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Cody Wells

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Philadelphia and the Fate of General Benedict Arnold (1741-1801)

Cody Wells

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

“Love to my country actuates my present conduct, however it may appear inconsistent to the world: who very seldom judge right of any man’s actions.”

Benedict Arnold¹

Benedict Arnold (1741–1801) is perhaps the most despised man of the American Revolution solely based on his actions to deceive the Continental Army and hand over the strategic location of West Point to the British. Despite what is known about him now, however, it was hard for Washington to imagine in 1780 that such a well-respected major general of the Continental Army would switch sides in a matter of a year’s time. What could have possibly happened to General Arnold during that year to convince him to commit treason, perhaps the most heinous of all military crimes?

There are many rumors that have circulated around the questionable General since his infamous actions were uncovered, but the main question still remains: what influenced Arnold to throw away everything he had earned and devoted his service to with the Continental Army in order to label himself a “traitor” by joining the British? This question then leads to further

¹ Benedict Arnold to George Washington, September 25, 1780, in *The George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741–1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799*, http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mgw4&fileName=gwpage071.db&recNum=258&tempFile=./temp/~ammem_O11d&filecode=mgw&next_filecode=mgw&itemnum=1&ndocs=100 (accessed September 20, 2012).

questioning: Was he influenced simply by the monetary sums and commanding position that the British were offering him, or was his loyalist wife, Peggy Shippen, to blame? Although no single factor may have completely influenced Arnold's fateful decisions while he resided in Philadelphia during the critical years of 1778 and 1779, it is clear that Arnold left the city a different man than had entered it. Perhaps a man that was even willing to commit the most intolerable of all military acts against his new country.

Born into an unstable family in Norwich, Connecticut in 1741, Benedict Arnold's early life was as complex as the man himself, and may have played an important role in his later decisions that set the stage for his treason.² His mother, quoted as being a "saint on earth," sent her son, at age eleven, for a classical education in hopes of instilling respectable qualities such as discipline, tradition, and respect for authority into him and prevent what she believed was the corrupt teachings of the Enlightenment from reaching the boy's mind.³ Arnold's father, a merchant and sailor, spent his time (and the family's savings) in local taverns and created a negative impression of the entire family that drove Arnold to strive for success the rest of his life.⁴ As a result of his extremely dissimilar parents, Arnold became close with his mother and often despised his father and the town of which he was raised. After being pulled from school, due to his father's growing debts, Arnold went to work for a local apothecary, Dr. Lathrop, who gave him permission, at age sixteen, to temporarily leave his apprenticeship and march with the local militia to Fort William Henry to fight the French in 1757. Arnold arrived too late to see any action but the thrill of the army encouraged the young man to run away from his apprenticeship

² Willard M. Wallace, *Traitorous Hero: The Life and Fortunes of Benedict Arnold* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1954), 5.

³ Willard Sterne Randall, *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 24–25.

⁴ Randall, 23.

multiple times to fight in northern battles of the French and Indian War.⁵ After the fighting had subsided, Arnold settled in New Haven, Connecticut and opened a small business, selling a variety of goods from drugs to books to merchandise from England.⁶ Throughout the early years of Arnold's life it is clear to see how the morals instilled by his mother and the obstacles left in his path by his father only encouraged him to strive for the best and resulted in Arnold's life as a successful merchant and an experienced soldier by the time of his services against the brutality of the British crown.

Throughout the first three years of fighting, Benedict Arnold had created himself an impressive resume of service. He was initially given the command of a small force of armed militiamen by the Continental Congress to secure colonial arms and ammunition at Fort Ticonderoga in 1775, and then aided in the Quebec Campaign later that same year. Arnold ended the campaign season of 1777 with a victory over General Burgoyne's army at Saratoga. Aside from the popularity Arnold gained during these early years of the Revolutionary crisis among his fellow soldiers, he failed to gain any great sense of notoriety from the general public or the Continental Congress. One such instance was during the Saratoga Campaign. Arnold, who fought so bravely that he wounded his knee to the point where a crutch was needed and was left incapable of riding a horse, was not even mentioned in General Horatio Gates' letter to Congress regarding the stunning victory for the Continental Army.⁷ Arnold's reaction to this sense of ungratefulness was that of modesty, noting that despite a sense of "ingratitude of my country...every personal interest shall be buried in my zeal for the safety and happiness of my

⁵ Randall, 29–32.

⁶ Wallace, 15.

⁷ Randall, 406.

country.”⁸ How could anyone that heard this from Arnold in late 1777 ever expect that in only a few short years that same general would attempt to commit one of the most potentially costly acts of treason that the Continental Army, and Washington, could have ever imagined? This sense of reserve and morality had been instilled in Arnold by his Puritan New England mother since the time of his birth, but could the desire for success drive Arnold to seek other routes of notoriety?

Having courageous generals like Arnold as examples for soldiers and civilians alike was one of Washington’s priorities in order to keep morale high both on the battle fields and throughout the colonies as a whole. Due to the physical constraints Arnold now faced, Washington, who had sincerely wished to have the General’s “services in the ensuing campaign,” realized that in order to continue to use Arnold effectively, he must be implemented in a different fashion.⁹ This propelled Arnold into the spotlight during Washington’s search for a military commander to remain in Philadelphia after the British evacuation while he and the rest of his generals planned another season’s campaign. After making the final decision of whom to appoint as commander in Philadelphia, Washington summoned Arnold to his Valley Forge headquarters and assigned him the command on May 21, 1778. Arnold graciously accepted the position and departed to reclaim the city immediately after the last British soldier had evacuated on June 18.¹⁰

As Benedict Arnold first rode through the streets of the newly-occupied Philadelphia on June 19, along with a host of “old inhabitants, part of the artillery, and some military,” he had no

⁸ James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution: 1775-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), 210.

⁹ George Washington to Benedict Arnold, January 20, 1778, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(gw100314\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw100314))) (accessed September 20, 2012).

¹⁰ Randall, 406.

idea what trials and tribulations were in store for him over the next few months.¹¹ Although many merchants and civilians had fled the city, many more were trapped within, either unable or unwilling to leave their goods and property behind. Elizabeth Drinker, a Philadelphia resident who remained in the city to protect her property, wrote that thousands of frightened Tory refugees were following the British across New Jersey as the Patriots marched back into town.¹² Unpaid debts by British soldiers and a loss of a market for supplies left merchants scrambling to evacuate the city as well, which they found a nearly an impossible task.¹³ Fears of property confiscation and public humiliation created a tense situation between neighbors and fellow merchants, as self-interest was often the driving force of actions. Soon opposing voices began to rise that had been suppressed during the British occupation that could be classified as “radical” to the large population of Philadelphians who leaned towards anti-war sentiments.¹⁴ Grace Galloway, wife of a well-known Tory, Joseph Galloway, wrote in her diary of the fear of property confiscation and her own eviction from the premises before the Continental Army had even entered the city.¹⁵ These diverse views and opinions would create a very difficult situation for Arnold, who was expected to keep order within the city until a more structured government could be established.

After arriving in Philadelphia, Arnold’s plan was to conduct a peaceful takeover of the city using martial law, which occurred without struggle on June 19, the same day he had entered the city.¹⁶ Arnold’s next action was to send “a boat down the river and horsemen to discover the enemy ships and watch their motions,” adding that all reports would be sent to Washington’s

¹¹ Kenneth A. Radbill, “The Ordeal of Elizabeth Drinker,” *Pennsylvania History* (1980): 169.

¹² Radbill, 169.

¹³ Richard K. Murdoch, “Benedict Arnold and the Owners of the Charming Nancy,” *The Pennsylvania History of Magazine and Biography* (1960): 28.

¹⁴ Randall, 407.

¹⁵ Beverley Baxter. “Grace Growden Galloway: Survival of a Loyalist, 1778–1779,” *A Journal of Women Studies* (1978): 63.

¹⁶ Randall, 408.

headquarters as quickly as possible.¹⁷ Next Arnold settled himself into his headquarters at the Penn Mansion and began appointing his own staff.¹⁸ Arnold's first appointments, and perhaps his most critical, would be his Aids-de-Camp. These included Major David Solebury Franks, a Philadelphia merchant who was rumored to have questionable ties to a wealthy family in British-occupied New York City and who had worked with the General since the Battle of Saratoga, and Mathew Clarkson, whose loyalist daughter was close friends with a Miss Peggy Shippen.¹⁹ The basis for these choices remains unclear; however, the men's lacking qualifications and experience to handle such delicate civilian affairs did not appear problematic to Arnold.²⁰ Little did Arnold know that these choices, and the connections he would later make from them, were already leading to his decline in popularity in Philadelphia. After establishing his staff, Arnold expected to ensure peace within the city, temporarily under his control, by following his direct orders from Washington of giving "security to individuals of every class and description", regardless of loyalties.²¹ This perhaps seemed easier said than done, for Arnold would soon find himself faced with an array of Tory versus Patriot struggles in a city where economic hardships and political chaos ran rampant.

Among Arnold's initial orders from General Washington was the direct command to "prevent the removal, transfer or sale of any goods, wares, or merchandize, in possession of the

¹⁷ Benedict Arnold to George Washington, June 20, 1778, in *The George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General Correspondence. 1697-1799*, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mgw4&fileName=gwpage050.db&recNum=237> (accessed September 20, 2012).

¹⁸ Edward Lawler, Jr., "A Brief History of the President's House in Philadelphia," Independence Hall Association, <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/history/briefhistory.htm> (accessed June 9, 2013). The Penn Mansion, better known as the "President's House", was a three and a half story brick mansion previously owned by Richard Penn, grandson of the proprietor. After the Penn family fled to England during the early days of the revolutionary crisis, General Sir William Howe used the mansion as his headquarters before the evacuation of the city. The mansion sat on Market Street.

¹⁹ Randall, 407.

²⁰ James Thomas Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy* (New York: Brace and Company, 1953), 222.

²¹ George Washington to Benedict Arnold, June 19, 1778, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(gw120117\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw120117))) (Accessed September 20, 2012).

inhabitants of the city”.²² These actions, Washington hoped, would prevent Tories and smugglers from transferring critical stockpiles needed by the Continental Army from Philadelphia to New York City, where the demand would increase due to the massive army and displaced loyalists now under British influence. Grace Galloway again noted in her diary that “men were nominated to seize our estate,” and “took an inventory of everything even to broken china and empty bottles.” It would not be long before her home would be turned over for the use of officials and she would be evicted by force.²³ Despite the fact that the direct orders of property confiscation of suspected and known Loyalists came from the Pennsylvania civil government, the backlash of unpopular support by Philadelphia merchants would be centered on the military commander in the city, Benedict Arnold. The city’s economy had become so fragile and unpredictable since the evacuation of the British, that civilians found it “almost impossible to get anything,” where just the previous day a “very plentiful market” had existed.²⁴ This deep economic crisis only angered Philadelphian merchants more, believing that Arnold was overstepping the rights of the people and of the Pennsylvania civil government. This was perhaps the first time since taking command of the troops in Philadelphia that Arnold’s leadership and exact role in the city were being questioned by civilians. The resulting economic hardships in Philadelphia would become a place of constant rally for Arnold’s opposition. Many civilians did not realize, at least as much as Arnold hoped they would, that the individual sacrifices were a necessity, for the British had begun confiscating ships and property without their own permits in 1778 as well.²⁵ The race to stabilize one’s economy and wear down that of the enemies’ was now on between Philadelphia and New York City.

²² Ibid.

²³ Baxter, 63.

²⁴ Radbill, 169.

²⁵ Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 115.

During the deep economic crisis in Philadelphia in the summer and fall of 1778, many merchants and civilians ignored the military restrictions on trade and, acting completely on self-interest, developed black markets of goods that were finding their way around the city and out to New York. Women were often used as messengers to help establish economic connections, for men had a much more difficult time getting passes to cross enemy lines under the pretense of simply “visiting family and friends.”²⁶ Arnold was no different than any other individual witnessing the chance to make quick money through backroom deals. Arnold’s early profits from these black markets helped to refurnish his residence and headquarters at the Penn Mansion.²⁷ While life for many civilians grew worse on the streets, Arnold was viewed as living luxuriously in a manner that even Washington could not bring himself to approve of.²⁸ This method of profiting on the illegal sale of goods, known as privateering, could be very beneficial to a crafty merchant; however, it takes money to make money which meant that many individuals could not enter the black markets, keeping them exclusive to already-wealthy merchants and influential military officers.²⁹

Although it is unclear as to all of the deals Arnold allowed himself to be a part of, it is certain that the glamour and high fashion that Arnold obtained in Philadelphia were far beyond the means of his pay as a general in the Continental Army. As questions began to rise of Arnold’s economic initiatives, backroom deals began to unfold, with Arnold reaping large profits from the sales.³⁰ One such case was that of Robert Shewell in early June 1778. The Philadelphia merchant had petitioned that General Arnold give his cargo ship, the *Charming Nancy*, a pass to

²⁶ Ibid, 61.

²⁷ Randall, 411.

²⁸ James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution: 1775–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), 375–377.

²⁹ Van Buskirk, 127.

³⁰ Randall, 411–413.

leave the port of Philadelphia to sell supplies outside of the city. Shewell had been denied a pass earlier in the spring by Washington and Pennsylvania Militia officers because of his vague personal story and his questionable ties to Tory merchants in New York City. However, Arnold gave Shewell a pass, without consulting Shewell's purpose or ties in New York, because of Shewell's verbal promise that he and his partners were "friends of American liberty." In July the *Charming Nancy* was captured by Continental vessels while attempting to sail for New York City.³¹

Now it initially seems that the ship owner had perhaps fooled Arnold and the promise to uphold American liberty, however, there is more to this story. It was later discovered that Arnold had purchased goods from the ship worth more than £7,500, and had sent them to be sold on the black market.³² This directly tied Arnold to the merchant ship and revealed that he had given Shewell the pass solely for the purpose of personally profiting from the sale of the cargo. Privateering, for most individuals, often meant quick profits at very minimal risk; however, as in Arnold's case, if one was discovered participating in a market that hurt the city and its inhabitants, the consequences could be unthinkable.³³ As a result of Arnold's participation in this corrupt scandal involving the *Charming Nancy*, more anger and suspicions of the general were raised by other merchants who had not been allowed to transport their goods outside of the city. This case does not directly tie Arnold with his later treasonable acts, but it does show that Arnold held his own personal gain above matters that were perhaps crucial to the Continental Army,

³¹ Richard K. Murdoch, "Benedict Arnold and the Owners of the Charming Nancy," *The Pennsylvania History of Magazine and Biography* (1960): 38.

³² Murdoch, 42.

³³ Van Buskirk, 113, 117. The British encouraged these types of black markets to arise, allowing themselves to gain profit and supplies, while draining the supply of the rebels. Earlier actions, such as the loosening of the Prohibitory Act, in 1777 and 1778 allowed for New Yorkers to trade more openly with the surrounding area, increasing profits and strengthening the city's economy.

such as allowing these goods to make their way to the hands of the British Army and allow Tories to profit from the sales.

As more and more black markets arose, so did another question: what was happening to confiscated loyalist property that was locked up in warehouses by the Pennsylvania Militia? After investigations were conducted it was discovered that Arnold and a number of his aides were purchasing the goods at discount prices and either using them personally or selling them for their own profits.³⁴ This infuriated the already distraught merchants, mostly devout Patriots, who hoped to use the goods to finance their own patriotic aspirations. Arnold's defense was simply put, if loyalists still within the city could secretly make profits from the selling of their goods then why couldn't a hard-working, dedicated Patriot like himself make a profit?³⁵ However, this defense would hardly stand for Arnold after his profiteering venture with the Tory-controlled *Charming Nancy* was discovered. The secret markets that Arnold found himself engulfed in would become so large by 1779 that Washington himself stepped in and ordered that anyone crossing enemy lines for any reason must obtain a legitimate pass given by either himself or by the governors of Pennsylvania and New Jersey.³⁶

Although Arnold seemed to be making large profits from smuggling goods to New York City and through buying discounted loyalist property, he was unable to successfully manage his money. Entertainment for the General included the theater, gambling, and even horse racing, which resulted in a massive accumulation of debt.³⁷ Continued involvement in the black market between Philadelphia and New York seemed to be the only way to fuel Arnold's ambitions. Whether Arnold was drastically increasing his own personal wealth, as most civilians believed,

³⁴ Randall, 413–415.

³⁵ James Thomas Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy* (New York: Brace and Company, 1953), 224.

³⁶ Van Buskirk, 120.

³⁷ Wallace, 170–171.

or digging himself deeper into financial debt is unknown; however, it is certain that troubled economics within the city only added to the discontent many Patriots began to feel for the military commander.

To combat these tensions within the city and to create a peaceful environment as Washington had ordered, Arnold insisted on the fair treatment of both Patriots and Loyalists, at least from a legal standpoint. This strategy of attempting to please both sides with leniency only created bitter resentment towards Arnold, especially on the side of the Patriots. With British protection now gone from the city, Patriots began arresting and publicly humiliating the remaining loyalists who refused to abandon their property within the city. Arnold's immediate response to these actions was to prevent radical Patriots from "rounding up" loyalists for public humiliation and punishment.³⁸ This decision portrayed Arnold not as a mediator, but instead as a loyalist-sympathizer. Some accusations grew so extreme that members in Congress began calling Arnold a spy for the British.

As a result, Arnold tried to separate his personal life from this constant harassment as a commander. He was noted as working half of his day at his post as military commander and the rest socializing with particularly wealthy merchants. Portraying himself as "host" in Philadelphia, Arnold held numerous parties at his residence. He even kept an open invitation to wealthy merchants and known loyalists. This, once again, only raised the anger of the economically-stressed Patriots.³⁹ This resentment spread through the countryside with the growing number of Patriots, and by early November General Nathanael Greene wrote to Pennsylvania General John Cadwalader that "General Arnold is become very unpopular among

³⁸ Randall, 409.

³⁹ James Thomas Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy* (New York: Brace and Company, 1953), 226.

you oweing to his associating too much with the Tories.”⁴⁰ Perhaps Arnold was trying to set an example for the city of Philadelphia, by attempting to mingle with known Tories; however, it is certain that the backlash from hardened Patriots did not alter Arnold’s actions in terms of his social and economic attitudes towards his friends, whether Tory or not.

In the end, Arnold found himself unable to effectively restrain the Patriots from attacking and punishing the loyalists entirely. The most he was able to achieve was persuading the Pennsylvania civil government to give suspected loyalists court trials. The total number of loyalist accusations came to 487 and most, despite Arnold’s attempts, were stripped of their property and publicly humiliated.⁴¹ Regardless of fighting a losing battle, Arnold still saw the protection of rights and liberties within the city of Philadelphia as his duty to uphold, or at least as a necessity to his newly influential friends high on the Philadelphia social ladder.

Aside from the economic partnerships Arnold created in Philadelphia, he also developed strong personal ties to Peggy Shippen, the daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia merchant and loyalist. Arnold’s secret friendship with Peggy soon became the gossip of the town as the couple was seen together at parties and spending more time together alone. Of course, this intensified the growing opposition towards Arnold and his persona as a patriotic general.⁴² The accusations against Arnold and his desire for a loyalist wife were proven accurate when the couple married the following April, in 1779. There are no direct ties linking Arnold’s new marriage to his decision to commit treason, but it is fair to say that the public opinion of Arnold was greatly

⁴⁰ Nathanael Greene to John Cadwalader, November 1778, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene: Volume IV 11 May 1779–31 October 1779*, ed. Richard K. Showman (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 98-99.

⁴¹ Randall, 428.

⁴² Cornel Lengyel, *I, Benedict Arnold: The Anatomy of Treason* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), 38.

wounded by the marriage and the growing web of Tory ties that Arnold was finding himself attached to.

Feeling himself confined to Philadelphia, where growing resentment limited his military powers, Arnold began searching for a way to escape the city and re-enter the war in the late summer of 1778. However, due to his physical constraints he knew that neither Washington nor Congress would assign him a command on the battlefield. Aside from these physical limitations, Arnold also found himself facing depression and constant illness brought on by heavy workloads and the compiling stress from the attacking Patriots. One observer stated that Arnold was so “overcrowded with business” that he was put in a physical state that no man in his position should be in.⁴³ Arnold’s condition only worsened as did that of Philadelphia’s, and the General realized he must act in order to escape the city.

Soon Arnold found the chance he had been waiting for when a victorious French fleet sailed into Philadelphia’s port after defeating the British in a naval battle in the Delaware Bay in early July, 1778.⁴⁴ After hosting a large celebration for the victorious fleet, Arnold offered a military proposal to French Ambassador Gérard de Rayneval, General Washington, and the Continental Congress. Since entering the army as a relatively poor man, Arnold hoped that after this ambitious plan was put into action, he would be raised both in rank and social status.⁴⁵ This, Arnold viewed, would be his only chance to escape the confines of Philadelphia and make a better name for himself both socially and perhaps politically before the end of the Revolution.

Arnold’s plan called for a combined French and Colonial fleet to sail to the Caribbean and attack the British naval vessels and merchant ships there. The fleet would then invade the

⁴³James Thomas Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy* (New York: Brace and Company, 1953), 223.

⁴⁴ Randall, 420.

⁴⁵ Flexner, 229. Officers were often underpaid in the Continental Army, requiring them to find their own ways to make profits and what would hope to be a suitable life for themselves after the war.

islands of Barbados and Bermuda, effectively wounding British imperial trade with even more of its colonies. Naturally, Arnold ambitiously volunteered himself to be the Admiral leading the expedition. Despite any chance of success, Arnold's plan was never taken seriously by his superiors. His plan was denied by Congress and was never even responded to by either General Washington or the Naval Office in France.⁴⁶ Arnold slowly watched as his chances for escaping the divided Philadelphia and making a name for himself sink with his naval plan.

Throughout the fall and winter of 1778, Arnold saw the number of radical Patriots in the city and state government grow and gain more support. Despite the rising tensions, Arnold held firm in his belief that he was to uphold the safety of all civilians, regardless of loyalties. Arnold's stand on protecting loyalists alongside Patriots, and his new economic and social connections, were beginning to make their way into newspapers and helped to vilify the General. Continuing rumors circulated of Arnold's sympathizing tendencies, as well as new rumors of spying for the British. His backroom economic deals with wealthy merchants and loyalists added to the accusation that Arnold was trampling Pennsylvania's trade rights.⁴⁷ In addition, the romance Arnold developed with Peggy Shippen ignited rumors that he was now influenced by loyalist love, not military or patriotic incentives. Writing to General Greene in November of 1778, Arnold condemned the "deplorable" and "horrid" situation of the country at the time, citing low morale in the army and a depreciating currency, noting that "impending ruin" would be their fate if things did not change.⁴⁸ Could Arnold have predicted a military disaster due to internal disorganization, and therefore begin considering his options out of the pending catastrophe?

As growing rumors and charges developed against Arnold, the general began to feel that it would be best to take leave from his post for a short time in the winter of 1778 and 1779. He

⁴⁶ Randall, 420–423.

⁴⁷ Randall, 437–439.

⁴⁸ Benedict Arnold to Nathanael Greene, November 1778, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 98–99.

first travelled to see General Washington at his camp, then in New Jersey. Despite the rumors, Washington had full faith in his general and believed that he had nothing to fear if the accusations ever resulted in a trial. After visiting Washington, Arnold travelled to New York to attend to some personal business. When word of this trip reached patriot ears in Philadelphia, rumors developed that had Arnold “retreating to enemy lines.”⁴⁹ Why Arnold decided to travel to enemy territory during his leave is still shrouded in mystery. All that is clear is that despite many public officials on the Continental side choosing to not cross enemy lines for personal reasons alone, Arnold seemed to find no problem with conducting his private business in enemy territory.⁵⁰ After a short stay in New York, Arnold realized that it was time to return to his post in Philadelphia and face the growing opposition that now wanted to see him answer for his crimes of the previous year.

Arriving back in Philadelphia, Arnold found even greater opposition than when he had left. Radical Patriots in the Pennsylvania government had transformed the rumors against Arnold into legal charges, which traced back to the very first month that Arnold assumed command within the city. This list of crimes included the “illegal” act of closing Philadelphia’s trade and limiting its businesses, even though it was a direct order from General Washington, and for giving passes to certain merchants and loyalists to trade outside the city.⁵¹

On May 5, 1779 Arnold, arrived at Independence Hall to face his charges under court-martial.⁵² However, due to a lack of witnesses and the beginning of the new military campaigning season, the trial was pushed to a later, undetermined date. Arnold wrote to

⁴⁹ Randall, 442.

⁵⁰ Van Buskirk, 57-58, 65, 73-74. Military officers were permitted to pass between enemy lines solely on their word alone. This also required one to travel across enemy lines under the protection of one’s own flag. Major John André was captured crossing under disguise and was therefore treated as a spy.

⁵¹ Randall, 443.

⁵² Randall, 441-447.

Washington, urging him to push for an earlier trial date, with no success. Washington promised Arnold that he would involve himself with the issue only when it was militarily convenient, perhaps when the British appeared inactive.⁵³ This left a very impatient Arnold wanting nothing more than to simply go through with the trial, regardless of the outcome. During this time, many of Arnold's sympathizers discussed the general's undeserving troubles. One such writer was Silas Deane, a controversial diplomat in Philadelphia at the time, who wrote to General Nathanael Greene in May of 1779 that Arnold was much more sensible to the "wounds his character has received, from base, and envious men, than those he received, in defense of his country."⁵⁴ After being court-martialed again on June 1, 1779, the final trial was not set until December 23, which continued into January of the following year.

The long and antagonizing wait for a winter trial proved to be a critical time for Arnold. Unable to predict his future with the Continental Army, the general began his ever famous correspondence with Major John André, using his new wife's connections and his inner circle of loyalist friends.⁵⁵ By mid-July, 1779 the exchange of letters had transformed into an exchange of instructions and intelligences, all written in invisible ink or in a secret code. General Henry Clinton was also pressuring for a face-to-face meeting with Arnold, hoping to entice the general with a high command in exchange for intelligences on the Continental strong-hold of West Point. As the time for Arnold's trial came closer; however, the general was put under a closer watch and communications between Arnold and the British temporarily stopped.⁵⁶

⁵³ George Washington to Benedict Arnold, July, 20, 1779, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(gw150472\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw150472))) (accessed September 20, 2012).

⁵⁴ Silas Deane to Nathanael Greene, May 1779, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene: Volume IV 11 May 1779-31 October 1779*, ed. Richard K. Showman. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 98-99.

⁵⁵ James Kirby Martin, *Benedict Arnold: Revolutionary Hero and American Warrior Reconsidered* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 428.

⁵⁶ Randall, 463-477.

After the December-January trials held in Morristown, New Jersey, Arnold was cleared of all major charges. Despite his attempt to publicize his innocence of the charges, anger grew among the many Patriots and radicals in Philadelphia which showed Arnold that much of his future time, energy, and capital would be wasted in battling these groups if he remained in the city. Some radical Patriots acted so intensely that effigies of the general were burned, even after the trial's verdict had been announced.⁵⁷ The final blow to Arnold would come from his beloved and well-respected commander, General Washington. In regards to the charges against Arnold, Washington wrote that the alleged actions of the general were "imprudent and improper."⁵⁸ Realizing that his successful trial had lost him more allies than he had ever expected, Arnold resigned his post as military commander in Philadelphia in April of 1780.⁵⁹ No longer would Arnold seek to please either the Continental Army or the civilians he had once stood for in the Revolution.

Apparently, Washington's opinions on Arnold's actions were publicized more for patriotic support than for the Arnold's pleasure. By appearing to scold Arnold for his actions and perhaps influencing the General to resign his post, Washington was able to move his crucial military commander to the Continental stronghold of West Point, controlling the Hudson River Valley, with little opposition from the Pennsylvania government and the radical Patriots. It would be a very short command for Arnold until his treasonous plot to turn over the stronghold to the British for a profit and military commission would be discovered. Despite the growing tensions and questionable actions of Arnold, no one felt more betrayed by his secret

⁵⁷ Van Buskirk, 97.

⁵⁸ Clare Brandt, *The Man in the Mirror: A Life of Benedict Arnold* (New York: Random House, 1994), 190.

⁵⁹ Randall, 497-499.

communications than General Washington. Upon hearing of the General's treason, Washington cried out, "Arnold has betrayed us, whom can we trust now?"⁶⁰

Just what could have happened in a crucial matter of one year in Philadelphia to make a highly-respected general turn from holding his country above his own honor to selling out his ideals and closest allies to the enemy? It may be impossible to single out one deciding factor for Arnold's change of heart, but there is no doubt that the constantly growing resentment he faced from Philadelphian civilians by simply following Washington's orders played a large role in helping to disassociate Arnold with their cause. There also seems to be a large financial weight attached to Arnold's decision. With large gambling habits, and the desire to live a wealthy and comfortable lifestyle, Arnold may have been influenced more by the money and better chances of success by leaving the side that he believed was on a path to its own destruction anyway. This especially seems likely since Arnold was working with Tories to gain personal profits almost immediately after he had taken his command in Philadelphia. However, despite the ingratitude the country had for Arnold, it was not until Washington's harsh, yet politically-driven, dismissal of his actions were given that the vengeful General realized that he had nowhere else to turn but to the enemy.

The complexities surrounding Benedict Arnold have been nothing but contradictions throughout his entire life. Being raised by a devout Puritan mother, he still desired success and fame. Fighting for the common American, he still sought a high social status and a luxurious lifestyle. These contradictions are difficult to analyze, and are often a result of human nature, yet they play a critical role in Arnold's decisions. He viewed anyone and anything preventing him from reaching his goals as an obstacle that had to be overcome one way or another. Perhaps most

⁶⁰ James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution: 1775–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), 386.

of all, Arnold believed he had no other option to become more successful than to join the British and gamble on what would become the most critical decision of his career, one that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

About the author

Cody Wells recently earned his B.S.Ed. in Social Studies Education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, with a focus in American Revolutionary history. He plans to teach Social Studies at the secondary level while working towards a M.A. in History.