

Benedict Arnold

In the early years of the Revolutionary War, Benedict Arnold was one of George Washington's most accomplished field generals. His legacy today is quite different, with Arnold branded the most notorious traitor in American history, after a failed gambit to trade the vital American outpost at West Point for cash resulted in his defection to the British side.

A pharmacist by trade, he was short, solidly built (one acquaintance remembered that "there wasn't any wasted timber in him") and blessed with almost superhuman energy and endurance. He was handsome and charismatic, with black hair, gray eyes and an aquiline nose, and he carried himself with the lissome elegance of a natural athlete.

He was born in 1741. The first Benedict Arnold had been one of the colony's founders, and subsequent generations had helped to establish the Arnolds as solid and respected citizens.

But Arnold's father, who had settled in Norwich, Connecticut, proved to be a drunkard; only after his son moved to New Haven could he begin to free himself from the ignominy of his childhood. By his mid-30s he had had enough success as an apothecary and a seagoing merchant to begin building one of the finest homes in town.

From the first, he distinguished himself as one of New Haven's more vocal and combative patriots. On hearing of the Boston Massacre, he thundered, "Good God, are the Americans all asleep and tamely giving up their glorious liberties?"

When in April 1775 he learned of the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, he seized a portion of New Haven's gunpowder supply and marched north with a company of volunteers. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, he convinced Dr. Joseph Warren and the Massachusetts Committee of Safety to authorize an expedition to capture Fort Ticonderoga in New York State and its 80 or more cannons. (Smithsonian)

Benedict Arnold was part of the command (with Ethan Allen) of the Green Mountain Boys. He created a navy for Lake Champlain, battled the British at Valcour Island, and burned the boats in what is now Arnold Bay during retreat from that battle, effectively stopping the British from gaining a foothold in the area.

Arnold's forces eventually clashed with the British at Fort Ticonderoga – nestled along the shores of Lake Champlain in northern New York – capturing valuable artillery stores. He achieved this with relative ease, providing the Continental Army with its first victory of the war and a desperately needed boost of confidence.



The heavy cannons taken by Arnold proved instrumental in ending the Siege of Boston the following year. His exploits, however, were not without cost; he suffered the first of two serious leg injuries during a failed attack on British-occupied Quebec, Canada.

By early 1777, Arnold was back in the field, leading his troops in a blocking action against a British advance in Connecticut. The enemy force, commanded by William Tryon, the British Governor of New York and recently appointed general, was acting on intelligence from a British spy about a suspected Continental Army weapons depot.

The British achieved their objectives but at great cost, suffering twice as many casualties as the Americans in the ensuing skirmish. Arnold narrowly escaped death, having two horses shot out from under him on the battlefield.

Arnold was also instrumental in the historic American triumph at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777. By virtue of his bravery and exceptional leadership, his men prevailed against a formidable army commanded by one of England's brash generals.

The lopsided victory at Saratoga, resulting in the surrender of thousands of British soldiers, was a turning point in the Revolutionary War, emboldening France to formally enter the war and strike a decisive alliance with America.

Arnold did not escape the battle unharmed, suffering a severe wound in the same leg he injured earlier. To facilitate his recuperation, Washington appointed him Military Governor of Philadelphia.

Brewing Troubles

Arnold's patriotism and battlefield exploits earned him little reward. Though the British surrender at Saratoga was hailed throughout the colonies, other officers took credit for Arnold's tactical success and diminished his role.

As a further insult, Congress refused to promote Arnold in rank, elevating several junior officers above him.

It is not clear when 37-year-old Benedict Arnold first met 18-year-old Peggy Shippen; however, on September 25, 1778, he wrote her a love letter—much of it an exact copy of one he'd sent to another woman six months before.

Knowing of "the affection you bear your amiable and tender parents," he had also written to Peggy's loyalist-leaning father. "Our difference in political sentiments will, I hope, be no bar to my happiness," he wrote. "I flatter myself the time is at hand when our unhappy contest will be at an end."

He also assured Peggy's father that he was wealthy enough "to make us both happy" and that he had no expectations of any kind of dowry. (Smithsonian)

But in September 1778 he did not yet have the money he needed to maintain Peggy in the style to which she was accustomed.

There was also the matter of the Shippens' politics. They might not be outright loyalists, but they had a decided distaste for the radical patriots who were waging an undeclared war on Philadelphia's upper classes now that the British had gone.

Given Arnold's interest in Edward Shippen's daughter and his lifelong desire to acquire the wealth his bankrupt father had denied him, it is not surprising that he embraced the city's marginalized nobility with a vengeance. (Smithsonian)

As Arnold gradually became more disaffected, his wife, Margaret "Peggy" Shippen, was immersing herself in lavish spending, deeply indebting the general. Adding to the swirl of troubles, Arnold faced a court-martial on charges of misconduct and financial impropriety.

Though he was largely exonerated, he received a stinging rebuke from Washington, fanning a deep-seated resentment. Bitter, indignant, and desperate for money, Arnold decided to turn away from his country, brokering a secret agreement to begin spying for the British.

In 1780, Washington summoned Arnold to rejoin the Army as a top commander, but the disillusioned general had other plans. He requested and was granted command of the American defenses along the Hudson River at West Point. The fortified outpost held much strategic value, controlling lines of communication and transportation between New England and the rest of the country.

Arnold is usually credited with coming up with the idea himself, but there are reasons to think the decision to turn traitor originated with Peggy. Certainly the timing is suspect, following so soon after their marriage.

Arnold was bitter, but even he had to admit that the Revolution had catapulted him from the fringes of respectability in New Haven to the national stage. Peggy, on the other hand, regarded the Revolution as a disaster from the start.

Not only had it initially forced her family to flee from Philadelphia; it had reduced her beloved father to a cringing parody of his former self. With her ever-growing attachment to Arnold fueling her outrage, she had come to despise the revolutionary government that was now trying to destroy her husband.

By marrying Peggy, Arnold had attached himself to a woman who knew how to get what she wanted. When her father had initially refused to allow her to marry Arnold, she had used her seeming frailty - her fits, her hysteria, whatever you wanted to call it - to manipulate him into agreeing to the engagement for fear that she might otherwise suffer irreparable harm. Now she would get her way with her equally indulgent husband.

Given the ultimate course of Arnold's life, it is easy to assume that he had fully committed himself to treason by the time he sent out his first feelers to the British in early May 1779.

But that was not the case. He still felt a genuine loyalty to Washington. On May 5, Arnold wrote his commander what can only be described as a hysterical letter. The apparent reason for it was the delay of his court-martial to June 1.

But the letter was really about Arnold's fear that he might actually do as his wife suggested. "If your Excellency thinks me criminal," he wrote, "for heaven's sake, let me be immediately tried and if found guilty executed."

Arnold's Treachery Discovered

Arnold began discreetly weakening the stronghold while surreptitiously reporting to André on troop strength, planned movements, and defensive positions. After returning from one of their secret meetings, André was captured and searched by local American militia, who discovered documents implicating Arnold.

Alerted that André had been captured, Arnold fled West Point and managed to reach the HMS Vulture, a British warship nearby. He wrote to Washington, requesting safe passage to Philadelphia for his wife. Washington acquiesced, unaware of her involvement in Arnold's scheming.

As for André, Washington ordered the captured British officer hanged as a spy. This came after an offer from Washington, proposing to exchange André for Arnold, was rejected by his British counterpart.

Arnold was soon rewarded by the British with a commission as a brigadier general. After clashing with redcoats for years, he would soon be leading them against his former comrades.

In the aftermath of the betrayal, Washington ordered his cavalry commander, Major Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee (the father of future Confederate commander Robert E. Lee) to plan the capture of Arnold from New York City.

Weeks after Arnold's flight, the handpicked John Champe, Lee's Sergeant Major, posed as a defecting Continental soldier and joined British forces in New York. From there, aided by local spies, he planned to abduct Arnold and return him to American lines. A last-minute transfer saved Arnold, allowing the turncoat to elude Champe, who eventually returned to the American lines.

Three months later, Arnold led 1,600 men of the American Legion - mostly Loyalist troops and Continental Army deserters - to Richmond, Virginia's capital, which was defended by only a small handful of volunteers.

After being chased off by Arnold's men, Governor Thomas Jefferson offered a bounty of 5,000 gold coins for the capture of the former American general.

Arnold survived the war and moved with his wife Peggy to England, where he lived out the remainder of his life, mistrusted even by the British and consigned to relative obscurity. He died in London in 1801. (National Intelligence)

Information here is primarily from National Intelligence Agency; Vermont Historical Society; Smithsonian; Mount Vernon

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young