

Cold Spring Harbor – Isreal Ketchum

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plaque_commemorating_Israel_Ketchum_in_Cold_Spring_Harbor,_New_York.jpg



<http://mentalfloss.com/article/31062/how-motley-crew-counterfeiters-saved-george-washington-continental-army-and-usa>

Henry Dawkins was always a bit of a scoundrel. In the spring of 1776, he finished a long prison tenure and was let back onto the streets. Although free, he was not a changed man. Dawkins continued committing crimes. His knack for law breaking, however, inadvertently saved the USA.

After leaving prison, the ex-con rented a room on Long Island. He told his landlords, Isaac and Israel Youngs, that he was going to start a printing business. (He left out what he'd be printing—counterfeit money.) The brothers loaned Dawkins some dough for a printing press. Dawkins bought the machine under a fake name and hid it in the Youngs' attic. In mid-May, Dawkins asked his friend Isaac Ketcham to buy rolls of currency paper. Ketcham purchased the paper, and a suspicious salesman reported him to the authorities. Days later,

Dawkins was back behind bars. This time, Ketcham and the Youngs brothers were with him.

Ketcham was assigned to a cell brimming with loyalists—Americans who supported the monarchy. Ketcham befriended some of the Tories and eavesdropped on their conversations. The prisoners treated him to the freshest British intelligence, and he learned about multiple plots to capture Manhattan.

Ketcham was desperate to get out of jail, and he knew that digging up dirt on the Brits could be his ticket out. He secretly petitioned the Provincial Congress—the same people who convicted him—and asked to be freed. “I...have something to [tell] to the hounorable house,” he said. “It is nothing concerning my own affair, but entirely on another subject.”

Congress took the hint. Ketcham was quickly called in for questioning, but was sent right back to jail. This time, however, he wasn’t there as a prisoner. He was now a spy.

INSIDE INFO

On June 16, two soldiers, Michael Lynch and Thomas Hickey, had been placed in Ketcham’s cell for counterfeiting. Both men were George Washington’s bodyguards. The duo asked Ketcham and Israel Youngs why they were in jail. The two spun a yarn about being diehard loyalists, and Lynch and Hickey began boasting that they secretly enlisted in the King’s army. They said the Royal Navy was soon going to invade New York, and American defectors like themselves were going to blow up Kings Bridge—the only route to mainland. Other traitors would raid munitions stocks and destroy American supply depots. Washington and his 20,000 troops would be trapped on Manhattan Island, surrounded by Royal navy men and loyalists. A bloodbath was inevitable.

The next morning, Ketcham wrote again to the Provincial Congress. “I have (last night) received intelligence from Israel Youngs that he discovered a plan from whence he did not expect it...he is not willing to explain it to any other person but your Honour. Sir, as to my own liberty, I think I have clearly earned it.”

The Provincial Congress acted quickly. On June 22, a witch-hunt ensued, and every known conspirator was caught. Hickey confessed that eight of Washington’s trusty bodyguards were Tories, and they were just days away from kidnapping the famous General.

MAKING AN EXAMPLE

The news made Washington furious. He targeted his old bodyguard, Thomas Hickey, and made an example out of him for all traitors. Hickey was court-martialed on June 26, and three of his fellow conspirators were forced to testify against him. The court charged Hickey with “mutiny, sedition, and treachery,” and decided that he must “suffer death for said crimes by being hanged by the neck till he is dead.”

Two days later, a crowd of 20,000 people gathered around a wooden scaffold near New York’s Bowery. Hickey was slowly escorted to the gallows by 200 Continental soldiers. At

11:00am, the noose tightened its grip, and Hickey became the first American executed for treason.

Washington warned his men: “[I hope this] will be a warning to every soldier in the army to avoid those crimes and all others, so disgraceful to the character of a soldier, and pernicious to his country, whose pay he receives and bread he eats.”

Two months later, Ketcham and the motley crew of counterfeiters were pardoned.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Hickey_\(soldier\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Hickey_(soldier))

Thomas Hickey (hanged on June 28, 1776) was a [Continental Army](#) soldier in the [American Revolutionary War](#), and the first person executed for treason against what would become the [United States](#).^[1] Born in [Ireland](#), he came to America as a soldier in the British Army and fought as personal assistant to Major General [William Johnson](#) in the [Seven Years' War](#), but deserted to the other side when the [Revolution](#) broke out. He became part of the [Life Guard](#), which protected Gen. [George Washington](#), his staff and the Continental Army's payroll. Hickey was jailed for passing [counterfeit money](#) in [New York](#), tried and executed for [mutiny](#) and [sedition](#), and he may have been involved in an assassination plot against [George Washington](#) in 1776.

In April 1776, after the conclusion of the [Boston campaign](#), Gen. Washington and the Continental Army marched to [New York City](#) and prepared for an anticipated attempt by the [British Army](#) to occupy the city. The [Royal Governor of New York](#), [William Tryon](#), had been driven out of the city by revolutionary forces and was compelled to seek refuge on a ship in New York Harbor. Nevertheless, the city had many [Loyalist](#) residents who favored the British side.

Thomas Hickey was a private in the [Commander-in-Chief's Guard](#), a unit formed on 12 March 1776 to protect Gen. George Washington, his official papers and the Continental Army's cash. That spring Hickey and another soldier were arrested for passing [counterfeit money](#). While incarcerated into Bridewell prison, Hickey revealed to another prisoner, Isaac Ketchum, that he was part of a wider conspiracy of soldiers who were prepared to defect to the British once the expected invasion came.^[2] Arrested by civilian authorities, Hickey was turned over to the Continental Army for trial. He was [court-martialed](#) and found guilty of mutiny and sedition. He was hanged on June 28, 1776 at the corner of [Chrystie](#) and Grand Streets before a crowd of 20,000 spectators in New York. Hickey was the only person put on trial for the conspiracy. During the trial [David Mathews](#), the loyalist [Mayor of New York City](#), was accused of funding the operation to bribe soldiers to join the British. Although the charge was never proven, Mathews and 12 others were briefly imprisoned. The conspiracy became greatly exaggerated in rumor, and was alleged to include plans to kidnap Washington, assassinate his officers and blow up the Continental Army's ammunition magazines. The rumors greatly damaged the reputation of Loyalists throughout the nascent United States.^[citation needed]

Private or Sergeant?^[edit]

In the transcript of *Court Martial for the Trial of Thomas Hickey and Others* on 26 June 1776, Hickey is referred to as a "private sentinel" in Washington's *Life Guards*, under the command of *Maj. Gibbs*. There is reason to suspect this transcript is a copy made shortly after the end of the Revolutionary War, when many official papers were being copied for preservation. In Harry Ward's *George Washington's Enforcers* (2006), he gives Hickey's rank as Sergeant, and notes that Capt. [Caleb Gibbs](#) was not promoted to Major until 29 June 1778, two years after Hickey's trial.^[3] When enlisted soldiers are convicted, it is normal for their punishment to include reduction to the lowest rank,

private. A postwar transcript would explain why Hickey is listed at his lowest rank and Gibbs is identified at his highest rank.^{[[citation needed](#)]}

Assassination plot^{[[edit](#)]}



Richmond Hill (built ca. 1760, demolished 1849).

Washington's headquarters from May to June 1776 was at [Richmond Hill](#), a suburban villa outside the city. [Samuel Fraunces](#), a tavernkeeper whose establishment was about two miles away, provided meals for the general and his officers. Washington hired a housekeeper, a 72-year-old widow named Elizabeth Thompson, who worked at Richmond Hill from June 1776 to December 1781.^{[[4](#)][[5](#)]}

Although Hickey was jailed for passing counterfeit money, and then charged with sedition and conspiracy while in prison, William Spohn Baker, the late-19th-century Washingtonian, believed that the real reason for his execution was involvement in a plot to kill or kidnap Washington:

"Thomas Hickey, one of Washington's Guard, was tried by a court-martial and sentenced to death, being found implicated in a plot to murder the American general officers on the arrival of the British, or at best to capture Washington and deliver him to Sir [William Howe](#). The plot had been traced to Governor Tryon, the mayor ([David Mathews](#)) having been a principal agent between him and the persons concerned in it."^{[[6](#)]}

Baker was wrong about the specific crimes of which Hickey was convicted, but in 1776 there was a real rumor of an assassination plot:

"[June 24, 1776.] A most infernal plot has lately been discovered here, which, had it been put into execution, would have made America tremble, and been as fatal a stroke to us, this Country, as Gun Powder Treason would to England, had it succeeded. The hellish conspirators were a number of Tories (the Mayor of ye City among them) and three of General Washington's Life Guards. The plan was to kill Generals Washington and Putnam, and as many other Commanding Officers as possible."^{[[7](#)]}

"[July 13, 1776.] I suppose you have heard of ye execution of one of the General's Guards, concerned in ye hellish plot, discovered here some time past. There was a vast concourse of people to see ye poor fellow hanged."^{[[8](#)]}

Two other contemporaneous references to an assassination plot have been published.^{[[9](#)]} A garbled account of an assassination attempt appeared over two years later in a provincial English newspaper, *The Ipswich Journal*, 31 October 1778:

Advice is received from America that two persons, a man and a woman who lived as servants with General Washington, have been executed in the presence of the army for conspiring to poison their master.^[10]

Fraunces' Petition to Congress^[edit]



Portrait of Samuel Fraunces, unknown artist, circa 1770-85, [Fraunces Tavern Museum](#), New York City.

In a 5 March 1785 sworn petition to the U.S. Congress, Samuel Fraunces claimed that it was *he* who discovered the assassination plot, that he was falsely accused of being part of it and was jailed until his name was cleared. He wrote (in the third person):

"That he [Fraunces] was the Person that first discovered the Conspiracy which was formed in the Year 1776 against the Life of his Excellency General Washington and that the Suspicions Which were Entertained of his agency in that Important Discovery accationed [sic, occasioned] a public Enquiry after he was made a Prisoner on which the want of positive Proof alone preserved his Life."^[11]

Congress' response to Fraunces' petition downplayed the plot but accepted his role as "instrumental in discovering and defeating" it.^[12] For debts incurred during the Revolutionary War, Congress awarded him £2000,^[13] a later payment covered accumulated interest,^[14] and Congress paid \$1,625 to lease his tavern for two years to house federal government offices.^[15]