

Old Field

It happened in Setauket... General Washington's *Culper Spy Ring*



Emma S. Clark
Memorial Library

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GENERAL WASHINGTON'S SETAUKET-BASED CULPER SPY RING

~ HISTORY CLOSE AT HAND ~
By Beverly C. Tyler

It happened in Setauket! A clandestine operation, to provide General Washington with information on the activity of the British on Long Island and in New York City, existed during the Revolutionary War. You can explore the sites that figured in the operation of the Culper Spy Ring, as it was known.

Call 631.498.4740 for an audio tour of Setauket's Revolutionary War Spy Locations. While following the tour outlined below, simply press the number indicated within each entry to get an audio description of the site.

1 THREE VILLAGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY EXHIBIT-SPIES! -- PRESS 21

Three Village Historical Society Headquarters and Museum

<http://www.ThreeVillageHistoricalSociety.org>

93 North Country Rd., PO Box 76, East Setauket, NY 11733

Phone: 631.751.3730, Fax: 631.751.3936, Email: info@tvhs.org

Museum & Gift Shop hours: Sun. 1-4 PM, and by appointment.

Admission: \$5.00. Call for information about Walking Tours and membership information.

The current (2014) exhibit is ***SPIES! How a Group of Long Island Patriots Helped George Washington Win the Revolution.*** The exhibit begins at

the gift shop and winds its way through the house moving from 1775 through the Battle of Long Island, the death of Nathan Hale and Washington's loss of New York City in 1776 to the formation of the

Culper Spy Ring in 1778, the addition of an agent in Manhattan in 1779, and the saving of the French fleet at Newport in 1780. In the last room is the computer with **SPIES: OVERVIEW**, a 5 minute overview,

SPIES: IN ACTION, a group of games simulating various activities of the spy ring and **SPIES: THE COMPLETE STORY** with all the documents, maps and information you could ever want.



Writing with invisible ink can be a part of the SPIES! Exhibit experience

2 SETAUKET PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH -- PRESS 5



Begin at the Setauket Village Green. Face the entrance to the First Presbyterian Church of Setauket. The previous church (1714-1812) was used as a stable by British during Revolutionary War. The present building dates from 1812. The minister before and during the Revolutionary War was Reverend Benjamin Tallmadge, father of Major Benjamin Tallmadge, soldier, patriot, and head of General Washington's Secret Service.



Abraham Woodhull, was born on his family's farm in Setauket, overlooking Little Bay, in 1750. He was a farmer by occupation.

Walk to the right, go through the gate into the cemetery, turn left alongside the church and then left behind the church and right to the brick encased memorial marker that is the grave site of Abraham Woodhull.



Woodhull home circa 1690.
Photo circa 1900. Burned 1931

From the beginning of the Setauket Spies in 1777-78, Woodhull was in charge of day- to-day operations. His code name was Samuel Culper and the spy operation came to be known as the Culper Ring. Woodhull was referred to as Samuel Culper Senior after he recruited Robert Townsend, who became Samuel Culper Junior. Not only did Woodhull direct field activities, but he also risked his life countless times by personally collecting information in New York and on western Long Island.

Woodhull was responsible for evaluating the reports received from all sources, determining what was to go forward to Washington's headquarters and seeing that the dispatches were carried across the Sound by Caleb

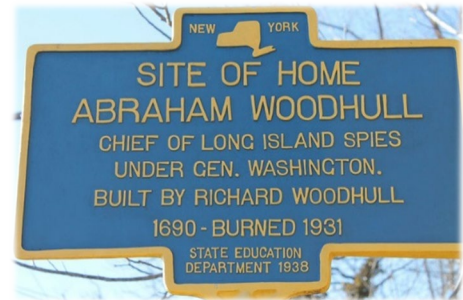
Brewster. Woodhull's health was not good and he lived in constant fear of discovery.

After the Revolution, Woodhull became the first Judge of Suffolk County. He died January 23, 1826 and bricks from the foundation of the Woodhull homestead, which was destroyed by fire in 1931, were used in his memorial.

3 ABRAHAM WOODHULL HOME MARKER -- PRESS 6

Travel north on Dyke Road around Little Bay to the NYS blue & yellow east iron marker that marks the Woodhull home site.

A direct descendant of Richard Woodhull, one of the most outstanding of Setauket's original settlers, Abraham was a farmer by occupation. Probably because of his elder brother Richard's death at the early age of 32, Abraham inherited the circa 1690 family home and farm. The land had been in the family since Richard Woodhull came to Setauket sometime between 1655 and 1657.



4 STRONG'S NECK -- PRESS 7



Look across Little Bay to Strong's Neck and the point at the entrance to Little Bay.

Anna Smith "Nancy" Strong, according to folklore, hung her laundry from the clothesline in a code formation to direct Woodhull to the correct location where Caleb Brewster was hiding with his whaleboats and crews. A black petticoat was the signal that Brewster was nearby, and the number of handkerchiefs scattered among the other garments on the line showed the meeting place.

"Nancy" Strong, in actuality, appears to have stayed on the family estate to assist the Setauket spies. She was a good friend of Caleb Brewster and probably kept Woodhull informed when Brewster was in the area.

Anna Smith Strong was alone on Strong's Neck throughout most of the war. Her husband, Selah Strong, was confined in the "Sugar House" prison in 1778 for "Surreptitious correspondence with the enemy." She obtained his release by appealing to her Tory relatives. Selah was still in danger and spent the rest of the war in Connecticut, taking their children with him.

While British officers luxuriated in the Strong's Manor House (no longer standing—a 19th century Manor replaced it), "Nancy" lived in a small cottage across the Bay from Woodhull's farm as British officers occupied the manor. She could also easily have rowed across Little Bay or walked around Little Bay to contact Woodhull at his home.

After the war Anna & Selah were reunited and Selah led President Washington's entourage to the Roe Tavern in April of 1790, during Washington's tour of Long Island. Nancy died in 1812 and Selah in 1815. They are buried in the Smith-Strong family graveyard.

5 ST. GEORGE'S MANOR FAMILY CEMETERY -- PRESS 8



— APPOINTMENT NEEDED TO VISIT THE CEMETERY —

Across Little Bay, is the cemetery where Anna Smith Strong and her husband Selah Strong are buried. To reach the cemetery, continue along Dyke Road and turn right onto Cemetery Lane. Continue straight ahead to the cemetery (private). You MUST have written permission to visit. Contact Ray Strong (email Ray.Strong@Evercore.com) Please be respectful. Go through the gate to the south end where Anna & Selah are buried overlooking little Bay. The two, tall memorial stones (center of photo) are their tombstones.

6 SETAUKET SCHOOL -- PRESS 4



Retrace your route back past the Setauket Village Green and take Main Street south to the Setauket School.

The polychrome statue on the peak end of the Gymnasium is **Benjamin Tallmadge**, organizer and leader of the Revolutionary War Setauket Spies (code name John



Bolton), who was born in Setauket in 1754. The home where Tallmadge was born is still standing in Setauket at the end of Runs Road. Tallmadge grew up in Setauket and attended school here with his close friends Abraham Woodhull, Caleb Brewster and Austin Roe. Tallmadge, a classmate of executed spy Nathan Hale, graduated from Yale in 1773 and, like Hale, taught school for a time in Connecticut.



When the Revolution began, Tallmadge enlisted in the Continental Army and was soon awarded the rank of Major. Shortly thereafter General Washington appointed him head of his secret service and tasked Tallmadge with establishing a trustworthy espionage network against the British in New York City. To conduct this vital undercover operation on Long Island, Tallmadge chose his boyhood friend Abraham Woodhull. They also chose other friends and neighbors from Setauket; men and women who could be trusted, and who would prove to be so discreet in all their contacts that their identity would not be discovered until the 20th century.

Vance Locke Murals - Inside the Setauket School Auditorium (opposite the gymnasium) are the murals of the history of Setauket including one of Tallmadge attacking Fort St. George in Mastic (left), Woodhull secretly meeting Brewster, and Austin Roe riding from New York City to Setauket.



7 BREWSTER HOUSE -- PRESS 9



Continue south on Main Street, turn left onto 25A and go to the bottom of the hill. The historic Brewster house on the left belonged to Caleb Brewster's ancestors.

Caleb Brewster was perhaps the most bold and daring of the spies. Brewster's task throughout the war was to command a fleet of whale boats operating from the Connecticut shore against British and Tory shipping on Long Island Sound. This,

together with his knowledge of the Long Island shoreline, and his boyhood association with Tallmadge, made him an ideal choice to carry intelligence back and forth across the Sound.



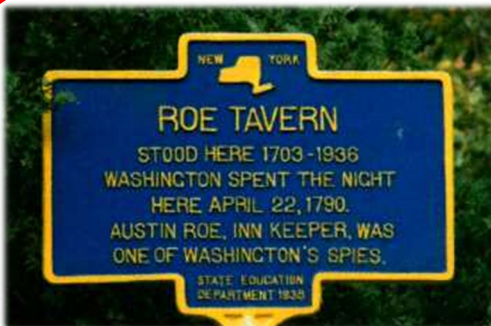
Brewster made numerous trips with his Whaleboat Navy; into Long Island Sound to attack British shipping; and across to Setauket to bring messages back for Major Benjamin Tallmadge to deliver to General Washington.

8 **Benjamin Tallmadge Birthplace** - Next to the Brewster house is Runs Road, which leads to Tallmadge's birthplace (private). To get an excellent view of the home of Reverend Benjamin Tallmadge continue east along 25A and take your next left, Shore Road. Proceed approximately one-half mile to the Brookhaven Town Dock and beach, located where Shore Road curves to the right.

Look southwest across Setauket Harbor to the circa 1730 colonial home with its central chimney. The house sits on a rise above the harbor, by the creek that empties into Setauket Harbor.



9 ROE TAVERN MARKER -- PRESS 10



Continue along Shore Road as it heads east and take your next right onto Bayview Avenue and proceed to the end where it meets Route 25A. Turn right onto 25A. Immediately on your right is the NYS marker where the Roe Tavern stood until it was moved in 1936.

Austin Roe ran a tavern in East Setauket and used his position as a tavern owner to justify his trips to New York City (Manhattan). While in New York Roe gathered the supplies he

needed for the tavern as well as the intelligence that had to be relayed to General Washington. On April 22, 1790, President George Washington enjoyed the hospitality of Austin Roe and spent the night.



The spy network in New York coordinated their efforts through **Robert Townsend**. Townsend, who lived in Oyster Bay, was the principle contact in New York for most of the period between 1779 and 1781. During portions of that time Abraham Woodhull (Samuel Culper Senior) took over from Townsend, as he had done before recruiting Townsend.

The Culper spy network supplied General Washington with vital information concerning British troop movements, fortifications, and intentions in New York and the surrounding area during the perilous war years from 1778-1783. In 1780, intelligence transmitted by the spies enabled Washington to prevent the British from capturing Newport, Rhode Island, and destroying the newly arrived French army.

Roe made the 110-mile round trip often. The road was heavily traveled by British & Tory troops and by highwaymen. Roe would receive information directly from Townsend, usually written in invisible ink and in code. He would ride back to Setauket and pass the information to Woodhull. Woodhull would meet Caleb Brewster and the information would go from Brewster to Tallmadge and then to General Washington. Austin Roe made numerous trips to New York and was never discovered.

10 SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, FRANK MELVILLE JR. MEMORIAL LIBRARY, STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY -- PRESS 20 [Access by appointment: please call 631-632-7119]

In the Special Collections, on the second floor of the University Library are three original letters relating to the Culper Spy Ring. Two are from General Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge discussing various aspects of the operation of the ring. The other is from James Jay, brother of John Jay, requesting payment from Congress for the invisible ink and reagent he provided to General Washington during the war.

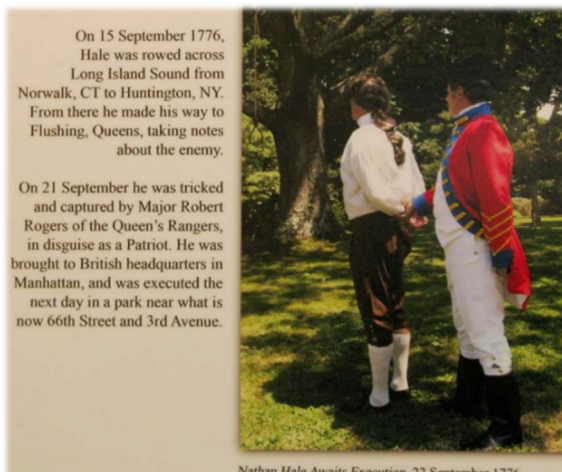
Hawkins Mount House, Stony Brook - Built circa 1757. Corner of North Country Road (25A) and Stony Brook Road. It was here that the original route of North Country Road ran straight past the south side of the Hawkins-Mount house, through University grounds and joined up with

Thompson Hay Path before turning left through Setauket and around the Village Green. The sign on the loading door of the Hawkins-Mount House on the peak of the west facade reads "Jonas Hawkins Store and Ordinary." By the time Jonas Hawkins operated the house as a store and tavern in the late 18th century it had been enlarged for the third or fourth time.

During the Revolution Jonas Hawkins was one of the messengers for the Setauket-based Culper Spy Ring. Hawkins (1752-1817) operated as a courier for Abraham Woodhull between January and June 1779. In 1814, William Sidney Mount and his family moved here from Setauket to live with his uncle.



• **NATHAN HALE MEMORIAL, HUNTINGTON -- PRESS 3**



On 15 September 1776, Hale was rowed across Long Island Sound from Norwalk, CT to Huntington, NY. From there he made his way to Flushing, Queens, taking notes about the enemy.

On 21 September he was tricked and captured by Major Robert Rogers of the Queen's Rangers, in disguise as a Patriot. He was brought to British headquarters in Manhattan, and was executed the next day in a park near what is now 66th Street and 3rd Avenue.

Nathan Hale Awaits Execution, 22 September 1776

Located along 25A at the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Museum building at 228 Main Street. The memorial is a marble pillar dedicated to Nathan Hale. The Soldiers and Sailors Memorial building was designed by famed architect Stanford White and dedicated in 1894.

- **RAYNHAM HALL MUSEUM, OYSTER BAY -- PRESS 1**

Located at 20 West Main Street in the heart of Oyster Bay, the circa 1738 saltbox-style home was expanded to a lavish Victorian villa in 1851. The house was home to generations of the Townsend family, including merchants, politicians, ships captains, and even a member of the Setauket-based Culper Spy Ring Robert Townsend, Samuel Culper Jr., code number 723.



- **FORT HILL CEMETERY & ROBERT TOWNSEND GRAVE -- PRESS 2**

From Raynham Hall go west on West Main St. Turn left on Spring Street (heading south). First left on Orchard St. And immediate right onto Prospect St. to end and bear right onto Simcoe St. the cemetery is on your right. Simcoe Street is named after Lt. John Grave Simcoe. The earliest grave here is of John Townsend, buried here in 1668. This is the final resting place of Robert Townsend.

- **GW [FORMERLY GEORGE WASHINGTON MANOR], ROSLYN -- PRESS 22**

NOT AN ACTIVE NUMBER. NO DESCRIPTION.

SAGTIKOS MANOR, BAY SHORE - The house was first built c. 1692. Additions to the house were added in the 18th century, including the room where George Washington slept in during his tour of Long Island in 1790. The first owner of the manor was Stephan Van Cortland, the first native-born New York Mayor. From him the house went to the Carle family, then to Isaac Thompson, the brother of Dr. Samuel Thompson of Setauket. During the Revolutionary War, Isaac's brother and father, militia officers and town leaders, became refugees in Connecticut, but Isaac stayed in Bay Shore. There are no document to support the belief that Isaac Thompson was a Patriot spy or a member of the Culper Spy Ring during the Revolutionary war; however, when President Washington made his tour of Long Island, he spent the night in just three locations: two, Setauket and Oyster Bay, were the hometown of Samuel Culper and Samuel Culper, Jr. The third was the home of Isaac Thompson, now Sagtikos Manor.



CONNECTIONS & RELATIONSHIPS: Significantly, Mary Woodhull Thompson, Isaac and Samuel's mother was the sister of Abraham Woodhull's father Richard. So Isaac Thompson was first cousin to Abraham Woodhull. The same can be said for Anna Smith Strong and her husband Selah. Selah's mother was Susannah Thompson, sister to Jonathan Thompson. This makes Selah Strong and Isaac Thompson first cousins. Anna Smith Strong is the first cousin of Thomas "Bull" Smith who married Mary Thompson. This makes her Isaac Thompson's second cousin. How many more connections do we need to establish the work of Patriots who did not want to be known to the British nor to other Patriots or their descendants?

