

ON NEW LONDON, CONNECTICUT, SEPTEMBER 4-13, 1781

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For my parents, Brett and Barbara; and grandparents, Andrew and Eleanor, who taught me the value of hard work and encouraged me to follow my passions.

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Photos have been added throughout the text for the convenience of the reader.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADM	Admiralty
AH	Arcinsys Hessen, Marburg, Germany
AO	American Office
CCR	Connecticut Colonial Records
CG	Connecticut Gazette
CHS	Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut
CM	Caledonian Mercury
CO	Colonial Office
CSL	Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Connecticut
CSR	Connecticut State Records
JSC	James Steelman Collection
LOC	Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
MS	G. W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport, Mystic, Connecticut
NARA	National Archives, Washington D.C.
NLCHS	New London County Historical Society, New London, Connecticut
PA	Pension Application
PAC	Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
QLR	Museum of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment, Preston, Lancashire, United Kingdom
TNA	National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom
TO	Treasury Office
WCL	William Clement Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan
WO	War Office
YU	Yale University
YUL	Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut

Preface

 September 1881, exactly one hundred years after Benedict Arnold's raid on New London, the state of Connecticut organized a gigantic two-day "Centennial Celebration" to commemorate the event. It committed massive resources to the affair, including activating four National Guard regiments, and inviting soldiers from the U.S. Army and vessels from the U.S. Navy to participate in a reenactment. Attended by politicians, Civil War veterans, and over 20,000 spectators, it featured military parades, school children singing patriotic songs, poetry readings, fireworks, and political speeches. But the highlight was the dramatic, bloodless reenactment of the attacks on New London and Fort Griswold.

Missing from the commemoration were the grim realities, horrors, and tragedies of the war. As historian Matthew Warshauer correctly surmised in his book, *Connecticut in the American Civil War*, "The memory of war is a tricky thing. It inevitably changes as time marches on and those who participated in a conflict pass on. A new generation can never fully experience the fear, despondence, and the loss, or the joy, victory, and nationalism of those who came before. Every nation desires to remember and promote the justice of its cause and the sacrifice of those who fought. Even defeat can morph into a living force, a consciousness that honors soldiers and commitment, and expands on positive rationales for fighting." While Warshauer was referring to the memory of the American Civil War, the same could be said of the American Revolution.¹

1 Matthew Warshauer, *Connecticut in the American Civil War: Slavery, Sacrifice, & Survival* (Middletown, CT: 2012), 173.

In a hundred years, the memory of the raid had become greatly distorted. This has complicated the modern historian's ability to study and write about it. Initially this distortion was due to a successful Continental anti-British propaganda campaign launched immediately after the battle. Focusing primarily on Fort Griswold, it embellished and "improved" accounts, such as the supposed surrender and subsequent death of Colonel Ledyard, all meant to encourage further support for the war. But even after the war ended, the distorted interpretation of events remained entrenched for many Americans.

Such distortion can be seen at the Fort Griswold Battlefield State Park. The Groton Battle Monument, erected in 1830 and which stands near the remains of the fort, is inscribed to the "memory of the brave Patriots, who fell in the Massacre at Fort Griswold . . . when the British, under the command of the traitor Benedict Arnold, burnt the towns of New London and Groton, and spread desolation and woe throughout this region."

The misleading narrative was furthered by veterans. Survivors like Stephen Hempstead held strong, bitter grudges against the British for decades. This bias is evident in his narrative of the battle. Falsely presenting himself as a witness to every critical moment, Hempstead never missed an opportunity to portray the British in a bad light. Another veteran, Jonathan Rathbun, published his recollections in 1840. The first to make use of Rufus Avery's narrative, he modified it to further the anti-British narrative. These modifications were not detected until the original narrative was discovered nearly forty years later, by which time highly inaccurate interpretations of the raid had taken root.

It was not until 2000, with the publication of Dr. Walter Powell's *Murder or Mayhem? Benedict Arnold's New London, Connecticut Raid, 1781*, that the trend was broken. Powell presented the first unbiased study, publicly questioning the traditional narrative, especially concerning Colonel Ledyard's death. But despite Powell's efforts and extensive research, the traditional interpretation continues to reign as it has for the last two centuries.²

While Arnold's expedition lasted ten days, what is remembered occurred on one day, September 6, 1781. That day saw two separate battles. The first was the attack on New London, referred to by veterans as the Battle of New London. This engagement included house to house fighting, an exceedingly rare occurrence during the Revolutionary War. The second was the Battle of Groton Heights, which included the assault on Fort Griswold and skirmishing along Birch Plain Creek. Though not the largest battle of the war, it was the bloodiest in the sense

2 Walter L. Powell, *Murder or Mayhem? Benedict Arnold's New London, Connecticut Raid, 1781* (Gettysburg, PA: 2000).

that the percentage of those engaged who became casualties was greater than in any other battle.

None of the events leading up to the expedition, British planning, or the effects on Connecticut have ever been explored. Its impact on the war has also been glossed over. While it did not directly affect the outcome of the larger war, the consequences of the raid showed how well American intelligence deceived the British and took the strategic initiative away from them. Consequent British mistakes further contributed to the defeat at Yorktown. The attack destroyed New London and cemented Benedict Arnold's reputation for villainy.

This study is a military history covering such things as strategy, tactics, and battlefield movements. Second, it offers a balanced portrayal of both sides, drawing upon dozens of hitherto ignored or unpublished narratives and accounts. Third, it will challenge and seek to debunk myths that have flourished for 243 years, utilizing many newly discovered primary sources. Some may see this study as an attempt to condone British actions, but my aim is rather to explain how and why things happened. Lastly, it is my hope that this effort will increase interest in battlefields such as Groton and New London and promote their preservation and interpretation.

Acknowledgments

What today has become *The Traitor's Homecoming* began over a decade ago. It was originally an interpretive guide to the Fort Griswold Battlefield as part of my master's project at Sacred Heart University. But as I compiled material for the guide, it grew into something much larger than I ever planned.

It is my intention to thank everyone who made this book possible, but if I fail to include your name, please know how much I appreciate your help in making this book a reality.

I would like to collectively thank the staffs at the following institutions: the Connecticut State Library, the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History (formerly the Connecticut Historical Society), the New London County Historical Society, the Clement Library at the University of Michigan, and Fort Griswold State Battlefield Park.

Many historians have assisted me in tracking down and sharing resources, as well as answering my numerous and often random questions. A thank you goes out to Don Hagist, Todd W. Braisted, Kevin Johnson, Bob Brooks, Selden West, Dale Plummer, Richard Malley, and Don Troiani who were all helpful beyond words.

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Tad Sattler assisted me in taking many of the photographs of the Fort Griswold Battlefield you see across this book. My co-worker Paola Bronner for helping me prepare the photos for publication.

None of the maps would have been possible had it not been for my capable and talented mapmaker Edward Alexander.

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There has been so much support for this project. A huge thank you goes out to my friend and co-worker, Terrie Schmitt, my students and co-workers at Vernon Center Middle School, the Friends of Fort Griswold, my former colleagues at the New England Civil War Museum and Research Center (especially Steven Norcross and Alexander Oliphant), and to my good friend Dr. Walter L. Powell whose book on Arnold's raid, *Murder or Mayhem?* not only inspired me to write this book, but Dr. Powell also provided me with many resources, and took the time to read through early drafts and offered his valuable insight and critique.

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I could not conclude without giving a shout out to my intrepid cousin, Cameron Shaw, who accompanied me on many, sometimes forced, visits to the Fort Griswold and New London battlefields.

Lastly, but definitely not the least, thank you to my family, my parents, and especially my wife Melisa for her love, patience, and support throughout this entire project. I could not have done this without you!

Deo gratias!

Introduction

The raid on New London and Groton on September 6, 1781, by British, Hessian, and Loyalist soldiers commanded by General Benedict Arnold stands as Connecticut's bloodiest day of the American Revolution. The heroic sacrifice by those defending Fort Griswold on Groton Heights is still honored with an annual memorial service. Looming large in the story of that tragic Thursday are American allegations that the commander of Fort Griswold, Col. William Ledyard, was murdered with his own sword while offering it in surrender to a prominent British or Loyalist officer, and that subsequently, more than half the defenders were "massacred" while begging for their lives. While General Arnold was not present during the attack, and may have attempted to cancel it, the tragic outcome of the battle was clearly his responsibility. If there were any lingering doubts in the public's mind about the depth of Arnold's treason, in the aftermath of Fort Griswold the "Hero of Saratoga" would forever be reviled as the leader of "Traitor Arnold's Murdering Corps."

I began studying the New London Raid nearly 50 years ago as a graduate student in history at Kent State University, and early in my research discovered in Governor Jonathan Trumbull's papers at the Connecticut State Library several depositions by Fort Griswold survivors. These accounts, deposed before Justice Samuel Mott in New London in April 1782, had not been published, and reading through them, I realized they raised compelling questions about the manner of Colonel Ledyard's death, the treatment of the wounded, and the details of the battle as depicted in multiple 19th and 20th century narratives. As a result of my subsequent MA thesis, and its later publication, I had frequent occasion

to give lectures on this topic, often greeted by the public with skepticism and occasional hostility. In an article for *The New London Day* titled “The Battle Never Ends” (November 28, 1999) local historian Mary Beth Baker, reviewing my latest lecture at Groton City Hall, overheard one attendee remark “You always find these guys who are anxious to nibble away at what is known to be historical fact.” But Baker admonished readers to remember the words of the noted Connecticut antiquarian and biographer George Dudley Seymour in his *Digressive History of Nathan Hale* (1933): “Controversy is the fuel which keeps the fires burning on the Altar of History.”

Historian Matthew Reardon has certainly fueled that fire! This impressive work, likely to become the definitive history of the New London Raid, is informed by the discovery of many significant new British, Hessian, Loyalist, and American accounts—a testimony to the thoroughness of the research. From the moment the Jaegers “hit the beaches” to cover the landings on both sides of New London harbor that morning to the hasty British withdrawal from Fort Griswold in late afternoon, Matt succeeds, as no prior historian has, in making a virtual hour by hour narrative come alive through the words of participants on both sides, providing a much needed critical and nuanced understanding of the actions, motives, and challenges they faced. Not surprisingly, not every “villain” or “hero” will remain the same.

Dr. Walter L. Powell
Plymouth, Massachusetts
January 11, 2024

Chapter One

Rhode Island: A Lost Opportunity

The sizeable Palladian window and cupola atop the Georgian mansion at No. 1 Broadway in lower Manhattan offered impressive panoramic views. One could see for miles. The Kennedy house with its grand staircase, large banquet hall, and parlor room represented the height of elegance in New York City. Its splendor attracted Lt. Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, the commander-in-chief of the British army in America, to choose it as his military headquarters.¹

The 51-year-old Clinton was the son of Adm. George Clinton, who served as the colonial governor of Newfoundland and later New York. Clinton grew up in New York City and began his military career there as a young militia officer. After his father resigned from the governorship of New York, Clinton returned to England, where he purchased a commission in the prestigious Coldstream Guards. He served with distinction in the Seven Years War ending the war as a colonel. Afterward, he obtained a seat in Parliament and was promoted to major general.

Clinton returned to North America in mid-1775 as part of a contingent of reinforcements for the Boston garrison. At the Battle of Bunker Hill, he urged aggressive action by landing in the American rear and cutting them off but was overruled. He nonetheless played a conspicuous role in the subsequent action. The following year, he led a British expeditionary force against Charleston, South Carolina. Foiled at the Battle of Sullivan's Island, Clinton's force retired and joined the main British army in New York. During the ensuing campaign, he took part in the successful operations around New York City, especially at the

1 David McCullough, *1776* (New York, 2005), 121.

Battle of Brooklyn, where he led the British troops that outflanked Washington's army. Subsequently, he commanded the force that captured Newport, Rhode Island, establishing it as a British base of operations. Clinton then returned to England on leave in early 1777 and considered resigning. But under the urgings of Lord Germain, the secretary of state for America, along with a knighthood and promotion to lieutenant general, Clinton returned to New York as the British army under General Sir William Howe campaigned in Pennsylvania in 1777. That fall, he led a relief force up the Hudson River to assist Burgoyne's army, which was then engaged at Saratoga. After Howe's resignation as commander-in-chief in 1778, Clinton succeeded him and as the army evacuated Philadelphia, he commanded it ably at the battle of Monmouth in June 1778.

After the British army returned to New York, the war against the rebellious American colonies, now in its third year, was reduced to a stalemate. This was due to the entry into the war of France in 1778 and Spain in 1779 on the side of the Americans. The situation was further complicated in 1780 when the Netherlands declared war on Great Britain. Under orders from Lord Germain, Clinton detached most of his army to shore up the defenses of other key British colonial possessions, including the West Indies, Florida, and Canada.

The British navy, like its land counterpart, had enjoyed early supremacy over the Americans, both in organization and numbers. However, with the entry of France, Spain, and the Netherlands, the maritime situation changed drastically. Like the army, the navy found itself weakened by having to spread its resources to help protect other British possessions across the globe. The British could no longer concentrate a large naval force in a specific theater of war. This frustrated the high command as it now had difficulty maintaining naval superiority over its enemies, a condition it considered vital to ultimate victory.

Clinton wished to launch a decisive strike against the main Continental Army under George Washington. Instead, with the navy, Clinton was ordered to make quick raids along the extensive rebel coastline, but never to remain long. The overall goal was to disrupt and destroy American shipping, slowing down the rebel economy. This strategy was implemented in neighboring Connecticut. In July 1779, Clinton attempted to draw Washington from his strong position in the Hudson Highlands by sending Maj. Gen. William Tryon with a British force to raid the coastal towns of New Haven, Fairfield, and Norwalk. But these attempts ultimately failed.²

2 Lord Stirling to Washington, Oct. 14, 1778, Papers of George Washington, Library of Congress [hereafter LOC].



General Sir Henry Clinton, British Commander-in-Chief in America, 1778-1782. *Dr. Walter L. Powell*

In 1780, the British war effort shifted to the southern colonies. In March, a British army under Clinton launched its largest operation in North America since 1778. An expeditionary force under his command returned to Charleston, South Carolina, where a month-long siege ended with its capture. After leaving Maj. Gen. Lord Charles Cornwallis in charge of the British Southern Department, Clinton returned to New York. There, he anticipated an attack on the city, a belief furthered by the news in July that an expeditionary force of 5,000 French soldiers, convoyed by a squadron of thirty-five warships, was approaching the city. Clinton was reassured but still concerned when they instead landed at Newport, Rhode Island, which had been abandoned by the British in 1779, as they shifted forces to other parts of the empire.³

Instead of waiting for the French to join with American forces under Washington, then at Morristown, New Jersey, Clinton wanted to take the initiative

³ Sir Henry Clinton, *Narrative of Lt. Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, K.B. Relative to His Conduct During Part of His Command of the King's Troops in North America*, 2nd ed. (London, 1783), 26.

and launch an attack on the French at Rhode Island. He believed he could eliminate the French army and, more importantly, keep the French navy there from participating in any future operations with the Americans against New York. Moreover, its success could change the direction of the war.

But before Clinton's expedition could proceed, he needed assistance from the navy. Besides needing it to help battle the French navy in Narragansett Bay, he also needed its ships to convoy his army. His naval counterpart, Vice-Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot, commander of the North American Station, had convoyed his army to Charleston months earlier. However, the two men did not work well together, their poor relationship becoming visible when Arbuthnot refused to back the Rhode Island operation. The admiral withheld his support and chose to work independently and set up a yearlong blockade of the French at Rhode Island.⁴

The blockade proved embarrassingly ineffective. In mid-June 1781, the French army under Lt. Gen. Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, the Comte de Rochambeau, departed Newport on an overland route. Marching westward through Rhode Island and Connecticut, Rochambeau rendezvoused with Washington's army in the Hudson Highlands, some fifty miles north of New York City.⁵

The presence of both armies so close to the city alarmed many British officers and political leaders. As in mid-1780, an attack seemed imminent. An article in the British newspaper *Caledonian Mercury* attests to their uneasiness. It stated that Brig. Gen. Benedict Arnold, the former American general now in British service for almost a year, with the approval of several other army officers, had pressed Clinton to give him 5,000 men to attack the Continental Army of 8,000 in the Hudson Highlands, an area Arnold had once commanded. Notoriously overzealous, Arnold believed most of the Americans were inexperienced and that he could easily defeat them.⁶

Born in Norwich, Connecticut, the 41-year-old Arnold was the oldest of five surviving children of Benedict Arnold Sr. and Hannah (Waterman) King. He lost both parents at a young age and, as his alcoholic father had lost the family fortune, had to struggle to earn a respectable place in society. Through hard work and determination, Arnold established himself as a profitable seafaring merchant

4 *George Washington's Generals and Opponents: Their Exploits and Leadership*, 2 vols; George Athan Billias ed. (New York, 1994), 2:266-267; Henry Clinton, *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of His Campaigns, 1775-1782, with an Appendix of Original Documents*. William B. Willcox, ed. (New Haven, CT, 1954), 444.

5 Clinton, *Narrative* 13, 15.

6 "Extract of a letter from London, Nov 10," *Caledonian Mercury*, Nov. 14, 1781; Thomas Jones, *History of NY During the Revolutionary War and of the Leading Events in the Other Colonies at that Period*, Edward Floyd de Lancey, ed. (New York, 1879), 2:204.



Brigadier General Benedict Arnold. *Clive Arnold Hammond*

and horse trader in New Haven, Connecticut. There, he helped establish the 2nd Company, Governor's Guards, a militia company assigned to protect the governor and General Assembly and became its first captain.⁷

Between 1775 and 1777, Arnold seemed to be everywhere, constantly showcasing his charisma, ingenuity, and courage in leading troops into battle, earning the respect of the men who served under him. In April 1775, and despite orders to the contrary, Arnold led his Governor's Guards to the aid of Massachusetts. In May, he helped capture Fort Ticonderoga. That winter he conducted a legendary march through the wilderness into Canada. In December, he personally led troops at the Battle of Quebec, where he was wounded in the left leg. After his recovery, he organized a fleet of boats on Lake Champlain, which despite losing the Battle of Valcour Island in October 1776, helped delay an expected British invasion from Canada.

In April 1777 Arnold was passed over for promotion to major general. He considered resigning and returned home to New Haven. But the British launched an expedition against the Continental supply depot at Danbury, Connecticut, and Arnold joined in defense of his native state, leading militia and Continentals at the Battles of Ridgefield and Compo Hill. For his actions, he was promoted to major general. In July 1777 he was assigned to the Northern Department, and helped ensure American victories at Fort Stanwix in September, and Saratoga in October. At Saratoga, he was again seriously wounded in the left leg.

Needing time to recuperate from his Saratoga wound, Arnold was appointed military commandant of Philadelphia in 1778. There, he re-entered the merchant trade and made some questionable business decisions. While his actions were legal, his association with suspected loyalists in a highly politically charged city attracted much negative attention. His marriage the following year to Margaret Shippen, the daughter of an alleged loyalist, cultivated more unwanted attention. Citing Arnold's questionable activities and other accusations of misusing his military authority, a group of adversaries persuaded the Continental Congress to appoint a committee to investigate him. Arnold was brought up on eight charges and a court-martial was convened.

Incensed at his treatment, a month before his court-martial Arnold began to correspond secretly with the British in New York. He offered his services to the Crown and gave away American troop strength, positions, and the locations of supply depots, all the while negotiating his compensation. Though the court-

7 Today, the unit still exists as the 2nd Company, Governor's Foot Guard.

martial cleared him of all but two charges and allowed him to remain in the army, George Washington was forced to issue a public reprimand against him.⁸

Such public admonishment increased Arnold's resentment, especially toward Washington. He wanted revenge. Instead of returning to field command, Arnold requested a transfer to the command of West Point, along the strategically important Hudson River. He then proffered it to the British, who had desired it for some time, to entice them to raise their compensation. They offered him £20,000 for its successful capture, plus £500 as a life annuity and a commission as brigadier general in the British army; if the plot to hand it over failed they still agreed to pay him £10,000. Arnold accepted, but before the plot could be put into action his contact, John Andre, was unexpectedly captured after meeting with him. Realizing the probable consequences of this development, Arnold fled to the safety of British-occupied New York. He received compensation: a commission as brigadier general and authority to raise his own regiment. What he did not receive, however, was the hero's welcome he felt he deserved, and he was forced to wait months before being given a chance to prove himself.⁹

In December 1780, Clinton dispatched Arnold with 1,500 men to tidewater Virginia, to relieve pressure on Cornwallis and his army, then in North Carolina, and to establish a base at Portsmouth. Arnold achieved great success, especially when conducting raids on Richmond, Chesterfield, and Petersburg, where he destroyed mills, storehouses, a cannon foundry, and numerous military stores.¹⁰

Arnold was recalled to New York in June 1781. But his relationship with Clinton had soured. While he was gone, Clinton learned Arnold had gone behind his back, writing to Lord Germain, Clinton's superior. Arnold advised Germain how to conduct the war, while offering sharp criticisms of Clinton. So, when Arnold requested to lead an offensive against Philadelphia or against the Americans and the French in the Hudson Highlands, Clinton rebuffed him.¹¹

8 Willard Sterne Randall, *Benedict Arnold Patriot and Traitor* (New York, 1990), 474; Clare Brandt, *Man in the Mirror: A Life of Benedict Arnold* (New York, 1994), 190; *Proceedings of a general court martial of the line, held in Raritan, in the state of New-Jersey, by order of His Excellency George Washington, Esq. and commander in chief of the Army of the United States of America, for the trial of Major General Arnold, Jun. 1, 1779. Major General Howe, president.: Published by order of Congress* (Philadelphia, 1780), 5.

9 Brandt, *Man in the Mirror*, 206, 220, 223.

10 Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 581–582; Brandt, *Man in the Mirror*, 242–248; James Robertson, *The Twilight of British Rule in Revolutionary America: The NY Letter Book of General James Robertson 1780–1783*, Milton M. Klein and Ronald W. Howard, eds. (Cooperstown, NY, 1983), 204; Stephen Brumwell, *Turncoat* (New Haven, CT, 2018), 311–313.

11 Brandt, *Man in the Mirror*, 247–248; Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 581–585.

Clinton spoke little, outside of his inner circle, of his planned Rhode Island expedition. This supposed inaction caused many to criticize his motives openly. Clinton had many detractors in the city, including at times his adviser, Royal Chief Justice William Smith. Smith, a member of a prominent New York family, had served as chief justice of the colony for nearly two decades and remained loyal to Great Britain. Smith noted in his diary as Washington and Rochambeau made their junction: "There seems to be a general Censure of Sir Henry as unprepared for a great Force as he might be and not even for getting behind the Enemy . . . He is incapable of Business. He consults No Body. All about him are Idlers and ignorant."¹²

Arnold continued to sulk as his resentment towards Clinton grew. He asked Justice Smith, whom he had met shortly after his defection, to use his influence back in England to lobby his ideas. Smith penned in his diary dated August 25: "[V]isited Arnold. He is greatly disconcerted. None of his Propositions of Service are listened to, and he despairs of any Thing great or small from Sir. H. Clinton, who he suspects aims at prolonging the War for his own Interest. He wants me to signify Home his Impatience, his Ideas, and his Overtures."¹³

Clinton was largely able to ignore his detractors, including Arnold, at least for the moment. Though he considered attacking Washington and Rochambeau, he believed the only option that would garner success was against the French navy at Rhode Island. This was based on his belief that he could not adequately defend his post at New York—including Long Island and Staten Island—and at the same time successfully launch an offensive into the Hudson Highlands against an enemy he believed outnumbered him.¹⁴

In between asking London for reinforcements, Clinton continued to contemplate Rhode Island. Though the bulk of the French army had departed, its siege artillery and stores remained in Providence. In addition, a naval squadron supported by a combined force of some 1,800 French regulars and militia remained at Rhode Island. The isolated French squadron was a tempting target for Clinton. An opportunity presented itself that had the potential, as one British officer believed, "to be a fatal blow to the French." Capturing or destroying the

12 William Smith, *Historical Memoirs From 26 August 1778 to 12 November 1783 of William Smith: Historian of the Province of New York; Member of the Governor's Council, and Last Chief Justice of that Province Under the Crown; Chief Justice of Quebec*. William H. W. Sabine, ed. (New York, 1971), 426.

13 Smith, *Historical Memoirs*, 434; Brandt, *Man in the Mirror*, 246–247; *Caledonian Mercury*, Nov. 14, 1781.

14 Clinton, *Narrative*, 11–16. Clinton considered Arnold's option of attacking the allies north of NY City, but also an offensive into the Hudson Highlands, another into New Jersey, and another against Philadelphia, which he overruled due to lack of available troops, sailors, and supplies.

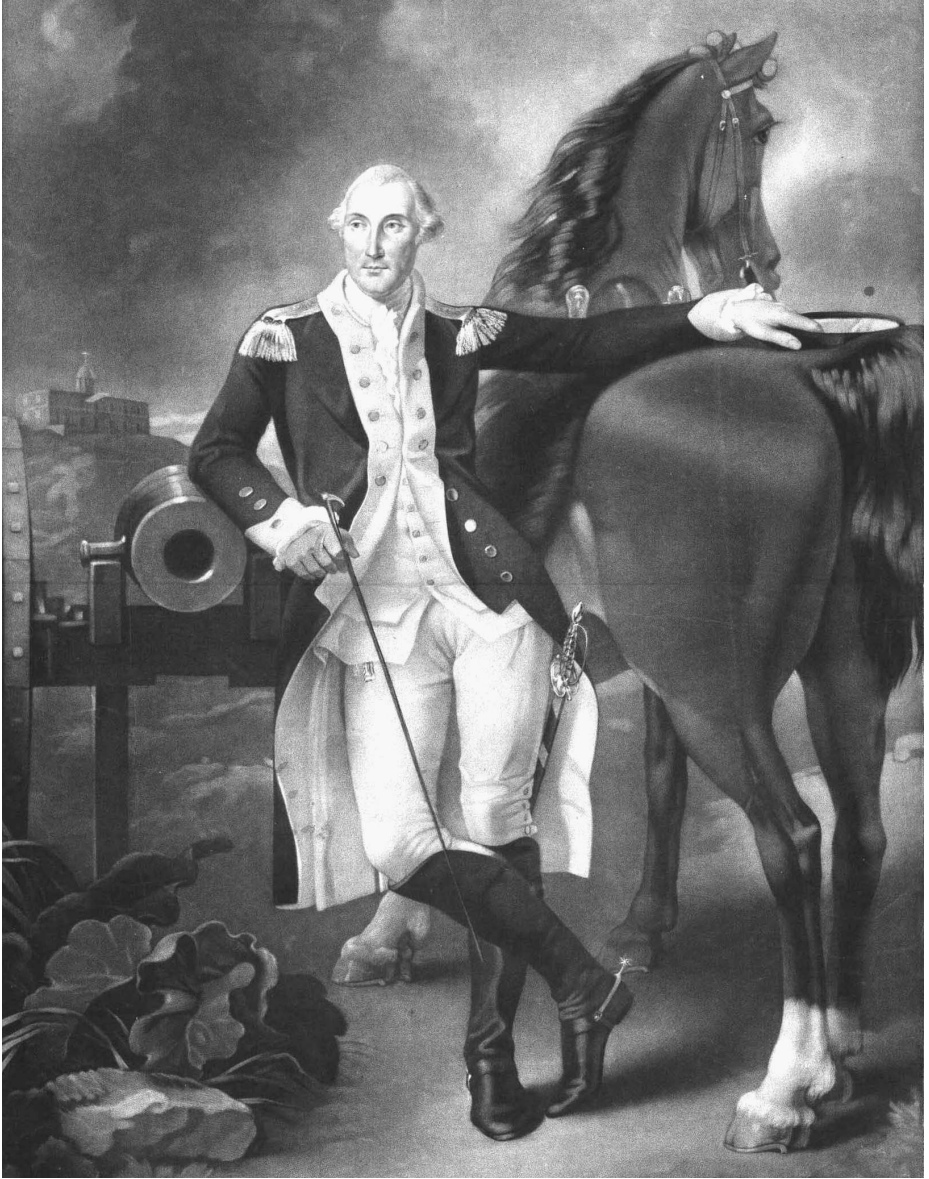
French squadron would eliminate it from future operations against New York. Landing in Rhode Island might even draw Washington and Rochambeau away from New York. It might give Clinton, who planned on leading the expedition, an opportunity to engage the enemy on his own terms on ground he knew well. This could be the decisive battle he had desired ever since taking command.¹⁵

However, unknown to Clinton, there were problems in his intelligence services. A large portion of the intelligence on which he based his planning and strategy came from intercepted allied correspondence. Clinton placed a great deal of faith in its validity, even sending the captured correspondence back to London. American deserters coming into British lines were also saying similar things. What Clinton did not realize was that Washington deliberately allowed at least some of these letters to be captured. Washington and Rochambeau had met in person earlier that spring in Wethersfield, Connecticut, where they agreed to move south and attack Cornwallis. But they did not want the British to realize their strategy, so they put in place a carefully conceived deception scheme. Each letter the British intercepted contained bits of both factual and false information which led Clinton to believe that Washington preferred a joint Franco-American operation against Cornwallis in Virginia, but had settled for an attack on New York because the French navy was inferior to the British navy and could not hope to contain them. This was in fact the opposite of what they planned to do.¹⁶

Washington and Rochambeau continued their ploy when the two armies rendezvoused north of New York. To increase the deception's credibility, in early July parts of their armies were detached and sent towards Manhattan on reconnaissance missions to harass the British outposts and alarm the city. Other larger feints were made throughout the month to probe and reconnoiter the British defenses, and siege artillery was brought up to help prop up the ruse. Clinton reacted just as Washington hoped: defensively. Clinton surrendered the initiative

15 Clinton, *Narrative*, 11–15; Frederick Mackenzie, *Diary of Frederick Mackenzie: Giving a daily narrative of his military services as an officer in the regiment of Royal Welsh Fusiliers during the years 1775–1781 in MA, RI, and NY*, 2 vols., Allen French, ed. (Cambridge, MA, 1930), 2:598, 600.

16 *London Gazette*, July 10, 1781; Clinton Papers, Volume 165, item 34, University of Michigan, William Clement Library [hereafter WCL]; George Washington to the Marquis de Lafayette, May 31, 1781, Papers of George Washington, LOC. In a captured letter, Washington wrote to the Marquis de Lafayette, who was then in Virginia with a small army, telling him an “Attempt upon NY was deemed preferable to a Southern operation, as we had not the command of the water.” One deserter, James Hassard, of the 5th Massachusetts Regiment, told his captors, “The whole talk [within the Continental Army] is about taking NY, this Summer . . .”



General George Washington, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, 1775-1783.

New York Public Library

and went into a defensive siege mode mentality and set about improving the New York fortifications.¹⁷

By late August, after leaving a small force of Continentals and militia under Maj. Gen. William Heath to defend the Hudson Highlands, Washington and Rochambeau marched their two armies out of Westchester County, crossed the Hudson River, and marched south into northern New Jersey. Covering their movements through Bergen County, they made a feint towards British-held Staten Island. Clinton took the bait because he remembered that prior to capturing New York, in 1776, the British had first taken possession of Staten Island. This ploy was further enhanced when Clinton's intelligence reports warned him of a French naval squadron consisting of 24 ships with 8,000 troops on board. This force was said to have left the West Indies and was now heading up the coast. Its destination was not known, but Clinton believed it to be New York.¹⁸

Clinton now prepared his southern harbor fortifications to resist a naval attack. He ordered additional heavy cannon to be placed in separate batteries along the heights on Staten Island which commanded the southern entrance into the harbor. Additionally, he continued to build up his defenses in Manhattan, and shifted troops to Denyces Ferry in Brooklyn where they could be moved speedily to wherever a threat was perceived.¹⁹

Concurrently, Clinton prepared to go on the offensive. Part of his reasoning for bolstering his defenses was the anticipation of taking nearly 5,000 troops on his Rhode Island expedition. The force left behind needed to be able to resist any allied attack in his absence. He informed Frederick Mackenzie, his deputy adjutant general, on August 25 of his intentions, tasking this trusted staff officer with the distribution of troops within his defenses and assembling an expeditionary force.²⁰

Recent changes within the British navy bolstered Clinton's resolve. In July, Vice Admiral Arbuthnot had been temporarily replaced by Rear Adm. Thomas Graves. Clinton welcomed the change. Graves was a forty-year veteran of the navy, having served during the War of Austrian Succession, the Seven Years War, and

17 Jones, *History of NY*, 2:204; Robertson, *Twilight*, 214; Clinton planned to attack the allies in Westchester County with 6–7,000 troops from Kingsbridge, but the attack never materialized as the allies crossed the Hudson River before it could be launched. See Mackenzie, *Diary*, 2:590–592.

18 Mackenzie, *Diary*, 2:590–591.

19 *Ibid.*, 2:590, 597, 599. Two days before Hood's arrival, Mackenzie told Clinton he believed the allies were in New Jersey to block a supposed joint British attack by Clinton and Cornwallis against Philadelphia. Clinton told Mackenzie he "would encourage that Idea as much as possible."

20 *Ibid.*, 2:597–598. Mackenzie had served in Newport during its occupation by the British. He wrote in his diary, "[I] am well acquainted with the works we left there, [Clinton] asked me many questions respecting them."

Rear Admiral Sir Thomas Graves, Commander-in-Chief of the North American Station, 1781.

New York Public Library



the current war. When he arrived, he discussed the Rhode Island operation with Clinton. Graves gave him his support but asked for time to allow naval reinforcements expected daily from Europe.²¹

However, by mid-August, the expedition had moved nowhere, and Clinton's impatience grew. Writing to Graves, he again repeated his desire to pay "a visit to Rhode Island." Graves concurred, but again asked to delay, this time to repair two warships which he deemed essential to success. The expedition was again postponed.²²

On August 26, Clinton held a meeting with Cmdr. Thomas Wells, a recently exchanged naval officer. Wells brought with him news of a message originally carried aboard the brig *Active* and intended for Graves, which had been captured at sea. Wells rushed to New York to deliver the message personally to Clinton. It revealed that a British fleet under Rear Adm. Samuel Hood was headed to New York from the Caribbean. Wells also told Clinton the French fleet in the Caribbean had left and Hood had attempted to locate it and after being unable to, assumed they were returning to Europe. This helped to further maintain Clinton's belief that the British maintained naval superiority and that he could safely launch a raid against Rhode Island. Hood's squadron also carried two infantry regiments. Clinton was elated.²³

21 William B. Willcox, "Sir Henry Clinton: Paralysis of Command," in Billias, ed., *Generals and Opponents*, 2:88; William Stewart, *Admirals of the World: A Biographical Dictionary, 1500 to the Present* (Jefferson, NC, 2009), 147–148; Clinton, *Narrative*, 16. Clinton told his superiors that Arbuthnot must be removed, or he would submit his resignation. His request was granted.

22 Extract from Clinton's Letter to Graves, Aug. 16, 1781, in Clinton, *Narrative*, 63.

23 Mackenzie, *Diary*, 2:598; Smith, *Historical Memoirs*, 435. The fleet consisted of the combined squadrons under Hood and Rear Admiral Sir Francis Drake. The news also convinced Clinton that Cornwallis was not in any real danger.

Two days later, on August 28, Hood's twenty warships arrived at Sandy Hook. Mackenzie believed their arrival would "ensure success" on the Rhode Island expedition. It so encouraged Clinton that, "In consequence of his arrival," Mackenzie wrote, "the Commander in Chief has determined to undertake the Expedition to Rhode Island immediately if The Admirals approve of it. He went down early this morning to confer with them upon the matter, and has given orders for all the Military arrangements to be made."²⁴

Hood's warships had been sent from the West Indies to pursue a French squadron under Adm. Francois Jean-Paul Comte de Grasse, which Graves expected to unite with the French squadron under Adm. Jacques-Melchoir Saint-Laurent, Comte de Barras, at Newport, in preparation for the allied attack on New York. Hood searched Cape Henry and then Delaware Bay to see if de Grasse intended to interfere with Cornwallis's army, but not finding de Grasse in either location, continued on to Sandy Hook.

Later, while Clinton was away, Mackenzie, also optimistic, closed his diary entry, writing: "If we do not execute something with so powerful a fleet, and a fine Army fit for an undertaking, we shall be deservedly blamed for our supineness. But to let the French Squadron remain quietly and unmolested so near as Newport would be unpardonable. The Navy will no doubt join heartily in this enterprize, wherein they have a fair prospect of signalizing themselves by the Capture or destruction of the Enemy's whole squadron." British success could be achieved.²⁵

Clinton met with Graves on Long Island on the same day as Hood's arrival. Hood eventually joined them. In a letter to the secretary of the admiralty, Hood later stated that when he arrived at the meeting, Clinton and Graves were already deliberating the details of the Rhode Island expedition. Hood gave some support to the joint operation but admitted to the secretary that he insisted they actively watch for the French squadrons.²⁶

At around 10:00 p.m. someone unexpectedly interrupted the meeting. The disruption came from an unnamed person, presumably a loyalist, who according to Mackenzie had been sent to Montauk Point, at the easternmost tip of Long Island, to monitor de Barras's squadron at Newport and report back any movements. They were told that de Barras had departed three days earlier and was seen to be sailing southward, passing Block Island the following day. The news shocked them.

24 Mackenzie, *Diary*, 2:599, 602. For about a week, Clinton had expected the RI expedition to proceed and had selected the units that would comprise it. The orders to the units were sent out as Clinton left his headquarters to meet with the admirals.

25 *Ibid.*, 2:602.

26 *Letters Written by Sir Samuel Hood In 1781-2-3*, David Hannay, ed. (1895), 24–26.

Justice Smith, who was in attendance, recalled that Hood, upon hearing the news, “looked and behaved like a stiff Yankee colonel.”²⁷

Angry and disappointed, Clinton wrote, “Thus, to the Admirals great mortification and my own, was lost an opportunity of making the most important attempt that had offered the whole war.” An opportunity to divide the allies and destroy an isolated portion of the French navy in America vanished. Clinton’s planning, which had spanned over a year, had come to absolute naught. Around midnight, Clinton reluctantly sent out orders countermanding the movements of the troops belonging to the expeditionary force, which was done before any had left their posts.²⁸

The capture of the *Active* ultimately led to the end of the Rhode Island expedition. Dispatches aboard which told of Hood’s intended movement were not thrown overboard, but instead made their way into the hands of George Washington. Realizing the implications of the British naval movements, Washington wrote to de Barras and warned him about leaving his squadron so isolated, writing, “should [Hood’s] squadron actually arrive—form a junction [with Graves] and find the French naval force separated, it might eventually prove fatal.”²⁹

Mackenzie admitted after the meeting that the “unfortunate Capture of the *Active*, gave the Enemy information of the sailing of The British fleet from the West Indies, and as they knew it might be expected in the course of this Month, they lost no time in removing their fleet from a place in which, in all probability it would have fallen into our hands or have been destroyed.” Realizing the implications of the lost opportunity, he sadly admitted, “Thus we have lost the opportunity of giving a capital blow to the French Navy.”³⁰

Afterwards, Smith blamed it all on the navy, confiding in his diary: “The French Fleet gone from Rhode Island. . . Why was not Graves upon the Look out? Or why did he not send a Detachment the very Night of Hood’s arrival?” Despite the lost opportunity, another meeting between Clinton and the admirals was planned for the following day to discuss intelligence reports and future operations.³¹

27 Mackenzie, *Diary*, 2:603; Willcox, “Arbuthnot, Gambier, and Graves: Old Women of the Navy,” in Billias, ed., *Generals and Opponents*, 2:279.

28 Clinton, *Narrative*, 17; Mackenzie, *Diary*, 2:603; Smith, *Historical Memoirs*, 435.

29 Washington to de Barras, Aug. 15, 1781, Papers of George Washington, LOC. Washington also utilized Rochambeau’s influence to further prod de Barras to move; he wrote, “At the request of the Count de Rochambeau, [it is desired] “that you form a junction, & as soon as possible with the Count de Grasse in Chesapeake bay.” The stage was being set for Yorktown.

30 Mackenzie, *Diary*, 2:603.

31 Hood, *Letters*, 26; Smith, *Historical Memoirs*, 435.



Rear Admiral Sir Samuel Hood

New York Public Library

There were now serious concerns about the intentions of the French navy. Where was de Barras headed? And where was de Grasse? Clinton and the admirals could not agree on the objective or destination of either French squadron. Hood believed their target was Cuba, Graves believed they were headed towards East Florida and Georgia, and Clinton feared, again, their target was New York. Even on August 29, as French and American troops marched through New Jersey, Clinton remained convinced New York was their objective and wanted

the admirals to assist in its protection. Reports from loyalists in Bergen County warned him that the French were constructing a bakery in Chatham, and that Americans were collecting boats to land on Staten Island—all indicators of a siege.³²

Hood won the debate. Convinced their combined squadrons “will be superior” to any French naval force opposing them, they would sail for the Chesapeake to locate de Grasse and defeat him, preferably before he was reinforced by de Barras. This would ensure a blow against the French navy. It would also aid Cornwallis’s army, now at Yorktown, Virginia, which might otherwise become isolated by the French navy. Even so, Clinton remained stubborn despite some on his staff who, at least privately, believed the British were being purposely deceived. Clinton remained convinced Washington and Rochambeau were not headed to Virginia, and therefore Cornwallis was in no real danger.³³

Before the admirals departed, Clinton convinced them to let him use a small naval detachment to assist in a diversionary land-naval operation. The commander-in-chief needed to find a quick alternative to Rhode Island. In this new operation, he held the same overall objectives in mind. First, divert attention of the French and Americans away from New York. Second, attack them where he saw a favorable

32 Smith, *Historical Memoirs*, 435; Mackenzie, *Diary*, 2:605–606.

33 Smith, *Historical Memoirs*, 435; Robertson, *Twilight*, 206–208; Mackenzie, *Diary*, 2:606.

opportunity. To accomplish this, he believed it would be necessary to attack the rebel coastline somewhere near the city. He explained, "As I was disappointed of the blow which I intended against Rhode Island, I was unwilling that the preparations for that service should be wholly lost, without some attempt being made to annoy the enemy's coasts and [some] endeavor to cause a diversion somewhere."³⁴

Clinton now realized that, except for some American privateers, the British controlled Long Island Sound. Until the French navy was located, there was no longer any large enemy naval presence near him. He discussed this with Justice Smith, who wrote, "Sir Henry has a Choice of Objects. The whole coast is now at the Mercy of the British force, till the French [under de Grasse] appear from the West Indies." A window of opportunity presented itself to Clinton, or so he believed, and he shifted his focus to the Connecticut coastline. What place could he attack that could cause the most attention and not be ignored? One town stood out. This town, Clinton's next target, was New London.³⁵

³⁴ Clinton, *American Rebellion*, 330–331.

³⁵ Smith, *Historical Memoirs*, 435.