

# The Spy Who Never Was

## The Strange Case of John Honeyman and Revolutionary War Espionage

John Honeyman is famed as the secret agent who saved George Washington and the Continental Army during the dismal winter of 1776/77. At a time when Washington had suffered an agonizing succession of defeats at the hands of the British, it was Honeyman who brought the beleaguered commander precise details of the Hessian enemy's dispositions at Trenton, New Jersey.

Soon afterwards, acting his part as double agent, Honeyman informed the gullible Col. Johann Rall, the Hessian commander, that the colonials were in no shape to attack. Washington's men, he said, were suffering dreadfully from the cold and many were unshod. That biting cold

Christmas, nevertheless, Washington enterprisingly crossed the Delaware and smashed the unprepared (and allegedly drunk) Hessians. Three days into the new year, he struck again, at Princeton, inflicting a stunning defeat upon the redcoats. Though Washington would in the future face terrible challenges, never again would the Continental Army come so close to dissolution and neither would dissension so gravely threaten the Revolution's survival.

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The problem is, John Honeyman was no spy—or at least, not one of Washington's. In this essay I will establish that the key parts of the story

were invented or plagiarized long after the Revolution and, through repetition, have become accepted truth. I examine our knowledge of the tale, assess the veracity of its components, and trace its DNA to the single story—a piece of family history published nearly 100 years after the battle.<sup>1</sup> These historical explorations additionally will remind modern intelligence officers and analysts that the undeclared motives of human sources may be as important as their declared ones—particularly when, as readers will see here, a single source is the only witness.

## Origins and Evolution

The Honeyman story has a substantial pedigree in published histories. First publicly appearing in 1873 in a New Jersey journal, the tale has since 1898 been a mainstay in Revolutionary War histories. In that year, William Stryker, president of the New Jersey Historical Society, published the authoritative *Battles of Trenton and Princeton*, in which he announced that it was *already* “a well-established tradition that the most reliable account of Colonel Rall’s post at Trenton was given by Washington’s spy, John Honeyman.”<sup>2</sup> Soon afterwards, Sir George Otto Trevelyan’s *The American Revolution* chimed in that the “conversation on a winter night between Washington and John Honeyman settled the fate of Colonel Rall and the brigade which he commanded.”<sup>3</sup> A generation later, in the 1920s, Rupert Hughes’s inspirational biography *George Washington* declared that “a splendid monument glorifies Nathan Hale and his name is a household word in America, though he failed in his short mission; but for John Honeyman, who made the first great victory possible, there is oblivion.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1948, Alfred Bill’s *The Campaign of Princeton* helped rescue Honeyman from that awful fate by declaring him “one of the ablest of Washington’s spies.”<sup>5</sup> Even so, Hale retained his crown, while Honeyman’s fame remained confined to Revolutionary War buffs.

That changed in 1957, when Leonard Falkner, a features editor at the *New York World-Telegram & Sun*, published “A Spy for Washington” in the popular history magazine *American Heritage*.<sup>6</sup> The piece brought widespread attention to Honeyman’s exploits and cemented his reputation as Washington’s ace of spies in Americans’ minds. Two years later, John Bakeless, a former intelligence officer and author of *Turncoats, Traitors and*

*Heroes: Espionage in the American Revolution*, portrayed Honeyman in the most glowing terms.<sup>7</sup>

In March 1961, as part of NBC's *Sunday Showcase* drama series, Honeyman's adventure was celebrated before a national audience. Titled "The Secret Rebel," the special tantalized viewers with the advertising line, "It was tar and feathers for the 'traitor' who claimed to know George Washington!"<sup>8</sup> A decade later, Richard Ketchum's bestselling history of the Trenton and Princeton campaign, *The Winter Soldiers* (1972), again paid lavish tribute to Honeyman.<sup>9</sup>

As recently as 2000, Thomas Fleming, a Fellow of the Society of American Historians and an extraordinarily prolific narrative historian, reasserted Honeyman's essential contribution to Washington's Trenton victory. Until that battle, "New Jersey had been on the brink of surrender; now local patriots began shooting up British patrols, and the rest of the country, in the words of a Briton in Virginia, 'went liberty mad again.'"<sup>10</sup> The Wikipedia entry on Honeyman reflects this view.

More recently, however, the Honeyman story has diminished in importance, at least among general historians. Perhaps owing to its broad canvas, David McCullough's *1776* omits him, while *Washington's Crossing*, David Hackett Fischer's exhaustive examination of those remarkable nine days between 25 December 1776 and 3 January 1777, hedged on the question of authenticity. "[The story] might possibly be true, but in the judgement of this historian, the legend of Honeyman is unsupported by evidence. No use of it is made here."<sup>11</sup>

Intelligence historians, perhaps paradoxically, tend to give more credence to Honeyman's achievements. George O'Toole's *Honorable Treachery: A History of U.S. Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA* repeats the traditional story.<sup>12</sup> The CIA's own useful history, *The Founding Fathers of American Intelligence*, notes that Honeyman's intelligence work "came at a critical time for the American side" and permitted "a strategic victory in political and morale terms."<sup>13</sup>

## **Deconstructing Honeyman**

The Honeyman story may be partitioned into the five fundamental components that repeatedly appear in accounts of his heroics. Linked together in a narrative, they may be defined as the “Ur-version” of Honeyman’s espionage career.

**Claim:** John Honeyman, of Scottish ancestry, was born in Armagh, Ireland, in 1729 and was a soldier in General James Wolfe’s bodyguard at the battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759, where the British victory eventually led to the creation of Canada. He helped bear the fatally wounded Wolfe from the field. Honeyman, however, was never a willing recruit and disliked being dragooned as a redcoat. Soon after Wolfe’s death, Private Honeyman was honorably discharged and made his way south. He reappears in Philadelphia in 1775. In the interim, he became a weaver, butcher, cattle-dealer, and the husband of Mary Henry. In early 1776, they and their young children move to Griggstown, New Jersey.

**Evaluation:** At the time of Honeyman’s birth, there was no record of a family of that name living in the Armagh area, making the circumstances of his birth difficult to certify. Alternatively, he may have been born in Fife, Scotland, though one genealogist has speculated that he was the son of a Captain John Honeyman, who had arrived in New York sometime before 1746 and embarked on a small expedition against Quebec that year. Honeyman the future spy was indubitably a Protestant, and almost definitely a Presbyterian. Despite the uncertainty of his birthplace, he appears to have taken the king’s shilling in Armagh and to have sailed with Wolfe to Canada in 1758.<sup>14</sup>

There is no evidence, however, that he was reluctant to join the army and, if nothing else, the faith Wolfe reposed in him indicates that he performed his duties with alacrity and enthusiasm. If his father were Captain Honeyman, the colors would have been a natural avenue for the young man. The unsubstantiated belief that Honeyman was suborned into donning a uniform is almost certainly a later embellishment intended to demonstrate that this Scotch-Irish “outsider” was secretly disaffected from his English overlords decades before the Revolution—and thus explaining his future actions on Washington’s behalf. In truth, if Honeyman were alienated from the Crown during 1775–76, it would most likely be owed to his being a Presbyterian (so antagonistic were his co-religionists toward established authority that King George III once joked that the Revolution was nothing but a “Presbyterian War.”)<sup>15</sup>

As for his wife and young family, the traditional story tends to stand up to

scrutiny. Mary Henry was from Coleraine, another Protestant part of Ireland, and records indicate that she was eight years his junior. Honeyman also had seven children, of whom at least three were born before the family moved to Griggstown (Jane—the oldest—Margaret, and John.)<sup>16</sup>

**Claim:** In early November 1776, as Washington's battered forces were retreating from New York and New Jersey into Pennsylvania, Honeyman arranged a private meeting with the general at Fort Lee, New Jersey. He had gained access by brandishing a laudatory letter of introduction from Wolfe and declaiming his attachment to the cause of independence. The meeting was a necessarily hurried one, but (in the words of the chief 19th century source) the two men decided that Honeyman "was to act the part of a spy for the American cause" while playing "the part of a Tory and quietly talk[ing] in favor of the British side of the question."<sup>17</sup>



The Honeyman story was retold in October 1941 in True comics Number 5. The full issue can be found in the digital collection of the Michigan State University library.

In other words, Honeyman was to present himself as a Loyalist

while the Americans were nearby, but once Washington had departed and the British occupied the rump of New Jersey, his mission was to collaborate with the enemy, selling the army cattle and horses and supplying its soldiers with beef and mutton. He was to operate behind enemy lines, travel alongside the army, and leave his wife and children at home. As a camp follower, Honeyman would be in an excellent position to observe British movements, dispositions, fortifications, and logistics, plus gain advance knowledge of the enemy's designs.

**Evaluation:** Washington's movements affirm that such a meeting could have taken place. The general was based at his headquarters in White Plains, New York, between 1 and 10 November and thence Peekskill between 11 and 13 November, ruling out Honeyman's recruitment in that period; upriver from Manhattan, White Plains and Peekskill were quite a trek from Griggstown. However, Washington *was* at Fort Lee, only 50 miles away) from 14 November to the 17th or 18th.<sup>18</sup> The chronology therefore fits the story. However, it might fit only because Honeyman's later popularizers checked the dates and applied them to the tale for authenticity's sake.

Also plausible, perhaps surprisingly, is that such a meeting—between a walk-in volunteer and the commander of an army—would take place. The 18th century world was a smaller and more intimate one than our own. Washington might well have set aside a few minutes for one of Wolfe's veterans and suggested that he glean what information he could and transmit it to him.

There is no record, however, of this meeting and not once is John Honeyman mentioned in Washington's voluminous correspondence and papers. Even so, it could be argued that so informal was the gathering that no record was kept, though, considering Honeyman's alleged centrality to Washington's surprise victory, his total omission, especially after the triumph, is suspicious.

More troublesome is the question of historicity: Does Honeyman's plan to remain permanently behind enemy lines in plain clothes as an agent-in-place accord with what we know of Washington's rudimentary intelligence apparatus at this time? Is this detail an anachronism that unwittingly demonstrates its own falsity?

In these years, Washington lacked any kind of "secret service," let alone the experienced "case officers" needed to run networks of operatives in

hostile territory. Hitherto, uniformed soldiers (often junior officers) had probed the enemy lines and fortifications and reported back to their units' commanders, who sometimes relayed pertinent information to Washington. Occasionally, these agents would don civilian garb and attempt to get behind the British lines—but with the intention of returning home within a day or two. A few months previously, Nathan Hale had been one of the latter, and his doom serves as a reminder of just how risky such missions were. In sum, there were no long-term agents, masquerading as sympathizers, with realistic cover stories, operating in British-held territory. It was a concept whose time had not yet come.

It would come soon—but only after Washington's appointment of Nathaniel Sackett as de facto chief of intelligence in February 1777. Sackett, a wholly forgotten figure, should justly be counted as the real founding father of American intelligence-gathering. He would last only a few months in the job, but it was he who conceived the idea of embedding agents among the British. Major John Clark was among the first of these remarkable individuals. He spent some nine months living undercover and unsuspected on Long Island, all the time making precise observations of British troop strength. It is important to realize, however, that Clark's success was almost certainly unique. Sackett's few other agents tended to last about a week, having either switched sides or suffered exposure.

Clark's achievement was actually a strike *against* adopting the agents-in-place policy. As success was so unlikely, Washington would not be convinced that replacing reconnaissance, the traditional form of spying, was worthwhile until as late as *September 1778*. In that month, he cautiously authorized one of Sackett's successors to "endeavour to get some intelligent person into the City [of New York] and others of his own choice to be messengers between you and him, for the purpose of conveying such information as he shall be able to obtain and give."<sup>19</sup>

In this light, the claim that Washington was discussing precisely such matters with an untried civilian like Honeyman two years before, in November 1776, looks distinctly weak. This impression is confirmed by Washington's correspondence of that month. At the time, Washington was more concerned about the Continental Army's lack of soldiers, food, and even shoes, stemming desertion, and keeping his militia under arms than he was with aggressively acquiring intelligence of British movements in New Jersey for a battle he was in no state to wage. Upon meeting Honeyman, a veteran of the British army, Washington would have been more likely to recruit him as a sergeant than as a spy.

**Claim:** Apparently, once Honeyman had acquired sufficient intelligence from the British, he was to “venture, as if by accident, and while avowedly looking for cattle, go beyond the enemy lines as to be captured by the Americans, but not without a desperate effort to avoid it,” in the words of the 19th century account of his espionage work.<sup>20</sup> By this stratagem, Honeyman would be able to maintain his cover as a Tory sympathizer when word of his arrest reached the British. To add verity, Washington was supposed to offer a reward for his arrest, on condition that Honeyman was captured alive and brought directly to his headquarters.

So it was that late in December 1776, having ascertained the British deployments around Trenton and “aware that the discipline [there] was very lax, and knowing too that the holidays were approaching, when a still greater indulgence would probably be permitted,” Honeyman resolved to recross the line and pass his intelligence to Washington.<sup>21</sup> Keeping to the plan that he and Washington had cooked up, Honeyman walked to the Delaware and pretended to be in search of his lost cattle. After some time, he espied two American scouts and a prolonged pursuit ensued. Honeyman was captured only when he slipped on the ice as he tried to jump a fence. Even then, he violently resisted capture, but with two pistols pointed at his head he surrendered.

Dragged directly to Washington’s tent, Honeyman continued his masquerade by theatrically trembling and casting his eyes downward in shame. Washington instructed his aides and guards to leave and held a private debriefing with Honeyman before ordering the spy to be locked in the prison until morning, when he would be hanged following a court-martial. By a remarkable coincidence, a fire erupted in the camp that night and Honeyman’s guards left to help put it out. When they returned, nothing seemed amiss, but Honeyman had made good his escape. The fire, according to this account, had been set on Washington’s orders to permit the spy to flee, and Washington himself feigned extreme anger that the “traitor” had escaped custody.<sup>22</sup>

**Evaluation:** The story of Honeyman’s escape from prison is plainly ridiculous, and the entire set-up for his capture inordinately complex. There is no record of any of it happening. Still, a lack of documentation in these situations is not uncommon and, in fact, in late 1776 and throughout 1777—menacingly dubbed the “Year of the Hangman” for the resemblance of its three sevens to gallows—hundreds of suspected Tories were rounded up (and usually hanged following a courts-martial).<sup>23</sup>

It is therefore more than possible that Honeyman fell into the hands of American scouts. But why? It could be that he looked willing to alert a British patrol that enemy troops were in the area, or that he might even have been probing the American pickets for information to sell to the British. His determined struggle to avoid capture might have been prompted not by a desire to keep intact his cover as a well-known Tory but by the fact that he *actually was* a well-known Tory. He knew the penalty for collaboration.

Once Honeyman was in Washington's camp, the general would have been most interested in quizzing him about the British positions and possible preparations for an assault. After all, at the time Washington had been warning his senior commanders to remain vigilant against a surprise attack. More proactively, he asked them on 14 December to "cast about to find out some person who can be engaged to cross the River as a spy, that we may, if possible, obtain some knowledge of the enemy's situation, movements, and intention; particular enquiry to be made by the person sent if any preparations are making to cross the River; whether any boats are building, and where; whether any are coming across land from Brunswick; whether any great collection of horses are made, and for what purpose."<sup>24</sup>

Honeyman advocates have suggested that the spy Washington intended to "cross the River" was Honeyman, but this is to misinterpret the letter.<sup>25</sup> It was not sent to *one* commander asking him to find a spy (and, in any case, if Washington and Honeyman were so chummy, why didn't the general ask for Honeyman by name?), but to at least four field officers requesting that they "cast about" among their units for someone suitable with military experience. This is exactly what he had done earlier that summer when Nathan Hale volunteered for service. Washington, in short, did not have *any* agent readily to hand, let alone the civilian Honeyman. Moreover, Washington assumes that the spy is to cross the river *from the American side*, in Pennsylvania, and sneak through the British lines to elicit intelligence and come back. Honeyman, however—as the established story specifically states—was already based on the *British* side, in New Jersey.

**Claim:** News of Honeyman's escape enraged his family's Patriot neighbors in Griggstown. "It was well known there that he had gone over to the English army, and he had already received the title of 'Tory John Honeyman,' but now, 'British spy, traitor and cutthroat,' and various other disagreeable epithets, were heard on every side," declares the primary

source account.<sup>26</sup> An indignant, howling mob surrounded his house at midnight, terrifying his wife and children. Mary eventually invited a former family friend (now the crowd's ringleader) to read out a piece of parchment she had hitherto kept safely hidden. Upon it was printed:

*To the good people of New Jersey, and all others whom it may concern,*

*It is hereby ordered that the wife and children of John Honeyman, of Griggstown, the notorious Tory, now within the British lines, and probably acting the part of a spy, shall be and hereby are protected from all harm and annoyance from every quarter, until further orders. But this furnishes no protection to Honeyman himself.*

*Geo. Washington*

*Com.-in-Chief*

Stunned by this revelation, the crowd grew silent and dispersed. His family was henceforth left alone.

**Evaluation:** This famous “letter” of Washington is the most bizarre and sensational twist in the Honeyman tale, but there is not a whit of substantiation for it. No such letter has turned up in the Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, even though the general enjoyed a most efficient secretarial staff that retained copies of all correspondence leaving his headquarters and dutifully filed that arriving. Though apparently a treasured Honeyman heirloom, it has since disappeared.

If Washington did write such a letter, it could only serve as proof of Honeyman's service if one understands the words “acting the part of a spy” to mean in the service of Washington, an interpretation only possible if one ignores the letter's pointed exclusion of the “notorious Tory” Honeyman from the general's “protection.” Indeed, since the letter was evidently written some time before, it only lends weight to the suspicion that Honeyman had long been known as a pro-British activist.

It has been traditionally assumed that the letter's magnanimity toward Mrs. Honeyman and her children verifies the Honeyman-as-spy story. But the seeming contradiction between its generosity toward the family and the exclusion of Honeyman from protection was not uncommon either in the day or for George Washington. Benedict Arnold's treachery was, for

instance, of the darkest dye, and yet Washington allowed his wife and children to join the disgraced general in New York, even as he set in motion secret plans to kidnap Arnold and bring him back for execution.

Likewise, Washington took a surprisingly benign view of James Rivington, America's first yellow newspaperman and, as proprietor of the New York-based *Royal Gazette*, a sworn enemy of his during the war. Rivington's publishing house had been the "very citadel and pest-house of American Toryism," and his rag packed with the grossest and most incredibly libelous accusations against Washington.<sup>27</sup> And yet, once the British evacuated the city in 1783, Washington directed that Rivington and his property be protected from mob violence. Though there are some who say that Washington's decision was prompted by Rivington's alleged spying on his behalf later in the war, a more or equally likely explanation was the general's dislike of social disorder and his firm attachment to the principle of press freedom.<sup>28</sup>

**Claim:** After his escape, Honeyman surrendered to the British and entered the enemy camp. Astounding guards with tales of his derring-do, he demanded to be taken to Colonel Rall immediately. The Hessian commander was dutifully amazed and asked him question after question about the whereabouts and strength of the Americans. Honeyman accordingly spun a tale about Washington's army being too demoralized and broken to mount an attack, upon which Rall exclaimed that "no danger was to be apprehended from that quarter for some time to come." It was a fatal error.

Honeyman, knowing his ruse could not last long once Washington crossed the Delaware and understanding that "there was little if any opportunity for the spy to perform his part of the great drama any further," then vanished until the end of the war. In 1783 he "returned to his home the greatest hero of the hour. The same neighbors who had once surrounded his humble dwelling and sought his life, again not only surrounded it, but pressed vigorously for admittance, not to harm, but to thank and bless and honor him, and to congratulate and applaud his long suffering but heroic wife."<sup>29</sup>

**Evaluation:** There is not a shred of proof to this tale. It is hardly likely that an officer as shrewd and as experienced as Rall would have fallen for such an obvious ruse, and the entire structure of the tale is based on the assumption that Washington sent Honeyman in to lull the opposition several weeks before by posing as a Tory, Washington's ultimate intention

always being to mount an attack. Hence the elaborate scheme to allow him to “escape” back across the enemy line. But had he?

Washington in fact seized an unexpected and risky opportunity to surprise Rall. The raid luckily paid off in spades. He despatched three columns across the Delaware to arrive simultaneously at dawn. In the event, just one made it successfully and it was by the greatest of good fortune that Hessian patrols did not discover the invasion sooner. Washington’s was a makeshift scheme, not a strategy plotted with grandmasterly skill and executed thanks to Honeyman’s predetermined mission to mislead Rall.

Regarding Honeyman’s sudden disappearance after deceiving Rall, a rather more probable explanation is that he, a known collaborator, feared falling again into the hands of the revolutionaries. Honeyman, in fact, did not completely vanish but flitted in and out of sight in for the rest of the war. According to court records, for instance, on 10 July 1777—more than six months after his “disappearance”—he was the subject of an official proceeding to seize his property “as a disaffected man to the state” of New Jersey.<sup>30</sup> In early December of that year, another record shows that he was actually caught, jailed, and charged with high treason by the state’s Council of Safety.<sup>31</sup> Honeyman was again lucky: the “Year of the Hangman” fervor for prosecuting suspected Loyalists had already subsided and two weeks later he was temporarily released after pledging a bond of £300.<sup>32</sup>

Then, on 9 June 1778, he was indicted for giving aid and succor to the enemy between 5 October 1776 (about two months *before* he allegedly performed his patriotic service) and June 1777.<sup>33</sup> He pleaded not guilty, and no further action was taken, but in March 1779 he was threatened with having his house and property sold as a result of the indictment.<sup>34</sup> The sale, like the trial, never took place, leading his supporters to assert that “highly placed authorities were able to prevent actual trial, a trial which would have endangered his usefulness” as an American double.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps, but a less conspiratorial interpretation might be that, given the administrative chaos of those years, the constantly shifting allegiances of the population, the carelessness with which law clerks kept records, the Council’s habitual concessions to expediency, the lack of hard evidence against such a relatively minor collaborator as Honeyman, and the diminishing enthusiasm of the revolutionary authorities to pursue low-level instances of “disaffection,” Honeyman was slapped on the wrist and

warned to keep out of trouble.

This type of response was by no means unique. By 1778–79, New Jersey’s punishment system had become little more than pro forma as the British threat receded. Furthermore, property confiscations for loyalty to the Crown were rarely executed after 1777, as Patriots discovered that such cases were difficult to prove and, just as pertinently, they realized that personal quarrels, official graft, and greed were leading all too often to false accusations. (The head of the New Jersey confiscations department, for instance, ended up in the enviable position of “owning” several lovely properties formerly belonging to accused Tories.)<sup>36</sup>

As for Honeyman’s “triumphal” return, sometime after Lord Cornwallis’s 1781 surrender at Yorktown, passions had cooled, and he would have gone home and reconciled himself to the reality of Washington’s victory, as did many thousands of displaced Loyalists and former Tory militiamen.

So concludes the tale of John Honeyman. How and when did this story originate? Therein lies the solution to the mystery.

## **The Story’s Genesis**

The Honeyman story was first made public in the aftermath of the Civil War. (Honeyman himself had died on 18 August 1822, aged 93.) In 1873, a new, and unfortunately short-lived, monthly magazine named *Our Home* (edited, revealingly, by one A. Van Doren Honeyman, later the author of the Honeyman family history) published a long article by Judge John Van Dyke (1807–78), the heroic Honeyman’s grandson, a three-time mayor of New Brunswick, two-time congressman, and one-time justice of the Supreme Court of New Jersey, lately retired to Wabasha, Minnesota, where he became a state senator.<sup>37</sup> “An Unwritten Account of a Spy of Washington” first fleshed out the Honeyman legend in all its colorful and memorable detail. At the time, Van Dyke’s revelations made a significant stir and were given additional publicity by their prominence in Stryker’s popular *Battles of Trenton and Princeton*.

The timing of Van Dyke’s *Our Home* memoir is key. The newly reunited nation was preparing for the centenary celebrations of the Declaration of Independence. Having but recently emerged from the bloodiest of civil

wars, Americans were casting their minds back to those worthy days when citizens from north and south rallied together to fight a common enemy.

For Van Dyke and his editor, Honeyman could be upheld as a gleamingly patriotic exemplar to former Unionists and Confederates alike. The author was also an old man, and would die just five years later. He may well have taken what could have been the last opportunity to seal his family's honorable place in the nation's history. Not long after Van Dyke's death, in fact, organizations such as the Sons of the American Revolution (1889) and the Daughters of the American Revolution (1890) would spring up to celebrate the unity and purpose of the Founding Fathers, and Honeyman was exalted as representing their ideals.

Van Dyke swabbed a thick layer of typically Victorian sentimentality and romanticism over the Honeyman story. In terms of intelligence writing, the post-1865 era is remarkable for its fanciful descriptions of espionage practice, its emphasis on beautiful belles using their feminine wiles to smuggle messages to their beaux in camps opposite, and its depiction (accompanied by imaginative dialogue and entertainingly cod accents) of hardy, lantern-jawed heroes valiantly crossing the Mason-Dixon line and masquerading as the enemy. Needless to say, there is little attempt in the spy memoirs of the time to relate intelligence input to actual operational output, yet somehow every agent succeeded in saving the Union (or Confederacy) in the nick of time.<sup>38</sup> As Van Dyke's article appeared soon after the initial flood of Civil War spy memoirs, it would perhaps not be outlandish to suspect him of being influenced by the genre.<sup>39</sup>

In the hands of John Van Dyke, then, John Honeyman—hitherto a man of modest accomplishments and abilities—became the quintessential American hero. Far from being the questionable character and man of uncertain loyalties who emerges from history's dusty documents, Honeyman was in fact a glorious lion heart and Washington's secret warrior—with the achievements and adventures to match.

## **The Secret Revealed**

Judge Van Dyke most likely colorized the Honeyman story, as we've seen,

but he did not invent it. In a letter dated 6 January 1874, the judge revealed that he had originally heard the story from the “one person who was an eye and ear witness to all the occurrences described at Griggstown”: his Aunt Jane, Honeyman’s eldest daughter, who had been about 10 or 11 in the winter of 1776/77.

Jane had been present when the Patriot mob surrounded the house after Honeyman’s escape and “she had often heard the term ‘Tory’ applied to her father. She knew he was accused of trading, in some way, with the British; that he was away from home most of the time; and she knew that their neighbors were greatly excited and angry about it; but she knew also that her mother had the protection of Washington,” wrote Van Dyke. “She had often seen, and read, and heard read, Washington’s order of protection, and knew it by heart, and repeated it over to me, in substance, I think, in nearly the exact words in which it is found in the written article.”

Aunt Jane, therefore, is the sole source for Honeyman’s exploits. As Jane died in 1836, aged 70, Van Dyke must have elicited the details from her at least some 40 years before he published them in *Our Home*—plenty of time, then, for him to have mixed in lashings of make-believe, spoonfuls of truth, and dollops of myth to Aunt Jane’s original tale, itself stitched together from her adolescent memories of events that had occurred six decades previously.

Importantly, Jane was the only child of Honeyman’s never to have married. According to a contemporary description, “she was a tall, stately woman, large in frame and badly club-footed in both feet. She was a dressmaker, but had grace of manners and intelligence beyond her other sisters.” Would it be any wonder if clever, imaginative Jane—doomed to long spinsterhood by her appearance, and fated to look after her aged and ailing father for decade after decade—had embroidered a heroic tale to explain what had *really* happened?

One question still remains. How had Jane Honeyman come to invent a tale of a man involved in valiant deeds of spying for Washington while stoically suffering the abuse of his neighbors, family, and ex-friends?

The answer may lie in the dates. John Honeyman died in the summer of 1822. One year before, the up-and-coming novelist James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), future author of *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer*, had published what is today counted as the first US espionage novel, *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground*.

Cooper's historical romance, which included George Washington in a cameo role, rescued the secret agent from his squalid 18th century reputation as a paid trafficker of information and painted him as a noble figure akin to a soldier, albeit one forced to work in shadows, without the benefit of public glory and medals.

The hero of *The Spy* is Harvey Birch, an honest peddler who refuses to accept money for his undercover work for the American side during the Revolution. Owing to a series of melodramatically crossed wires, Birch finds himself accused of treachery and is pursued by British and Americans both. Only Washington knows the truth of the matter but is obliged to remain silent to maintain Birch's cover.

At the end of the war, Washington confides to the faithful Birch during a secret meeting that "there are many motives which might govern me, that to you are unknown. Our situations are different; I am known as the leader of armies—but you must descend into the grave with the reputation of a foe to your native land. Remember that the veil which conceals your true character cannot be raised in years—perhaps never."<sup>40</sup>

Then, Washington, impressed by this son of toil, "stood for a few moments in the attitude of intense thought" before writing "a few lines on a piece of paper" and handing it to Birch. "It must be dreadful to a mind like yours to descend into the grave, branded as a foe to liberty; but you already know the lives that would be sacrificed, should your real character be revealed," the great man cautions as Birch takes the letter. "It is impossible to do you justice now, but I fearlessly entrust you with this certificate; should we never meet again, it may be serviceable to your children." 41

Cooper shifts the action to the War of 1812 in the final chapter, and we find Birch, who has lain low in the ensuing decades owing to his seemingly opprobrious conduct, again struggling for the cause of liberty, again against the British. Two young American officers catch sight of him, wondering who this odd, old, solitary, ragged figure is. They engage him in conversation, and he claims that he knows one of their mothers, but the sound of an approaching fire fight delays further talk and they separate until the next day. Following the battle, they discover that Birch mounted a brave solo assault to capture prisoners but never returned. Fearing the worst, they search for his corpse.

"He was lying on his back...his eyes were closed, as if in slumber; his lips, sunken with years, were slightly moved from their natural position, but it

seemed more like a smile than a convulsion which had caused the change.” Birch’s “hands were pressed upon his breast, and one of them contained a substance that glittered like silver.” It was a tin box, “through which the fatal lead had gone; and the dying moments of the old man must have passed in drawing it from his bosom.” Opening it, the officers found a message from many years before:

*Circumstances of political importance, which involve the lives and fortunes of many, have hitherto kept secret what this paper now reveals. Harvey Birch has for years been a faithful and unrequited servant of his country. Though man may not, may God reward for his conduct!*

—GEO. WASHINGTON<sup>42</sup>

After this bombshell, Cooper resoundingly concludes that the spy “died as he had lived, devoted to his country, and a martyr to her liberties.”

*The Spy* was an enormous hit, and it wouldn't be outlandish to suppose that Aunt Jane read it sometime after her father died. Could she, in order to consecrate her father's silent martyrdom and hush those neighbors still gossiping about his wartime past, have merely plagiarized Cooper's basic plot and final twist?

Yet the Honeyman story's myriad anachronisms and suspiciously detailed narrative signal Judge Van Dyke's handiwork. For patriotic and social reasons, it was he who not only colorized the tale, but broadened its focus, thrust, and intent far beyond what Aunt Jane had ever envisaged. Between them, Jane and the judge endowed a most ordinary man with an extraordinary—and almost wholly fake—biography. It was John Honeyman himself, strangely enough, who is innocent of telling tall tales. For more than half a century, he remained resolutely silent about his wartime behavior (as well he might, given his not altogether sterling record.) Van Dyke, who “was with him very often during the last fifteen years of his life, and saw his eyes closed in death,” heard nothing of his grandfather's past in all that time. His life was a blank slate upon which anything could be written. And so when Aunt Jane handed her nephew the ball, he ran with it.

That was more than a century and a quarter ago, and it is high time to bury the John Honeyman myth: a spy he never was.

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# Endnotes

1. J. Van Dyke, "An unwritten account of a spy for Washington," reprinted in *New Jersey History*, LXXXV (1967), Nos. 3 and 4.
2. W.S. Stryker, *The Battles of Trenton and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898), 87.
3. G.O. Trevelyan, *The American Revolution* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 4 vols., 1912–1920 new edn.), III, 94.
4. See R. Hughes, *George Washington* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 3 vols., 1926–1930), 568–70.
5. A.H. Bill, *The Campaign of Princeton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948), 26.
6. The article, which appeared in that year's August issue, is available online at [http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1957/5/1957\\_5\\_58.sh](http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1957/5/1957_5_58.sh)
7. J. Bakeless, *Turncoats, Traitors and Heroes: Espionage in the American Revolution* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998 edn., orig. pub.1959), 167–70.
8. The sparse details available for this program can be found at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0417034/>.
9. M. Ketchum, *The Winter Soldiers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1973), 288–89.
10. T. Fleming, "George Washington, Spymaster," *American Heritage*, February/March 2000.
11. D.H. Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), Appendix X, "Doubtful Documents," 423.
12. G.J.A. O'Toole, *Honorable Treachery: A History of U.S. Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991), 25.
13. P.K. Rose (a pseudonym), *The Founding Fathers of American Intelligence*, available at <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.

14.A. Van Doren Honeyman, *The Honeyman Family* (Honeyman, Honyman, Hunneman, etc.) in Scotland and America, 1548–1908 (Plainfield, NJ: Honeyman’s Publishing House, 1909), 94. The story that Honeyman aided the stricken Wolfe to the rear might be true. Francis Parkman, the 19th century American historian and author of *Montcalm and Wolfe*, noted that after the general was hit for the third time “he staggered and sat on the ground. Lieutenant Brown, of the grenadiers, one Henderson, a volunteer in the same company, and a private soldier, aided by an officer of artillery” carried him out of danger. The anonymous “private soldier” might have been Honeyman, though there are several other claimants for the honor. See F. Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe* (London, UK: Macmillan & Co., 2 vols., 1885), II, 296. Regarding Honeyman’s religion, in addition to the other evidence we possess, we know he is buried in Lamington Presbyterian Church Cemetery, Somerset County, New Jersey.

15. On the role of Presbyterianism in the Revolution, see A. Rose, *Washington’s Spies: The Story of America’s First Spy Ring* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2006), 79–81.

16. Some family records are missing, but Van Doren Honeyman, 117–18, pieces together what there is.

17. Van Dyke, 221.

18. This chronology is based on the dated series of letters Washington wrote at the time, all of which are printed in P. Chase et al (eds.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 16 vols. so far, 1985–continuing), VII.

19. Washington letter to Charles Scott, 25 September 1778 in the George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

20. Van Dyke, 221.

21. *ibid.*, 221–22.

22. *Bakeless, Turncoats, Traitors, and Heroes*, 169 and Van Dyke, 223.

23. See Rose, *Washington’s Spies*, Chap. 2. Later, Washington expressed alarm at the prevalence of these courts-martial, saying that he was “not fully satisfied of the legality of trying an inhabitant of any State by military

law, when the Civil Authority of that State has made provision for the punishment of persons taking Arms with the Enemy.” See Washington letter to William Livingston, 15 April 1778, Washington Papers.

24. Washington letter to Lord Stirling, Mercer, Stephen, and de Roche Fermoy, 14 December 1776, Washington papers.

25. Stryker, 88, implies thus.

26. Van Dyke, 223.

27. M.C. Tyler, *The Literary History of the American Revolution, 1763–1783* (New York: G.P Putnam’s Sons, 2 vols., 1897), II, 154.

28. An interesting analysis of the Rivington affair is J.L. Lawson, “The ‘Remarkable Mystery’ of James Rivington, ‘spy,’” *Journalism Quarterly* XXXV (1958), No. 3: 317–23, 394.

29. Van Dyke, 223–24.

30. Van Doren Honeyman, 113.

31. Council of Safety Meeting, 5 December 1777, printed in *Minutes of the Council of Safety of the State of New Jersey* (Jersey City, NJ: John H. Lyon, 1872), 169.

32. Council of Safety Meeting, 20 December 1777, printed in *Minutes of the Council of Safety*, 176.

33. A. O’Shea and S.A. Pleasants, “The Case of John Honeyman: Mute Evidence,” *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* LXXXIV (1966), No. 3: 176; see also Van Doren Honeyman, 112, for the full text of the document.

34. *The New-Jersey Gazett*, 10 March 1779: 4.

35. O’Shea and Pleasants, 177. See also Van Doren Honeyman, 114–15.

36. This subject is authoritatively dealt with in R.C. Haskett, “Prosecuting the Revolution,” *American Historical Review* LIX (1954), No. 3: 578–87.

37. The author is indebted for these biographical details to Michael Christian, librarian of the Sons of the American Revolution.

38. E. Fishel's article, "Myths That Never Die," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* II (1988), No. 1: 27–58, is the best source for this aspect of espionage.

39. For example, R.B. Marcy, "Detective Pinkerton," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* XLVII (1873), 281: 720–27; L.C. Baker, *History of the United States Secret Service* (Philadelphia: L.C. Baker, 1867); R. O'Neal Greenhow, *My Imprisonment and the First Year of Abolition Rule at Washington* Belle Boyd in *Camp and Prison, Written by Herself* (London, UK: R. Bentley, 1863); B. Boyd, (New York: Blelock, 1865).

40. J.F. Cooper, *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company; 1911 edn.), 405.

41. Cooper, 406.

42. Cooper, 409–15. "The Strange Case of John Honeyman and Revolutionary War Espionage"

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