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Spymaster of Setauket: The Impact of Benjamin Tallmadge and the Culper Spy Ring on the American Revolution

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Benjamin Tallmadge in his dragoon uniform. Sketch by Col. John Trumbull, c.1783.

Photo Courtesy of mountvernon.org

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the brave members of the Culper Spy Ring, who risked their lives in the cause of American independence. Their sacrifices helped ensure a democratic society that welcomed difference of opinion and toleration of various faiths and beliefs.

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Introduction

The summer of 1776 was a time of rejuvenation and hope for an infant United States. New England militiamen had just driven one of the world's strongest armies out of the city of Boston in March, and many more were flocking to the ranks of George Washington's rapidly-growing Continental Army. By July 2nd, the Continental Congress had voted to move a proposal declaring independence from the British Empire, with the Declaration of Independence being read to the Continental garrison in New York City several days later. However, things would take a turn for the worst as British soldiers and their Hessian allies overran Patriot fortifications on Long Island, forcing Washington and his men to flee the Island and eventually Manhattan. This disastrous defeat left many believing that the American cause was doomed and that a British victory was inevitable.

Enter Benjamin Tallmadge, the son of a Presbyterian minister of the same name from Setauket, New York.[1] The second of five boys, young Benjamin had demonstrated remarkable intelligence at an early age and eventually attended Yale University on a scholarship. While there, he would meet and befriend the ill-fated Patriot spy Nathan Hale. The two would form a deep bond and joined the "Brothers in Unity" society during their Yale tenure, referring to each other as Damon and Pythias, respectively.[2] Following the Battles of Lexington and Concord, Tallmadge recognized that "I finally became entirely devoted to the cause in which my country was compelled to engage. I finally began to think seriously of putting on the uniform, and

[1]Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 16.

[2] Ibid., 17.

returned," he wrote, "full of zeal in the cause of my country."[3] Although he never explicitly recounted his reasons for enlisting, Tallmadge's upbringing in a Presbyterian household in 18th century New York provides some insight into his potential motivations for doing so.

Many historians have often overlooked the role which religion played in the buildup towards and violence during the American Revolution, especially within the colony of New York. Leading experts in the field such as Gordon Wood and Edward Countryman devote little, if any, attention to the theological differences between American Dissenters and their Anglican overseers during this time in their books, and in so doing fail to recognize one of the leading catalysts for animosity and discrimination between the two sides. Instead, historians like Wood attempt to characterize the growing individualism of the religion in the wake of the Revolution as a byproduct of the war itself, metaphorically putting the cart before the horse. In their view, the deism of the Founding Fathers caused them to look down upon "superstition disseminated by ignorant liberal preachers."[4] To Wood, the Founders "At best…only passively believed in organized Christianity and, at worst, privately scorned and ridiculed it."[5] Others such as Richard Welch hold that a lack of religious references in Tallmadge's correspondence suggests that the young spymaster was likely a deist as well.[6] Even fewer attention is given to the divide between pious Dissenters such as Tallmadge and Anglicans within New York, thus leaving out a crucial chapter from the story of why the American Revolution was fought.

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[3] Ibid., 19.

[4] Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1991), 330.

[5] Ibid.

[6]Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014)), 165.

In the century prior to the shot heard 'round the world, the territory of what is today New York State was a multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan urban landscape that was home to a wide variety of religious faiths. During the time of the Dutch administration of New Netherland, these different ethnic communities largely enjoyed the same religious toleration that was in place in the Dutch Republic, and any attempted legislature which threatened its existence encountered much backlash. This environment would change, however, with the English takeover of the colony in 1664 as the new administration began to promote imperial unity with the rest of the growing English empire through a strong Anglican Church. For the next one hundred years, members of Dissenting religious sects in New York found themselves out of power and out of allies as Anglicanism became the most politically-dominant faith in the colony. Corruption ran rampant and those who were friends of the Anglican Church benefited greatly from it. Although Dissenters always outnumbered Anglicans in New York, they had little to no say in the running of colonial issues due to the perennial Anglican governors and legislators.[7]

The fear which many Dissenters like Tallmadge had of potential religious discrimination would be realized following the aftermath of the Battle of Long Island. Presbyterian churches in particular often fell victim to burnings and ransacking while their congregations experienced harassment, beatings, and robbery at the hands of Anglican Loyalists.[8] Those who carried out such crimes often did not face consequences for their actions, with some even receiving praise as they "had served with great credit and reputation during the war."[9] This made the conflict

[7] Ruma Chopra, *Unnatural Rebellion: Loyalists in New York City During the Revolution* (Charlottesville, VA: Univ Of Virginia Press, 2013), 12-22.

[8] Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 72.

[9] William Tryon, Testimonial. May 25, I784.

personal for Dissenters like Tallmadge as he looked to exact vengeance upon the Anglican aggressors. Fortunately for him, the opportunity would arrive in 1779 when George Washington tasked him with infiltrating the iron curtain of New York City and Long Island to gather intelligence on the movements of British troops, allowing Tallmadge to both assist the American cause as well as carry out his own destruction on the enemies of New York Dissenters.

For all of his impressive performances in the field and soldiering prowess, the mission that befell Tallmadge was an enormous task. Both New York City and neighboring Long Island had become the base of operations for military activity in British North America, and the local population was predominantly Loyalist. New York's royal governor, William Tryon, noted that "a great number would join the King's troops as soon as they saw them land, particularly if they saw the Rebels once defeated."[10] Many wealthy Loyalist New Yorkers also had strong religious ties to the invading forces, with Reverend Charles Inglis recommending that Anglican ministers wait in sending funds to Anglican churches that suffered under Patriot occupation before "city & country are restored to his majesty's peace and protection."[11] The British Army received a warm welcome from the Anglican inhabitants of the former colony by way of local provisions and militias who offered their services to fight for the Crown, which would make it difficult for Tallmadge to find friends so close to the city.[12]

In order to carry out his mission, Tallmadge would utilize a lesser-known conflict into his grand scheme of espionage and gathering intelligence. Known as the "Whaleboat War," irregular Patriot forces would often use whaling boats to launch raids on the northern shores of Long

[10]Ruma Chopra, *Unnatural Rebellion: Loyalists in New York City During the Revolution* (Charlottesville: Univ Of Virginia Press, 2013), 52.

[11] Ibid., 52.

[12] Ibid., 53.

Island from Connecticut across the Long Island Sound. These men specialized in hit-and-run guerilla warfare that kept British forces occupied within Long Island and thus unable to leave the island undefended. Such a line of communication could provide Tallmadge with a direct route from which his informants could leave sympathetic Suffolk County to Patriot-held Connecticut to relay their findings. While raids had been occurring on Long Island since the beginning of the British occupation, Tallmadge took control of such operations with the particular hope of revitalizing them to suit his interests, placing local Setauket friends in charge of finding potential recruits.[13]

Despite the staunch support that British occupiers enjoyed in New York and Long Island amongst Anglicans, there still remained plenty of citizens whose disdain for their new overseers provided Tallmadge with a large pool to recruit agents. In Tallmadge's home of Suffolk County, Presbyterians endured an oppressive occupation at the hands of the British Army as many became wartime refugees following the destruction of their farms. This made many of them willing participants in Tallmadge's schemes and some would even accompany Tallmadge on his whaleboat raids. Although none of these skirmishes proved decisive in tipping the war in the Patriots' favor, the constant irritation which Tallmadge's Presbyterian band caused British officials would ultimately prove crucial in distracting British forces while the Franco-American army marched south towards Yorktown at the war's end. Had it not been for the intelligence and espionage of Tallmadge's Culper Spy Ring, the victory at Yorktown might not have been possible as Cornwallis would be reinforced and the war would continue for several years; instead, Tallmadge's deeds were enough to convince the British army that Washington's main

[13]Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 46-47.

attack was centered on New York City and thereby allow Washington to march south unopposed.

What one finds when they investigate the Culper Spy Ring within the context of religious animosity between sects is that the actions of the Ring were not only instrumental in achieving American independence, but they also point towards the religious undertones of the American Revolution. The latter aspect of their work has been particularly difficult to uncover, largely due to the secrecy of the ring members' identities which Tallmadge and Washington believed was of utmost importance. Another difficulty in sharing this story was that most of the letters which Tallmadge and his Long Island compatriots wrote in their personal correspondence made little if any explicit reference to their religious beliefs. However, thanks to recent scholarship into the true identities of the ring members, historians may now place their similar upbringings as New York Dissenters during the mid-18th century within the context of the divide between Anglicans and Dissenters in colonial New York.

Chapter One: "Then the Church will in all probability flourish": The Anglican Empire's Formative Years in New York[14]

Long before any European explorer set foot on the island of Manhattan, the area had already become home to a number of diverse cultures. Humans first began to inhabit the area approximately 15,000 years ago, excelling as a hunter-gatherer society in a land rich with game and wild fruits. Although those that lived in this area claimed to belong to the "Lenape" tribe, the reality is more complex; roughly twelve different tribes comprised the Lenape nation, stretching from present-day Connecticut to New Jersey. However, as Europeans would come to learn, the Lenape did not associate themselves with a particular tribe or nation as Europeans understood nationalities from the empires they had left behind. Instead, these peoples identified with smaller bands of anywhere from a dozen to a hundred individuals that they traveled with from one seasonal campsite to the next, with the island of Manhattan alone hosting approximately 80 such sites. The Reverend Charles Wolley provided his own demeaning depiction, stating that the Lenape people lived "very rudely and rovingly, shifting from place to place, according to their exigencies, and gains of fishing and fowling and hunting, never confining their rambling humors to any settled mansions."[15]

European explorers encountered a similar cultural layout on Long Island as well. Indeed, the Island was home to no fewer than thirteen Native American tribes alone, consisting of the

[14]Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 218.

[15]Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33-34.

Montauks, Shinnecocks, Manhassets, the Patchogue, Setaukets, Nessaquogues, Secatogues, Marsapeagues, Rockaways, Canarsies, and Corchaugs.[16] Much like their neighbors in Manhattan, those Native Americans living on Long Island would soon find themselves on the front lines of wars of empire between the newly-arrived Dutch and their English rivals. The Dutch had been the first European nation to explore the area under the captaincy of Englishman Henry Hudson near the turn of the 17th century, but they certainly would not be the last. Scores of Dutch Calvinists would follow Hudson's arrival and settle on the island of "Manna-hata" as the local native populations called it. To the north, French Huguenots began constructing forts along what is today known as the Hudson River, trapping the many neutral Indian tribes between the warring European powers.[17]

Similar to the emergence of American Patriots a century and a half later during their own revolution, the very presence of Dutch settlers in the colony of "New Netherland" is the direct consequence of Dutch merchants hoping to assert their religious independence against their former Spanish overlords. Following the conclusion of a twelve-year truce with Spain in 1621, the Dutch republic sought to both upend Spanish economic dominance in the New World and prevent the spread of Catholicism into the shores of modern New England. In June of the same year, the Dutch West India Company received its charter and "secured a monopoly of all Dutch trade and navigation with the Americas and West Africa," as well as the task of "'advanc[ing] the peopling of those fruitful and unsettled parts'" that it encountered in its colonial expansion.[18]

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[16]Earnest Edward Eells, "Indian Missions on Long Island Part II: Beginnings on Long Island." *Journal of the Department of History (The Presbyterian Historical Society) of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.* 18, no. 8 (1939): 359.

[17] Michael Kammen, *Colonial New York – A History* (New York City: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 9.

[18] Ibid., 26.

The West India Company quickly set out to plant the Dutch flag on the African and American continents with varying degrees of success; they would fail in their efforts to supplant the Catholic Portuguese from Brazil but succeeded in establishing bases in Guiana, Guinea, and New Netherland. With that said, it became evident that the Company soon began to play favorites as it concerned itself more with its South American and African possessions than it did with the forested island of Manna-Hata.[19]

Meanwhile, the population of New England had skyrocketed into the tens of thousands compared to the miniscule 500 inhabitants of New Netherland by the mid-1600s.[20] Overpopulation led many Puritans to expand southward and cross the Long Island Sound in search of new farmland, founding the first English settlement in modern New York in Southampton in June 1640. In addition to bringing their own livestock to raise, these Puritan immigrants also brought their autonomous churches, town hall meetings, and communal land systems. In contrast, Dutch colonial society had its base in social units comprised of scattered individuals, with only nine Dutch towns being incorporated in the two decades following the arrival of the first Dutch colonists. While the Dutch had common meadows, the colonial hierarchy controlled their size and usage; they didn't even establish colleges from which they could produce their own clergymen, opting instead for ministers from the homeland who had received approval from a proper jurisdictional body.[21] Such differences would eventually become the cause of suspicion and hostility between both communities.

[19] Ibid., 27.

[20] Ibid., 38.

[21] Ibid., 40.

Despite the mutual animosity that the two communities harbored for each other, their co-habitation of Long Island helped it to make the area one of the most culturally diverse in the New World at the time. New Netherland (or "New Amsterdam" as it became known by 1624) was home to 18 different languages alone by the time the city fell under English control in 1664; census records from 1698 show that only half of New Amsterdam's population was of Dutch descent, despite the territory being a Dutch possession for much of the century. Instead, Dutch immigrants shared Manhattan and Queens with Dutch-speaking Flemish, French-speaking Belgian Walloons, French Huguenots, Scandinavians, Irish, Scottish, Germans, Turks, Poles, Italians, Jews, enslaved Africans, and Native Americans, along with the arrival of even more Englishmen and women during the latter half of the 17th century. Such great ethnic diversity led to calls for cultural toleration and freedom as evidenced in the signing of the Flushing Remonstrance of 1657 after an Englishman named John Bowne refused to pay taxes to the Dutch Reformed Church in his hometown of Flushing. Bowne himself was a nonconformist and would later become a Quaker, but he believed that the patent under which Englishmen were permitted to live in Flushing from a previous Dutch governor guaranteed his religious freedom as was custom in Holland. The Dutch West India Company sided with Bowne, and 30 Flushing residents banded together to "desire therefore in this case not to judge least we be judged, neither to condemn least we be condemned, but rather let every man stand or fall to his own Master."[22]

John Bowne would not be the only Englishman to enjoy victory at the expense of the Dutch colonial government. By the 1660s, the colony of New Netherland was exhausted from incompetent leadership, skirmishes with native tribes, and was left reeling from the Anglo-Dutch

[22] Edward Hart, The Flushing Remonstrance. December 27, 1657.

naval war of 1652-1654 that interfered with shipping to and from Holland. The growing British empire would soon come to put the Dutch colonists out of their misery as Charles II granted his brother James, the Duke of York, a vast amount of land in North America to call his own. Such territory included parts of Massachusetts and all of present-day Long Island, "together also with…Hudson's River and all the land from the west side of the Connectecutte River to the East side of De la Ware Bay."[23] Charles's gift, although generous, failed to adhere to the Dutch claims to such territories or to lands belonging to English inhabitants, meaning James would have to bring along some incentive for his new subjects. This step was not particularly hard for James, considering that he was Lord High Admiral of England, and he dispatched a fleet of four warships that arrived near Coney Island in August 1664. When Dutch representatives came out to greet the ships and demand their reason for arriving, Colonel Richard Nichols explained "in his Majestie's [sic] Name I do demand the Towne, Scituate upon the Island commonly knowne by the Name of Manhatoes with all the forts thereunto belonging."[24] Despite protests from the Dutch governor regarding the claims of the Dutch Republic to the island, Nichols was adamant; he warned the Dutch representative that English warships would enter New Amsterdam's harbor within two days and there was nothing that would stop him. The Dutch then surrendered the town without even firing a shot.[25]

The Anglicanization of what was once New Netherland did not occur overnight; rather, it was an extensive campaign which the Church of England launched in order to plant Anglicanism as the leading denomination in the growing multiethnic metropolis. In the years immediately

[23] Michael Kammen, *Colonial New York – A History* (New York City: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 71.

[24] Ibid., 72.

[25] Ibid.

following the English conquest, the only Anglican services in the entire colony occurred in the governor's chapel at the Old Dutch Church. This Anglican island found itself surrounded on all sides by Lutherans, Dutch and French Reformed, and English Dissenters, creating an unlikely setting in which Anglicanism would eventually thrive. However, despite the large religious diversity within New York, Governor Benjamin Fletcher called for "good sufficient Protestant minister[s]" to serve within New York City and surrounding villages.[26] Fletcher's request received backlash from the Dutch inhabitants of the colony, forcing him to compromise by erecting a Dutch Church in Manhattan, which he complemented with chartering the Anglican Trinity parish. Other Anglican churches popped up across Westchester County and Long Island, although their arrival caused indifference or dissatisfaction amongst the local populations. The ineffectiveness of these early Anglicanization efforts is evident in the estimate of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which listed New York as home to just 1,000 of the 43,000 Anglicans residing in the North American colonies.[27] It quickly became evident to leading members of the Anglican clergy in England and New York that new measures must be implemented to ensure the Church's growth in the bustling seaport.

In accordance with this quest to establish the Anglican Church as the leading religious entity in England's North American colonies, the first occurrences of the unification between Church and State in New York appear. The erection of Trinity Church in 1697, the first Episcopal church in Manhattan, was the direct result of Governor Benjamin Fletcher's corporate charter which he granted to Anglicans in the colony. Additionally, Fletcher had pressured the

[26] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 216.

[27] Ibid., 216-17.

colony assembly into passing the Ministry Act four years prior, which allowed for the public election of vestryman and churchwardens in New York City and surrounding villages. Such measures did not sit well with the local Dutch population, with some mobs even intimidating leading colonial officials and causing violence.[28] The Anglican hierarchy quickly recognized the need for a change in their strategy and decided to embrace the missionary spirit that began sweeping across the colonies during the early 18th century. Said Colonel Lewis Morris, governor of New Jersey and adversary to "the scum of the old" in the Puritan heartland that was New England, "If by force the salary is taken from [the people] and paid to the ministers of The Church…they wont [sic] make many converts among a people who think themselves very much injured…Whereas, let this matter be once regularly determined…and then the Church will in all probability flourish."[29] Morris's prophetic words would become realized in a variety of new missionary societies that would become swept up in the great religious revival of the age that was the Great Awakening.

The Great Awakening has its roots in the collapse of Puritanism in New England at the turn of the 18th century. Out of Puritanism's collapse came a number of evangelical sects, firstly in Congregationalism and Presbyterianism which will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter. Other sects that would emerge include "Baptists, Methodists, Campbellites, Disciples of Christ, and Progressive, Liberal Protestants."[30] Across the colonies, large crowds gathered to

[28] Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 132-33.

[29] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 218.

[30] William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978, 44.

hear travelling preachers such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards in open fields speak. Many in attendance underwent "conversion experiences" in which they had physical outbursts of passion and repentance due to the preachers' charismatic performances. Isaac Backus, a farmer from Norwich, Connecticut, attended one such gathering as Whitefield passed through his hometown; he first recalled the initial horror he felt from it. Said Backus, "Nothing now distressed me more than to find that hearing the most powerful preaching and also the shrieks and cries of souls under concern did not affect me as I desired, but my heart felt hard notwithstanding."[31] It would be some time later before Backus finally underwent his own conversion while tending to his field; as he described the moment, "the justice of God shined so clear before my eyes in condemning such a guilty rebel that I could say no more – but fell at his feet…And I lay like a dead, vile creature before him."[32] Although evangelists experienced their own conversion stories in different ways, all of them believed like Backus that salvation lied in total submission to God and not necessarily in church dogma.

In order to meet the demands of encouraging missionary activity throughout the Anglicizing colony, New York officials looked to the construction of Trinity Church as a blueprint for erecting another Anglican landmark which could produce potential clergymen. In 1753, the colonial assembly approved a lottery to raise funds for a potential institution of higher learning called "King's College." The College (which would later be renamed Columbia University) received a royal charter for construction a year later and awarded its first bachelor's degrees in 1758. Although the school was not intended to replicate other divinity schools like Harvard, Yale, and William and Mary in solely producing clergymen from its inception, King's

[31] Ibid., 64.

[32] Ibid., 65.

College counted largely on Anglican financial support in its construction and would go on to enlist many Anglicans within its faculty, as well as produce leading members of the Episcopal Church in later years.[33]

Anglicanism would continue to develop as the most politically powerful religious sect in New York throughout the mid-18th century. Even though only 26 out of the 239 churches in the colony were Anglican by the time Continental Congress declared independence from the British Empire in 1776, Anglicans perennially occupied many of the highest offices attainable in the colonial government.[34] Thanks to booming maritime trade, many New York merchants were able to establish relationships with such Anglican elites to move themselves up the social hierarchy primarily through corruption. The Anglican Governor William Tryon, for instance, attempted to grant his endorsers favorable land and "promised to give the [New York] Council 10,000 acres without fees" to "Gentlemen of weight and consideration."[35] Similarly, some merchants benefitted immensely with the arrival of war with France in 1754 as a select few received generous military contracts to provide provisions like food and alcohol as New York City became a headquarters and de-embarkation point for the British Army. Several merchants even used their Anglican allegiance to receive letters of marque which allowed them to convert their merchant vessels into privateer ships and gain gold and glory in battles with the French. Such tactics not only dissuaded immigration to the colony, but they also exacerbated a terrible economic recession in the wake of the Treaty of Paris in 1763. The departure of British soldiers

[33] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 222-23.

[34] Ruma Chopra, *Unnatural Rebellion: Loyalists in New York City During the Revolution* (Charlottesville, VA: Univ Of Virginia Press, 2013), 12-13.

[35] Ibid., 16.

from New York City led to a swift economic downturn and large increase in the number of poor and homeless New Yorkers. Their struggles only worsened when Parliament passed the Stamp Act of 1765 as a means of paying off debts incurred from the war, thereby setting the stage for widespread discontent towards the Crown amongst New York City and Long Island.[36]

The anger which New Yorkers felt towards the Stamp Act was not unique in the American colonies. Indeed, riots and boycotts occurred in cities across the Atlantic seaboard while twenty-seven men from nine of the thirteen colonies convened in New York City to draft a formal response on the colonies' behalf. However, the Stamp Act was not the only reason for fear and fury amongst New York Dissenters in the wake of the Seven Years' War. In addition to a deeply contested General Assembly election in 1768, rumors of the Crown appointing an Anglican bishop to exercise religious authority over all of North America began to circulate throughout New York and the other colonies. Such an appointment, many Dissenters believed, would trample the religious tolerance that they enjoyed for generations since the days of New Netherland and complement Parliament's trampling of political liberties via the Stamp Act and other unpopular taxes.[37] Such concerns permeated into the General Assembly election itself, with the Presbyterian candidates alleging that their Anglican opponent had traveled back to England to petition Parliament for an Anglican bishop. The Anglican candidate James DeLancey of the illustrious DeLancey clan denied such rumors and published pamphlets and poems that at once defended DeLancey's Anglican faith and villainized his Presbyterian foes. Said one author in

[36] Ibid., 17-22.

[37] Luke J. Feder, "'No Lawyer in the Assembly!': Character Politics and the Election of 1768 in New York City." *New York History* 95, no. 2 (2014): 167-68.

DeLancey's defense, "I believe some People would make the religious Rights of their Neighbours, the Bone of Dissention, while they themselves are stealing the Flesh."[38]

The General Election of 1768 along with the Bishop controversy of the same year would ignite the fierce political rivalry between the Anglican DeLanceys and Presbyterian Livingstons as they leading families in New York on the eve of revolution. Dissenters would rally to the Livingston camp as the bishop controversy was enough to instill in them suspicion of monarchist loyalties and the Anglican bureaucracy in the colony. Tensions would continue to rise between Anglicans and Dissenters through their respective DeLancey and Livingston figureheads until the outbreak of violence on a field in Lexington, Massachusetts would forever alter the course of Anglican-Dissenter relations both in New York and throughout the colonies. The War for Independence would provide ample opportunities for Dissenters in New York to serve in the defense of religious liberty both on the battlefield as soldiers and as spies on the home front.

[38] Ibid., 169.

Chapter Two: Serving "in the cause of my country.": Tallmadge's Road to Revolution[39]

The evident distrust between Anglicans and Dissenters in the colony of New York made it an ideal location for a potential spy network to form when war broke out in 1775. At the center of such an operation was Benjamin Tallmadge, a native of Setauket, New York on Long Island. Born the second of five sons to Benjamin and Susannah Tallmadge, young Benjamin came from a zealously-religious family; his maternal grandfather, the Rev. John Smith, had been pastor of the White Plains Presbyterian Church from 1742 to 1771. In his memoir, Tallmadge reveals that he had a close relationship with his mother's parents, "having visited them often when I was young."[40] Tallmadge's father was also a man of the cloth and presided over his own Presbyterian parish after his ordination in New Haven, Connecticut.[41] Although Tallmadge would remain a devout Presbyterian throughout his life, doing so put him at risk of suspicion and discrimination during his years as a young adult.

In the wake of widespread Anglicanization in New York during the 18th century, identifying as a Presbyterian was to identify as an anti-establishmentarian. Presbyterianism, much like Congregationalism in the New England colonies and other Long Island communities, caught the ire of many leading Anglicans, especially in the aftermath of the "Old Lights" and the "New Lights" rift within the Presbyterian community. The New Lights saw themselves as harbingers of "a movement away from formal, outward, and established religion," and "to personal, inward, and heartfelt religion," something which the Old Lights distrusted greatly as

[39] Benjamin Tallmadge, *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*. (The New York Times and Arno Press, 1968), 7.

[40] Ibid., 5.

[41] Frederick Lewis Weis, *The Colonial Clergy of the Middle Colonies: New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, 1628-1776* (Salem, MA: Higginson Book Co., 2004), 324-35.

they sought to uphold an organized church system.[42] In the Great Awakening's aftermath, the New Lights grew more rapidly than their Old Light counterparts before the two sides' reconciliation in the Synod of New York and Philadelphia in 1758. However, the New Lights' anti-establishment legacy remained prevalent in the reunified sect and prompted many leading Anglican politicians and clergymen to remain cautious of Presbyterianism in New York.[43]

Another factor in Presbyterianism's poor reception by Anglicans in New York and throughout the Middle Colonies was the sect's rapid growth. The arrival of immigrants from Scotland and the Lowlands (Scots-Irish) before the recession of the 1760s allowed Presbyterianism to blossom in the middle Atlantic colonies during the 18th century. Anglicans began to feel threatened by these new arrivals, believing they had the potential to outnumber Anglicans and eventually become the dominant religious sect in New York. Their paranoia is clearly evident in the arrest of the Scots-Irish Presbyterian Francis Makemie; once an advocate for a stressing the similarities between Presbyterianism and Anglicanism, the Irish-born Makemie soon grew concerned over the growing Anglicanization of the American colonies through societies like The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.[44] Upon reaching New York with a fellow member of his new American presbyter, Makemie and his colleague found themselves placed under arrest for a sermon he gave in which he claimed God was "the eternal and only wise Law-giver, [who] has framed a Law every way quadrate, & suited to advance our

[42] Joseph S. Tiedemann, "Presbyterianism and the American Revolution in the Middle Colonies." *Church History* 74, no. 2 (2005): 308.

[43] Ibid.

[44] "Makemie, Francis (1658?– July 1708), Presbyterian Minister," American National Biography.

secular interest."[45] Outraged, Makemie accused the Anglican New York governor "for apprehending me, and design of giving me fresh trouble at *New-York*"; he then requested "to represent to Your Lordship my just concern at the sundry Precepts for apprehending me as one of the greatest Criminals; whereby I am prevented in performing my Ministerial Duties to many in Your Lordships Government of my own Perswasion [sic], who desire it."[46] The significance of the trial in American religious history was not lost on those present, with the presiding judge Robert Mempesson commenting how "*This is the first Instance I can learn, has been of a Tryal* [sic] *Prosecution of this nature in* America." [47] The jury found both Makemie and his fellow minister not guilty of all charges they faced, but the suspicion which Anglicans held for Presbyterians would remain for decades after the trial.

Just as the Dissenters of Long Island despised the encroachment of Anglican churches into their communities and government, Presbyterians who lived outside of the budding merchant hub of New York City shared in their frustrations with New York's Anglican establishment. Suspicion of Anglicanization, which only increased with the rumors of a new Anglican bishop in North America, combined with public discontent towards Parliament and the Crown in the wake of the Intolerable Acts to lead many Presbyterians to identify as Whigs. American Whigs were a political faction that remained wary of monarchial power in the aftermath of the English Civil War and committed themselves to individual liberties and local

[45] Francis Makemie, *A Good Conversation*, 1707.

[46] Francis Makemie, *A Narrative of a New and Unusual American Imprisonment of Two Presbyterian Ministers: and Prosecution of Mr. Francis Makemie One of Them, for Preaching One Sermon at the City of New-York: By a Learner of Law, and Lover of Liberty.* July 28, 1707.

[47] Ibid.

self-autonomy.[48] Paranoia of Anglican rule only deepened with the passage of the Coercive or "Intolerable" Acts in 1774 which were a series of Parliamentary legislature designed to punish the citizens of Boston following the Boston Tea Party. The most notable measure taken in the Acts was the closure of the port of Boston itself until they could provide compensation to the East India Tea Company for the 342 chests of tea they destroyed. Presbyterians argued that their monarch must exercise his authority in a righteous manner, lest he experience a revolt at the hands of "God's Chosen."[49] These conditions provided the perfect atmosphere for Whiggish sentiment to take hold in eastern Suffolk County by 1775.

This was the world which Benjamin Tallmadge entered into, but he did not allow for such perceptions of his faith to define him during his youth. He would follow in his father's footsteps and enrolled in Yale College at age 15 where he eventually met and befriended the ill-fated Patriot spy, Nathan Hale. Like Tallmadge, Hale grew up in a Congregationalist household and maintained a strong devotion to his faith throughout his life. Following the death of his mother at age twelve, his maternal grandparents oversaw his education and prepared him for entry into Yale two years later at 14 years old, armed with an excellent understanding of ancient Greek and Latin, theology, and the works of Cato, Cicero, and Horace.[50] Tallmadge also experienced little trouble adjusting to academic life at university, armed with an incredible aptitude for learning and friendly personality. He excelled in his studies while at Yale (the school's president had previously tried to recruit Tallmadge as a 12-year-old after being impressed by his knowledge of

[48] Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 5.

[49] Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*, (Bantam Dell, New York, 2006), 81.

[50] Ibid., 3.

the Classics), so much so that he admits in his memoir he had become lazy with his studies of Latin and Greek during his first two years. He joined the "Brothers in Unity" literary society along with his new friends Enoch and Nathan Hale, with he and Nathan referring to one another as "Damon" and "Pythias," respectively; this would be Tallmadge's first experience with using secret aliases, but it certainly would not be his last. The trio also caused their fair share of incidents on campus, as they "were all fined for smashing glass on campus" following an overstayed welcome at a local tavern.[51] Nathan himself received a stern warning in the form of a letter from his father, imploring him to "carefully mind your studies that your time be not lost."[52]A further setback arrived when Tallmadge contracted measles during his junior and senior years, but he managed to receive his degree in 1773 and even spoke at the commencement ceremony in recognition of his academic achievements.

Despite the distractions of academics and entertaining a social life through college, Tallmadge's writings to his friends during his college years and immediately after graduating exhibit his continued religiosity as a young adult. He wrote a letter to one of his friends who had found himself in arrears to express his concern, admitting to him that "When first you talk of dues and debt, / You'd almost make a Christian fret."[53] Tallmadge also fashions a connection between the religious divide in his home colony of New York with the growing resentment of the colonists towards Parliament during this time. In an epistle to future aide-de-camp of George Washington and ambassador to Portugal and Spain David Humphreys, he lays out his

[51] Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War*. (McFarland & Company, Inc., North Carolina, 2014), 6.

[52] Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*, (Bantam Dell, New York, 2006), 4.

[53] Benjamin Tallmadge, Letter to a Friend. March 26, 1775.

frustrations of how "our souls for freedom burn" following the actions of the "British Senate."[54] He shares how local town hall meetings thoroughly condemn the Intolerable Acts as "wicked measures," and that Parliament are "Depriving Boston of true freedom / So drive us where their Demon leads 'em."[55]Tallmadge's imagery of souls burning for justice and the Demons of Parliament exacting wickedness upon the poor citizens of Boston foreshadows the uprising of God's chosen against an unrighteous monarchy that Presbyterians predicted, further pointing towards a connection between the fight for political independence and the struggle for religious freedom.

A steady career path seemed to lie ahead of Tallmadge in replacing David Humphreys as the superintendent of the "*High School* in Wethersfield," but the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord interrupted such plans.[56] On April 19th, 1775, Massachusetts militiamen had confronted a column of British troops on their way to seize an arms cache in Concord, MA. General Thomas Gage, then the military governor of Massachusetts, had hoped to curb the growing threat of an armed rebellion in the countryside by launching this clandestine raid. Gage had been suspicious of Congregationalists' influence on Massachusetts colonists, claiming that "They have a particular manner in perverting and turning everything to their own purposes."[57] His paranoia of Congregationalist political interference was not entirely unfounded; many Congregationalist

[54] Benjamin Tallmadge, Epistle to David Humphreys. June 21, 1774.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Benjamin Tallmadge, *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*. (The New York Times and Arno Press, 1968), 6.

[57] David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1994), 40.

ministers assisted in militia musters and joined the ranks in some cases, with other ministers opening their meetinghouses for group prayers before drills.[58]

However, the efforts of William Dawes, Samuel Prescott, and Paul Revere in their famous midnight rides ruined any element of surprise that the redcoats had hoped to use. At dawn, the advance column experienced a cold reception by 70 minutemen on Lexington Green before "the shot heard 'round the world" rang out, prompting British soldiers to fire on the militia and ignite a powder keg of hostility throughout New England. Upon reaching Concord, the British soon realized the gravity of their predicament as militiamen from all over Massachusetts and other New England colonies poured into the town. The British endured a grueling march back to the safety of Boston as they absorbed musket fire all along the road from behind stone walls, trees, and buildings. As Tallmadge put it, "the whole country seemed to be electrified" after the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord as he "caught the flame which was thus spreading from breast to breast" and rode to Boston to learn if the news was true.[59]

During Tallmadge's journey northward, another confrontation between New England militiamen and British regulars broke out with similarly catastrophic results for Loyalist forces. In an attempt to lift the siege of Boston, General Gage ordered troops to seize the nearby Charleston Peninsula where rebel forces had encamped on Bunker and Breed's Hill. Wave after wave of a red-coated sea crashed onto the rebel defenses, only to be repulsed under intense musket fire before the rebel militia ran out of ammunition. Although British forces inevitably succeeded in taking the hill from the rebels, they did so at a high price; Gage's *corps d'elite* of

[58] Ibid., 158.

[59] Ibid., 6.

grenadier and light infantry companies saw their ranks diminish into thin air. The Royal Welch Fusiliers, for example, could only muster 12 men following the Battle of Bunker Hill, having entered Lexington Green with "three officers, five noncoms, and thirty other ranks."[60]

Upon Tallmadge's arrival at the rebel camp in Cambridge, he encountered a friend from Wethersfield who was serving as a captain in the rebel ranks. Tallmadge recalls being flattered by the idea of living a soldier's life, but was initially against making such a dream into a reality in favor of accepting his position as a schoolmaster. He would soon change his mind after considering the abuses which the colonies had endured for a decade at the hands of Parliament, as well as how an American revolution was the work of divine inspiration. In a letter to his friend Nathan Hale, Tallmadge explained that "Our holy religion, the honour of God, a glorious country, and a happy constitution is what we have to defend" against their Anglican oppressors.[61] For Tallmadge, religious freedom came first before fighting for independence and his new nation's government. Considering Tallmadge makes few, if any, explicit references to his religion in his correspondence during course the war, it is telling that he should include it when he thinks about what is at stake just before enlisting. It was at this moment that Tallmadge "finally began to think seriously about putting on the uniform, and later returned to Wethersfield full of zeal in the cause of my country." Tallmadge returned home and joined the Continental Army on June 20th, 1776 as a lieutenant.[62]

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[60] Ibid., 281.

[61] Benjamin Tallmadge to Nathan Hale, July 4, 1775.

[62] Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*, (Bantam Dell, New York, 2006), 7.

As the theater of war shifted to Tallmadge's home of New York, he gained permission to visit his father in Brookhaven. Tallmadge recalls the look of surprise present on his father's face when he arrived fully-dressed in military garb, for Tallmadge Sr. "was a firm and decided whig of the revolution" when war broke out, but disapproved of his son's decision to enlist. After all, two of Tallmadge, Jr.'s brothers had already enlisted in New York regiments, and their father did not wish to worry over losing three of his sons in the war that loomed ahead. However, Tallmadge made it clear to his father that "the die was cast," and he would return to the Continental Army's encampment outside Brooklyn as he "left the parental abode and entered the tented field."[63]

In mid-July, he and thousands of other soldiers from throughout the colonies as well as local New Yorkers gathered to listen to the Declaration of Independence be read aloud at the Common in New York City. Tallmadge later recalled that the event "filled everyone with enthusiastic zeal, as the point was now forever settled, and there was no further hope of reconciliation and dependence on the mother country."[64] Rebel soldiers and civilians alike took to the streets during the afternoon, dismantling and dismembering a statue of King George III before melting it down to use for musket balls. New York's royal governor and devout Anglican William Tryon lamented that "Every Vistage of Royalty, as far as been in the power of the Rebels, [is] done away."[65] The following week saw similar acts of vandalism, particularly against Anglican churches, as looters removed the King's seal in Trinity and St. Paul's churches.

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[63] Benjamin Tallmadge, *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*. (The New York Times and Arno Press, 1968), 8.

[64] Ibid., 9.

[65]Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 232.

and “The Episcopal Churches in New York [were] all shut up, the prayer books burned, and the Ministers scattered abroad.”[66] Although Tallmadge never reveals whether he took part in the ransacking of these Anglican landmarks, the implication that many Patriot soldiers and civilians viewed the Church as a symbol of English oppression appears evident in their actions.

The ensuing Battle of Long Island would prove disastrous for the Continental Army. In a complete turnaround of what occurred at Bunker Hill, Washington’s troops lost their defensive positions on Long Island and in Manhattan to the largest invasion force ever assembled in North America (25,000 British soldiers and sailors in total, including the feared Hessian and Brunswicker mercenaries). The Continental Army failed to provide any substantive opposition as local Long Islanders “[were] in a commotion…Women and children were running hither and thither. Men on horses were riding about in all directions.”[67] British troops along with New York-raised Tory regiments under the command of Oliver De Lancey, a member of the Anglican De Lancey clan, exposed a weakness in the rebel flank at the unguarded Jamaica Pass, forcing the entire rebel army to abandon its position and retreat across the East River to Manhattan under the cover of an early morning fog.[68]

Washington himself had known that his task of defending the city was daunting and its loss to the Howe Brothers was irreversible, conceding to a cousin that “It was obvious to me…that it will be next to impossible for us to dispossess them of [New York City] again.”[69]

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid., 235.

[68] Ibid., 235-39.

[69]Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 11.

Tallmadge's first taste of frontline fighting was equally disheartening, as his older brother William found himself captured and his commanding officer fell to a bayonet in battle. Tallmadge's regiment along with several other companies from New England served as Washington's rear guard while the bulk of the army retreated through Manhattan and across the Hudson River into New Jersey, leaving the many Presbyterian Whigs of Long Island to the mercy of their new overseers. As Tallmadge himself described it, "all was confusion and dismay, and it seemed as if we were on the eve of despair and ruin."[70]

Tallmadge would eventually call upon several fellow dissenters in the formation of his spy ring, but not before he would rise up the ranks of the Continental Army during the campaigns of 1777 and 1778. He would first receive a direct appointment from General Washington as captain of the second regiment of light dragoons in late 1776 following the disbandment of his Connecticut regiment, one that caused him to feel "highly honored and gratified."[71] During his journey to Philadelphia to receive his instructions and orders to raise a regiment, Washington guided his demoralized forces to two surprise victories over the Hessians at Trenton and British regulars at Princeton. Tallmadge, along with his Wethersfield recruits, would eventually regroup with the main body of the army in time for the Battle of Brandywine, although this engagement was more reminiscent of Long Island than of Washington's Christmas miracles. Not only had the rebels failed to safeguard their capital from Sir William Howe's forces, but a daring attack on the redcoats' Germantown garrison soon after had proven equally

[70] Benjamin Tallmadge, *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*. (The New York Times and Arno Press, 1968), 15.

[71] Ibid., 17.

frustrating. The Continental Army hunkered down into winter quarters at Valley Forge, with Tallmadge and his regiment skirmishing with British patrols for the remainder of the year.[72]

These encounters with British forces came as Tallmadge and his dragoon regiment acted as an observation corps to keep tabs on Howe across the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. The clashes themselves were typically small, and Tallmadge never lost more than four men in these engagements. It was during this time that Tallmadge would first become acquainted with Washington's vast spy networks; shortly following a skirmish, Tallmadge received word that a "country girl" was to leave Philadelphia with eggs and information about Howe's troops. Tallmadge quickly moved his men to Germantown as he traveled on closer to the British lines to greet the informant at a tavern, only for their meeting to be cut short by the sudden appearance of British light horse. He explained in that moment "I immediately mounted, when I found the young damsel close by my side, entreating that I would protect her," and the two made haste to Germantown as pistol shots whizzed by them.[73] The informant, per Tallmadge's recollection, "remained unmoved" during the ordeal, "and never once complained of fear after she mounted my horse."[74] The pair reached safety behind Patriot lines and word of the narrow escape soon spread throughout the ranks, leading to high praise for Tallmadge from all who came to know of his heroic feat.

Emboldened by the announcement of a formal treaty of alliance with France in February 1778, Washington planned to deliver a decisive blow against the British army. By this time, Sir

[72] Ibid., 20-27.

[73] Ibid., 26.

[74] Ibid., 27.

William Howe had been stripped of his status as commander-in-chief of British forces in North America and his replacement, General Sir Henry Clinton, began to march north towards New York. Clinton, the son of an admiral and brother-in-law to two more, was fearful that the intervention of the French Navy would trap British forces in Philadelphia, and he quickly decided that returning to the safety of New York's harbor which teemed with British warships was his only option.[75] Washington's army intercepted Clinton near Monmouth, New Jersey, where the two sides battled not only each other but also extreme heat and fatigue which heavily contributed to the number of casualties. Washington had hoped to surprise the British column with the main bulk of the army as General Charles Lee distracted them with a flanking maneuver, but he was infuriated to find Lee's men in retreat when he arrived and rallied them into his ranks. All told, British losses hovered around 1,000, while Patriot forces only lost 200-300 men, leading Tallmadge and others to consider the engagement a victory despite General Lee's calamitous attack.[76]

Tallmadge's personal accomplishments up to this point had helped him quickly rise through the ranks of the Continental Army, which was now once again on the march. He had come a long way from the Washington's forces moved north and made camp on the eastern side of the Hudson River to keep tabs on their British foes in New York City. Despite the embarrassment which he endured in the same place just three years prior, Washington knew that any type of direct assault on the city would be disastrous without the aid of the French navy

[75] Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, ""To Gain the Hearts and Subdue the Minds of America": General Sir Henry Clinton and the Conduct of the British War for America." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 158, no. 3 (2014), 202.

[76] Benjamin Tallmadge, *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*. (The New York Times and Arno Press, 1968), 28.

which was on course to bombard British troops in Newport, Rhode Island instead. Further complications arrived as the French fleet set sail for Boston to refit following a violent squall, leaving American troops to abandon the town that they had just liberated to Richard Howe's forces.[77] Eager to learn of General Clinton's next move, Washington would soon bestow upon Tallmadge one of his most difficult and dangerous tasks yet; one which would ultimately decide the course of the Revolutionary War.

[77] Ibid., 31.

Chapter Three: "Having constant and repeated intelligence": The Deeds of the Culper Spy Ring[78]

Following the Battle of Monmouth, Tallmadge recalled that he "opened a private correspondence with some persons in New York (for Gen. Washington) which lasted throughout the war."[79] However, he makes no further mention as to who these persons were or the nature of their correspondence in his memoir, save for how he used their intelligence in planning several raids on Long Island from his posts in Westchester, New York and Greenfield, Connecticut. The identities of these individuals were kept top secret for the duration of the war and remained so long after the war had concluded in 1783, with some identities of members still unascertained. Despite this, several ring members whose identities have been uncovered shared similar upbringings as Tallmadge did having grown up in Dissenter households in eastern Suffolk County, thereby uncovering a shared identity as Long Islander Dissenters united against Anglican suspicion and religious discrimination during the American Revolution.

One such Dissenter involved in the ring was Tallmadge's right-hand man, Abraham Woodhull. Like Tallmadge, Woodhull was born in present-day Setauket to a Presbyterian family. The two men were quite different in respect to personalities, however, as Woodhull held "the appearance as a placid man of toil" who frequently and vehemently wrote against the oppression of his British overseers compared to the bookworm that was Tallmadge. With his two older brothers passing away in 1768 and 1774, Woodhull felt that his efforts would be best served looking after his family's farm and his aging parents. As such, he never fancied himself a soldier

[78] Benjamin Tallmadge, *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*. (The New York Times and Arno Press, 1968), 35.

[79] Ibid., 29.

despite serving as a lieutenant in the Suffolk militia during the fall of 1775, after which he vowed to never volunteer for further military service.[80] Woodhull's passive hatred towards the Anglican establishment would soon change following the Battle of Long Island, as both he and Tallmadge would lose brothers during the fighting. Woodhull's brother, Nathaniel, was a general in the Continental Army and a veteran of the French and Indian War. Despite his lack of endorsement for the Declaration of Independence as president of the Provincial Convention of New York (feeling it was too extreme to support), this did not stop Loyalists such as Judge Thomas Jones from branding him a "flaming republican" on account of being a "rigid Presbyterian."[81]

Woodhull would soon get his chance at vengeance as he entered into an illicit black market that had developed in the wake of Washington's retreat from New York City. The city itself remained a mercantile hub under the protection of the Royal Navy, allowing a variety of luxury goods, including Spanish olives, Indian spices, and Italian candies to name a few. However, the same could not be said for essential foods such as grains and beef as rebel troops still controlled farms in the surrounding areas outside of the city limits; combined with the presence of thousands of British and loyalist troops, basic food supplies began to be rationed. Despite their religious and ideological differences, both staunch Patriots and devout loyalists were not above trading with one another for goods and supplies, so long as "at least both sides closed an eye." Woodhull was one such entrepreneur who found himself caught up in this

[80] Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*, (Bantam Dell, New York, 2006), 84.

[81] Ibid., 85.

expanding black market, befriending whaleboat men and securing their ferrying services for his goods to be shipped across the Long Island Sound.[82]

The Continental Congress itself wished that American citizens would overcome their materialistic dependencies, especially from an attachment to imported goods from Britain, but many Patriot military men did not feel as strongly opposed to the market's existence. Not only was such underground shipping rampant across the coasts of New Jersey and Connecticut, but men like Tallmadge and Washington believed that such a system could be used to their advantage. If goods and passengers could be easily transported across enemy lines, they believed, so too could information that would benefit the American cause. Even still, plenty of would-be merchants found themselves in chains having come across Patriot patrol boats taking part in the "Whaleboat Wars" that encompassed the Long Island Sound. This little-known theater of the war saw many Long Islanders like Caleb Brewster conduct raids on British outposts on the Island as well as on passing merchant ships filled with luxury goods.

Brewster was a friend of Tallmadge and had grown up on a farm in Setauket before joining the American cause; he would jump around from regiment to regiment before ultimately serving under Tallmadge with detached duties as the de facto admiral of Tallmadge's whaleboat flotilla.[83] With his assistance, Tallmadge was able to keep British forces on Long Island busy with raids of his own in Mastic and Coram, much to the satisfaction of General Washington. In a letter addressed to Tallmadge, he exclaimed "I beg of you to accept my thanks for your judicious

[82] Ibid., 72-73.

[83]Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 46-47.

planning and spirited execution of this business."[84] Loyalists in New York also began to take notice of Tallmadge's homecoming tour; as arch-Loyalist James Rivington reported in his *Rivington's Gazzette* in December 1780, such raids were enacted with help from Tallmadge's "old friends on the Island" while also fabricating tales of the Presbyterians' brutal murders of British soldiers and sympathizers.[85]

The reality of the situation was that British soldiers had themselves committed numerous atrocities against Dissenters throughout Long Island, although such actions rarely made the papers in New York. Presbyterians in particular received harsh treatment at the hands of British garrisons over the course of the war. In 1777, Loyalist soldiers under the command of Colonel Richard Hewlett partially damaged the Setauket Presbyterian Church where Benjamin Tallmadge Sr. had presided. The First Presbyterian Church in Huntington did not fare much better as Loyalist troops destroyed it entirely following an altercation between a church elder and a Loyalist officer. Even Banastre Tarleton, who would later become known for his infamous murders of American troops in the Waxhaws Massacre, tore down the Smithtown Presbyterian Church, carrying off 6,396 boards and leaving the village's rum supply 40 gallons short.[86] To identify as a Presbyterian on Long Island during this time was to put oneself in harm's way, and many Presbyterians would flock to the Patriot cause with open arms to seek both security and vengeance.

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[84] George Washington, Letter to Benjamin Tallmadge. November 28, 1780.

[85] *Rivington's Gazette*. December 2, 1780.

[86]Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 175.

Such was the case for Abraham Woodhull, who found himself imprisoned during one of the many Patriot raids on black market shipping that Congress had begun implementing to curtail the trade between Long Island and Connecticut. Whereas Connecticut's governor viewed Woodhull as a potential turncoat, Tallmadge saw his fellow Long Islander as a potential ally and member of his growing organization due to his Presbyterian background. After Tallmadge's consultation with Governor Jonathan Trumbull, Woodhull received permission to return home, but not before Tallmadge pitched the idea of his fellow Presbyterian helping to wage a secret war of intelligence. At first, Washington was unconvinced of Woodhull's loyalties as many of Washington's former "spies" had become fully immersed in the smuggling trade and were apt to "attend more to their own emolument than to the business with which they are charged."[87] However, Tallmadge reassured his Commander-in-Chief that Woodhull could be trusted, and the two began to establish the foundations of what would become the Culper Spy Ring.

Secrecy would be of utmost importance to the ring members. To prevent the identities of the members from being discovered, Tallmadge and Washington developed a series of aliases that Tallmadge had been familiar with from his college days. For example, Tallmadge became "John Bolton" in the ring's correspondence and Woodhull became "Samuel Culper" (The name "Culper" came from Culpeper County, Virginia, at Washington's own recommendation). The ever-rebellious Brewster chose to keep his real name, prominently depicting it on all of his correspondence. Additionally, the names of important people and places would be replaced with a series of numbers that only the members themselves could decipher; some of the most frequent numbers included 721 (John Bolton), 722 (Samuel Culper), 727 (New York), and 729 (Setauket).

[87] George Washington, Letter to Samuel Parsons. December 18, 1779.

Perhaps the most intriguing codename in Woodhull's correspondence is 355, or "lady," who is mentioned only once in all of the letters from the ring and refers to Woodhull's neighbor Anna Strong. Strong had married the prominent Whig Selah Strong, who was both the Nathaniel Woodhull's nephew and Tallmadge's step-uncle, and seems to have helped the ring per Woodhull's letter.[88] The ring members would also incorporate other clever forms of espionage in their writings, such as the usage of "sympathetic ink" which future Supreme Court Justice John Jay supplied to Washington and Tallmadge and the addition of a code dictionary which replaced names and nouns for certain numbers. Also known as "invisible ink," the writing substance could appear invisible to the naked eye on paper until it was held up to candlelight, revealing secret messages written in-between the lines of legible writing for those who knew to look for it.[89]

Apart from Tallmadge, Woodhull, Brewster, and Washington, the ring would welcome Austin Roe, Jonas Hawkins, and Robert Townsend into the fold. Roe was the owner of a tavern which he purchased from the Woodhull family in his native Setauket, a heavily Presbyterian town, and often traveled into the city to gather supplies as well as information on the movements of British troops. Little is known about Hawkins, apart from his family's rooted presence in Setauket and his involvement in the local militia following the war, but Tallmadge was able to convince Washington of his usefulness to the ring in splitting duties with Roe.[90] Townsend, however, remains an outlier; he was from Oyster Bay of Kings County, a predominantly Loyalist town, and was not known to identify with any established religion. However, his family had

[88] Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*, (Bantam Dell, New York, 2006), 173.

[89] Ibid.,104-20.

[90] Ibid., 102.

strong ties to the history of religious freedom within the colony of New York, as several of his ancestors had signed the Flushing Remonstrance of 1657 which was a landmark in establishing religious toleration in New Netherland.

Townsend also had his own personal reasons for joining the ring. Following the defeat of Patriot forces on Long Island in 1776, his father was arrested and beaten for his Whiggish beliefs. He publicly took an oath of submission in order to save himself and his family from further harassment, but any relief that came from it would be short-lived. In 1779, Townsend's home had been taken over and repurposed as the headquarters of loyalist unit called the Queen's Rangers under the command of Colonel Simcoe. Simcoe had recently found himself homeless following an altercation with Presbyterian Minister Ebenezer Prime; the Huntington clergyman had been frustrated by the large presence of British troops in town and voiced his displeasure to the officer before watching his furniture be destroyed and his church ransacked. Simcoe was also responsible for the conversion of the local Quaker meetinghouse (the first in New York) into a commissary store and arsenal despite protests from its congregation and established strict curfews on townspeople.[91] The actions of Simcoe and other Loyalist troops towards dissenters were repulsive even to members of the British Army, with one officer observing that "We planted an irrevocable hatred wherever we went, which neither time nor measures will be able to eradicate."[92] Townsend reached out to Abraham Woodhull in 1779, having worked as a commissary for Woodhull's brother Nathaniel, where he eagerly offered his services to General

[91] Ibid., 163.

[92] Charles Stuart, Letter to Lord Brute. September 16, 1778.

Washington and the ring by infiltrating New York City under the guise of running errands for his merchant father.

The addition of Townsend to the ring was a great relief to Tallmadge. Not only had he been attempting to gain direct access into New York City, but he was also preoccupied waging his own private war against members of the Anglican DeLancey clan. Tallmadge's raids of Long Island and patrols of Westchester County saw him clash swords with soldiers under the command of James and Oliver DeLancey, the former of which had previously faced charges of supporting an Anglican bishop in the North American colonies during his campaign for the General Assembly. James' troops were notorious for their savagery in battle and the burning of Bedford, New York, which instilled a personal hatred in Tallmadge towards DeLancey. Upon capturing two of DeLancey's men in a skirmish, Tallmadge recalled how he "ordered them immediately put to Death, but their Cries and entreaties prevailed upon me to spare them, for a more exemplary Punishment."[93] These men would likely have preferred a firing squad compared to the "half-hangings" they would endure, which were the 18th century equivalent to waterboarding. Further headaches arrived with the capture of Major John André and Benedict Arnold's betrayal of the plans to the Patriot fortification at West Point, which made Tallmadge anxious that his own agents might be discovered as well.

Unlike the failed exchange between Arnold and André, Tallmadge's spy network never went completely silent. The information Tallmadge received concerning British troop movements and locations of supply depots proved crucial in conducting his whaleboat raids from across the Sound and keeping the British entrenched in New York as Washington and his French

[93] Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 73.

allies marched to Yorktown. Tallmadge remained in the New York theater as the majority of the allied army marched for Washington's Virginia home, as he was determined to prevent further British raids from Benedict Arnold and bring the turncoat to justice. Following Arnold's burning of New London, Connecticut, in September 1781, Tallmadge retaliated by sending troops to capture Fort Slongo in present-day Northport, New York. He recalled how "The troops landed on Long Island by 4 o'clock, and at the dawn of day the attack was made and the fortress subdued. The Blockhouse and other combustible materials were burnt, and the detachment and prisoners returned in safety."[94]

A year later, Tallmadge received word of British soldiers forcing local militia in Huntington to tear down the Presbyterian church to build a fort on a burial ground nearby; outraged, Tallmadge gathered his troops along with Caleb Brewster for an attack on the fort. Tallmadge's force was sizeable, consisting of "four companies of light infantry…and a body of dismounted dragoons, to mount the captured horses of the enemy…amounting in all to about 700 men."[95] Unfortunately for Tallmadge, his flotilla encountered bad weather on the night of the landing and skirmishes with Loyalist patrol boats the next night forced Tallmadge to call off the planned expedition.[96]

Despite this setback, the accomplishments of Tallmadge and his ring members gained much notoriety both from Patriots and Loyalists alike at the war's conclusion. Upon entering into occupied New York City to discuss the treatment of former agents and prevent any Patriot

[94] Benjamin Tallmadge, *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*. (The New York Times and Arno Press, 1968), 47-48.

[95] Ibid., 50.

[96] Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 114-18.

reprisal against their feigned loyalties to Britain, Tallmadge enjoyed a seat as the guest of honor at Sir Guy Carleton's table where he met other high-ranking members of the British Army. Washington met with many friends and agents of Tallmadge and provided his thanks for their clandestine services. Meanwhile, Tallmadge enjoyed a hero's welcome upon his return to Setauket, having not dared to visit home during his raids and thereby bring unwanted attention from Loyalists to his family. With the exception of the few Anglicans who lived in Setauket, the village rejoiced at their salvation from seven long years of Anglican occupation and hosted a feast on the public green in Tallmadge's honor, with Benjamin Tallmadge Sr. providing an invocation.[97] Tallmadge's long-deserved recognition, both as the spymaster of Setauket and the hero of the Presbyterian Church, had finally been achieved.

[97] Ibid., 135-36.

Conclusion: "Everything bids fair for a change"[98]

The impressive accomplishments of Benjamin Tallmadge did not end with the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. Having purchased property in Litchfield, Connecticut, in 1782 during the final years of his military service, Tallmadge married Mary Floyd (Mary's father, William Floyd, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence) and became a well-to-do merchant in town. He also served as the president of Phoenix Bank, later renamed the First National Bank of Litchfield, and went on to serve his country again as a Federalist member of the House of Representatives.

Tallmadge's largest concern during his political career was the treatment of and compensation for veterans of both the Revolution and War of 1812.[99] Religion remained an important part of Tallmadge's life, as is evident in his letters to friends and family during his later years where he references theological topics including the rebirth of the human soul and recent sermons at his local church.[100] Part of the reason for Tallmadge's continued religiosity during this time could be the tragic losses of his first wife and two of his sons, compelling him to participate greatly in the Second Great Awakening during the 1820s and 1830s. Tallmadge himself would pass away in his home on March 7, 1835, as death notices appeared in cities from Rhode Island to as far away as South Carolina to relay the news.[101]

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[98] Benjamin Tallmadge, Letter to Nathan Hale. May 9, 1775.

[99] Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 138-42.

[100] Benjamin Tallmadge, Letter to John Paine Cushman. March, 1823.

[101] Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 166-71.

Although Tallmadge had gained popularity because of his work in Congress during his lifetime, research into his heroic deeds with the Culper Spy Ring has helped to shed light onto another important chapter in Tallmadge's career. Popular history has become infatuated with the story of the ring, as the release of television presenter Brian Kilmeade's book *Washington's Secret Six* coincided with the debut of the hit AMC television series *Turn: Washington's Spies*. However, despite helping to draw attention to a chapter of the American Revolution that has largely gone unnoticed in the public eye, these attempts fail to fully demonstrate the religious undertones of both the ring's creation as well as the cause of the war itself. Little if any scholarship has been done on the religious communities of Long Island during the 18th century, leaving audiences to assume that Tallmadge and the other ring members joined solely out of a sweeping sense of patriotism and individualism at the expense of their religious identities. To ignore this crucial factor which the members considered in choosing to risk their lives for the right to freedom of religion is to misinterpret the ring's purpose and its legacy.

Since the conclusion of the American Revolution, the rich multi-ethnic history of New York City and Long Island has been woven into the fabric of the American story. Since emerging from a small trading post on the edge of the known world, New York City has come to represent the ideal environment for cultural and religious diversity and understanding thanks in large part to the sacrifices of individuals like Benjamin Tallmadge. The discrimination which many New York Dissenters once experienced at the hands of an Anglican oligarchy remains relevant to Americans today, as marginalized minority groups have increasingly clamored for relief from oppression in recent years. In learning the true story of Tallmadge's Culper Spy Ring, one may hopefully take away that sacrifice and persistence in the face of danger are required in order to promote ideals of religious freedom in society.

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