



Revolutionary Times



Containing the Latest News from the Sons of the American Revolution

Invisible Ink

George Washington received a letter from John Jay, written November 19, 1778 ...

“This will be delivered by my Brother, who will communicate & explain to your Excellency a mode of Correspondence, which may be of use, provided proper agents can be obtained.”

“I have experienced its Efficacy by a three Years Trial. We shall remain absolutely silent on the Subject. I have the Honor to be with the highest Esteem & Respect Your Excellency’s most obedient Servant. John Jay”

John Jay was a Founder, delegate from New York to the First and 2nd Continental Congress (and served as President of the assembly).

John Jay served as the second Secretary of Foreign Affairs (later ‘Secretary of State,’) wrote several of the Federalist Papers, was signer of the Treaty of Paris, was Second Governor of New York and was First Chief Justice of the US.

James Jay, the brother of John Jay (referred to in the letter above), was a physician practicing in England, created a chemical solution to be used as an invisible ink, and supplied quantities of the stain to the colonists.



He developed invisible ink in 1775 and used it throughout the war in correspondence with his brother.

George Washington himself instructed his agents in the use of what was referred to as the ‘sympathetic stain,’ noting that the ink “will not only render ... communications less exposed to detection, but relieve the fears of such persons as may be entrusted in its conveyance.”

Washington suggested that reports could be written in the invisible ink “on the blank leaves of a pamphlet ... a common pocket book, or on the blank leaves at each end of registers, almanacks, or any publication or book of small value.”

Ciphers and secret codes were used to ensure that the contents of a letter could not be understood if

correspondence was captured. In ciphers, letters were used to represent and replace other letters to mask the true message of the missive.

A key was used - which referenced corresponding pages and letters from a well-known book - to decode the document’s true message. Some spy groups even created their own pocket guide to serve as a cipher’s key.

This broadsheet is dedicated to the 250th Anniversary Celebration of the Declaration of Independence for more information visit the National Society Sons of the American Revolution website at: www.sar.org

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