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Culper
Spy Ring

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Finding Liss

BY CLAIRE BELLERJEAU AND TIFFANY YECKE BROOKS

“If I see any of the officers, will make inquiry for Liss—Tho’ I think there is no probability of your getting her again,” Robert Townsend wrote to his father, Samuel, in May 1779. “I am surprised that Col. Simcoe would permit her to go—he certainly must have known it when they left Oyster Bay.”



Liss by Lindsey Levine

COURTESY OF CLAIRE BELLERJEAU

For more than 60 years, this short passage was overlooked or explained away by historians studying the Townsend family as a story about a stolen cow, while the seemingly more interesting evidence of Robert Townsend’s work as Culper Jr. in the famed Culper Spy Ring was researched and celebrated. As it turns out, however, by connecting letters, ledgers, logbooks, and other records, the enigmatic “Liss” had a story all her own.

Working backwards from a 1787 letter in which Robert appealed to business partners in Charleston, South Carolina, to help him buy back “a Wench named Elizabeth, sent from this place,” we were able to reconstruct Liss’s story, confirming in family records not only that Elizabeth and Liss were, indeed, the same person, but that the intervening eight years between her escape and return to Oyster Bay were highly eventful.

After she left with the British, Liss did not remain with Colonel Simcoe but appears to have been re-enslaved by a different British officer in Manhattan. At the same time that Robert was passing information from Manhattan to Abraham Woodhull in Setauket, who then passed the information along to General Washington by means of whaleboats across Long Island Sound to Connecticut, a woman—the famed “355” of the Culper code—was apparently gathering intelligence of her own and sharing it with the ring. Curiously, Liss shows up in the account books of Robert’s shop during his time as a spy, indicating he purchased several items for her. Why would a woman who had escaped her enslavers seek out a member of that same family for a casual acquaintance two years after she disappeared? And why had Robert’s father never run a single “runaway slave” ad seeking information about Liss? Could Robert and Liss have known more than they let on?

Even more curious, in 1782, a now-pregnant

Above: In 1799, Robert Townsend wrote to his father Samuel about Liss's escape. COURTESY OF THE FRIENDS OF RAYNHAM HALL

Below: In a 1787 letter, Robert Townsend appealed to business partners to help him buy back Liss. COURTESY OF THE EAST HAMPTON LIBRARY, LONG ISLAND

Liss appealed to Robert to purchase her from the officer who had re-enslaved her so that she would not have to evacuate with the retreating British army. He did, and she moved into his home, more as a guest than an enslaved domestic worker. Robert, who would soon join an early anti-slavery movement, employed a white woman as his housekeeper. Perhaps because Robert did not want to own a slave, when Liss's son Harry was six months old, mother and child were sold to a widow both Liss and Robert knew, with an agreement that, should the widow ever wish to sell them or move away, she must approach Robert first. He recounts this arrangement in his letters to South Carolina, laying out the circumstances that led to Liss being separated from her child and sold without his knowledge.

Thanks to collections as far-flung as New York, London, South Carolina, Michigan, Connecticut, and Canada, we were able to learn not only what happened to Liss, but the identity of her newest enslaver: Richard Palmes, an apothecary with a violent temper, perhaps best remembered as one of the instigators of the Boston Massacre of 1770. New York archives played the largest role, with eight different institutions providing the puzzle pieces that came together into the story we tell in *Espionage and Enslavement in the Revolution: The True Story of Robert Townsend and Elizabeth* (Lyons Press, 2021).

When Robert learned of Liss's fate, he personally removed her child from the home of the enslaver who had shipped Liss south and brought the boy back to the Townsend family home in Oyster Bay. He also wrote letters until he found a Charleston merchant willing to visit Palmes's estate and arrange for Liss's return, which was fraught with legal difficulties. Meanwhile, the New York Manumission Society, on whose rolls Robert Townsend's name appears, had helped pass a New York law forbidding out-of-state purchases of enslaved people. As a result, Liss likely was smuggled back into New York, where she lived as a free woman but without full legal protection until 1803, when her manumission certificate reveals she was finally granted her

freedom alongside her sister Hannah. Harry, however, remained enslaved into his adulthood, as the law prohibited the manumission of children, even if their parents became free.

This is where the joy of discovery collides with sobering reality in archival research; sometimes, we can forget for a moment that the stories preserved in records aren't really stories—they are remnants of the lives of real people with real heartbreak and real suffering alongside the joy and celebration. They remind us that history is far more complex than the often simplified, glorified, or dramatized mythologies around which we build our identities and allegiances.

Because of the efforts of the professionals who maintain archives, special collections, and now online historical databases, countless untold stories will finally see the light of day. As communication and accessibility between different collections continues to improve, more stories like Liss's will finally get the recognition they deserve. Historians are now able to chase hunches much further and faster than ever before; sometimes they yield dead ends, but other times they open up entire new worlds. We just have to be willing to follow them as far as they will take us.

For more information, visit rememberliss.org. ■

the officers, will make enquiry for Liss. I think there is no probability of your getting her again—believe you may when I am amongst your other dead losses—I am surprised that Col. Sumner would permit her to go—he certainly must have known it when they left Oyster Bay. I am
Dear Sir,
Your Obedient Son
Robt. Townsend

(Copy) New York, Jan 17th 1787.
Mr. Livingston Wash.
Gentlemen,
We are now to request the favor of you to purchase a Woman named Deborah, sent from this place by Mr. Robertson, and sold by Messrs. & Willard, the 2. of Feb^y 1785. to Capt. Rich^d Palmes of your place, and sent her to us as if lost goods of justice. If you are not acquainted with Capt. Palmes you can be informed of them by applying to Mr. Sumner, of your place, who has a bond for the amount of what the Woman sold for. This Woman was brought up in our fathers family and sold for no material fault but that of being for friend of the British officers. The person she was first sold to being about to leave this state on the evacuation by the British, and she not willing to go with him, applied to our A. T. to purchase her, which he did with a child which she had while with her then master.
Mr. Sumner, since Mr. Robertson, knowing the Woman applies to purchase her, and she being willing to live with her, he sold her with the child and particularly stipulated that whenever Mr. Sumner should decline



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Battle of Long Island by
Domenick D'Andrea

Selah Strong

BY MARK STERNBERG

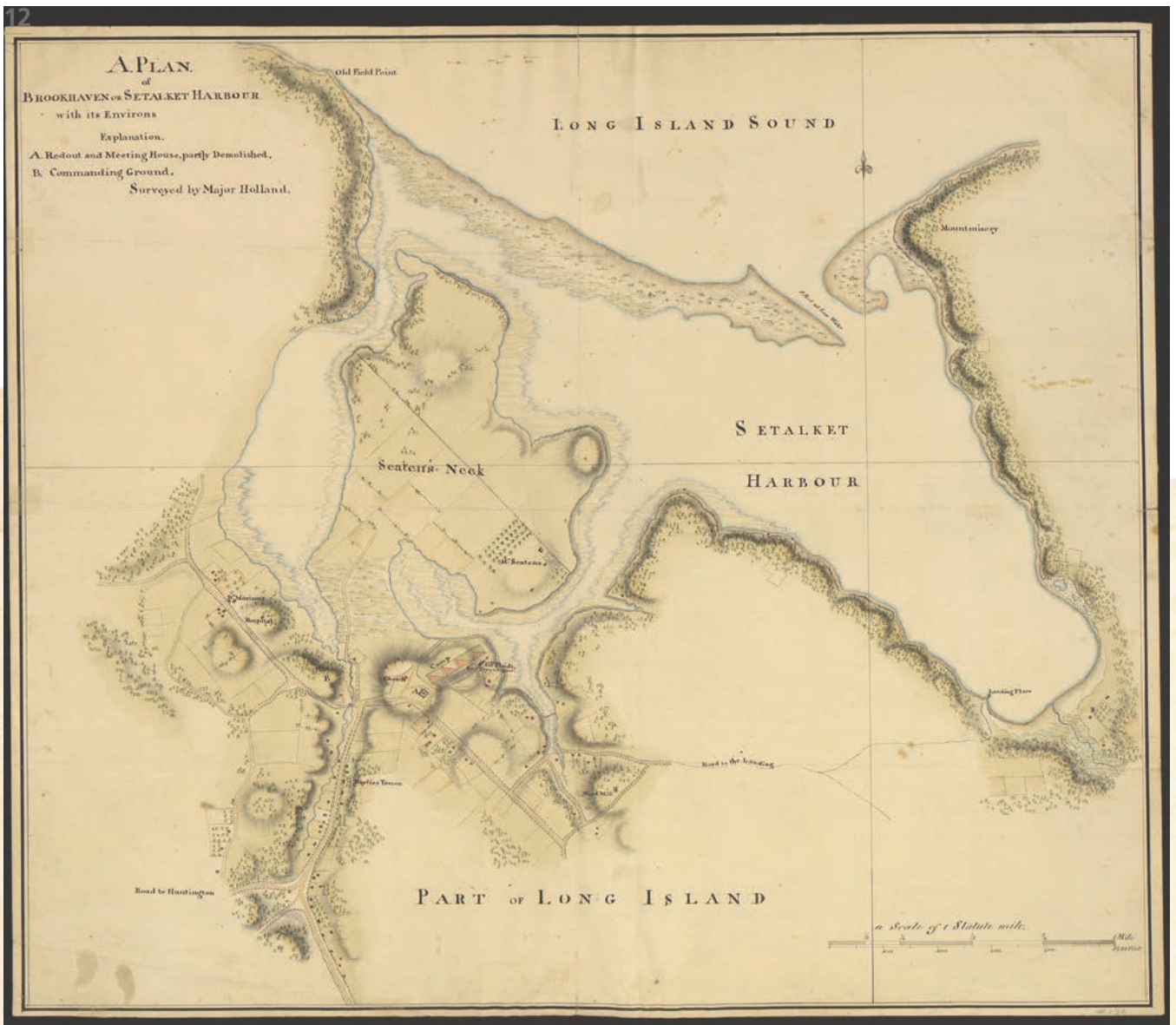
RECORDS REVEAL an OVERLOOKED HERO of the CULPER SPY RING

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

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

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

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



Map of Setauket

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

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

Treasonable Correspondence

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

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

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

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

Richard Woodhull
 Gilbert Smith
 Thomas Helme
 Isaac Overton
 Selah Strong

Justices of
 Peace

NEW YORK STATE LIBRARY

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

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

A key document from the

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

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

Political Refugees?

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

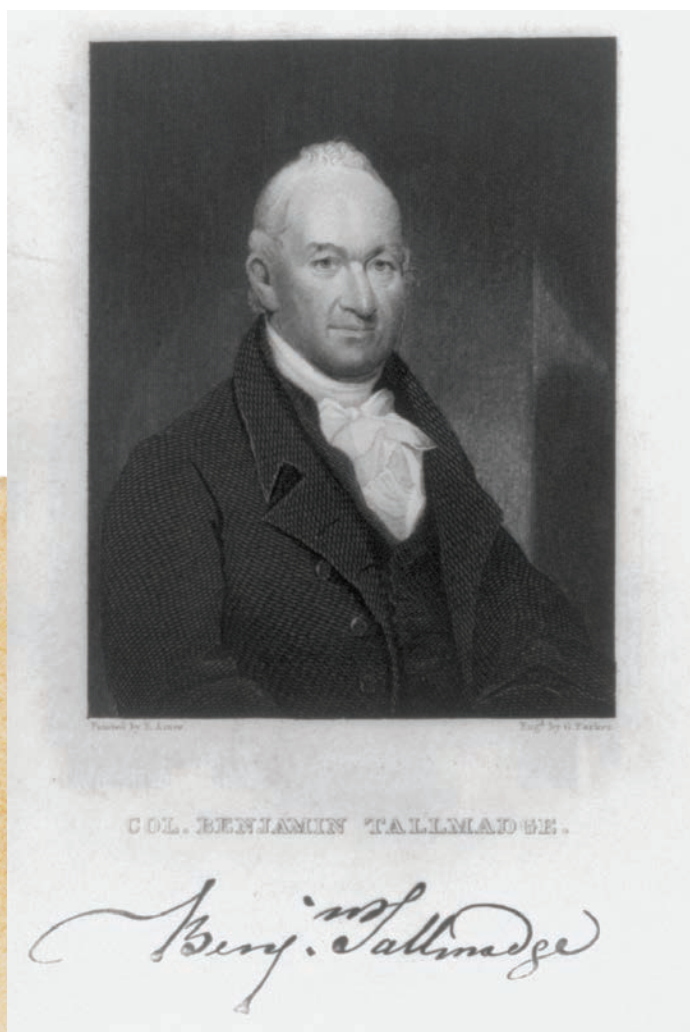
Selah Strong's election certification indicates that he was not in prison in June of 1778.

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

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

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

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



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

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

Pension Records

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

Sir

Hartford March 20th 1781 120

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE ARCHIVES
CONNECTION

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

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

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

Culper code book



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