

“HOSTAGE TO FORTUNE”: BENEDICT ARNOLD’S INVASION OF VIRGINIA IN 1781

Benedict Arnold has the unique and questionable distinction of being the only American who served as a general officer on opposing sides in the same war. His military record, as an officer on the American side from 1775 to 1780, was exceptional. He was instrumental in capturing the fort at Ticonderoga in May of 1775 and in saving Fort Stanwix in the Mohawk Valley in August of 1777. In the fall of 1775, he led a force of a thousand men on a three hundred mile march through the Maine wilderness to participate in a New Years Eve attack on Quebec. The next year he supervised the building of a fleet of boats and then used those boats effectively in a delaying action on Lake Champlain. In 1777, he fought in the Battle of Ridgefield and then played a pivotal role in defeating a British army at Saratoga. In September of 1780, his attempt to deliver the fortification at West Point to the British was discovered shortly after his first face to face meeting with the British, and he barely escaped to a British ship before being captured by the Americans.

Arnold’s military career did not end with his escape to the British side. Even though there was mixed reaction among the British officers and loyalist leaders in New York, the British commander in chief, Sir Henry Clinton, made him a British brigadier general. Although Arnold had proven himself as an American military leader, he faced resistance because some in British controlled New York suspected his recent allegiance to the British cause and some blamed him for his role in the death of John Andre, who was a very popular aide to Clinton and had been the British contact in the negotiations with Arnold.

Arnold’s first assignment as a British general was to lead an expedition to Virginia in December of 1780. This Virginia campaign was important for two reasons. First, most historians have largely ignored the period after he went over to the British side emphasizing, instead, his American military activities.¹ Therefore, it is widely believed

¹ Of the nineteen Arnold biographies, ten have a page or less about the Virginia campaign. Most of the other nine focus on negative aspects of Arnold’s character relating to his Virginia campaign citing his alleged threat to burn Richmond, the story of his asking a captured rebel what would happen to Arnold if he were captured by the

that Arnold's military accomplishments and military career ended when he left the American army. This article will look at Arnold's record as a British officer to see whether he exhibited the same leadership qualities on the battlefield for the British that he showed as an American commander, and whether he achieved any significant results in his Virginia campaign.

Second, Arnold's Virginia campaign was one of the opening rounds in a series of events that culminated in the British surrender at Yorktown in September of 1781. As it turned out, Arnold's appearance in Virginia "soon proved to be a magnet drawing forces of both sides to Virginia".² Of course, no one knew at the time that Arnold's expedition would be one of the first in a series of events that would result in an American victory at Yorktown, and ultimately the end of the war. For some of the same reasons that Arnold's career as a British general is overlooked, many historians who write about Yorktown and the events leading up to it do not mention Arnold's prominent role.

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Arnold's expedition sailed into the Chesapeake Bay and ran into a severe winter storm on December 26th and 27th, which ended up separating at least three of his transport vessels, containing six hundred men, from the rest of the convoy. Arnold continued on to his initial destination, which was the Hampton Roads area, and arrived there on December 30th.⁴ Rather than wait in Hampton Roads for the arrival of the rest of his transports and men, Arnold, behaving in characteristic fashion, decided to move immediately up the James River with his present force of eight hundred men escorted by two armed warships,⁵ realizing that surprise would make his success more certain and that delay would enable the opposition to gather enough momentum to contest his route up the river.

Arnold ran into the first American opposition at Hoods Point, where a small detachment of fifty inexperienced militia and an artillery battery of five pieces were strategically located to prevent possible British raids on Richmond and Petersburg. When Arnold attempted to pass Hoods Point, the American battery provided "brisk fire upon us

Americans, or else his dispute with the navy over prize claims. Only two articles that are primarily about Arnold in Va. have ever been published: Lassiter in 1901 and Comtois in 1994.

² American Military History, Army Historical Series, Office of the Chief of Military History, The Winning of Independence, 1777-1783, 95.

³ See Carrington, Lafayette's Virginia Campaign, 1781; Burke Davis, The Campaign That Won America; Henry P. Johnson, The Yorktown Campaign and the Surrender of Cornwallis, 1781; Yorktown and the Siege of 1781, N.P.S.

⁴ Arnold to Clinton, January 21, 1781, Clinton Papers, William L. Clements Library; Ewald, 258.

⁵ Arnold to Clinton, January 21, 1781; Ewald, 289.

which killed one man”.⁶ Early the next morning, Arnold sent Simcoe with one hundred fifty men to attack the battery from the rear, but the militia had abandoned the post during the night, so the British confiscated one artillery piece and disabled the others. By January 4th, Arnold was at Westover Plantation, which was the estate of William Byrd III, who himself had been a patriot up to the time of his death, but whose wife was sympathetic to the British and also happened to be the cousin of Arnold’s wife.⁷

Simcoe says that Arnold hesitated to continue up the river from Westover because of Clinton’s instructions and not really knowing what his forces would face in Richmond, which was about twenty-five miles away. According to Simcoe, Arnold consulted both him and Dundas, and they agreed that a one-day march was not that risky and would not violate his orders from Clinton.⁸ After spending the night at Four Mile Creek, Arnold arrived in Richmond on the morning of the 5th and established his headquarters at City Tavern on Main Street. Much to his surprise, he arrived “untouched by the militia”, which was in too much of a state of disorganization to offer any opposition. On the way into the city, Arnold ordered Simcoe to disperse some militia who were lined up at the outskirts of Richmond, and when he approached, they ran off “in great confusion” without firing a shot.⁹

Arnold’s move up the James River toward Richmond had resulted in a flurry of activity by the government and the militia leaders, but the men they subsequently recruited were too little and too late to save Richmond. “Several thousand militia had at length gathered, a force which might have saved Richmond if raised a few days earlier”.¹⁰ Unfortunately, Governor Thomas Jefferson had delayed acting on earlier reports of British ships in the Chesapeake. Because he waited to call up the militia until Arnold was moving up the James River, both he and the Virginia legislature had to leave Richmond in a hurry to avoid being captured by Arnold.¹¹

Richmond had been untouched by the war to that time so there was a substantial amount of goods to destroy or confiscate. Not only did the British destroy rum, tobacco, flour, tools, salt, bread, corn and clothing, Arnold also sent

⁶ Arnold to Clinton, January 21, 1781; Lee A. Wallace, Jr., *The Battery at Hoods, Virginia Cavalcade*, 23, 1973, 42.

⁷ Ewald, 421n.#16 & 17; Robert P. Davis, *Where A Man Can Go*, Major General William Phillips, British Royal Artillery, 1731-1781 (Westport: Greenwood Press) 1999, 120.

⁸ Lieut. Col. John G. Simcoe, *A Journal of the Operations of the Queens Rangers* (North Stratford: Ayer Co. Publishers) 2000, 160.

⁹ Arnold to Clinton, January 21, 1781; Simcoe, 163; Dawson, 642.

¹⁰ H.J. Eekinrode, *The Revolution in Virginia* (Hamden: Archon Books) 1964, 214.

a small force under Simcoe to destroy the Westham Foundry, which was the only cannon foundry in the state. The foundry included a machine shop and a powder magazine containing five or six tons of gunpowder.¹²

While in Richmond, contrary to the stories that have been published about his threat to burn the town, Arnold sent a letter to Jefferson offering to pay the owners of goods, such as “tabacco, rum, wine, sugar, sail cloth and coffee... one half of the current price at Richmond”, upon the delivery of the goods to the British.¹³ A reading of the letter shows no vindictive attitude on Arnold’s part, and, in fact, the letter is a mild offer containing no threat to burn the city or to harm the inhabitants. This request was rejected by Jefferson, who replied that, “I am not fond of encouraging an intercourse with the enemy for the recovery of property”.¹⁴ Based on Jefferson’s response, the British continued to destroy the supplies and goods in Richmond.

Steuben, who was the opposing commander, did not find Arnold’s actions in Richmond to be as problematic as subsequent commentators have alleged. Steuben attributed the plundering and destruction of property that occurred in Richmond as much to straggling British soldiers and unrestrained American militia as to the British soldiers directly under Arnold.¹⁵ An American major also indicated that Americans did some of the plundering. “I am sorry to say that there is a stigma which rests upon the conduct of some of our own men with respect to the pillaging of public and private goods, that does not upon the British troops...”.¹⁶ It is ironic that Arnold has been blamed for actions that were either done by Americans or straggling British troops, which he neither ordered nor condoned.

Governor Jefferson stated that Arnold “burnt some houses and stores” before he left Richmond, and most historians agree with the account in the *New-Jersey Gazette* of January 31, 1781, which states that Arnold “burnt some buildings of public, and some of private property, with the stores that remained in them; destroyed a great quantity of private stores, and about twelve o’clock retired towards Westover”. The *Gazette* goes on to state that “the loss

¹¹ Wallace, *Virginia Cavalcade*, 42.

¹² Arnold to Clinton, January 21, 1781; Simcoe, 163; Selby, 223; Rankin, 22-23; Henry Lee, *The American Revolution in the South* (New York: Arno Press) 1969, 300.

¹³ George Green Shackelford, *Benedict Arnold in Richmond 1781*, *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography*, 60, October 1952, 598-99, copy of Arnold’s letter to the Inhabitants of Richmond and Manchester, January 7, 1781.

¹⁴ Shackelford, 598.

¹⁵ Shackelford, 597.

¹⁶ Shackelford, 597.

sustained is not accurately known”, and reports that papers belonging to the Auditor and the Council were mistakenly placed at the Foundry and were destroyed by the British.¹⁷

On January 8th, Arnold sent Simcoe on a raid on the Charles City Courthouse, which was nine miles from Richmond. Simcoe’s subsequent report of this action has him encountering a body of American militia with whom he fought a skirmish that resulted in the killing of twenty Americans and the taking of eight prisoners.¹⁸ On January 9th, the men in the three lost transports finally joined Arnold at Westover, increasing his army to the original force of approximately fifteen hundred men. While at Westover, Arnold sent his men on a raid to neighboring Berkeley Plantation, which was the home of Benjamin Harrison, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a well known patriot leader.

Arnold left Westover for Portsmouth on the 10th and late in the day anchored his transports north of Hoods Point. He sent Simcoe and a force of three hundred men on a surprise attack on Steuben’s forces, which were camped to the west of Hoods. On his way to attack Steuben, Simcoe was ambushed by a group of American militia under the command of George Rogers Clark. The militia under Clark initially held their position so the first counter-attack by the British did not succeed. It took a subsequent attack to drive the American militia from Hoods Point “in the utmost confusion”.¹⁹ On the 12th, Arnold was at Cobham where he destroyed a warehouse full of flour and tobacco. On January 14th, Arnold landed his force at Harding’s Ferry and then marched to Smithfield, where he destroyed a storehouse of American goods. By January 19th, Arnold was in Portsmouth, which was to serve as his winter quarters and his base of operations for the rest of his Virginia campaign. Upon his arrival, Arnold began fortifying the preliminary defenses that Leslie had left behind some two months earlier and established his headquarters at the Patrick Robinson house.²⁰

¹⁷ Shackelford, 595 for Jefferson’s reply; New Jersey Gazette is from Frank Moore, *The Diary of the American Revolution 1775-1781* (New York: Washington Square Press) 1967, 471-73.

¹⁸ Simcoe, 165-67; Dawson, 645-6.

¹⁹ Wallace, *Virginia Cavalcade*, 43; Simcoe, 168-9; John Marshall, *The Life of George Washington, I* (New York: Walton Book Co.) 1930, 490. Marshall notes that he was present at the Hoods skirmish.

²⁰ Arnold to Clinton, January 21, 1781; Simcoe, 169-70.

Arnold's ability to move quickly up the James River was significantly improved by the capture of some American boats, which Captain Ewald of the Field Jager Corps called sloops.²¹ These American boats were smaller than his transport ships and were ideal for use on the rivers of Virginia. Recent research has revealed various types of boats that were being used in the Virginia waterways prior to 1781.²² I believe that the captured American boats were large versions of either a James River bateau or a Potomac River gundalow, or both. Since Ewald called them sloops, they most likely had sails as well as oars.

Arnold not only utilized the captured American boats, but just as important, after he set up operations in Portsmouth, he built his own boats. Dundas, in his January 22nd letter to Clinton, says, "Every step is taken by Gen. Arnold towards building boats for the speedy transporting a large body of men".²³ Simcoe in his journal says that, "Gen. Arnold had constructed a great many boats, excellently adapted for the transportation of soldiers" and that Arnold "had it in his power to reinforce any of the points within ten minutes".²⁴ His immediate subordinates both recognized that Arnold was providing a special tool to the British army, which strengthened its defensive position in Portsmouth and enhanced its offensive operations along the rivers of Virginia. Arnold confirmed his intentions in his January 23rd letter to Clinton, where he proposes to build fifty boats.²⁵

The type of boats that Arnold was building in Virginia, while not described in detail by any other contemporary observer, was described by Arnold in his January 23rd letter to Clinton, and can be reasonably ascertained by looking at Arnold's previous experience with boats and their use in amphibious operations. In 1776, Arnold built and subsequently commanded a fleet of fifteen boats in his fight with the British on Lake Champlain. The boats constructed by Arnold for that operation can be verified because some of them have been recovered from their resting-places in the waters of Lake Champlain. Varick's list of "Armed Vessels in Lake Champlain" from 1776²⁶ shows the type of boat that is relevant to the Virginia campaign. The boat was called a galley and the Varick list shows that it could hold eighty men. Chapelle describes these vessels as being 72 ½ feet long and twenty feet wide

²¹ Ewald, 259.

²² Minnie Lee McGhee, *River Boat Echoes: Batteaux in Virginia* (Virginia Canals & Navigation Society) n.d., and other publications of the Virginia Canals & Navigation Society.

²³ Dundas to Clinton, January 22, 1781, Clinton Papers, William L. Clements Library.

²⁴ Simcoe, 179.

²⁵ Arnold to Clinton, January 23, 1781, Clinton Papers, William L. Clements Library.

and “rigged with two lanteen sails and sparred with masts of about equal length”. Chapelle described these boats as being “flat bottomed” and double ended. He says that Arnold’s galley had provisions for rowing and carried eight guns.²⁷

Simcoe describes the boats being constructed by Arnold during the Virginia campaign as being able to hold eighty men not counting the rowers. He describes them in at least one place as gunboats and has them being rowed to attack Hood’s Point.²⁸ Another contemporary journal describes Arnold’s vessels as being “flat boats”.²⁹ Steuben describes Arnold’s boats as “flat boats each of which carried one hundred men”.³⁰ Arnold describes his boats as holding eighty men and drawing “12 inches water”.³¹ Based on this rather sketchy, but important, information, I conclude that the boats used by Arnold in his Virginia campaign were similar to the galleys he used on Lake Champlain. These larger boats would have allowed Arnold to carry most of his men in the “thirteen topsail vessels and twenty-three flat bottomed boats” he had built,³² and would have provided him with the rapid response feature that he needed to stay ahead of the Americans. Although the boats built by Arnold in Virginia were also similar to the James River bateaux and the Potomac River gundelows, Arnold’s own relevant experience was with boats that operated in the northern waterways on or near Lake Champlain.

George Otto Trevelyan, a twentieth century British historian, confirms Arnold’s prowess in utilizing boats in combat by concluding that Arnold was “skilled beyond any other living man in the arts and practices of amphibious warfare”. Trevelyan describes Arnold’s activities in Virginia as “harrying them and despoiling them on land and making havoc of the shipping in the interior waterways”.³³ Arnold’s use of smaller vessels demonstrates an understanding of the type of boats that would be most effective in Virginia that he coupled with his knowledge of how to use them to their best advantage to support his army.

²⁶ A List of Armed Vessels on Lake Champlain, Taken from Colonel Trumbull’s return of the 12th instant, American Archives, Series 5, II, 1039.

²⁷ Chapelle, 106.

²⁸ Simcoe, 160, 179.

²⁹ Bartholomew James, Journal of Rear-Admiral Bartholomew James 1752-1828, M.A., eds. John Knox Laughton and James Young F, Sullivan (Navy Records Society) 1846.

³⁰ Friedrich Kapp, The Life of Frederick William Von Steuben, Major General in the Revolutionary Army (New York: Mason Brothers) 1859, 423.

³¹ Arnold to Clinton, January 23, 1781.

³² Robert P. Davis, 142; Kapp, 425.

³³ Sir George Otto Trevelyan, George the Third and Charles Fox (London: Longmans, Green & Co.) 1914, I, 333.

While in his winter quarters at Portsmouth, Arnold did not sit idly by waiting for the Americans to make a move. On January 25, Dundas was sent on a raid across the Elizabeth River to Princess Ann and, in subsequent actions, Simcoe led an expedition to fortify the post at Great Bridge and then, a few days later, to Kemp's Landing, where he had a skirmish with the American militia. On February 16, Simcoe was ordered to split his force and send half to Northwest Landing and half to Great Bridge. Arnold continued his active raiding parties throughout the rest of February and into March.³⁴

By the beginning of March, Washington assigned Lafayette to take a force of twelve hundred New England and New Jersey troops and to attempt to capture Arnold and his army with the help of the French navy. Alden describes the purpose of Washington's plan as "to catch Arnold between the French ships and American troops and to force his surrender before he could secure relief".³⁵ Lafayette's advance into Virginia was the first direct action by Washington to involve the Continental army in Arnold's invasion. Washington had instructed Lafayette that he should "do no act whatever with Arnold that directly or by implication may screen him from the punishment due his treason and desertion, which if he should fall into your hands, you will execute in the most summary way".³⁶ Washington wrote a letter to Rochambeau on the 18th of February to request the support of the French in his attempt to trap Arnold. Washington indicated that "the destruction of Arnold's corps was of such immense importance to the welfare of the Southern states "that the Americans would attempt to do it alone without any French troops if the French navy "could protect the operation by commanding Chesapeake bay, and preventing reinforcement of the enemy from New York".³⁷ At least one commentator has observed that the expedition against Arnold seemed to be motivated more by Washington's desire for personal revenge than by military strategy. Despite some delays, Lafayette finally arrived at Yorktown on March 14th.³⁸

The French naval force that was supposed to provide support to Lafayette met the British navy in the First Battle of the Virginia Capes on March 16th. Each side had an equal number of ships but the British ships had more guns. The

³⁴ Simcoe, 172-78.

³⁵ John Richard Alden, *The South in the Revolution 1763-1789* (Louisiana State University Press) 1957, 292.

³⁶ Washington to Lafayette, February 20, 1781, Fitzpatrick, XXXI, 255.

³⁷ John Austin Stevens, *The Expedition of Lafayette Against Arnold*, Maryland Historical Society, Publication No. 13, 1878, 18-19.

engagement between the two naval forces only lasted about one hour. Both sides suffered some damage but the superior British firepower finally broke the French line. The French withdrew a short distance away, and both sides considered their positions. The British ships were "too crippled" to initiate a second action and the French ships had sustained damage and did not have the confidence that they could prevail if they continued. The French then turned around and took their fleet back to Newport. Lafayette, realizing that he could not carry out his mission to trap Arnold in Portsmouth without the French Navy, wrote Washington that the action of the French navy "destroys every prospect of an operation against Arnold".³⁹ After the French withdrawal, Lafayette left Virginia to return to Washington's headquarters. The timely assistance of the British fleet probably saved Arnold's life because without the British navy he had no means of escape.

In order to protect Arnold's position in Virginia after he learned about Lafayette's expedition, Clinton assigned Major General William Phillips to reinforce Arnold and gave him the command of the Virginia campaign. Phillips had recently been released as a member of the Convention Army that had surrendered to the Americans in 1777 at the Battle of Saratoga. A total of twenty-two hundred men were placed under Phillips's command, including one thousand light infantry troops, six hundred troops from the 76th Regiment of Foot, five hundred Hessians and one hundred men from the Royal Artillery. Phillip's forces left Sandy Hook on March 18, 1781 in sixteen transports and sailed to Virginia to meet up with Arnold.⁴⁰

Phillips's convoy arrived in Virginia on March 27th and he discovered that Arnold was away on a raid with Dundas in the Williamsburg area. Phillips wanted to utilize his reinforcements to help out so he proceeded to where Arnold was supposed to be, but when he arrived in Williamsburg he found that Arnold had gone on to Newport News. Phillips and Arnold met up with each other aboard the *Guadaloupe*, which was anchored off of Newport News, and Phillips assumed command of the British forces in Virginia, which with the addition of Phillips's troops totaled approximately thirty-seven hundred men.

³⁸ Stevens' article discusses Lafayette's actions in detail. See Kapp, 407, for view of Washington's motives.

³⁹ Lafayette to Washington, March 26, 1781, Washington Papers, Library of Congress, No. 47, fol. 235. See also Stevens's article for details on Lafayette's effort to entrap Arnold.

⁴⁰ Robert P. Davis, 125-26.

Upon reviewing the situation in Virginia, Phillips concluded that Portsmouth was not an easily defensible position, but felt that he had to spend some time improving its inner and outer works until he could change the location of his base of operations. By April 18th, Phillips's army was on the move with the intention of attacking Petersburg, dispersing the militia assembled at Williamsburg and "destroying the American stores on the south side of the James that had been untouched by Arnold's invasion"⁴¹. Phillips's forces arrived in Williamsburg on April 20 and, after dispersing the American militia they disabled the American cannons. Phillips sent Simcoe on an overnight raid to Yorktown to run off the American militia guarding that town.⁴² With almost no opposition, Phillips and Arnold were in possession of two important towns, but they did not stop there.

Phillips's primary objective in this operation was to seize the town of Petersburg, which was a major supply depot and an important communications link between the colonies in the north and south. Phillips's army arrived in Petersburg on the morning of April 25th, and prepared to attack the Americans. Steuben and Muhlenberg opposed Phillips's army with a smaller force made up of Virginia militia. The militia proved to be a stronger opponent than Phillips had expected so the resulting battle lasted the entire day before the British finally took the city, with significant losses on both sides. Near the end of the day, the British were trying to contest the American's use of the bridge over the Appomattox to engage in an orderly retreat, realizing that if the Americans could get across and then destroy the bridge, the British army would not be able to effectively pursue them. The British were unsuccessful and the bridge was destroyed, which delayed pursuit long enough for the American militia to escape.⁴³ The American losses, according to Peckham, were one hundred killed, but others suggest a higher number.⁴⁴ British losses were "nearly 25-30".⁴⁵

Phillips rested his troops for a day in Petersburg and then divided his force. On April 27th, he sent Arnold on a surprise raid to Osborne's Landing and took the rest of his troops to Chesterfield Court House, because he heard that Steuben and the American militia had stopped there to regroup. Steuben got word of the advancing British army and

⁴¹ Harry M. Ward and Harold E. Greer, *Richmond During the Revolution 1775-1783* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia) 1977, 85.

⁴² Robert P. Davis, 137-39; Simcoe,

⁴³ See Robert P. Davis, 149-161 for a detailed description of the Battle of Petersburg.

⁴⁴ Howard H. Peckham, *The Toll of Independence: Engagements and Battle Casualties of the American Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1974, 85; Robert P. Davis, 161.

⁴⁵ Robert P. Davis, 161.

pulled out of Chesterfield Court House before the British arrived.⁴⁶ Phillips did not want to continue the chase so he destroyed the supplies in the town and then burned the barracks buildings that were there.

Arnold's forces were able to move undetected over land to Osborne's Landing where he discovered "a very considerable Force of ships four Miles above Osbornes, drawn up in a line to oppose us". Arnold placed his troops and artillery in position and then demanded the surrender of the eleven larger ships and several smaller vessels that were anchored to the west of Osborne's. The American commander, who stated that he "would sink in them rather than surrender", rejected Arnold's demand.⁴⁷ Arnold responded with his artillery and in the resulting battle, "four ships, five Brigantines and a number of smaller vessels were sunk and burnt" and a substantial amount of tobacco was destroyed. The British also captured two ships, three brigs, two schooners and five sloops containing tobacco and flour. Arnold reported that he did not lose a man but that "the enemy suffered considerably".⁴⁸ The ships destroyed by Arnold turned out to be all the remaining ships of the Virginia navy, which had been called up to be used in the Lafayette expedition to Virginia in March, and had been left unprotected and inadequately manned at Osborne's after that campaign against Arnold ended in failure.⁴⁹ This successful attack by Arnold, which resulted in the destruction of most of the Virginia navy, was the reverse of his usual method of operation in Virginia, which relied on the use of boats to attack a fixed American position on the land.

On April 29, Phillips moved his combined army toward Manchester, which was on the James River across from Richmond, after sending a small detachment under Arnold ahead in the boats. Lafayette had been ordered back to Virginia to take command of the American forces following his return north in March, after failing to capture Arnold. He arrived back in Virginia on April 21st and joined up with Steuben and Muhlenberg at Richmond to oppose Phillips's army.⁵⁰ Phillips arrived in Manchester without any real opposition, and proceeded to destroy supplies, which included tobacco, beef, pork, flour, ropewalks and "several small vessels".⁵¹ Meanwhile, Lafayette and the American army took up positions across from Manchester on the highest point in Richmond overlooking the

⁴⁶ Robert P. Davis, 163-67.

⁴⁷ Simcoe, 199.

⁴⁸ Arnold to Clinton, May 12, 1781, Clinton Papers, WLC.

⁴⁹ For the best account of this battle see Henry B. Dawson, *Battles of the United States by Sea and Land* (New York: Johnson, Fry and Co.) 1858, I, 687-9.

⁵⁰ Robert P. Davis, 169-70. See Henry B. Carrington, *Lafayette's Virginia Campaign 1781*, *Magazine of American History*, 6, 1881, for details on Lafayette versus Phillips and Arnold.

James River to oppose any attempt by Phillips to cross the river. Phillips evaluated his situation and decided that it was too risky to cross the river and attack the American forces in their secured position, and instead he decided to destroy the stores in nearby Warwick and Cary's Mills.⁵² After carrying out those actions, Phillips concluded that his mission had been satisfactorily achieved, and decided to head back to Portsmouth to await further orders from Clinton.

On May 3rd, Phillips was at Westover Plantation with the Byrd family, and the next day his army continued down the river. By this time, Phillips had become sick, but in response to a letter just received from Cornwallis, he ordered his troops back up the river to Petersburg. Cornwallis's letter had directed Phillips to meet up with him at Petersburg to combine their armies in order to pursue Cornwallis's objective of defeating the American army in the south by operating in Virginia instead of the Carolinas.⁵³ By May 9, Phillips's forces reached Petersburg again, having won a tight race with Lafayette's army to see who could get there first. In Petersburg, Arnold assumed command of the army due to Phillips's incapacity from his sickness. Lafayette arrived across the river from Petersburg on the 10th, and after reviewing the situation decided not to make an attempt on the British position, but the next day he did barrage Petersburg with his artillery.⁵⁴

Phillips died at Bollingbrook Plantation in Petersburg on May 13th of a "bilious fever",⁵⁵ leaving Arnold in command of the British forces in Virginia. Arnold was faced with the necessity of securing his position while he waited in Petersburg for Cornwallis to arrive. On the 20th of May, Cornwallis brought his army into Petersburg to meet up with Arnold's forces.⁵⁶ After reviewing the situation in Virginia, Cornwallis decided to move their combined forces, which at that point numbered approximately fifty-three hundred men, back down the James River to the Westover Plantation. Cornwallis arrived there on the 24th of May and found Major General Leslie, who had just arrived from New York, with additional reinforcements consisting of two thousand men.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Arnold to Clinton, May 12, 1781.

⁵² Robert P. Davis, 170.

⁵³ Robert P. Davis, 176-79.

⁵⁴ Robert P. Davis, 179-80.

⁵⁵ Robert P. Davis, 180; Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution* (New York: Harper Brothers) 1852, II, 340n.

⁵⁶ Selby, 275; Willard M. Wallace, *Traitorous Hero The Life & Fortunes of Benedict Arnold* (New York: Harper and Brothers) 1954, 276.

⁵⁷ Selby, 275; Carrington, *Lafayette's Virginia Campaign*, 344.

At that time, Benedict Arnold received permission to leave Virginia and return to New York in the transport ships that had brought Leslie and his troops. Arnold's return to New York was supported by Cornwallis, who acknowledged in a letter to Clinton, written while at the Westover Plantation on May 26th, "General Arnold goes to New York by the first safe conveyance".⁵⁸ Arnold was back in New York on June 11th, ending his first campaign as a British brigadier general.⁵⁹

Benedict Arnold's invasion of Virginia lasted just under five months. During his first five days in Virginia, Arnold had led a small force up the James River to take Richmond, where he destroyed a sizeable amount of both military and private stores. Up until the time he arrived back at the Westover Plantation on January 7th, he had met very little opposition and lost only one man. The New-Jersey Gazette summarized the success of the British forces in their initial raid, as follows, "Within less than forty-eight hours of the time of their landing, and nineteen from our knowing their destination, they had penetrated thirty-three miles, done the whole injury, and retired".⁶⁰

Arnold then moved back down the James, raiding as he went, and established his headquarters in Portsmouth just twenty days after he had first arrived in the state. According to the Gazette of New York, the British losses in the first twenty days of Arnold's invasion were seven killed and twenty-three wounded.⁶¹ Most of the British casualties had occurred in the skirmish at Hoods Point against George Rogers Clark's militia on the 10th of January.

Simcoe states in his Journal that when Arnold arrived in Virginia he moved with "incomparable activity and dispatch".⁶² Dundas reported to Clinton, in an after action report dated January 22nd, as follows: "In the first place to express (as far as I may be allowed to judge) my approbation of the conduct of our General, it has been enterprising

⁵⁸ Cornwallis to Clinton, May 26, 1781, in Willcox, 522.

⁵⁹ Milton M. Klein & Ronald W. Howard, *The New York Letter Book of General James Robertson, 1780-1783* (Cooperstown, N.Y.: New York State Historical Association) 1983, 203, Robertson to Amherst, June 12, 1781, confirms the date of Arnold's arrival in New York and the fact that he came by the transports.

⁶⁰ Moore, *Diary*, 473.

⁶¹ Marshall, 490.

⁶² Simcoe, 159.

and determined upon every occasion.” He goes on to tell Clinton, “we hope we are sent here to be active and could a force sufficient for action be put into Mr. Arnold’s hands his genius leads him to harass and distress the enemy”.⁶³

Compared to Arnold’s actions in his first twenty days, Leslie had been in Virginia for twenty days with more troops than Arnold and had barely moved beyond his initial landing place at the time he left the state. Collier and Matthews were in Virginia for sixteen days with more troops than Arnold, and as with Leslie, they did not leave the Hampton Roads area where they initially landed. Arnold is clearly superior as a commander as compared to the two previous British expeditions to Virginia.

Arnold’s time as commander in Portsmouth should be considered in the context of the size of his force, the availability of British naval vessels to support his efforts, the reward of five thousand guineas posted by Governor Jefferson for Arnold’s capture,⁶⁴ and the potential size of the American forces that could overwhelm Arnold depending on the successful recruitment of enough American militia. Sir John Fortescue, a well-known British Army historian, was critical of Clinton’s insertion of Arnold into Virginia with an insufficient force to protect his position. “Clinton, by setting him down permanently in isolation with a handful of men, was giving him as a hostage to fortune, for the British squadron on the coast was little if at all superior to the French”.⁶⁵ Even though Washington failed to trap Arnold in Portsmouth between Lafayette’s troops and the French navy, Arnold was very much at personal risk in his raid on Virginia.

Arnold demonstrated in Virginia that he could achieve impressive results with a limited number of men. In his first three months his force never exceeded fifteen hundred men, and for the first nine days was only eight hundred men, yet he was able to effectively contain the entire state, despite the reward for his capture and the active recruitment of militia by the Virginia government. Flexner gives Arnold the proper credit when he says: “Moving in their fleet on intricate watercourses to destroy many Rebel installations, the British army kept the defenders so off balance that no effective opposition was possible”. Arnold’s survival for the first three months confirms Flexner’s conclusion.⁶⁶

⁶³ Dundas to Clinton, January 22, 1781, Clinton Papers, WLC.

⁶⁴ Wallace, 274.

⁶⁵ Sir John Fortescue, *The War of Independence: The British Army in North America 1775-1783* (London: Greenhill Books) 2001, 210.

⁶⁶ James Thomas Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co.) 1975, 396.

As second in command to Major General Phillips for two months, Arnold helped the British forces capture Petersburg and Williamsburg and was active in the offensive operations of the British forces, including the action at Osborne's Landing, where he destroyed the Virginia navy. In his first letter to Cornwallis, Phillips summarized his feelings about Arnold: "I cannot conclude without doing justice to the ability, activity and zeal of B.G. Arnold who with a small Corps of Troops effected a very ___ move up James River".⁶⁷ Arnold left Virginia at the end of May while the British army still enjoyed a superior position in the state.

In his five months in Virginia, Arnold's forces killed approximately two hundred men, wounded another one hundred seven men and captured one hundred eighty-five men. During that same period, his losses were thirty-one killed, fifty wounded and fifteen captured.⁶⁸ He lost no engagement with opposing forces, his casualties were minimal and he was one step ahead of the American forces most of the time. His army also destroyed a substantial amount of supplies and goods that would have been used by the Americans to support their army in the field, and was one of the primary purposes that the expedition was sent to Virginia in the first place. Finally, Arnold's invasion of Virginia did temporarily accomplish an important British objective, which was to interrupt the effort by the Virginia patriot government to support Greene's southern army in the Carolinas. The British believed that interrupting Virginia's support for Greene would pave the way for a conclusive British victory in the south, but subsequent events ending in the surrender at Yorktown were to prove otherwise.

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⁶⁷ Phillips to Clinton, April 8, 1781, Cornwallis Papers, P.R.O. 30/11/7.

⁶⁸ The battle casualties are taken from multiple sources including Arnold's letters, Simcoe's Journal, Ewald's Diary, John K. Robertson's web site on the Land and Naval Battles of the Revolution, the books by Ward and Dawson on the battles, and Peckham's excellent study of the battle casualties. I did a spreadsheet on all of the various encounters between Arnold and the American army, which listed, among other things, the total casualties for each side and then made some adjustments where data was inadequate. For example, many of the first hand reports don't list the enemy captured or their own forces that were captured, so the "captured" figure from the various sources are very understated.

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