

ON THE TRAIL OF *Treason*

Peggy Shippen's Amazing Story

by Stephen H. Case

WAS SHE THE MOST DANGEROUS YOUNG WOMAN in American history? More than a decade ago I encountered the fascinating but little-known story of someone who fit this description: Peggy Shippen, eighteenth-century Philadelphia debutante.

Born in 1760, granddaughter of a Philadelphia mayor, Peggy belonged to one of that city's long-time first families. At their fancy home, just around the corner from Independence Hall, her parents entertained George Washington as a dinner guest. At eighteen, Peggy Shippen married a crippled, war-hero widower twice her age. Together, they embarked on a plot to destroy the American Revolution.

Peggy was Mrs. Benedict Arnold.

For more than a century, historical consensus depicted Peggy as the unfortunate, even pitiable, wife of the iconic traitor. She was thought to be an exploited, innocent young woman, as shocked and threatened by her husband's defection as everyone else. But in the 1920s, when personal archives of the British army commander Henry Clinton became available to researchers in the United States for the first time, the documents proved conclusively that Peggy had been an active conspirator with her husband from the very start.

I first encountered Peggy and the story of her central role in her husband's treason in James Thomas Flexner's masterful four-volume biography of George Washington, *The Traitor and the Spy* (1991). It seemed odd that Peggy wasn't better known. In a war that produced so many famous, heroic men, why so few



renowned women? Peggy, of course, wasn't really a heroine — she was an anti-heroine. But her story was nevertheless fascinating and I was intrigued. Did anything in her early years foreshadow her defection? What happened to her after the dramatic unwinding of the treason attempt?

Happily, there turned out to be plenty of information available about Peggy Shippen. In 1776, at age sixteen, Peggy was a beguiling, charming star of the Philadelphia social scene. When she was seventeen, the British invaded and occupied the city. Over the winter, since little fighting occurred, the younger British officers caroused and courted the local girls. Peggy developed a friendship with a particularly handsome and charming twenty-six-year-old British officer, John André. Wearing a Turkish party dress, Peggy posed as André drew her picture, which is now in the Yale University Art Gallery. Sadly for Peggy, André and the rest of the British military abruptly evacu-

Above: Detail of a portrait of Peggy Shippen, Mrs. Benedict Arnold. 111-SC-92575; part of the series Signal Corps Photographs of American Military Activity, compiled 1754–1954. Courtesy of the National Archives.



If successful, the treasonous plot devised by Peggy and Benedict Arnold and Major John André would have surrendered the Americans' key military base at West Point to the British. This watercolor by Pierre Charles L'Enfant provides a panoramic view of West Point circa 1780, and shows American encampments on the Hudson River. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. NEHGS owns a similar watercolor, dated August 1782, which was presented to the Society on December 30, 1873, by Rear Admiral Henry Knox Thatcher, U.S.N. Thatcher, an NEHGS member, was the grandson of Revolutionary War general Henry Knox, commander of West Point in 1782.

ated Philadelphia in June 1778, less than a year after they arrived. Shortly thereafter, and fatefully for Peggy, André became the British army's spymaster at its main headquarters in New York City.

In the meantime, the Patriots left their winter redoubt at Valley Forge, northwest of Philadelphia, and returned to the city proper. Washington appointed his most heroic and accomplished field general, Connecticut native Benedict Arnold, as military commander there. Arnold's successful exploits at military engagements at Fort Ticonderoga, Quebec, Valcour Island, and Saratoga place him, in my opinion, alongside Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, and George S. Patton, Jr., as one of the most effective field commanders in American military history. Some might compare his tactical achievements with those of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

At the same time, Joseph Reed, a local lawyer, was the elected head of civilian government. He and Arnold clashed — bitterly and repeatedly. Reed and his inner circle alleged evidence of wrongdoing against Arnold (for example, using army wagons to transport goods for personal profit). This allegation led to an investigation by a committee of the Continental Congress, which resulted in a congressional recommendation that Arnold be court-martialed, which he was. Washington issued a reprimand to Arnold equivalent to today's "conduct unbecoming an officer."

These attacks angered and alienated Arnold, who was crippled from severe wounds sustained at Quebec and Saratoga. A widower, he found solace courting Peggy Shippen. They married April 8, 1779, and a month later sent a secret, coded message to André, Peggy's friend in New York, offering Arnold's services to the enemy.

The Patriot military base at West Point, New York, was the centerpiece of the treason scheme. Today, of course, this site is the *sanctum sanctorum* of training for elite U.S. Army officers. During the Revolution, West Point was the most-sought-after real estate in the entire war. Supplies for the Patriot Army arrived in New England ports by sea and were shipped southwest across the Hudson River to reach the rebels. If the British, who had overwhelming naval superiority, could sail up the Hudson all the way to Albany, New York, they could shut off Washington's supplies. The base at West Point prevented British ship movements upriver, thereby protecting Patriot supply lines — and the survival of Washington's army.

Arnold finagled Washington into appointing him commander at West Point. Then the Arnolds and André reached a secret agreement to surrender West Point to British invaders, with 3,000 rebel soldiers to become British POWs. And the conspirators picked a time when George Washington was scheduled to be



Treacherous Beauty

Treacherous Beauty: Peggy Shippen, the Woman behind Benedict Arnold's Plot to Betray America by Mark Jacob and Stephen H. Case is published by Lyons Press, an imprint of Globe Pequot Press, Guilford, Connecticut.

To order: Purchase the book through NEHGS by calling 1-888-296-3447 or visiting AmericanAncestors.org/store. *Treacherous Beauty* is also available from Amazon.com and other booksellers.

Willard Sterne Randall and Clare Brandt included additional details about Peggy, but all framed inside Arnold's story.

I concluded that Peggy's story — with her as the star, not a supporting actress — ought to reach a wider audience. First, since I enjoy opera, I wondered whether there was a way to turn the tale into

an Arnold family houseguest. Had the plan succeeded, Washington very well might have been captured.

The plot failed. André was captured while returning to New York City from a midnight meeting with Arnold. The maps and papers found in one of his stockings gave away Arnold's traitorous role. Word reached Arnold just before the arrival of his famous houseguest. Arnold escaped by rowboat down the Hudson to the safety of a British sloop, leaving Peggy and their new baby at home to answer to Washington.

Peggy reacted with an amazing performance, convincing Washington and his aides she was innocent. For an entire day she went stark raving mad, shrieking and running around half-dressed, declaring that there were hot irons in her head and that her husband had escaped by rising through the ceiling. Peggy's mad scene fooled them all. They never considered, even once, that she was part of the plot. Taking pity, Washington sent her home to her father in Philadelphia. Shortly after she arrived, the rebels hanged André as a spy. Ultimately, Peggy was banished from Philadelphia and sent to her husband, who was with the British forces in New York. She and Arnold had seven children, five of whom lived beyond infancy. The family moved to England, then Canada, then back to England. Arnold died in London in 1801, and Peggy died there in 1804, at 44, known in England as the charming, innocent wife of a vilified man.

Curious to learn more, I sought out numerous books about Arnold, looking for details on Peggy. Flexner's *The Traitor and the Spy* dealt with the West Point plot. Although Flexner included Peggy's story, she got junior billing while close attention was paid to Arnold and André. (Otherwise, Flexner would have called his work *The Traitor, the Spy, and the Lady* — and maybe he should have.) Another key historian, Carl Van Doren, revealed Peggy's complicity in the plot by analyzing British General Henry Clinton's archives for his groundbreaking *Secret History of the American Revolution* (1968). Excellent biographies of Arnold by

an opera. (An American composer, Julian Livingston, had already written one opera about Peggy.) Then I thought — and still do — that her story could make a great movie. A friend suggested that the best way to get a movie going would be to write a book first. And so I set out to do just that.

Gary Heidt, a college friend of my late son, Eddie, is a resourceful literary agent in New York. We had lunch. He suggested that I write a book proposal. After I put together the proposal and sent it to him, we had lunch again, and he delivered the bad news: my style and approach were just not commercial enough. (He was correct.) Not easily dissuaded, I asked him whether he could recruit one of his many clients to help. He asked Mark Jacob, an editor at the *Chicago Tribune* who had written several histories, including a delightful one called *What the Great Ate: A Curious History of Food and Fame*, which Mark coauthored with his brother Matt.

Mark had never heard of Peggy Shippen. But when he started reading about her, he became just as fascinated as I was. That launched a wonderful collaboration conducted almost exclusively long distance, with about 4,500 emails and many hours of phone calls. We attracted a publisher, Lyons Press, a division of Globe Pequot, and settled on our book's title — *Treacherous Beauty: Peggy Shippen, the Woman behind Benedict Arnold's Plot to Betray America*.

Both Mark and I have a strong interest in history, but neither of us is a professional historian. Mark is a journalist; I am a lawyer who does mostly investment transaction and business bankruptcy work. We knew we would need a team of academic researchers who would bring intellectual rigor and professionalism to our project. While Mark set out to read as much as possible about the era and outline the narrative, I assembled our team of historians and archivists. They included Andrea Meyer, especially knowledgeable about Revolutionary War spy networks and the lifestyles of women of that era; Stephanie Schmeling; Julianna Monjeau; and Marie Elizabeth Stango, who provided

expertise on the University of Michigan's British war documents — the archive that does more than any other to explain Peggy's role in the conspiracy.

The researchers and I delved into various archives, looking for relevant letters and other documents. We received strong encouragement and cooperation, especially at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; the David Library of the American Revolution in Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania; and the New-York Historical Society. Much of the Shippen family correspondence had been published piecemeal, but there was great value in confirming the transcripts and seeing the words in context. And occasionally we would find something unexpected.

One Saturday at the New-York Historical Society, I was poring through the papers of Colonel Richard Varick, an aide to Arnold when the conspiracy was exposed. Varick was cleared of complicity and later became mayor of New York. (Varick Street in Manhattan is named for him.) In one box, I found a letter to him from Peggy, dated September 26, 1780 — the day after Arnold fled to the enemy. Although Peggy had engaged in her amazing hysterical fit the day before, her note of September 26, calmly composed, asked Varick to give her any of Arnold's money he had. The note — either overlooked or dismissed by other writers — seemed significant to us in telling Peggy's story, providing further evidence that her "mad scene" was more theatrics than insanity. In any case, it's another reminder that there's no substitute for original sources and archives. After every visit to a research institution, our researchers and I uploaded copies of the documents to a server so that the whole team could review everything.

Meanwhile, Mark was starting to write the first draft, and asking many questions: What was the significance of high hairdos for women of the era? What were women's views of childbirth, and how perilous was the experience? Was divorce even an option in Revolutionary Pennsylvania? And, by the way, can you get your hands on an article in a 1780 edition of the *Pennsylvania Packet* newspaper? What a great team we had! Each of Mark's questions resulted in an emailed article from an academic journal, a citation from a scholarly book, a scanned page from a document, or a promise to hunt for more and better answers.

I searched for descendants of Benedict and Peggy Arnold in case any had interesting family lore or heirlooms. This is where the New England Historic Genealogical Society provided vital assistance. NEHGS Senior Researcher Rhonda R. McClure assembled a list of as many of the Arnold-Shippen descendants as privacy laws would permit. Most of them lived in Europe.

I began calling possible descendants, with only limited success. One guy hung up on me. Maybe he thought I was calling him a "Benedict Arnold."

But I finally hit pay dirt, tracking down an engaging, highly skilled professional fashion photographer named Hugh Arnold living in France. He said, "Yes, I'm a descendant [a great-great-great-great-grandson] of Peggy Shippen and Benedict Arnold. And I have trunks full of old letters, including some written by Peggy herself."

I rushed to France, accompanied by my wife, Margaret Ayres, and researcher Marie Stango. Hugh indeed had original letters written by Peggy, carefully bound in leather by his grandfather, as well as type-written transcriptions. The letters were mostly from Peggy to her firstborn son, Edward, while he was serving with the British army in India. Edward died in 1813, at age 33, and his mother's letters had been returned to his relatives.

These letters had rarely been studied before. We found fleeting references to them in two books, but neither came close to fully mining the correspondence. For our purposes the letters provided by Hugh Arnold — which illuminated the later years of Peggy's life — were a wonderful find. Hugh's archives allowed us to tell for the first time, for example, the story of a woman in London who had sneakily intercepted a letter that the woman's husband had written to Peggy. Apparently, Peggy's charms even in middle age inspired both admiration and jealousy.

As already noted, genealogical research helped our project greatly. Another example: While trying to identify which Sir Walter Stirling (father or son) introduced Benedict Arnold to the Court of St. James, we went looking for Stirling descendants. A wonderful website, <http://clanstirling.org>, put us in touch with two family members, Elspeth Flood and Rick Stirling, who helped us solve the mystery and correct a forty-five-year-old error in history books and articles. One of the major lessons of our project is that people are willing — even eager — to help you.

In every way, our book project was a team effort in which people who cared about history united around a single mission: to tell the fascinating story of the mysterious woman who came close to altering the outcome of the American Revolution. ♦

STEPHEN H. CASE is managing director and general counsel of Emerald Development Managers LP, a New York based private-equity firm. A trustee emeritus of Columbia University, he has been for decades an American history hobbyist, especially interested in the eighteenth century. He and his coauthor, Mark Jacob, welcome questions and comments at authors@treacherousbeauty.com.