



SPHERE

PROHUMAN FOUNDATION

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Anna Smith Strong: A Spy During the American Revolution

ADAPTED FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL BY CHRISTINA LAROSE

A Clothesline for the Revolution

Did you know that the clothesline played an important role in the American Revolution? Anna Smith Strong used her clothesline to pass along secret messages as part of George Washington's secret spy group, the Culper Spy Ring. Strong was the only female member of the Culper Spy Ring.



Life on Long Island

Before these acts of courage, Anna Smith Strong was born in New York State in 1740. She married Selah Strong III. Before the American Revolution, Selah Strong helped lead the New York government. Anna and Selah Strong had 10 children. The British thought Selah Strong was a spy and put him in prison in New York City. Anna Smith Strong helped get him released. The British didn't know that she would become a spy.

The Culper Spy Ring

What was the purpose of spies during the American Revolutionary War? In 1778, George Washington needed spies to get information about British troop strength, supplies, and movements. He asked Continental Army Major Benjamin Tallmadge to gather a group of spies. Major Tallmadge asked some trusted friends to work as spies, including Abraham Woodhull and Caleb Brewster. Major Tallmadge had grown up with Anna Smith Strong and he trusted her, so he asked for her help.

How the Spies Worked Together

Anna Smith Strong had one job in the spy ring. Her job was to give signals to her neighbor, Abraham Woodhull, about Caleb Brewster's whereabouts. Brewster was a valued go-between in the transfer of secret messages. He would row his boat across the Long Island Sound to meet Woodhull, who would give him the information. Then Brewster would row to Connecticut and pass the information to Major Tallmadge. Next, Major Tallmadge would decide which pieces of information he would send to George Washington's headquarters in Westchester County, New York.

A Dangerous Job

As a spy, a person faced serious danger. Anna Smith Strong's job was dangerous because the British already knew that Brewster was a spy. If he had been caught by the British, he could have been jailed or even killed. All members of the Culper Spy Ring could have been jailed or killed as well. Strong and the members of the spy ring had great courage. They risked their lives to fight for American independence.

Secret Messages

One question is: How can a spy like Anna Smith Strong send messages without being caught? Since Strong's house was in Setauket, a small town on the north side of Long Island, it was easy for her to look from her backyard and see boats in the Long Island

Sound. Strong's job was to send signals to Woodhull to let him know that Brewster had arrived in the Sound. Strong had a special way of sending messages. She would hang a black petticoat on her clothesline to let Woodhull know that a message was ready to pick up.

Another way Strong would make sure to send secret messages was to hang a certain number of handkerchiefs on the clothesline. Because there were six coves along Long Island's shore, Strong would hang handkerchiefs to tell Woodhull where he should meet Brewster, who hid his boat in the coves. One handkerchief meant that he was in the first cove, two meant that he was in the second, and so on. By counting the number of handkerchiefs on the line, Woodhull knew which cove Brewster was in.

Anna's Courage

Townpeople did not suspect that a woman doing ordinary household chores was part of a spy ring. They thought that Strong was just hanging her laundry out to dry on her clothesline. But Strong was doing something much more. She was bravely using her secret messaging system to help send messages from Brewster to Woodhull, then to Major Tallmadge, and finally to George Washington. Along with Strong's clothesline signals, the spy ring members used coded messages published in newspapers and invisible ink in letters.

The Legacy of the Culper Spy Ring

The spy ring was very successful and achieved more than any other intelligence network during the war. In 1780, it uncovered British plans to ambush the newly arrived French Army in Rhode Island. It also uncovered information involving the secret negotiations between Benedict Arnold and the British to surrender the American fort at West Point, New York, in return for money and a command in the British Army.

It is interesting and significant to note that the secret messaging system Strong and the rest of the Culper Spy Ring used was never broken, and no one in the ring was ever caught. Even General Washington did not know the identities of all his spies. The Culper Spy Ring was not known to the public until 1929, when the members' letters were discovered.

Strong made a big difference by being courageous. Her bravery, along with all the spy ring members, played a key role in helping the Americans win the Revolutionary War. In 1790, President George Washington visited Anna Strong and the Culper spies. As one defeated British intelligence officer is often quoted as saying, "Washington did not really outfight the British. He simply out-spied us."

Sources Consulted:

- <https://www.womenshistory.org/articles/revolutionary-spies>
- <https://www.lowellmilkcenter.org/programs/projects/view/anna-smith-strong/hero>
- <https://honoringourpatriots.dar.org/patriots/anna-smith-strong/>
- <https://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2011/07/anna-smith-strong.html>
- <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/george-washington-spy-master>
- [https://kids.kiddle.co/Anna_Strong_\(spy\)](https://kids.kiddle.co/Anna_Strong_(spy))