



Benedict Arnold: The Plot to Betray West Point

October 2, 1780

Today the name **Benedict Arnold** is practically a synonym for “traitor.” Yet Arnold did not begin the American Revolution as a villain. He began it as one of the Continental Army’s most aggressive and courageous commanders. His transformation from American hero to British officer remains one of the strangest stories of the Revolution. And on October 2, 1780, another man paid with his life for Arnold’s treason.

From Hero to a Bitter Man

Arnold had earned a reputation for bravery early in the Revolution and played an important role in the American victory at Saratoga in 1777, where he was badly wounded. But Arnold increasingly believed that Congress and fellow officers failed to give him the recognition he deserved. He also developed financial problems and became embroiled in disputes over his conduct while commanding Philadelphia.

Arnold’s resentment grew, and by 1779 he had secretly begun communicating with the British. His contact was **Major John André**, a young British officer who served as an intelligence chief for General Sir Henry Clinton in New York. Arnold soon acquired something extremely valuable to sell.

The Prize: West Point

In 1780, George Washington placed Arnold in command of **West Point**, the strategically important American stronghold overlooking the Hudson River. Control of the Hudson was vital because British possession of West Point could have threatened American communications and movement between New England and the other states.

Arnold secretly offered to surrender West Point to the British. On September 21, 1780, Arnold and André met near the Hudson River to work out the details. Arnold supplied André with information concerning West Point's defenses, troops and fortifications. André then began the dangerous trip back toward British-held New York City. He never made it.

Papers in a Boot

On September 23, three American militiamen stopped André near Tarrytown, New York. André was traveling under the assumed name **John Anderson** and carried a pass signed by Arnold. But the militiamen searched him and discovered incriminating papers concealed in his clothing, including information concerning the defenses at West Point.

The plot began to unravel as news of André's capture eventually reached Arnold. Realizing that his treason had been exposed, Arnold escaped down the Hudson and reached the British warship *Vulture*. George Washington arrived at West Point expecting to meet Arnold and instead discovered that one of his trusted generals had defected to the enemy.

The Spy Pays the Price

André was not as fortunate as Arnold. A board of American officers considered his case and concluded that he had been operating behind American lines under an assumed identity and therefore qualified as a spy. André reportedly impressed many Americans who encountered him. He was intelligent, cultured and courageous, and even some of Washington's officers sympathized with him.

The rules of war, however, were unforgiving. On **October 2, 1780**, Major John André was hanged at Tappan, New York. He was 29 years old. Arnold, meanwhile, received a commission as a brigadier general in the British army and later fought against the country whose independence he had once risked his life to achieve. After the war he eventually settled in England, where he died in 1801.

The Name That Survived

The plot failed. West Point remained in American hands, and the Revolution continued toward the decisive American and French victory at Yorktown the following year. John André became one of the Revolution's more tragic figures, while Benedict Arnold achieved a very different kind of immortality.

America remembers Washington, Jefferson, Franklin and Lafayette for what they helped create. It remembers **Benedict Arnold for what he tried to betray.**