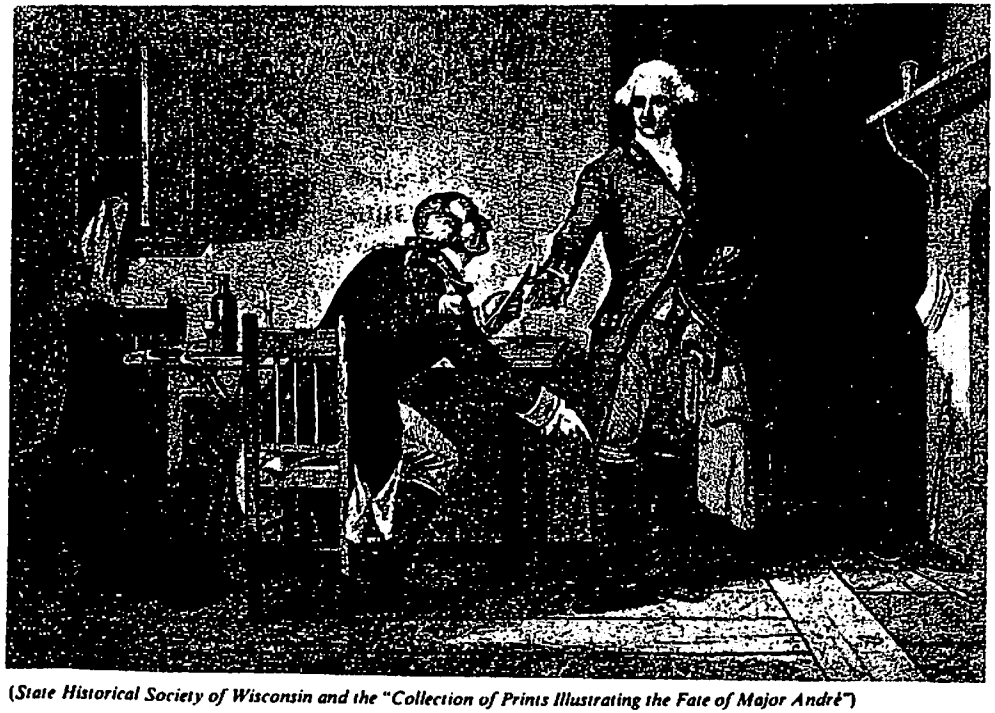
From Triumph to Treason

BENEDICT ARNOLD



(State Historical Society of Wisconsin and the "Collection of Prints Illustrating the Fate of Major André")

Treason of Arnold

On any list of great villains in American history the name Benedict Arnold is likely to appear. Even today to call someone "a Benedict Arnold" is equivalent to calling that person a traitor. Strangely however, on any list of great military heroes of the American Revolution, the name Benedict Arnold is also likely to appear. According to one historian: "Arnold was easily the outstanding battlefield officer of the Revolution." How odd it seems that a man can be both a hero and a villain. What did he do to bring about such contradictory judgments?

Stormy issues swept through America at the time of the Revolution. Many people were not certain that the Revolution should be fought. State governments wanted to protect their own authority. They were suspicious of one another as well as the Continental Congress. The congress was trying to establish greater authority over the separate states. There were also the practical problems of finding effective military leaders and raising enough money to support the American army. Benedict Arnold's life was deeply affected by these difficulties.

At the beginning of the Revolution, Arnold was an energetic, patriotic businessman in New Haven, Connecticut. Although the death of his parents had left him with little money, he had become fairly wealthy in the business of trading with Canada and the West Indies. In addition, he was happily married to Peggy Mansfield, a member of one of Connecticut's most prominent families.

British trade restrictions hurt many businessmen like Arnold. He came to believe that military action against the British was both necessary and right. After the news that war with England had begun, Arnold was elected to lead a group of soldiers to Boston. Once there he convinced the Massachusetts officials that they needed cannons to help drive the British out of the city. Where to get the cannons? The poorly defended British Fort Ticonderoga in New York had many, and could easily be attacked. At first the Massachusetts group was unwilling to send troops because they thought the New York government would protest an "invasion" from Massachusetts. Finally they supported Arnold's idea and sent him to New York. Arnold was pleased. Not only had they accepted his plan; they had also promoted him to colonel.

Things did not go as smoothly as Colonel Arnold hoped. A Connecticut group had also decided the cannons of Ticonderoga should be captured and sent to Boston. They supplied money to the rough-and-ready Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys for an

attack on the fort. Allen and Arnold met and had a raging argument over who should command the attack. Finally they compromised and agreed to share leadership.

The fort was taken without bloodshed. In spite of Arnold's significant role in the victory, friends of Allen sent an account of the battle to Massachusetts. Their story made it appear that Ethan Allen deserved all the credit for the victory. This would not be the last time that Arnold's pride and reputation would be insulted by unfair accusations. The worst was yet to come.

Arnold's pride was hurt and so was his bank account. Massachusetts had not provided enough money for the mission and Arnold helped pay for his troops with his own money. In spite of this the Massachusetts committee was unwilling to pay him back. If this weren't enough, Arnold learned that his beloved wife had died leaving his three young sons without a mother.

One man did give Arnold the credit he deserved—General George Washington. Washington recognized Arnold's ability and sent him on a mission to capture Quebec. To avoid squabbles between the politicians in different states, Washington placed Arnold directly under his command.

In September 1775, Arnold, with an army of about one thousand, began the long march to Quebec. The plan was to leave from Massachusetts and march hundreds of miles through unmapped Maine wilderness. Arnold's leadership was extraordinary. Harsh weather, floods, and disease afflicted his troops. One of his officers and an entire division deserted and returned to Boston.

In spite of these hardships Arnold and his remaining troops reached the St. Lawrence River. His heroic efforts were praised by Washington. Arnold's men also admired his courageous leadership.

Although the grueling march through Maine was a success, the attempt to capture Quebec was not. From an American deserter the troops at Quebec had learned of the coming attack. They were prepared. Also, Arnold was supposed to receive supplies and more troops from an American army at Montreal. For various reasons he received neither. Arnold's attempt to take Quebec failed. During the fierce fighting he was badly wounded in his left leg but refused to leave the battle until the pain and loss of blood caused him to faint. Arnold and his troops, chased by the British General Burgoyne, were forced to retreat into New York.

In recognition of Arnold's efforts, the Continental Congress promoted him to brigadier general in January 1776. As usual, there were

those opposed to him. Unfriendly officers claimed that Arnold illegally took goods in Montreal, but an attempt to put him on trial failed.

During the fall of 1776 Arnold, commanding a small navy on Lake Champlain, battled a much larger British navy. The British wanted to recapture Fort Ticonderoga and to move south, hoping to join with another British army. If Burgoyne from the north and Howe from the south could control the Hudson River region they would have split New England from the rest of the states. This divide-and-conquer strategy was believed necessary for a British victory. Arnold was unable to defeat the British navy, but through clever and courageous maneuvers he delayed them and they were forced to withdraw to wait out the winter. Arnold had again risked his life in helping his country but, once again there were those who looked down on his efforts.

In February 1777, Arnold's pride was again insulted and his achievements unrewarded. The Continental Congress appointed five new major-generals, but Arnold was not among them. Because Connecticut already had two major-generals, a promotion for Arnold, also from Connecticut, might arouse jealousy in other states. George Washington was not consulted about the promotions and he was angered. Washington believed Arnold should have been promoted.

In a battle at Danbury, Connecticut, Arnold again showed great courage and leadership. The Continental Congress finally appointed him major-general but failed to give him proper seniority (priority over those of the same rank). At this point Benedict Arnold had had enough. He believed that, despite sacrificing much of his money, losing a happy family life, and risking his life to serve his country, political squabbles and lies had prevented him from receiving his proper reward. He sent a letter of resignation to the congress.

Congress also received a letter from Washington praising Arnold and requesting he be sent north to beat back Burgoyne who had recaptured Fort Ticonderoga and was moving toward Albany. Arnold asked that his resignation be suspended and moved north as directed.

Arnold had to serve under General Gates, and rivalry between them greatly distressed Arnold. Arnold's troops had been decisive in a battle at Freeman's Farm, but Gates did not give them the proper credit in his report of the battle. Arnold was outraged and, after a fierce argument with Gates, he asked to return to Washington's headquarters. Gates wanted Arnold to leave, but a petition was signed by many officers urging Arnold to stay. They knew of his outstanding ability in battle.

Further arguments with Gates occurred and Gates replaced Arnold

with another general. As the important battle with Burgoyne was about to take place, Arnold was without a command. The battle was joined in October 1777 at Bemis Heights. Arnold could not stay on the sidelines. He leapt to his horse, and to the cheers of the troops, galloped into the fight. In the furious battle Arnold's performance was spectacular and the Americans defeated Burgoyne. Arnold narrowly missed being killed but was wounded again in the same leg that was hit at Quebec. Burgoyne later surrendered at Saratoga and claimed that Arnold's bravery was responsible for the American victory at Bemis Heights.

The defeat of Burgoyne was doubly important for the Americans. The British effort to split the colonies was again prevented. Also, the French, now believing the Americans had a good chance of winning the war, joined forces with the former colonies.

Arnold's wound was severe. Doctors recommended that his leg be amputated, but Arnold refused. Because of his crippling wounds, Arnold was never able to serve on the battlefield again.

During his long, painful recovery, Arnold went to Valley Forge in May 1778. There he signed an oath of allegiance that all officers were expected to sign. The oath said, in part, that Arnold owed his loyalty to the United States of America and not to the King of England and that he would support and defend the United States against England. Arnold willingly signed the oath. Soon afterward Washington appointed Arnold to the command of Philadelphia. If Arnold could have known what was to happen he probably would have refused the appointment. If Washington could have known what was to happen he probably would have never offered it.

Philadelphia, then capital of the United States, stirred with unrest brought on by the Revolution. There was friction and political jealousy between the Continental Congress, representing a central national authority, and the Pennsylvania Council, representing a strong state government. Not all the citizens of Philadelphia supported the Revolution. Many of them hoped the war could quickly be settled and that England, after making reforms, would still be the central government. There was also tension between the rich and poor. Wealthy Philadelphians often gave expensive parties that angered the poor citizens who had difficulty buying goods during the scarcity caused by wartime. As military commander of Philadelphia, Benedict Arnold stepped into the middle of these problems.

Among the wealthy in Philadelphia was the Shippen family. During

the British occupation many parties and fancy balls had been given. Some Philadelphia citizens were invited. The beautiful Peggy Shippen was often invited to these social events and was frequently the center of attention. The British Major John André and Shippen became close friends during the occupation. The handsome, artistic, and charming André was perhaps even more popular than Shippen. When André and the British left, it seemed the elegant parties would end. Arnold, however, continued them.

Arnold lived in high style in Philadelphia. He met Peggy Shippen with whom he fell passionately in love. He persuaded her to marry him. In April 1779 they were wed. Like Arnold, she enjoyed wealth. His desire for money became stronger than ever.

Arnold's finances had suffered during the war. He often used his own money to supply his troops. In addition, he could not conduct his Connecticut business while dodging bullets on the battlefield. In Philadelphia he became friends with many wealthy businessmen, including Robert Morris, later called the financer of the Revolution. These men introduced Arnold to a variety of business activities.

Most of the businessmen did not think it wrong to make money during the Revolution. They often lost large amounts of money because of the conflict, so it seemed fair to make some when they could. Arnold's efforts to make money became the source of great controversy. One of his activities was the selling of supplies taken from captured ships. In one case he ordered army wagons to bring captured cargo to Philadelphia. He sold these goods (sugar, tea, glass, guns, etc.) and made a handsome profit. Such materials were difficult to obtain during wartime, so Arnold believed he was providing a service to the citizens. Not all agreed. His use of army wagons for private gain outraged those who heard of it.

One of those outraged was Joseph Reed, president of the Pennsylvania Council. He was suspicious of anyone who even seemed lukewarm in supporting the Revolution. He came to despise Arnold because of his expensive style of life and his association with wealthy businessmen. In addition, the Reed family did not like the Shippen family.

Reed was determined to discredit Benedict Arnold. So were others. Vicious rumors were spread. In one newspaper article it was claimed that Arnold had massacred Canadian villagers when retreating from Quebec. Such untrue stories furthered Arnold's sense that he was not being treated the way a hero was entitled to be.

In February 1779, as Arnold was on a trip to visit General Washington, the council published formal complaints against him, including his use of the wagons. Arnold had told the council that the truth of such charges should only be determined by the Continental Congress or General Washington. Reed and the council, believing they were the proper authority to hear the charges, were furious.

A committee of the Continental Congress, headed by William Paca, investigated the charges against Arnold and found only one, the wagon charge, to be justified. They recommended that military authorities decide what should be done about the charges. This further enraged the council. To prevent more conflict the congress decided to ignore the Paca report and recommend Arnold be court-martialed on some of the charges. Arnold was disgusted but wished a quick court-martial so that his innocence could be shown as soon as possible.

Washington agreed to May 1, 1779, as the date for the court-martial. Reed, feeling he didn't have enough evidence, wanted it delayed. Reed told Washington that unless the trial were delayed Pennsylvania would no longer provide transportation for the army. Washington felt he had no choice but to agree to postpone the trial. Arnold was again deeply hurt. Washington was one of the few men he trusted.

The court-martial was held in February 1780. Arnold was found not guilty on most of the charges, but his use of the wagons was determined to be improper. He was sentenced to be reprimanded by Washington. In his reprimand Washington wrote that Arnold's use of the wagons was reprehensible.

Arnold was crushed by this episode, but it did not directly lead him to treason. Almost a year earlier he had begun making secret contacts with the British.

Major André, now an aide to British General Clinton in New York, became Arnold's contact. Through a complicated system involving codes and the use of invisible ink, the bargaining went on. The British wanted to be sure Arnold could provide them a significant military advantage. Arnold wanted to be sure he would receive a large amount of money.

Arnold's wounds prevented him from taking command of an army which he could turn over to the British, but he did obtain the command of West Point, a fort on the Hudson River. If the British could hold that fort it would help them control the Hudson Valley.

They decided to reward Arnold if he would come over to their side. Some of Arnold's greatest military achievements had prevented the British from controlling the Hudson and splitting the colonies. Now, by his treason, he would be helping them gain the advantage his heroism had denied them.

It was arranged that André and Arnold would meet to discuss the plan. In the fall of 1780, André, aboard the British warship *Vulture*, sailed up the Hudson on his secret mission. Late at night he and Arnold met on the shore. Their talks went on through the night. With dawn approaching, the *Vulture* was forced to move down the river. André could not return to the ship. After hiding out for a time, it was decided André would have to return by land. He was disguised, and with secret papers in his boot, including a detailed map of West Point, he attempted to return to the British lines.

Unfortunately for André, he was captured by some American militiamen who intended to rob him. In the course of the robbery they found the secret papers and decided to turn them over to Washington. Washington was on his way to West Point for a meeting with Arnold. The general was stunned to discover that Arnold was planning treason.

Just before Washington was to arrive, Arnold discovered that André had been captured and that the treason plan was known by Washington. Arnold was able to escape from Washington and rowed down river to the safety of the *Vulture*.

André was not so lucky. Washington attempted to trade André for Arnold, but the British General Clinton, who was supposed to encourage Americans to come over to the British side, refused the trade. As a result, André was convicted of spying and hanged.

The British made good on their promise to pay Arnold a large sum of money, but the traitor was never respected by many of the British citizens. Arnold commanded a few naval expeditions for the British after which he and his wife moved to England. He died in England in 1801. The once honored military hero would be mainly remembered for his betrayal of his country.

The major sources for this story were:

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Wallace, Willard M. *Traitorous Hero*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954.