

Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



The Americans charge (top) and Benedict Arnold is wounded (bottom) at the Battles of Saratoga. See "Benedict Arnold: Hero Betrayed?" p. 2. Image: revolutionarywar.us.

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Blackwell's
Almanac

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Benedict Arnold: Hero Betrayed?

His name has come to be synonymous with treason. Yet, between 1775 and 1780, Arnold was a relentless American patriot. As a commander in the Revolutionary War, he was a brilliant and courageous battle strategist, defeating or stymieing major British incursions that might have otherwise kept our country under British rule.

How he became a turncoat was the story told at the RIHS Library Lecture on November 15, 2022, by James Kirby Martin, professor emeritus of the University of Houston and author of "Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered." The lecture series is jointly sponsored by the RIHS and the Roosevelt Island branch of the New York Public Library.

Benedict Arnold was born in 1741 in Norwich, CT to a family of wealth and prominence. But, during Arnold's childhood, his father succumbs to alcoholism. The ruined family is brutally ostracized by the pious Norwich community, leaving young Arnold stripped of any social standing and enraged at the arbitrary power wielded by his neighbors. Even years later, after he has built a hugely successful shipping and trading enterprise, making him one of the wealthiest merchants in the colonies, that acceptance into prominent social circles is never completely restored. In reaction, a search for honor and opposition to arbitrary power animate his entire life.

It is hardly surprising, then, that when a fervor for independence takes hold of the colonies, Arnold is totally aligned with the movement's ideals of egalitarianism, meritocracy and ending the British legacy of aristocratic control. And when the shots "heard round the world" are fired at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, he is ready to put his personal fortune and life on the line.

Success and Injustice

Arnold immediately organizes the Connecticut Militia Company. Recognizing that the Boston area rebels need artillery and knowing from his trading travels that the British-held Fort Ticonderoga is lightly defended, he secures a commission to raid it. Implemented under a shared command with Ethan Allen (and his friend John Brown) of the Green Mountain Boys, the mission is victorious. But Allen's troops then



Benedict Arnold. Image: Connecticut Historical Society and Connecticut History Online.

proceed to plunder the surrounding area. An outraged Arnold puts a stop to their activities, inadvertently making bitter enemies of Allen and Brown.

Despite the personal differences, Arnold inventories 200 artillery pieces. He and his men drag the cannon a distance of 300 miles over a period of 56 days, ultimately pounding the British in Boston. His first expedition is a resounding success; it also presages two countervailing elements that will characterize Arnold's future: animosity and rank unfairness on the part of some of his colleagues, and his own unstoppable determination to win.

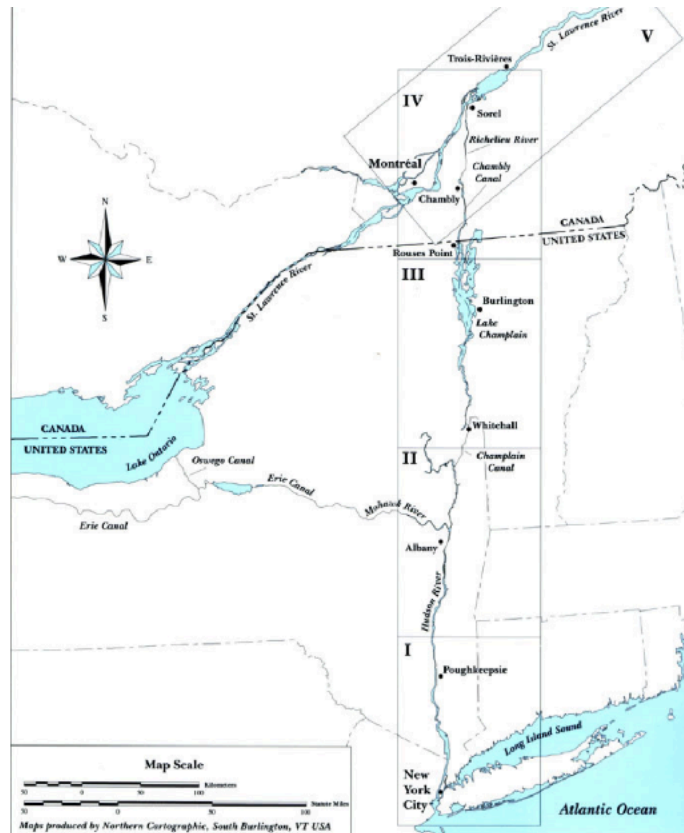
Arnold perceives that Lake Champlain, with its access to the Hudson River, is the strategic key to transporting men and materiel from Canada to New York and New York to Canada. There is no other route. Convinced the Americans must hold the lake at all costs, he gathers boats and supplies. Meanwhile, Allen and Brown are publicly challenging his authority over the Champlain area. They circulate derogatory remarks, scapegoat him for flaws in the operation, and use their influence with Congress to have him relieved of the command—Arnold's first taste of Revolutionary War injustice.

The American Hannibal

George Washington, on the other hand, thinks very highly of Arnold. So highly, he promotes him to colonel and puts him in charge of a daring and dangerous attempt to seize Quebec City, an essential British staging area.

In autumn of 1775, Arnold and his company navigate Maine's Kennebec River and confront the northern wilderness. They are beset by one hardship after another: their boats leak; the stores of heavy equipment cause the bottoms of their boats to grind against the river's rocks; they are without maps to guide them through the wilderness; not only are their provisions exhausted, an officer makes off with what food is left and a full detachment of men; they eat dogs, shoes, old boxes, clothes and even candles; frigid weather causes clothing to ice up like glass and many men freeze to death in the snow.

None of this daunts Arnold. He purchases cattle on the hoof; he takes great personal interest in his men. And his exemplary leadership keeps his troops from quitting as they cross the St. Lawrence River and come upon Quebec—a fortress city protected by a sheer wall.



Contemporary cruising guide showing Lake Champlain-Hudson River access to New York City. Image: landfallnavigation.com.

In what is somewhat of a bluff, they lay siege to the fortress, but the British refuse to show themselves. When another company under Colonel Richard Montgomery joins his, Arnold attacks. The windy, stormy weather is almost impenetrable and the Americans are vastly outnumbered. Montgomery's men cut and run. Arnold continues to fight. He takes a gunshot to the leg, but drives his men on. Despite his wound, he fights through the winter, an unheard of practice in the 18th century. While Arnold's requests to Congress for reinforcements go unanswered, additional British troops stream into the city. Arnold is finally forced to retreat, but his fierceness in battle becomes legendary. Even among the British, he is deemed the American Hannibal.

Another Relentless Fight

In the spring of 1776, British General Guy Carleton is readying his Army of Canada to launch an attack southward through Lake Champlain. Rebel General Horatio Gates is in charge of defending the Lake. Washington sends Benedict Arnold, who knows about sailing ships, to assist him.

With few resources, no boatbuilders and almost no experienced sailors, Arnold oversees the construction of ten vessels. He then lets it be known that he is headed for the British ship-building site at St. John. He is posturing; he doesn't have near the power of Carleton's more numerous and bigger ships and bigger guns. Nevertheless, per Arnold's plan and reputation, the British general is sufficiently threatened to send for a warship. As this must be dismantled, transported overland and then reassembled, any thought of an offensive action is delayed by 28 crucial days into fall.

Arnold knows his crews will be slaughtered in a head-to-head battle. So he frantically searches for a tactical advantage. He

lines his ships up across the narrow, rocky strait between Valcour Island and the New York shore, while the redcoats proceed south with the wind. When Carleton sees the American fleet, he is forced to engage them in the channel where his battleship and bigger gunboats cannot advance without risk of going aground on the rocks. Even so the six-hour battle is brutal and bloody. Arnold actually mans the cannon, inspiring his men with his visibility and valor. As darkness falls, Carleton halts the fighting, thinking he will blockade the American boats where they are and finish them off on the following day.

Arnold has other ideas. Having observed that the larger size of the British gunboats prevents them from hugging the shore, he lines his vessels up one behind the other just offshore and the men row silently, slipping away through the foggy night unseen. In the morning, a dismayed Carleton gathers his armada in pursuit. Over two days, the British vessels gain on the Americans. Arnold turns his own gunboat around and engages the enemy in order to give his own crews time to escape. In the end, the rebels run their surviving boats aground, set fire to them and manage to arrive safely on foot at Fort Ticonderoga.



Hidden behind Valcour Island, Arnold had to send out two gunboats to attract Carleton's attention. Adapted from YouTube.

A cautious Carleton decides to return to Canada, using approaching winter as his excuse. Against overwhelming odds, Arnold's sheer bravado and seamanship repel what would have been a searing British victory. And with the threat from the north now eliminated, more men and resources are available to Washington to cross the Delaware and fight the Battle of Trenton.



Arnold believes the best defense is a good offense and so advances his men to meet Burgoyne at Freeman's Farm. Image: Saratoga National Historical Park.

More Disillusioning Injustice

Washington assigns Arnold to command the New England area. General Gates expected the position and so views Arnold as a rival. Making common cause with John Brown, Gates and his new ally block Congress from promoting Arnold to major general, while five of his colleagues are elevated to that rank over him. Arnold is livid at what he sees as a perpetuation of the colonial "ole boy network" and arbitrary power...in an emerging country that was supposed to eschew such inequities. He resigns.

When the British attack the civilian population in Ridgefield, CT in April 1777, Washington, who has been pleading Arnold's cause with Congress, persuades him to return. Again Arnold fights with almost superhuman ferocity, leading just 200 men against a force of 2,000 and carrying the soldiers to victory. In the wake of such heroism, he is promoted to major general, but is still junior to those

promoted before him and Congress refuses to restore his seniority. He resigns again.

Then Come the Defining Battles of Saratoga...

First Battle of Saratoga: By late 1777, General John Burgoyne has assumed leadership of the Army of Canada and is advancing south to capture Albany.

Washington insists that Arnold return to the northern theater, first under General Phillip Schuyler, but later under his replacement, General Gates.

As Burgoyne advances down the valley west of the Hudson, Arnold aggressively plants what men he has on the high ground of Freeman's Farm and mounts an attack. Though he urges Gates to join with his troops to finish the enemy off, Gates refuses; he will only agree to send a small detachment and tells Arnold to stay back.

Without Arnold, the battle rages on devoid of leadership. Arnold returns to the fight. Gates sends an adjutant to order him back.

Regardless, the Americans stop the British in their tracks. They have suffered losses, but have managed to stalemate the opposing army.

Arnold is admired and celebrated by his men. Be that as it may, Gates sends his battle report to Congress without even mentioning Arnold and crediting himself for the outcome. What's more, he relieves Arnold of his command. The men sign a petition for him to stay, but Arnold refuses to serve under Gates.

Second Battle of Saratoga: Gates still declines to go on the offensive, frittering away two weeks during which Burgoyne has time to resupply. Finally the general decides to meet the advancing troops. Arnold has no command and is waiting at headquarters. When he receives news that the rebels are disorganized and losing ground, he disobeys orders, heads for the battlefield and rallies the men. Inspired by Arnold's demonic fury,

the men hurl themselves at the British line and break through. In face of the blazing Americans, the British flee.

The decisive Saratoga victory is the pinnacle of Arnold's military career...and a turning point in the Revolution. Not only do the British lose confidence at their shocking defeat. The amazed French finally give in to ambassador Benjamin Franklin's entreaties and sign a treaty of alliance. The Brits now must deal with a global conflict.

Arnold, however, doesn't fare so well. During the skirmish, he was hit, shattering his leg. So, while Arnold is lying in agony and threatening to shoot anyone who tries to amputate his limb, Gates, who did nothing, receives the surrendered sword from Burgoyne. Burgoyne himself credits Arnold publicly, but official praise goes to Gates.

Aftermath

Arnold's leg is saved, but he endures a long, painful recovery and a severe depression. Washington tries to reward him with an appointment as military governor of Philadelphia. To Arnold's chagrin, the city's population is profoundly divided; radical patriots have begun to arrest, confiscate the property of, and execute masses of civilians with loyalist sympathies. He eventually puts an end to the carnage, but the radicals petition Washington to court martial Arnold for some petty administrative infraction and threaten to withdraw the Pennsylvania militia from the war if he doesn't. Washington, Arnold's friend and supporter, is forced to issue a public reprimand of his most courageous officer. Arnold demobilizes and goes back to trading, but not without brooding and bitter thoughts.

He contemplates the corruption he has seen during the war effort. Others have been profiting from the hostilities, while he has sacrificed money, property and his blood and health. He spent a considerable amount of his own money to support his troops. He was supposed to be reimbursed, but Congress has returned very little. What's more, the war has devastated entire families. He has

pressed Congress to create a fund for fallen officers, but they have refused. So he contributes funds of his own.



Burgoyne surrenders his sword. In a magnanimous gesture, Gates returns it to him. Image: Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library.

Arnold feels Congress does not subscribe to the same ideals as he. They traffic in cronyism and favoritism, he believes. And he fears the country is headed toward the same aristocratic tyranny—arbitrary power, in other words—that he has repudiated his entire life. He no longer sees himself as part of the cause for which he has fought.

Arnold begins corresponding with a British officer. He then seeks and secures command of West Point, called “the key to the continent.” In September 1780, Arnold's correspondent is caught with papers detailing the American defenses at West Point, signed by Arnold. He flees. He is never caught or tried, but the American establishment demonizes him throughout the states, until even the youngest child associates the name Benedict Arnold with infamy. And yet, the circumstances are hardly black and white. Historians legitimately ask:

Did Arnold betray his country? Or, did his country betray him?

Additional source: Talon Films documentary “Benedict Arnold: Hero Betrayed,” available on Prime Video.

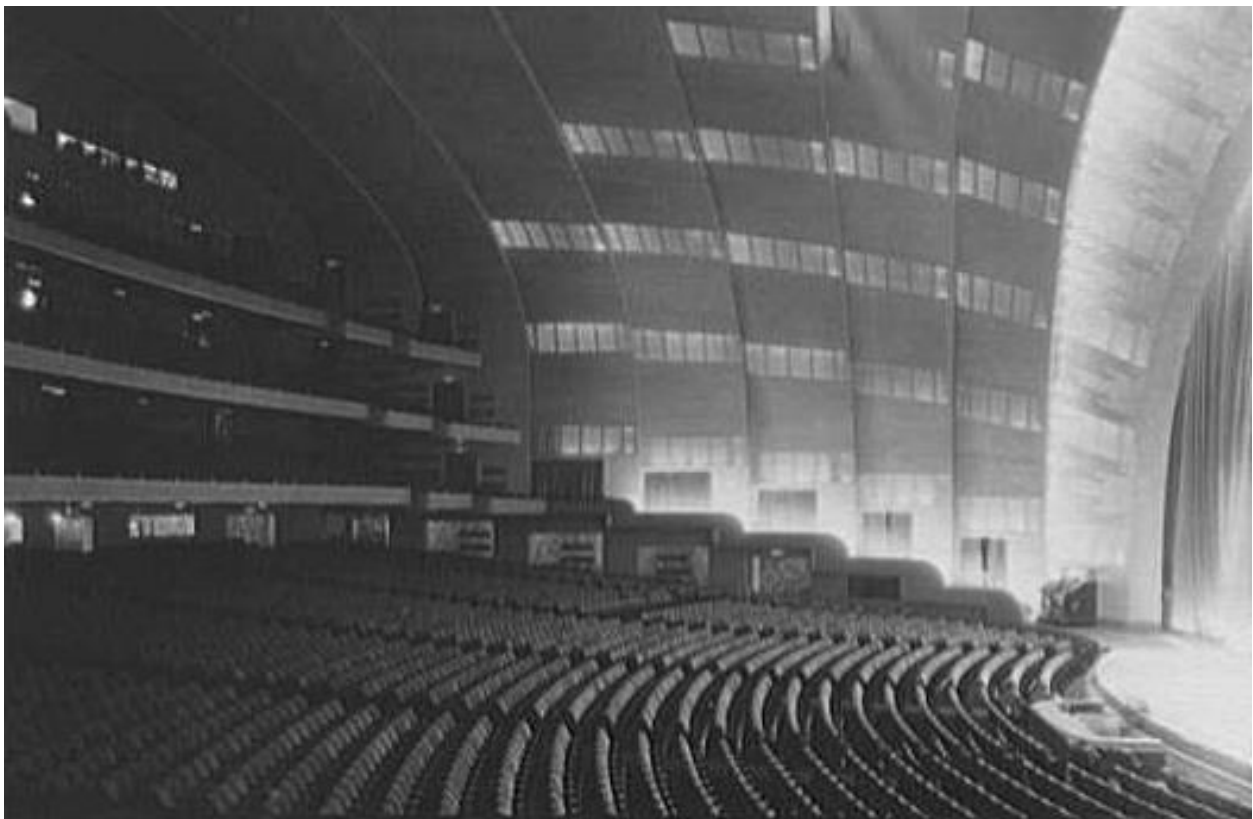
Backstage at Radio City Music Hall

Part 1

by Dean Irwin

Dean Irwin grew up backstage at Radio City. His pass? His father, Will Irwin, who was musical director of Radio City Music Hall in the 1960s and 70s. Before that, Will was musical director of more than 30 Broadway shows in the 1940s and traveled around the country on national tours in the '50s. When he was offered the job of Choral Director at the Music Hall, the decision made itself. For here was the rarest of things—a stationary, steady job in live theater.

It was steady because in those years the Music Hall never closed. It was the biggest indoor theater in the world, seating an audience of over 6,000, alternating a new stage show with a first-run movie premiere four times a day, seven days a week. For the weeks around Christmas and Easter, there were five shows a day to accommodate the huge crowds who waited in lines around the block. When the movie changed, the stage show changed with it. Everyone at the



theater hoped for a long movie run so they didn't have to rush into production for the next show. On [an] afternoon in 1960, my mom and I found the 51st street stage entrance and went up to the fifth floor where my dad had a small office with an upright piano and a desk. His job as Choral Director was to hire and rehearse the singers needed for each production, which varied, depending on how many voices were required. Sometimes he put together a choir of 16 men to sing Max Bruch's "Kol Nidrei" for the show that ran during the Jewish high holy days; sometimes

he needed a group to sing carols and double as wise men for the Christmas show. Leon Leonidoff, who had never lost his Romanian accent, turned to my dad at the dress rehearsal of a Christmas Show and asked "Vill, where did you find such stupid vise men?" He didn't like the way my dad's singers stumbled around the manger.

There were live animals during the Christmas show: a baby elephant, a camel, a horse and several sheep who stayed on stage level in the Animal Room, making the theater smell like the circus it actually was. Besides the Rockettes, there was a resident Corps de Ballet, vocal soloists, the 50-piece orchestra, and



guest acts that were booked for every show: jugglers, acrobats, magicians, professional whistlers, stand-up comics, bull-whip artists who could flick a cigarette from the lips of a glamorous assistant.

Behind the scenes, a phalanx of carpenters, prop men, electricians and hydraulics mechanics handled the sets, the fly floor, the lights, and the three massive elevators and turntable which made up the surface of the stage.

Interestingly, the elevator system was built by Otis Elevator in 1932 and used as the technology for U.S. aircraft carriers in World War II. During the war, there were government agents backstage to prevent espionage.

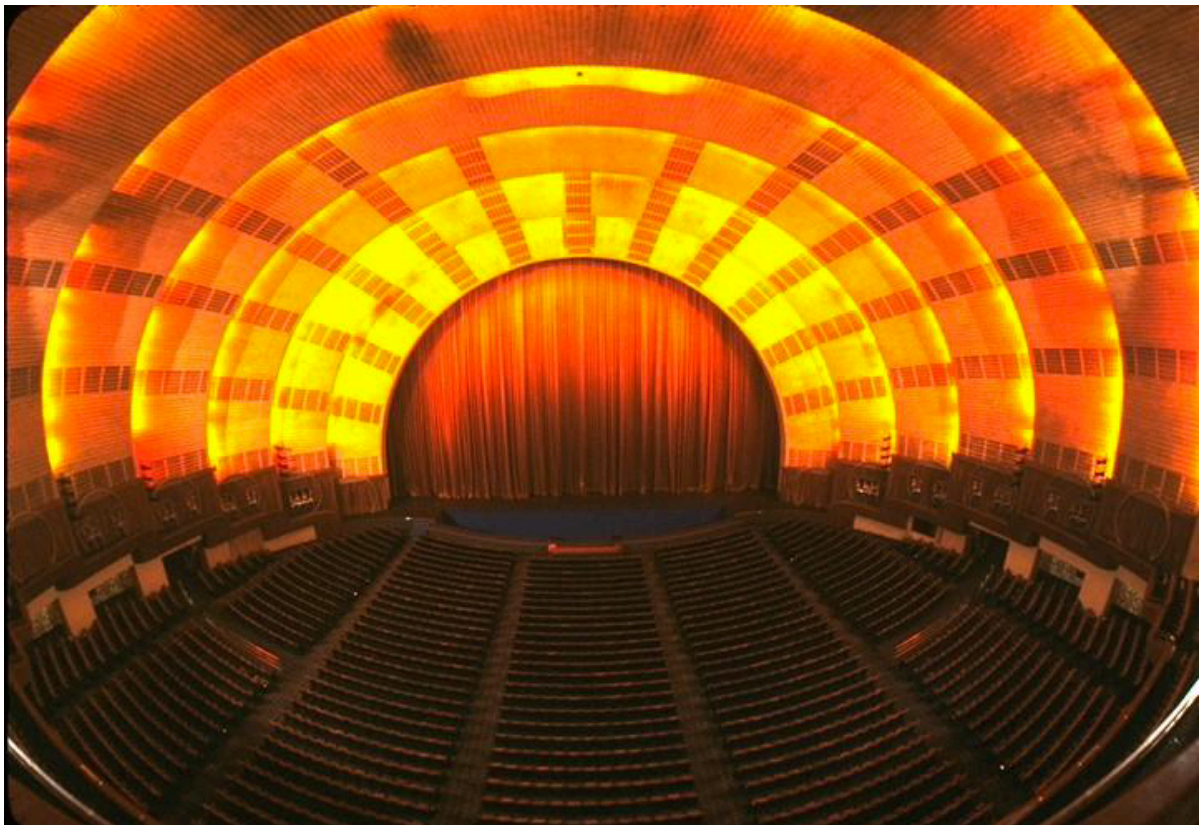
Between the stage shows and movie presentations was a twelve-minute intermission when audience members who'd already seen the show could leave, and new spectators could enter and take their seats. It was known as the Organ Break because when the houselights came up, one of the Music Hall's resident organists would pop out of an alcove on either side of the stage and play the massive pipe organ, the largest ever built by the Wurlitzer company. The organist's sudden appearance seemed like magic because the audience, distracted by the end of the movie, hadn't seen him slip unobtrusively behind the curtains housing the organ console on the side of the stage.

When the houselights came up, the organist would hit a switch, opening the alcove curtains and moving the entire console out towards the audience on a motorized track and into the spotlight. At the end of the break, he'd hit the switch and glide back into the alcove.

Ray Bohr, the assistant chief organist, told me that one day when he flipped the switch and started playing, the console kept moving out, straining against four huge chains which held the organ to the back of the wall, threatening to topple over into the first rows of the audience. Bucking back and forth on the organ, Ray yelled at the people in the front to get away from him before they were crushed. Stagehands disabled the switch and saved the day. Ray finished the break, and the show went on.

It was just one of many backstage stories, some funny, like the star of Bethlehem getting stuck on its overhead track at Christmas, and some fatal, like a performer falling to his death when part of the stage had been lowered sixty feet to load a set. It was a big place with a lot of moving parts.

As a kid, I was always fascinated by the pipe organ, whose parts were hidden all over the ceiling of the auditorium—Radio City's famous series of concentric rings, shaped like a sunset. From my dad's fifth floor office, I would wander down the hall to a big metal door, unlocked in those days, which led to shadowy catwalks inside the roof of the theater. There in the darkness I could glimpse the stage and the audience far below.



During the organ breaks, xylophones and bells a few feet from me would burst into life as the organist pulled the stops. The huge 32-foot bass pipes for the pedals made the whole building shake.

Since the theater never closed, there was a daily rhythm to the Music Hall, like a small village, starting around 10 in the morning when the doors would open, and ushers would seat people for the first showing of the movie.

The first stage show happened around noon and would run anywhere between 35 minutes to an hour, depending on the length of the film. The second show began around 2:30pm, the “dinner” show around 6pm, and the last show would start between 8 and 9 in the evening.

The fourth show was considered the most important of the day, with ticket prices slightly higher and performers warmed up and on their toes. The musical director wore a tuxedo instead of a dinner jacket for the fourth show and until the 1950’s, the chief stage manager also wore a tux backstage, even though the audience couldn’t see him.

Thanks to his Broadway experience, my dad soon became one of the assistant conductors. His boss was Raymond Paige, who’d made a name as a popular orchestra leader in the 1950’s. Red-haired and of Welsh extraction, Mr. Paige was a showman on the podium. With a sense of humor and a taste for drink between shows, he told my dad that one of the 1930’s mother-of-pearl buttons on the conductor’s stand could blow up the orchestra pit. My dad never tried it, but he quickly became the musical liaison between Raymond Paige and the hot-tempered producer, Leon Leonidoff, on the opening day of a new show.



Furious that tempos were wrong and corrections from dress rehearsal hadn’t been followed, Leon would search for Paige in his office and backstage. “Vill,” he would ask my dad in his ungrammatical way, “Did you see Paige? He is hiding from me. I know he is hiding.” My dad

would plead ignorance, then, back in his office, he'd get a phone call with a quiet voice on the other end.

"Will? Raymond Paige. Is your wife with you?" "No, Mr. Paige." "And your young son...he's not visiting?" "Why no, Mr. Paige." "Good. I'm in the second chair behind the blue mirror in the Men's lounge. Come get me and we'll step across the street to Schrafft's and have a cup of cheer." At the restaurant bar, my dad would go over the show notes. He was becoming part of the family, part of a self-contained entertainment complex.

**Look for Part 2 of this story in the May issue.
If you wish to read the article in its entirety, click the link below.**



[Dean Irwin_Backstage at Radio City Music Hall.pdf](#)
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A Historical Glimpse of the St. Patrick's Day Parade

March is coming, and with it that irrepressible tradition, the St. Patrick's Day Parade. Where did it originate? Not in Ireland, as it turns out.

It's true that Ireland has been celebrating the day since at least the 1600s. But the first parade took place in this country... before it was even a country. The Vicar Ricardo Artur of the Spanish colony in St. Augustine, Florida is credited with organizing the march in the year 1601. Yes, he was an Irishman. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether he continued the march as an annual tradition. We do know that it pops up in historical records in the following century, although sources differ as to the exact date.

One narrative claims that homesick Irish soldiers serving in the British military paraded in Boston and New York in 1737. Another names the same homesick soldiers, but puts the date at 1762. Either way, it represented a kind of rebellion against the British, who had outlawed the wearing of the green in Ireland.

Here the soldiers delighted in the freedom to wear green, speak Irish, play Irish tunes on the pipes and sing Irish songs.

The early processions were organized by the military and marched past the old St. Patrick's Cathedral at Prince and Mott Streets in what is now Soho. Sponsorship changed in the 19th century, assumed first by a number of Irish fraternal and beneficial societies, and later by the Ancient Order of Hibernians, which merged the efforts of the individual societies. In modern times, both the sponsorship and the route have evolved: the parade is now run by a special, dedicated corporation and proceeds up Fifth Avenue past the contemporary St. Patrick's Cathedral between 50th and 51st Streets.

In 2020 and 2021 the parade was canceled for the first time in decades due to Covid. Happily it is back and, this year, is expected to attract over 200,000 marchers plus a couple of million onlookers lining the streets.



The 1895 St. Patrick's Day Parade features men only. Image: Museum of the City of New York/Byron Collection.