

PLOT TO KILL WASHINGTON

George Washington and the Plot of the Poison Peas.

In June 1776, rumors swirled in New York City, Williamsburg, and throughout the other colonies of various plots against the life of George Washington as he and 20,000 men of the northern Continental Army were in New York preparing for an expected attack from 30,000 British soldiers, 10,000 sailors, and hundreds of Royal Navy warships. New York's Royal Governor, William Tryon, situated on a British warship in New York harbor, hatched a plot to make sure the British troops met with little resistance by organizing Loyalists in the city to rise against the Patriots at the sight of Howe's fleet, abduct George Washington's staff, and murder Washington himself.

With the help of the Mayor of New York, David Mathews, Tryon bought the loyalty of dozens of men and women, many of whom formed a secret society pledged to George III and the destruction of the Revolution. Among them were several members of Washington's personal bodyguard, known as the Life Guard, including Thomas Hickey, an Irishman who had deserted from the British army. Hickey had easy access to the Commander-in-Chief, so it was said at the time that he took charge of the plot to eliminate the general by poisoning him. There is a tradition that Hickey enlisted the assistance of Washington's housekeeper, the daughter of an enslaved person of "Black Sam" Fraunces, the owner of Fraunces Tavern, where Washington took his meals. There are several versions of the story, but the one that first appeared in the early 19th century maintains that Samuel Fraunces foiled the plot by notifying Washington that arsenic had been placed in a dish of fresh peas, the general's favorite food. Other stories that emerged later in the 1800s attributed Washington's rescue to the housekeeper.

Beginning on June 15, Hickey, other members of Washington's Life Guard, and dozens of New Yorkers, including the mayor, were arrested and imprisoned for, as one soldier in the city at the time put it, contriving a Plot to Kill general Washington." The Virginia Gazette reported that "a most diabolical plot to assassinate the general at York" had been discovered. Another eyewitness later recollected that he was present at the punishment of Hickey, "one of General Washington's Life Guards as it was said for bribing the cook to poison the General."

Never heard of this story? Many haven't. Novelist Brad Meltzer came across it in a footnote and couldn't stop thinking about it. He investigated and found it to be true. But aside from confirming an anecdote, Meltzer uncovered insights into George Washington. The man whom we imagine as the stoic and stone-faced father of the country, with a brain for his heart, was a real human. And that humanity – as well as Washington's leadership – was put on display as he unraveled the plot against him.