

Benedict Arnold's 1780 treason and the execution of John Andre recalled, 1823

Introduction

During the American Revolution, the discovery of General Benedict Arnold's plot to surrender West Point to the British was a deeply shocking revelation. In a memoir written some forty years after the war, William North, an aide-de-camp to General Baron Von Steuben, recalled how the news of the plot was broken to the Army:

It was midnight, Horses were saddling officers going from tent to tent, ordering their men, in a suppressed voice, to turn out & parade no drum beat– the troops formed in silence & in darkness – I may well say, in consternation, for who in such an hour, & called together in such a manner, & in total ignorance of the cause, but must have felt, & feared the near approach of some tremendous shock –

John Andre, aide-de-camp of the British commander in chief, Sir Henry Clinton, was General Benedict Arnold's contact. Andre was taken by the American forces and hanged as a spy in Tappan, New York, on October 2, 1780. Although many on both sides felt Arnold should have been the one to die for treason, Washington determined that he had no choice but to execute the captured British officer. William North wrote of the execution:

I was at Tappan with the army when Andre was executed, but I did not attend his execution, nor as I have always believed did an great number of spectators go to witness the ~~execution~~ exit of that unfortunate gentleman- You must remember that ~~no one rejoiced~~ all mourned his fate though fully convinced of its Justice & propriety. . . . after the execution, it was asked if Major Andre's request to be shot could not have been complied with– No, answer^d the Baron He was a spy & in no army was any other death than by the gibbet awarded to a spy–

Excerpt

I was at Tappan with the army when Andre was executed, but I did not attend his execution, nor as I have always believed, did an great number of spectators go to witness the ~~execution~~ exit of that unfortunate Gentleman– You must remember that ~~no one rejoiced~~ all mourned his fate though fully convinced of its Justice & propriety– When Baron Steuben came from the house in which the court had been holden– I remarked to him that the tryal had not taken so long a time as I had expected– No, said The Baron, ~~gave us no~~ The unhappy prisoner gave us no trouble in calling witnesses. He confessed everything. after the execution, it was asked if Major Andre's request to be shot could not have been complied with– No, answer^d the Baron He was a spy & in no army was any other death than by the gibbet awarded to a spy– I have thought that Andre's request to those around him, to witness “that He died like a brave man”, ought not to have been made. with respect to The story told in Lees ~~memory~~ history of the Southern War, respecting the attempt to take Arnold, in which it is said, or hinted, that another General Officer, was suspected by the Com^{dr} in Chief all I can say is, that I never heard the remotest suspicion attaching to any

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one, of being concerned or in any Way implicated in Arnolds treason – It is true, it was a moment of alarm & fear, & doubt how far the treason might have extended but *to have* Suspicion to have allighted on anyone, much more a General Officer, I can not bring my mind to believe it– I remember the dark moment well in which the defection of Arnold was announced in [~~strikeout~~] pers, It was midnight, Horses were saddling officers going from tent to tent, ordering their men, in a suppressed voice, to turn out & parade no drum beat– the troops formed in silence & in darkness – I may well say, in consternation, for who in such an hour, & called together in such a manner, & in total ignorance of the cause, but must have felt, & feared the near approach of some tremendous shock –

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, study the transcript, and examine the images of the original document. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. What is the tone of beginning of the document? Rewrite the text in your own words.
I was at Tappan with the army when Andre was executed, but I did not attend his execution, nor as I have always believed, did an great number of spectators go to witness the ~~execution~~ exit of that unfortunate Gentleman– You must remember that ~~no one~~ ~~rejoiced~~ all mourned his fate though fully convinced of its Justice & propriety–
2. Why did the trial of Major Andre not take a long time to complete?
3. Why did the court refuse Andre's request to be shot?
4. What emotions did William North express on hearing of Benedict Arnold's treason?
5. How did the time of day affect the announcement of Arnold's treason?

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Transcript

William North, Recollections, New London, Connecticut, September 18, 1823.

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much that in grasping my hand he reeld, it is for Joy of seeing you once more Captain North, said he, that is the occasion of this [4]

It was said of John Adams by R^d Henry, or some other of the Lees, that He was sometimes mad, frequently great, & always honest— & when He lost the Presidency, His madness was at its highth— Poor Human Nature! I wish that His letters not only to Cunningham, but to Hamilton had never been written— & I presume He wishes so too— His son has drawn censure on himself as I see by the Boston papers. Whether He will be President or not is to me of no consequence. His manners are not conciliating, & his soul I believe is pretty much like Bob's- Eustis also I see is laughed at in the Galaxy— To be in high station in our country, is not to be on a bed of roses. His inaugural speech was exceedingly bad— I am glad Cunningham committed suicide, & I hope his son will do the same

I am D^r Sir
Your Friend Ser^t
W North

New London Sept. 18
1823

Note: Letters between John Adams and a relative, William Cunningham Jr., were published in *Correspondence between the Hon. John Adams, later President of the United States, and the Late Wm. Cunningham, Esq. Beginning in 1803 and Ending in 1812* (Boston, 1823) by Cunningham's son, E. M. Cunningham.

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Images

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William North, Recollections, September 18, 1823, p. 1. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC02541.02)

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William North, Recollections, September 18, 1823, p. 4. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC02541.02)