

A TALE OF TWO SPIES:

A COMPARISON OF NATHAN HALE AND BENEDICT ARNOLD

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I learned of the essay contest through a fellow homeschooler.

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“Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.” Nathan Hale was honored by both the Patriots and the Loyalists as one with truthful frankness and bold perseverance. On the day of Hale’s hanging, British officer Frederick MacKensie, who was present at the scene, penned, “He behaved with great composure and resolution, saying he thought it the duty of every good Officer, to obey any orders given him by his Commander-in-Chief; and desired the Spectators to be at all times prepared to meet death in whatever shape it might appear” (“Nathan Hale | Facts, Early Years, Life, Death, Military & Spy”). In great contrast, the legacy of Benedict Arnold was one of dishonor with both the Americans and the British. His traitorous actions made Arnold a scoundrel in the minds of the Americans and a recreant in the minds of the British. The character of Hale and Arnold as shown in their responses to the Revolution shaped their future, leading one to sacrifice with honor and the other to survive with dishonor.

Nathan Hale was “born and bred” among the hills of Toland County, in Coventry, Connecticut (Seymour 3). Richard Hale, the father of Nathan, was a devout Christian with strong religious morals and expected as much from the members of his family (Phelps 5). Raised on Christian principles and fed with patriotism, Nathan Hale learned to love both God and country (5). At the age of eighteen, he graduated from Yale with honors. He soon became known as a patriot schoolteacher and a dedicated soldier. As a spy, Nathan Hale encountered officers, endured risks, and exposed plans vital to winning the Revolution. Disguised as a Loyalist schoolteacher, Hale went from camp to camp gathering information (Lossing 16). Concealed in the soles of his shoes, the papers containing observations such as drawings, the memoranda of fortifications, etc.,

were secreted until they were brought over the British lines to the American Commander-in-Chief, George Washington (17).

Born in Norwich, Connecticut, Benedict Arnold began his life as the son of a drunkard and a descendant of Rhode Island “royalty” (History.com Editors). As a pre-Revolutionary occupation, Arnold was an apothecary and seagoing merchant captain (Philbrick 35). During the American Revolution, Arnold rose through the ranks, becoming a brigadier general, and was recognized as a war hero, because of his aid in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga (37). Although superiorly ranked in the military, Arnold’s ambition for higher recognition was not satisfied. With his lofty rank in the military, Benedict Arnold believed he was entitled to the use of supplies and services of the military, in addition to managing them. For example, Arnold used military wagons for personal use. He was also charged with allowing an enemy ship to dock in an American harbor (Dell 74). In light of his military misconducts, Arnold was passed over for the promotion he desired. On one occasion, Arnold wrote a letter to his wife, Margaret “Peggy” Shippen, expressing his disgust with the Americans. He stated, “I daily discover so much baseness and ingratitude among mankind that I almost blush at being of the same species” (73). With a Loyalist as a wife and wounded pride, Benedict Arnold turned spy, working against the Patriot cause. Beginning with a report of the plans of West Point and a list of the vessels on the Hudson, Arnold started upon the path of a traitor.

Nathan Hale was America’s hero. The dedicated service he gave to his country, the risks he took, and the sacrifices he made, caused his patriotic heritage to be remembered for generation after generation. With his humble nature, Hale never felt the need for recognition for his services. He stated, “I am not influenced by the expectation of promotion or pecuniary reward. I wish to be useful, and every kind of service necessary for the public good, becomes honorable by being

necessary. If the exigencies of my country demand a peculiar service, its claim to perform that service are imperious” (Stuart 94). With a heartfelt duty to his country, he felt honored that he could die for the cause of liberty. In relation to the candid confession of Nathan Hale, a British officer, to whom Hale addressed, stated, “the frankness, the manly bearing, and the evident disinterested patriotism of the handsome young prisoner, sensibly touched a tender chord of General Howe’s nature” (Phelps 187). During his imprisonment, while awaiting his fate, Hale was composed. On his way to his execution, Hale was described as having walked with “grace and stateliness of a man carrying out the will of his people, the will of his God” (190). His patriotic and heroic deeds caused Nathan Hale to be forever in the minds of his fellow countrymen.

Benedict Arnold was originally known for the courage and valor he exhibited in the many battles he fought. Later, Arnold was recognized by his true character: an ambitious and cowardly turncoat. The constant petting and praising from British news reporters, as well as the Loyalist sympathies of his wife, lured Benedict Arnold to betray his country for the life of a dishonored British officer (Dell 74-75). He became an infamous traitor, retrieving information for the British, vital to a British victory over the Continental Army. However, when another British spy, John André, was captured, Arnold’s deeds were unearthed, showing his venal personality (King 58). He escaped to British lines, leaving behind a perpetual legacy of dishonor with the Americans. Likewise, with the British, Arnold’s double-sided, craven ways led to disgrace. Repeatedly, after the War, Benedict Arnold tried for upper-level positions in the British Army and the British East India Company, with no avail (History.com Editors). He finally bought land in Canada to establish trade, which failed due to underhanded business dealings. A true understanding of the feeling of Canadian neighbors is illustrated by their burning of Arnold’s effigy in front of his home and family (Brandt 263). Soon after, his family moved back to London and traded with the

West Indies during the French Revolution, until his health began to decline in 1801. Benedict Arnold died on June 14, 1801, at the age of 60, leaving behind a vestige of disrepute (“The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica”).

The contrasts between Benedict Arnold and Nathan Hale reveal the true meanings of patriotism and honor. Benedict Arnold’s seemingly patriotic acts grew from pridefulness, the love of money, and a yearning to have a high-ranking position. His character was one of selfishness and pride. Even his name, in common speech, has become synonymous with betrayal. Nathan Hale was a true patriot, with a motive that is not paralleled by any other. Hale’s patriotism sprouted from his love for his country and a great desire to see a nation “conceived in liberty.” His character was one of forthrightness and true patriotism. This patriotism, this undying will to serve his country, caused Hale to be a hero forever in the minds of his fellow countrymen. Nathan Hale himself said it best with his often-misquoted last words, “I am so satisfied with the cause in which I have engaged that my only regret is that I have not more lives than one to offer in its service” (Phelps 192).

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Student Biography

Rebecca is currently a tenth-grade homeschooled student. Her academic achievements include maintaining a 4.0 grade point average, excelling in honors classes through Florida Virtual School, and writing winning essays at the post level in the Patriot's Pen Contest. In addition to conventional college prep studies, she takes classes at a local homeschool cooperative program. She will be attending dual enrolment classes at the College of Central Florida this spring. She played violin in the Citrus Youth Educational Orchestra for 6 years and hopes to further her studies in violin, piano, and flute. She is a dedicated member and volunteer at Citrus Missionary Baptist Church. She plans to attend college in Florida and is currently interested in pursuing degrees in paralegal studies and accounting.