



Stars, Stripes, & Secrets

A Poe Lakes Story

“It’s going to be another scorcher,” Maisie said, arm in arm with her husband Jason along Main Street.

He nodded and winked. “Perfect for your historical display. Didn’t you tell me people come through even when they don’t care a lick about history, just to stand in the AC?”

“True.” She grinned. “The hottest years give us the best shot at wrangling townspeople into exploring our heritage. Plus, to celebrate the country’s 250th birthday, we have added more documents from locals with ties back to the founders.”

She rested her head on his shoulder as they passed the flags and the red, white, and blue bunting that covered nearly every surface on the street. Hanging baskets of native flowers in the same three colors swung from the lamp posts. She had lost her first husband, and Jason his first wife, years back, and neither of them had once expected to be walking anywhere arm in arm again. A banner strung over the road announced the Brats & Burger Battle, the grilling contest that would fire up later that morning.

Maisie loved the town this way, before the crowds. Soon Main Street would fill with parade-goers and floats and the high school band, and this year a good dozen members of the Historical Society would march the route in uniforms and dress cut to look like 1776.

At the town meeting hall, Jason kissed her cheek. “I’ll find you once the parade clears and we’ll grab lunch. I want to try Elton Pruitt’s burger this year. He’s been bragging on it for weeks.”

Maisie laughed. “Doesn’t he brag about everything?”

“He does. I still want that burger. It’s got some jalapeño sauce, and you know I love a little heat.”

“You do.” She kissed him once more and hurried inside.

Cat Ellis and Louise Haskell were already at the display, setting out copies of their own family documents. Both women descended from Poe Lakes’

founding families, the ones that traced back to the Philadelphia households who had backed the Revolution.

The three of them worked and traded gossip about the parade floats and which songs the band had supposedly been caught rehearsing. Then Constance Franklin burst in, Vivian Baker Sutcliffe a step behind her.

“We all know Josiah Baker was a Loyalist.” Constance waved a single sheet of paper. “And now I can prove it.”

“That is a dirty lie.” Vivian stretched for a look at the page.

Constance held the letter out to Cat and Louise instead. “I’ve been cataloging the boxes we took in from the Knowles estate. Plenty of it is already authenticated to the Revolutionary period.”

Cat and Louise bent over it together. The first few lines were blurred, but the rest was legible. It read as an accounting of how much bread the writer could bake each week for the British soldiers, with a copy of a supply order to meet the demand. It was signed Josiah Baker, March 1778, Mulberry Street, Philadelphia.

Constance smirked at Vivian, turned on her heel, and went back out to spread the word.

Vivian’s breath came out close to a sob. “It isn’t true. Cat, Louise, you have to help me. Your families go back just as far in Philadelphia, and everyone knew they were Patriots. I know how the rumors have run, and I know how this letter looks. It still isn’t true. We have private letters and papers in our family that call Josiah a Patriot. Please. Help me prove it.” She pressed a tissue to her eyes and left the hall.

Cat looked at Louise. “I think it’s time we went digging in our own family papers.”

She left Maisie in charge, set two of the younger volunteers on the last of the display, and she and Louise headed out to sort through documents they hadn’t brought to exhibit, including the letters too personal to display in public.

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At home, Cat went straight to the wardrobe where she kept her however-many-greats grandfather's correspondence. Somewhere she had the full family tree in a book, but she didn't need it now. She paused running her hands over the beautiful cedar of one of the many pieces her great grandfather had handcrafted in the 1800s. The exterior was treated with a transparent stain and sealer allowing the warm color of the wood to shine through, and each time she opened the wardrobe, Cat caught the faint trace of cedar that still lingered in the unfinished interior.

Near the end of the war Elijah Parsons had written out an account of it, the quiet work he and other men did as spies for Washington, the ways they had supported the Patriots, even the women's associations that raised the money. His pride was evident in the accounts of his wife and eldest daughter participating in the effort.

Then Cat found another letter. He had written to warn those who came after him. He cautioned against branding any man a Loyalist too quickly, not with the punishments being handed out beyond the law, some pushed by a Captain and a Colonel Lynch, no relation as far as he knew, both calling for everything from flogging to hanging on nothing more than suspicion. Some of the truest Patriots, he wrote, wore the other side's colors on purpose. More than a few in their own networks had worn the crown's colors and served British soldiers while spying for the cause.

Cat called Louise, talking fast.

"I have notes on this too," Louise said. "Robert Townsend is in my family's papers as a friend who spoke of hiding messages within seemingly normal letters. Lemon juice and milk were frequently used and could be revealed with heat."

"We need to get back to the hall and test it."

* * *

Maisie and the volunteers gathered close while Cat laid the letter out.

"Look at the spacing." Cat traced the gaps between the lines. "There is room here for a second message tucked in."

She lit a candle and held the paper above the flame, but nothing appeared, so she carried it to the kitchen and steamed it over the kettle. Again, nothing rose to the surface. Cat set it down. “Maybe I had it wrong. I really thought we were onto something.”

Maisie had her laptop open on the folding table. “What if Vivian is wrong and the old rumors are true. Maybe the letter is exactly what it looks like.”

Her screen loaded. “Wait. There is another kind of invisible ink from back then, one heat will not bring up at all. Here is a rough recipe. Oak galls for the ink, and a ferrous sulfate reagent to develop it.”

Louise leaned in to read over her shoulder. “We might as well have it say eye of newt and toe of frog. My pantry is no help here.” She waved one of the volunteers over and handed off the printout. “Run this down to Doc Osgood at the pharmacy. He is the only soul I know who might make sense of it.”

* * *

Doc Osgood came back with the volunteer a while later, reading glasses pushed up on his forehead and a small paper sack in one hand. He tapped the printout the volunteer had carried down to him. “Oak gall ink,” he said. “Now that takes me back to pharmacology school. Professor Watson had a passion for historic chemistry. Somebody would write the hidden lines using a tea of oak galls and let them dry. That is why your candle got you nowhere. Heat brings up lemon juice and milk. It does nothing at all to this. As the recipe states, this needs ferrous sulfate.”

“So where on earth do you get ferrous sulfate?” one of the ladies asked.

Doc drew a small bottle from the sack. “It is the rust treatment the gardeners buy for their azaleas, and it is the very same thing in the iron tablets on my shelf. I ground a few down and mixed a wash on the walk over.”

Constance and Vivian had returned to learn the verdict, neither sure they wanted to hear the final, tested results.

Doc dipped a fine brush and drew it through the blank space between the visible lines. For a breath nothing happened. Then the paper began to darken, thin, brown strokes surfacing where there had been none as the iron found the old ink.

“Would you look at that,” Doc said. “Two hundred and fifty years, and he still has something to say.”

They leaned in together. The hidden lines ran right between the ones about loaves and supply orders. “Officers Grey and Hunter were heard planning a surprise attack on troops stationed near New York referencing Battle of Paoli tactics. No timeframe given.” He also listed names of soldiers who talked loosest at the pub next door to his shop. This he signed with the number 715.

Vivian pressed the back of her hand to her mouth.

Constance’s chin stayed up, but the certainty had gone out of her expression.

“It takes nothing from your own name, Constance,” Louise said. “Though I will note you still haven’t proven that line back to Benjamin Franklin.”

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By the time they reached the grilling contest, the entries were in and the judges were working down the row. Jason found them at the pavilion, where Maisie, Cat, and Louise had fallen in with the casserole committee, loading the long tables with sides and desserts to round out the meal. They told the story as they worked.

Elton Pruitt took Best Burger, with a Wagyu patty stacked with bacon and three cheeses topped with a jalapeño sauce. He grimaced having to hand the recipe over to the head judge per contest rules. Best Brat went to Dale Hawkins, who entered all of the town’s cookoffs every year without fail.

Once the ribbons were handed out, Cat stepped up to say a few words. She told the crowd what the morning had turned up, that a letter everyone had read one way had been hiding the truth in its own lines, and that Josiah Baker had served the cause and not the crown. A copy would go on display at the Historical Society come Monday for anyone who wanted to see it. Vivian’s family, she said, would be entered in the Patriot’s Book of Poe Lakes and honored at the annual gatherings from here on.

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That evening, with the festivities over and the town gone quiet, Jason and Maisie walked home the way they had come in that morning, arm in arm.

“You solved it,” he said. “That whole business with the ink and the spies, I’d have been a week running it down, if I got there at all.”

“I had help,” Maisie said. “The documents from Cat and Louise did most of the work. I only knew how to run a search.”

He tucked her hand closer against his arm. “I keep saying I’ll cut my hours down to nothing one of these years. Days like today, I believe it. This town has plenty of people sharper than me to sort out its mysteries.”

She smiled as he leaned down to kiss her cheek like he had that morning.

A Note on History

Poe Lakes and everyone who lives there are invented, and so is the letter at the heart of this story. Josiah Baker, Vivian, Constance, Cat, Louise, Maisie, and Jason never drew breath, and Constance's claim on Benjamin Franklin is offered strictly for fun.

The method behind the mystery, though, is real. During the Revolution, George Washington ran a spy network remembered as the Culper Ring, organized in 1778 by Major Benjamin Tallmadge. Its agents hid messages in a "sympathetic stain," an invisible ink worked out by Sir James Jay, brother of John Jay. Lemon juice and milk show their writing when warmed, but Jay's ink did not. It stayed invisible until a second liquid, a developer, was brushed across the page. The ink drew on the gallotannic acid found in oak galls, and iron in the developer brought the hidden lines up in brown, the same chemistry as old iron gall ink. That is why Cat's candle and kettle came to nothing and Doc Osgood's iron did the trick.

Cat's ancestor's warning about "a Captain and a Colonel Lynch" points at real men. Colonel Charles Lynch of Virginia lent his name to "Lynch's law," the informal courts that punished suspected Loyalists during the war, most often with whipping and the seizure of property. A Captain William Lynch of Pittsylvania County, no relation, is sometimes credited with the phrase as well for similar practices. The lethal lynching of later centuries came afterward and belongs to a separate and far darker history.

The number Josiah signs is a nod to another piece of real spy craft. To keep a captured letter unreadable, Tallmadge created a code book of seven hundred and sixty-three numbers that stood in for words, names, and places. The people in the ring carried numbers of their own. Washington was 711, Tallmadge 721, and the two men who wrote as Samuel Culper, Abraham Woodhull and Robert Townsend, were 722 and 723. Places followed, with New York at 727 and England at 745. A handful of numbers were never filled in, and 715 is one of them, an empty slot history left open. I borrowed it for Josiah Baker. Robert Townsend, named in Louise's family papers as a friend,

was no invention. He was the merchant who reported from New York as Samuel Culper Junior.

A few places to read more

- The Culper Ring and the sympathetic stain, from George Washington's Mount Vernon. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/espionage-tactics>
- The invisible ink and its oak gall chemistry, HistoryNet. <https://historynet.com/washington-invisible-ink/>
- John Jay's 1778 letter introducing the ink to Washington, Founders Online, National Archives. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-18-02-0218>
- The origin of "Lynch's law," Encyclopedia Virginia. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lynching-in-virginia/>
- Captain William Lynch, "no relation," Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lynch_\(Lynch_law\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lynch_(Lynch_law))
- The Culper code book and its numbers, from George Washington's Mount Vernon. <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/the-culper-code-book>