

ARTS | SETAUKET

Tracing the Origins of an American Spy Ring

A show about a Revolutionary War operation highlights an area's Colonial history.

By ALYSON KRUEGER

When Linda Carlson recently flew from Orlando, Fla., to visit her daughter and five grandchildren in Patchogue on Long Island, she added an unusual item to the family itinerary: touring the sites she had seen on "Turn: Washington's Spies," a television series on AMC about local espionage efforts during the Revolutionary War.

The show, now in its third season, follows the actions of the Culper Spy Ring, a select group of friends from the Three Village area of Long Island who risked their lives as spies for Gen. George Washington.

The series is historical fiction, but many of the sites involved, from the homes of the main spies to the taverns where they picked up information from drunk British soldiers, are real, and are still standing along Route 25A, between Oyster Bay and Setauket. When Ms. Carlson found out she could see them in person, she could not wait. "Just walking where these people walked at one time is fascinating to me," she said.

"We have definitely seen an uptick of people who mention the show," said Emily O'Hara, an assistant hotel manager of Three Village Inn, an inn in Stony Brook built in 1751. (Brian Kilmeade's 2014 book, "George Washington's Secret Six: The Spy Ring That Saved the American Revolution," has also contributed to tourism in the area, said Margo Arceri, a local historian.)

Long Island became central to the Revolutionary War effort when, in 1778, Washington asked his protégé Benjamin Tallmadge to put together a clandestine spy operation. The idea was for the Patriots to use intelligence to compensate for what they lacked in weapons and training. Mr. Tallmadge, who was from Setauket, implemented the mission in his hometown with childhood friends he trusted. The intelligence they collected was vital: They discovered plans by the British to attack the Colonies' French allies, as well as correspondence between the traitor Benedict Arnold and a British officer.

Because some local historians have long celebrated this part of history and over the years have made sites available to the public, much of the infrastructure for the "Turn" tourism rush was already in place. Raynham Hall, for example, the home where the lead spy Robert Townsend lived and was buried, has been a museum in Oyster Bay since 1953.

At Three Village Historical Society in Setauket, "attendance has more than doubled" since the AMC show's debut, said Donna Smith, the society's education director. For its Culper Spy Ring-themed exhibit "Spies!" the interactive experience is especially entertaining for children, who can learn how to write messages in invisible ink, as the spy ring did, and see copies of the coded letters.

Even locals like Susan Skillman Fedele, a 50-year-old retired speech pathologist who lives in Boca Raton, Fla., but grew up in the Three Village area, are discovering the significance of the region's history. "I walked by, drove by these sites every day growing up, and I didn't realize where I lived," she said. "Now, I am watching 'Turn' on television, and it's so cool. When they say the word 'Setauket,' I'm like, 'That's my hometown.'" In May, she brought her 16-year-old daughter north for some spy-themed tours.

After the premiere of "Turn," Ms. Arceri started TRI SPY Tours of the sites on bicycle, on foot or in a kayak. A highlight is seeing where Anna Smith Strong, the wife of a



A preservation group in the Three Village area of Long Island has put together a Washington Spy Trail, starting to place signs outside historical sites from the Revolutionary War, including Raynham Hall in Oyster Bay, top; St. George's Manor Cemetery in East Setauket, right; and the Brewster House, in the town of Brookhaven, above.

A military effort started in New York to counter the British.

Patriot judge, used to help the spies communicate with one another by hanging different articles of clothing on a clothesline. Another popular site is the grave of Abraham Woodhull, a leading member of the spy ring, whose alias was Samuel Culper Sr. Guests leave flowers, American flags and stones on the grave, Ms. Arceri said.

Last year Ms. Arceri started Culper Spy Day, during which local attractions hold spy-related activities. Country House Restaurant, which served as a tavern and meeting place for the Culper Ring, offers children a free dessert if they decode a message, and encourages diners to search for a local ghost. Approximately 400 people attended Spy Day last year; Ms. Arceri said she believes that attendance could nearly double on this year's Spy Day, July 23.

To further generate excitement about local history, Gloria Rocchio, the president of the Ward Melville Heritage Organization, which owns and preserves numerous local sites, is working with government officials to hang Washington Spy Trail signs outside landmarks.

Ms. Arceri said that although the historical information in "Turn" was probably about "70 percent inaccurate," the series shined a light on an important part of United States history. "These were ordinary people doing extraordinary things," she said.



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Gathering Intelligence for General Washington

On July 23, the second annual Culper Spy Day will take place in the Three Village Historical area. Here is what you need to know:

THE BASICS Events will take place from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., rain or shine. Tickets are \$25 for adults and free for children under 12, and can be purchased at the Long Island Museum, the Ward Melville Heritage Organization or the Three Village Historical Society. Information: 877-386-6654; discoverlongisland.com/spytrail.

WHERE TO STAY Three Village Inn, known as the Old Homestead, was built in 1751 by Richard Hallock. While the inn retains much of its history (you can see holes in

the fireplace that lead to tunnels that locals believe might have been used for the Underground Railroad), it has the amenities of a modern luxury hotel. The executive chef, Guy Reuge, who runs a formal restaurant and cafe in the hotel, has been a James Beard Award finalist four times.

WHAT TO DO There are 17 events around the area, educational and engaging for children and adults. Start on the Village Green in Setauket, where there will be walking tours of sites, colonial cooking demonstrations and re-enactments. You can pick up a map there that details other nearby events.