

Jonathan Rathbun: The Burning of New London

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The Battle of Yorktown is considered the most significant battle of the American Revolution, as Washington's victory over Cornwallis in October 1781 led to the British decision to abandon the war.¹ However, residents of New London, Connecticut, were still mourning the death of loved ones and the destruction of their homes by the British.² A month before Washington's victory, British forces under the command of none other than Brigadier General Benedict Arnold raided the city and burned it to the ground. The Battle of Groton Heights was part of a series of strategic raids on Patriot-controlled port cities and forts in southern Connecticut. Hoping to capture Patriot strongholds and potentially divert Washington's attention away from Cornwallis, the British massacred Patriot forces at Fort Griswold in Groton, Connecticut, and destroyed 140 New London buildings, "including private homes, warehouses, commercial facilities, and docks."³ Overshadowed by Washington's success at Yorktown, the Battle of Groton Heights is regarded as one of the last major British victories in the northern colonies, with the city of New London suffering "the highest percentage of destruction of any American city," during the war.⁴

One account regarding the events of New London comes from a veteran of the American Revolution, a militiaman named Jonathan Rathbun. While only four pages long, Rathbun's account, titled *The Narrative of Jonathan Rathbun: Of the Capture of Fort Griswold, the Massacre that followed, and the Burning of New London, Conn., September 6, 1781*, provides insight into not only the effects of total war strategy, but also questions military wartime ethics, and foregrounding discourse on Benedict Arnold, casting him as a cold-blooded, revenge-seeking man unworthy of praise.

Produced in 1840, Rathbun's narrative was a means for the seventy-year-old veteran to "solicit the charities of the beneficent" and curb "one of the last soldiers of the American Revolution from the pain of begging his daily bread."⁵⁵ A narrative that will "nurture the spirit of patriotism." Rathbun's account, according to its editor, would impress "a love for Freedom" upon the minds of children and "teach them to detest a traitor like Arnold, and to scorn the inhuman and dishonorable conduct of the frenzied villain who murdered our brave Ledyard with his own sword after surrendering!"⁵⁶ Setting a moral precedent and detailing the perceived savage violence of British military strategy carried out by Arnold, the editor maintains that Rathbun's narrative will inspire in all who read it "a new ardor and zeal for their rights as freemen, and boldness in defending their country from foreign invasion."⁵⁷ Despite being only four pages in length, the narrative provides a cautionary tale of warfare during the American Revolution. Most importantly, Rathbun's account also depicts a shift in Benedict Arnold's military philosophy, a man known to subscribe to conciliatory military restraint. Rathbun regards Arnold's actions in New London as outside the laws of war and immoral.

Born in Colchester, Connecticut, in 1765, Rathbun supported the Patriot cause at sixteen by joining the Colchester volunteer militia, where his first taste of the revolution was not the gallantry of battle but "a sense of suffering and horror which surpasses description."⁵⁸ Upon learning of the attack on New London by British forces, a young Rathbun and one hundred fellow volunteer Colchester militiamen marched nearly twenty miles to offer their support. Arriving in the early hours of September 7, "the day after the battle," Rathbun and the militiamen found the city ransacked and destroyed by an already dispersed British force.⁹ As part of a British military operation to capture strategic patriot strongholds along the Thames River and Long Island Sound, Rathbun reported that the British in New London, "under the conduct of the traitor Benedict Arnold," left "behind them the marks of their barbarism and cruelty."¹⁰ Arriving to a city "in ashes," Rathbun noted: "more than

one hundred and thirty naked chimneys were standing in the midst of the smoking ruins of stores and dwelling houses,” with “very little property” escaping “the conflagration.”¹¹ Residents who had fled returned to find that their “homes, their provisions, and even their apparel were the spoils of the enemy or lay in ashes at their feet.”¹² While the city’s material wealth and infrastructure were destroyed or plundered by the British, the raid also resulted in the physical loss of life, with Rathbun citing women “carrying in their arms their fatherless and houseless babies.”¹³ Within a “few short hours,” these women “had been bereaved of all that was dear on earth,” with Rathbun tallying the raid as having made “more than forty widows.”¹⁴

It is within the context of the dead that a young Rathbun was brought “directly into the midst” of “heart-rending scenes where the wife first recognized her husband, the mother her son, the sister her brother, in the body of a mangled soldier so disfigured with wounds and clotted with blood and dust, as to be scarcely known.”¹⁵ Tasked with burying the deceased, it was the mangled bodies of militiamen that most troubled the teenaged Rathbun and stayed with him well into his old age. He recalled that New Londoners who fled the city returned to inquire “with the deepest distress for the mangled bodies of their friends, while others were seen following the carts which bore their murdered fathers, husbands, or brothers to the grave.”¹⁶ Rathbun explained he was unable to “forget the tears, the sobs, the shrieks of woe which fell from the kindred of our brave countrymen,” stating “though many years have since rolled away the recollection is still fresh in my mind,” with visits to the city that bore his “slaughtered countryman...awakening anew the strong feelings of sympathy I then felt, and rousing into activity the love of my country.”¹⁷ Gruesome and psychologically damaging, the harrowing scenes of suffering, death, and destruction provided an edge of motivation for the sixteen-year-old to continue the fight for independence. Led “by the spirit which the scenes I had witnessed in New London,” and fanning “into a flame” the motivation needed for him to leave “father’s house and the peaceful pursuits of agriculture,” the events of New London caused

Rathbun to formally reenlist into the Connecticut State Troops in 1782, with the scenes of September 6 ever ingrained into his mind and consciousness.¹⁸

While Rathbun's personal experiences at New London were psychologically and emotionally moving, scenes of suffering and wartime atrocities were also essential rhetorical tools used by American revolutionaries throughout the war to legitimize rebellion and gain popular support among colonists and those abroad. According to Historian Holger Hock, numerous Patriot leaders, such as John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, "seized on soldiers' mangled bodies to forge an atrocity narrative," using the deceased in conjunction with eighteenth-century forensic evidence to also cite British military atrocity.¹⁹ Such cases allowed supporters of independence to "tell a story of national distinction and lodge national sentiment in the hearts of Americans, and to assert their moral authority in the eyes of civilized nations."²⁰ Utilizing witnesses of the deceased, survivor battle wounds, and testimony to form a narrative, "revolutionary authorities sought to turn grotesquely mangled bodies and mutilated corpses into a central asset in the moral and polemical war that shadowed the war on the battlefield."²¹ As such, published evidence of British war atrocities produced by patriot leaders, especially atrocities found and articulated under the Congressional Committee of 1777, were essential in shaping perceptions and narratives of not just warfare, but of the American Revolution in general, helping to foster emotional and physical support of rebellion.²²

According to Rathbun, survivors, many of them women, wandered the rubble-strewn city with "consternation and despair," endlessly searching "with the deepest distress for the mangled bodies of their friends, while others were seen following the carts of which bore their murdered fathers, husbands, or brothers to the grave."²⁷ While the residents and survivors of New London were "Bereaved of all that was dear on earth," and the target of the British military's murderous rampage, they were more the victims of the once-Patriot general, Benedict Arnold.²⁸ In the eyes of

Rathbun, the events of New London showcase the true character of Arnold, a man who should be regarded as not only a traitor but a cold-blooded, heartless man.

Recounting a “fact of a different character” that was not reported on at the time of the raid, Rathbun argued New London was the product of “the deeper disgrace of the infamous Arnold.”²⁹ With family ties to the city, specifically a sister with “whom he dined on the day of the battle,” Arnold, believing his sibling “too much of a patriot for his taste,” burned and ransacked the city as a “step in revenge.”³⁰ Thus, “by his orders,” the city, including her home, was set afire and plundered out of spite and reflecting the petty and savage character of Arnold.³¹

However, historians Mark Lender and James Martin argue that Arnold’s New London raid “did not stem solely from spite or a preference for a style of warfare” but developed “from his experience in his first independent command as a British Brigadier General” during the British invasion of Virginia in early 1781.³² Defecting to the British in 1780, Arnold’s first act as a newly appointed British Brigadier General was heading military operations in Virginia in January 1781. Viewing Arnold as a political and military asset, British General Henry Clinton hoped Arnold’s presence in Virginia on the side of the crown would “induce other patriot officers to desert to the king’s forces [and] rally Virginia Loyalists, if not induce Virginia Patriots, to return to the imperial fold.”³³ With British efforts in the northern colonies at a stalemate, Clinton gambled on Arnold to tap into “a storehouse of Loyalist support and restore Royal authority in the southern colonies,” believing the local American general was their ticket to reconcile with the rebellion and restore order to the crown.³⁴

In command of 1,500 soldiers, many of whom were American-born and belonged to the veteran Loyalist regiments like the American Legion, the Loyal American Regiment, the Bucks County Volunteers, the New York Rifle Company, and Simcoe’s Queen’s American Rangers, Arnold’s military strategy and action in Virginia exemplified restraint and military discipline.

Throughout the campaign, Arnold “wanted to avoid pointlessly making enemies or to initiate needless fighting.”³⁵ As one goal of the campaign was supporting Virginia’s Loyalists and creating a base of military operations for a southern campaign, Arnold was tasked to secure strategic Virginian cities such as Portsmouth, a town that held “easy access to the Chesapeake Bay,” and a strategic geographical point to hold if the “Royal Navy was to support operations in the South.”³⁶

On his trek to Portsmouth, Arnold and his troops engaged Patriot militiamen and conducted raids on villages and cities. However, unlike New London, Arnold “went out of his way to avoid the plunder of private goods,” ordering the destruction and seizing of only public buildings and goods “connected to the patriot war effort.”³⁷ His actions in Virginia reveal restraint and military discipline, with direct violence targeted only at the “rebel economy and war related stores,” not private goods or the civilian population.³⁸ Capturing Portsmouth on January 19, Arnold’s operational victory showed Clinton his loyalty and restraint in battle. His success in Virginia was cheered on by British forces in the north, as “Arnold seemingly had done what previous royal commanders had failed to accomplish in the Old Dominion.”³⁹

Arnold’s 1781 Virginia campaign is noteworthy for exemplifying eighteenth-century conciliatory military ethics and operations by refusing to plunder or vandalize private citizens’ homes and goods. During the war, conciliatory tactics were regarded as a proper means to rally colonists towards the crown, resurface Loyalist sympathy, and quell the rebellion. Like fellow British commanders Clinton and William Howe, Arnold recognized the political and social implications of committing acts of terror.

For historians Lender and Martin, Arnold’s change of tune lies in his experience occupying Portsmouth and the surrounding region. With patriot militia forces harassing British troops and sentinels by shooting rifles from afar, “a practice considered bad form in European armies,” many British troops, with the approval of junior officers and captains, retaliated by wandering into the city

and killing any civilian dissenters or militiamen hiding in private homes.⁴⁴ For example, Captain Robert McCrea, acting against “Arnold’s direct orders to remain in his post...ambushed his tormentors, killing or wounding ten of them,” pinning “a note to a dead militiaman, threatening to burn any local houses giving cover to the rebels.”⁴⁵ McCrea’s threat, according to Patriot commanders, violated the wartime Enlightenment doctrine of *jus in bello* that “sought to limit the brutality of martial behavior and infuse warfare with an element of humanity.”⁴⁶ While the principle viewed restricting combat specifically between military forces, sparing noncombatants and civilians from warfare, it also “conceded the right of combatants to retaliate against civilians or their property if civilians involved themselves in the fighting.”⁴⁷ Thus, for McCrea, the actions of militiamen shooting British entities and troops from the confines of private homes entitled him to retaliate without civilian restraint. Still trying to continue “his effort to curry popular support,” Arnold condemned McCrea’s nonconciliatory actions, supporting the doctrine of *jus in bello*.⁴⁸

Loyalist public support in Portsmouth slowly waned and the Patriot militia expanded its show of force and resistance, continuing to harass its British occupiers, Arnold was forced to change his governing style and military philosophy. Coined “Arnold’s epiphany” by historians Lender and Martin, the general, in response to the lack of popular support and insufficient loyalist military manpower, ceased “deliberate outreach to Virginia Loyalists,” and discontinued conciliatory military restraint.⁴⁹ He internalized the belief that only “extinguishing the rebel cause would vindicate his reputation” and end the rebellion. Arnold’s Virginia campaign was a psychological turning point both militarily and personally, one that led him to abandon restraint and shift towards brutality and a total-war policy of destruction.⁵⁰ Southern Connecticut would face a new Arnold who favored a policy of total-war violence and destruction.

One returns to Rathbun’s narrative and New London, a city that unfortunately bore the effects of “Arnold’s epiphany.” The violence and destruction in New London were, for Rathbun,

not the result of Arnold's experience during his southern campaign but a reaction against a city and region that housed his family's Patriotism. Already a traitor and turncoat for abandoning the Patriot fight for Independence, Arnold's raid on New London solidified in the eyes of Rathbun, "the deeper disgrace of the infamous Arnold," an immoral and violent man who would go so far as to burn his sister's home and the surrounding region in an act of revenge.⁵¹

Whether considered acts of savagery or immoral behavior by Patriots, like Rathbun, or deemed necessary to assert British military dominance and crush the rebellion, as in Arnold's eyes, the events of September 6, 1781, saw New Londoners' lives change; a civilian population wrapped up in the chaos and struggle that was the American War of Independence. Whichever case it may be, *The Narrative of Jonathan Rathbun* articulates the brutalities of total-war policy seen during the American Revolution, its effects on the civilian population, and the personal psychological damage it caused. To put it simply, it is a narrative that depicts the effects of Arnold's violent epiphany—or his essential nature.

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¹ Robert Coakley and Stetson Conn, *The War of the American Revolution*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2010), 81.

² Coackly and Conn, *The War of the American Revolution*, 81.

³ Mark Lender and James Martin, "A Traitor's Epiphany: Benedict Arnold in Virginia and His Quest for Reconciliation," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 12 (2017): 315.

⁴ Eric Lehman, *Homegrown Terror: Benedict Arnold and the Burning of New London*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 160.

⁵ Jonathan Rathbun, *The Narrative of Jonathan Rathbun: Of the Capture of Fort Griswold, the Massacre that followed, and the Burning of New London, Conn., September 6, 1781*, (New York: William Abbatt, 1911 [1840]): 549.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 550.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 550.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 551.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 551.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 551.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 551.

¹² *Ibid.*, 551.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 551.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 551.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 552.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 551.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 552.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 553.

¹⁹ Holger Hook, "Mangled Bodies: Atrocity in the American Revolutionary War," *Past and Present* 230 (2016): 124.

²⁰ Hook, "Mangled Bodies," 124.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

²² Hook, "Mangled Bodies," 132.

²⁷ Rathbun, *The Narrative of Jonathan Rathbun*, 551.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 551.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 553.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 553.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 553.

³² Lender and Martin, "Traitor's Epiphany," 317.

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- ³³ Ibid., 322.
³⁴ Ibid., 319.
³⁵ Lender and Martin, “Traitor’s Epiphany,” 327.
³⁶ Ibid., 323.
³⁷ Ibid., 331.
³⁸ Ibid., 334.
³⁹ Ibid., 340.
⁴⁴ Lender and Martin, “Traitor’s Epiphany,” 346.
⁴⁵ Ibid., 347.
⁴⁶ Ibid., 347.
⁴⁷ Ibid., 347.
⁴⁸ Ibid., 347.
⁴⁹ Ibid., 349.
⁵⁰ Lender and Martin, “Traitor’s Epiphany,” 350.
⁵¹ Rathbun, *The Narrative of Jonathan Rathbun*, 552.