

A Case for Anna Smith Strong: Her Relationship with the Setauket-Based Culper Spy Ring

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Synopsis: Anna Smith Strong, called Nancy by her family and friends, was a wife, mother, descendant of Brookhaven's lord of the manor William "Tangier" Smith, and she played a vital role with members of the Culper Spy Ring. Nancy Strong's hidden activity as a spy is detectable through many documents and stories.

Introduction: To begin to understand Nancy Strong's depth of involvement in the Setauket-based Culper Spy Ring it is necessary to understand the complex family and community relationships that existed between the Strongs, Woodhulls, Brewsters, Townsends, Roes, Underhills, Smiths and Hawkines that existed from well before the Revolutionary War and that continued after the war as well.

Setauket was a small community but the connections between these families and their positions in the community before, during and after the Revolutionary War, dictated their actions and responsibilities. For example, Caleb Brewster was first cousin once removed of Abraham Woodhull's wife Mary Smith, second cousin of Joseph Brewster whose daughter Hannah married Thomas Shepard Strong; eldest son of Selah and Anna Smith Strong. Caleb Brewster was also second cousin twice removed of Tallmadge's wife Mary Floyd. Mary Floyd is daughter of William Floyd, Suffolk signer of the Declaration of Independence. [1]

Nancy Strong certainly understood her family responsibility for both the Smith family and the Strong family. Anna Smith married Selah Strong in November 1760 and they lived on what was called Little Neck (now Strong's Neck) in Setauket. [2] Their first child, Keturah was born a year later. On September 10, 1782 Keturah married James Woodhull, first cousin of Abraham Woodhull and her second cousin once removed. Unfortunately, tragedy struck the Strong family on August 13, 1790; their daughter Keturah died, age 28. [3]



A plan of the Setauket area, surveyed by British Major Holland, 1777. At center is the Setauket Presbyterian Church that was a Loyalist-manned fort in 1777. Above the fort is Little Bay and Seaton's Neck where Selah and Nancy Strong lived. The Setauket Village Green, Caroline Anglican Church, Setauket Mill Pond, the stream into Conscience Bay and other features are clearly visible.

Their second child, Thomas was born in May, 1765. In August, 1791, Thomas married Hannah Brewster, daughter of Joseph Brewster. Anna & Selah's third child Margaret was born in 1768, their fourth, Benjamin Franklin, was born in 1770, their fifth, Mary, was born in 1773 and died three weeks later, their sixth, William Smith, was born in 1775, and their seventh child, Joseph, was born on December first, 1777. By then the British had controlled Long Island for more than a year. It would be five years before Anna and Selah had their eighth and last child, George Washington Strong, born January 20th, 1783. [4]

Selah Strong was first elected as a trustee of Brookhaven Town in 1767 and continued to be elected as a trustee for the next decade. Selah was last present at a trustees meeting on May 6, 1777. This was the date of new elections and Selah Strong and Jonathan Thompson, both captains in Colonel Smith's Regiment in 1775, were out as trustees. Strong was also listed in April, 1776 as captain of Brookhaven Minutemen. [5] By the beginning of 1777, Brookhaven was significantly under the control of the Loyalists in the town. Benjamin Floyd, an avowed Tory (Loyalist) was elected as a trustee and supervisor of Brookhaven Town in both 1777 and '78. [6]

According to Rivington's Royal Gazette, Selah Strong was captured and confined in the sugar house in New York for "Serendipitous correspondence with the enemy." [7] How much involvement, if anything, the new Loyalist trustees of Brookhaven had on the arrest of Selah Strong is unknown. Nancy Strong was able to bring her husband produce from the farm and to get him released by appealing to her Tory relatives in New York City. [8] Selah then fled to Connecticut. This adds one more connection between Nancy Strong and the Culper Spies. She could easily have worked both sides of the street, so to speak, in New York City.

In 1778, with her husband a refugee in Connecticut, Nancy Strong was living on what was then Seaton's Neck in Setauket where she continued, despite the war, to raise and care for her six children. We do not know if any of the children went to Connecticut with their father. However Nancy, running a farm and likely nursing both William three and Joseph less than one, needed the assistance of her older children, ages 17, 12, 9 and 7 on the farm. [9]

I.

The Culper Spy Ring began in September, 1778, carrying intelligence on British operations in New York City to Setauket, across Long Island Sound to Fairfield, CT and on to General Washington's headquarters. [10]

Abraham Woodhull, a Setauket farmer and boyhood friend of Benjamin Tallmadge was selected by Tallmadge to head up the spying operation. Woodhull's sister and her husband Amos Underhill ran a boarding house in Manhattan. This gave Woodhull the perfect cover to spend time in New York City gathering intelligence. [11] However, Woodhull was concerned that his frequent trips to New York would cast suspicion on a simple farmer from Setauket. [12] On a few occasions Nancy Strong accompanied Abraham Woodhull to New York posing as his wife. It seems it was easier for a man and wife to travel through checkpoints to Manhattan than for a single man. Woodhull wrote, "I intend to visit 727 (New York) before long and think by the assistance of a 355 (lady) of my acquaintance, shall be able to outwit them all." [13] The "lady" in question, Anna Smith Strong, having Loyalist relatives in Manhattan, including her brothers, had the opportunity to gather useful information. [14]

In his original book on the Culper Spies, Pennypacker made a connection between Woodhull and Strong. "A clue was found among the papers of the Floyd family and when this was compared with the (Abraham) Woodhull account book it was discovered that the signals were arranged by no less a personage than the wife of Judge Selah Strong. Anna Smith was her maiden name." [15]

II.

On one of the many occasions when Caleb Brewster came across Long Island Sound from Fairfield to Setauket to retrieve spy messages for General Washington he noted his location. "I lay up back of Esqr. Strong's yesterday..." [16] Thus, by letting the Strongs know where Brewster and his whaleboat crew were located, Nancy Strong could signal Abraham Woodhull.

On May 2, 1780, Selah Strong, Nancy's husband, was elected as president of the Town of Brookhaven trustees. He was present in Setauket at the first meeting on July 15th. By this time British influence in Brookhaven was fading. Many residents, disturbed by British treatment of all Americans, turned to the Patriot cause and abandoned their Loyalist sentiments. In May, 1781, 1782 and 1783, Strong was again elected president of the Town of Brookhaven trustees. However, in 1782, he was also elected as town supervisor. In 1784-89, Strong, now referred to as Judge Strong, was elected as both president of the trustees and town supervisor. Strong continued to serve as head of the Town of Brookhaven through 1797. [17]

We know more about Selah Strong than we do about his wife Anna Strong. Even though Selah was elected as president of Brookhaven trustees (equal to today's town supervisor), we are not sure when he was in Brookhaven and when he was not. As detailed in Mather's Refugees, "On March 20, 1781, Selah Strong and his sister Susannah (Mrs. William Shelton), asked leave to visit their aged parents at Brookhaven." [18] So it seems that ten months after being elected head of the Town of Brookhaven, Strong was still in Connecticut, or was he? [19]

III.

Setauket's Caleb Brewster was perhaps the most bold and daring of the Revolutionary War spies, a boldness that occasionally put other Patriots in danger. He was the only one of the Culper Spy Ring that the British eventually identified as a spy.

Kate Strong detailed a story about Brewster "My great-great-grandfather, Selah Strong, saved the life of a British officer. Not that he was fond of the British, but he had a good reason for saving this man's life. While walking one day with Caleb Brewster on (Strong's Neck) they saw a British officer on the shore below. Brewster aimed his gun, but my ancestor stopped him, explaining that while Caleb could flee in his boat, he himself lived here and would have to bear the brunt of the shooting. So Brewster lowered his gun, and the British officer passed on safely, little knowing how closely death had passed him by." [20]

Caleb Brewster was a good friend and cousin of both Selah and Anna Strong. The Strongs contacted Brewster after an incident at their home when whaleboat raiders (thieves taking advantage of the Revolutionary War by preying on both sides) attacked them and Nathaniel Roe. Brewster followed up with a deposition and then by locating and capturing some of the raiders.

"That on or about the 15th day of (March) Whale Boats, Commanded by Captains Nott and Elderkin landed near Mount Misery on Long Island, that a number of the crew, went to a certain David Longbotham, & inform'd him that they had come from Connecticut, and had permission, that they wish'd to barter for English goods, that they procur'd the said Longbotham for a guide to conduct them to a Mister Nathaniel Roe, at Drowned Meadow; on their arrival there, some of the party called upon Mr. Roe, and told him they wanted to trade with him, he at first refused to let them into his house, but upon solicitation consented and opened the door, they immediately on their entry questioned him, if he had any British goods, on which he answered a few trifles, they accordingly took what goods he had, & finding but a small booty they treated Mr. Roe with a great deal of violence, & pillaged him of ...money (and)... many other things of value.

"That after plundering Mr. Roe they proceeded to Mr. Selah Strong's of Setauket... Mr. Strong absolutely refused letting them in and repeatedly questioned them, if they had any Order from his Excellency Gov. Trumbull, they gave him no satisfactory answer, he told them if they had any Order to enter his house he would instantly open his doors, they told him they were determined to get into his house, & immediately began to stave the doors with large billets of wood, but finding that ineffectual, they fir'd a number of shot into the house, one of which went through Mrs. Strong's hair, & lodged in the wall, that Mr. Strong by their threats & violence was Compelled to open the door to save her life

"That after they had entered the house, Mrs Strong demanded what authority they had to break her door, one of the party presented a bayonet to her breast & told her that: that was his authority, they began to ransack the house,

& not finding any English goods, took furniture ... & demanded Mr. Strong's money, but the Militia assembling they were oblig'd to quit Mr. Strong's before they could get it." [21]

IV.

Anna Smith Strong found ways to assist the Culper spies in their efforts between New York City and Setauket. As reported by Kate Strong, "I went to the East Hampton Library and Mr. Pennypacker (author of *General Washington's Spies*, 1939) read me bits of old documents... He showed me an old account book in which "Nancy", the name by which my great, great grandmother Anna Smith Strong was known, had ordered expensive goods to be bought in New York. That was so Austin Roe would have the excuse to go to the city where he gathered news for General Washington." [22]

Kate Strong reported that family records also showed Nancy Strong purchasing materials in New York City. "As the old account books show, Madam Nancy found need for many things and needed them at once. Yards and yards of tablecloths and other expensive things were ordered in haste. And those trips to town brought back information as well as drygoods." [23]

The spy ring was never exposed but a number of times the identities of members of the ring were in jeopardy, never more so than in 1781 when a British spy reported his discovery, "Private dispatches are frequently sent From your city to the Chieftain [Washington] here by some traitors. They come by the Way of Setalket [sic], where a certain Brewster receives them at, or near, a Certain woman's." [24]

This note from British spy William Heron to British Intelligence Chief Oliver Delancey revealed the Culper Spy Ring. Fortunately the British never suspected Robert Townsend in New York, nor Austin Roe carrying the messages to Setauket, nor Anna Smith Strong being the "certain woman" who coordinated between Abraham Woodhull and Caleb Brewster. One more confirmation of the part that Anna, known as Nancy Strong played.

The Strong's last child, George Washington Strong, was born on January 20th, 1783. So, in spite of the war and the British occupation, life returned to a degree of normalcy for the Strongs.

Congress proclaimed the end of the war with Great Britain on April 11, 1783, however it was not until November 21, 1783 that all British soldiers left Long Island. [25]

Seaton's Neck, where the Strongs lived, where Nancy Strong had lived with her children throughout the war, where she kept a line of communication going between Abraham Woodhull and Caleb Brewster, became Strong's Neck on February 16, 1785 when Selah Strong purchased the neck at auction. [26] Andrew Seaton, the Loyalist who owned it, had by this time, moved to Florida.

The only activity remaining for the Culper Spies was to meet President Washington when he stayed at the Roe Tavern in Setauket on April 22, 1790 during his four-day tour of Long Island. Washington and his entourage were led from Coram to Setauket by Selah Strong, leader of the Town of Brookhaven, first judge of the County of Suffolk (1784) and husband of Culper spy Anna Strong. On his departure the next morning, President Washington described the Roe Tavern as "Tolerably decent with obliging people in it." [27] Obliging people then and during the Revolutionary War.

Conclusion

Written sources, both primary and secondary, combined with family genealogy, oral history and folklore provides sufficient evidence to establish the direct connection between Anna Smith Strong and the Revolutionary War Culper Spy Ring. In addition, the one, and only one, primary source use of the code number 355, combined with the additional references, firmly establishes the identity of the "lady" in question as Anna Smith Strong. [28]

All of the agents in the Culper Spy Ring were given code numbers between 711 (General Washington) and 726

(James Rivington). Fanciful articles and novels following the Revolutionary War suggested that a female agent 355 worked for Robert Townsend, bore his child, was arrested as a spy and confined on the British prison ship *Jersey* where she died. In truth, 355 was simply the code for “lady” as 371 was the code for man. Known details on the life of Robert Townsend, including a well-researched article in the Long Island Forum by Estelle Lockwood, [29] have now completely discredited the Agent 355 story. [30]

Notes

[1] The genealogies of the Brewster, Strong and Floyd families. Rhodes Collection, Emma S. Clark Memorial Library, Three Village Historical Society Archives, Setauket, NY. They are also listed on <http://LongIslandGenealogy.com>

[2] Kate W. Strong, “Nancy’s Magic Clothesline,” (Bay Shore, NY: Long Island Forum, November, 1939), 13. ; Estelle Lockwood, “The Gentleman from Seaton’s Neck.” *Three Village Historian*, (East Setauket, NY: 1994), 23. William Henry Smith sold Little Neck to Andrew Seaton on June 18, 1768, for 50 pounds down and two big mortgages. It turned out to be a bad investment for Seaton. Nancy and Selah Strong lived in a house on the neck after they were married to protect her father’s interest. William Henry died in 1776.

[3] Ruth Tangier Smith & Henry Bainbridge Hoff, *The Tangier Smith Family* (Farmingdale, Long Island, NY: The Order of Colonial Lords of Manors in America, 1978), 1-11, 25-26.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Osborne Shaw, *Records of the Town of Brookhaven Book C 1687-1789* (New York: Derrydale Press, 1931), 326-385.

[6] James Rivington, *Royalist Gazette*, (New York) January 3, 1778, 3; Frederic Gregory Mather, *The Refugees of 1776 from Long Island to Connecticut*, (Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon Company, 1913), 582. As detailed in Mather’s *Refugees*, “It is commonly reported in the [Strong] family, that he was afterwards confined on the Jersey Prison Ship.”

[7] Ibid.; Frederic Gregory Mather, *The Refugees of 1776 from Long Island to Connecticut*, (Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon Company, 1913), 582. A report by Mr. Selah B. Strong, Grandson of Selah and Anna.

[8] Frederic Gregory Mather, *The Refugees of 1776*, (Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon Company, 1913), 582.

[9] Kate W. Strong, “In Defense of Nancy’s Clothesline,” (West Islip, NY: Long Island Forum, July 1969), 138. Reproduced in *Kate Strong’s True Tales 1938-1976* (East Setauket, NY, The Three Village Historian, Three Village Historical Society, 1992), 13.

[10] B. Tallmadge, *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*, (New York, 1858), 42.

[11] Alexander Rose, *Washington’s Spies: The Story of America’s First Spy Ring*, (New York, NY: Bantam Dell, 2006). 90. See Notes 60, 61, 62, chapter three.

[12] Letter, Abraham Woodhull to B. Tallmadge, June 5, 1779. All letters listed here are in George Washington’s Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Div., Washington, DC.

[13] Letter, Abraham Woodhull to Benjamin Tallmadge August 15, 1779.

[14] Ibid.; [9]

[15] Morton Pennypacker, *General Washington’s Spies on Long Island and in New York*, (Garden City, NY: 1939). 15.

[16] Letter, Caleb Brewster to Benjamin Tallmadge, August 27, 1780.

[17] Osborne Shaw, *Records of the Town of Brookhaven Book C* (New York: The Derrydale Press, 1931), 326-385.

[18] Frederic Gregory Mather, *The Refugees of 1776 from Long Island to Connecticut*, (Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon Company,

1913), 582. "On Mar. 20, 1781, he [Selah Strong] and his sister, Susannah, Mrs. William Shelton, asked leave to visit their aging parents at Brookhaven." ; Kate W. Strong, "My Great, Great Grandfather," (West Islip, NY: Long Island Forum, March 1974), 45.

[19] Osborne Shaw, *Records of the Town of Brookhaven Book C* (New York: The Derrydale Press, 1931), 388-391. Selah Strong is listed as attending Town of Brookhaven Trustees meetings on July 15, 1780; Feb. 5, 1781; May 1, 1781; Aug. 6, 1781; Dec 3, 1781.

[20] Kate W. Strong, "Bits of Long Island History," (Amityville, NY: Long Island Forum, July, 1955), 137.

[21] Captain Caleb Brewster, "Deposition," (Fairfield County, CT: 3-23-1781. Selleck Sillionan Justice: Peace). "The above and foregoing deposition, Capt. Brewster, Watson, Jarvis & Lyman had from the mouths of Mess'rs Roe and Strong, and others of the family, with many other agravating Circumstances, that human nature would blush to reveal."

[22] Kate W. Strong, "In Defense of Nancy's Clothesline," (West Islip, NY: Long Island Forum, July, 1969), 138.

[23] Kate W. Strong, "Nancy's Magic Clothesline," (Bay Shore, NY: Long Island Forum, November, 1939), 13.

[24] Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*, (New York, NY: Bantam Dell, 2006), 247. Chapter nine, Note pp. 339. Letter, "Hiram" to British Intelligence, February 4, 1781, in Delancey (ed.), "Private daily intelligence," *Magazine of American History*, X, pp. 410-17 (William Heron to Oliver DeLancey, British Intelligence Chief, February 4, 1781.

[25] Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando: Benjamin Tallmadge in the Revolutionary War*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2014). Kindle Ed., Chapter 11, Loc 2229.

[26] Estelle Lockwood, "The Gentleman from Seaton's Neck." *Three Village Historian*, (East Setauket, NY: 1994), 25.

[27] Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, Eds. "The Diaries of George Washington," (Charlottesville, VA: Thursday, April 22, 1790), 65. Image 85.

[28] Letter, Abraham Woodhull to Benjamin Tallmadge August 15, 1779.

[29] Estelle D. Lockwood, "The Lady Known as '355,'" (West Sayville, NY: Long Island Forum, Winter 1993), 10-15. As detailed by Lockwood, Solomon Townsend noted in his personal scrapbook that Robert Townsend Jr., his cousin, knew his mother who was a bondswomen and a housekeeper for Robert.

[30] Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*, (New York, NY: Bantam Dell, 2006), 173, 276. Rose states without reservation, "This mysterious '355' " —decoded as "lady" in the Dictionary— is mentioned just once in the Culper correspondence. She was Anna Smith Strong, Woodhull's neighbor and wife of Selah Strong,..."; Richard F. Welch, *General Washington's Commando*, notes in Kindle Ed., Loc 619 that, "Anna fits the bill." Rose also states, "In (1784) Townsend may have fathered an illegitimate son, also named Robert, by his housekeeper (Mary Banvard), to whom he would leave five hundred dollars in his will." *Washington's Spies*, pp. 276.