When Major John André of the British forces was captured by three colonists, no one expected to unearth the most infamous scandal of the American Revolution. The next day, General Benedict Arnold, the proud patriot, fled to British controlled New York and soon was deemed a traitor. This surprising sequence of events has perplexed historians for many years. They have attempted to analyze the motives for the turn of one of Washington’s most trusted generals. Further examination of the mystery has led many historians to conclude that the proud man felt disrespected by the Continental Congress. The feeling of mistreatment, coupled with friends equally dissatisfied with Congress, led to Arnold’s disenchantment with the Revolution.¹ Due to his contentious relationship with Congress, and some suspicious friendships, Arnold gradually came to resent the very cause that had elevated him to fame: the fight for freedom from Britain.

Benedict Arnold grew up in a family that was prosperous until his father’s poor business decisions left the family bankrupt. Benedict’s
mother, though penniless, kept the airs of her former position. Arnold swore never to end up as his mother: a woman pitied by the town. His sense of pride followed him throughout his life; this pride led to his downfall. With his family broke, Arnold left school and could only find employment as an apothecary apprentice to his mother’s cousins. After both his father and mother died, Arnold traveled to Europe to buy supplies for his own apothecary. Along with his only surviving family member, Hannah, Arnold opened an apothecary in New Haven, Connecticut. After passage of the Sugar Act in 1764, Arnold soon began smuggling goods between the Indies and New Haven, consequently breaking British law in the process. Once word reached New Haven about the battle at Lexington and Concord in 1775, the fame hungry Arnold quickly gathered his militia and took them into action. Though he was not involved in any conflict at the time, this started a career that would bring Arnold the fame he coveted.

Once the war started, Arnold soon realized that the British colony of Canada could prove to be a key foothold for the colonies. He set his sights accordingly on Fort Ticonderoga, on the shores of Lake Champlain. After convincing Dr. Joseph Warren and Samuel Adams of the importance of the northern territories, Arnold’s plan was brought to the colonial assembly. Upon approval, Arnold received a colonel’s commission. Arriving in New Jersey as the highest-ranking officer, Arnold wrongly assumed he would take over in command. Yet upon his arrival, he discovered that Ethan Allen, James Easton, and Seth Warner had already distributed power amongst themselves in accordance to the amount of men each had brought with them. Shocked that he was not given control, Arnold became belligerent about his right to command the troops as the senior officer. This created tension between him and the troops—so much so, that the other men almost left the entire operation. Faced with an impending revolt and daunted by the task at hand, Arnold and Allen unwillingly agreed to participate in

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1Flexner, The Traitor and the Spy, 4.


3Like many other New England men, Arnold had joined a militia in 1774 and in March of 1775 was elected captain; Martin, Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero, 61–62.

4Wilson, Benedict Arnold, 34.

joint-command of the unit. Despite this contention, during the attack on Ticonderoga, the officers’ cooperation became quite useful. The rough Allen called for surrender by threat of violence, while Arnold made an appeal to maintain order and validate their siege by presenting Captain Delaplace with his commission from the Massachusetts Congress. After Arnold’s success at Ticonderoga, he expected direct praise of his performance. However, the Massachusetts Congress thanked him for his service, and never publicly recognized Arnold’s personal achievements. The proud man could only perceive this omission as an intentional slight against him.

Although Arnold had shown skill as a commander, he wanted to step down. The Massachusetts Congress sought and found a replacement for him, but at a more junior level. Arnold saw the installation of an officer at the same rank but with less seniority as an intentional underestimation of his competency. In addition, he had been refused reimbursement for the personal money he had spent for the patriot cause. Insulted, the proud colonel felt he had no other option but to resign his current commission. Affronted by the audacity of the Massachusetts Congress to send a man lacking experience as his replacement, Arnold went on the offensive. Historians have had a difficult time interpreting Arnold’s next actions. It appears that Arnold and his troops took Edward Mott and several of his men hostage aboard the Schooner USS Liberty for no apparent reason. Mott later accused Arnold of inciting his men and encouraging them to sail to the British with intent to surrender themselves and the schooner. Arnold, of course, refuted all claims made by Mott, asserting that he was as much a hostage as everyone else aboard the ship. While neither Mott’s nor Arnold’s story has ever been verified, the implication of culpability on Arnold’s part vilified him in the eyes of many members of Congress.

Two years later, in 1777, Arnold was dealt another shock from Congress when they passed him over for a promotion. Yet again he found him-

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8 Clare Brandt, The Man in the Mirror, 34–35.
9 Benedict Arnold to the Massachusetts committee, June 24, 1775, in the American Archives.
10 Brandt, Man in the Mirror, 37.
self being surpassed by soldiers who lacked his own seniority. Arnold, who firmly believed in the traditional hierarchy, was astounded that he was overlooked in favor of five younger officers. Writing to General Washington, Arnold conveyed his disappointment with Congress:

> Congress has doubtless a right to promote those . . . they esteem as more deserving . . . . Their promoting junior officers to the rank of Major General, I view as a very civil way of requesting my resignation, as unqualified for the office I hold . . . . My commission . . . [I] received with pleasure only as a means of serving my country, with equal pleasure I resign it, when I can no longer serve my country with honor.\(^1\)

Humiliated that younger and inferior officers were presented the promotion Arnold was in line to receive, it seems that he felt the only way he was able to save face was to resign; Congress no longer wanted him, so he no longer wanted them. Congress had recently initiated a cap system on the number of officers of a certain rank each state could have, which adversely impacted Arnold, as Connecticut had already met its allotment for major generals. Washington understood Arnold’s disillusionment with a system that promoted soldiers not necessarily upon merit but rather upon which state possessed fewer officers of that rank. Accordingly, Washington requested Arnold to delay his resignation in order for Congress to fully assess the situation.\(^2\) Just nine days after Arnold penned his letter of resignation to Washington, Arnold found himself in Philadelphia. Rather than addressing his concerns of promotion or their debt to him, Congress chose to discuss the list of John Brown’s complaints against Arnold’s conduct in Ticonderoga. While they acquitted Arnold from the charge of treason, they did nothing about his other pressing concerns.

General Phillip Schuyler, an old mentor and friend of Arnold’s, was also in Philadelphia to address charges. Schuyler and Horatio Gates, another one of Arnold’s mentors, were both caught in a bitter feud which would soon entangle Arnold himself. Though Arnold avoided taking sides for most of the debacle, in Philadelphia he seemed to sup-


\(^2\) Brandt, _Man in the Mirror_, 118.
port Schuyler’s side slightly more than Gates’s. This began a partnership that would quickly be strengthened when Arnold headed to Albany to meet Schuyler’s northern army, hoping to bolster his relationship and position with Schuyler.

The day Arnold received his orders to go to Albany, he sent John Hancock a letter once again addressing his current rank in regard to serving with Arthur St. Clair, one of the officers promoted ahead of him:

My being someone since superseded by a number of junior officers, which is generally, but by the army in particular, viewed as an implied impeachment of my character and declaration of Congress that they thought me unqualified for the post that fell to me in the common line of promotions. I therefore hope Congress will do me the favor to accept my resignation... from a real conviction that it is not in my power to serve my country in the present rank I hold.

Though Arnold had submitted his third resignation in two years, he still followed his orders to New York with General Schuyler, claiming to disregard tension regarding rank for the benefit of the country. While he was in New York, Congress decided to again deny Arnold’s request to become a major general. Unfortunately, Congress did not deny him because he did not deserve the advancement but rather because he had asked for it. To succumb to Arnold’s demands would make Congress appear vulnerable.

The ongoing feud between Schuyler and Gates continued to simmer after Arnold joined Schuyler in New York. After losing Fort Ticonderoga, Phillip Schuyler was worried that he would be blamed for the failure. When Congress gave Major General Horatio Gates command of the Canadian campaign, it seemed that Schuyler’s fears were

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confirmed. When Gates arrived in Albany, the troops in Canada were retreating. This led to Schuyler claiming Gates had no army to command and therefore no position. Gates on the other hand, claimed that even though the troops were no longer in Canada he was still their commander. Unable to reach a consensus, the two commanders left it to Congress to pick which one of them was in charge. Congress refused to grant Gates command over the well-connected Schuyler. As neither of the commanders was granted superiority over the other by Congress, Gates was allowed to maintain command of the Canadian campaign. This also permitted Schuyler to keep his command of the rest of the Northern Department. Since Arnold had been a general officer in the Quebec campaign, he was to serve directly under Gates.

With Schuyler and Gates feuding, Arnold would have to choose a side eventually. When Gates gave Arnold command of an entire division, it seemed that Arnold was bound to side with him. However, Schuyler had something Arnold had always wanted: a position in society. While Gates was from humble origins in England, Schuyler was born to a prominent family in New York. Because of his elite status in society, friendship with Schuyler allowed Arnold to form connections with prominent individuals. Without Schuyler, Arnold could not have hoped to move among these high-ranking members of society. Matthew Clarkson, Richard Varick, and Henry Livingston were examples of the distinguished members of society that friendship with Schuyler brought. And they soon became acquainted with Arnold. Varick already held a position in the army on his own account, but Arnold hired both Clarkson and Livingston to serve as personal aidses. While Arnold believed whom he formed friendships with did not constitute picking a side in the feud, Gates saw the group of Schuyler loyalists, formed by Arnold, as a clear indication of where Arnold’s loyalty lay.

By regularly associating with Varick and employing both Clarkson and Livingston, Arnold had inadvertently shown Gates that his loyalty to Schuyler remained and tensions rose accordingly. Arnold confronted Gates when Gates contradicted a set of commands Gates himself had

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19 Flexner, The Traitor and the Spy, 169.  
20 Martin, Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero, 369–70.
given him. Still driven by concerns about his image, Arnold felt Gates had made him appear a fool. Tensions flared yet again when Burgoyne and his British forces attacked, and Gates made the battle-driven Arnold wait rather than attack upon initiation of the battle. Incensed that he could do nothing while his counterparts took part in the action, Arnold uncharacteristically remained where he was ordered—for a time. Eventually no longer able to idly stand by, Arnold confronted Gates and demanded his troops be allowed to target the weak part of the British front. While Gates eventually agreed to Arnold’s strategy, the vulnerable center had gained reinforcements by that time, leading to a hard-fought battle with no victor. Once the battle was over, Gates made no mention of Arnold’s strategy or his heroics during the battle to Congress, but rather only mentioned the troops’ behavior.  

When Arnold confronted Gates about the omission, Gates revealed that Congress had accepted Arnold’s resignation of July 1777, an event of which Arnold had yet to be informed. According to Gates, this demonstrated that Arnold had no standing as a regular officer and therefore deserved no recognition. While many speculated as to the reason of the confrontation, Livingston constructed the most poignant justification; in a letter to Schuyler, he attributed the new animosity towards Arnold to his and Schuyler’s friendship. Confounded that Congress had accepted his resignation, Arnold hastily announced his withdrawal from his post in order to approach Congress. But before he could embark to Philadelphia, the British struck again, and unlike the previous battle, Arnold did not stay put. Though he had given his resignation to Congress, he could not squander his chance to garner a victory in Canada and decided to go to battle. Charging forward upon his horse, he eventually crushed his leg that had previously been shot in Canada.

Arnold was sidelined from the battlefield by the wounds he suffered in the charge, but Washington offered him the position of military governor of Philadelphia. Feeling defeated, Arnold traveled to Philadelphia. Not only was he no longer considered fit for field duty and therefore confined to govern a city, Arnold was also “honored” with a promotion to major general. While that promotion may seem to be a long-awaited victory for him, Arnold perceived it instead as a drastic loss.

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21 Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy*, 175.
since his seniority was not restored over the junior officers who had been promoted over him.

Arnold soon found himself in a new predicament involving the rightful ownership of trade goods, when one Robert Shewell Jr. appeared in camp requesting a pass to Virginia. The request in itself was not odd, but Shewell was a known Tory sympathizer and requesting a pass from the Patriots was his last chance to avoid their seizure of his goods. Though it was well known that Congress would soon be signing an ordinance that cut Philadelphia trade off, Arnold signed the pass for Shewell’s schooner, the Charming Nancy.\(^{23}\) Trouble ensued when Shewell and company were captured by a Pennsylvania privateer, Samuel Ingersoll, as Shewell had also acquired a pass from the British. Desiring the contraband aboard the ship, Ingersoll soon ventured to the New Jersey Court of Admiralty to obtain the commodities. Upon hearing that the harbor in which the Charming Nancy docked was soon to be attacked by the British, Shewell and company pleaded with Arnold to send wagons to New Jersey to save their assets. Consequently, several wagons reserved for the use of the revolutionary militias reached Egg Harbor to rescue what were essentially British trade goods at Arnold’s order.\(^{24}\) Arnold’s involvement became even more questionable when the owners of the Charming Nancy enlisted a shopkeeper, Stephen Collins, to dispose of their merchandise for a commission. Thereafter the three owners could collect half of the money, with the remaining half to be collected by Arnold. When Arnold then proceeded to personally go to Collins’s shop and sign for his portion of the money, he implicated himself as someone invested in the venture, calling into question whether or not he had been involved since the beginning of the trade or if he had eventually become involved simply due to a desperate plea by Shewell and company to save their property.\(^{25}\)

Though it was extremely hard to prove any actual charges against Arnold, he was subsequently court-martialed. In order to convict

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\(^{24}\) Wilson, *Benedict Arnold*, 152.

Arnold of any wrong doing, it was essential to demonstrate that he knew about Congress’s new resolution about Philadelphia trade before the pass was given to Shewell. It was also vital to show that Arnold became a partner in this venture before the controversial pass was administered. Not being able to concretely prove most of the accusations against him, the court only found him guilty of neglecting his duty by allowing the Charming Nancy to leave the port and commandeering the wagons to move the goods. The proud Arnold was already outraged at the audacity of Congress to call his judgment into question, and he was about to receive a scolding from one of the men he admired most. On April 6, 1780, General Washington outlined the charges and whether Arnold was to be found guilty of them. The court had sentenced Arnold to receive a public reprimand from Washington. This was delivered in the General’s general order after he discussed the charges against Arnold. While the admonition given was mild, the respectable Arnold would struggle to forget the reprimand that he deemed as an attack on his character.

Valuing his reputation above all else, Arnold could not tolerate when someone dared to question his character in any fashion. Entering the war in hopes of creating a respectable place in society for himself, he had managed to become a hero only to watch his reputation become tarnished by multiple accusations. Arnold had earned enough respect in the beginning of his career to be elected the Captain of his militia and then granted the title of Colonel by Congress. Both of these acts allowed Arnold to start his military career and therefore garner praise from prominent individuals such as George Washington. When writing to Congress concerning Arnold’s eventual promotion, Washington had praised both Congress’s decision and Arnold’s character: “He [Arnold] has certainly discovered, in every instance where he has had an opportunity, much bravery, activity, and enterprise.” Though he had won praise and admiration throughout his career, Arnold was no stranger to controversy. He had been accused of treason by Edward

Mott, skipped over his due promotion, refused due credit, promoted but refused restoration of his seniority, considered an invalid by the army, and accused of questionable actions by his once trusted mentor.

During the court-martial and with his insecurities growing, Arnold started courting a Tory, Peggy Shippen, and eventually married her. While Peggy’s father refused to take sides during the war, Peggy had spent a considerable amount of time with British officers before the Patriots arrived. A friend of the British general John André, Peggy soon introduced her friend and husband. This would mark the start of one of the most infamous events in American history. Some historians theorize that it was over the new couple’s honeymoon that treason was initially discussed. Peggy, young, adventurous, and loyal to the British cause, may well have been the catalyst in Arnold’s change of allegiance. Once together, the new couple contacted Peggy’s old friend André and the path to treason began. As one of Washington’s most trusted generals, Arnold was extremely valuable to the British; however, he needed something valuable that would secure his position in British society once he was able to publicly join them.

West Point was extremely critical to both the British and the Patriots because it had the capability to split the colonies in half. British control of the fort would lead to diminished communication and trade between the former colonies, which could very well lead to the end of the war in favor of the British. Still in negotiation with André and Henry Clinton of the British, Arnold knew they could not turn down his offer if he could hand over West Point. Although he did not have command of the fort yet, he promised to deliver it once he was in command. Only asking for property and money, Arnold was ready to betray the country that had wronged him for so long. The next task Arnold had was convincing Washington that he should entrust him with West Point. On August 3, 1780, Arnold was successful in his quest for command of the fort.

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30 Benedict Arnold to John André, July 12, 1780, in *The Sir Henry Clinton Collection,* ed. Cynthia Ghering, Kate Foster, Melissa McCollum, and Michelle Light (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999).
31 Benedict Arnold to John André, July 15, 1780, in *The Sir Henry Clinton Collection.*
Desiring a government and comrades that would value him the way he felt he deserved, Arnold began to betray the country he could now only feel apathy towards. Arnold continued to communicate with his wife’s friend André. Finally, on September 20, Arnold issued a pass for a John Anderson, John André’s alias, and gave it to Joshua Smith. Smith, who lived nearby, would be able to escort André through enemy lines. After all this time solely conversing through coded letters, André and Arnold finally met face to face to discuss the details of the treason. Arnold haggled over money, refusing to betray West Point if the amount was not right. Once remuneration was decided, the two soldiers discussed strategy, debating whether Washington should be at the fort when it was handed over to the British, the amount of ammunition that should be left at the fort, and other plans to make the fort both vulnerable and a worthy prize.

The meeting went smoothly, but the execution was a catastrophe. After their meeting Arnold promptly returned to his house, where Peggy awaited him. André, who was supposed to head back on the ship the Vulture, stayed the night at Smith’s, since the ship had to flee after being attacked. André then took the dangerous trip to British lines with Smith, who unknowingly escorted a spy, not the Patriot John Anderson. Because of the lack of knowledge on Smith’s part, the trip was not taken in haste, and he managed to talk to almost every Patriot he saw. Abandoned by his companion at the British lines, André felt relief for the first time since his excursion had begun. Only fifteen miles from the next royal outpost, he had safely made his way through enemy lines and believed he was safe. However, near Tarrytown, André was stopped by three men. He then proceeded to profess to being a British officer, but soon suspected he would need his pass from Arnold to appease these men, who seemed to be Patriots. In hopes of finding money, the men made André strip. Finding nothing, they finally searched his boots and found papers that the major had hidden in his stocking. Realizing he was a spy, André’s captors escorted him to Lieutenant Colonel John Jameson.

Arnold was suspected by Jameson, who informed Washington of the

capture of André. Arnold had time to flee to British-controlled land; however, André was not so lucky, as he was soon hanged for espionage by the Patriots. Arnold maintained Peggy’s innocence in the plot, penning a letter to Washington pleading for mercy for his wife, who, he claimed, knew nothing of the deed. After being categorically humiliated by Congress and his fellow soldiers, Arnold had become hateful to the cause he once championed in hopes of finding respect in a new country. With André’s capture, Arnold was marginalized yet again. His former comrades admired André’s composure in face of certain death, and his new country mourned a hero and received a traitor.

Arnold succeeded in his quest for fame, but not in the way he had intended. Instead of being memorialized as a hero, his betrayal has become infamous in the United States. A man who valued his reputation and did not forgive easily, Arnold could not accept the mistreatment he experienced at the hand of the Patriot forces. Pointedly denied recognition for his ingenuity, refused a promotion that he believed was due to him to make way for junior officers in order to fulfill a cap system, mistreated by Gates, subjected to public ridicule by Washington and his court-martial, and then denied his seniority once given the rank of major general was all too much for Arnold to handle. Once married to Peggy, a Tory sympathizer, the choice was clear: either be subjected to more ridicule or find a hero’s reputation in Britain. However, seen as a traitor in Britain as well, Arnold was often ignored and ultimately did not die the death of a hero but rather a pariah.

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About the Author:

Rebecca Andrews is a junior at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. She is a double major in political science and history. In the spring of 2018, she studied abroad in Certaldo, Italy. She is a member of Gamma Sigma Sigma and Pi Sigma Alpha Political Science Honors Society. Rebecca hopes to pursue a graduate degree in international relations. She is originally from Charlotte, North Carolina.