

HERCULES MULLIGAN

by Mike McCormack

An almost forgotten hero was born on 25 September 1740 in Coleraine, County Derry. He came to New York City in 1746 where he became a major contributor to America's Irish immigrant story. His name was Hercules Mulligan. He graduated King's College in 1784 and became a haberdasher, tailoring clothes for colonial aristocrats and British officers and even married Elizabeth Sanders, a British admiral's niece. Yet, when a bankrupt Crown exploited its colonies with taxes he opposed them and in 1765 became a leader of the secret Sons of Liberty. He was a member of the Committee of Correspondence, a group that rallied opposition to the British through written communications. In August 1775, he and a volunteer militia company captured four British cannons from the Battery and in 1776, he and the Sons of Liberty toppled a statue of King George III in Bowling Green, then melted the lead into bullets to return the statue to the Brits.

Earlier, in 1773, a penniless teen had arrived with a letter of introduction to Mulligan's brother Hugh from a family he knew and for whom the teen had clerked in St. Croix. Hercules took him into his home at 23 Queen St (now 218 Pearl Street) in lower Manhattan and sent him to King's College. Mulligan's anger over British oppression was contagious and his house-guest soon joined him in the Sons of Liberty and in 1775, even wrote a popular essay denouncing the British. The boy's name was Alexander Hamilton.

As violence intensified, Mulligan quietly endured the British occupation of New York, since while outfitting British officers, he engaged them in seemingly meaningless conversation and, asking the right questions, gained valuable insight into their plans. He would then put it in a note and sew it into the hem of a new shirt, pack it in a box and send his servant, Cato, off as if he were simply delivering an order. Cato was his equally patriotic African servant who served as a spy together with Mulligan, acting the role of courier. He would pass through British lines by posing as a slave on an errand for his master; he was also known to many of the British sentries who frequented Mulligan's shop. As a result, Cato passed unchallenged and delivered the information to none other than Alexander Hamilton, who had now become George Washington's aide de camp. On at least two occasions their information prevented a planned ambush of Washington.

After a few years of freelancing as a spy, Mulligan was recruited into the Culper Spy Ring by Robert Townsend, a member of the ring and a successful merchant who traveled back and forth between the City and Setauket, Long Island – the center of the spy ring. Mulligan sometimes even rode the 65 miles to Setauket himself to deliver information that couldn't wait. In 1781, a year after Benedict Arnold's betrayal of West Point, he betrayed Mulligan by outing him as a spy. With no evidence to verify his accusation, the British who despised Arnold as a turncoat, weren't about to give up their favorite Irish tailor and ignored the charge! Mulligan continued collecting data.

When the Revolutionaries were won, Mulligan, who outwardly appeared to be like all the other Loyalists, feared an act of patriotic revenge, but George Washington remembered his confidential correspondent. On November 26, 1783, Washington led an 'Evacuation Day' parade celebrating his return to New York. The following morning, the triumphant general stopped at 23 Queen Street and enjoyed breakfast with Mulligan announcing his savior as '*a true friend of liberty*.' Washington then generously ordered a full civilian wardrobe. Mulligan hung a sign outside his shop: **Clothier to General Washington** and his business boomed. After Washington's Presidential inauguration in 1789, he went back to Mulligan's Clothing Emporium where he hired him as the official Presidential Tailor. Mulligan hung out a new sign and became wildly popular!

He eventually bought a large home off of the Bowery where he retired comfortably until 1825 when he died at eighty-five. He is buried with his family in Trinity Churchyard at Broadway and Wall Street. Time covered up the remnants of his life and since 1970 there is a 24-story building at 218 Pearl Street and it is not known what happened to Cato. However, on January 25, 1785, Mulligan and Hamilton became two of the founders of the New York Manumission Society to promote the abolition of slavery.

Finally, in 2016, Hercules Mulligan was given a page of his own on the U.S. CIA website and there is now talk of naming a small bridge in lower Manhattan as the Hercules Mulligan Bridge. However, many may still not learn the truth because in 2015 a Broadway musical HAMILTON revised the history of this trio of conspirators. Sadly, they combined the characters of Mulligan and Cato into one; showing Mulligan as an African patriot thereby robbing Mulligan of his Irish heritage and the true African patriot, Cato, of his very existence. How sad!