



Homegrown Terror: Benedict Arnold and the Burning of New London

Eric D. Lehman
English Department
University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT



Cartoons like this of Benedict Arnold, the Devil, and Jefferson Davis during the Civil War demonstrate the long-term effects of his treason on the American imagination.

Abstract

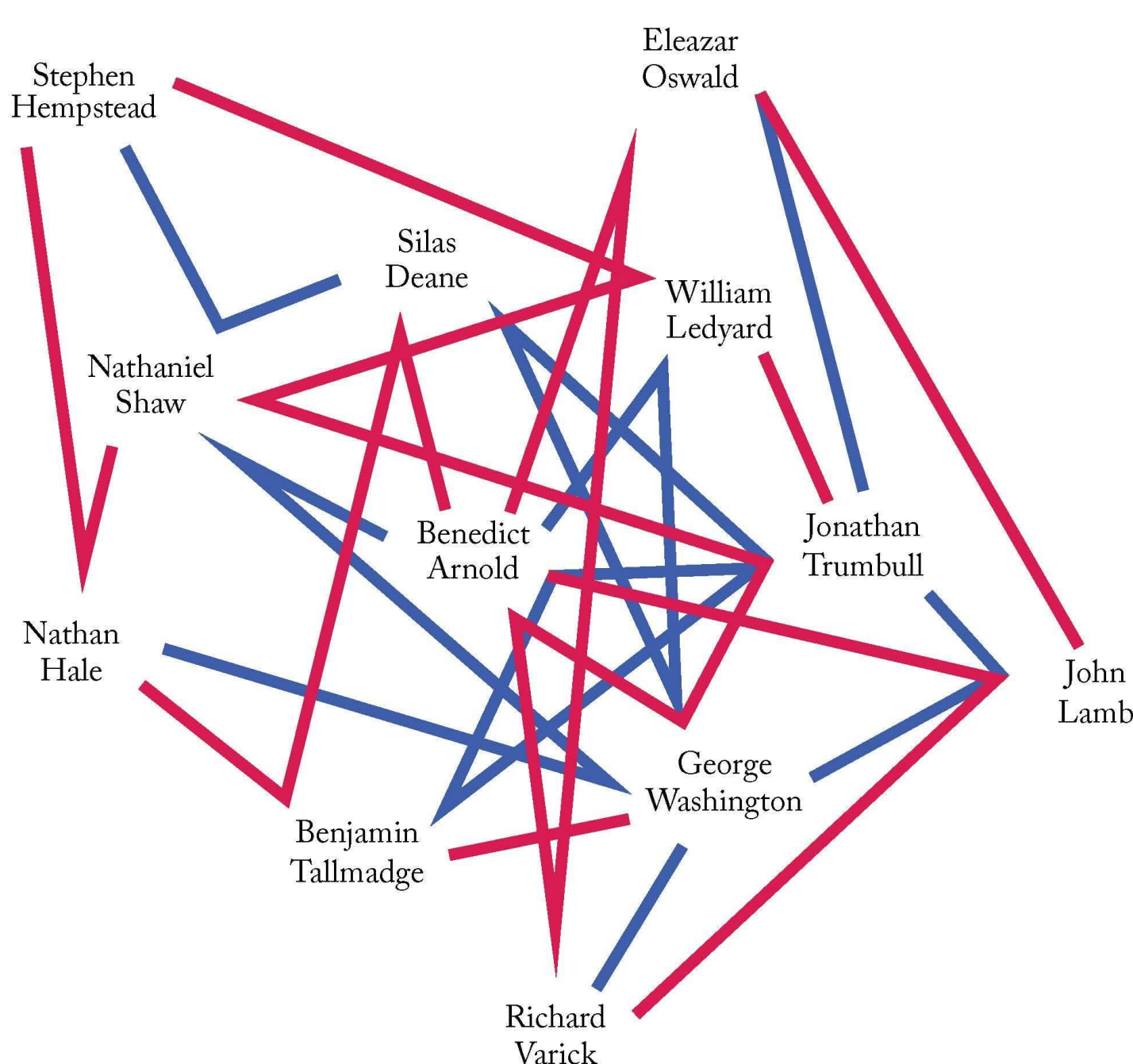
Benedict Arnold was a man who could have been a “founding father” of America, but instead became a national villain. His brutal attack on Connecticut epitomizes this transformation: the moment where an abstract idea of betrayal completes its evolution to the slaughter and destruction of his neighbors and their homes. Focusing on this significant but unfortunately forgotten incident addresses some of the major challenges of any discussion about this complex and confusing American figure. It also directly links Arnold’s story with the stories of his friends and colleagues, something that has never been done before.

The combination of these two approaches puts the focus on Arnold’s effects rather than his motives, and on the victims rather than the attacker. Moreover, it reframes his “treason” as “homegrown terror,” a term that resonates with modern readers and whose definition echoes the 18th century word “parricide,” used by many contemporaries to describe Arnold’s actions.

Arnold and his Peers

Once I began to research the burning of New London the connections between Benedict Arnold and other revolutionaries became clearer and clearer. Connecticut was a web of interwoven loyalties and friendships, as evidenced by the surviving letters and memoirs. It was a small world, and Arnold was linked to others through business, through freemasonry, through the Sons of Liberty, and through service in the army. He made friends throughout Connecticut and the colonies.

A biography of Arnold, then, needed to be a multiple biography in order to show the effects of his actions. In the chart below you can see some (but not all) of the men whom Arnold was connected to. During Arnold’s attack on New London, William Ledyard would be killed, Stephen Hempstead would be seriously wounded, and Nathaniel Shaw’s wife would die indirectly. Silas Deane’s reputation would be destroyed by their friendship. Richard Varick, John Lamb, and George Washington would likely have been killed outright or captured and hanged during Arnold’s attempted “sale” of West Point to the British.



Red stands for close friendships, Blue stands for business or military relationships. Design by Katelyn Wall, SASD, University of Bridgeport.



One of the many graves throughout New London County of soldiers killed “by traitor Arnold’s murdring corps” during his brutal attack on his homeland on September 6, 1781.

Homegrown Terror

Most recent books on Arnold gloss over or leave out his attacks on Virginia and Connecticut. Furthermore, when talking about his “treason” most focus on his plot to give up West Point and George Washington to the British. However, his crimes include more than this arguably political betrayal; they include his acts of political violence against his former neighbors.

The term “parricide” was used by contemporaries like Thomas Jefferson to describe Arnold. It is nearly identical to our term “homegrown terrorist,” though it makes no distinction between a political dissident or political tyrant.

This book studies Benedict Arnold’s relationships with his peers and neighbors, and therefore the term “parricide” and its modern equivalent seems an appropriate one, focusing on the victims’ reactions rather than the aggressors’ actions. “Terrorist” should not be considered a legal term defining Arnold’s official status or pigeonholing him into a category that will lead to a belated two-hundred-year-old conviction. Instead, it is intended to keep the focus on the people who suffered and died because of his actions. It was terror they experienced, and it was from one of their own.

Research Methodology

No one has previously set this shocking attack by Arnold in its full historical context, nor has anyone fully explored Arnold’s relationships with his fellow Connecticut revolutionaries. I have extensively used letters, memoirs, and diaries to get to the root of problems and to the words and reactions of key players, and to mark the differences in this narrative from previous ones. Many of the primary sources for the war have, of course, been published, and I have used those when available, in particular *Connecticut’s Naval Office*, *Documentary Life of Nathan Hale*, *American Archives*, *Public Records of the State of Connecticut*, *Hinman’s Historical Collection*, *The Revolutionary War Correspondence of Benedict Arnold*, and the various published papers, diaries, and journals of contemporaries.

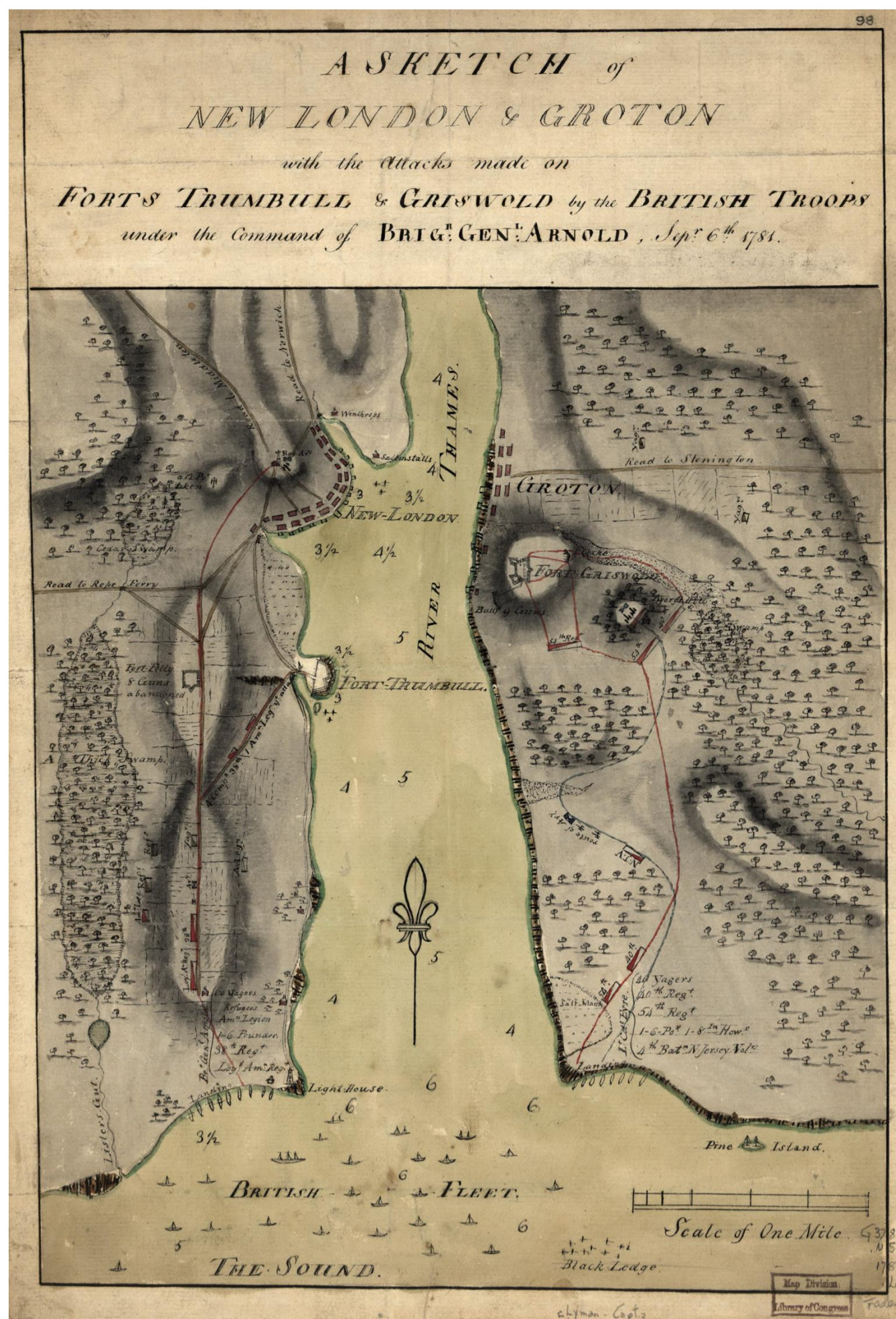
However, this project also required dozens of visits to the New London County Historical Society, the Connecticut Historical Society, the Connecticut State Library, the New Haven Museum, and other archives, in order to read unpublished primary sources and letters. The result is a book with almost nine hundred documented sources, a comprehensive look at Benedict Arnold that challenges current views and provides a new look at an old problem.

Conclusions

In recent decades, respect for Arnold’s military prowess and early heroism has unfortunately mutated into respect for him as a man. This problem of revisionist historical scholarship has leaked into the popular imagination, with many people not even sure of what Arnold did wrong, or why he was a “traitor.”

The story of Benedict Arnold and the burning of New London will hopefully draw attention to a regrettably overlooked incident and its profound effects, and help reassess Arnold and his place in American history. It will focus on his friends and neighbors and their reactions to this act of “parricide.” It will also, I hope, shine light on how Americans responded and continue to respond to betrayal and terror.

The manuscript has already passed through editorial and peer review and will be published as an academic history book by Wesleyan University Press in autumn 2014.



Contemporary map of the attack on New London and Groton. Library of Congress.