

Unexpected Histories

Volume 3

The Secret in Arlington

Edward Barnard

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Volume 3: The Secret in Arlington

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Chapter 1. The Secret in Arlington

There is a secret message in Arlington, hidden in plain sight, on the headstone of the founding cryptographer of the NSA (National Security Agency). For more than 40 years nobody noticed it was there. How is that even plausible? His widow, Elizebeth Friedman, was that good.

The Photograph

The opening page (frontispiece) of *The Woman Who Smashed Codes: A True Story of Love, Spies, and the Unlikely Heroine Who Outwitted America's Enemies* (2017) by Jason Fagone reads:

The king hath note of all that they intend, By interception which they dream not of. –
SHAKESPEARE, HENRY V, 1599

Knowledge itself is power. –FRANCIS BACON, SACRED MEDITATIONS, 1597

William and Elizebeth Friedman had, in 1918, [encoded a secret message in a photograph](#) (Figure 1.1, “Encrypted graduation photo”) using the Bacon cipher.



KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Figure 1.1. Encrypted graduation photo

The NSA declassified and released, in 2014, [A Pioneer in Cryptology](#) which explains the photo.

Conveying a secret message, students and staff of the U.S. Army's cryptographic school in Geneva, Illinois, assemble for a graduation picture with their director, William F. Friedman (seated at center right), in February 1918. Friedman arranged his pupils and colleagues to form five-element groups in various combinations, as Morse code uses dots and dashes.

The message reads from left to right, beginning at the back row, where the letter “K” is enciphered as “dot dash dot dot dash,” and spells out “Knowledge is power,” an aphorism of the 16th Century English philosopher Francis Bacon. Alas, Friedman had four fewer people than he needed and had to serve by himself as the final “r”.

William and Elizebeth married 1917, and thus they jointly taught this cryptographic class during their first year of marriage. Each of the 76 persons in the photo is looking towards the camera, representing “A,” or away from the camera for “B.” Elizebeth is seated in the center of the five people, Fabyan seated leftmost.

The George C. Marshall Foundation, holder of the William F. Friedman collection, published a [five-minute video about the Knowledge is Power photo](#). The narrator explains that the Friedmans had a copy of the wide photo hanging at home, and that William always had a second copy of that photo under glass on his office desk. The photograph, with its Bacon cipher, was his constant companion.

Arlington

Widow Elizebeth Friedman, in designing their headstone, surely reflected back on how they met her first day at Riverbank. Their project was to determine who was the “real” author of the Shakespeare plays. The “Knowledge is Power” photo hung above her desk at the time of William’s funeral in 1969.

Elizabeth commissioned their headstone to read KNOWLEDGE IS POWER at the bottom. This was her reference to how they first met, and to Friedman’s message of 50 years earlier, the Francis Bacon quotation that had been encoded in the Francis Bacon biliteral cipher.

Elizabeth lived another ten years. She gave the (classified) oral history interview during that time, her husband long since interred underneath that headstone. So, among those who knew, the source and significance of KNOWLEDGE IS POWER would be known. The 1918 photo was itself no particular secret; visitors to their home saw it on the wall. Visitors to Friedman’s office would have seen it on his desk.

Now, after 50+ years of marriage, she’d lost her husband. Knowledge is power, sure, but she was undoubtedly evoking the foundation of their relationship, carved in granite forever. [Figure 1.2, “William F. and Elizebeth Smith Friedman,”](#) depicts William F. and Elizebeth Smith Friedman in an exhibit at the National Cryptologic Museum at Fort Meade, Maryland.



Figure 1.2. William F. and Elizebeth Smith Friedman

Hiding in Plain Sight

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