



*A memorial in Tappan, New York, near the Hudson River, marks the spot where André was hung and first buried.*

## **DUPES OF THE PRETERNATURAL?**

*Some thoughts on André, Arnold, and Aaron Burr.*

As some of you my esteemed and *patient* readers are or might be aware, in my sundry writings I have written on spirit people, that is to say *the unearthly*; having in some measure alluded to the same in my earlier Continental Army series pieces on Silas Deane, i.e., “Almost a Traitor -- The Strange Case of Silas Deane,” and the one on Maj. Robert Rogers’ “Ponteach.” Although I take for granted that some do or would look askance on such conjectures and view such with matter of fact skepticism, I nevertheless am strongly convinced of the possibility that such claim can, when all is said and done, be empirically established and proven. This said, although I would not belabor the subject of just here, I did think it worth sharing, for purposes disinterested pondering purposes, some jottings and musings of mine on the ghosts or specters who *may* have *haunted the Revolution*. I reproduce these vignettes then as they originated from my personal journals; so that in any case you at minimum have the opportunity to judge for yourself. I’m sorry (due to exigencies somewhat beyond my control) I could not do this article up as a more formally developed composition. Yet since I have a mind *possibly* adding to it at some later time, I thought it just as well to defer attempting too much here; thereby leaving more room and energy for that as yet uncertain eventuality. My assumptions are profuse and which I concede only makes the brief and perfunctory nature of these sketches all the more to be regretted. Even so, I do write considerably more on the topic of spirit people elsewhere, and which, if one is interested, can find be found at my website at <http://www.gunjones.com>

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A most engaging account of the Arnold treason plot and resultant execution of André is given in Charles Stedman’s *History of the Origins, Progress and Termination of the American War*, vol. II, pp. 247-253; the “what ifs” of that famous intrigue being no little stimulating of curious speculation. What if, for instance, the *Vulture*, André contact and pre-arranged vessel for evacuation, had not been fired upon by the Americans, and its retreat forced? It makes one think that *if there were* a spirit-person/devil who was personally inimical and somehow jealously had it out for André, such might have indirectly brought about the withdrawal of the *Vulture* to pass (say, by alerting the Americans.) Someone might object, even granting your assumption, why would a devil do that rather than assist Arnold and Clinton? To which I would respond -- perhaps, it was seen at the last that that bringing about the scheme successfully was too fraught with complications and risky ramifications. At the same time, doing-in a handsome and dashing figure like André would or might be viewed as a great feather in a devil’s cap. Also, if we look for who was most to blame for André’s ignoble capture, was it not after all Arnold for instructing him to act as his prisoner? Perhaps, as something we might consider, Arnold originally obtained the idea and suggestion from *someone else*. The very difficulties Arnold is described as having found himself beset with were as likely as not fiendishly fomented or orchestrated taunts designed to get him to react -- certain such would be very in keeping with a literal devil’s manner and mode of doing things.

As to André’s sentence, I personally don’t believe great fault, if any, can be found in it on technical or legal grounds such as Stedman or others argue; all the less so given the gravity of the danger

his actions posed the Americans.<sup>1</sup> Respecting Arnold, Washington himself in later years thought it no small proof of the former's aggravated perfidy that the former had taken prisoner the poor, deceived boatmen who were only obeying the orders given them by an (one-time) American general.<sup>2</sup> And yet, in fairness, was Arnold's villainy *wholly* of his own prompting and doing?

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[Stedman] Whilst general Washington was absent from his army upon this service, a deep-laid scheme was formed by one of his own officers, one of general for delivering up to sir Henry Clinton the strong post of West Point, in the high lands upon the North River, the possession of which would have nearly cut off all communication between the northern important post into the and middle colonies. The officer engaged in this design was the hands of the famous general Arnold, whose services in the cause of America had been of the most meritorious kind, and whose brilliant actions in the field justly raised him to superior notice and regard. After the evacuation of Philadelphia by the British troops in the year 1778, he was appointed to command the American garrison that took possession of it; and while he acted in that capacity had the misfortune to disgust many of the inhabitants, and even to fall under the displeasure of congress. He lived expensively, and, as was supposed, considerably beyond his stated income; but he was at the fame time concerned in trading speculations, and had shares in several privateers; and upon the profits expected from those adventures, he probably relied, as a means of enabling him to keep up the state and style of life he had assumed. He had also claims against the public to a considerable amount; and upon the payment of them he depended as a fund to satisfy the immediate demands of his creditors, who were beginning to become importunate. But the trading speculations in which he had engaged proved unproductive; his privateers were unsuccessful; and a considerable portion of his demand against the public was cut off, by the commissioners appointed to examine his accounts. From the decision of the commissioners, general Arnold appealed to the congress, who appointed a committee of their own

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<sup>1</sup> In a footnote, vol. I, pp.208-209, to his *Life and Correspondence of Nathanael of Greene* (1822), Judge William Johnson relates the following concerning André:

“The following facts may be relied upon. Let them weigh with the reader for what they are worth.

“It was an universal belief, as well in the British army as in the city of Charleston after its fall, that André had been in the city in the character of a spy, during the siege. There is now living in the place a respectable citizen, who acted in the commissary department in the British army, during and after the siege; and another of equal respectability, and whose means of information were much greater, who was in Charleston during the siege, and remained in it until the evacuation, who will testify to the truth of this assertion. And this opinion is corroborated by the following fact. There were two brothers of the name of S. S. and E. S. both well known as men of property and respectable standing in society. The former was, to the last, faithfully devoted to the cause of the country, the other was disaffected. During the siege, S. S. being taken sick, was permitted to go to his brother's house to be better attended. There, he was introduced to, and repeatedly saw a young man, in a homespun dress, who was introduced to him by his brother as a Virginian, connected with the line of that state then in the city. After the fall of Charleston, S. S. was introduced to Major André, at his brother's house, and in him recognized the person of the Virginian whom he had seen during the siege. This he remarked to his brother, who acknowledged that he was the same, asserting his own ignorance of it at the time. S. S. related these facts to many persons in his lifetime, and his veracity was unquestionable. Another citizen, Mr. W. J., at the time of André's capture, a prisoner at St. Augustine, also saw the supposed Virginian at the house of E. S. while S. S. lay sick, and his recollection of the fact was revived by S. S. soon after he had made the discovery of his real character. It is also known that the life of E. S. was afterwards assiduously sought after by Marion's men, on the charge of his treachery.”

<sup>2</sup> As recorded at Mount Vernon by his secretary Tobias Lear, in Lear's diary entry for 22 Oct. 1786: “...—I orderd Col. Hamilton to mount his horse & proceed with the greatest dispatch to a post on the river about <illegible>, papers found upon him [André] were in his possession. Colo. Jemmisson [John Jameson], when Andre was taken with these papers, could not beleive that Arnold was a traitor but rather thought it was an imposition of the British in order to destroy our Confidence in Arnold. he, however, immediately upon their being taken, dispatched an express after me, ordering him to ride night & day till he came up with me. the express went the lower road [(]which was the road by which I had gone to Connecticut) expecting that I should return by the same rout & that he sho'd meet me, but before he had proceeded far he was informed that I was returning by the upper road. he then cut across the Country & followed in my tract till I arrived at W[es]t Point. he arrived about 2 hours after & brot the above <page mutilated Arnold gave orders illegible> he ordered his men (who were very cleaver fellows & some of the better sort of soldiery) to proceed immediately on board the Vulture Sloop of war (as a flag) which was lying down the river, saying that they must be very expeditious as he must return in a short time to meet me, & promised them 2 Gallons of rum if they wou'd exert themselves. they did accordingly; but when they got on board the ship, instead of their two Gals. of rum, he ordered the Cocksman to be called down into the Cabin & informed him that he & the men must consider themselves as prisoners. the Cocksman was very much astonished, told him that they came on board under sanction of a flag. he answd that was nothing to the purpose—they were prisoners; but the Captain had more generosity than this mean, pittiful scoundrel & told the Cocksman that he would take his parole for him to go on shore & get cloaths, & whatever else was wanted for him & his companions. he accordingly came, got his cloths &c. & returned on board; when they got to New York, General Clinton, ashamed of so low & mean an action, set them all at Liberty.” For further, see: William Moultrie to Washington, 30 July 1786. *The Papers of George Washington* Digital Edition, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008; Confederation Series (1 January 1784–23 September 1788), Volume 4 (2 April 1786–31 January 1787).

members to revise the sentence: But the committee of congress were even less favourable to his views than the commissioners, from whose decision he had appealed. They reported that the balance already allowed by the commissioners was more than general Arnold was entitled to receive.

So many disappointments could not fail to ruffle a temper less irritable than general Arnold's: Recollecting his former services, he gave full scope to his resentment, and complained of ill-usage and ingratitude in terms better calculated to provoke than to mollify, and such as were peculiarly offensive to congress. His enemies availed themselves of his indiscretion to swell the tide of popular clamour which already ran strongly against him. A court-martial was appointed to examine into his conduct during his command in Philadelphia, and by the sentence of that board it was in general terms reprehended, and himself subjected to the mortification of receiving a reprimand from general Washington.

From this moment it is supposed that Arnold formed the design of quitting the American service and joining the British; and only delayed the execution of his purpose until an opportunity should offer of performing some essential service to the power which he was about to join, that might render his accession of more importance. A correspondence was opened with sir Henry Clinton: The a delivering up the post at West Point, where Arnold, now commanded, was the service he proposed to perform; and the interval of general Washington's absence, when he went to confer with the French commanders, was the time appointed for finishing the negotiation. To facilitate the means of carrying on the previous correspondence, the *Vulture* sloop of war was stationed in the North River, at such a distance from West Point as to excite no suspicion, but near enough to serve for the intended communication; and as general Arnold required a confidential person to treat with, major André, aid-du-camp to sir Henry Clinton, and adjutant-general of the British army, undertook to confer with him, and bring the British negotiation to a conclusion. For this purpose he repaired on board the *Vulture* sloop. At night, in pursuance of a previous arrangement, a boat from the shore carried him to the beach, where he met general Arnold; and day-light approaching before the business on which they had met was finally adjusted, major André was told that he must be conducted to a place of safety, and lie concealed until the following night, when he might return on board the *Vulture* without the danger of being discovered. The beach where the first conference was held was without, but the place of safety to which major André was conducted to lie concealed during the day, was within the American out-posts, against his intention, and with out his knowledge. Here, however, he remained with general Arnold during the day; and at night, the boatmen refusing to carry him on board the *Vulture*, because she had shifted her position during the day, in consequence of a gun being brought to bear upon her from the shore, he was reduced to the necessity of endeavouring to make his way to New York by land. Laying aside his regimentals, which he had hitherto worn, he put on a plain suit of clothes; and receiving a pass from general Arnold, under the assumed name of John Anderson, as if he had been sent down the country on public business, he set out on his return to New York. His pas port secured him from interruption at the American out-posts; and he had already passed them all, and thought himself out of danger, when three American militia-men, who had been sent out to patrol near the road along which he travelled, suddenly springing from the woods, seized the bridle of his horse and stopped him. The suddenness of the surprise seems to have deprived major André of his wonted presence of mind; and, although a man of the greatest address, he was entrapped by the rude simplicity of clowns. Having inquired from whence they were, and being answered, 'From below;' 'And so,' said he, 'am I.' It was not long before he discovered his mistake; but too late, it would appear, to remove the impression which his first answer had made. The men who had made him prisoners searched him for papers, and having taken from his boot a packet, in the hand-writing of general Arnold, determined to carry him without delay to their commanding officer. It was in vain that he offered them a purse of gold and his watch, to suffer him to pass: His promises of an ample provision, and getting them promotion, if they would accompany him to New York, were equally unavailing. The unfortunate André, after these efforts to regain his liberty, seems to have been regardless of what might be his own fate, and was only anxious to save general Arnold. Before the commanding officer of the militia he continued to perforate the supposed John Anderson, and requested that a messenger might be sent to general Arnold to acquaint him with his detention. A messenger being accordingly dispatched, and sufficient time having elapsed for general Arnold to make his escape, he no longer disguised his real name, and avowed himself to be major André, adjutant-general of the British army: He also wrote a letter to general Washington, in his real name, acquainting him that he was his prisoner, and accounting for the disguise which necessity had obliged him film to assume. The message sent to general Arnold, announcing the detention of John Anderson, was sufficient notice to him to

provide for his own safety: He quitted West Point without delay, got on board the *Vulture* sloop, and in her proceeded to New York.

In the mean time general Washington returned from his interview with the French commanders, and being informed of what had passed during his absence, together with Arnold's escape, he reinforced the garrison of West Point with a strong detachment from his army, and appointed a board of general officers, to inquire into and report upon the case of major André. The candid, open, manly, and ingenuous explanation of his conduct, given by major André, before the board of officers, impressed with admiration and esteem even his enemies who were about to shed his blood. Dismissing from his thoughts all personal considerations of danger, he was only anxious that the transaction in which he had been engaged, shaded as it was by the intervention of unfortunate circumstances, might be cleared from obscurity, and appear in its genuine colours, at least with respect to his intention, which was incapable of swerving from the paths of honour. But the board of officers fixing their attention upon the naked fact of his being in disguise within their lines, without perhaps duly considering the unfortunate train of incidents which unexpectedly, and almost unavoidably, led him into that situation, were of opinion that he came under the description, and ought to suffer the punishment, of a spy.

The concern felt at New York, in consequence of the capture of major André, was in the mean time inconceivably great: His gallantry as an officer, and amiable demeanour as a man, had gained him not only the admiration, but the affection, of the whole army; and the uncertainty of his fate filled them with the deepest anxiety. Sir Henry Clinton, whose esteem and regard he enjoyed in an eminent degree, immediately opened a correspondence with general Washington, by means of a flag of truce, and urged every motive which justice, policy, or humanity, could suggest, to induce a remission of the sentence. Finding his letters ineffectual, he sent out general Robertson, with a flag, to confer upon the subject with any officer that should be appointed by general Washington. An interview took place between general Robertson and general Green[e], who had been president of the court-martial. But all efforts to save the unfortunate André were unavailing: His doom was irrevocably fixed. The greatness of the danger which the American army had escaped by the discovery of Arnold's plot before it was ripe for execution, seems to have extinguished in the breath of the inexorable Washington, every spark of humanity that remained. Although entreated by a most pathetic letter from major André, written on the day previous to his execution, to change the mode of his death from that of a common malefactor to one more correspondent to the feelings of a soldier, he would not condescend to grant even this inconsiderable boon to the supplication of his unfortunate prisoner: And on the second day of October this accomplished young officer met his fate, in the manner prescribed by his sentence, with a composure serenity, and fortitude, which astonished the beholders, and excited those emotions of sympathy that would have been more honourably and humanely exercised in averting than lamenting his fate.

Thus fell the unfortunate André. If intention is necessary to constitute guilt; and if guilt alone merits punishment, some doubt may be entertained with respect to the sentence of the board of officers. Major André did not, at first, knowingly enter within the American lines: He was then also in his regimentals: And when he actually found himself within those lines, contrarily to his intention, whatever he afterwards did, in order to extricate himself, by assuming a disguise, and using a feigned passport, ought rather to be ascribed to the imposed necessity of his situation than to choice. But, even if the sentence pronounced against him should be found agreeable to the letter of the law of nations, so unsuitable is the exercise of extreme justice to our imperfect state, that we turn with disgust from those transactions, in which the finer feelings of humanity have been sacrificed to its rigour. Bright as the fame of Washington shall shine in the annals of America, as one of the most illustrious supporters of her independence, the sons of freedom will lament the cold insensibility, that did not suffer him to interpose, in order to rescue from his fate so gallant an officer, and even could withhold from him the poor consolation of meeting death like a soldier; whilst a glance of indignation shall dart from the eyes of her fair and compassionate daughters, softened only by the tear of pity for the fate of the accomplished André.

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Without question Aaron Burr stands as one of the most enigmatic and strangest characters in early United States history, and it is somewhat of a marvel why he was both *so* lionized and vilified in his time,

and yet in retrospect did not accomplish anything as a public office holder that was especially noteworthy; while, outside of hearsay, was actually found guilty of palpably little. True, we learn later that according to the then British ambassador, Anthony Merry, he reportedly sought British aid in his scheme to betray the United States<sup>3</sup> -- but was this his real intention? And yet if betraying the United States was his goal, i.e., as the result of founding a breakaway kingdom in the west, how could he have imagined the United States would sit idly by and be so rudely used and insulted? Likewise (and based on what we read), Burr's incomprehensible foolishness revealed itself most glaringly in that his scheme relied so heavily on Wilkinson as the commander of American forces at New Orleans, whether to assist him in attacking Florida, Mexico, or else founding a new state. And yet Wilkinson, as it turned out, was in the secret pay of the Spaniards. What then was it that made him think Wilkinson could be relied upon in so crucial a role? To compound the distortion and nonsense, some have tried to come to Burr's defense by defaming Hamilton or Jefferson, but this seems a poor explanation of the former's seemingly mad and mysterious actions.

In perusing a diversity of materials on Burr, one is inclined to think he (and also the perhaps overly condemned, or at least misunderstood, Wilkinson) was a target of spirit people hoodwinking and using him as the object of what amounted to a grandiose practical joke. Respecting the famous Weehawken duel, it seems not at all implausible that both Burr and Hamilton were in some ways victims of the same shadowy personage. The trick pistol, for instance, Hamilton (is said to have) brought to the duel may have been planted by someone else (whether before or after the event), and which seems more likely than to assume Hamilton would be such roguish cheat. And not least fiedishly of all, not merely Hamilton but Burr himself was done in by the duel.<sup>4</sup>

Burr's hounded life, including the very cruel views others had of him, despite the subsequent sympathy he received from such as John Adams and Washington Irving, and the bizarre and almost occult-like disappearance and loss of Burr's daughter, further possibly suggest that he was in some manner persecuted by spirit people (and their henchmen.) This is by no means to say that Burr was a complete innocent, but that a very little he was truly guilty of may have been extravagantly spun out by someone else to trip him up to his ruin. Probably and more than anything else, it was his womanizing that was his chief undoing; a weakness an envious devil predictably delights in tormenting, exploiting, and charging for. In respect of his alleged conspiracy to seize power in the West, he seems more to blame for being ridiculous than malevolent. Although there is much circumstantial evidence, there is simply not enough conclusive proof as to his ultimate motives there.

That he was a grandson of Jonathan Edwards may also have been a contributing factor; insofar as that well-meaning divine, some of whose views -- such as predestination;<sup>5</sup> a favorite doctrine of devils; insofar that by means of it they can plausibly argue they are divinely impelled to do wrong -- perhaps bordered, albeit unintentionally, on the diabolical, as a result drew mischievous spirit people to him, and plausibly in turn to some of his family. Alternatively, we might also say some of his family was beset and afflicted because Edwards himself was such a champion for good. Either way or both, I offer such comments as mere speculation, not irrefragable fact, yet speculation not perhaps without its potential as, ultimately, verifiable truth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Henry Adams' *History of the United States during the Administration of Thomas Jefferson*, pp. 571, 576.

<sup>4</sup> We still don't know with certainty what caused the Burr-Hamilton feud. However two facts which stand out in the controversy is that 1) Hamilton cost Burr the presidential election of 1800, and 2) the Federalists turned their back on Hamilton to support Burr in the New York gubernatorial election, probably because Hamilton, although avowedly anti-democratic, was adamantly pro-Union in the face of the then nascent New England secession movement, and Burr by contrast, and in his antipathy toward Jefferson and the Virginia dynasty, was perhaps more malleable and open-minded towards the New England confederates.

<sup>5</sup> Edwards' ideas on predestination were of a qualified sort; by which he said, in effect, that man has free will, but that God knows a man's choices in advance. Such an interpretation of the question is a more than reasonable compromise; so that if, as I hypothesized when this was originally written by me, devils were encouraged by him due to his views on predestination, they were encouraged in error.

<sup>6</sup> In a letter to his son-in-law, Gov. Joseph Alston of South Carolina, written from New York on 20 Nov. 1815, Burr made these illuminating, albeit not a little politically motivated, comments regarding James Monroe; which provide unusual insight into some notable Revolutionary War figures (Burr himself included.)

"Independently of the manner of the nomination and the location of the candidate, the man himself [James Monroe] is one of the most improper and incompetent that could be selected. Naturally dull and stupid; extremely illiterate; indecisive to a degree that would be incredible to one who did not know him; pusillanimous, and, of course, hypocritical; has no opinion on any subject, and will be always

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under the government of the worst men; pretends, as I am told, to some knowledge of military matters, but never commanded a platoon, nor was ever fit to command one. ' -- He served in the Revolutionary War! --' that is, he acted a short time as aid-de-camp to Lord Stirling, who was regularly \*\*\*\*\*. Monroe's whole duty was to fill his lordship's tankard, and hear, with indications of admiration, his lordship's long stories about himself. Such is Monroe's military experience. I was with my regiment in the same division at the time. As a lawyer, Monroe was far below mediocrity.

"He never rose to the honour of trying a cause of the value of a hundred pounds. This is a character exactly suited to the views of the Virginia junto."

In the interest of bi-partisan fairness, here are Thomas Jefferson's views of Burr and Monroe:

[RE. Burr] "A great man in little things, he is really small in great ones." (To G. Hay, 1807.)

"I have had, and still have, such entire confidence in the late and present Presidents [Madison and Monroe], that I willingly put both soul and body into their pockets." (To N. Macon, 1819.)

Monroe, also and incidentally, had been seriously wounded in the shoulder at the battle of Trenton while leading an attack there, and later served as a lieutenant colonel in the Virginia militia under Brig. Gen. Robert Lawson in Lafayette's campaign against Cornwallis in 1781.