John Clark, Jr. – Spymaster

By: John Whiteside

George Washington, best known at the Father of our Country, is also considered to be the first great American spymaster. His efforts, and those of the spies and agents who supported him, are generally credited with out- spying the British military during the Revolutionary War and securing a very crafty victory. Even British military leaders praise Washington for his exceptional espionage tradecraft as a reason for his win.

One of Washington's best spymasters was John Clark, a young Pennsylvanian born in Lancaster County, Pa. about 1751. Clark lived there for nearly twenty years before moving to neighboring York County, where he studied law. He entered the Pennsylvania Rifle Corps in 1775 and subsequently saw combat during the siege of Boston. His military efforts continued in the defense of Washington's troops in the battle of Long Island and their subsequent move to New Jersey. His efforts on the battlefield as well as in the collection of enemy intelligence resulted in a promotion to the rank of Major. He was then assigned as an Aide-de-Camp to General Nathanael Greene, and participated in battles at Trenton and Princeton, NJ.

In 1777 as General Howe decided on attacking Philadelphia from the south, Clark was tasked by General Washington to collect information on British troop strength, movements and supply issues. Clark set up his command in a home on Goshen Road, in what is now Newtown Square, Pa. Clark himself posed as a disaffected Quaker who was angry with the rebels for vandalizing his home. Clark was eventually successful in gaining access to General Howe, and was able to provide Howe with fictious disinformation, often prepared by Washington himself, to deceive the British of his own strength and plans. In so doing, Clark's network of spies could readily collect information about British military targets as well.

John Clark received a painful right shoulder wound, either just prior to or during the battle of Brandywine. After a short recuperation that left him in constant

discomfort, he continued his espionage network, trying to deny food and supplies to the enemy while at the same time diverting similar supplies to Washington's troops at Valley Forge. His spy ring helped provide information about Howe's surprise attack at Whitemarsh in early December, 1777. Throughout the latter four months of 1777, he had written some forty letters back and forth to Washington. In these letters, Clark always signed his name, adding the suffix "Junior." While this might indicate he was the son of John Clark, there are no other references to his use of the suffix.

Clark's wounded shoulder continued to cause such pain that he sought permission to return to York, Pa. and recuperate. In January 1778, Clark was offered a position as auditor of the army. That February he returned to York to commence his new assignment. Clark would later re-enlist and serve until the end of the war. He returned home to his wife, Margaret Bittinger Clark, and his son and five daughters. He has been described by friends who knew him as being brave to a fault, having a great wit and a fine mind. Clark sought to run for Congress but was unsuccessful in his political bid. He returned to the practice of law, working until the day before his death on December 27, 1819. He is buried with his wife and children in a family plot at Saint John's Episcopal Churchyard, 140 N. Beaver Street, York, Pa.

Sources:

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Photo of John Clark, Jr.'s house courtesy of Newtown Square Historical Society.