

Historical Thinking Module

Historical Inquiry, SCIM-C Method (part 2)

In the previous section, the SCIM strategy of historical inquiry was discussed. Specifically, summarizing, contextualizing, inferring, and monitoring, as well as the four analyzing questions per phase. In this application section, the SCIM strategy will be applied to a historical primary source in order to demonstrate the ability of the SCIM strategy to illuminate the source relative to a guiding historical question: What was the role of spies during the Revolutionary War?

The source to be analyzed is a letter from George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge, a spy. The letter was originally hand-written. What you see before you is a transcription based on that original. Before I begin to analyze the letter, I want to make clear how I will proceed, as I address each of the four phases of the SCIM strategy, I will attempt to answer the four analyzing questions associated with each phase. For example, the summarizing phase and its four analyzing questions. As I answer each analyzing question, that question will be highlighted, as will any relevant text within the letter. It is important to know how different portions of the text help to answer different analyzing questions.

The first phase of the SCIM strategy is summarizing. The purpose of summarizing is to locate any information or evidence that is explicitly available within the source. The first piece of evidence available from the source is the source type. That is, I'm analyzing a letter. At this point, it is necessary to read through the letter to get a broad understanding of the letter's author, subject, audience, and purpose.

The letter is addressed and dated. New Windsor, June 27, 1779. "Sir, I observe what you say respecting your position at Bedford – and the fatigue of the horse – with regard to the first, when Bedford was pointed out, it was descriptive only of a central place between the two Rivers and as near the enemy as you could with military prudence take post for the purpose of covering the habitants, and preventing the ravages of small parties. The judgment of the official commanding, is, under the idea just captured, to direct the practices. Sport and choice of ground which ought to be varied continually, while you're near enough to the enemy to give assistance to the people – with respect to the second matter I have only to add that I do not wish to have the horse unnecessarily exposed or fatigued, but if in the discharge of accustomed duties they should get worn down, there is no help for it. Colonel Maylans Regiment is on its march to join you, which will render the duty carrier and Your Troops there more respectable – The inclosed contains matters for our knowledge only.

I am Sir – Your Most Respected Servant

Gen. Washington

As I continue the summarizing phase, what does the letter tell me explicitly? The author of the letter is General George Washington, and he's writing to Benjamin Tallmadge. Unfortunately, from the letter, it is not possible to discern who Benjamin Tallmadge is, as Washington only refers to him as "you." The purpose of the letter is to address two issues. Tallmadge's position at Bedford, and the

fatigue of the horse. Obviously, the letter's within the timeframe of the Revolutionary War. But there is a lot in the letter that is not immediately obvious in terms of summarizing.

The second phase of the SCIM strategy is contextualizing. The purpose of the contextualizing phase is to examine the source in more detail in terms of recognizing and locating the source in time and space. In this case, when and where the letter was written is fairly straightforward, and was mentioned previously within the summarization phase. Specifically, the letter was written in 1779 in New Windsor. Why the letter was written is also clearly stated. General Washington was responding to a previous communication concerning Tallmadge's position at Bedford and the condition of his horse. I now know who wrote the letter, why it was written, and the context within which it was written.

Within the SCIM strategy, I now move on to inferring. That is, what information may be implied or concluded from the evidence within this cryptic source. Examining the first of Washington's two issues, Tallmadge's position at Bedford, Washington intimates that the people in the Bedford area are both part of the general war, and part of Tallmadge's specific assignment, whatever it is. There's clearly a sense that protecting these people is important – the purpose of covering the inhabitants.

Regarding Washington's second issue, Tallmadge's horse, General Washington seems very concerned. The progression of summarizing, through contextualizing, to inferring, always leads me to questions. The fourth phase of the SCIM strategy is the monitoring phase. That is, what questions do I have regarding my initial assumptions and interpretations, or my current understandings. In this case, I have several questions.

1. Who was Tallmadge, what was his role in the war, and what were his orders?
2. What is the relationship between Tallmadge, the enemy, and Colonel Maylan's regiment?
3. What was the larger role of spies in the Revolutionary War?
4. And how involved in selecting, training, and deploying spies was General Washington?

With all four phases of the SCIM strategy complete, I'm left to create final interpretation of the source relative to the guiding historical question: What was the role of spies during the Revolutionary War?

A final interpretation might look like this:

This letter, written by General Washington, in 1779, to Benjamin Tallmadge, suggests that spies were part of a broader relationship between American forces, the British enemy, and the civilians in vicinity of the troops. Washington's commands to Tallmadge involve positioning himself as close as possible to the enemy, offering assistance and protection to the people, and waiting for the arrival of American troops.

The specific issues that concern Washington, and presumably Tallmadge, include his designated location and the fatigue of his horse. These two points call attention to the close relationship between

position and mobility, the first determining to a large extent the effectiveness of the spy, and the second presumably a means of self-protection in the event of detection.

Letters provide only limited information about these broader issues, because they were, by definition, meant to be as cryptic as possible, and thus do not explain broader purposes, identify key participants, or suggest future actions. The letter thus needs to be read as it was presumably written: quickly, in brief, and with specific purposes in mind.

The letter does clearly convey Washington's direct involvement in the command of his troops, which extends in this case to the situation of a particular spy and even the condition of his horse.