

He Foiled Benedict Arnold. His Medal Is Now Out From Under the Bed.

After 200 years as a family heirloom, a military decoration awarded to Isaac Van Wart, who helped capture a British spy and save West Point, has been given to New York State.



By Christopher Kuo

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The American militia men were hidden in the bushes having lunch and playing cards when they heard the horse galloping toward them. Springing from their lookout post near Tarrytown, N.Y., they confronted a stranger who was seemingly in a great hurry.

He was Maj. John André, head of British secret intelligence. But on this day, Sept. 23, 1780, he was disguised as a civilian, “John Anderson.”

Stuffed in André’s boot were papers that laid out how to successfully take the American fort at West Point. He had only received the information two days earlier from Benedict Arnold, the commander of the fort, and André now was riding south in the hope of getting back behind the British lines.

But the militia men, John Paulding, David Williams and Isaac Van Wart, questioned André, realized he was a spy and arrested him. West Point was never attacked, André was later hanged and Arnold, whose name became synonymous with treason, fled.

Paulding, Williams, and Van Wart were recognized by the Continental Congress with hand-wrought, silver military medals, now considered to be the first ever awarded to American soldiers. Two of the three were stolen from the New-York Historical Society in 1975. But the third, held by the Van Wart family for more than two centuries, has now been given to the New York State Museum in Albany, where it will go on display this fall.

“As the only one of the three out there, it’s such a unique medal,” said Sara Mascia, the executive director of The Historical Society of Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown. “It’s invaluable. I don’t think you could put a number on it.”

After Van Wart died in 1828, the medal was passed down in his family until it reached Rae Faith Van Wart Robinson, a descendant living in White Plains. It became her prized possession, and until she died in 2020, she kept it in a shoe box under her bed, taking it out occasionally to display at events hosted by the historical society.





The medal awarded the three militiamen in 1780 was made of silver. On one side it carried the Latin words “Vincit Amor Patriae,” or “Love of Country Conquers.” New York State Museum, Gift of the Estate of Rae Faith Van Wart Robinson



Two of the medals were given to the New-York Historical Society, from which they were stolen in 1975. New York State Museum, Gift of the Estate of Rae Faith Van Wart Robinson

“It was the one thing she cared about,” said Henry Neale, the lawyer representing the executor of her estate.

Mascia said Robinson, who did not marry and had no siblings or children, found the account of her distant relative’s pivotal role in American history stirring. “She would say, ‘I’m so proud of my ancestor,’” Mascia said.

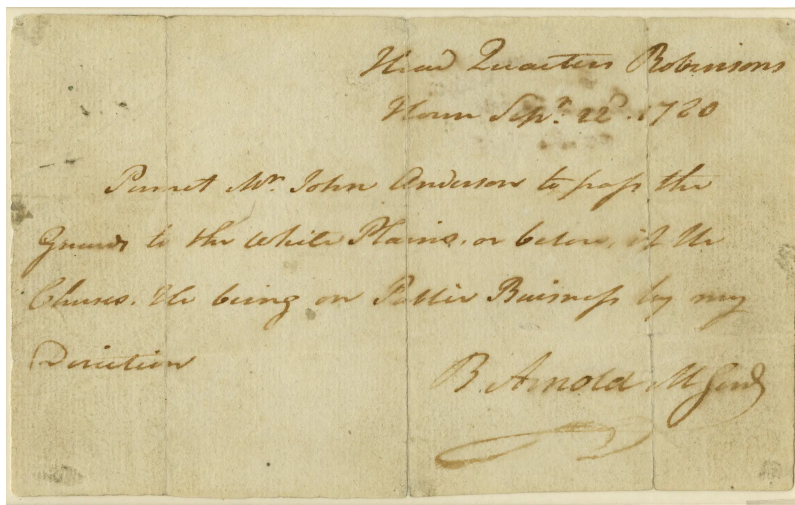
Neale donated the medal to the New York State Museum in February, based on Robinson’s wishes that it be given to a museum where it could be seen by the world.

"I love it because it's a story of three regular guys that happen to be major players in national and international events," said Jennifer Lemak, chief curator for the New York State Museum.

When André was captured, the outlook was not promising for the American side. The British were ensconced in New York City. The Continental Army had largely run out of money and supplies, and the fortress at West Point was one of the remaining barriers to a British advance. If the British could secure West Point, they could simultaneously connect to their troops from Canada and sever the American forces by splitting New England from the rest of the colonies.

"If Washington and the American patriots had lost West Point, we would have lost our independence," said Cole Jones, associate professor of history at Purdue University.

Van Wart and his two companions were young farmers in their twenties who lived in a region battered by the war. Sandwiched between Washington's forces in the Hudson Highlands and the British army in Manhattan, Van Wart and his neighbors lived in no man's land, where bands of loyalists called "Cowboys" waged guerrilla warfare against bands of colonists called "Skinners." Both parties ravaged the Tarrytown residents, scorching their farms and plundering their fields.

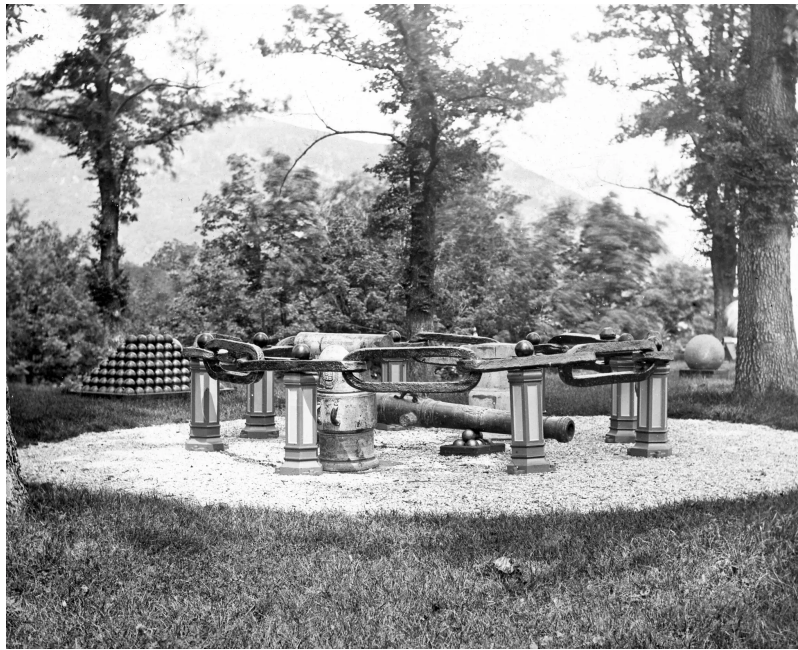


To help the British take West Point, Benedict Arnold, the fort's commander, gave British Maj. John André detailed notes on its fortifications and this written permission to allow him passage through the American lines. New York State Archives

To guard the roads and protect their families, the residents had assembled their own militia, which is why Van Wart, Paulding and Williams were in the bushes near the Albany Post Road when André came by.

The handwritten papers he was carrying exposed West Point's operations and vulnerabilities. Detailed notes outlined the position of artillery, described the size of the American forces and depicted the nature of the fortifications a British army laying siege would face. Arnold had sneaked away from his post to deliver the papers to André at a clandestine meeting in the town of Haverstraw.

But André's ship, which had been parked in the Hudson, sailed away to avoid American artillery and the spy found himself stranded, forced to escape, if he could, by land.



During the Revolution, a massive iron chain was stretched across the Hudson at West Point to prevent British war ships from passing up the river. Links from the chain remain on the West Point campus. New York State Archives

Van Wart and his two companions might not have uncovered André's true identity if it had not been for Paulding's coat — the green, red-trimmed coat of a Hessian mercenary that Paulding had acquired while imprisoned by the British. Seeing the coat, André mistook the men for allies and asked if they belonged to the "lower party," meaning the British. This immediately raised the men's suspicions, which led to further questioning and ultimately the search that led to the papers in the boot. André tried to bribe the men, but failed and they handed him over to American forces.

"These three men, in capturing André and saving West Point, saved the Revolution," Jones said. "There's no doubt in my mind that their heroism on that day prevented the British from seizing arguably the most strategic position in all of North America."

News of André's capture traveled to Washington and to Arnold, who managed to escape to the British camp. The three men met with Washington and each received his medal, as well as a plot of land and a lifetime annual pension of \$200, a princely sum at the time. (U.S. officials view the Purple Heart, of which a precursor was created in 1782, as the nation's oldest military medal because, unlike the decoration received by the militia men, it is still being awarded.)

During his imprisonment, André captivated many of the upper-class American officers, including Alexander Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette. A genteel poet and amateur sketcher who was fluent in three languages, he could wield both the pen and the sword. Unlike Van Wart, an illiterate farmer, André struck some as the embodiment of the gentlemanly ideals embraced by so many upper-class American officers.

"He became 'Poor André,' the man that American officers wanted to emulate and be like," said Robert Cray, a historian at Montclair State University in New Jersey.



André drew this self portrait on the day before he was hanged. New York State Archives

The response to the capture of André soon fractured along class lines. André was “memorialized as the sentimental spy, the honorable adversary of genteel parts regrettably executed as a necessity of war,” while the three farmers were largely ignored, Cray wrote in a journal article titled “Major John André and the Three Captors: Class Dynamics and Revolutionary Memory Wars in the Early Republic, 1780 — 1831.”

A 1798 play called “André” didn’t even include the three captors as cast characters. Paintings portrayed him as the central figure, and the other men as peripheral. His grave in Tappan, N.Y., became a tourist attraction and one woman even planted a peach tree there.

“Washington’s officers wrote letters that valorized André, which raced through the press,” said Sarah Knott, a historian who teaches at Indiana University. “But the ordinary men who apprehended André and brought him to American justice were largely overlooked.”

In 1817 when Paulding petitioned Congress for a larger pension, a member of Congress accused the three men of being loyalist Cowboys rather than patriots, a charge that was later discredited.



The Captor's Monument in a park on the border between Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow commemorates the capture of André. Douglas Healey for The New York Times

It wasn't until well into the 19th century, when the American public became more comfortable with the idea of celebrating ordinary heroes, that these men began receiving more praise and attention.

Van Wart ultimately sold his land to buy a farm and became a respected chorister in a local Presbyterian church. He died on May 23, 1828. Today, in Elmsford, a marble obelisk marks his grave and is inscribed with a lengthy phrase:

"Nearly half a century before this monument was built, the conscript fathers of America had in the Senate chamber voted that Isaac Van Wart was a faithful patriot, one in whom the love of country was invincible, and this tomb bears testimony that the record is true."

His medal has only one prominent word on the front — Fidelity — and three featured words on the back. But they are enough.

Vincit Amor Patriae.

(Love of Country Conquers.)

Christopher Kuo is a culture reporter for The Times and a member of the 2023-24 Times Fellowship class. More about Christopher Kuo

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