

Hidden History of the American Revolution: Part IV

The Traitor

By Thomas Fleming

• *Once one of the Continental Army's most admired heroes, **Benedict Arnold** decided he valued money more than freedom. George Washington was left wondering, 'Who can we trust now?'*

EDITOR'S NOTE: Any history book will tell you about Concord and Lexington, Saratoga and Yorktown. In this exclusive Boys' Life series, noted historian and best-selling author Thomas Fleming takes you behind the scenes, to the hidden turning points in the American Revolution. This month: A traitor reveals America's hidden strength.

The most unlikely hidden turning point of the American Revolution was the treason of General **Benedict Arnold**. After George Washington, **Arnold** was the most admired American general. In a battle, no one could react faster or attack more fiercely than this stocky argumentative soldier from Norwich, Conn.

Arnold had been one of the first to volunteer to fight in 1775. He had helped capture vital Fort Ticonderoga in northern New York. He took the lead in the 1775 invasion of Canada. When the Americans were forced to retreat in 1776, **Arnold** built a fleet and fought a larger British fleet to a standstill on Lake Champlain. This forced the enemy to abandon its plan to seize northern New York that year.

The next year, when the British invaded New York, General **Arnold** was one of the battlefield leaders in the crucial victory at Saratoga. As one soldier who served under him said, with **Arnold** it was never "Go, boys." It was always "Follow me, boys!" He risked death repeatedly, leading his men from the front.

Arnold had suffered an agonizing leg wound in an attack on Quebec in 1776. The same leg was shattered again when he led a frontal assault during the battle of Saratoga. The two wounds left him barely able to walk.

A Reckless Lifestyle

In the summer of 1778, Washington put **Arnold** in command of the garrison in Philadelphia. There **Arnold** was soon quarreling with several members of the government of Pennsylvania.

A widower, **Arnold** had married beautiful 20-year-old Peggy Shippen, daughter of a prominent Philadelphia family. **Arnold** rented a splendid mansion and spent money recklessly to provide Peggy with every luxury. The Pennsylvanians said this lavish lifestyle offended many poor citizens. **Arnold** dismissed their complaints.

Deeply in debt, **Arnold** began secretly investing in private businesses and sometimes used army wagons to transport goods. His critics complained to Washington. Meanwhile, his wife was telling him it was time to quit the American side of the Revolution. Peggy Shippen was a secret loyalist.

Washington's Support

In May 1779, **Arnold** began a correspondence with the British, using one of his wife's loyalist friends as a courier. The chief of British intelligence, Major John Andre, had been friendly with Peggy when the British occupied Philadelphia from 1777 to 1778. **Arnold** asked Andre how much the British would pay him to switch sides.

Washington, meanwhile, did his utmost to defend **Arnold** against his civilian critics. Even when a court-martial board found the general guilty of making money as a businessman while in uniform, Washington gave him the mildest of reprimands.

Washington wanted **Arnold** to serve under him as commander of the left wing of the Continental Army. The French were shipping an army and fleet to America, and Washington hoped to take the offensive against the British. But **Arnold** said his wounded leg was still too weak. Instead, he asked for command of the fortress of West Point, on the Hudson River in New York.

Washington reluctantly agreed. He had no idea **Arnold** was hoping to surrender this key bastion and its garrison to the British for 20,000 pounds--the equivalent of more than a million dollars today.

Where's All the Help?

In June 1780, a French army of 4,000 men and an eight-ship fleet arrived in Newport, R.I. The Americans were disappointed. This force was too small to have any serious impact. The war was going badly for the Americans. The British had scored major victories in the South.

Worsening matters was the way inflation had made the currency issued by the Continental Congress almost useless. The \$480-a-month salary of a captain was worth a mere \$13. This put a strain on many men's patriotism.

On Sept. 20, 1780, Washington conferred with the French commander and his generals in Hartford, Conn. The meeting was discouraging. The French refused to budge even a mile from Newport and the protection of their fleet. They claimed that they were supposed to receive reinforcements from France that would make them strong enough to act. But no one knew when these troops and warships would arrive.

On the way back to his headquarters, Washington decided to visit General **Arnold** at West Point. Perhaps he was still hoping to persuade him to take a fighting command. Washington sent an aide to tell **Arnold** when he would arrive.

Capturing the (Wrong) Spy

While Washington was conferring with the French, **Arnold** was having intense conversations with Major Andre at a loyalist's house not far from West Point. The traitor gave Andre a set of papers containing the layout of the fortress, the size of the garrison, the number and positions of its cannon and everything else the British needed to know for a swift conquest.

[\(See picture, "**Arnold, Benedict: Conspiring with Major John Andre.**"\)](#)

When Andre tried to return to the British sloop *Vulture* that had brought him up the river from New York under a flag of truce, he found it had been forced to retreat far downriver to escape cannon fire from American militiamen. The jittery **Arnold** told the major he would have to change to civilian clothes and return to New York City by land.

In Westchester County, just north of the city, Andre was seized by three militiamen. They forced him to strip and found Arnold's confidential papers concealed in his boot.

At an American outpost, Andre confessed he was a British officer. The colonel in command sent Arnold's papers to General Washington. The officer also sent a messenger to General **Arnold**, telling him about Andre's capture. **Arnold** himself was still above suspicion.

'**Arnold Has Betrayed Us!**'

Early the next day, Sept. 25, two of General Washington's aides arrived at Arnold's headquarters, across the river from West Point. They found **Arnold** at breakfast and told him the commander in chief was on his way.

While **Arnold** was still at the breakfast table, the messenger arrived with the letter from the outpost, describing Andre's capture. **Arnold** coolly told the messenger to say nothing about this news to anyone. He strolled upstairs to his bedroom, where his wife was caring for their infant son. He told Peggy the plot was blown and he was about to flee. Downstairs, he got more alarming news: General Washington would arrive within minutes!

Arnold told one of his aides he had "urgent business" across the river at West Point and would be back in an hour. He hurried down to the river and boarded his barge. He ordered the oarsmen to row down the river to the *Vulture*.

Washington, still suspecting nothing, arrived and ate breakfast. When **Arnold** did not return, the commander in chief decided to cross the Hudson and inspect West Point. There was, of course, no sign of General **Arnold**.

After several hours, Washington and his party returned to Arnold's headquarters. The place was in an uproar. Arnold's aides did not know where he was. Mrs. **Arnold** was hysterical, screaming she knew nothing about betraying West Point. She begged them not to kill her and her baby.

At this point, the messenger carrying the papers found in Major Andre's boot finally caught up with Washington. It took only a few minutes for the commander in chief to realize what had almost happened. "**Arnold** has betrayed us!" he gasped. "Who can we trust now?"

New Reason for Hope



**Arnold, Benedict:
Conspiring with Major
John Andre**

(Photo by Time Life
Pictures/Mansell/Time
Life Pictures/Getty
Images)

When General **Arnold** reached the British sloop *Vulture*, he scrambled aboard and urged his oarsmen to join him. He promised them money and promotions in the British army. Every one of these ordinary soldiers said no. General **Arnold** ordered the *Vulture's* sailors to seize them as prisoners of war.

Soon a letter from **Arnold** reached Washington. He claimed that he had switched sides out of "love for my country." He assured Washington that Peggy was "as innocent as an angel"--another lie.

In New York, the British did their best to hide their disappointment. Many officers thought **Arnold** had exposed Major Andre to death by forcing him to change into civilian clothes. Their fears were well founded. Washington grimly convened a court martial, which condemned the major to hang as a spy.

Meanwhile, the British issued a proclamation signed by **Arnold** urging other American soldiers to follow his example and become fighters for George III. To Arnold's embarrassment, only about 40 men responded--far fewer from the thousands the traitor had hoped to persuade.

Gradually, Washington and his officers realized that Arnold's treason had revealed the depth and breadth of American loyalty to the Revolution. In spite of the disappointments and defeats of the year 1780, there was new reason for hope.

The Not-So-Hidden History

A Timeline of the Revolution, Part IV

Jan. 29, 1779: British capture Augusta, Ga.

Feb. 14, 1779: Colonel Andrew Pickens of South Carolina defeats loyalists at Kettle Creek in Georgia, but Pickens fails to recapture Augusta. Guerilla warfare rages.

Feb. 25, 1779: Colonel George Rogers Clark captures another British outpost in the west, Vincennes.

May 10, 1779: The British navy raids and burns the towns of Portsmouth and Norfolk, Va.

May 31, 1779: The British seize Stony Point and another fort south of West Point.

July 9, 1779: British navy ships burn Fairfield, Conn.

July 10, 1779: The same British navy squadron burns Norwalk, Conn.

July 15, 1779: General Anthony Wayne leads a surprise attack on Stony Point that captures the entire British garrison.

Aug. 14, 1779: Captain Jones leads a five-ship flotilla in another attack on enemy ships in British home waters. He sails completely around the British Isles and captures 17 ships, creating an uproar in London.

Aug. 29 to Sept. 15, 1779: General John Sullivan invades Iroquois territory in northern New York in retaliation for Indian raids on American settlements. Sullivan defeats the Indians and their loyalist American allies and burns more than 40 villages.

Sept. 23, 1779: Commodore John Paul Jones, commanding the American ship *Bon Homme Richard*, defeats the British frigate *Serapis* in a moonlit battle off the British coast. Thousands of civilians watch from the shore.

Oct. 9, 1779: An American-French attempt to recapture Savannah, Ga., is repulsed with heavy losses.

May 12, 1780: British capture Charleston, S.C., and its garrison of 5,500 men, including 2,500 Continentals.

May 25, 1780: Part of the Continental Army, camped at Morristown, N.J., mutinies over lack of food, pay and clothing during a harsh winter. The mutiny is suppressed.

June 7, 1780: British invade New Jersey, hoping to destroy Washington's army and end the war. With help from the state's militia, the invaders are defeated at the battle of Springfield on June 23.

Aug. 16, 1780: Americans under General Horatio Gates are routed in the battle of Camden, S.C.

Sept. 25, 1780: General **Benedict** Arnold's plot to betray West Point is discovered just in time.

Oct. 7, 1780: American militia defeat loyalist militia at the battle of Kings Mountain, N.C. But the British regular army continues to control Georgia and South Carolina.

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