UnLOCk THE BOX
AT HOME
with the Culper Code

GET INSPIRED

The Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress holds the papers of 23 of America's presidents, from George Washington to Calvin Coolidge. The papers of George Washington include approximately 77,000 items accumulated by Washington between 1745 and 1799 and constitute the largest collection of original Washington papers in the world.

During the American Revolutionary War, code was used to provide General George Washington with critical information on British troop movements and other activities. For example, the Culper spy ring, directed by Major Benjamin Tallmadge, operated in New York City while the area was occupied by Britain. To facilitate secret communications, Tallmadge created a code in which numbers were substituted in place of words. The numbers and text were arbitrary and fixed in their relationship. To read the message, the receiver would need the same codebook that the sender used to create it.

In this activity, kids will decode a message using the Culper Code that will UnLOCk a box full of treasures, then use the code to create their own secret message.

GET READY

1. Collect materials:
   - ⚒ Combination lock with letters
   - ⚒ The Culper Code to use online, or print a copy
   - ⚒ Print the clue below, copy it in calligraphy, or create your own
   - ⚒ Your "UnLOCk" box using the instructions here and filled with a treasure of your choosing inside
2. Set your combination lock

UnLOCk THE BOX

1. Use the code to open the box. Kids should find the words that match the numbers on the code sheet, then use the first letter of each word to UnLOCk the box.
2. To extend the activity, place a clue in the box to lead them on a new search, or have them create their own clue and use it to relock the box.

> *From the first of each of these, you will find the code you need:*
>
> *193 | 298 | 548 | 600 | 635*

Answer: FIRST | 193 = **F**leet, 289 = **I**nland, 548 = **R**eady, 600 = **S**ignal, 635 = **T**roops

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EXPLORE MORE

⚒ Thomas Jefferson's cipher

In 1803, Thomas Jefferson proposed a means of secret communication to the explorers Lewis and Clark as they traveled west across the continent. He suggested they use a type of Vigenère cipher, in which letters are substituted for other letters based not on a codebook, but on an algorithm. Jefferson's instructions explain how to encrypt or decrypt a message based on a square. The square is established by a pattern, which means that Lewis and Clark could reproduce it and execute the algorithm as long as they understood the underlying pattern.

Challenge kids to write a secret message to compare Washington's code and Jefferson's cipher. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? (For instance, codebooks have to be distributed and may be stolen, but algorithms might be cracked by someone skilled in decryption.) What were the real-world historical situations faced by Washington and Jefferson, such as geography, travel, and communication technologies, and how might those have affected their use of codes?

⚒ Read more about both of these codes in this blog post from "Teaching with the Library of Congress"

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