may also be displayed, and a sample artifact of a piece of espionage (i.e. coded letter, invisible ink, clothesline, etc.). [Interview notes may also be displayed, or performed, as the teacher wishes.]

Lastly, students will participate in a gallery walk to view the exhibits and learn about all of the patriot spies discussed in this lesson. Students will record the key facts they learn in their museum exhibit journals as they walk around.

Share:

The students will participate in a gallery walk to view the exhibits. If the teacher chooses to have students perform the interviews, the gallery walk should be conducted after.

Close:

Do you think America would be the nation it is today without the contributions of the spies of the American Revolution? Why or why not?

Modifications

- Students may research each spy instead of using provided biographies if possible.
- Instead of conducting a gallery walk, students can be directed to move from table to table as a group with timed viewing sessions.
- Teachers may also have students perform the roles of the interview in front of the class.
- A list of questions for the interview may be developed by the class as a whole to use.
- The teacher may provide question stems for students to use to develop their questions.

Extension

Students can use the code book of the Culper Spy Ring to write and decode messages in order to understand and experience the complexity of the system created by Washington and his spies.



Notes

**Use discretion for activities according to what is appropriate for your class.*



Teacher's Notes for Mini-Lesson

- George Washington, commander of the Continental Army (a.k.a. Agent 711 in the Culper Ring), was a great spymaster among many other traits.
- Compared to the British, Washington's army was low in numbers, and they lacked the training, funding, and equipment needed to win. Washington knew he needed to outsmart the enemy to be successful.
- Washington oversaw the first American intelligence community that was largely in the hands of merchants, tailors, farmers, seamen and other patriot civilians with ordinary jobs.
- Washington appointed Major Benjamin Tallmadge, a.k.a. John Bolton, as the director of the Culper Spy Ring which operated out of New York, a British stronghold during the war.
- "The members of the ring performed a complicated, clandestine ballet. Perhaps a tip would originate with Robert Townsend, or "Samuel Culper, Jr.," a loyalist coffee-shop owner and society reporter, who often passed along the scoop he overheard at gatherings of the British elite. A message might then be communicated by Anna Strong, who would hang clothes on her clothesline in a specific manner to indicate that intelligence had been gathered. Or, a valuable nugget might be hidden away at a farm owned by Abraham Woodhull, known as "Samuel Culper." It might then be picked up and transported by Caleb Brewster, who ran a whaleboat that traveled between Long Island and Connecticut."
- While the Culper Ring was among the most successful of the intelligence operations, it was just one group of many who would provide Washington with crucial information.
- Spies used the most innovative tactics and technologies for communication including code names, ciphers, book codes including a complex system of letters, numbers, and symbols, locations of "dead drops", clothesline codes, invisible ink, and propaganda. Codes had to be changed frequently as communication of them was delivered by post or word of mouth.

Source: <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/george-washington-spymaster/>



Teacher's Model for Work Activity

**This model has 3 questions for a sample. Student work should include at least 8.*

Interview with Hercules Mulligan	
Source(s): https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2016-featured-story-archive/the-legend-of-hercules-mulligan.html	
Question	Answer
What was your role in the espionage activities for George Washington?	I was a tailor in New York City for many British officers. Usually I would recognize that if soldiers needed their tailoring done by a certain date that meant the troops were moving, and I would alert my slave and dispatcher, Cato, to get that information to General Washington.
Did any of the information you acquired alarm George Washington? Was it successfully passed on to him?	Yes. One particular incident comes to mind. Late one night a gentleman came into my shop asking for a coat in a hurry. When I asked him about the late hour, he eagerly told me that he was departing to capture General Washington within the day. I hurried him from my store and alerted Cato to get the message to General Washington. Thanks to Cato, the information got to him in time.
Did you or Cato ever face any danger or get caught?	Cato was caught once on his journey back from Washington's headquarters. The British suspected me and jailed me once, but eventually let me back to my shop. The only real danger I faced was after the war ended. I was thought to be loyal to the British for my serving them so regularly in my store. It wasn't until General Washington visited me and updated his wardrobe at my store that people believed in my patriotism.

Sample information that could be included in an exhibit:

Exhibit 1	Exhibit 2	Exhibit 3
SPY: Hercules Mulligan JOB: Tailor LOCATION: New York City Hercules retrieved information from the comings and goings of British officers who used his tailor shop.	 Cato, who was Hercules' slave and dispatcher, would travel to Washington's camp to relay key information.	 After the war ended, this sign hung on Hercules' storefront which quelled any fear that he was loyal to the British.



Museum Exhibit Planner

Type – object, artifact, biography, note

How it will be displayed – picture, object, writing, digital

Exhibit 1	Exhibit 2	Exhibit 3
Type:	Type:	Type:
How it will be displayed:	How it will be displayed:	How it will be displayed:
What information will be included to explain the exhibit?	What information will be included to explain the exhibit?	What information will be included to explain the exhibit?
Why is this information important?	Why is this information important?	Why is this information important?
Anticipated questions from viewers:	Anticipated questions from viewers:	Anticipated questions from viewers:



Museum Exhibit Journal

Spy (Name, Job, Location)	Role	Key Facts



Benjamin Tallmadge

Born in Setauket, New York on Long Island, Benjamin Tallmadge was the ideal choice to lead a spy ring operating out of the British headquarters of New York City.

Before beginning his efforts in the American Revolution and leading the Culper Spy Ring, Tallmadge was a student at Yale University. He attended Yale from 1769 to 1773, where he became close friends with Nathan Hale, who would also become involved in espionage. After finishing his studies, he became a teacher at a school in Wethersfield, Connecticut.

After the Battles of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill, Tallmadge thought seriously about joining the army to support the fight for American independence. In 1776, Tallmadge eagerly accepted a position of lieutenant in one of Connecticut's regiments offered to him by Captain Chester of Wethersfield. His first encounter was the Battle of Long Island, which saw a British defeat, but also the capture of Tallmadge's older brother William who, according to Tallmadge's memoir, starved to death in prison. Tallmadge then went on to become a captain in Colonel Elisha Sheldon's prestigious 2d Regiment of Light Dragoons in December 1776, and rose to the rank of Major in April 1777.

In 1778, George Washington appointed Tallmadge to be the director of a spy ring that would secure information from the British in New York City. Tallmadge called on his friends from his youth to join in the dangerous task of espionage. The patriots that they were readily responded with their devotion to the cause. Abraham Woodhull, Caleb Brewster, Anna Strong, and Austin Roe were eager to join the effort along with others such as Robert Townsend.

Tallmadge took every caution to safeguard the identities of his spies. He gave them pseudonyms and invented a numerical system to identify them instead of using names. There were seven hundred and sixty-three numbers used. Tallmadge, also known as John Bolton was 721, General Washington was 711, Caleb Brewster was 725, England was represented by 745, and New York 727.

Tallmadge's Culper Spy Ring had many successes of spoiling British plans and sending the British off course with others. Ultimately, Tallmadge's capture of Major John André, a British spy who was involved with the treason of Benedict Arnold, would be one of his greatest accomplishments. At the time of his capture, Arnold was an unknown traitor, and André was to be sent to West Point, Arnold's headquarters, where he likely would have escaped. Tallmadge's suspicion of André prevented him from being sent to West Point. Tallmadge supervised André's custody until his execution and is said to have shook his hand out of respect at the gallows.

After the war, Tallmadge returned to civilian life in Connecticut with his wife Mary Floyd Tallmadge and their seven children. He entered into various business and financial ventures. During President Washington's first term, he appointed Tallmadge the position of postmaster for Litchfield, Connecticut. In 1800 he was elected to Congress as a Federalist and remained in the House of Representatives until 1817.

Source: <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/benjamin-tallmadge/>



Robert Townsend

Robert Townsend, also known as Culper Junior, became the Culper Spy Ring's primary source of information from New York City in 1779.

He posed as a loyalist coffee-shop owner and merchant while working as a journalist. As a merchant, he was able to move about the shops and docks of Manhattan, and social events, without arousing suspicion from the British while eavesdropping on their conversations. He also was able to obtain information being a reporter. Robert Townsend used invisible ink to pen information which would likely be sent to Long Island with Austin Roe and then sent to Washington's headquarters.

Townsend and his fellow spies were able to obtain information about British troop movements. They uncovered the plot that the British were planning to undermine the war effort by disseminating counterfeit American currency throughout New York.

Robert Townsend risked his life and his family to serve his country. He kept his involvement with the Culper Spy Ring a complete secret from his family and friends for the rest of his life. His involvement in the Culper Spy Ring is said to have not been discovered until 1930 when historian Morton Pennypacker proved the true identity of Culper Junior through his handwriting.

Source: <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/culper-spy-ring/>
<https://raynhamhallmuseum.org/history/culper-spy-ring/>



Abraham Woodhull

Born in Setauket, New York on Long Island, Abraham Woodhull, the son of a prominent judge, was essentially the leader of the Culper Spy Ring on Long Island. He worked on a farm in Setauket, which was used for keeping messages that circulated in the spy ring. When his childhood friend, Major Benjamin Tallmadge, reached out to him for help in the war effort through espionage, Woodhull was readily on board.

Woodhull began spying for General Washington and the Continental Army in late 1778. His code name was Samuel Culper, and he would travel between Setauket and Manhattan seemingly to be visiting his sister. The British became suspicious of him and went to his home to arrest him in June of 1779, but he was not there. Although he was not arrested, this incident left him shaken. Even though he was nervous about being caught, he was eager to find another way to keep spying.

He recruited Robert Townsend, a merchant who worked in Manhattan, to be responsible for gathering information from the British in New York City. His name became known as Samuel Culper Jr. The information Townsend gathered would get to Woodhull via a courier. Woodhull would retrieve the messages on his farm and alert Anna Strong to send her message to Caleb Brewster to retrieve the documents.

Woodhull continued to spy for the Culper Ring until the end of the war. He then stayed settled in Setauket with his wife Mary Smith and their three children. After her death in 1806, he remarried in 1824. Woodhull became a judge in his later years in life and died in 1826 in Setauket.

Source: <https://www.biography.com/political-figure/abraham-woodhull>
<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/culper-spy-ring/>



Caleb Brewster

Born in Setauket, New York on Long Island, Caleb Brewster became one of the most indispensable members of the Culper Spy Ring.

Always dreaming of being at sea, Brewster joined a whaling boat as a young man. By the time the hostilities between England and the colonists had escalated, Brewster was an expert seaman. Having grown up on the northern part of Long Island, he knew the northern Long Island coastline and the stretch north to Connecticut better than most.

When Major Benjamin Tallmadge was recruiting members for a spy ring in New York, he depended on his friend Caleb to join his effort. Tallmadge was stationed in Connecticut with General Washington, but British headquarters were in New York. The information acquired by other spies in New York would need to get to Connecticut swiftly and inconspicuously, as well as the information Tallmadge needed to get back to New York. Brewster's expertise as a seaman, and his loyal friendship, made him perfect for the task.

Brewster was under suspicion of the British as the primary courier between Long Island and Connecticut. Once, while waiting to receive information from another member of the Culper Ring, a British officer discovered him. Brewster knocked the officer from his horse and took some of his possessions before fleeing, making it appear that the incident was one of robbery rather than espionage.

The Culper Ring was under suspicion of the British. They knew Brewster's name, and where he lived and operated, but he was never captured. Brewster's reputation for being incredibly brave, his resourcefulness, his seamanship, and his knowledge of every cove of Long Island made him successful in his efforts for the revolution.

After the war, Brewster settled in Connecticut as a blacksmith and a farmer. For many years, he also was an officer in the United States Revenue Cutter Service, forerunner of the Coast Guard. He died in 1827 at the age of 79 in a section of Fairfield that is now part of Bridgeport. There is a street named after him in Bridgeport near where he lived.



Austin Roe

Austin Roe was recruited as a member of the Culper Spy Ring to be the courier of information. He was a tavernkeeper in Setauket, Long Island, New York. In his travels to New York City, he gave the excuse that he was buying supplies there for his business. In New York City, he would enter Townsend's establishment. He would place an order for a man named John Bolton (code for Benjamin Tallmadge). The coded messages were delivered and retrieved, and Roe would hide them in goods that he would take back to Setauket. Once home, Roe hid the messages in Abraham Woodhull's farm. Once Woodhull retrieved the message, he would alert Anna Strong to signal Caleb Brewster to come and collect the information to bring to Washington.

Although there is little information about Austin Roe, his contribution to the Culper Spy Ring and the cause of the revolution is incredibly significant. Without his bravery and courage to enter the heart of British headquarters to get crucial information, the Culper Spy Ring may not have been as successful. Traveling on horseback, especially carrying coded messages of espionage through British territory, was severely dangerous, and Roe risked his life for the freedom of his country.

Source: <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/culper-spy-ring/>



Anna Strong

Anna Smith Strong was a friend and neighbor to the other Culper Spy Ring members. Her husband, Selah Strong, was a Patriot judge, and was arrested and imprisoned by the British for corresponding with the enemy. Anna was alone in Setauket.

When Major Benjamin Tallmadge, the head of the Culper Spy Ring, called on his friends on Long Island to help, Anna readily responded to join the effort. Anna was crucial in the chain of the Culper Spy Ring. She owned a farm near Abraham Woodhull and used her clothesline to communicate coded messages to other members of the spy ring. After receiving information from Abraham Woodhull, Anna hung a black petticoat to signal Caleb Brewster that documents were waiting for him to retrieve. She informed him of which cove he should hide in to meet Woodhull by hanging a certain number of handkerchiefs. Brewster would obtain the messages and be on his way to Major Benjamin Tallmadge.

Although there is not much information on Anna Strong, her part in the Culper Spy Ring was essential in ensuring that the members did not rise to suspicion of the British. With her clothesline messages, contact between Abraham Woodhull and Caleb Brewster remained virtually unknown, making it hard to connect those who worked together in the spy ring for Washington.

Source: <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/culper-spy-ring/>
<https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/culper-spy-ring>



James Armistead Lafayette

An enslaved African American, James Armistead is known for his brave contribution to General Washington and the revolutionary cause. With the permission of his master, he enlisted in the Revolutionary War in 1781. Armistead served under the Marquis de Lafayette, the commander of allied French forces.

Lafayette appointed Armistead to be a spy with the hopes of gathering information on enemy movements. Armistead posed as a runaway slave who was hired by the British to spy on the Americans. He successfully infiltrated the headquarters of British General Charles Cornwallis. Armistead returned north with Benedict Arnold where he continued to learn crucial details of British operations undetected. His free movement between British and American camps made it easy for him to get information to Lafayette.

The details from Armistead's report was used by Lafayette and General Washington to prevent the British from sending reinforcements to Yorktown, Virginia. The American and French blockade surprised British forces and destroyed their military. As a result of Lafayette and General Washington's victory at Yorktown, the British officially surrendered.

Although Armistead's espionage was crucial in winning the war, he returned as a slave to William Armistead. He was not eligible for emancipation under the Act of 1783 for slave-soldiers because he was considered a slave-spy. He had to petition the Virginia legislature for freedom. Armistead was helped by the Marquis de Lafayette who wrote him a recommendation for emancipation, which was successful. James Armistead was granted freedom in 1787. In gratitude to the Marquis de Lafayette for his support and assistance, James Armistead adopted Lafayette's surname.



Nathan Hale

One of the first known American spies of the Revolutionary War, Nathan Hale stepped forward when General Washington called on the need for a brave individual to gather intelligence behind enemy lines. Hale, a Captain of the 19th Regiment of the Continental Army, made the ultimate sacrifice for his country.

Hale was educated at Yale University and a classmate of Benjamin Tallmadge. This background enabled Hale to disguise himself as a schoolmaster. On Long Island, a British-held territory, Hale gathered information about British troop movements over the course of several weeks. While there, the British invaded Manhattan and took control of the city in September of 1776. British soldiers were on the lookout for any Patriot sympathizers. Hale was captured while sailing the Long Island Sound heading for American-held territory.

Hale was interrogated by British General William Howe. It was discovered that he was carrying incriminating documents, and General Howe ordered his execution for espionage the following morning. It is said that Hale's last words on the gallows was, "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Nathan Hale was hanged on the morning of September 22, 1776. He was 21 years old.

Source: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/nathan-hale-volunteers-to-spy-behind-british-lines>

