History Boredom Busters!
Spy Messages
Invisible Ink & Codes

Historical Context

During the Revolutionary War, both British and American militaries used secret intelligence to try and win the war. Spies sent information through letters that contained secret messages. They used secret messages in case the letter was read by someone else. Two common strategies were to use ciphers, or codes, and invisible inks to hide the important information in the letter. Using codes and/or invisible ink, people could send written messages and even maps or drawings.

British and American spies used secret codes and ciphers. A cipher is a system of using letters, symbols, or numbers in the place of letters or words. In order to decode a cipher, the reader of the letter must have a key to know what the coded letters, symbols, or words really mean. Some spies made up their own pocket dictionary to encode their messages. Each word had a corresponding number. Others spies assigned each letter in the alphabet a corresponding number.

One form of secret writing used by both the British and American armies was invisible ink. Invisible ink, at the time of the Revolutionary War, usually consisted of a mixture of ferrous sulfate and water. The secret writing was placed between the lines of the seemingly ordinary letter. In order to read the secret message, the letter had to be held over a candle flame for the heat to reveal the invisible ink or the paper was treated with a chemical such as sodium carbonate.

Source: Spy Letters of the American Revolution from the Collections of the Clements Library

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Virginia Spy - James Lafayette (1748-1830)

Born into slavery in New Kent County, James Lafayette spied for the American colonists as a double agent during the Revolutionary War. During the war, James worked with the Marquis de Lafayette, a famous French general and American ally. Lafayette helped James acquire freedom from slavery after the war. Once he was free, James took Lafayette's last name for his own. For more information, read the children's book *A Spy Called James: The True Story of James Lafayette, Revolutionary War Double Agent* by Anne Rockwell.
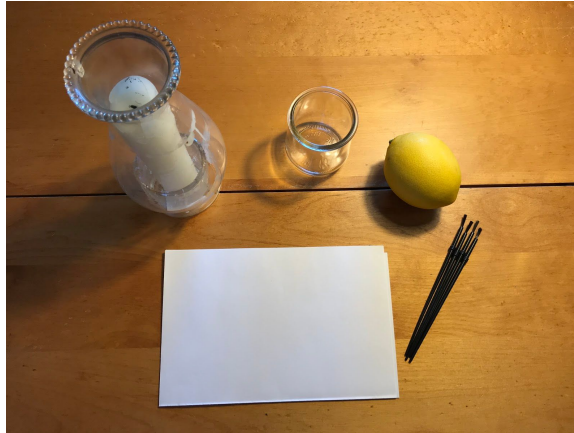

Bonus Activity - Do a Google search for Revolutionary War spies to learn more about this topic!
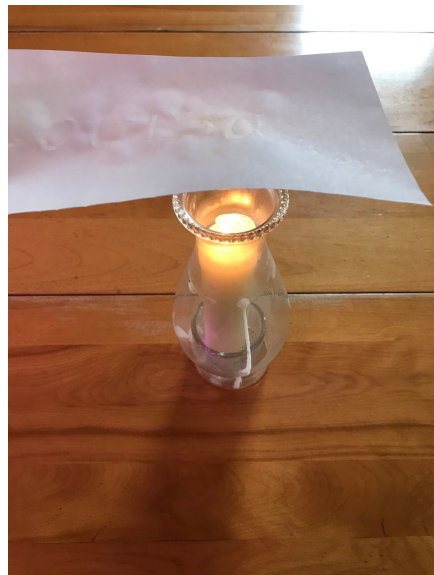
Activity : Invisible Ink

Supplies
- Paper
- Pencils
- Lemon juice in a small cup/bowl
- Paint brushes or cotton swabs
- Candle and matches/lighter* (Optional - glass hurricane)

*Adult supervision required!

Instructions
1. Using the paint brush or cotton swab, write a message in lemon juice on a piece of paper. The lemon juice has to dry completely. Move on to the secret code activity while it dries.
2. Have an adult light the candle and hold the paper close to the flame. Don't hold the paper too close and make sure to keep slowly moving the paper so it does not catch fire!
3. The heat from the candle flame should reveal your secret message!

Activity : Secret Codes

Supplies
- Paper
- Pencils
- Secret Code Template

Instructions

1. Print out the secret code template (below).
2. Create your own key: Next to each letter of the alphabet, write a unique number or letter or draw a symbol.
3. Write your secret message: Using the key, write a message with the letter, numbers, and/or symbols you used in your alphabet key.
4. Give the secret message and the key to someone so they can translate it.

MY SECRET SPY CODE - KEY

A	N
B	O
C	P
D	Q
E	R
F	S
G	T
H	U
I	V
J	W
K	X
L	Y
M	Z