

Remembering the Revolution  
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The advent of spring in 1780 brought renewed anxiety about British intentions for Fortress West Point and the renewal of Iroquois raids on settlements on the New York frontier. One of the symbols of spring was the floating of the Great Chain between West Point and Constitution Island. Brig. Gen. John Paterson, the commander at West Point, and Maj. Gen. Robert Howe, the new commander of the Highlands Department, were foiled in their attempts on April 1 to return it to the Hudson River. It took the efforts of the whole garrison under the supervision of engineer Col. Thaddeus Kosciuszko to accomplish the feat on April 5. With the river blocked, West Point's fortifications once again deterred British plans to assail them directly.

The threat to West Point would come from a most unexpected direction. Howe had unwittingly joined the cast of characters in one of the great American soap operas — the conspiracy of Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold to hand over the fortress to Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander in chief. The previous year, Howe had presided over the court-martial of Arnold for misuse of government wagons and other alleged transgressions while he served as military commander of Philadelphia. On April 6, Gen. George Washington upheld the court's sentence and issued a formal reprimand to one of the Continental Army's great fighters. While Washington wrote that he "would have been much happier in an occasion of bestowing commendations on an officer who has rendered such distinguished services to his country," he instead found Arnold's actions to be "peculiarly reprehensible." This rebuke was added to a growing list of grievances, real and imagined, over rank, status, and perceived value to the cause that had already influenced Arnold to take the first steps toward treason by offering his services to the British the previous May. Arnold's marriage to Margaret (Peggy) Shippen, daughter of a prominent Philadelphia Loyalist, on April 8, 1779, had provided the hero of Saratoga a sympathetic ear and another channel of communications to Clinton's deputy adjutant general and spymaster, Captain John André. By the time Arnold's court-martial had convened on June 1, 1779, he had already made his first contacts with André through an intermediary. Washington's reprimand only strengthened Arnold's resolve to deliver West Point to the British once he was in command there.

The day after Washington carried out the sentence of Howe's court, Chief Joseph Brant and a raiding party of 19 Iroquois and Loyalists struck the settlement of Harpersfield, in Delaware County, as a detachment of militia was making maple sugar. Brant's men killed two and captured 12. The shock waves of this attack and earlier ones elsewhere on the frontier reverberated all the way to Poughkeepsie and forced Governor George Clinton on April 11 to call out the militia as far south as Westchester. The British and Native American attacks on the frontier would continue, reminding New Yorkers that peace seemed only a distant possibility.

This year's Patriots' Weekend, sponsored by the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area and the Hudson River Valley Institute, will remember the Arnold-André conspiracy from September 29 to October 2. Details will be posted at <http://www.hudsonrivervalley.net> and <http://www.hudsonrivervalley.com>.

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