

The Man Behind the Curtain

Taxation protests arise, British occupation begins, shots are fired, and the Declaration of Independence is signed; the bloody fight for American independence in the 18th century has started, and most colonials participated in the conflict. Civilians typically took on one of three roles during the American Revolution: soldier, nurse, or the common man. In addition to these roles, hidden behind the curtain and amidst the chaos and bloodshed, is President George Washington's first spy ring, known as the Culper Ring. Benjamin Tallmadge led the Culper Ring, which was a secret organization that gathered information to expose traitors, enemy trading, and identified British Secrets. The vital help from Benjamin Tallmadge and his team eventually led to American victory in the revolutionary war.

After capturing the British at Saratoga, the Americans realized that winning the war was within their reach. France's lent their assistance, after being the first country to recognize the Declaration of Independence. Eager to capitalize on the momentum gained at Saratoga and find other creative ways to win the war, George Washington supported Lieutenant Caleb Brewster, who offered to spy on the enemy.

Lieutenant Caleb Brewster's spy mission was successful, and Washington then decided to search for a leader who could build a permanent team of spies. Benjamin Tallmadge and Charles Scott were both hired for this role, but Scott eventually resigned. Tallmadge proved to be a match for the job with incredible qualifications. Born on February 25, 1754, Tallmadge graduated from Yale to become a schoolteacher and later a high school headmaster. When the first shots of the war were fired, Tallmadge saw it as his duty to fight for independence. He eventually enlisted to become a lieutenant and adjutant, later taking on the position as Captain

and Major of the 2nd Continental Light Dragoons Regiment. Tallmadge's dedication to his country and impressive leadership abilities would lead to his management of the Culper Ring.

Washington's intentions for the Culper Ring were made clear to Tallmadge. In a conversation between the two men, Washington took his stance, "Generals have a way of talkin' sometimes when they're bein' fitted for an embroidered waistcoat... [so] I keep me ears open" (Gates 231). Taking the job, Tallmadge would operate the spy ring under Washington's orders to gather as much information about the enemy as possible.

Washington trusted Tallmadge to recruit trusted citizens to help collect intelligence in New York City ("Culper Ring Explained"). Key recruitments were made, such as Abraham Woodhull, who would come to take the alias 'Samuel Culper' when he accepted the job offer from Tallmadge and Washington. The organization grew exponentially, and successful management under Tallmadge paved the way to a prosperous future for the Culper Ring.

Although recognized as a successful leader, Tallmadge made his most notable accomplishments undercover. He and his fellow spies discovered Benedict Arnold's true alliance, as he created plans with British Major John Andre to surrender the garrison to the British and turn over the American fort at West Point, New York ("Culper Ring Explained"). The discovery of the plans laid out by Benedict Arnold and John Andre prevented a disaster. Without the help of Tallmadge and the Culper Ring, the Americans would risk losing a war that was ready for them to win.

Another significant success of the Culper ring came in November 1780, "Through my private emissaries, I obtained much information respecting the illicit trade carried on to Long Island, etc., and many of these trading boats fell into our hands" (Tallmadge 75). With the help of their trusted spies, the Americans capture the enemy's supplies and destroy the British

outpost. Tallmadge and the Culper Ring's accomplishments set a clear path to America's win in the American Revolution.

The Treaty of Paris of 1783 officially declared England's recognition of American Independence, cries of glee and despair could be heard across the entire nation when the war ended. Just as the war came to an end, so did the Culper Ring.

In his words to Washington, Tallmadge continued to stay positive, "His approbation of my conduct on many occasions, expressed both publicly and privately by letter...that afforded me the highest satisfaction that a soldier could receive" (104). Satisfaction was not only for Benjamin but the entire nation as Tallmadge's legacy from the American revolution still exists in modern times. The authors David M. Kennedy and Elizabeth Cohen of the *American Pageant* points out that Tallmadge "served with distinction in the Revolutionary War" (208).

Not only did the Culper Ring succeed a great deal during the war, but it also set a precedent for future spy operations. Kevin Gould concludes, "Tallmadge's management of Culper Ring provided timely and accurate Intelligence to Washington and set a high standard for future clandestine intelligence operations" ("Benjamin Tallmadge").

Tallmadge and his team of spies from the Culper Ring led the Americans to victory in the Revolutionary War through their successful efforts to collect intelligence on the British. Most notably, the organization and Tallmadge would expose traitors, such as Benedict Arnold, capture goods from enemy trading, and secured American land from British control almost every time with the knowledge of British secrets. Tallmadge led the Culper Ring to success due to his unique qualifications, dedication to the organization, and ultimately, his loyalty to America. Independence was secured, a new nation formed and the constitution was passed, all with the help of Benjamin Tallmadge.

