

## Did Sally Townsend Save West Point?

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Quite frequently, the Historical Society receives requests for information on Sally Townsend and her role in the capture of Major John Andre during the American Revolution.

"Sally" (Sarah) Townsend, 1760-1842, grew up in the Townsend home (now known as Raynham Hall) in Oyster Bay. The house functioned as the headquarters of a Loyalist garrison occupying Oyster Bay, with the officers requisitioning several rooms for their sleeping quarters. John Graves Simcoe, lieutenant-colonel commanding the Queens Rangers (a Loyalist regiment) was visited several times by his friend John Andre, Adjutant-General of the British Army.

According to the legend that has grown up around Sally, she overheard British officers mention the American fort at West Point and saw a mysterious man drop a letter off in a cupboard addressed to a "James Anderson." She forwarded this information to her brother Robert in New York, known as "Culper, Jr." in the Patriot spy ring that operated in New York and Long Island, who then forwarded the information to Washington's spymaster, Major Benjamin Tallmadge. Utilizing the information Sally provided, Andre was captured and West Point and the Patriot cause was saved!

One would think, if the legend had any truth to it at all, that the Townsend Family would have been justly proud of the accomplishments of these two Patriots and passed their story down to succeeding generations. No such family history of the legend exists. In fact, no mention of the story is made in the family genealogy, known as "The Townsend Memorial," published in 1865, which is otherwise chock full of anecdotes about family members.

The story's history only reaches back to earlier last century, and can be traced to Long Island historian Morton Pennypacker. Pennypacker was responsible for the discovery, through handwriting analysis, that Robert Townsend was indeed "Culper, Jr.," Washington's spy. In his book, "The Two Spies," published in 1930, he puts forth the story about Sally's involvement related above, without any supporting documentation or even mention of where the story came from.

If one looks at the facts of Andre's capture, little credence can be given to Sally's involvement. Andre sailed up the Hudson River in a British ship, the Vulture, and was rowed ashore to meet with Arnold. Their meeting was supposed to end well before daylight so that Andre could return to the ship under the cover of darkness, with the plans to West Point that Arnold had given him. Unbeknownst to Andre, American artillery fired on the ship, forcing her captain to retreat downriver. When, near daybreak, Andre tried to return to the ship, he found it had sailed without him.

Arnold left Andre in the care of a local man, Joshua Hett Smith, suspected by the Americans of being a Tory. Smith was supposed to guide Andre back to the British lines

by land. Of course, in full daylight, Andre's uniform would be noticed immediately, so Andre was forced to borrow a suit of civilian clothes from Smith. The two proceeded on horseback to a point a mile or two from the British outposts, where Smith left Andre.

Shortly thereafter, almost in sight of the British lines, Andre was accosted by three American militiamen, who he at first mistook for Loyalists, to his chagrin and ultimate demise. The three, with their muskets trained on him, ordered Andre to dismount and proceeded to search him, some say for whatever loot they could take from him. Andre showed them the pass he had from Arnold, which identified him as James Anderson. The militiamen, suspicious that someone who had hoped they were Loyalists should have a pass through the lines from the American general commanding the area, searched Andre's person and thereupon found the plans to West Point. They escorted him to the nearest American officer, and Andre's fate was sealed. The officer sent word to Arnold of "Anderson's" capture, which gave Arnold time to flee to the Vulture, which had returned to the area. Andre was hung as a spy, though the Americans would much rather have placed the noose around Arnold's neck!

So we are left wondering, if she did indeed send word of the plot to her brother and it reached Washington, how could Sally's intervention have caused Andre's capture?