Buttons for General Washington

by Peter and Connie Roop
illustrated by Peter E. Hanson
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For Father—a patriotic son of the American revolution whose heritage enhances our history

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This book is available in two editions:
Library binding by Carolrhoda Books, Inc.,
a division of Lerner Publishing Group
Soft cover by First Avenue Editions,
an imprint of Lerner Publishing Group
241 First Avenue North
Minneapolis, MN 55401 U.S.A.

Website address: www.lernerbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roop, Peter.
Buttons for General Washington.
(A Carolrhoda on my own book)
Summary: Reconstructs a possible mission of the fourteen-year-old spy who carried messages to George Washington's camp in the buttons of his coat during the Revolutionary War.
E280.D37R67 1986 973.3'85 [92] 86-6120

Manufactured in the United States of America
18 19 20 21 22 23 – JR – 06 05 04 03 02 01
AUTHORS’ NOTE

Spies played an important role in the Revolutionary War. American spies kept General George Washington informed about the size of British troops and the state of their supplies, and they often discovered when and where the British planned to attack.

In the fall of 1777, the British army, under the command of General Howe, had captured and occupied Philadelphia. The Darragh family lived across the street from General Howe’s British headquarters. As Quakers, the Darraghs were gentle people who used “thee,” “thy,” and “thou” as forms of address, dressed plainly, and opposed violence. They were not supposed to fight on either side, but Charles, the oldest Darragh boy, had joined General Washington’s army, and the rest of the family became spies to aid in his safety.

Mr. Darragh, a teacher, created a code for secret messages. Mrs. Darragh, who later became the most famous spy of the family, hid the messages in the buttons of her son John’s coat. Fourteen-year-old John then took the messages to Washington’s camp, where Charles Darragh read them.

This story tells what might have happened on one of John Darragh’s dangerous missions as an American spy.
“Are any soldiers in the street, John?” his mother asked.

“Only the guard at General Howe’s headquarters,” John answered.

“Remember, John.
Keep away from the British soldiers,” his mother said.

“And go the way I told thee.”

“But I know a faster way,” John said.

“Do as thy mother asks,”
his father said.

“She has sent messages to
General Washington before.”
John nodded his head. He wished that his mother would finish sewing the new buttons on his coat. He was nervous and in a hurry to be on his way to General Washington’s camp.
“Here, John,” his mother said at last.
“The new buttons look just like the old ones.”
John took his coat.
He ran his fingers over the cloth-covered buttons.
He could not feel the small holes inside the buttons.
Secret messages for General Washington were hidden in those holes.
"If I am caught, will anyone be able to read the messages?" John asked.

"No," answered his father.

"I wrote them in a code that only thy brother Charles can read."

"I wish I could give the buttons to General Washington himself," John said.

"Maybe someday thee will," his mother said.

John carefully buttoned his coat.

"Be careful," his father warned.

"The British are looking for American spies."
“If they catch thee, it means prison—or worse,” his mother said.

A shiver ran down John’s back.
He knew that captured spies were lucky to end up in prison. Usually they were hanged. “I will be careful,” John said. “Here is thy pass to leave Philadelphia,” his mother said. “Thou needs it to get past the British guards.”
John put the pass in his pocket. His hands shook as he touched the buttons for good luck.

“We will wait supper for thee,” his mother said.

“Godspeed, John,” his father said.
John walked up Second Street.
He turned on Market Street.
British soldiers were everywhere.
John wished they would all go back to England. John walked slower as he neared the guardpost at the edge of town.
“Hey, Yankee Doodle,” he heard a voice call from behind him. John turned quickly. It was Samuel Baker. Samuel’s family liked the British soldiers. They wanted the British to win the war. The Bakers and other Tories wanted America to be part of England again. John hated Samuel even more than he hated the British soldiers.
“Did you see all of our new soldiers?” Samuel asked.
“You Americans can never win now. General Howe will whip Washington before Christmas.”
“He will not,” John said fiercely.
“Oh, yes, he will,” Samuel said.
“We British are too strong for you.” John stepped up to Samuel.
“Just thee wait and see who wins the war,” John said angrily.
“When we win, thee can return to England where thou belongs!”
“Who is going to make me?” Samuel said, poking John.
“Me!” John yelled.

“See,” Samuel said.

“We will win.” Samuel walked away proudly.
Brushing off his coat, John stood up. He wished he could hit Samuel back, even though he knew that he should not fight. Besides, he knew it was more important to reach General Washington’s camp.
John stopped at the guardpost. A red-coated British soldier took his pass. He looked at it for a long time. John began to worry. “You are going to your aunt’s house?” the soldier asked. “Yes,” answered John. “I must check each pass carefully,” the soldier said. “There are many American spies. You are not a spy are you?” the soldier asked with a smile. “Oh, no, sir,” John answered quickly. “Off with you then,” said the soldier. “Just remember, we hang any spies we catch.”
Well, thou won't catch me, John thought as he put the pass back in his pocket.
John knew he should not be too sure of himself, though, so he kept a sharp lookout for more British soldiers. They might guess that he was a spy if they found him past his aunt’s house. They might even find the secret messages.
John stopped suddenly. He heard horses coming. He jumped over a ditch and hid behind a tree.
Five British soldiers came along the road. They passed slowly. They were looking for someone.
John waited until the soldiers had ridden away.
He touched his buttons for good luck.
A button was missing!
John looked all over the ground.
He could not find the button anywhere.
Then he remembered Samuel Baker's blow.
The button must have come off near the guardhouse.
John started to run back down the road toward Philadelphia.
His breath came in short gasps.
He had to find that button.
He stopped near the guardpost. He looked all around for the button. “Are you back so soon?” John jumped in surprise. The British guard walked toward him. “I lost one of my buttons,” John said. “My mother would not be happy if I could not find it.” The soldier held out his hand.
He had John's button!
“I found it where you boys were fighting,” the soldier said. John tried to keep his hands from shaking as he took the button. He hoped the soldier had not found the message.
“Thank thee for finding my button,” John said, backing away.
“On your way, then,” said the soldier.
John put the button deep in his pocket.  
He looked at the sky.  
It was past noon.  
Against his mother’s warning, he took a shortcut through the woods toward General Washington’s camp.  
John stopped for a rest after an hour.  
He took a long drink from an icy stream.
Suddenly, a hand grabbed him from behind as he stood up.
“What might you be doing in these woods?” asked a gruff voice.
John was spun around before he could answer.
He faced a bearded man.
The man aimed a pistol at John.
John said the first words that came to him.

“I was hunting.”

“Hunting without a gun?” the man asked.

“I was really going to my aunt’s house,” John said.

“I will take you with me to find out the truth,” the man said sharply.

“Now march,” he ordered.

John knew that the man would shoot him if he tried to run.

They walked through the woods for a long time.

John was hungry and tired.

He was scared, too.

Where was the man taking him?

What would John do if they were going to a British camp?
At last they came to an open field. 
A large white tent stood in one corner. 
Soldiers in blue uniforms were marching in the field. 
It was an American camp.
John breathed a sigh of relief. Once he talked to Charles, everything would be all right. "We will have the truth from you now," the man told John.
He took John to the white tent.
“I have a spy here,” the man told a soldier guarding the tent.
“I caught him prowling in the woods near Philadelphia.”
The soldier stepped into the tent. He was back within a moment. "Bring him in."
The bearded man pushed John into the tent.
“There is a message in Father’s code hidden inside.”

Charles uncovered the button. He took out the message and looked at it.

“Please decode the message right away,” the tall man said.

“Don’t, Charles,” said John.

“Only General Washington is supposed to know.”
Charles laughed at his brother.
“John, this is General Washington.” General Washington held out his hand. John shook it.
“It is an honor to shake the hand of so brave a patriot,” the General said.
“Thank thee, sir,” John said.
“Charles,” said the General, “please report to me after you have decoded the messages.” General Washington left the tent.
Charles began cutting the buttons off John's coat.
John could not believe that he had met General Washington.
Washington's words of praise still filled John's ears.
After removing the messages, Charles sewed the buttons back on John’s coat.
“Now be careful on the way home,” Charles said.
“We need thee to bring more buttons.”
John touched the buttons for good luck. Then he laughed as he put on his coat. “I will bring enough buttons for General Washington’s whole army!”
WITHDRAWN
Fourteen-year-old John Darragh was a spy. But British-occupied Philadelphia in 1777 was not a safe place for an American spy. If he were captured, John knew he would be hanged. In this suspenseful story based on accounts of the Darragh family’s spying activities for General Washington, young John undertakes a dangerous mission to deliver a message to the American army.

A Notable Children’s Trade Book In The Field Of Social Studies, NCSS-CBC Joint Committee

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