

Benedict Arnold, American Hero



F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "Show me a hero and I'll write you a tragedy." Never have Fitzgerald's words been more apropos than when applied to Benedict Arnold.

Before he became a traitor to America, Arnold was a hero. He saved the American Revolution. In the most important battle in the War for Independence, Arnold defied his commander and won a great victory. If Arnold had not done so—if he had not been at Saratoga, New York, at that defining moment in history—there might not have been a United States of America.

To understand the significance of the events that took place at Saratoga in 1777, it should be noted that Sir Edward Creasy, the foremost military historian of the nineteenth century, listed Saratoga among the fifteen most important battles in the history of humankind. It was the battle (actually a series of battles) that turned the tide in America's struggle for independence. Even more significant, if the colonials had been defeated there, they almost certainly would have lost the war.

With the outbreak of hostilities in America, both sides anticipated a rapid conclusion to the struggle. George Washington predicted the conflict would last no more than six months. It lasted six years.

The British plan for a quick victory was simple in concept—blockade the coast, control the Hudson River, and win the war. The British planned to clear the Hudson River Valley of rebel forces and build a string of forts from its upper lakes to New York City. Once that was accomplished, it would split the colonies in two, isolating commercial New England from the agricultural colonies of the west and south. The Hudson also would provide a navigable inland waterway for the transportation of British troops and supplies from Canada.

The campaign to conquer the Hudson began when Gen. John

Traitor and hero
Benedict Arnold, whose
name is synonymous with
treachery, saved the
Revolution at Saratoga.
*National Archives & Records
Administration*



Burgoyne came down out of Canada with 8,300 troops—including British regulars, German Hessians, and Indian allies. His objective was to defeat the Continental Army occupying the region and capture Albany, New York. To support Burgoyne, a British force of some 1,800, led by Col. Barry St. Leger, was to attack from the west. Meanwhile, troops under Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, stationed in New York City, were to march north, forcing rebel forces to retreat before them. The British plan was to sweep the Colonials before these three armies, trap them at Albany, and destroy the Continental Army there in a three-pronged attack.

To face Burgoyne and meet the British challenge, the Continental Congress inexplicably chose Gen. Horatio Gates to command the Colonial Army occupying the Hudson River Valley. Gates replaced Maj. Gen. Philip Schuyler, who had proven himself a capable field commander but could not get along with the Congress. By contrast, Gates was a boorish windbag with little military experience and even less imagination. But he was a darling of the Congress.

To face the British, Gates had some 14,000 ill-trained and poorly organized troops scattered around him, and not a clue what he should do with them. That is when Gen. Benedict Arnold arrived on the scene to save him. Arnold knew what to do. He was, without doubt, America's most talented field commander. With only a small force, Arnold had taken the war to Canada and



Arnold's temptation
Peggy Shippen, the 18-year-old daughter of a British Loyalist, led Benedict Arnold to betray his country.
Dictionary of American Portraits

placed Quebec City under siege. Although the Colonial invasion of Canada fell short of victory, it did serve to tie up British forces north of the border for an extended period of time. Forced by superior numbers to retreat back to the colonies, Arnold had been assigned to support Gates at Saratoga.

The first thing Arnold did was to eliminate the threat of an attack from the west. With only 1,000 men, he bluffed St. Leger's British force into abandoning Fort Stanwix and retreating back to Canada, cutting off one of the three potential prongs of attack.

Upon arriving at Saratoga, Arnold was dismayed to find the Continental soldiers sitting, inactive, in ill-organized defensive positions with Burgoyne poised to attack them. Arnold was especially upset to find the Continental Army's left flank fully exposed and the supine Gates unwilling to do anything about it. And on September 19, 1777, that is precisely where Burgoyne struck.

Arnold pleaded with Gates to release troops to him to meet the attack. Gates, incapable of making a forceful decision, finally released a small force to Arnold, who sent it against the British advance at Freeman's Farm. When it appeared his outnumbered Colonials would be pushed back, Arnold defied Gates's orders and brought additional troops into the action. Following a bloody four-hour struggle, the British assault was halted. Although Burgoyne held the field, the British invasion force had suffered heavy casualties.

was Arnold who met the enemy and prevailed. As the battles raged, Gates refused to leave what he perceived to be the safety of his camp, heavily fortified with troops he refused to release for combat. During the critical Battle of Bemis Heights, Gates sat in his tent, discussing the merits of the American rebellion with a captured British officer while Arnold slugged it out with Burgoyne. Burgoyne's reinforcements never arrived from New York. General Clinton and his troops could not fight their way through local militias to get to Saratoga. With Burgoyne's force short of rations and having been repulsed at every turn, the general ordered a retreat back to Canada. The order came too late. By then, Arnold had circled behind the British Army and cut off its escape. Burgoyne was left with no choice but to surrender some 5,000 men.

Two important events occurred as a result of Arnold's brilliant victory at Saratoga: France signed a secret alliance with the colonies and provided funds, weapons, warships, and troops, without which the Americans could not have won the war. And the Continental Congress proclaimed Horatio Gates "The hero of Saratoga."

Arnold received two wounds at Saratoga, one to his left leg and the other to his rather enormous ego. Arnold's disaffection with the Continental Congress did not begin with Saratoga. For some time he had been battling the politicians with the same stubbornness he had exhibited while fighting the British. Arnold had been passed over for promotion and had brooded when others received credit for victories he had won. At one point he had resigned from the army in disgust, only to have George Washington talk him into changing his mind.

Meanwhile, the career of the sublimely incompetent Gates was on the rise. The Continental Congress even considered turning over Washington's command to "The Hero of Saratoga." Instead, they elevated Gates to near equal status with Washington and placed him in charge of all southern forces. It was in that capacity that the true level of Gates's incompetence finally was revealed. Upon assuming his new command, Gates requested that some of Washington's troops be transferred to his command. The doing Congress readily agreed, depleting Washington's ranks of some of his most experienced soldiers. Unfortunately, Gates did not have Arnold with him when he came up against British general Lord

...mandating that even his congressional friends were compelled to relieve him of command.

Following Saratoga, Arnold went to Philadelphia to recover from his wound. With George Washington pleading his case to the Congress, Arnold finally was given his promotion to major general. But then, like a knife thrust following a pat on the back, he was denied his seniority, leaving him ranked below officers far less competent and less deserving than himself. The final blow to Arnold's pride came when he was assigned command of the fort at West Point. In effect, the politicians had relegated their most brilliant battlefield officer to barracks duty.

While recovering in Philadelphia, Arnold became enamored with a beautiful 18-year-old girl named Peggy Shippen. She was the daughter of a British loyalist, and there is little doubt she played a role in his decision to defect to the British. Through Shippen's father, Arnold was put in touch with General Clinton who devised a scheme whereby Arnold would turn over West Point to the British. He was to be paid the equivalent of \$100,000 for his betrayal. The plot was discovered when Continental soldiers captured a courier carrying plans for the takeover, and Arnold was forced to flee to avoid capture.

The British made him a brigadier general and gave him command of a poorly organized unit composed mostly of Tories and deserters. Arnold quickly demonstrated his abilities by using them to capture Richmond, Virginia. He won several engagements before marching north to besiege New London, Connecticut. If Arnold had been given a disciplined army, there is every likelihood he might have turned the tide of the conflict back in favor of the British.

Three years after Arnold's defection, a combined force of 8,000 French troops and 7,000 Colonials trapped and defeated Cornwallis's army at Yorktown, effectively ending the war. As the battle raged, the French Navy patrolled the coastline, cutting off British reinforcements and assuring victory. Ironically, without Arnold, the French would not have been at Yorktown were it not for Arnold's performance at Saratoga. In fact, there would not have been a Yorktown, because the war would have been lost years before.

With the surrender of General Cornwallis, Arnold and Shippen escaped to England. His reception there was hardly what he

expected. Arnold discovered the British despised him almost as much as his fellow Americans. Arnold received some \$35,000 over the years, most of it in the form of a pension, but he never received the \$100,000 he was promised.

In recent years, attempts have been made to clear Arnold's name. Supporters have gone so far as to suggest he was framed, forcing him to defect to the British. There is little credible evidence to support such a claim.

It should be noted that the American Revolution produced a different kind of war, one in which defections were commonplace. As the tide of events shifted, so did sentiments. Tories joined the Colonial armies, and Colonials joined the British. Loyalty often depended on who happened to be winning at the time. Seldom mentioned in history texts is that during the bitter cold winter of 1778, some 2,000 Continental soldiers deserted, and most of them made their way to Philadelphia to sign up with General Howe's British Army. Although the actions of others hardly justify Arnold's betrayal, it does illustrate that loyalty was a rather fleeting commodity during that war.

At Saratoga today there stands an unusual monument. It has no human face or even a name on it. It is a bas-relief depicting a cannon, a wreath, a major general's epaulet, and a left-foot military boot. The monument is a wordless tribute to Benedict Arnold and his victory in one of the most important battles in the history of humankind.