

THE SPIES OF SETAUKET

Edward Perdue

Dickinson Wright PLLC

On the North Shore of Long Island, NY, about 50 miles east of New York City, lies the small village of Setauket. Not much happens in Setauket. It's a sleepy hamlet, part of an area in the Town of Brookhaven (along with the villages of Old Field and Stony Brook) known as the Three Villages. The police in Setauket spend most of their time shutting down bon fires and issuing traffic citations. But this sleepy town is the setting of an inspiring story of a veteran and intelligence agent from Setauket during the Revolutionary War who became the first county judge in Suffolk County, NY.

Children in Setauket go to Setauket School, formerly the local high school but a building which now (and in the 1970s) houses an elementary school. As a child I remember being escorted across the street and the Village Green to visit the musket ball on display in the Episcopal Church, and the gravestones in the cemetery of the Presbyterian Church. We made pencil rubbings on the gravestone of Abraham Woodhull, and were told he, and other brave men and women from our town, were members of George Washington's secret intelligence service who were instrumental in defeating the British during the Revolutionary War. See Fig. 1.

Fig. 1: Grave stone of Abraham Woodhull in Setauket Presbyterian Church.



The young cavalry officer who came to lead General Washington's intelligence service, Benjamin Tallmadge, was also a native of Setauket and the son of the pastor of the Presbyterian Church. As if to cement that history in our fertile minds, a statute of Tallmadge hangs on one wing of the school. See Fig. 2.



FIG 2: Setauket School (author's elementary school) with a sculpture of Benjamin Tallmadge on wing.



The school's auditorium is adorned with massive murals depicting the Battle of Setauket (not directly related to the activities of the intelligence service), and the activities of the Culper Spy Ring (as the cell of spies was known). See Fig. 3 and 4. The name Culper Spy Ring is

derived from the aliases of two of its key members – Samuel Culper, Sr. (Woodhull) and Samuel Culper, Jr. (Robert Townsend). Its members were such a closely held secret that even Washington did not know the identities of all its members.

Fig. 3: Battle of Setauket from Vance Lock Mural – Setauket School (Setauket Presbyterian Church in background).



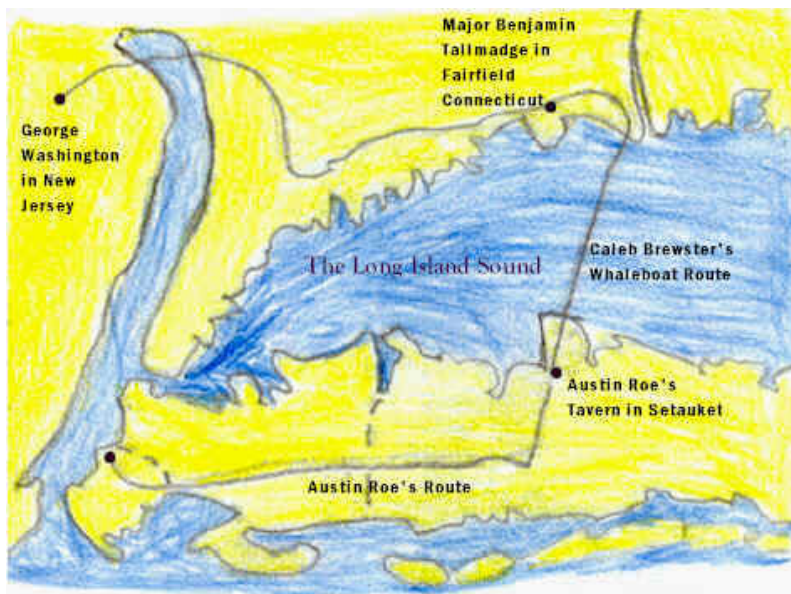
As one can partly glean from the scene in Figure 4, Tallmadge, Woodhull and his local recruits were engaged in collecting intelligence in British occupied New York City, returning those reports through British lines in Brooklyn to Setauket, and arranging their pick-up and delivery across the Long Island Sound to Connecticut for evaluation by Tallmadge and personal delivery to Washington at his headquarters in New Jersey.

Fig. 4. Abraham Woodhull with Caleb Brewster and his whaleboat crew (from Vance Locke mural, Setauket School).



The circuitous route often proved frustrating to Washington, but the successes of these brave men and women ultimately proved the wisdom of the system they developed. See Fig. 5.

Figure 5: The collection and dissemination route (from Three Village Schools website).



Among the intelligence coups achieved by the Culpers are the following:

- Discovered and exposed an attempt by British intelligence to flood the colonies with counterfeit currency;
- Obtained and disseminated to the French fleet off of Yorktown the English Navy's code book;
- Allowed Washington to prevent the English army occupying New York from interfering with a French landing in Newport, Rhode Island; and
- Provided key intelligence which allowed Tallmadge to discover and interrupt Benedict Arnold and Major John Andre's attempt to turn over the critical American position at West Point to the British.

This last accomplishment alone likely prevented disaster for the American cause, as the British capture of West Point on the Hudson River north of New York City would have allowed the British navy to sever Washington's internal lines of communication and would have divided the colonies in two.

The Culpers were of course a group of individuals, all serving for personal reasons and all subject to their own fears and personal concerns. Each of their stories is fascinating in its own respect and each played a unique and largely unheralded role in the American victory. At the head of the chain of command was Benjamin Tallmadge. This energetic and intelligent Setauket native had moved to Connecticut to teach school and became a young officer in the American Army after Washington's victory at Boston in 1775. When Nathan Hale, who was not a Long Island native, was captured and executed in New York after an abortive attempt to establish a source of intelligence on Long Island for Washington, Tallmadge was asked to use his local knowledge and relationships on the island to recruit one or more sources of intelligence. Tallmadge was the recipient of the raw intelligence in Connecticut and he would deliver the

reports to Washington's headquarters outside occupied New York City in New Jersey. Tallmadge would later lead a successful raid on British installations which began with an amphibious landing in Mount Sinai (just east of Setauket).

A childhood friend of Tallmadge from Setauket, Abraham Woodhull was a member of Tallmadge's father's congregation at the Presbyterian Church. He was on the verge of inheriting his family's homestead. He also was somewhat of an entrepreneur who bought and sold goods used by taverns and other businesses throughout Long Island. That business, along with some family ties in the city, gave him a legitimate reason to be traveling with goods back and forth from New York to Setauket. He demanded that Tallmadge never reveal his identity to anyone other than Washington, and reserved the right to recruit all members of the cell himself. Along with Tallmadge, he developed a code for their correspondence which included representative numbers for the agents, places and things. Woodhull had many close calls with the British, and on one occasion a British cavalry detachment unsuccessfully sought to capture him at his family home and severely beat his father as a warning to Woodhull. He almost suffered a heart attack one night when two teenage girls (who were visiting his home) sought to cheer up their nervous and pensive relative by bursting into his room to surprise him while he was in the act of transcribing an intelligence report in invisible ink. He was compelled to report this incident to his handlers as it resulted in the loss of half of his supply of the "sympathetic stain." He never sought compensation beyond his expenses, and after the war he became a local magistrate and the first judge of Suffolk County (in the court where the author would begin his legal career more than two hundred years later).

Woodhull's first recruit was Setauket tavern owner Austin Roe. A neighbor and acquaintance of Woodhull, Roe's tavern provided a convenient cover for Woodhull's delivery of intelligence reports along with other tavern supplies. Roe's involvement also provided Woodhull with a layer of insulation between his activities and the delivery of the intelligence to Washington. Roe and Woodhull's roles over time became somewhat interchangeable, and at times Roe assumed responsibility for making the runs into New York City to pick up the intelligence reports from the embedded operatives in the city. Moved from its original location along Route 25a in Setauket, Roe's tavern still stands today and is now a private residence. After the war George Washington visited Setauket to thank the members of the Culper Ring and stayed in Roe's tavern. See Fig. 6.

Fig. 6. Roe Tavern, Setauket (now a private residence). George Washington stayed here in 1790 when he visited the members of the spy ring to personally extend his appreciation for their efforts.



The swashbuckling figure who was responsible for delivering the reports across the sound to Tallmadge was Setauket native Caleb Brewster (depicted in the right foreground of Figure 4 speaking to Woodhull). Like the author centuries later, Brewster grew up running his boats in and out of the coves and marshes that surround Setauket. Recruited by Woodhull, Brewster and his crew would hide his whale boat in one of six locations around Setauket. If intelligence was available for delivery, he would take the reports and run the gauntlet of British naval shipping in Long Island Sound to deliver the reports to Tallmadge in Connecticut. In addition to eluding the British in several chases, Brewster would add his own intelligence

regarding British naval movements to the reports and actually guided the American forces on their raid on the fortified British position in Setauket village now known as the Battle of Setauket.

The local who assisted Brewster in his effort to retrieve the intelligence was the wife of an American Patriot imprisoned in one of the British prison ships in New York harbor. Anna Strong managed her household in her husband's absence, but she also played a critical role in the delivery of the intelligence to Washington. When Brewster's boat came in he would alert her which one of the six pre-determined locations his boat would be hiding and she would employ an ingenious signaling system to notify Woodhull of his location. She would hang a black petticoat from her clothesline to signal that Brewster was in harbor and one to six handkerchiefs to signal which location. See Fig. 7.

Fig. 7. Anna Strong and her petticoat and handkerchief signaling system (from Three Village Schools website).



The Culpers employed three different intelligence gathering agents in the city itself. Robert Townsend, whose identity was not discovered until 1939, went by the alias Samuel

Culper, Jr. He worked as a shipping clerk in an office near the docks that was frequented by the British and from which he could gather intelligence on shipping and troop movements. Townsend was from a family of patriots from Oyster Bay, Long Island, and his family home and general store had been occupied by the same British cavalry troop that beat Woodhull's father. Townsend seethed with hatred for the British who relegated his family to a back room existence, flirted with his younger sisters and chopped down his family orchard to fortify his home against American raiders. After being captured during the Battle of Brooklyn where he served as a quartermaster for a battalion in Washington's army, Townsend swore allegiance to the crown and maintained his cover as a harmless shipping clerk. Later he obtained a part time position as a reporter for a local publication which allowed him to visit British units and installations under the cover of reporting news for his loyalist paper.

The publisher of that loyalist paper was an Englishman named James Rivington. Reviled by colonists as an English lackey, Rivington published news, poems and gossip in what was commonly known as a loyalist rag. He often published poems written by Major John Andre, the fashionable head of British intelligence in the colonies. This provided him with the perfect cover, and in conjunction with his work as the proprietor a popular coffee shop, he travelled in the British social circles that provided Washington with valuable intelligence. His cover was so well established that it came as a surprise to most that he stayed in New York after the war and it is said that Washington was required to personally intervene to prevent retribution against him by the local populace. His reputation never recovered however, and he spent much of his later life in poverty.

The last key player in the ring was a woman known only as Agent 355. She has been the subject of much historical interest, but her true identity has never been discovered. She appears to have been a close friend or associate of Townsend, and the fact that his identity was only discovered in the late 1930s has left a cold trail as to her identity. She is believed to have been a socialite from a loyalist family, and possibly even a paramour of Andre. It is suspected that intelligence she provided directly implicated Andre and Benedict Arnold in the plot to surrender West Point. Townsend appears to have been severely distressed at events which suggest she was captured and imprisoned in one of the prison ships based in the harbor. Her capture appears to have immediately followed Andre's capture and eventual hanging in current day Sleepy Hollow. In any event, most historians believe Agent 355 made the ultimate sacrifice and our nation owes her an inestimable debt of gratitude.

In short, much happened in Setauket in the latter half of the Revolutionary War that led to the ultimate success of the American forces. Like the town from which they hailed, all of the spy ring members went on with their lives with the notable exception of Agent 355. Woodhull remained humble and anonymous and continued to serve his community as described above. Tallmadge served in Congress and retired in Connecticut. Brewster too retired in Connecticut, and Roe and Townsend lived out their lives in relative obscurity. The entire area surrounding Anna Strong's homestead is now known as Strong's Neck. If ever in New York City, consider taking a drive out to Setauket and visiting Setauket School, Roe Tavern, the Village Green, Patriot Rock, the Presbyterian cemetery and the Episcopal Church. Take the ferry from Port Jefferson to Bridgeport and imagine the days when Caleb Brewster was chased out of Setauket's local coves by British frigates along that same route. But by all means remember those unsung heroes who did more for our nation than most Americans will ever know.