

Women as Spies in the Revolutionary War

When people think of these early American spies, many think of the work of Nathan Hale, but few people know that women were also working to destroy British occupiers from the inside out. These are some of the most prominent female spies of the American revolution:

Agent 355 was a prominent member of the Culper Spy Ring. There were several Patriot spy rings that worked to overthrow British occupation during the Revolutionary War, but very few of these secret groups had women who actively took part in the espionage. The Culper Spy Ring, however, is known mainly for a very unusual agent, a spy known then and now only as 355 — the group's code number for the word "woman." The mystery woman's identity was kept secret to protect herself and likely her family, but her daring contributions to the American cause have been remembered in history. She took part in several counterintelligence missions, including spy operations that resulted in the arrest of major John Andrew — the head of England's intelligence operations in New York — and the discovery of Benedict Arnold's treason.

Anna Smith Strong used her laundry as a coded Patriot communication system. She worked alongside 355 and her male compatriots in Long Island, and was known for her fierce patriotism and fearlessness. Strong's sleuthing wasn't quite as flashy as Agent 355's, but the communication system she developed for the saboteurs was incredibly influential.

Ann Bates posed as a peddler to glean military information — for the British. The contributions of female spies to the American Revolution

is incredibly impressive, but the Patriots weren't the only ones with ladies working undercover. The British forces had women working for them as well, and Anna Bates was one of the best. Bates was a Loyalist schoolteacher in Philadelphia who began spying for the Red Coats in 1778, posing as a peddler and selling knives, needles, and other dry goods to the American military. ADVERTISING While she sold her wares to the rebel forces, she also took note of how many weapons and soldiers each camp held, and would pass this information along to loyalist sympathizers and British officers. Luckily, though Bates's work was helpful to the British military, it wasn't enough to derail the coming success of the American Revolution.

Lydia Darragh, patriot housewife, risked the lives of her sons for the American cause While many spies were part of complex underground networks, some worked alone. When British officers began using a large room on the second story of the Darragh's home for military meetings, Darragh was quick to capitalize on the opportunity to gain information. Before the officers would file into the room, Darragh would hide inside an adjoining closet and press her ear to the wall, taking notes on the clueless officers' battle plans. She would then have her husband, William, translate her work into a coded shorthand on little pieces of fabric or paper. She would then fold the slip to fit over the top of a button mold, cover the mold with fabric, and then sew the message-filled buttons on to the shirt of her teenage son, John. Darragh would then send John on "visits" to his older brother Lt. Charles Darragh's house, who would then take the buttons and present the stolen information to other rebel military leaders. It was an incredibly risky endeavor, but Darragh was willing to risk her own safety — and the safety of her family — for the American cause.

Black women acting as formal intelligence agents or spies are extremely rare, as most enslaved and free African American women went unrecorded. However, historical overviews and local accounts indicate that Black women inside domestic settings, as well as camp followers, used their routine presence to gather and pass vital intelligence to Patriot forces.

Invisible Presence: Both armies frequently dismissed enslaved or working-class Black women as incapable or irrelevant, allowing them to overhear British plans, troop movements, and supply strategies while working as cooks, maids, or laundresses in camps and households.

Enslaved Networks: Enslaved individuals (both men and women) frequently acted as couriers, informants, and guides, often leveraging the chaos of war and the promise of freedom to relay enemy positions to Patriot commander