

SCOUNDRELS

**WHO
MADE
AMERICA
GREAT**

MARTIN HENLEY

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The little American navy of Lake Champlain was wiped out, but never had any force, big or small, lived to a better purpose nor died more gloriously, for it had saved the Lake for that year.

Admiral Alfred Mahan, War of American Independence

In the summer of 1776 George Washington and the southern colonial army were in full retreat. In Canada, the British led by Sir Guy Carleton turned back an American invasion force decimated by smallpox and desertions. To observers on both sides it was obvious that an ill-equipped colonial army of farmers and merchants was no match against seasoned British regulars. With colonial forces in disarray, the British sensed an opportunity to quash the rebellion. They marshaled their forces to launch a two-pronged attack. A massive force from Canada led by Carleton would link up with General William Howe's British regulars in Albany. The combined British armies would isolate New England from the rest of the colonies. Fractured

lines of leadership, communication, and supplies would signal the death knell of the fragile Revolution.

The colonial situation was desperate, but one man had a plan: stymie the British northern invasion on Lake Champlain and buy time to build an adequately prepared colonial defense. The man was Benedict Arnold. This is the story of how Benedict Arnold led a ragtag American fleet against the most powerful navy in the world. Four years later he would be reviled as a traitor, but at Valcour Island, on October 11, 1776, Benedict Arnold saved the American Revolution.

North of Albany, about 50 miles south of the Adirondack high peaks, sits the bustling community of Saratoga Springs, New York. Renowned for its racetrack, spas, and mineral water, Saratoga vibrates with the tony electricity only money can buy. Eight miles southeast of the village, a bucolic national landmark stretches across a wide swathe of rolling hills, open fields, and woods. It was here in 1777 that one of the most crucial battles of the Revolutionary War was fought. In their first major victory of the war, the Battle of Saratoga, colonials defeated a large British invasion force from Canada. The unlikely victory blunted the British plan to quell the rebellion by seizing the Hudson River Valley and isolating New England from the rest of the colonies.

Tourists visiting the expansive battlefield encounter a puzzling monument at marker #7 on the nine-mile drive around the battleground. The four-foot-high marble display of a cannon, with an epaulet and a wreath sculpted above a horseman's boot, is dedicated to an unnamed hero. On the back an inscription reads: "In memory of the most brilliant soldier of the Continental Army who was desperately wounded on this spot, the sally port of BURGOYNE'S GREAT

(WESTERN) REDOUBT winning for his countrymen the Decisive Battle of the American Revolution and for himself the rank of Major General.”

The anonymous soldier had, in fact, been relieved of duty that day. But, in typical fashion, Benedict Arnold disobeyed General Gates’s orders to remain in his quarters. Instead he charged into the fray on the wide meadows of Bemis Heights. Ignoring intense enemy fire, Arnold rallied colonial troops to victory. After the battle an American soldier said of his commander, “He didn’t care for nothing. He’d ride right in. It was ‘come on boys,’ not ‘go boys’ There wasn’t any wasted timber in him.” Three years after his valiant leadership at the Battle of Saratoga Arnold again made an indelible mark on the American Revolution, but not as a hero—as a traitor after he attempted to sell to the British documents describing the defensive fortifications of West Point.

While many Americans switched sides during the Revolution, none were more reviled than Benedict Arnold. The scope of his betrayal was magnified by his status as a hero of the rebellion. During the early years of the revolt in 1775, 1776, and 1777, Arnold was the most courageous and gifted officer under Washington’s command. However, in post-Revolution America the condemnation of Arnold was so complete that his name became synonymous with the word “traitor.” Ben Franklin’s remark, that Judas betrayed one man but Arnold betrayed three million, succinctly captured a young country’s revulsion toward its spurned warrior. Arnold was blackened in every conceivable way. He was hanged in effigy. His name was erased from the membership rolls of his Masonic lodge. His father and infant brother’s grave markers were obliterated. Monuments celebrating his victorious battles were dedicated to others, and of course there is the empty boot. In pictures and print he was depicted in the company of Satan. A popular colonial child’s verse warned mothers not to name their children “Arnold”:

*Mothers shall still their children and say—Arnold!—
Arnold shall be the bugbear of their years,
Arnold!—vile, treacherous, and leagued with Satan.*

Myths sprang up about a twisted childhood. Arnold was portrayed as a youngster who was cruel to animals, disdainful of authority, and a bully. Such undocumented tales were based on a conviction that his treachery was predetermined by a wayward childhood. However, there is not a shred of evidence that Arnold was anything more than an active and daring young man. His early life was difficult, but he lived during harsh times. Rather than being a prelude to self-destruction Arnold's childhood travails forged a resilient leader who, win or lose, was an inspiration to his men on the battlefield.

Benedict Arnold was born in Norwich, Connecticut, on January 14, 1741. His early years were typical of a well-to-do lad growing up in mid-18th-century New England. His mother, Hannah, was strict but loving. His father, Captain Benedict Arnold IV was a respected businessman. Young Benedict was an exuberant and active child. Several stories, some corroborated, others perhaps more fancy than fact, describe a daredevil. In one such tale the boy grasped a large mill water wheel with one hand and rode the wheel for an entire cycle. Another story, verified by a letter to his mother from his angry schoolmaster, groused that Benedict walked the ridgepole of a burning barn—a stunt that got him suspended from school.

In colonial America during the mid-18th century, 30 percent of children died before the age of 21 from such diseases as yellow fever, smallpox, and typhus. Even an infection from a small cut could be deadly. Arnold's sisters Elizabeth and Mary died of a mysterious illness the colonists called "throat distemper." The affliction started with a sore throat and eventually constricted the esophagus until the victim choked to death. Two of his brothers, Absalom and Benedict V, died of fever at a young age.