



# THE LEGACY OF BENEDICT ARNOLD

## American Traitor, Father of Community Good in Athens, Ontario

By Lorraine Payette

When our American neighbours think of Benedict Arnold, the immediate image is that of a traitor to one's country, so bad, he turned his back on everything he and his family, friends and neighbours hold dear, for no understandable reason. Fame? Fortune? Love of a woman? All played a part in him turning his back on his country. How could any place find a value in such a person?

In Athens, Ontario, however, you'll find a different viewpoint altogether.

"Oh, yes," says Sally Smid, local historian. "We know Benedict Arnold. His descendants settled here and did amazing things for Athens."

Arnold is best remembered for his military exploits. A dedicated soldier, he fought long and hard as a member of the Sons of Liberty, eventually becoming an officer in the young Continental Army. He was wounded in battle several times and known to be charismatic and moody with a stormy temper. He spent far more than he earned, often squandering not only his own money but that entrusted to him for his troops. He was passed over for promotion on occasion, and felt unreasonably slighted. He began selling military secrets to the British, becoming a secret Loyalist. Eventually, he was given command of West Point, which he offered to weaken and turn over to the British. The plot was uncovered, and he

escaped down the Hudson to the sloop of war *Vulture*, which brought him safely to the other side.

He had married Margaret Mansfield in 1767 and had three children by her. Then after her death in 1775, he met and married Peggy (Margaret) Shippen in 1779, having five children by her. Most of these offspring went on to illustrious careers in the military. But it was another child, from the wrong side of the sheet, who made all the difference in Leeds-Grenville.

According to the *History of Leeds and Grenville* by Thaddeus W. H. Leavitt, 1879, the British Government awarded large tracts of land to the Loyalists, whether they were disbanded soldiers or refugees:

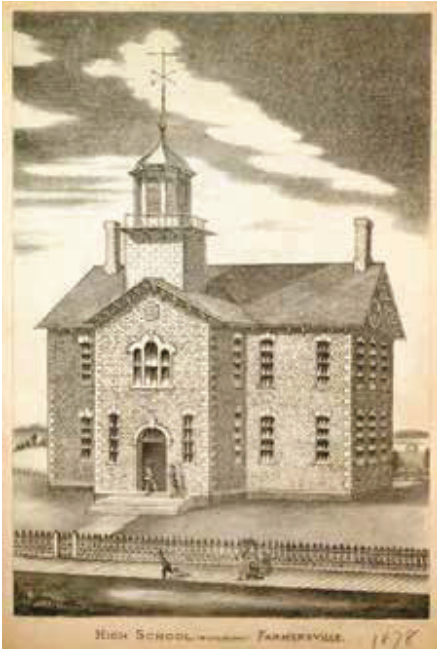
"... The scale of granting land was: To a field-officer, 5,000 acres; captain, 3,000; subaltern, 2,000; private, 200.

"Among the individuals of note who received grants, was Benedict Arnold, the traitor, who drew 18,000 acres, besides having given to him, as a reward for his treachery, \$50,000. Several of the blocks were in the United Counties, one lot being perhaps, the finest farm in Central Canada, situated near Kilmarnock..."

Although Arnold and his legitimate descendants never were known to live in the area, the ninth child, John Sage Arnold, is known as the ancestor of most of the Arnolds whose influence helped to build Canada. Born on April 14, 1786, he was a



**Top:** A young Benedict Arnold (from the net); **Right:** House at 3 Elma Street, former residence of Richard and Morton Arnold (submitted photo)



prosperous farmer, well established in the Athens area. His grave marker can be found in the Lehigh Cemetery, indicating that he died on October 22, 1831, at the age of 45.

His mother is unknown, although she may have been named Margaret Sage. His father is unlisted, but John either took or was given the Arnold name. What is known is that his children and their children went on to become outstanding pillars of the entire area, from Smiths Falls to Brockville, particularly the Athens community, contributing at many levels.

In 1878, Morton Arnold built a new high school in Athens (sadly, no longer in existence). Leavitt described it as “a structure ... of beautiful blue limestone, main building 44x64 feet, with an entrance 16x24. The facings were of white cut stone, the interior containing lecture rooms, music hall, library and all the modern conveniences. The situation is admirable, commanding a view of an extensive stretch of country; the intention being to make the grounds equal to those of any attached to a High School in the Province.”

Also well known was Henry H. Arnold, who ran a mercantile on Main Street in Athens from 1877 to 1939. He was instrumental in the building of the Central Block in 1887. He was also a member of the High School Board (1885 – 1925), taking the position as chairman for many years and serving as secretary-treasurer for 30 years. He was a member of the Canadian Order of Chosen Friends, the Athens I.O.O.F. (Odd Fellows), and a charter member of the Athens Rising Sun Lodge. He served as treasurer of



***Clockwise:** Athens High School, 1878, built by Morton Arnold – plate from Leavitt’s History of Leeds and Grenville; Athens Central Block ca 1890 – Henry H. Arnold and his staff posing in front of the store in the lower right corner – photo at Athens museum; Athens Central Block in January, 2015 – a hardware store now fills the space once held by H. H. Arnold (photo by Lorraine Payette)*

the Village of Athens for 7 years, and was publicly mourned as “one of Athens most prominent citizens” when he passed away in 1945 at the age of 90. He had five children, some of whom may still have descendants living in Athens today. His store in the Central Block was immortalized in a mural on the Stedman’s Store in Athens.

Richard Arnold was known to be living in the house at 3 Elma Street in 1901, and it was later taken over by his son Morford. Almost everywhere you look in Athens, you will find

evidence of the Arnolds and all they did for this community.

Was Benedict a hero or villain?

“To us, you might say he was a hero,” says Smid. “Where would Athens be today without him?”

To learn more, go on-line and read History of Leeds and Grenville by Thaddeus W. H. Leavitt, 1879, find a copy of Benedict Arnold: A Traitor in Our Midst by Barry Wilson, or search the net for Benedict Arnold and his descendants. [LH](#)