

Plot to Kill George Washington

On March 11, 1776, from his headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts, overseeing the siege of Boston, General George Washington issued a General Order to Colonels or Commanding Officers of regiments of the Continental Army.

Washington's order directed these officers to select four men from each regiment who would form his personal guard.

General Washington had a clear idea of the type of men he was seeking and the qualifications were laid out in the General Order. Washington wrote,

His Excellency depends upon the Colonels for good Men, such as they can recommend for their sobriety, honesty and good behavior;

he wishes them to be from five feet eight Inches high, to five feet ten Inches; handsomely and well made, and as there is nothing in his eyes more desirable than Cleanliness in a Soldier,

he desires that particular attention be made in the choice of such men as are clean and spruce.

Captain Caleb Gibbs, an adjutant of the 14th Massachusetts Continental Regiment, was selected by General Washington to command the new unit, promoted to the rank of Major, and given the title Captain Commandant. The task fell to Gibbs to organize the new unit, whose motto was "Conquer or Die."

The explicit mission of the new group was "to protect General Washington, the army's cash and official papers." Among Gibbs' immediate staff officers was Lieutenant George Lewis, a nephew of General Washington.

The official designation of the new unit was "His Excellency's Guard," or the "General's Guard." Enlisted soldiers referred to the unit as "The Life Guards," "The Washington Life Guards," or "Washington's Body Guard." General Washington usually referred to the unit as "My Guards," while Gibbs signed dispatches and unit correspondence "Commandant C-in-C, Guards."

Within two months of the Lifeguards' formation, several enlisted men and Non-Commissioned Officers were at the center of what became known as the Hickey mutiny. (Mount Vernon)

A group of New York Tories had established a secret organization whose possible goal was to assassinate General Washington while he was encamped with units of the Continental Army on Manhattan Island. (NPR)



Banner of the Guard

The New York Provincial Congress had established the Committee on Conspiracies, a top-secret team of civilians with a mission to gather information about the enemy and detect and thwart the enemy's intelligence operations. (Smithsonian)

As the plot against Washington got bigger, people started to talk, and this little committee - led by lawyer and Continental Congress delegate John Jay - wound up bringing the whole thing down. It was the beginning of America's counterintelligence efforts.

At the start of the Revolutionary War, the governor [appointed by the royal government] and the mayor of New York, both British loyalists, successfully turned some of Washington's personal guards against him. They were ready to strike, but Washington found out. (Smithsonian)

In June 1776, General Washington ordered the arrest of David Mathews, the Loyalist mayor of New York City, for conspiring in support of British plans to invade the city and strike the Continental Army there.

It was later learned that Mathews was also involved in a devious plot against Washington, along with William Tryon, the British-appointed governor of New York.

The conspirators aimed to capture or assassinate Washington using traitors in his "Life Guard," the detachment of soldiers responsible for the general's safety.

They were foiled by the Committee for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies, led by John Jay, who would later gain fame as a Founder, diplomat, and jurist.

Thomas Hickey, the Continental soldier at the center of the plot, was a favorite of Washington.

An Irishman and British Army deserter, Hickey joined the colonial militia in Connecticut and was later handpicked by Washington to join his elite Life Guard.

Hickey proved a disappointment and was later jailed on suspicion of counterfeiting. While detained, he confided to fellow prisoners that he was turning his back on the cause of independence and actively recruiting others to support the British.

Hickey was court-martialed for his role in the plot against Washington, and pleaded innocent to charges of "exciting and joining in a mutiny and sedition," and "treacherously corresponding with, enlisting among, and receiving pay from the enemies of the United Colonies."

Hickey was found guilty on June 26, 1776.

Per General Orders, Head Quarters, New York, June 27th 1776.

Several persons having been detained by Sentries, notwithstanding their having given the Countersign at night, and others in the day time on the wharves on a pretence of their not having passes—The General forbids such practices, and any Soldier convicted of them in future will be punished—Officers of guards to be careful, in posting their Sentries, to make them acquainted with this order.

After Orders. Thomas Hickey belonging to the Generals Guard having been convicted by a General Court Martial whereof Col. Parsons was President of the crimes of “Sedition and mutiny, and also of holding a treach’rous correspondence with the enemy, for the most horrid and detestable purposes,” is sentenced to suffer death. The General approves the sentence, and orders that he be hanged to morrow at Eleven o’Clock.

All the officers and men off duty, belonging to Genl Heath’s, Spencer’s, Lord Stirling’s and Genl Scott’s Brigades, to be under arms, on their respective parades, at Ten o’Clock to morrow morning, to march from thence to the Ground, between Genl Spencer’s and Lord Stirling’s encampments, to attend the execution of the above sentence.

The Provost Marshal immediately to make the necessary preparations, and to attend on that duty to morrow.

After Orders. Each of the Brigade Majors to furnish the Provost Marshal, with twenty men, from each Brigade, with good arms and bayonets, as a guard on the prisoner to and at the place of execution.

By Washington’s orders, all soldiers who were not on duty at the time were present at the execution. Washington later wrote in a letter to the Continental Congress, “I am hopeful this example will produce many salutary consequences and deter others from entering into the like traitorous practices.”

Mere days before the passage of the Declaration of Independence, 20,000 spectators gathered in a field where Manhattan’s modern-day Chinatown lies.

All together, soldiers and citizens alike, they amassed the largest crowd to watch a public execution in the colonies at the time.

Although he was the only one executed, Hickey, it turns out, was part of a much larger scheme, one concocted by British loyalists to assassinate Washington, who at the time was commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. (Smithsonian)

Hickey was the first individual to be executed for treason against what would become the United States.

The assassination plot is ‘hidden history.’ When the British were coming, the last thing Washington wanted to say was, “Hey, everyone, my own men just turned on me.” (Smithsonian)

Information here is primarily from Mount Vernon Foundation; NPR; National Archives; Smithsonian

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young