

A Medical History of John Paul Jones

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This is the ninth in a series of vignettes based on "Troubled Waters," a manuscript of the late Benjamin S. Abeshouse, M.D., a practicing urologist whose lifetime avocation was the collection of historical data dealing with the influence of genitourinary disease in the lives of famous men and women.

Benjamin Samuel Abeshouse was born on February 7, 1901, in New Haven, Connecticut. He attended Yale University, receiving a Ph.B. in 1921 and an M.D. in 1924. Doctor Abeshouse trained at the Sinai Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, where he was Chief of Urology at the time of his death on November 7, 1961. He was a member of the American Medical Association, Baltimore City and Maryland State Medical Societies, a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, Fellow of the International College of Surgeons, and a Diplomate of the American Board of Urology.

A noted contributor to the genitourinary literature, Dr. Abeshouse was author of more than one hundred and twenty articles. He possessed the world's largest collection of epitaphs at the time of his death. This collection now resides with the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.

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A Medical History of John Paul Jones

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Dr. K

Dr. J. Anderson

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Probably not one American in a hundred would recognize the name of John Paul as belonging to a hero of the Revolution. But add "Jones" to the name, as its owner did, and there may come to mind one of the most famous sea battles in history and a ringing cry of defiance, "I have not yet begun to fight!"

John Paul Jones was at various times a slave ship captain, quondam actor, Caribbean adventurer, job-seeking hero, nemesis of the British, darling of the French. His road to legend was marked by macabre incidents such as a lost interment, a lead coffin filled with alcohol, and, of particular interest to physicians, an autopsy which clarified his medical history more than a hundred years after his death.

BOY AT SEA ⚓ John Paul was born on July 7, 1747, at Arbigland in western Scotland, son of a gardener on the estate of the Laird of Kirkcudbright. He received a meagre education in the parish school and a more practical one at the seashore. At the age of 12 he was apprenticed to a shipowner and made his first voyage to what was to be his adopted land. In six years he worked himself up to a position as chief mate on a Jamaica-Guinea brigantine in the slave trade. Malignant fevers were endemic in this miserable traffic. Young Paul suffered a succession of "very severe fevers," probably malarial, which dogged him for years and, in light of his later history, did insidious damage to his kidneys and general health.

Disenchanted with the slave trade, Paul took up with a touring troupe of actors in Jamaica until he tired of island hopping and the debilitations of tropical heat. He took a berth as seaman on a ship bound for England. The vessel was only a few days at sea when the captain and mate

died of fever. John Paul took command and brought the ship to port. The grateful owner made him master forthwith and he made several voyages to Tobago for his employer. On one of these a rebellious ship's carpenter was so insolent that the young captain laid a cat-o'-nine-tails on his back. Soon afterward the man died on another ship, actually of fever, though there were mutterings that the flogging had killed him. The incident weighed heavily on Paul's mind.

STRANGE INTERLUDE ⚓ In his prime, John Paul had black hair and eyebrows, brilliantly dark eyes, a strong slender body of medium height, and a wild Highland look. He was well mannered but somewhat withdrawn, aloof, even arrogant, in the eyes of underlings whom he kept at a distance. He was a disciplinarian who ran a tight ship without respect to Dale Carnegie.

These qualities were put to tragic test in a ship which he owned and commanded. He put



all his funds into purchase of a cargo at Tobago, expecting to pay off the crew with the proceeds when the ship returned home. The crew, sensing opportunities for riotous expenditure in Tobago, had different expectations, and mutinied. One mutineer was run through by the captain's sword. The circumstances are clouded; one story is that the man impaled himself. But there was no court in Tobago to try the issue, and Paul faced long imprisonment pending the sitting of admiralty officials. He fled.

There followed a strange interlude which tantalizes historians to this day. Paul vanished from history for two years. Rumors hint that he escaped on a pirate ship, but nothing is really known of these lost pages of his life. When he reappeared in 1774, living on his brother William's estate in Fredericksburg, Virginia, he had added the name "Jones." His reasons can only be guessed at, but the Tobago incident and the two years wiped from his record suggest reasonable motivations.

Through Joseph Hewes, a Virginia neighbor who was a member of the Congressional Marine Committee which was attempting to assemble a navy, Jones received a commission in 1774. He commanded a small frigate, the *Alfred*, raised the flag of the colonies for the first time on a fighting ship, and led a successful raid on a town in the Bahamas.

NAVAL COMMANDER  Two months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence Jones began to cruise the Atlantic coast, convoying Continental vessels and harrying British shipping. He captured several enemy ships and destroyed others, but fared so poorly with bickering, bumbling, jealous officials that he wound up with a humiliatingly low place on the list of naval commanders.

After months of frustrating inactivity he was given command of the *Ranger* and charged with carrying the news of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga to the French. The Atlantic crossing

was the first made by a Yankee man-o'-war. In hospitable Paris, Jones became a close friend of Benjamin Franklin who represented the colonies. At Franklin's suggestion, Jones took the *Ranger* to sea in 1778 with a free hand to harry shipping along the English coast.

Near Belfast he encountered and attacked a heavily armed British sloop, the *Drake*. After an hour's fighting the *Drake* surrendered and Jones took the ship back to France as a prize. The French, ecstatic over blows struck at perfidious Albion by somebody else, feted him magnificently. But he was soon idle again and compelled to pay his men out of his own pocket.

Early in 1779 an old tub was obtained, largely through Franklin's efforts, for refitting as a fighting ship. During the spring while the vessel was being outfitted Jones was stricken with a prostrating fever, probably a recurrence of malaria. He was now in his early thirties and beginning to show signs of chronic pulmonary trouble—cough, bronchitis, asthma. But he recovered

from acute fever and in June the ship which was to inspire a thousand paintings was ready for action.

In tribute to Franklin, Jones named the ship for Poor Richard, but in Gallicized form pleasing to French hosts: *Bonhomme Richard*.

VICTORY BY MOONLIGHT & Politics, procrastinating bureaucrats and jealous subordinates kept Jones land-bound until August. It was an odd squadron which finally put to sea—the *Bonhomme Richard*, an American frigate, the *Alliance*, and several privateers and small French ships. The smaller ships soon deserted, the captain of the *Alliance* was insubordinate, and only a few small prizes were taken. But on the return to France a fleet of several dozen English merchantmen was encountered, escorted by a formidable warship, the *Serapis*.

The battle was joined at sunset, without aid from the *Alliance*, which deserted. Jones sailed in close to lessen the disadvantage of his



unwieldy and lesser-armed craft. The crash and flare of cannon went on for hours. The decks of the *Bonhomme Richard* were riddled, her hull pierced and planking shattered. Scattered fires broke out and she was slowly sinking—a propitious moment for the British commander to call for surrender. John Paul Jones's reply thunders in American legend: "Sir, I have not yet begun to fight!"

Fight he did in the bright moonlight until the battle ended after three and a half hours. Somehow, Jones managed to lash his ship to the *Serapis*. His crew swarmed over, subdued the enemy, and watched the *Bonhomme Richard* sink the next morning. The triumphant commander guided the *Serapis* and his prisoners to France.

For John Paul Jones it was the last battle of the war.

Louis XVI presented the hero with a gold sword and made him a chevalier. He was given a purse of \$50,000 by his intimate friend, the

Duchess of Chartres. French officials showered him with letters of the highest recommendation. But nobody offered him a ship.

UNEMPLOYED HERO  After a year in Paris Jones returned home to meet with frustrations. He was little known in the colonies, fellow officers were unappreciative, Congress uncooperative. He spent an abortive summer cruising the Caribbean and was prostrated by marsh fevers at Porto Cabello. At the war's end he was 36 years old, a tired man, sicker than he knew. The only therapy he received was "cold bath treatments" at a Moravian sanitorium in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

For a time he went into the whale-oil trade. Late in 1783 he was sent to Paris to adjudicate claims for prizes captured under his command. An affair with a Mme. Tollison ended sadly when the aristocratic lady disappeared in the shambles of the Reign of Terror. A journey to Copenhagen in 1787, in the interests of Amer-



ican ships holed up in the then Danish port of Bergen, was so rigorous that he was forced to bed for days.

His physique was weakening and respiratory troubles mounted. But he thought himself fit for duty at sea. He was born to command and it happened that an influential woman was in position to offer him an appropriate job. She was Catherine the Great who had an opening for an Admiral in the Russian Navy.

Ice blockades prevented direct passage and Jones set out for Russia via a dangerous detour to Estonia in an open 30-foot boat manned by a few frightened sailors. Winds, waves and ice battered the boat unmercifully but the crew made a safe landing at Revel after several days. The shock to Jones's weakened constitution was so great that when he reached St. Petersburg in April, 1788, a severe "cold," perhaps pneumonia, kept him in bed for days. When he was received by the Russian Assembly he coughed so incessantly that he could not speak.

A thousand-mile journey over bleak Russian steppes to a military outpost made further inroads on his health. But in a campaign in the Black Sea he acquitted himself as a naval hero should, winning an astonishing victory over the Turks—for which envious Muscovites usurped credit. Three days in an open galley put Jones to bed for two weeks with bronchopneumonia.

Enemies spread scandalous charges that he had assaulted a young girl. Surrounded by intrigue which he had no talent to cope with, Jones asked for leave of absence and returned to Paris.

LAST DAYS OF AN ADMIRAL  In the spring of 1790 Jones was settled comfortably in a pleasant little house near the Luxembourg gardens. Day after day he called on Gouverneur Morris, the American minister, who came to regard the man as a nuisance. Lives of heroes all remind us how brief is glory.

At 43 years of age Jones was prematurely old, gray-haired, shrunken. Thomas Carlyle de-

scribed him: "In faded naval uniform, Paul Jones lingers visible here, like a wine-skin from which the wine is drawn. Like the ghost of himself." As the months wore on, signs of kidney damage wrought by repeated malarial and pulmonary infections became ominous. Nephritis was undoubtedly well advanced.

As spring merged into summer in 1792, Jones developed jaundice, which was soon followed by extensive edema of the legs and abdomen, signs of severe cardiac and renal insufficiency. An American colonel and a former aide-de-camp of Lafayette visited Jones daily, but he had scant medical attendance.

On July 18 Jones realized that he was dying. He summoned Gouverneur Morris who prepared a will and departed for a dinner engagement. But Morris was concerned about his eminent countryman, and he returned three hours later accompanied by his mistress, Mme. de Flahout, and Vicq-d'Azyr, Marie Antoinette's physician.



Jones was dead, still warm, his face on his bed, feet on the floor. He had died standing.

The French Assembly passed a resolution of honor. Morris gave instructions for a private funeral at the least possible expense. This so shocked a French friend of Jones that he paid the costs of interment himself—462 francs.

DISINTERMENT  The body was put in alcohol inside a lead coffin, “in case the United States should claim his remains, they might more easily be removed.” Jones was buried in the little-known Protestant cemetery of St. Louis, and there the coffin remained for 113 years while tides of change obliterated landmarks. Meanwhile, Jones’s posthumous fame increased and he became recognized as the father of American naval tradition, whose final resting place should be the United States. But the forgotten grave could not be located.

Ultimately it was the American ambassador to France, General Horace Porter, who in

1905 located the burial place by painstaking examination of old city maps, records and documents. Five shafts were sunk in the area, with galleries in all directions. Using long metal rods as probes, five lead coffins were located. One was manifestly superior in workmanship. This coffin was opened. It contained a remarkably well-preserved male body, the flesh intact, packed in straw, and the odor indicated that it had been preserved in alcohol.

Was it Jones? The features corresponded to a bust of Jones done by Houdon. The body was clad in a winding sheet and linen shirt. It was known that Jones had not been buried in uniform and that his medals and honors had not been buried with him because it was intended to auction them off. The hair was gathered into a cap with a monogram, a "J" with a loop which formed a "P" when inverted. Two anthropologists compared known measurements and characteristics of Jones with those of the corpse—stature, hair color, peculiar formation of ear

lobes, condition of the teeth. Every fact and physical measurement corresponded to known facts about Jones. There was no doubt that the body was that of the Admiral.

If there had been the slightest doubt, it was dispelled by findings at autopsy performed a few hours after the coffin was opened.

AUTOPSY  The autopsy was performed by Dr. J. Capitan of the School of Anthropology in Paris on April 13, 1905. Entry was made from the back in order not to alter the appearance of the corpse. The most significant findings concerned the lungs and kidneys. Organs impregnated with an alcohol liquid were so well preserved that a Prof. Cornil was able to make histological sections substantially identical with those from a recently demised patient.

The lungs presented some adhesions to the pleural walls and numbers of white hard masses which "had the appearance of calcified tubercles." However, no evidence of tuberculo-

sis could be found; the granulations, under the microscope, had the appearance of fine needles of tyrosin, product of the decomposition of azotized substances. There were small rounded masses which corresponded to small patches of bronchopneumonia partially cicatrized.

The kidneys presented the appearance of advanced interstitial nephritis. Both kidneys were small, hard and contracted. Microscopic examination showed lesions characteristic of advanced interstitial nephritis. The vessels at several points had their walls thickened and invaded by sclerosis. A number of glomeruli were completely transformed into fibrous tissue and appeared in the form of small spheres.

The heart was grossly normal; some streaks of muscle fiber were clearly visible. The liver also seemed normal and did not show cellular lesions consistent with known symptoms of jaundice. But critical histological evidence was remarkably in accord with clinical symptoms exhibited by Jones at the end of his life—pul-

monary disease and edema descending to the feet and ascending to the abdomen, indicating a renal affection. Death was attributed to chronic pyelonephritis and bronchopneumonia. The latter, in a jaundiced patient with chronic nephritis, was probably the event that finished him off.

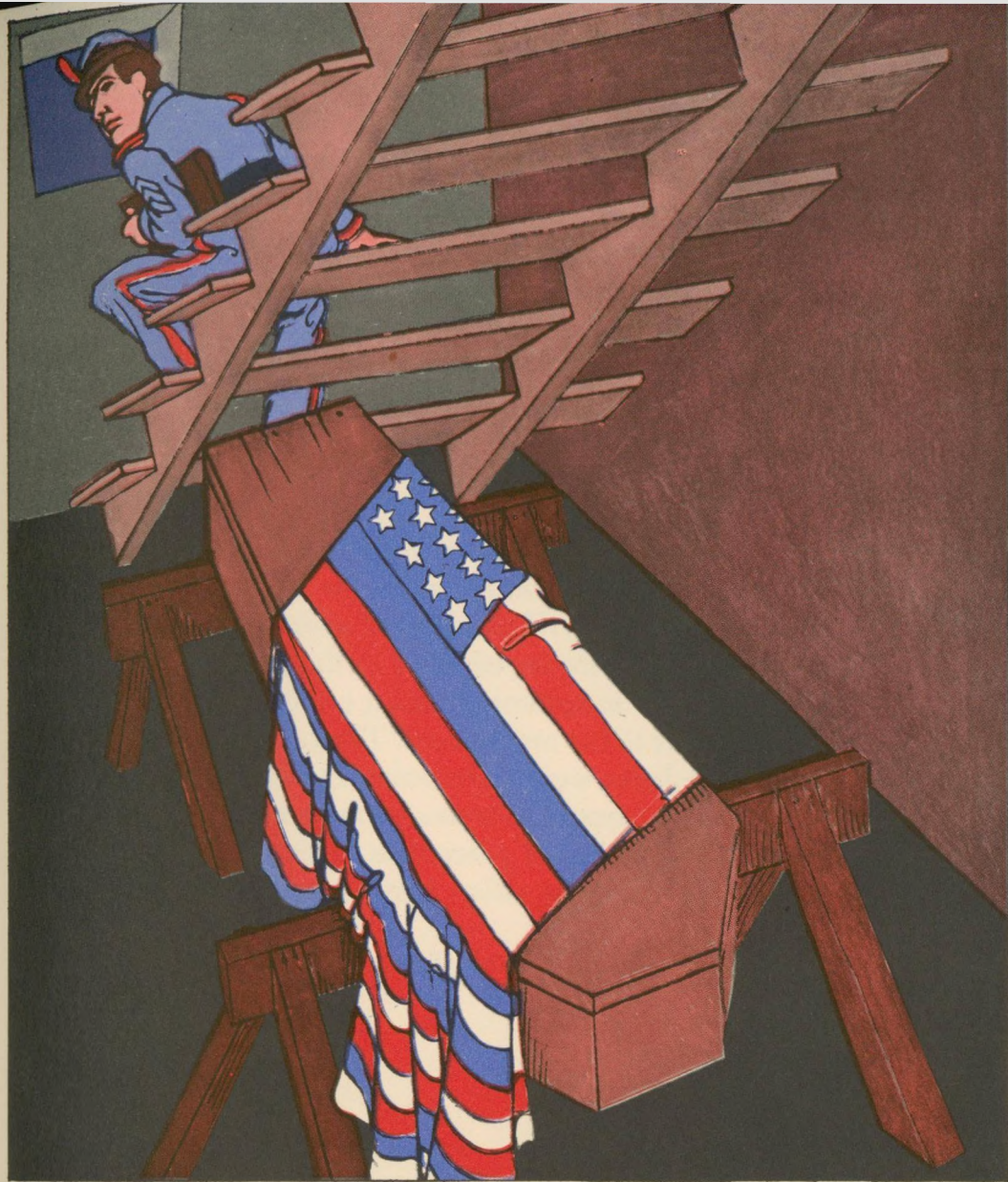
Chronic nephritis is insidious in onset and its inception difficult to determine with exactness even today. It is plausible that the fevers which began in Jones's young manhood and plagued him intermittently for years left irreversible scars upon his kidneys, and that repeated respiratory illnesses of his later years put great burdens upon a weakened constitution whose proprietor never pampered it.

The autopsy was undertaken to confirm, if possible, that the body was indeed that of Jones, and it fulfilled that purpose admirably by furnishing histological evidence that lesions corresponded with the documented clinical history of the subject. The autopsy also showed, although the circumstances were most unusual, that appli-

cation of modern techniques could elucidate the course of disease more than a century after the death of the subject.

HOMECOMING  The lead coffin was enclosed in a handsome mahogany coffin and taken to the United States aboard the cruiser *U. S. S. Brooklyn*. The final destination was the Naval Academy at Annapolis. Here, in Bancroft Hall, commemorative ceremonies for the nation's foremost naval hero were held on April 24, 1906.

The Postscript was ironic. The dead Admiral was once again subjected to the sort of Congressional whim and procrastination that had caused him so much frustration during his life. For seven years his coffin rested ignominiously on two wooden sawhorses behind a stairway while Congress leisurely debated the matter of appropriations for a suitable crypt. Midshipmen, irreverent as the mutineers John Paul Jones had known in Caribbean days, composed a



parody set to the tune of "Everybody Works But
Father," a popular song of the day:

Everybody works but John Paul Jones!

He lies around all day,

Body pickled in alcohol,

On a permanent jag, they say.

Middies stand around him,

Doing honor to his bones;

Everybody works in "Crabtown"

But John Paul Jones!

In time, handsome amends were made. A beautiful crypt was completed in the chapel of the Naval Academy. The names of several of his ships which had immortal roles in the struggle of the colonies to become a nation are inscribed in the marble of the mausoleum. The remains of John Paul Jones were ceremoniously and reverently removed from sawhorses to mausoleum on January 26, 1913, 121 years after his death.

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