

Tactics: Invisible Ink

During the Revolutionary War, we and the British both used invisible ink. Major John Andre, the chief British intelligence officer, had agents put a letter in the corner of their correspondence to inform the recipient as to how the hidden secret message could be developed; for example, an “F” was placed in the corner of letters that could be revealed by fire, an “A” for those that needed the application of an acid.

But George Washington wanted something more, an ink that could only be revealed by a unique, specially formulated reagent. Sir James Jay answered the general’s call. Jay, brother of American patriot John Jay and a physician that dabbled in chemistry, created a “sympathetic stain,” which he supplied to Washington. The ink in our letters could only be read when brushed with this specific chemical mixture. To avoid suspicion, Washington instructed us to write seemingly boring letters between the lines of their secret messages, or to inscribe them on the blank leaves of a pamphlet or any publication or book of small value. The British didn’t even know to look for invisible messages even if they did have the right chemicals to make them visible.

Amazingly, uses of invisible ink like this goes back more than years to the Romans and Greeks!

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