INTEL.gov

## EVOLUTION OF ESPIONAGE IN AMERICA

Revolutionary War

THE CULPER SPY RING
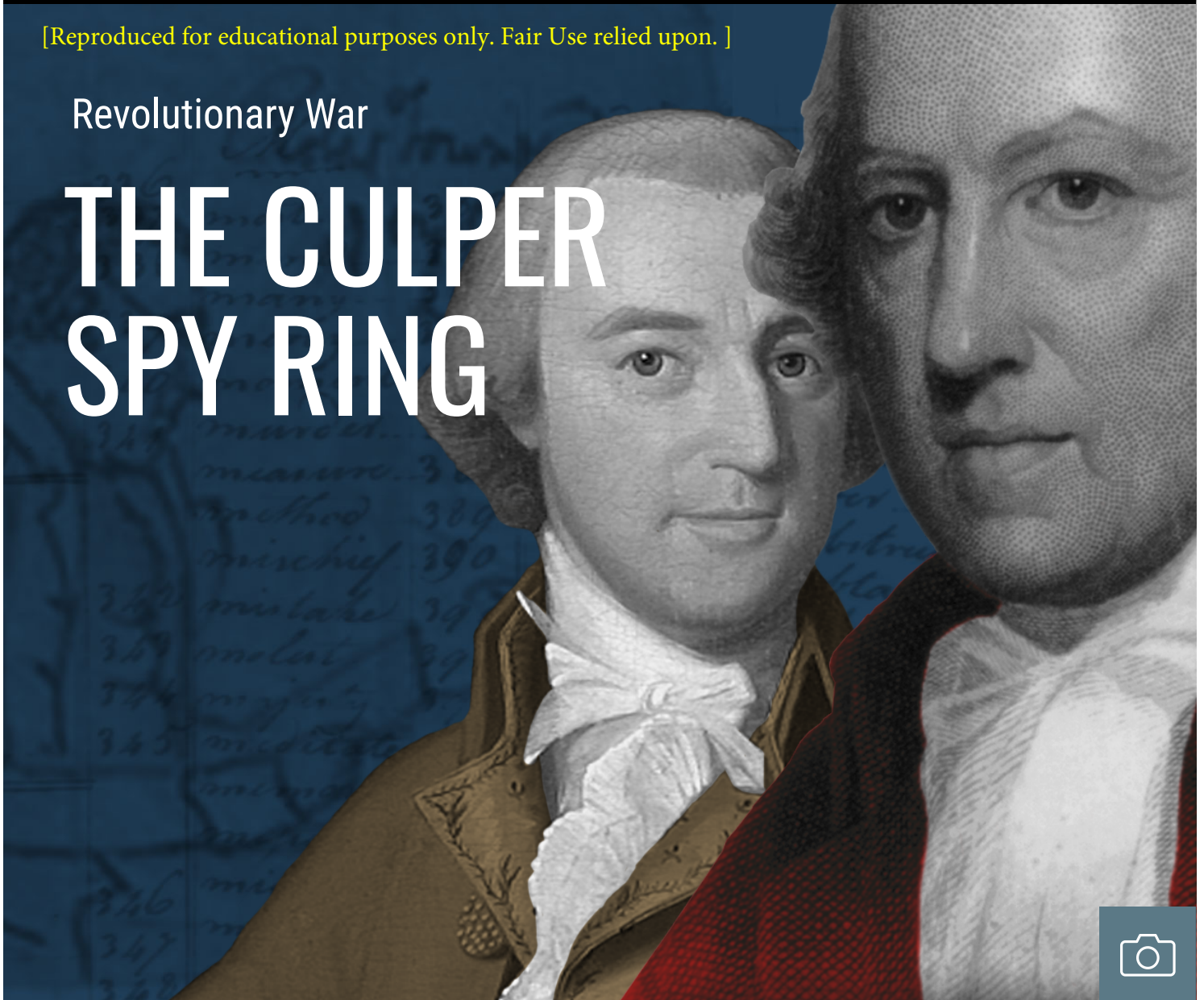
In October 1778, with the Continental Army encamped outside British-occupied New York City, George Washington and Benjamin Tallmadge masterminded what would become the most successful and enduring espionage network of the war. It was named the Culper Ring, an adaptation of Culpeper, the small Virginia community where George Washington had worked as a surveyor in his youth. Though Washington had a limited budget for espionage, he devoted nearly one-quarter of it to the Ring.

Collecting intelligence on British forces in New York City and Long Island, the Culper spies provided Washington with a wealth of secrets about British plans, unit strengths, and defenses. The discoveries aided Washington's efforts to keep the Continental Army intact and bottle up large numbers of British soldiers in New York.
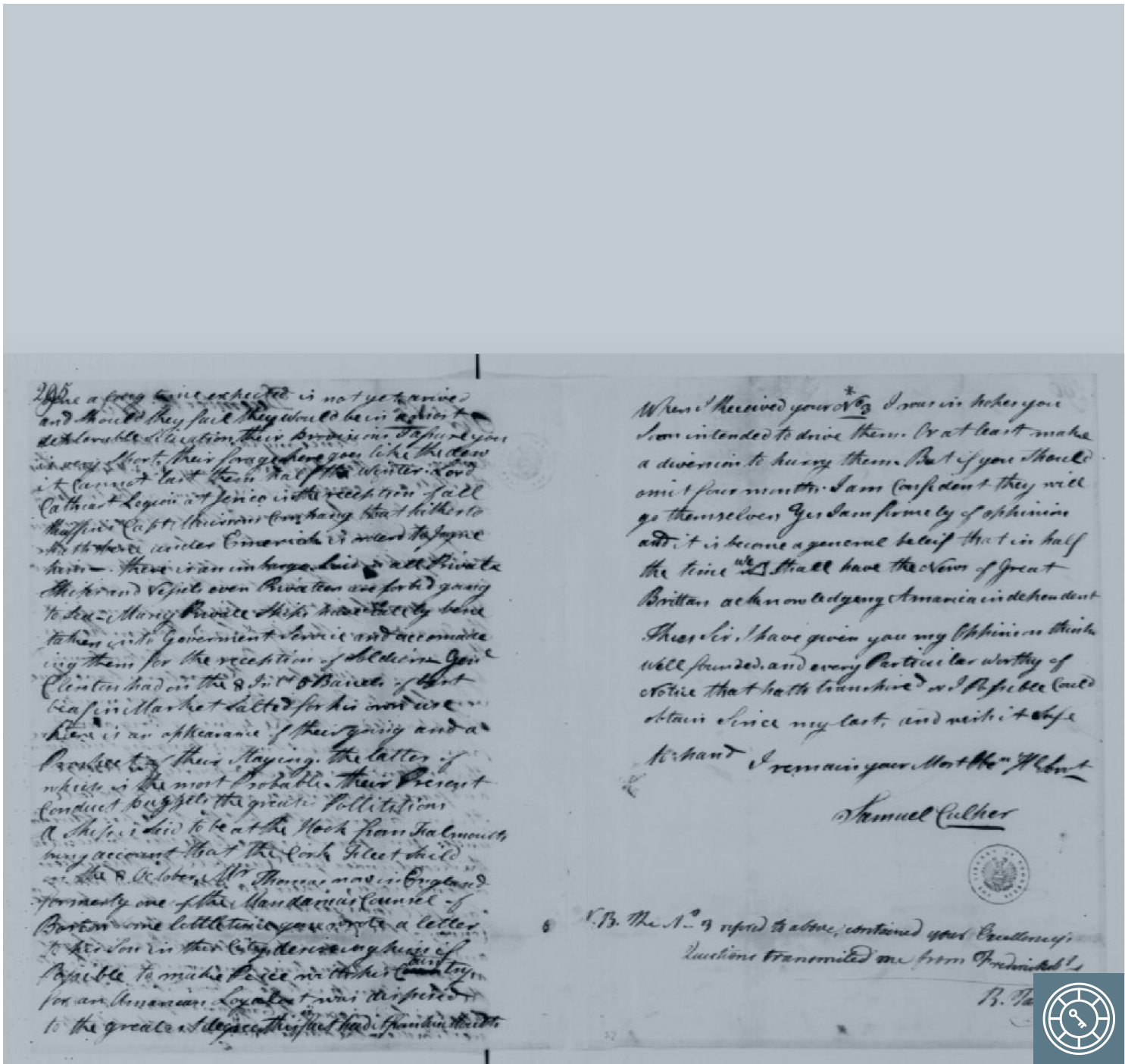
Letter between Culper Ring members, 1778

Members of the Ring were subjected to intense British scrutiny, and though several were arrested during the course of the war, not a single member was ever unmasked. Existence of the spy ring was virtually unknown to the public until the discovery of revealing correspondence in 1929.

Washington's Premier Spies

Among the Culper Ring's espionage successes was its foiling of a British counterfeiting operation to weaken the young republic by devaluing Continental notes. The British had even stolen reams of the paper used in the printing process, adding to the perceived authenticity of the counterfeit dollars.

Ring members also alerted Washington about British plans in the summer of 1780 to ambush 6,000 French soldiers arriving in Rhode Island to aid the Americans. The British had been tipped off about the French landing by their own spy, Benedict Arnold. After informing French allies of the impending attack, Washington ordered his operatives to spread disinformation that he was preparing to raid New York. The British took the bait, choosing to defend the city rather than attack the arriving French forces. This would not be the last time Washington used deception to hobble his adversaries; he later convinced the British of an impending attack on New York City, thus preventing British forces there from reinforcing the garrison in Yorktown, Virginia.

In perhaps its crowning achievement, the Ring obtained a copy of the British naval codes in 1781, providing the French Navy with a profound advantage against the British fleet during the Battle of the Chesapeake that year. The French sea victory was instrumental to Washington's siege of the British Army at Yorktown, hastening an end to the war.

Culper Ring Members

The Ring consisted of core agents with numerous others operating as sub-agents, couriers, and support personnel. Ring members had much in common. They were New Yorkers – mostly from Long Island – and knew each other as friends, neighbors, or family. Most had suffered cruelties at

the hands of the British. All feigned

loyalty to the Crown.

MAJOR   ROBERT TOWNSENDSARAH "SALLY" TOWNSEND
BENJAMIN TALLMADGE

ABRAHAM WOODHULL   CALEB BREWSTER

JAMES RIVINGTON   ANNA STRONG   AUSTIN ROE

Route used by Culper Ring members to send intelligence from New York City to General Washington's headquarters in downstate New York and New Jersey. The same route was used by Washington to convey intelligence requirements to Ring members with access to British officers and military information on Long Island and in Manhattan.
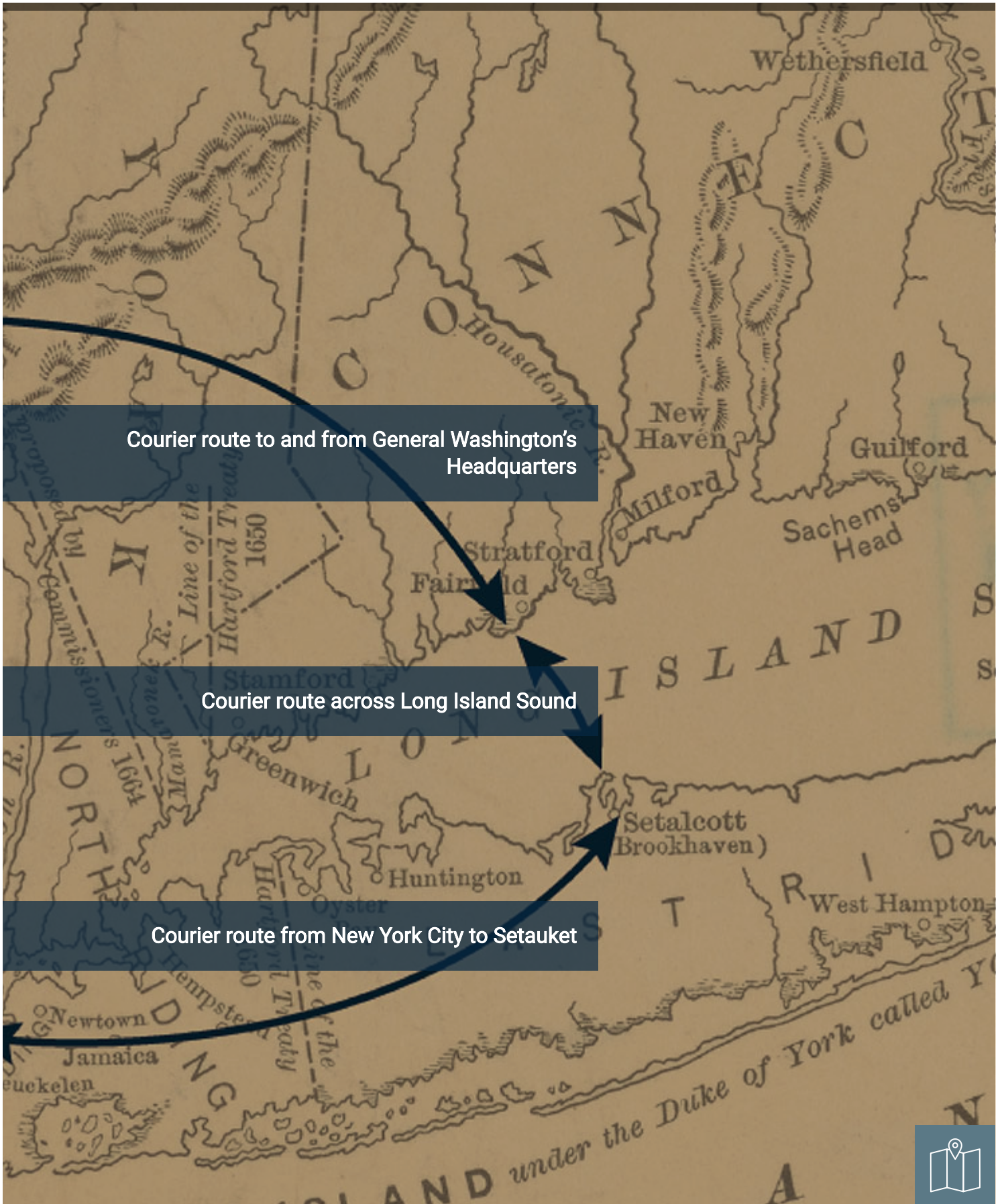
Courier route to and from General Washington's Headquarters

Courier route across Long Island Sound

Courier route from New York City to Setauket

Code Names, Ciphers, and Secret Inks

To preclude the British from decoding intercepted messages from the Ring, a number code dictionary was employed, substituting numbers for people, places, and things. This shielded the sensitive components of each message, provided the writer did not reveal important context in the unencoded portions.

The Culper Ring also had access to limited amounts of invisible ink developed by James Jay, a chemist and brother of John Jay. The ink – a unique creation that required a separate chemical reagent to reveal concealed text – was used in letters between the two brothers, and quantities were provided to Washington and others for use during the war.
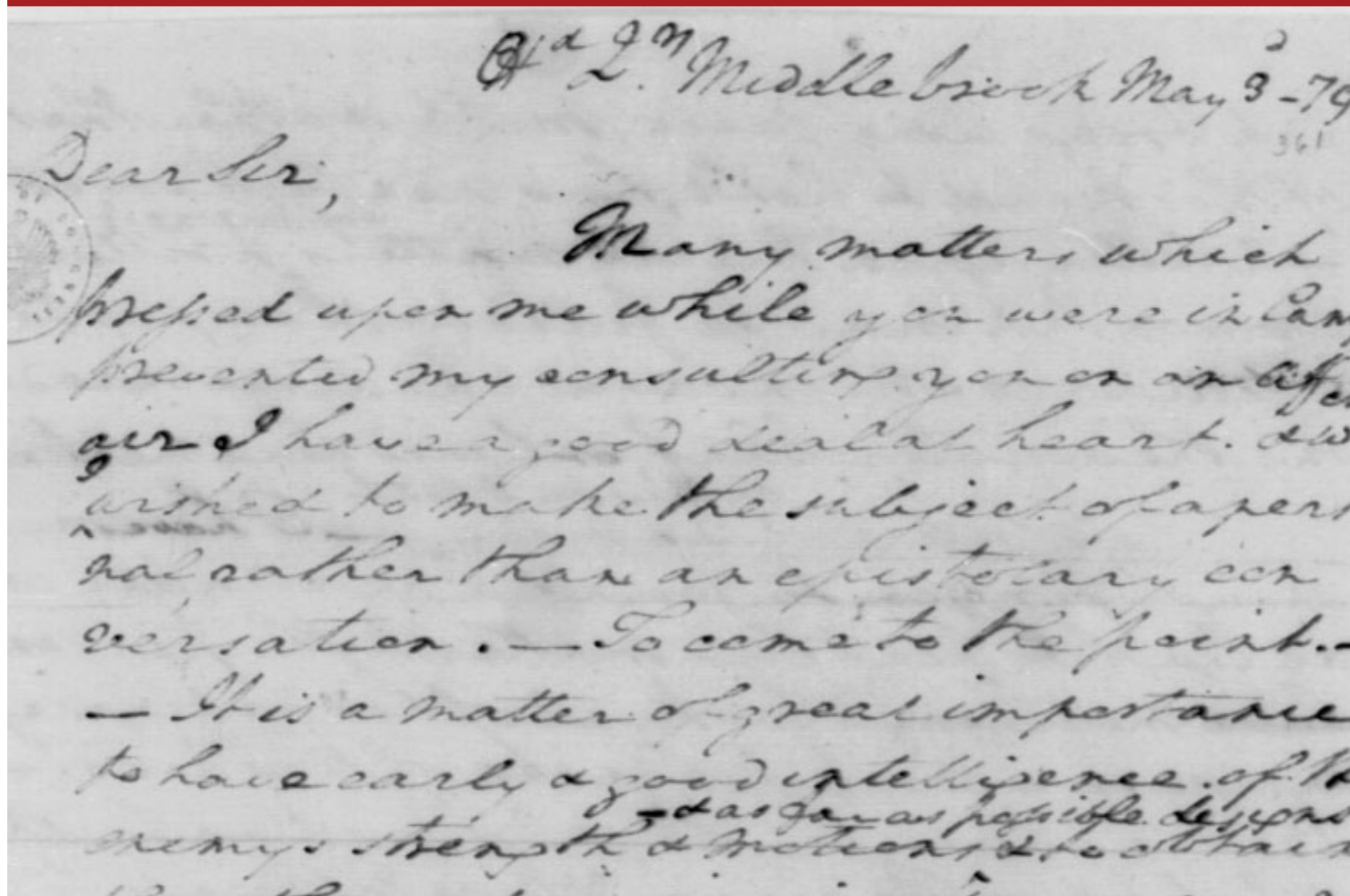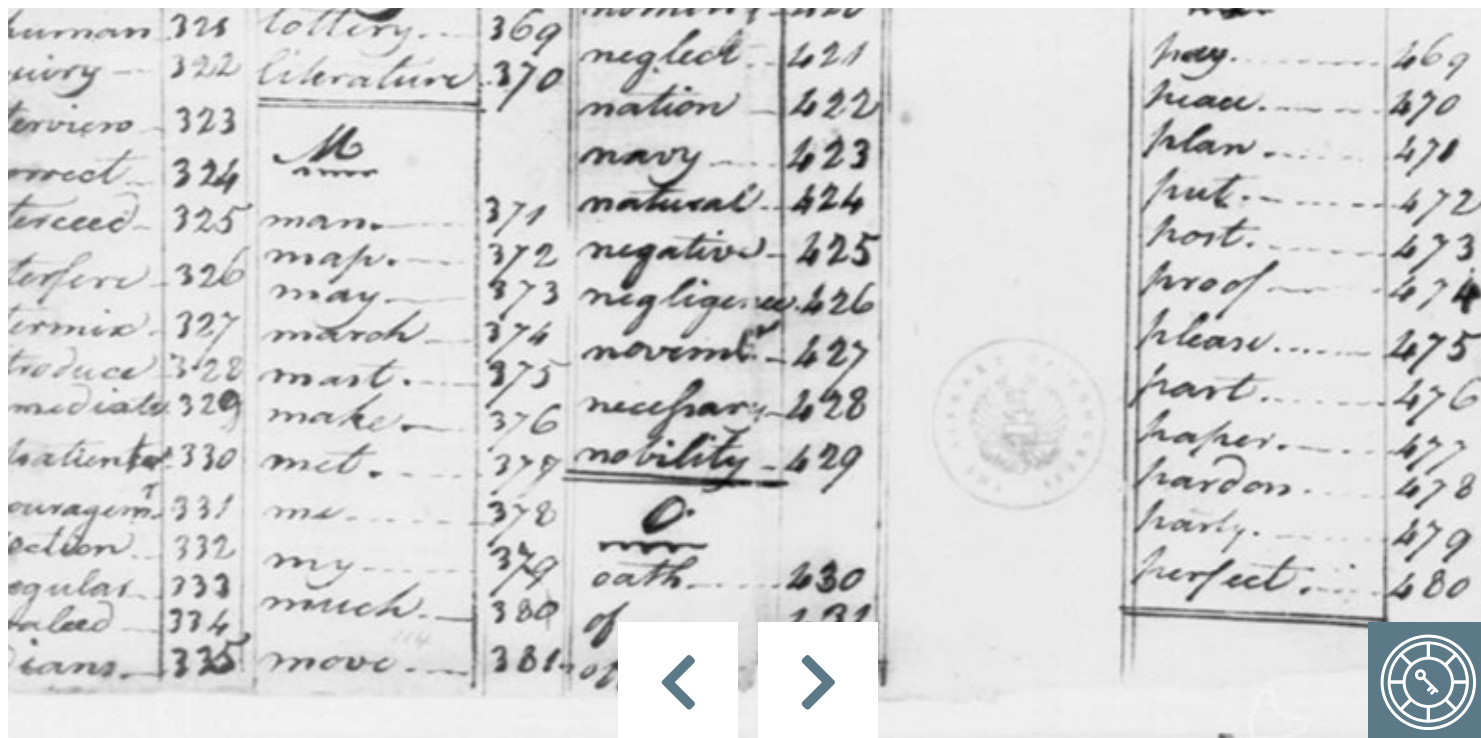
...en through different channels.— ...
you think it practicable to come at
this by means of Mr. P——d?— I shall
...r press it upon him, but you must
be sensible that to obtain intelligence
from a man of observation near the ~~head~~
head qrs. of an army ~~from whence all orders flow~~
~~and every thing originates~~, must be
a most desirable thing.— The person ren-
dering such service will entitle himself
not only to thanks but reward as a proper...

      If Mr. P——d is inclined to engage
in a business of this kind I shall leave it
to you & him to fix upon such a mode of
corresponding as will ~~convey intelligence in the~~ most speedy, ...
& ...fecations.— — To guard against poss-
ible evils, your correspondence might
be under fictitious names— by numbers
(representing Men & things)— in character
or otherways as you shall agree.— The...
is in my power, I believe, to procure a
liquid which nothing but ~~...~~ a coun-
ter liquid (rubbed over the paper
afterwards) can make legible.— Fire...

Letter from George Washington praising the attributes of invisible ink

I		J		M				O	
	280	June	336	most	382	30742		on	433
	281	July	337	mine	383			or	434
	282	Jury	338	many	384			out	435
	283	jealous	339	mercy	385			offer	436
	284	justify	340	moment	386			office	437
	285	January	341	murder	387			onset	438
m.	286			measure	388			order	439
to.	287	**K**		method	389			over	440
tance	288			mischief	390			obstruct	441
and	289	key	342	mistake	391			obtain	442
prefs	290	king	343	molest	392			observe	443
prior	291	kill	344	majesty	393			occur	444
camp	292	know	345	meditate	394			offence	445
cur	293			memory	395			omit	446
ert	294	**L**		messenger	396			oppress	447
force	295	law	346	misery	397			obligate	448
tance	296	land	347	moveable	398			obstinate	449
nars	297	love	348	multitude	399			obviate	450
truck	298	low	349	miscarry	400			occupy	451
trique	299	lot	350	misfortune	401			operate	452
trust	300	lord	351	miserable	402			origin	453
tant	301	light	352	mercenary	403			ornament	454
rest	302	art	353	majority	404			overcome	455
ite	303	learn	354	minority	405			overlook	456
norant	304	lady	355	memorial	406			overtake	457
prudent	305	letter	356	mysterious	407			overrun	458
untry	306	levy	357	manufacture	408			overthrow	459
famous	307	levies new	358	moderator	409			obedience	460
lucene	308	liar	359	ministerial	410			objection	461
antry	309	lucky	360					October	462
antry	310	language	361	**N**				obscure	463
ury	311	limit	362	name	411			occasion	464
scant	312	liquid	363	new	412			opinion	465
trument	313	longitude	364	no	413			oppression	466
timate	314	latitude	365	not	414			opportunity	467
gal	315	laudable	366	night	415			obligation	468
gin	316	legible	367	never	416				
portant	317	liberty	368	needful	417			**P**	
prison	318			number	418				
proper	319			neither	419				
umber	320								

Page 2 of the code dictionary used by Major Tallmadge and George Washington for communicating with the Culper Ring

previous
← A NEW NATION'S FIRST SPIES

next
HOME →

Learn about the exhibit that inspired the site →

WALL OF SPIES
EXPERIENCE · NCSC

Office *of the*
Director *of* National Intelligence

MISSION

Our Values

Intel Stories

History

PEOPLE

A Day in the Life

Barrier Breakers in History

Current Barrier Breakers

CAREERS

Career News

Explore Careers

Students

Veterans

INTEL VAULT

Intel Vault - All

THE PUBLIC'S DAILY BRIEF

President's Daily Brief

Public's Daily Brief Articles

The NIS @ a Glance

HOW THE IC WORKS

Our Organizations

Oversight

Myth vs Fact Quiz

Website Policies

No FEAR Act

FOIA

Contact the IC IG

USA.gov

Style Guide