



# Virginia 4-H MAKING the Future

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## The History of Codes and Ciphers

### The History Behind it . . .

#### ***When were codes and ciphers used?***

Codes and ciphers have been used for thousands of years to send secret messages back and forth among people. They have evolved from simple codes and ciphers to more complex encryption used by computers to send information electronically.

One of the earliest use of ciphers was with the cipher disk, invented in Italy around 1470 by Leon Battista Alberti. The use of codes and ciphers in the military dates back to the beginning of the US Army Signal Corps which was formed in June of 1860. They used a system of flag and torch movements to send messages back and forth. These flags and torches could be seen for miles by both their allies and their enemies, so they used cipher disks to encrypt the messages.

Today, the National Security Agency/Central Security Service (NSA/CSS) is America's codemakers and codebreakers. Together, NSA and CSS provide the technology and the information our Nation's leaders and warfighters need to get their jobs done.

#### ***World War I***

Armies used codes and ciphers to send secret messages back and forth during World War I. One of the most successful use of codes during the war was with a group of 14 Choctaw Indians soldiers from Oklahoma. Colonel Bloor, Commander of the 142nd Infantry, stated in a memo, "It had been found that the Indian's vocabulary of military terms was insufficient. The Indian word for "Big Gun" was used to indicate artillery. "Little gun shoot fast", was substituted for machine gun and the battalions were indicated by one, two and three grains of corn." The Germans were often able to break the codes sent back and forth over the telephone, but they were never able to understand the Choctaw code talkers!

#### ***Did you know?***

- More than 10,000 Native Americans served in World War I.
- In WWII the Marine Corps recruited Navajos to serve as code talkers, resulting in the only communication that was unbreakable by the skilled Japanese cryptographers.

#### ***Sources***

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- ⇒ The National Cryptologic Museum: [www.nsa.gov/about/cryptologic\\_heritage/museum/index.shtml](http://www.nsa.gov/about/cryptologic_heritage/museum/index.shtml)
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