

What a Character!

☆☆☆  
AMERICA'S  
FAMOUS SPIES

☆☆☆  
Notable Lives from History



Marilyn Boyer

First printing: April 2024

Copyright © 2024 by Marilyn Boyer and Master Books. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, copied, broadcast, stored, or shared in any form whatsoever without written permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations in articles and reviews. For information write:

Master Books, P.O. Box 726, Green Forest, AR 72638

Master Books® is a division of the New Leaf Publishing Group, LLC.

ISBN: 978-1-68344-363-6

ISBN: 978-1-61458-878-8 (digital)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024932930

Cover: Diana Bogardus

Interior: Terry White

Please consider requesting that a copy of this volume be purchased by your local library system.

**Printed in the United States of America**

Please visit our website for other great titles:

[www.masterbooks.com](http://www.masterbooks.com)

For information regarding promotional opportunities, please contact the publicity department at [pr@nlpg.com](mailto:pr@nlpg.com).



A Division of New Leaf Publishing Group  
[www.masterbooks.com](http://www.masterbooks.com)



# Table of Contents

American War of Independence .....	5
1. Nathan Hale— Spy and Hero .....	7
2. Lydia Darragh — Quaker Spy .....	19
3. Washington’s Spies — The Culper Ring .....	29
4. Anna Strong — Petticoat Spy .....	41
5. James Armistead Lafayette—Double Spy .....	53
The Civil War .....	63
6. Belle Boyd — Teen-aged Spy .....	65
7. Emma Edmonds—Nurse and Spy .....	79
8. Dabney and Lucy Walker — Clothesline Spies .....	91
World War II .....	101
9. The Ghost Army .....	103
10. The Navajo Code Talkers .....	115
Glossary .....	125
Corresponding Curriculum .....	133
Endnotes .....	135

## Image Credits

Images are AI-generated at shutterstock.com

Maps:

*Map Trek: Atlas of the World & U.S. History* – pages 6, 64, and 102

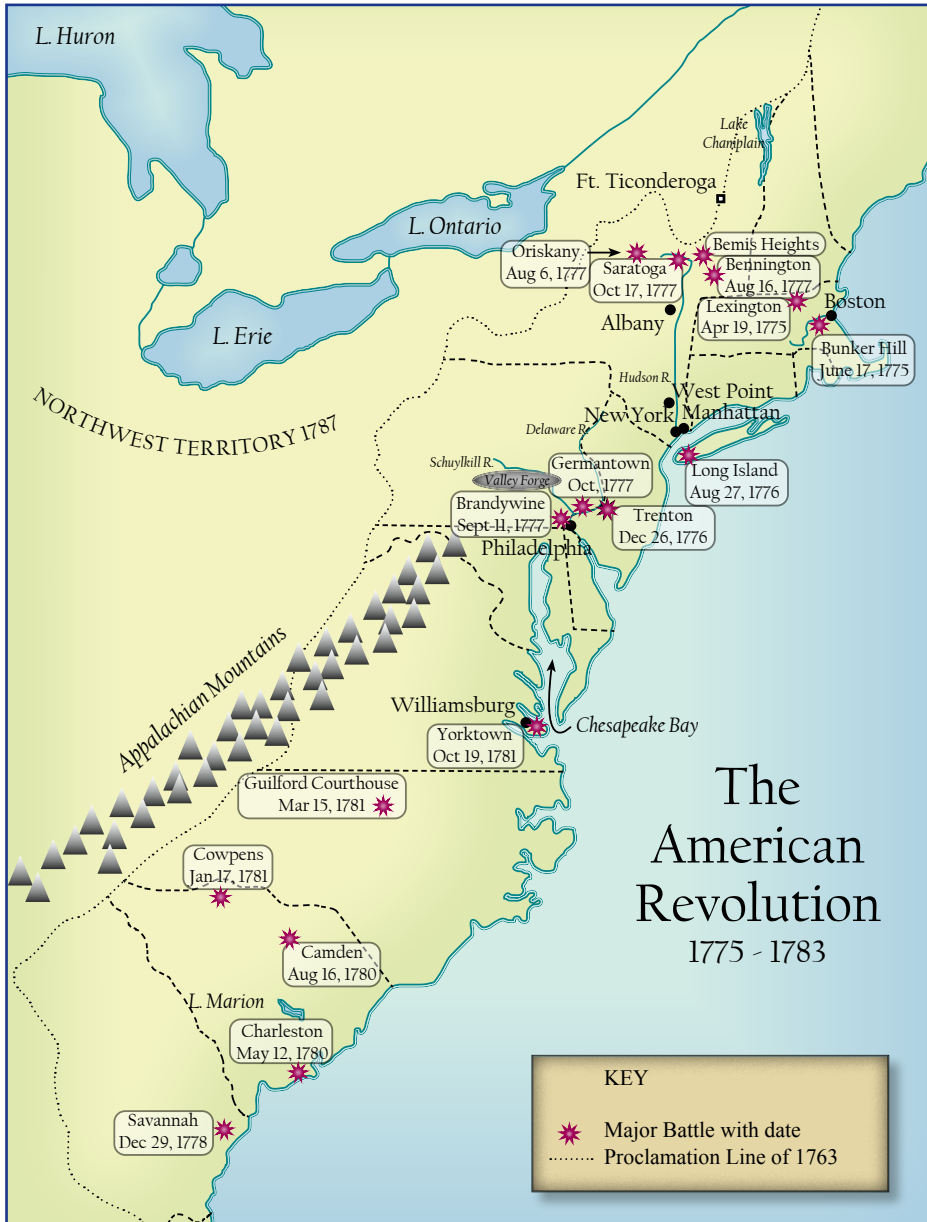
# American War of Independence



In the late 18th century, the thirteen American colonies were fed up with British rule and taxation without representation. The flames of revolution were ignited, leading to a daring struggle for independence.

Visionaries like Thomas Jefferson and brave leaders like George Washington emerged, guiding a diverse group of colonists in their quest for freedom. The American War of Independence marked a defining moment in history, culminating in the birth of a new nation, the United States of America. During the war there were secret missions, cunning disguises, and hidden messages that played a crucial role in the fight for independence. This was the era of spies, brave individuals who risked everything to gather information and outsmart the enemy.

After seven years of fighting for freedom, the colonies successfully gained their independence and created a brand new country. In 1789, they officially approved the Constitution, marking the beginning of the United States of America.





1

# Nathan Hale— Spy and Hero

September, 1776

American War of  
Independence



During the American Revolution, both the British and Patriot armies needed spies to gather information about the enemy. Spies would find out the number of soldiers the enemy had and where they were located, as well as how much ammunition and how many supplies the enemy had available. Each side especially needed to learn of the enemy's plans to march or attack. Spies had to try to learn as much information as possible without the enemy knowing what they were doing. Spies also had to be really smart. They'd use secret codes to send messages back to their own side. Spying was dangerous, and both sides knew it. But these brave individuals believed in the cause so much that they risked everything to help their side win.

## Off to College

If you had lived in the colony of Connecticut in 1769, you might have seen two young men riding away from their farm home on horseback. They were Nathan and Enoch Hale, and they were on their way to Yale



College. Nathan was only 14 years old. In those days, that was a common age for boys who went to leave home if they went to college. His father and mother worked hard on their farm to feed their 12 children. The children worked hard, too. Everyone had to help on the farm. The children were taught from the Bible and the family prayed together daily. The



parents finally managed to save enough money to send Enoch and Nathan to Yale University. Nathan liked college, and he was a good student. He loved to read. He liked the stories of heroes from the past. He dreamed of doing great deeds himself someday.

Nathan also loved the outdoors. He was a good runner and jumper, and he did well in the

contests he had with the other young men. He was a good wrestler, too. He was a kind young man; most people liked him. Nathan and his college friends were growing and changing. America was changing, too. In those days America was not a nation. It was just 13 British **colonies** spread up and down the eastern part of North America. They could not make their own laws because they were ruled by King George of England. They lived in colonial America, but they were still Englishmen.



## Trouble with England

King George made laws for the colonists without listening to them about their needs. He made them pay high taxes. He did many things that were not fair to his people in America.

Many people in the colonies were angry. As time went on, they got even more upset. The colonists asked the king for relief from laws he made that cost the colonists a lot of money

**colonies:** Areas under the full or partial political control of another country

and commanded control over their businesses and lives. But the king wanted more money to pay for his wars and didn't respect the colonists even though they were his subjects.



In 1773, Nathan finished college and became a schoolteacher. His students liked him because he was a good teacher. They knew he wanted to help them learn. He expected the children to be respectful and follow the school rules, but he wanted them to have fun, too. Sometimes he would do tricks for them, showing them how well he could run and jump. Nathan was happy teaching. He might have remained a schoolteacher for the rest of his life if something hadn't happened that changed Connecticut forever. In fact, it changed the world. A war started.

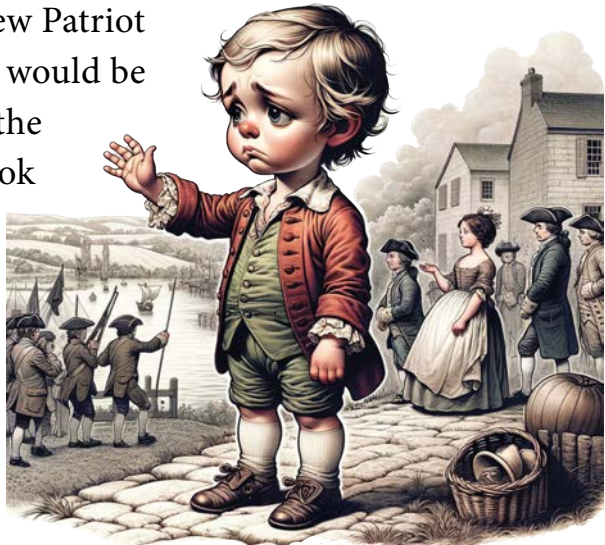
On April 19, 1775, there was a fight between British soldiers and the colonists at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts men believed that America should be free from England and its king. They had been storing up weapons and gunpowder at Concord. The British soldiers had marched out of Boston and through Lexington on their way to capture the supplies at Concord. When they reached Lexington, the men of the town came out to protect their homes. They did not plan to shoot at the soldiers unless the British tried to harm them or their homes. Someone — no one is sure if he was British or a Patriot — fired a shot. Then all the soldiers began shooting at the colonists. Several of the Lexington men were hurt or killed.

There was another battle at Concord. Riders were carrying the news around the countryside and the farmers were gathering from all around

to fight against the British. Soon there were so many Patriots shooting that the soldiers turned around and ran. The farmers chased them all the way to Boston. When the news reached Connecticut, the people gathered in town meetings to talk about war. Nathan went to one of these meetings with his neighbors. Some of the people were afraid to fight. They knew the British had many soldiers. They also had plenty of money to buy weapons and supplies. The Patriots had no army and little money.

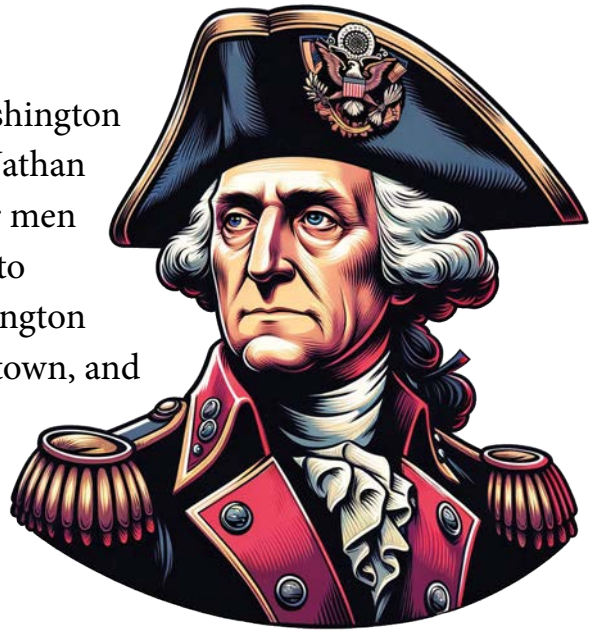
Some people at the meeting thought they should just make peace with England. Others said that the British government was wrong to rule the colonies unfairly. They must fight for their rights as Englishmen. And if the King would not treat them fairly, they should separate from England and start a new nation. Nathan was one of those who wanted to fight for freedom. When it was his turn to speak, he stood up and shouted, “Let us march at once and never lay down our arms until we obtain our independence!”<sup>1</sup> He wanted to become a soldier right away, but he had to finish the school year with his students.

One day Nathan received a letter. He was being asked to be an officer in the new Patriot army! Nathan was excited. He would be a leader of other soldiers. On the last day of school, Nathan shook the hand of each student and said his last goodbyes. He was sad to leave his young friends. They were sad also as they watched him leave. They hoped he would be safe as he fought for his country.



## Becoming A Ranger

Soon, Nathan joined General Washington and the Patriot army in Boston. Nathan and the other officers drilled their men over and over. They worked hard to learn to fight well together. Washington had the British **bottled up** in the town, and he hoped they would give up and sail away. Nathan wished they would come out and have a battle. He wanted to do more to help his country.



Time went on and winter came. This made it hard for the Patriot soldiers. There was snow and mud all around. The **bottled up: Trapped** men did not have enough warm clothing. It was hard to drill in the cold weather and many men got sick. Nathan visited his sick men in their tents and prayed with them. He tried to cheer them up, but many men were giving up and going home to care for their farms and families. In order to keep his men with him, Nathan shared his pay with them.

Nathan was made a captain in January 1776. He was responsible for leading many men into battle. After the Battle of Dorchester Heights in March, the British gave up Boston and marched down to their ships in the harbor. As they sailed away, General Washington thought they would go to the colony of New York to make their next attack. Nathan and many other soldiers were sent there to defend it. As Nathan looked out across New York from his camp, he could see British ships in the East River. Some of them were big battleships.



One was a small ship called a **sloop**. It was loaded with guns and other supplies. The Patriot army needed those things badly. As Nathan looked at the sloop sitting peacefully in the water, he had an idea. He thought he saw a way he could do something important to help the American cause.

When night came, Nathan and some of his men got into a rowboat. Being careful not to splash with their oars, the men paddled quietly to the sloop. It was near a massive warship called the *Asia*. If the sailors on the big ship heard them, they would shoot the Americans and sink their boat, but the Patriots were very careful. They got to the sloop and quietly climbed aboard. They took the British sailors on the sloop prisoner. The elated Americans sailed the sloop across the river to their army. The Patriots were overjoyed to get a ship full of things they badly needed! Soon Nathan was asked to join the Rangers, an **elite** group of soldiers who carried out specialized tasks for General Washington. Nathan hoped he would soon have another chance to do something great for freedom.

**sloop:** Small sailing warship

**elite:** Superior in training and abilities

### A Special, Dangerous Mission

In September 1776, the four Captains of the Rangers received a request. Colonel Thomas Knowlton called them to a meeting. He needed a volunteer to do a job that would be extremely hard and dangerous. Things were looking bad for the Patriots after the British



had beaten them at a battle in Long Island the month before. General Washington needed to know how many British soldiers were in New York, and where they were. When would they attack the Americans again? Colonel Knowlton looked grim. He needed a **spy**.

But no one wanted to be a spy. People thought spying wasn't honorable. Brave men were willing to fight and die in battle, but spying meant sneaking around and hiding, trying to fool the enemy instead of

**spy:** Person who secretly reports information on activities, movements, and plans of an enemy

defeating him in a fair fight. A spy did not wear his uniform, but regular clothes. If he were caught, he would likely be hung. The young officers looked unhappy. They wanted to fight for freedom, but spying? That wasn't honorable.

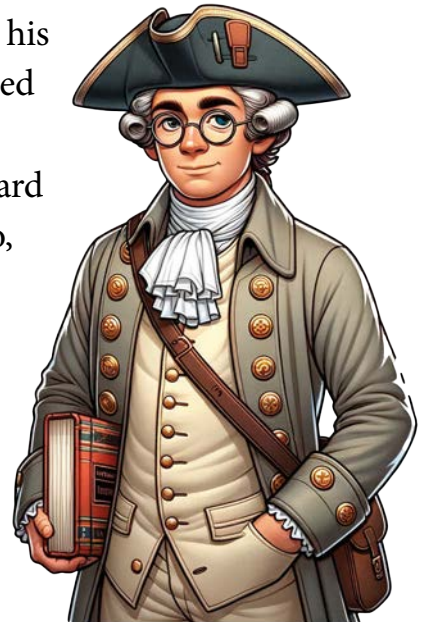
They looked around the room, not wanting to look Colonel Knowlton in the eye. Nathan could not offer to take the mission because he was recovering from a serious illness and was still quite weak. So, the colonel did not get his volunteer that night.

It wasn't long before Colonel Knowlton called his captains again. General Washington still needed a spy. Who was brave enough to risk his life? Nathan was no longer weak. He stepped forward and stood before Colonel Knowlton. "I will go, sir," he said firmly. The general had his spy!

Nathan told his friend, William Hull, what he planned to do. He would **disguise**

**disguise:** Alter one's dress or appearance to conceal one's true identity

himself as a schoolteacher and sneak into the British camp. He



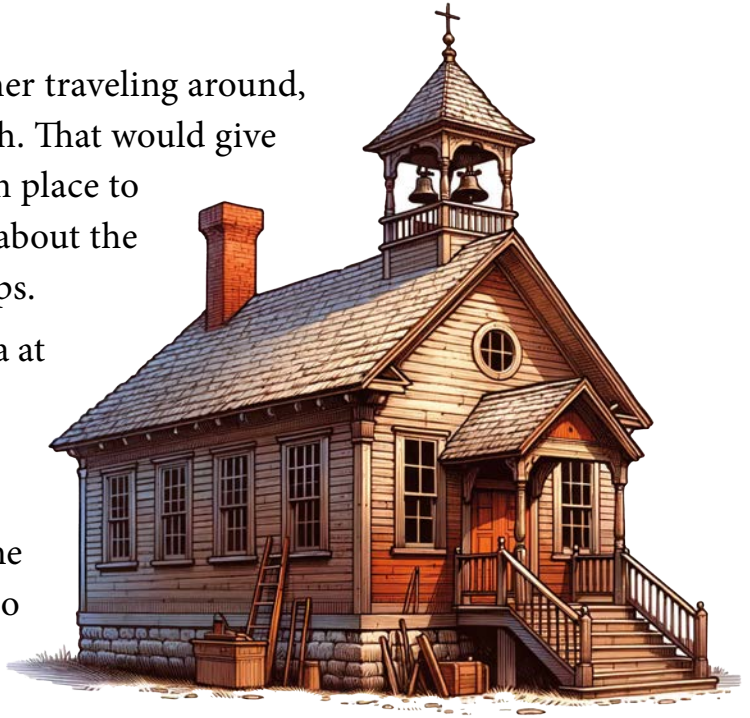


would pretend to be a teacher traveling around, looking for a school to teach. That would give him a reason for going from place to place while he wrote notes about the British army and their camps.

William did not like the idea at all. A spy? Why, spying was like lying or cheating. He thought Nathan would lose the respect of his friends if he did this. And Nathan was too honest for a spy. He would be found out and killed by the British. “Don’t do this, Nathan!”

William begged.

Nathan explained to William that he had to go. General Washington needed to know what the enemy was up to. “I wish to be useful,” he explained.<sup>2</sup> Yes, spying was dangerous, but it was not dishonorable. He confided in William that he longed to be useful and that every kind of service for the public good was honorable by being necessary. As the two friends shook hands, Nathan promised William that he would think it over. It is never easy for a young man to do something his friends think is wrong. Nathan knew William was only trying to help him with his advice. He also knew that many other people agreed with William. However, General Washington and his country needed him. He would do this job no matter what.



## Danger on Long Island

Soon Nathan was on his way across the water to Long Island. He left his uniform and sword in the camp and wore a plain coat and hat, like a wandering schoolteacher. In his disguise, he roamed around the island. How many soldiers did the British have? Where were they placed? How many cannons did they have? General Washington needed to know. Carefully, Nathan wrote notes and drew maps. He hid his papers in his shoes. For about nine days, Nathan walked about the camps. Then he started back toward the Patriot camp. Somehow, he was captured. Some thought it may have been his **Tory** cousin who saw and reported him. The British searched him and found his notes and maps in his shoes. Nathan knew he was in deep trouble.

He was brought to General William Howe, the highest-ranking officer in the British army in New York. He asked

**Tory:** American colonist who supported the British side during the American Revolution

Nathan who he was and why he was in the British camps.

Nathan was an honest man. He could have tried to

save himself by lying, but Nathan told the truth. He admitted he was an American soldier and a spy for General Washington. The British officer's face grew red with anger. A spy in his camp! He ordered Nathan to be hanged the very next morning.



Nathan was locked in a building near the General's office. There was no chance to escape because a soldier guarded the door. He tried to prepare himself to die the next day. He thought about his family back home. He thought about his country and about God. He hoped that America would win her freedom someday.



Nathan asked for a Bible. He asked for a minister to visit him in his last hours. The British officer in charge said no to both requests. How cruel! Nathan was given paper and ink to write letters. He wrote to his family and to Colonel Knowlton. Instead of sending the letters, the British officer destroyed them. He was determined to let Nathan have nothing but a hangman's rope.

When morning came, Nathan Hale was taken outside. He knew that he would die this morning, but he was not afraid to die. When the British officer asked if he had any last words, Nathan replied, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."<sup>3</sup> Though the young soldier's life was ended, the story of his heroic courage had just begun. For many, many years boys and girls all over America memorized and quoted his last words. A statue of him was placed at Yale College where he had studied as a boy.

Nathan Hale did not succeed in his mission to get news of the British for General Washington. He did not live to go on and win battles.

However, though he is not commemorated for a great victory, he is for being a great man of character. He was willing to face great danger for his country. He was willing even to give up

his life. He did not live to see his dream of freedom come true, but a grateful nation looks back even today with deep respect for Nathan Hale, a true American hero.







2

# Lydia Darragh – Quaker Spy

December 1777

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In September 1777, General William Howe, leading the British army, marched into Philadelphia, the seat of the Continental Congress. The Continental Congress was the ruling body set up in 1774 by American colonial leaders to determine how to proceed with opposition to unfair British rule. He took up residence there until the following spring. Many Patriot residents, businessmen of the city, and the Continental Congress abandoned the city before their arrival. Howe hoped that by seizing Philadelphia, he would rally the Loyalists in the colony of Pennsylvania, discourage the rebels by capturing their capital, and bring the war to a speedy conclusion. This also allowed British troops a comfortable place to spend the winter, forcing residents to allow them to occupy local homes.

Washington's troops spent six weeks at Whitemarsh Township, which

**redoubts:** Temporary fortifications

**monitor:** Keep an eye on

was 13 miles northwest of Philadelphia. The army began building **redoubts** to be ready if Howe attacked. From here Washington could **monitor** the British movements in Philadelphia as well as protect his supply cities in the west.

## Howe's Headquarters

General Howe set up his headquarters in Philadelphia at the home of Colonel John Cadwalader (a prominent Patriot) across the street from the large house of a quiet Quaker family, the Darraghs. Quakers were gentle people who dressed plainly and





opposed any form of violence. They were not expected to fight on either side in the war. William Darragh, age 56, was the son of a clergyman. He was a teacher who was skilled in **shorthand**. He and his wife Lydia, age 48, had five children at the time. She occasionally served as a nurse and **midwife**. Since the Darraghs' house was so spacious and well-suited for the purpose, General Howe often made use of one of the rooms there to hold important meetings with his officers.



Howe knew the Darraghs were Quakers, but he didn't know their oldest son Charles, age 22, had joined Washington's army and was stationed at Whitemarsh. He also didn't suspect that Lydia was a Patriot at heart.

**shorthand:** Method of rapid writing by using abbreviations and symbols

**midwife:** Delivers babies

### Howe's Important Meeting

On December 2, 1777, a British officer and spy, Major John Andre, entered her parlor and asked Lydia to have the room they used as a conference room ready for an important meeting at 8:00 that evening. He also instructed her to have all the family in bed by then. He told her he would let her know when the meeting was over so she could **extinguish** the fire and lock the doors. Lydia prepared the conference room, welcomed the officers, and as requested, got her family off to bed. Lydia, however, was not able to sleep. Thinking of her son Charles and the

**extinguish:** Put out

Patriot army shivering with cold at the nearby Whitemarsh camp, she slipped quietly out of bed and crept noiselessly down the hall. Entering a linen closet located next to the conference room she heard General Howe reading his order. He had learned from his spies that the Patriots were planning to move camp. The British plan was to ambush them at Whitemarsh late on the evening of December 4. Surely, considering their larger force and catching the Patriot army unprepared, it would be a certain victory for the British. Lydia, shivering with fright, dashed back down the hall and lay down in her bed, wondering how she could get this information to Washington in time to help not only her son Charles but the entire cause for freedom.

### Lydia's Dilemma

Soon thereafter, Lydia heard a loud knock on her bedroom door. Knowing it was Major Andre, she lay there, not answering until the third knock, pretending to be in a deep sleep. When she opened the door, acting very sleepy, Andre commented



that she must be a sound sleeper as he had knocked three times trying to wake her. He told her the meeting had ended, so she could put out the fire and lock her door. Lydia said goodnight to the officers, locked the door, put out the fire and candles, then made her way back to bed.

Lydia's mind raced trying to decide what she should do.

When morning came, Lydia matter-of-factly told her husband that their flour supply was getting low and that she would go to the mill today to buy more. Lydia crossed the street to Howe’s headquarters and requested a pass to leave the city to go to the mill at Frankford. Going to the flour mill was not an unusual thing



for a housewife to do so she had no trouble in obtaining a pass to go through British lines. She carried her empty sack and walked the eight miles on foot through light snow. Reaching the gristmill, she left the sack with the miller to be filled and told him she would pick it up later that day.

### The American Camp

Lydia set off on foot, heading in the direction of the American camp at Whitemarsh. Soon, she heard a horse approaching and looked up to see Lieutenant Colonel John Craig, one of Washington’s **light brigade**, a man she had met once before. Greatly surprised to see her he asked, “Why Mrs. Darragh, what are you doing so far from home?”<sup>4</sup> Lydia requested that he walk beside her, which he did, leading his

**light brigade:**  
Officers that travel  
light and fast



horse by his side. In **hushed** tones, she told him the important intelligence she was risking her life to deliver. He, without hesitation, led her to the eating establishment where Elias Boudinot, **Commissary of Prisoners**, was eating his breakfast. Questioning him about flour, she thrust in his hand a dirty **needle**

**book**. Surprised, he began to flip through its many pockets until he came to the last one where he found a slip of rolled-up paper. As he read the note, he learned the vital information that Howe was coming with 5,000 men, 13 cannons, baggage wagons, and 11 boats on wheels.

**hushed:** Quiet

**Commissary of Prisoners:** Office established to handle prisoners and find intelligence

**needle book:** Fabric book for keeping sewing needles

Boudinot and Craig suggested that Lydia go to a nearby house where she would be given some food before her trip home, then galloped off to Washington's headquarters. Lydia requested that they deliver the information, but not reveal the source, to protect her identity. She was determined to get home before dark, so Lydia did not stop for food or rest but trudged on back to the mill. She made her way into the



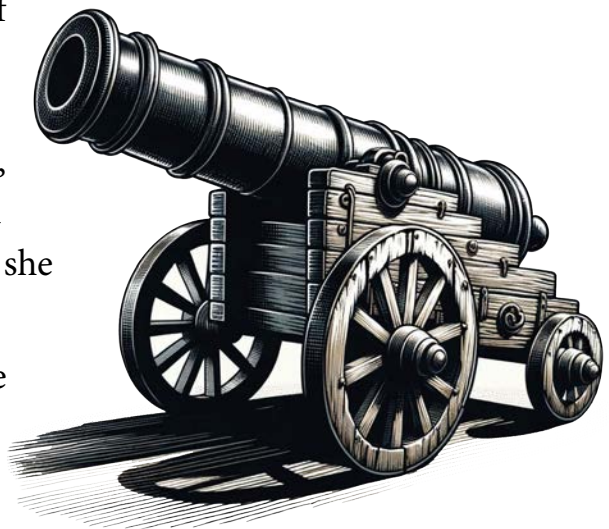
city, a heavy bag of flour on her shoulder. No one suspected the quiet Quaker woman of anything more than purchasing a bag of flour for her family.

### **Message Delivered**

As for William, “he little knew the part his wife had played in the drama of that eventful night. She feared the least suspicion of his having taken information out of the city might endanger his life and kept her secret.”<sup>5</sup> That evening Lydia shuddered while sitting by her window as she observed the British troops march out to town on their way to attack Washington’s men.

The next day, Lydia went about her household duties praying her message had arrived on time. Shortly after the British troops returned, there was a knock on Lydia’s door. When she opened it, an officer informed Lydia that Major Andre had summoned her to come to the council room. The Major locked the door behind her and told her to take a seat. The room was dark and helped to hide her pale, nervous face. Andre asked Lydia grimly if any of her family members had been awake on the night of their last council meeting. She replied, “No, indeed, they were all in bed at eight o’clock as thee bade me,” she truthfully replied.<sup>6</sup>

The British officer, looking quite perplexed, explained, “I cannot understand it. It is very



strange. I know that you were sound asleep for I had to knock several times on your door to awaken you to let us out. Yet it is certain that we were betrayed. I am entirely at a loss to imagine who gave General Washington information of our intended attack. On arrival near his encampment, we found his cannon mounted, the troops under arms and prepared at every point to meet us, and we have been compelled to march back like a parcel of fools. The walls must have ears.”<sup>7</sup>

Instead of finding a sleeping camp, the British were attacked by the Pennsylvania militia which confused them. It was clear they would not have an easy victory as anticipated. After making a few half-hearted assaults, they abandoned the mission and marched back to Philadelphia, their headquarters, knowing their well-laid plans must have been betrayed.

### **What’s in the Buttons?**

This was not the only time Lydia helped supply information to Washington’s army. Her location in town, the fact that she was a known peace-loving Quaker, and the frequent use of her council room by the British all contributed to her hearing plans of the enemy. She was





also easily able to observe troop movements within the city. She often brought the officers refreshments while they met in her council room, or she would step into the room to add wood to the fire.

She devised an **ingenious** plan to transmit gained intelligence to her son Charles, in Washington's army. Her husband William had developed a secret code which he shared with Lydia and Charles. When Lydia obtained **intel**, William would write them in his code on scraps of paper. Lydia, who sewed clothes for her family, would **conceal** these messages in a cloth-covered button. Covered buttons were made of either metal or wood. Fabric covered the forms with a separate back piece that secured the fabric behind the button. The cover was generally the same fabric from which the coat was made. They were common and are still used by some people today.

The message secured; the button was then sewed in place on the coat to be worn. William and Lydia had another son, John, who was 14 years old at the time. He was too young to join the Continental army, but he performed a valuable service to them in another way. Lydia would cut the buttons off John's coat, secure the messages safely inside his button covers, sew the buttons back on his coat, and send John off to Washington's



**ingenious:** Clever

**conceal:** Hide

**intel:** Information

camp where he would ask to speak to his brother Charles.

Charles would take John into his tent, remove his buttons, **decipher** the messages, and sew the

**decipher:** Decode

buttons back onto his coat until the next time.

Because he was a child, John was permitted to pass

and repass the **sentries** without being stopped. It was an amazing plan. It wasn't until years later that Lydia revealed her valuable role in

**sentries:** Guards

providing intelligence. If Lydia hadn't informed Washington of the British plans on so many occasions, the founding of America may have had a very different outcome.

