Revolution in Richmond: Part I

By Bert Dunkerly

Richmond Virginia was a village of 300 homes during the Revolution. Its residents were concentrated in the modern neighborhoods of Shockoe Bottom and Church Hill. Most of its few houses lined Main Street, with warehouses and workshops along the waterfront where the James River is very shallow.

Although best known for its Civil War history, Richmond has many important sites related to the Revolution that are overshadowed by that later conflict. Foremost among them is St. John's Church, where Patrick Henry gave his "Liberty or Death" speech in 1775.
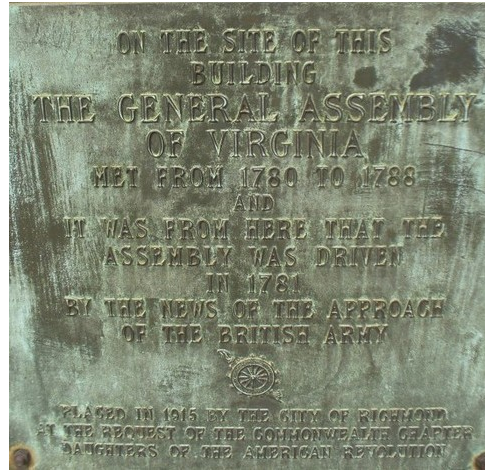
Virginia's first public reading of the Declaration of Independence occurred in front of the Henrico County Courthouse on Main Street. A newspaper reported:

"On Monday last, being Court Day, the Declaration of Independence was publicly proclaimed to the town of Richmond, before a large concourse of respectable concourse of freeholders of Henrico County, and upwards of 200 militia, assembled on that great occasion. It was received with the universal shouts of joy, and re-echoed by three volleys of small arms. The same evening the town was illuminated, and the members of the committee held a club, where many patriotic toasts were drunk. Although there were near 1,000 people present, the whole was conducted with the utmost decorum, and the satisfaction visible on every countenance officially evidences their determination to support with their lives and fortunes."

Feeling that the state Capital at Williamsburg was too close to the coast, the Capital was moved to Richmond in 1780, and the first session of the General Assembly within the city convened in May at a tobacco warehouse confiscated from a Loyalist. The site was a nondescript building at the corner of 14th and Main Streets, today occupied by the First Freedom Center. This museum highlights the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, adopted on the site in 1788. The state government would meet here until the new Capitol building on Shockoe Hill was completed after the war.
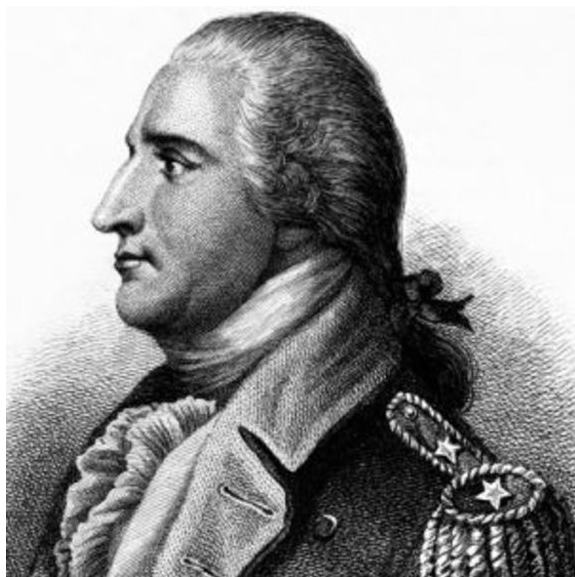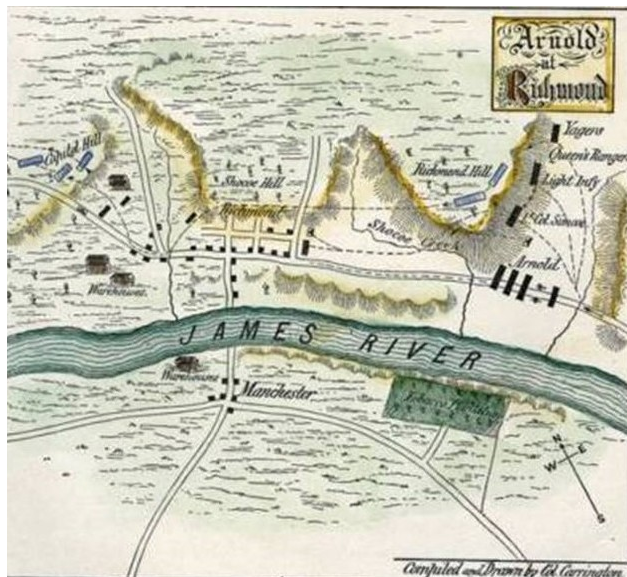

St. John's Church

Marker at the site of the first Virginia General Assembly in Richmond

Not only was Richmond a center of trade and commerce, local government, eventually state government, but it was also the site of a skirmish. In January 1781, newly minted British General Benedict Arnold landed in Portsmouth, on the coast. He launched a raid up the James, landing about twelve miles from the city on January 4th.

The rapid arrival of the British set the town into a panic. Roughly 200 local militia commanded by Major Alexander Dick hastily gathered to defend the new capital.

Benedict Arnold

Map of Arnold's raid in Richmond

For the last few years, several groups have partnered to tell this story and restore Richmond's Revolutionary history. We will learn more about that history in Part II next week.