

BENEDICT ARNOLD: HERO OF SARATOGA, TRAITOR AT WEST POINT

Benedict Arnold is a name synonymous with treason. This infamous villain of the revolution is less well-known for his earlier acts of patriotic heroism. One can only speculate when and why Arnold left the side of liberty, but a closer look at his initial devotion to the patriot cause makes his treasonous end even more poignant.

A fourth generation American, Benedict Arnold V was born to wealthy merchant Benedict Arnold IV and his wife Hannah on January 14, 1741, in Norwich, Connecticut (Randall 16). After enduring several family hardships, including the deaths of Arnold's two sisters and the overwhelming debt of his father's business, Arnold became apprenticed to an apothecary at the age of 14. Two years later, intrigued by news of the French and Indian War, he enlisted, returning after 13 days, upon hearing of his mother's illness. In 1759, Arnold's mother died, closely followed by his father in 1761. Left to support himself and his sister, Arnold established his own apothecary business by 1762 in New Haven, Connecticut. Arnold traveled worldwide, including numerous trips to the West Indies, on trading excursions.

During a business voyage, Arnold learned of the Boston Massacre. Representative of his early patriot leanings, he wrote, "...are the Americans all asleep and calmly giving up their liberties...that they don't take immediate vengeance on such miscreants" (Arnold 31). Returning home, Arnold received permission to form a militia. However, in the spring of 1775, New Haven's townspeople voted not to send their militia to Lexington and Concord. Nevertheless, Arnold's company prepared to march to Massachusetts on April 12. When refused gunpowder from the town's warehouse, Arnold replied, "Our friends and neighbors are being mowed down by redcoats. Give us the powder or we will take it..." (King 16). In Cambridge, Arnold met with a patriot band, the Committee of Public Safety, and proposed a march on Ticonderoga and Crown Point. (Randall

86). Impressed with his extensive knowledge of the area and his patriotic enthusiasm, the Committee commissioned Arnold to muster a brigade. Arnold left in pursuit of Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys, who were marching on a similar mission. Discovering Allen's men unwilling to follow him, Arnold reluctantly agreed to co-lead the garrison as they marched on Ticonderoga. Following the momentous surrender, Arnold insisted on command in order to execute the Committee's orders. Dr. Joseph Warren favored this, advising "Arnold take charge of them," this "may be a means of settling any dispute which may have arisen between him and some other officers..." (Arnold 40). Contrary to Arnold's request and Warren's advice, Connecticut officials appointed Allen commander. Disappointed, Arnold resigned his post and headed home receiving tragic news; his wife had died leaving him and his three young sons.

This blow did not render him inactive in the patriot cause, however. Within three weeks, he met General Washington with plans to capture Quebec. Arnold's men sprung an attack, and, although he suffered a gun-shot wound to his leg, Arnold and his men were unstoppable. Retreating to Fort Ticonderoga, they built a small fleet, slipped passed the British barricade, and sent the enemy further into Canada. Disgruntled with lack of recognition by Congress, Arnold resigned once again. Conscious of an impending attack from Canada and unaware of Arnold's resignation, Washington sent a letter to Congress requesting, "If General Arnold can be spared from Philadelphia, I would recommend him...He is active, judicious, and brave..." (Wade 32). Hearing of the commander-in-chief's recommendation, Arnold immediately left for Albany, New York, to block the three-part strike. He found General Gates already in command, which led to inevitable conflict. As the British marched toward Saratoga, Arnold exclaimed, "No man shall keep me in my tent today. If I am without command, I will fight in the ranks...Come on, victory or death" (Arnold 198). During this pivotal battle, Arnold was shot, and his horse fell under him. Yet, he

urged, “Rush on, my brave boys, rush on” (Arnold 205). Arnold’s vital role in this victorious battle led to his sought for promotion. He pledged, “I, Benedict Arnold Major General do acknowledge the UNITED STATES of AMERICA to be free, independent, and sovereign States...I do swear that I will to the utmost of my power, support, maintain, and defend the said United States...” (Wade 36).

On April 8, 1779, Arnold married Peggy Shippen, a Tory sympathizer, coming under the scrutiny of many patriots. With rising accusations, Arnold requested a court-martial to clear his name. Eight charges were brought (Arnold 243-245), to which Arnold rebutted, “Mr. President, and gentlemen of this honorable court...When...the war against Great Britain commenced, I was in easy circumstances, and, enjoyed a fair prospect...The voice of my country called upon her faithful sons to join in her defense...and from that time to the present hour, have not abandoned her service” (Arnold 252). Arnold was indicted on two of the charges. General Washington, instructed to issue a public reprimand, stated, “(I) would have been much happier...bestowing commendation on an officer who has rendered such distinguished services to his country as Major General Arnold” (Wade 46).

At this point, unexplainably, Arnold proceeded to survey West Point for faults of which he could notify the British. He petitioned for leadership of this complex, and, weeks later, General Washington issued him the command. On September 22, 1780, Arnold met with John André, a British spy, who had become his close correspondent, to relay vital information concerning the fort. As Arnold and André hatched their treasonous plan, including the capture of General Washington, André’s waiting ship was fired upon. Arnold contrived André’s escape, issuing a pass and entrusting him with six pages of information concerning West Point. Fortunately, André was apprehended, and the incriminating papers found. Word arrived of André's capture and Arnold

escaped to a British ship, ironically named the *Vulture*. A deeply wounded General Washington reported, “Treason of the blackest dye was yesterday discovered! General Arnold who commanded at West point, lost to every sentiment of honor...was about to deliver up that important Post into the hands of the enemy. Such an event must have given the American cause a deadly wound if not a fatal stab” (Founders Online). Onboard the *Vulture*, Arnold wrote to Washington, “I have ever acted from a principle of love to my country...the same principle of love to my country actuates my present conduct, however, it may appear inconsistent to the world...” (Wallace 252). Arnold soon became a wanted traitor throughout the American colonies. With the same brilliant tactics he used for the American cause, he maliciously led British raids against patriot strongholds, including his hometown New Haven, Connecticut.

After the surrender at Yorktown, Arnold and his family relocated to Nova Scotia and would eventually move to London in 1792. He lived primarily as a merchant, but, interestingly, continued his life as a spy for the British during the French Revolution. On June 14, 1801, at the age of 60, Benedict Arnold died from complications extending from the war wound in his leg. Notably, after abandoning the American forces, Arnold reportedly asked a seized officer of the Continental Army what would happen if he were captured by patriots, the officer replied, “They would cut off the leg that was wounded at Saratoga and bury it with the honors of war, and the rest of you they would hang on a gibbet” (Wallace iv).

Works Cited

***Works are cited according to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers Seventh Edition*.**

Arnold, Isaac N. *The Life of Benedict Arnold: His Patriotism and His Treason*. Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Co, 1880. Print.

“Founders Online: General Orders, 26 September 1780.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03388.

King, David C. *Benedict Arnold, and the American Revolution*. Woodbridge, Conn: Blackbirch Press, 1999. Print.

Randall, Willard S. *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003. Print.

Wade, Mary D. *Benedict Arnold*. New York: F. Watts, 1994. Print.

Wallace, Willard M. *Traitorous Hero: The Life and Fortunes of Benedict Arnold*. New York: Harper, 1954. Print.