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archives



Culper
Spy Ring

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Early Businessman
Harlem Hellfighter's Tale



Battle of Long Island by
Domenick D'Andrea

Selah Strong

BY MARK STERNBERG

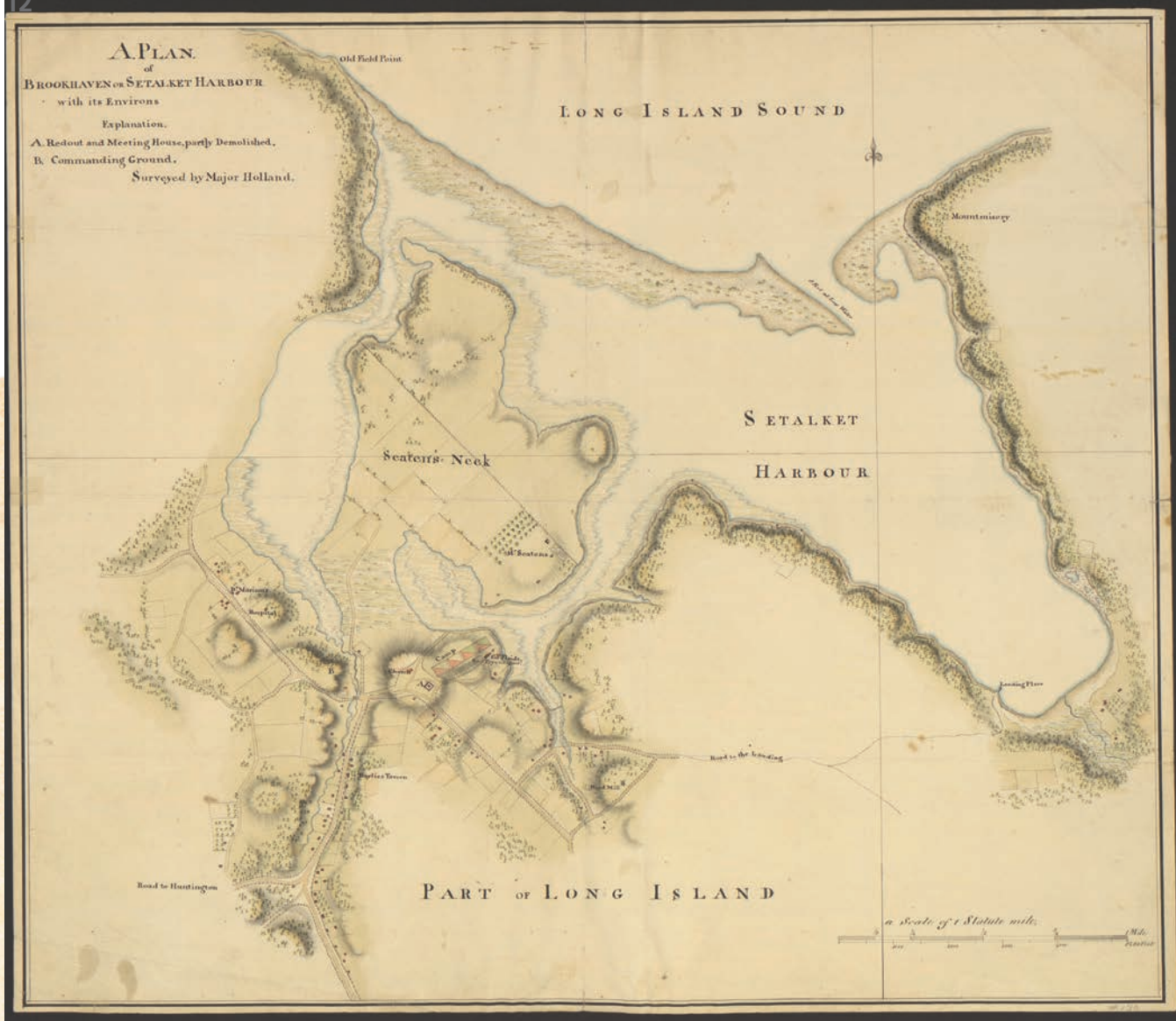
RECORDS REVEAL an OVERLOOKED HERO of the CULPER SPY RING

In late 1777, Patriot and Long Island-native Selah Strong was arrested for what in present-day terms would be regarded as spying. While Selah's spouse, Anna "Nancy" Strong, and his close friends would be considered part of George Washington's Culper Spy Ring, only a few

historians have included Selah as a member. This network of spies operated during the Revolutionary War and smuggled information out of the British headquarters in New York City via British-occupied Long Island and across the Long Island Sound, eventually to the Commander-in-Chief himself. By

re-examining primary sources for the first time in hundreds of years, Selah's heroic role in the Culper Spy Ring finally comes to light.

Even before the Revolutionary War came to Long Island shores, Selah was an ardent Patriot. In 1775, Selah was elected as a representative of Suffolk County



Map of Setauket

in New York's prestigious Provincial Congress, where on one occasion he even had the opportunity to meet with Washington himself. In that same year, he was elected as part of Brookhaven Township's Committee of Safety, a local Patriot government which supplanted the one loyal to the Crown and which included future members of the Culper Spy Ring like Abraham Woodhull, Nathaniel Roe Jr., and Phillips Roe. Records also show that

Selah was a captain of a company in Colonel Josiah Smith's regiment. As fate would have it, Selah was at home with a fever while his company fought as part of the larger American force which was soundly defeated at the Battle of Long Island.

Treasonable Correspondence

Selah and others in Setauket, Long Island, began spying for the American cause before the Culper Spy Ring was organized. On December 29, 1777, a little

over a year after the British took control of Long Island and Selah returned to civilian life, he was arrested for sending letters and information to Patriot General Samuel Parsons. Selah was charged with the civilian crime of "treasonable correspondence with his Majesty's enemies." This particular charge is different from being a "spy," which at the time was more of a legal term that generally required the accused be in the military and caught actively disguising their

On this election certification, dated June 23, 1778, the local justices of the peace signed their names attesting to the results of the election. Among those five justices was Selah Strong himself.

identity, such as in the famous cases of the American spy, Nathan Hale, and the British spy, John André. For his crime, Selah was sent to the Provost, a notorious prison in Manhattan under the control of the cruel provost-marshal, William Cunningham.

Erroneous assumptions regarding Selah's location during the Revolution have obscured his significant involvement in the ring. First, many presume that Selah was imprisoned for a lengthy period of time. If Selah was incarcerated during the operation of the Culper Spy Ring, it would definitely have prevented him from participating. The second assumption is that, upon his release, Selah is alleged to have immediately fled to Connecticut, deserting his wife, Anna, and their children on Long Island. If Selah was not on Long Island, where the Culper spies conducted their activities, it seems unlikely he could meaningfully contribute. However, after reviewing manuscripts in three archives, one realizes that these assumptions are entirely wrong.

A key document from the

New York State Library's Manuscripts and Special Collections dispels the first part of the Selah Strong myth—that he spent a significant amount of time in prison. Among the *Andrew Elliot Papers* is a certification for the election of Setauket locals Benjamin Floyd and Joseph Brewster to be representatives to correspond with the Loyalist Governor William Tryon. On this election certification, dated June 23, 1778, the local justices of the peace signed their names attesting to the results of the election. Among those five justices was Selah Strong himself. With Selah certifying this document in his own hand, it is clear that Selah spent less than seven

months in the Provost and was freed, or at least paroled, back to Setauket by the time the Culper Spy Ring began in August of 1778.

Political Refugees?

As to the second part of the Selah Strong myth, did Selah flee to Connecticut upon his freedom from the clutches of Provost-Marshal William Cunningham? Historian Frederic Gregory Mather, author of *The Refugees of 1776 from Long Island to Connecticut*, published in 1913, was the first to imply that Selah Strong, along with his sister Susannah (Strong) Shelton, fled to Connecticut at some point as political refugees. Mather bases this conclusion

Selah Strong's election certification indicates that he was not in prison in June of 1778.

Brookhaven in Suffolk County
June 23^d 1778
In pursuance to his Excellency Gov^r
Tryon's Orders, to us Directed, Were this
Day, Chosen & appointed at a publick
Town Meeting, Mess^{rs} Benjⁿ Floyd &
Joseph Brewster, to Correspond &c, with his
Excellency, if they should by him, be
thought proper Persons

Richard Woodhull
Gilbert Smith
Thomas Helme
Isaac Gorton
Selah Strong

Justices of
Peace

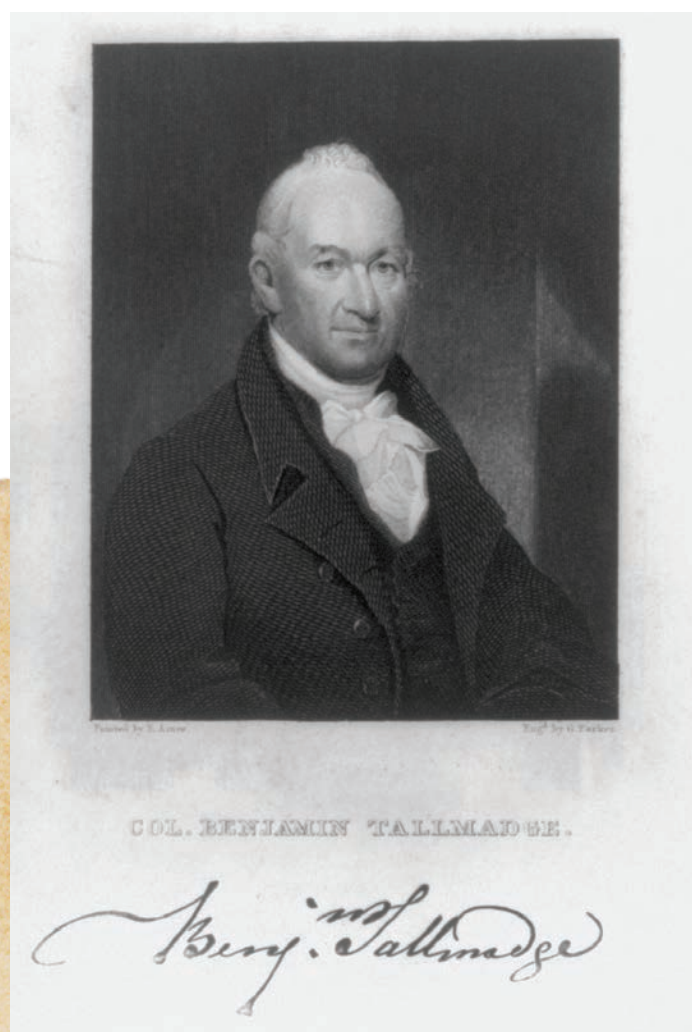
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The original request for permission to visit Long Island for Shelton and Strong was addressed to Connecticut Governor Jonathan Trumbull and was written by Benjamin Tallmadge, spy chief for the Culper Spy Ring.

on the fact that the two were asking for permission to return from Patriot-controlled Connecticut to British-controlled Long Island to visit their aging parents in March 1781. It appears that as the story of Selah Strong was retold over time, it evolved to indicate that Selah fled to Connecticut almost immediately after he was released from prison.

Mather's work expounded upon Henry Onderdonk Jr.'s *Revolutionary Incidents of Suffolk and Kings Counties*. In Onderdonk's book, published in 1849, the brief excerpt reads: "Mar. 20, '81. Mrs. Shelton and Mr. Strong, living at Stratford, wish to visit aged parents at Brookhaven." Onderdonk does not provide an exact citation, only stating the document was among petitions of Suffolk County refugees who now wished to leave Connecticut. Fortunately, it was still possible to track down the original request in the Connecticut State Library and Archives even without the specific citations.

The original request for permission to visit Long Island for Shelton and Strong was addressed to Connecticut Governor Jonathan Trumbull and was written by Benjamin



Tallmadge, spy chief for the Culper Spy Ring. Immediately upon reviewing Tallmadge's original written request, it appeared that a major error had been made in Onderdonk's transcription. The first line of Tallmadge's letter reads "At the request of Mrs. Shelton and Mrs. Strong..." As it turns out, Onderdonk had erroneously transcribed Tallmadge's handwriting as "Mr. Strong" and thus the myth that Selah fled to Connecticut was born. Comparing the handwriting characteristics in this document to other letters from Tallmadge, particularly one to Jeremiah Wadsworth in the Connecticut Historical Society where

Tallmadge wrote both the titles "Mr." and "Mrs.," it became obvious that Onderdonk had made this mistake. Furthermore, later in that same request, Tallmadge refers to the two subjects as the "above mentioned ladies." Though it should be noted that, as "Strong" was a fairly common surname, there is no reason to assume this "Mrs. Strong" refers to Selah's wife, Anna "Nancy" Strong.

Pension Records

With the knowledge that Selah Strong was at his home on Mount Misery Neck (the peninsula that now comprises the village of Belle Terre and the

Sir

Hartford March 20th 1781 140

At the Request of M^{rs} Shelton & M^{rs} Strong, now
 living at Hartford, I take the Liberty to ask
 Your Excellency's Permission for them to pay
 a Visit to their Friends in Brookhaven on
 Long Island. They each have aged Parents
 whom they have reason to believe have not
 long to live. If they could be indulged in
 their Request, any Obligations will be given
 to secure the State against the breach of its
 Laws prohibiting illicit Trade. I am well
 acquainted with both the above mentioned La-
 dies, & can recommend them as Persons of
 unexceptionable Character, both in Public
 and

Tallmadge's request to visit
 Long Island has been
 inaccurately transcribed.



Selah Strong's home on Strongs Neck, NY, which he acquired after the war from Loyalist Andrew Seton.

Port Jefferson community called Harbor Hills) throughout the operation of the Culper Spy Ring, the next task was to search for proof of his direct involvement. As it happens, evidence would be uncovered while examining the National Archives' Revolutionary War pension records for crew members of the Culper Spy Ring's whaleboat courier, Caleb Brewster. Several individuals had mentioned serving under Caleb Brewster in his secret service as part of their depositions. However, one particularly notable pension application comes from an intermittent member of Brewster's crew named Robert Brush. Brush's application received an endorsement from Brewster himself and provides details that transform our understanding of the Culper Spy Ring's operations.

While the entire deposition is informative, the section regarding Selah Strong is particularly illuminating on his role in the ring. According to Brush:

"[Brewster and his crew] usually started and landed on the island during the night and taking their boat up in the woods, they lay under it if the

weather was inclement and it was safe to do so or concealed themselves somewhere in the neighborhood. Their usual places of landing were Setauket, Stony Brook, a place called the Old Man's, and Crab Meadow (seldom however at the latter place being too near the British). At the place called "Old Man's," Capt. Selah Strong lived and from him they received such assistance and information as they needed when it was safe for him to do so, but if it was unsafe to do so or for them to remain there, Strong by some sign communicated the fact to Brewster. He remembers many times to have seen Strong pass the place of their concealment, as it were to fodder his cattle or [to] see to some work on his farm and by a shake of his head as he passed intimate to them that it was unsafe to hold any conversation or for them to stay there."

To clarify part of Brush's statement, "Old Man's" is modern day Mount Sinai, which is just east of Port Jefferson. Selah Strong's house was on the eastern side of Mount Misery Neck, near Mount Sinai harbor,

With the 250th Anniversary of the Revolutionary War approaching, there is a unique satisfaction in being able to recognize Selah Strong as a brave collaborator of the Culper Spy Ring.

though his house would be considered part of Port Jefferson today. As for the rest of Brush's statement, we learn that Selah ensured a safe hiding spot for Caleb Brewster and his crew while Brewster communicated with the spy whose pseudonym was Samuel Culper. This put Selah Strong at incredible risk, as he was arrested once for participating in espionage and, if he returned to prison, he would have a high likelihood of dying from disease or starvation. (More Americans died in prison than on the battlefield during the Revolutionary War.)

With the 250th Anniversary of the Revolutionary War approaching, there is a unique satisfaction in being able to recognize Selah Strong as a brave collaborator of the Culper Spy Ring. We can give him the credit he deserves and dispel myths that diminished his legacy. And, as evidenced here, the historic details of the Culper Spy Ring itself are far from settled. Only by returning to primary sources maintained by venerable archival institutions throughout our nation can we take steps to finally reveal the true story. ■

Culper code book

I	J	K	L	M	N
if 280	just 336	most 382	name 411	navy 423	natural 424
in 281	jury 337	misad 383	new 412	natural 424	negative 425
is 282	jury 338	misad 384	no 413	negligence 426	never 427
it 283	jury 339	misad 385	note 414	neglect 428	necessity 429
ice 284	jury 340	misad 386	night 415	nations 430	oath 431
ink 285	jury 341	misad 387	new 416	navy 431	off 432
into 286	jury 342	misad 388	needful 417	nations 432	oath 433
instance 287	jury 343	misad 389	number 418	navy 433	off 434
island 288	jury 344	misad 390	nothing 419	nations 434	oath 435
infirmity 289	jury 345	misad 391	neglect 420	navy 435	off 436
infirmity 290	jury 346	misad 392	nations 421	nations 436	off 437
infirmity 291	jury 347	misad 393	neglect 422	navy 437	off 438
infirmity 292	jury 348	misad 394	neglect 423	nations 438	off 439
infirmity 293	jury 349	misad 395	neglect 424	navy 439	off 440
infirmity 294	jury 350	misad 396	neglect 425	nations 440	off 441
infirmity 295	jury 351	misad 397	neglect 426	navy 441	off 442
instance 296	jury 352	misad 398	neglect 427	nations 442	off 443
instance 297	jury 353	misad 399	neglect 428	navy 443	off 444
instance 298	jury 354	misad 400	neglect 429	nations 444	off 445
instance 299	jury 355	misad 401	neglect 430	navy 445	off 446
instance 300	jury 356	misad 402	neglect 431	nations 446	off 447
instance 301	jury 357	misad 403	neglect 432	navy 447	off 448
instance 302	jury 358	misad 404	neglect 433	nations 448	off 449
instance 303	jury 359	misad 405	neglect 434	navy 449	off 450
instance 304	jury 360	misad 406	neglect 435	nations 450	off 451
instance 305	jury 361	misad 407	neglect 436	navy 451	off 452
instance 306	jury 362	misad 408	neglect 437	nations 452	off 453
instance 307	jury 363	misad 409	neglect 438	navy 453	off 454
instance 308	jury 364	misad 410	neglect 439	nations 454	off 455
instance 309	jury 365	misad 411	neglect 440	navy 455	off 456
instance 310	jury 366	misad 412	neglect 441	nations 456	off 457
instance 311	jury 367	misad 413	neglect 442	navy 457	off 458
instance 312	jury 368	misad 414	neglect 443	nations 458	off 459
instance 313	jury 369	misad 415	neglect 444	navy 459	off 460
instance 314	jury 370	misad 416	neglect 445	nations 460	off 461
instance 315	jury 371	misad 417	neglect 446	navy 461	off 462
instance 316	jury 372	misad 418	neglect 447	nations 462	off 463
instance 317	jury 373	misad 419	neglect 448	navy 463	off 464
instance 318	jury 374	misad 420	neglect 449	nations 464	off 465
instance 319	jury 375	misad 421	neglect 450	navy 465	off 466
instance 320	jury 376	misad 422	neglect 451	nations 466	off 467
instance 321	jury 377	misad 423	neglect 452	navy 467	off 468
instance 322	jury 378	misad 424	neglect 453	nations 468	off 469
instance 323	jury 379	misad 425	neglect 454	navy 469	off 470
instance 324	jury 380	misad 426	neglect 455	nations 470	off 471
instance 325	jury 381	misad 427	neglect 456	navy 471	off 472
instance 326	jury 382	misad 428	neglect 457	nations 472	off 473
instance 327	jury 383	misad 429	neglect 458	navy 473	off 474
instance 328	jury 384	misad 430	neglect 459	nations 474	off 475
instance 329	jury 385	misad 431	neglect 460	navy 475	off 476
instance 330	jury 386	misad 432	neglect 461	nations 476	off 477
instance 331	jury 387	misad 433	neglect 462	navy 477	off 478
instance 332	jury 388	misad 434	neglect 463	nations 478	off 479
instance 333	jury 389	misad 435	neglect 464	navy 479	off 480
instance 334	jury 390	misad 436	neglect 465	nations 480	off 481
instance 335	jury 391	misad 437	neglect 466	navy 481	off 482

THE ARCHIVES
CONNECTION

The Andrew Elliot Papers at the New York State Library and the Trumbull Papers at the Connecticut State Library each provided key manuscripts presented in this research. Revolutionary War veteran pension applications were obtained from the National Archives through their partnership with the online platform, Fold3. Documents held at the Connecticut Historical Society and the Long Island Collection at East Hampton Library were necessary for additional handwriting samples from Benjamin Tallmadge and Selah Strong, respectively. Background information on Selah Strong was also obtained via newspaper articles in Readex's *America's Historical Newspapers* database, and from nineteenth century publications regarding New York State history that are digitized and made available via Hathitrust. The map of Setauket and additional background information on Selah Strong comes from manuscripts archived in Clements Library at the University of Michigan.

For more on the history of the Culper Spy Ring, see

- "Spies of the Revolution" by John A. Burke and Andrea Meyer, Fall 2009
- "Finding Liss" by Claire Bellerjeau and Tiffany Yecke Brooks on p. 8 of this issue

For classroom activities related to this article, see our Educator Guide at <https://considerthesourcen.org/magazine-educator-guides>