

In Defense of John Honeyman (and George Washington)

Kenneth A. Daigler, aka P.K. Rose

In the June 2008 issue of *Studies in Intelligence* Alexander Rose, author of *General Washington's Spies*, made the case that John Honeyman—widely held to be a key agent of George Washington in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1776—was “no spy.”¹ From a purely academic perspective, I can understand his thinking, but I do not believe he has made his case. Since neither of us can produce documentation to support—or conclusively refute—the story written by Honeyman’s grandson nearly 100 years after the events of Trenton, we must both rely on indirect evidence and understanding of George Washington’s conduct of intelligence late in 1776.

Mr. Rose recognized my perspective as author of a monograph on Washington and his role in intelligence by noting, “Intelligence historians, perhaps paradoxically, tend to give more credence to Honeyman’s achievements.” He mentions the work of George O’Toole, a former CIA analyst, and me, a retired CIA case officer, as examples. While Mr. Rose has raised interesting questions, my career experiences and research in the field of early American intelligence history have convinced me that even in the case of Revolutionary War spies, Honeyman included, seldom will the public, including academic researchers, find documentation regarding successful intelligence activities. Obviously, a key aspect of conducting intelligence activities is to keep them secret. All intelligence professionals know only too well that the failures become public while the successes remain secret. Thus, if Honeyman provided intelligence of value regarding the Hessian positions and activities around Trenton, his mission would have been a success and his involvement worth keeping from the public.

Guarded treatment of such information would have been Washington’s approach. We know Washington was very security conscious, and formal records identifying “sources and methods” information were not routinely kept, particularly during this phase of the war, when Washington was being chased about the middle colonies by the British. Researchers studying Washington’s official records and those of other

¹ Alexander Rose, “The Strange Case of John Honeyman and Revolutionary War Espionage” in *Studies* 52, no. 2 <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol52no2/the-spy-who-never-was.html>. Rose’s book (published, 2000) focuses on details of the Culper Ring and mentions other intelligence related activities during the Revolutionary War. P.K. Rose is the pen name I used in my pamphlet about George Washington’s intelligence activity published for CIA, *The Founding Father of American Intelligence*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/the-founding-fathers-of-american-intelligence/art-1.html>

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army commanders and the Continental Congress find few specifics of intelligence activities other than scouting and reconnaissance at this time.

I believe the real weaknesses behind Mr. Rose's argument are his beliefs that Washington was not capable in December 1776 of conducting an intelligence operation like the Honeyman operation and that Washington would undertake an attack on Trenton without intelligence of the enemy's situation. On the first point, it appears that Mr. Rose does not believe it was possible to run an agent like Honeyman behind enemy lines without a developed network and "case officers," which Washington would not have until later. While it is true that running agent networks requires more organizational skills and resources than those required to handle a singleton agent—and I agree with Mr. Rose that at this point in the war such capabilities were not as developed as they would be by the time of the Culper Ring in New York City—Honeyman was a singleton agent, and given the time that he served Washington, about two months, he need not have been part of a network to serve successfully.

Secondly, by November 1776, Washington had already demonstrated skill as a manager of assets like Honeyman. He had already implemented singleton collection activities against the British in several areas and had carried out intelligence tasks like Honeyman's some 20 years earlier, both personally through observation and elicitation and with "agents" sent behind enemy lines. Washington's first experience in intelligence collection related to French activities before the start of the French and Indian War. In 1753, while delivering official correspondence to the French in the Ohio Valley and awaiting a reply, he obtained, through observation and elicitation, details of French plans and intentions in the area. His use of Indian "agents" to collect intelligence on French facilities, capabilities, and plans and intentions during this period is well documented in his diary. For example, his entry of 21 June 1754 discusses dispatch of agents not only to collect intelligence but also to try to stimulate a mass desertion by French troops.²

During the French and Indian War, Washington continued to collect tactical intelligence from Indian allies and French deserters regarding French movements and fortifications. Arguably the most influential intelligence teaching point in Washington's early military career related to an intelligence failure at the battle of Fort Duquesne, where he served under British General Edward Braddock. Braddock failed to collect adequate intelligence on the French and Indian forces in the area, was ambushed, and his forces mauled. Washington is given credit for reorganizing the troops after Braddock was wounded and saving the force from disaster. His experiences during this period led to his well known quote: "There is nothing more necessary than good intelligence to frustrate a designing enemy, and nothing that requires greater pains to obtain."³

The documentary record suggests that Washington applied the lessons of these experiences as the commander of the colonial army. Less than two weeks after taking command he recorded his first payment for intelligence collection. On 15 July

² John C. Fitzpatrick, A.M. (ed.), *The Diaries of George Washington 1748-1799*, Vol. I (Cranbury, NJ: The Scholar's Bookshelf, 2005), 54–55 and 97–101.

³ Washington to Robert Hunter Morris, 5 January 1766 in *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. I. (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1931–44), 268.

1775 he provided \$333 to an unidentified officer to go to Boston to establish secret correspondence for the purpose of providing intelligence on British movements and intentions. In a note to this entry Washington stated, “The Names of Persons who are employed within the Enemy’s Lines or who may fall within their power cannot be inserted”—and thus he established the pattern of generally not revealing the identity of his sources.⁴ By April 1776 he had expended \$5,232 on intelligence. This same determination to collect on the British was evident around Trenton. Mr. Rose cites one letter, of 14 December 1776, demonstrating Washington’s interest in acquiring intelligence on British plans and locations, but there was a greater effort. Col. Joseph Reed, Washington’s adjutant, was also active collecting information on the military situation in New Jersey.⁵ All of this hardly suggests, as Mr. Rose implies, that Washington depended on luck to take Trenton.

What of the story’s origins? Mr. Rose theorizes that “Aunt Jane,” the sole source of the Honeyman story, was inspired by James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Spy* and its hero, Harvey Birch. While this is possible, at the time of the novel’s publication, the speculation, widely publicized and debated, was that the Birch character was based on Enoch Crosby, a counterintelligence agent working for John Jay’s New York State Committee for Detecting Conspiracies in the “neutral ground.” Aunt Jane could have believed anything she wanted, but the novel’s plot and Birch’s activities bear only faint resemblance to the collection activities described in the Honeyman story.

Finally, one small, to me personal, point: Mr. Rose opined that Nathaniel Sackett, another one of Jay’s counterintelligence agents, who ran collection agents in New York City, deserved to be designated as the “founding father” of intelligence collection. Here, I must strongly disagree. Sackett was not the first individual to run an agent collection network against the British—the leaders of the “Mechanics” in Boston during 1774–75 clearly hold this distinction.⁶ Sackett certainly was not as experienced or as skilled a “case officer” or intelligence manager as Benjamin Tallmadge, the officer in charge of the Culper Ring, who also played a vital if serendipitous role in the capture of Major André, Benedict Arnold’s British contact.

As the individual in charge of creating new liaison meeting facilities at CIA Headquarters, I had to name the suites. I took this responsibility seriously and believed that in the Agency’s dealings with older intelligence services it was important to demonstrate that even as a relatively “young” nation we had a solid history of intelligence activities. *The Founding Father of American Intelligence* was written with this in mind. My selection of George Washington as the Founding Father of intelligence collection was based upon his creation of an American intelligence collection capability that he managed and directed throughout the war. I believed then, and still do today, that no officer of the period had the breadth of experience in intelligence operations that George Washington did.



⁴ Marvin Kitman, *George Washington’s Expense Account* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 119.

⁵ David Hackett Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 201.

⁶ Office of the National Counterintelligence Executive, *A Counterintelligence Reader: American Revolution into The New Millennium*, Vol. I, 2–3.