

Benedict Arnold – Savior of the American Revolution  
Daniel Stahl

I'm pretty sure everyone here has heard the name Benedict Arnold. In my view, one of the most fascinating figures in American history. I think most of us here know that the name Benedict Arnold is synonymous with the word "Traitor". But what really was the traitorous act? How did it really go down? What specifically was the transaction? What was offered? And what was received? Why did his efforts fail? And how did his betrayal affect the American Revolution? I will strive to answer those questions for you in this paper.

Before Arnold became America's notorious traitor, he was probably America's greatest war hero.

To understand Arnold, one must go back to Norwich Connecticut in 1741. Arnold was the son of a successful sea merchant. When he was about 13, his father, also named Benedict, fell on hard times after a severe economic downturn. The economic collapse combined with the fact that 2 of Arnold's siblings died from Yellow Fever, had a profound effect on young Benedict. Arnold Senior, always had a drinking problem, but became worse after suffering the loss of his wife and children. He allowed his business to become unattended and eventually fail. Arnold Senior was in and out of debtors prison because of his drinking and inability to pay his bills. Because of his father's reputation as a drunkard and a failure, young Benedict vowed to someday be successful and restore his family name.

One thing to know about young Benedict Arnold is that he was considered a very handsome young man, very athletic, well-muscled, graceful dancer, and ice skater. He had an exceedingly strong sense of propriety and honor. From boyhood, Arnold was known as a fast learner and a hard worker. He longed for action, craved attention. At 16, he joined the "Sons of Liberty" and signed up to fight the French during the French & Indian war where he saw his first military action.

History says that Arnold engaged in a number of duels. He was a vain man, quick to anger, sometimes peevish in nature. If you ever questioned his honor or integrity, you better watch out because if he does not challenge you to a duel, he'll likely just simply beat the crap out of you.

One story illustrates this character trait. Around 1765, the British had started taxing American goods and the new British taxes took a big bite out of Arnold's fledgling sea trader business. Like all Americans Arnold hated the new British taxes. So, he started smuggling to make ends meet. One day, Arnold was publicly confronted by a British tax collector, accusing Arnold of smuggling (which was probably true). But Arnold nonetheless, took umbrage, grabbed him by the collar, physically manhandled him, dragged him into the street, tied him to a horse post, and publicly whipped him in the town square. It was a brutal beating, witnessed by dozens. The British officer later brought a lawsuit against Arnold, and it went to court, and Arnold was found guilty, but the judge only gave Arnold a token admonishment, a slap on the wrist. Norwich, his home town relied on shipping and trade, and largely supported Arnold's action, and thus a local American Folk Hero was born.

In later years, Arnold would display his complete ineptness when it came to the fine art of subtlety and politics, and taking people's feelings into account. He had a way of rubbing people the wrong way, but that didn't matter because Arnold made his bones on the battlefield.

Arnold craved military action. He had to be in the fight. He had to lead the fight. He was fearless in the line of fire, a self-taught expert in military strategy, and motivating his men. Arnold was truly America's

first Action Hero. His many battlefield exploits are legend, each time, cementing his reputation as George Washington's golden boy. His capture of Fort Ticonderoga with the famous Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys was one of his early accomplishments and greatly impressed Washington.

Many historians believe the Battle of Valcour Island on Lake Champlain perhaps saved the revolution. It was there, Arnold built America's first naval fleet, and used it to bloody the nose of the British. In the end, technically, Arnold's forces lost the engagement, all the American ships were destroyed, but he inflicted far heavier casualties on the British than one would have expected. He forced the British to withdraw for the season and delayed their advance at an important time in the war. Arnold again captured the attention of General Washington, who now realized he had a star naval commander and battlefield commander working for him. Sure, Arnold was crazy, but he was Washington's kind of crazy and that's the way Washington liked it.

Perhaps the battle that cemented Arnold's reputation in the eyes of Washington was the battle of Saratoga. This story says a lot about Arnold's character and fighting spirit. Arnold knew the real action was going to be at Saratoga, but he was stationed 100 miles away at Fort Stanwix with no enemy in sight. So, without permission he left his command to his second in charge and rode to Saratoga to join the fight – because Arnold HAD to be in the action.

Arnold arrived at the American camp desperate to fight the British and lead men in battle, By the time Arnold arrived at camp, Horatio Gates was in command, and in fact, Gates' entire command structure was in place, Arnold was strangely out of place, he was extra. He had no authority, no men, officially he had nothing to do, And Horatio Gates told him to sit in his room and be quiet. But of course, there was no way in hell Arnold was going to sit on his hands when there was a battle to be won.

Arnold immediately begged and pleaded with Gates to let him take some men and bring the battle to the British.

At first Gates resisted, but finally, just to shut him up, Gates let him take about 2000 men forward to attack the British in the woods. Arnold immediately rushed in to the thickest of the fight.

"Nothing could exceed the bravery of Arnold during that battle" one of his men said," He was the very genius of war", said another. He was racing back and forth behind his men, urging them forward. For more than three hours Arnold and his men fought through the crackling of musket fire and crash of small canons. Arnold rode around on his black stallion, eyes flashing, pointing his sword, braving gunfire, urging his men to fight. Arnold was like a mad man, taking ridiculous chances with his own life, showing his men his bravery under fire.

The next day ignoring orders from Horatio Gates to stay put yet again, and without authorization, Arnold again rode his stallion into the thickest of the fighting and took command of the first Americans he encountered. He said, "No man shall keep me in my tent today, victory or death!" It was a second day of chaotic combat, just the way Arnold liked it. At one point he actually rode his horse between the opposing armies, and again behaved as a madman taking extreme chances with his own life.

His luck did not hold out entirely as a bullet ripped through his left femur while killing his horse. Still, he urged his men forward as the British broke and ran. Reeling from the pain of his leg wound, Arnold watched his men provide the most significant victory of the war to that point.

Everyone on the field knew Arnold was responsible for the victory at Saratoga, or at least played a very important role in the success. But shockingly, Gates didn't give him any credit, and didn't even mention Arnold in his reports back to Washington. Arnold was stunned. Now his leg was seriously injured, he was suffering from extreme pain, while he watched Gates take all the credit for the resounding victory at Saratoga.

While Gates really wanted to keep Arnold's actions under wraps, the men knew about Arnold's bravery under fire. And word got back to Washington about what really happened. While Arnold's valor was not recognized by Gates, it was recognized by the man whose opinions mattered most, George Washington. In fact, throughout his military career, Arnold's greatest friend and mentor was George Washington.

It was the stunning victory at Saratoga, that finally convinced the French that the Americans could actually win the war. Soon after Saratoga America made an alliance with the French.

But all this background begs the question: Why did Arnold turn? How did it happen?

A little more background...While his leg was still healing, Arnold was not really capable of leading men in the field, so Washington made him military governor of the city of Philadelphia. The British recently abandoned Philadelphia and consolidated their position in New York.

Arnold assumed command of Philadelphia in May, 1778. But it was here in Philadelphia as military governor, that Arnold started to feel a bit entitled to more than just his military salary, and the snub from Gates in his report to Washington after Saratoga was still eating at him.

As military governor of Philadelphia, he immediately moved into the largest mansion available and started issuing the orders of a military commander that didn't sit well with the locals. He acted in a high handed way, was often rude, dismissive and condescending to the local Philadelphia leaders.

He also started making ethically questionable choices, and made alliances with local merchants, started taking bribes. After all, he was owed right? He was successful sea trader, he volunteered to serve his country when called. He sacrificed his health and his wealth for the cause of independence, and he received precious little in return. So now it was time to even the score.

He posted guards outside his door, bought expensive new furniture, and rode around town in a fancy new carriage. People were beginning to wonder where he was getting his money. He was living in relative luxury while most residents barely had enough food. People were wondering how he was paying the bills.

## **WHAT WAS THE ACTUAL BETRAYAL**

I hate to blame the woman, but it might have been a pretty woman who influenced his decision.

As military governor, at one of the many fancy dinner parties he hosted, Arnold spied the young 18 year-old Miss Peggy Shippen, he asked for an introduction, and was immediately smitten. One person who knew Peggy said she was the most beautiful woman he had ever met. Her father was an important local figure, judge Edward Shippen, who was known to have loyalist leanings.

Young Peggy was fascinated by the stories of Arnold's gallantry and courage. Soon after their introduction Benedict and Peggy were married in her father's home in April of 1779. She was 18 and he was 38. It's not known what they talked about in the early days of their marriage, but based on subsequent events, we can guess. Given all that he had suffered, the spilling of blood, the loss of his personal business and fortune, not getting the respect and credit for his battlefield heroics, combined with the insistent pleadings of his beautiful young wife, caused Arnold, the first time to start thinking about offering his services to the British.

Only a month after their marriage, Arnold made his first overture.

Now in this part of the story, I have to back up a little bit. Years before she married Arnold, Peggy met the acquaintance of a young British officer Major John Andre during the days when the British occupied Philadelphia. Andre was known as a rising young star, and he was quite charming. He was well versed in history, culture, poetry, music, and drama. He was a handsome young man, rather elite, well read, and was everyone liked him immediately. Peggy considered Andre a "dear friend" from her acquaintance with him years before when she was only 14 or 15 years old. But most importantly, Andre was gaining the favor of senior British General Henry Clinton, and critically, Clinton made Andre Chief of British Intelligence.

Now back to the story. Local leaders stacked up charges against Arnold. There were charges of malfeasance, illegal purchases, illegal use of public wagons for private gain, using soldiers for personal tasks and generally being disrespect toward the leaders of Pennsylvania. Congressional leaders at the time were quite nervous about how military commanders were taking on a new kind of celebrity status, and they worried that the military would become too strong, too untouchable. They were convinced Arnold had committed crimes and were determined to hold him to account and take him down a peg, not just to check Arnold himself, but also to send a message that in America, we have civilian control of the military. That's what makes us different from England. They filed formal court-martial charges against Arnold.

By this time Arnold was exceedingly unpopular and was getting sick of the pushback from Philadelphia politicians and wanted to offer his services to Washington as a field commander again, but in light of his new legal troubles, Washington told Arnold to stay in Philadelphia and face the charges. Washington was a stickler for propriety and wanted Arnold's legal cloud lifted before he could return to active Army Service.

There was a court martial trial, and Arnold was found not guilty of the most serious charges, and passed other minor charges on to be resolved by General Washington. Congress ordered Washington to reprimand Arnold as his punishment for the remaining charges, essentially giving him a slap on the wrist. Instead of being happy with that outcome, Arnold was enraged again, that Washington, instead of being grateful for Arnolds service, actually gave him a reprimand as he was required by Congress to do.

Arnold expected nothing less than a full acquittal, and apology, and immediate restoration of his previous rank and position. When instead he received a mild rebuke from Washington, he felt betrayed yet again. In response, he resigned his Army Commission, and left the army seething with resentment.

Arnold began to wonder what good would it do to replace one unfair government with another. This insult may have been another reason Arnold turned to the British.

Arnold hired the services of his agent, Joseph Stansbury, a closet loyalist and friend of Peggy Shippen's father to make an overture to the British. In May of 1779, Stansbury, at the behest of Arnold, spoke in hushed tones to Major Andre, Chief of British Intelligence, and let him know Arnold was ready and willing to offer his services to the British.

Major Andre was in shock. He never dreamed that the famous General Arnold would be willing to work for the British. But now Andre had an enormous intelligence asset and had to figure out how Arnold could be of service. Andre and Arnold devised a method of coded communication that was to be handled by Arnold's wife Peggy.

The only problem is that by now, after the reprimand Arnold resigned his position in the Army. He was now a civilian, if he was ever going to be in a position to help the British, he had to figure out a way to worm his way back into the Army, back under the command of Washington so that he could execute his plan.

He started thinking about West Point, a vital American installation about 50 miles from New York City. West Point prevented the use of the Hudson River by the British to slice through the American countryside. So important was West Point that it was considered by Washington to be the "key to America". Arnold decided that West Point would be his bargaining chip. He would hand over West Point to the British and its 3000 American soldiers, artillery and all American provisions. Thus, bringing a quick end to the war. For delivering West Point, Arnold would be paid the handsome sum of 20,000 British Pounds, about equal to \$4.7 million in today's dollars.

His task now was to get himself assigned to Command West Point. In July 1780, Arnold's court marital was behind him. His leg wound was still bothersome, but was otherwise healthy. The good news was that Washington was eager for Arnold to be back in field command. The war was not over and Washington desperately needed his best field commander by his side, back in action.

So it was with considerable annoyance that Arnold kept pestering Washington to take control of West Point. Washington had a better idea. Arnold was to be given a "post of honor" and put in charge of Washington's entire left wing, the most senior position available to an American General other than Washington. It was a great honor that Washington expected Arnold would be thrilled and that he would accept with gratitude.

But by this time, Arnold had been communicating with Andre (and the British) for about 14 months. He had already delivered information to Andre regarding American troop positions and supplies, and Arnold had already begun secretly transferring his personal assets to England.

Arnold's objective was West Point, not commanding Washington's left wing. But Arnold's request was strange to Washington. Why would Arnold not want the most prestigious military position in the entire Continental Army, but rather stay behind in charge of a defensive installation like West Point which, sure was important but already well defended?

To Washington, Arnold was his finest field commander, he was a double-fisted brawler, and Washington needed him out front as his closest commander. So, Washington was gob smacked when Arnold instead insisted on taking command of the garrison at West Point.

Arnold argued repeatedly he was not physically ready for a field command, his leg was still not up to the stress leading men in battle. Arnold said he could not ride properly, and that the only command acceptable to him was that of West Point.

Exasperated and bewildered by Arnold's decision, Washington revised his orders and instead of Command of his Left Wing, he would take command of the West Point garrison. Washington was deeply disappointed, but for Arnold, the pieces were falling into place.

Earlier in the war the garrison at West Point was renamed Fort Arnold in his honor, but now bizarrely, Arnold was deciding how to attack Fort Arnold.

All that remained was for Arnold to have his final face-to-face meeting with Andre to finalize the plan.

Then came the most unexpected excellent news that raised the stakes even higher. General Washington informed Arnold that he himself, would travel to West Point – without his Army to meet with French Generals to discuss strategy. He asked Arnold to keep this information to himself as he understandably wanted to make his journey a secret.

Immediately, Arnold passed this information on to Andre. Washington himself would be at West Point, and if the British attacked while Washington was there, he could be captured, the fort would be captured, all of the artillery and provisions and 3000 men would be captured and the war would be over.

Andre by this time was only 28 years old, and had never conducted an intelligence mission before. The day before the rendezvous with Arnold, British General Henry Clinton took Andre aside emphasized 3 essential points about Military Intelligence that would keep him out of trouble.

1. Do not go behind enemy lines
2. Do not carry incriminating papers, and
3. Do not take off your British uniform

If anything goes south, these rules will protect you from charges of spying and certain execution.

Andre agreed, and apprehensively accepted the mission.

**This is where the plot gets thick.** So let's walk through what happened:

Arnold decided to use the services of a particular young man he knew named Joshua Hett Smith.

Arnold told Smith that there was a man named John Anderson (Andre) aboard the British boat called HMS Vulture. Anderson had valuable intelligence for the Americans, and Arnold wanted Smith was to row a boat out to the Vulture, pick up Anderson, and quietly row him back to shore so they could talk. Then before dawn, Smith would row Andre back to the Vulture, where they would sail back to New York and deliver the vital intelligence about West Point to General Clinton so that he could prepare his attack.

Smith did as he was told, thrilled to be part of a "secret mission". Along for the row to the Vulture were two young men, Samuel Cahoon and his brother. They would take turns to do the physical rowing while Smith did the steering.

At first everything worked according to plan, Andre was dropped off at the western shore of the Hudson with Arnold where they stood in a tiny clearing, talked through the night until 4:00am. At this point Smith interrupted the meeting to tell them that dawn was fast approaching, and that it was time for Andre to get back to the ship. Smith walked Andre back to the shore where the two Cahoon brothers were sleeping next to their rowboat. But they had been drinking, and told Smith they were too drunk and tired to row Andre back to the Vulture.

So Andre was trapped. He couldn't get back to the Vulture before dawn. He was obliged to stay another day. Arnold told Andre to get on a horse, and follow him to a safe house where he could hide until the next day. Along the way they were greeted by a couple of American soldiers. They recognized and saluted Arnold. At that moment Andre realized he was not in neutral territory as he expected, rather he was behind enemy lines. And he thus broke the first rule of intelligence, that Clinton warned him against. Do NOT go behind enemy lines.

They made it to the safe house owned by Joshua Hett Smith (later called "Treason-House") where they proceed to eat breakfast. Here they would eat, rest and hide out until the next evening. But their breakfast was interrupted by explosions coming from the river below. Seems an American officer named James Livingston saw the British ship tied up along the bank. He was shocked to see a British ship so close to the American lines. No one told him to, and he did not have authorization, but Livingston trained his small cannons on the Vulture and started firing holes through the mast and hull of the ship. For two hours Livingston blasted the Vulture with canon fire. The captain of the Vulture had no choice but to move out of range of Livingston's canons – miles up river, too far to row for Andre. So the easy voyage back to New York on the Vulture was not going to happen.

But the plan was still on track, but now, the only difference was, Andre would travel by horseback to the British lines instead of sailing to New York on the Vulture. Before Andre's departure back to the British Lines, Arnold and Andre found time to finalize their plans. Arnold, a meticulous planner had sketches and plans written out and wanted Andre to take them. At first Andre refused, because he had the plans committed to memory, but for some reason Arnold insisted he take the plans with him. He thought they would benefit General Clinton during his assault on West Point. Andre reluctantly agreed to hide the papers in his boot.

At this moment Andre violated Clinton's second rule of: Do not carry incriminating papers.

To help Andre get past the American soldiers, Arnold wrote out a pass for Andre that read "Permit Mr. John Anderson to pass the guards, he being on public business at my direction", B. Arnold.

This was supposed to get him passed the American Soldiers. The plan was for Andre to get to New York, share his intelligence with Clinton, Clinton would attack West Point, and if the timing were right, they would capture the fort and Washington himself.

But Andre didn't really know where he was going, he didn't know the way. So Arnold ordered Smith was to ride along with Andre to show him the way back to New York and the British lines. But of course, Smith could not be seen escorting a British officer. So Smith insisted that Andre travel in disguise so as not to attract attention. Andre put on some of Smith's clothes for the journey.

This was the third and final violation of Clinton's rules to Andre: Do not take off your British Uniform. It was a fateful decision.

For the next day or so, the journey was uneventful, until Smith stunned Andre by telling him that he was going no further, he was too afraid to proceed, and Andre was now on his own. But Andre thought he was going to be safe because he could see British territory ahead of him.

So, Andre felt confident as he proceeded alone. But soon he was stopped by a pro American militia group that were not really loyal American soldiers, they were mostly ruffians looking to rob someone. Andre saw the Hessian coat being worn by one of the men and so he thought they were British. Here Andre made the fateful decision that cost him his life. Thinking he was in already in friendly British Territory, he immediately declared himself to be a British officer on important business. The men looked at him in silence and amazement and said finally, (and I'm paraphrasing here), "Dude, we're American, get off your horse."

Because he said he was a British Officer, the ruffians thought he must have money on him. They shoved him into the trees and made him strip. Eventually the men found the plans that Arnold made him put in his boot. The men decided to turn him into the Americans not because they were patriots, but because they had hopes of cashing in on a reward.

They could have just as easily turned him into the British for the reward as Andre pleaded with them to do, but the ruffians thought it was too risky to try to get paid by the British, and decided instead to turn him to the Americans, even though the reward was not big, but it was more of a sure thing than trying to deal with the British. At this point, Andre said he wished they had blown his brains out when they first captured him.

The local American commander, LTC Jameson was unsure of what to do with Andre. His pass was genuine, but why did he have plans of West Point in his boot? At this point, he could not bring himself to accuse Arnold of plotting against the Americans, but he could not just let him go no matter what his pass said.

So, Jameson compromised – he sent notice to General Arnold that a certain Mr. Anderson was detained with incriminating evidence on him. While at the same time, he sent a similar message to Washington. But to Washington he included the actual papers taken from Andre. Two messengers rode through the night. One to Arnold, one to Washington.

The messenger sent to Arnold arrived first. Just as Arnold was sitting down for breakfast, the messenger dispatched from Jameson ran in and handed Arnold the note. Note said that a person named John Anderson was captured on the way to New York, he had certain incriminating papers on his person, and that those papers were sent to General Washington.

At this instant, Arnold looked up, turned white and said, (and I'm paraphrasing again), said, "Oh Snap". Arnold knew at this instant, the gig was up. Arnold stood up, excused himself, hobbled upstairs, told Peggy the shocking news that he had to go and go NOW. He abandoned his wife and child, he took a horse to the Hudson River, and ordered the men to row a boat to the Vulture, falsely declaring he had secret business with a man on the British ship.



Arnold slipped away, literally minutes in front of Washington. Soon after, the messenger assigned to Washington finally caught up to him. Washington opened **his** note from Jameson, and the plans that Andre was hiding in his boot.

Washington was stunned. His own general, his BEST general, was a traitor and a spy. Washington shuddered, visibly shaken and said “Arnold has betrayed me, whom can we trust now?”

An infuriated Washington proposed of trading Andre for Arnold, but General Clinton could not make that trade even though he was heartsick at the thought of losing his friend Major Andre. After an investigation and short trial, Andre was convicted and hung as a spy.

Arnold now walked the streets of New York as a British General. It didn't take long for Arnold to start pestering General Clinton about his reward. Arnold originally demanded 20,000 pounds for his actions. But considering that Andre was captured and West Point was not captured, Arnold said he would accept 10,000 Pounds instead. In the end, Clinton paid Arnold was 6000 pounds.

As a traitor, Arnold did not exactly get the reception he expected. British officers were appalled that they were suddenly outranked by this American newcomer. And they openly asked, “What kind of man sells out his country – **for money!**”

Arnold had indeed betrayed America, but was not content with taking his financial reward and retiring quietly in Britain. He never received the high-level command positions he craved, but he did command in the field again, this time for the British.

He fought a 6-month campaign against the Americans slashing and burning his way through Virginia, capturing Richmond, narrowly missing Jefferson, who left town shortly before Arnold arrived. He also fought against the Americans in New London Connecticut only a few miles from the town where he grew up as a boy. He burned all the buildings in New London.

Arnold left America for good in December 1781, he arrived in England a month later. He was received cordially at first but was not really trusted. He and Peggy were hissed in theaters, ignored by British society, and could not find a good job either in the Military or with the British traders. He tried again to restart his own Merchant business in New Brunswick, Canada, but his reputation preceded him, and he was plagued with rumors, distrust and bad press.

After a 6-year effort in trying to restart his sea trading business in Canada, he gave up as he was threatened by local Canadians and his effigy was burned in front of his house. Arnold went back to England and died at age 60 from complications of gout and respiratory problems, a physically, spiritually, financially and morally broken man. His war injury never gave him a moment without pain. His wife Peggy died only 4 years later from cancer at the age of 44.

In Conclusion:

The plan that Arnold conceived with Andre was solid, and probably should have worked. But, fortunately for the United States of America, it was really an incredibly improbable series of events that made the plan fall apart.

Let's review what happened to foil the plan...

- The Cahoon brothers getting drunk refusing to row Andre back to the Vulture
- Arnold's unwise decision to insist that Andre carry incriminating plans on his person
- The American soldiers firing on the Vulture, forcing it to move out of range, so that Andre had to travel by horseback
- Joshua Hett Smith turning back and abandoning Andre to travel alone.
- The three ruffians grabbing Andre and finding his papers within minutes of reaching British lines

And why did Andre simply blurt out that he was British? It was a rookie mistake that cost him his life. Imagine if he had just stuck to the plan and said he was an American working for General Arnold. With Arnold's pass, they would have just let him go, if the ruffians turned out to be British, they would have delivered him to General Clinton as a prisoner. Either way he would have escaped and his plan would have succeeded.

If any of these things didn't happen the plan probably would have worked, West Point likely would have been captured, Washington himself would have been captured or killed, and the evolution of the United States as a country would likely have been very different than what we know today.

One final point...

After it became known that Arnold betrayed America, there were riots in many American cities, his effigy was burned in cities up and down the American east coast. The American people who, up to this point, were growing quite tired and divided over the war were suddenly brought together and unified over the knowledge of Arnolds betrayal, and the newly unified American people suddenly started to believe they could actually win this war. Thus by his betrayal, Benedict Arnold may have saved the American revolution yet again.

THE END

Sources:

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