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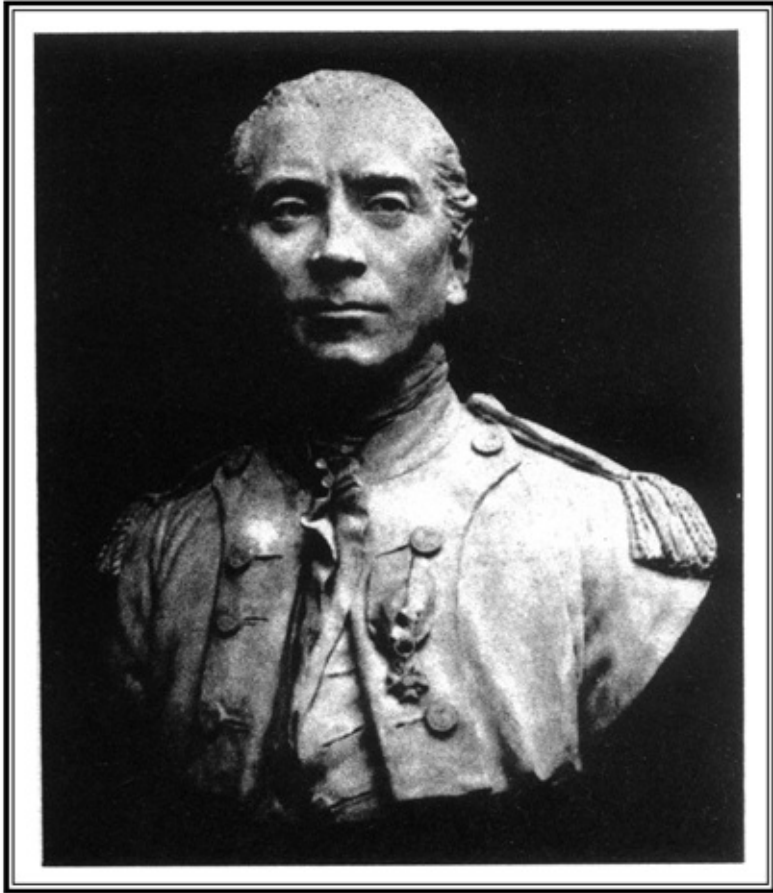
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# **John Paul Jones**

SAILOR, HERO, FATHER OF THE AMERICAN NAVY

EVAN THOMAS

*SIMON & SCHUSTER*

*New York London Toronto Sydney*



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*To my mother Anne D. R. Thomas*



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“Every officer in our navy should know by heart the deeds of John Paul Jones.”

—PRESIDENT THEODORE ROOSEVELT April 24, 1900

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*John Paul Jones*

# “My Desire for Fame Is Infinite”

JOHN PAUL JONES, the captain of the Continental Navy ship *Bonhomme Richard*, first sighted the Brittanic Majesty's Ship *Serapis* at 3 P.M. on September 23, 1779. The *Serapis* was about ten miles away. The wind was light, a gentle southwest breeze, and in the rush of the tide off of Flamborough Head on England's east coast, the two ships crept toward each other. No captain of an American navy ship had ever defeated and captured a British man-of-war of any real size or strength. Jones ached to be the first. He had about four hours to contemplate his chances for immortality.

At 5 P.M., drummers marched the deck of the *Bonhomme Richard*, beating a rattling cadence. The ship was cleared for action: bulkheads, chairs, tables, bunks, any objects that were portable and wooden, were stowed in the hold, in part to reduce the risk of flying splinters that could impale a man. The decks were sprinkled with sand to keep them from becoming slick with blood. Down in the dark cockpit, far belowdeck where the surgeons worked, tubs were put out for discarding amputated limbs. At each gangway, marines were posted to stop cowards from fleeing below. For courage, the men were issued an extra ration of rum.

Jones could see, through the light haze, two warships, one large—a heavy frigate, perhaps—and one small, probably a sloop-of-war. Captain Jones's squadron comprised four ships: the *Bonhomme Richard*, forty guns; the *Alliance*, thirty-six guns; the *Pallas*, thirty-two guns; and the *Vengeance*, twelve guns. Their combined firepower could hurl more than a thousand pounds of metal in a single broadside. The odds heavily favored Jones. He could squeeze the larger British ship in a vise, hammering her from both sides, or run along in line of battle, discharging broadside after broadside before the enemy could reload.

The British warships were protecting a convoy of more than forty British merchantmen, fat prizes. They were carrying lumber, canvas, and cordage from Scandinavia, crucial raw materials for Britain's “wooden wall,” the Royal Navy that commanded the seas. Taking these ships would make Jones wealthy, but he cared far more that victory would make him famous.

At 6 P.M., Jones ordered an officer to run up three flags, blue up the foremast, blue up the mainmast, blue-and-yellow up the mizzen. The flags signaled “Form Line of Battle.”

Jones could see the flags stirring in the dusk. This was the greatest moment of his life, the reckoning for any naval commander, that rare chance for true fame. Jones looked out at the other three ships in his little fleet and saw ...

Nothing. No response. The other captains simply ignored Jones's command. The *Alliance* sheered away. The *Pallas* continued on her previous course. The *Vengeance* hung back.

In those few moments, the odds radically shifted. The larger British warship swung open her gun ports and showed her teeth as a two-decker with a full lower gun deck of heavy cannon. Jones's ship was old and slow; many of its very mixed lot of cannon were old and of dubious reliability. The British man-of-war was faster and brand-new.

Jones was on his own, though not for the first time. He may have sighed, he may have sworn, but more likely his face was a coldly impassive mask. By now, he was accustomed to gross insubordination. Before going into his first decisive single-ship action, against HMS *Drake*, his crew had almost mutinied. Jones had bullied and cajoled the men into obedience. On this cruise, one of his captains, an irascible, addled Frenchman named Pierre Landais, had been flouting orders at every turn. At one point, Jones and Landais had nearly dueled.

Jones had a temper, but now he held it. Or rather, he aimed it. He steered the *Bonhomme Richard* right for the enemy.

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Low on the eastern horizon, a full harvest moon was just beginning to rise. The water was still almost glassy. The two ships, bristling with cannon, their slow matches eddying smoke in the zephyr, slowly glided toward each other. One hundred yards. Fifty yards. Twenty-five yards, the range, Jones later recorded, “of a pistol shot.”

A BRUSH WITH GLORY, then oblivion. Then he rose again. On a brilliant summer’s afternoon in June 1905, a casket bedecked with the American flag and bearing the body of John Paul Jones was paraded down the avenues of Paris. A squadron of French cuirassiers, in glittering helmets and breastplates led the way, followed by a column of 500 U.S. Navy bluejackets. The American sailors in the honor guard were chosen, according to one contemporary account, for their height (all were over six feet) and “manly” good looks. “Quels beaux garçons!” whispered the French ladies in the vast, cheering crowd, which surged against the barricades. Down the Champs-Élysées, across the grandly ornate Place Alexandre, the cortege made its way. At Les Invalides, before the gilded dome of the tomb of Napoleon, stood a pavilion hung in royal purple velvet adorned with martial emblems and battle-axes. There Jones’s casket rested while the diplomats and statesmen made speeches to the glory of his name.

A U.S. Navy squadron of cruisers awaited at Cherbourg to take him to America. The squadron—*Brooklyn*, *Tacoma*, *Galveston*, and *Chattanooga*—steamed westward across the Atlantic, to be met by seven battleships, passing through the Virginia capes, up the Chesapeake Bay to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis. On July 24, the casket was carried past rows of midshipmen, standing at attention along the seawall, while the academy band played Chopin’s funeral march and cannon boomed a salute.

The homecoming had been long delayed. Jones had died, lonely and feeling forgotten, in Paris in 1792. His casket had been interred for over a century in a graveyard so obscure that it had been paved over. It had taken the United States ambassador to France, General Horace Porter, several months just to find Jones’s remains, buried beneath a laundry on the outskirts of the city.

Jones had been resurrected in part because Teddy Roosevelt needed a hero. The young President, an avid naval historian, was eager to make the United States a great naval power at the turn of the twentieth century. Roosevelt wanted to celebrate Jones’s legacy with appropriate pomp. On a clear and cool day, April 24, 1906, special trains carried the President and various dignitaries down from Washington to the Naval Academy at Annapolis. The Baltimore Oratorio sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “How Sleep the Brave.” Jones’s casket was draped with the Stars and Stripes and upon it rested a wreath of laurel, a spray of palm, and the gold-mounted sword presented by King Louis XVI to Commodore Jones for his exploits. In his remarks, President Roosevelt wanted to make sure that the lessons of Jones’s life were not lost to his countrymen and its future leaders. “Every officer in our navy should know by heart the deeds of John Paul Jones,” the President decreed. From then on, all midshipmen were required to memorize Jones’s purported pronouncements on the correct training and proper manners of an officer and a gentleman. Beneath the transept of the Naval Academy Chapel, Jones was laid to his final rest in a marble sarcophagus modeled after Napoleon’s own crypt. “He gave our Navy,” reads the inscription on the tomb, “its earliest traditions of heroism and victory.”

How Jones would have loved it. “My desire for fame is infinite,” Jones once admitted in a letter to the French Minister of the Marine. He craved—too much, he knew—the trappings of glory. During his life, Jones had commissioned the drawing of three increasingly elaborate coats of arms (his real family had none). He spent hours designing uniforms for the fledgling Continental Navy; he preferred the more dashing white waistcoats of the British Royal Navy to the dowdy red ones required by the Continental Congress. He was very pleased when the court of Louis XVI awarded him the Ordre d

Mérite Militaire, which allowed Jones to wear a ribbon and a cross and to call himself “le Chevalier.” Angry when Congress would not give him flag rank, he was gratified to be named a rear admiral in the Russian navy (“Kontradmiral Pavel Ivanovich Dzhones”). As time went on, he was bitter that he had not received more public recognition in America.

Still, over the years, his popular legend grew. In cheap penny chapbooks, British children in the late eighteenth century read about the terrifying “Pirate Paul Jones” who had plundered their seacoast. Throughout the nineteenth century, authors with a romantic bent—Alexandre Dumas, James Fenimore Cooper, William Thackeray, Rudyard Kipling—made him a character in biography and fiction. He was exalted as “an audacious Viking” in a fictionalized telling of his triumphs (*Israel Potter*) by Herman Melville. Teddy Roosevelt’s cousin Franklin was entranced by the legend. In the mid-1920s, FDR wrote a perfectly awful screenplay treatment of Jones’s life. (At a strategy meeting during World War II, FDR’s aide, Harry Hopkins, had to interrupt the President as he digressed into a debate over Jones’s tactics against the *Serapis* with the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill.) In 1958, to the delight of schoolboys (including this one), Hollywood finally did discover Jones. In *John Paul Jones*, actor Robert Stack bellowed from the burning deck at the climax of Jones’s epic sea battle, “I have not yet begun to fight!” (stirring words Jones probably never said, though he did shout out a refusal to strike his flag).

Today, Jones has largely vanished from high school history books, and his glory in life did not begin to match his outsized dreams. He never did fulfill his ambition to become a great blue-ocean fleet commander. He imagined America as a mighty sea power long before the country had the capacity or the will to become one. He showed astounding flashes of fortitude and ingenuity in battle, but he endured long bleak spells of brooding over opportunities missed or denied. He could inspire with brave words and dash, but his narcissism sometimes cost him the affection of his men. Though he blamed others and suffered more than his share of bad luck, his edgy character caused much of his misfortune.

Jones was not what he wished to be. Even so, he was a warrior his new nation sorely needed. He was one of the few members of the revolutionary generation who really knew how to fight. His boldness and resourcefulness stand out against the sorry record of the Continental Navy.

Jones was memorable for more than his martial accomplishments. His life offers a window into the nation’s founding. Jones was the quintessential striver. He was, in the purest American sense, a self-made man whose raw drive and talent broke through his era’s walls of class and place. His rise mirrored that of his adopted country and its restless people, the ascendancy of the New World over the Old. Herman Melville saw the identification: “Intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart,” Melville wrote, “America is, or may yet be, the Paul Jones of nations.”

JONES LIKED TO SAY that he drew his sword, not for hire, but “in defense of the violated rights of mankind.” To be sure, he was willing to fight for other, less noble reasons. Eager for action and fame, after the end of the Revolutionary War, he went (with Congress’s blessing) into the service of one of history’s great despots, Catherine the Great of Russia. Yet he was a true-blue patriot. At his first meeting with the Russian Tsarina in 1788, he handed her a copy of the new Constitution of the United States. He was proud that he was the first naval officer to hoist the American flag over a warship, in Philadelphia in January 1776. Jones saw himself as a romantic, larger-than-life figure, and though he was a huge egotist, he was not self-deluding. He had a dreamy sense of destiny: “Our marine,” he wrote about the ragtag American navy in 1778, “will rise as if by enchantment, and become, within the memory of persons now living, the wonder and envy of the world.”

Jones earned the respect, if not always the friendship, of many of the Founding Fathers. General George Washington recognized Jones’s immense talents and all too singular achievements in the

Continental Navy with praise that made Jones preen. Benjamin Franklin was an avuncular figure Jones, who named his ship, the *Bonhomme Richard*, after Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Franklin valued Jones's drive and naval genius, though he scolded him for his self-absorption. During a tour as American minister to Paris, Thomas Jefferson performed one of the habitual duties of the post: handling Captain Jones's tangled love affairs. (On one occasion, Jones asked Jefferson to pass private letters to one of his mistresses, reputedly an illegitimate child of King Louis XV. Jefferson dutifully acted as go-between, but backed off when the woman asked him for a loan.) Notwithstanding Jones's dalliances, Jefferson had high praise for the Captain. In 1788, Jefferson wrote a friend, "consider this officer to be the principal hope of our future efforts on the ocean." At Monticello, Jefferson displayed Jones's bust alongside those of Washington, Franklin, and Lafayette.

John Adams, a great proponent of American sea power and shrewd judge of men, was fascinated by Jones's ego. In 1780, after dining with Jones, Adams observed:

This is the most ambitious and intriguing officer in the American Navy. Jones has Art, and Secrecy, and aspires very high. You can see the Character of the Man in his uniform ... variant of the Uniform established by Congress. Golden buttonholes, for himself—two Epaullets....

Eccentricities and Irregularities are to be expected from him—they are in his Character, they are visible in his Eyes. His voice is soft and still and small, his eye has keenness and Wildness and softness in it.

Adams's wife, Abigail, was struck by the unexpected softness in Jones's demeanor. After encountering the naval hero in a Paris salon in 1784, Abigail wrote playfully to a female relative, "daresay you would be as much disappointed in him as I was.... I expected to have seen a rough, stout warlike Roman. Instead of that, I should sooner think of wrapping him up in cotton wool and putting him into my pocket, than sending him to contend with cannon ball[s]. He is small of stature, well proportioned, soft in his speech, easy in his address, polite in his manners, vastly civil." Abigail noted with some surprise, that Jones knew "the etiquette of a lady's toilette as perfectly as he does the masts, sails, and rigging of his ship.... He knows how often the ladies use the baths, what colors best suits a lady's complexion, what cosmetics are most favorable to the skin. We do not often see," she whimsically observed, "the warrior and the abigail thus united."

Jones may have been part "abigail" (a seventeenth-century literary expression for a lady's maid) in the drawing room, but his tenderness vanished on the quarterdeck. He was, without question, a great sea warrior. The tiny, patchwork Continental Navy that put to sea (or, in many cases, stayed in port) against the mighty Royal Navy was pitifully overmatched. On the rebel side, the sea story of the War of Independence is largely one of bumbling and futility. Jones was a powerful exception. Admiralty records show the British sea lords at Whitehall in London working late into the night and on Sunday to try to catch "the Pirate Jones," whose daring raids were causing a popular uproar along the English coast.

As a strategist and commander, Jones was well ahead of his time. In the eighteenth century, warfare was notable for its restraint. Battles were contained, hot and fierce when the forces clashed but rarely free-wheeling or marauding. With some infamous exceptions, civilians were not targeted. The officer class valued personal bravery. Naval commanders disdained protective armor and—like Nelson, who was wounded fatally at the Battle of Trafalgar—wore their shining decorations as they stood on the quarterdeck, exposed to grapeshot and musket ball. Yet an unwritten code allowed a sea captain to break off an engagement before it became an outright or senseless slaughter.

While he dearly wished to be seen as a gentleman officer, Jones was determined to fight to the death. He fought one three-hour battle that was a bloodbath by eighteenth-century standards. Fully half the combatants were killed or wounded in large part because Jones stubbornly refused to surrender, even though his ship was battered, burning, and sinking. When one of Jones's petty officers



did try to haul down the ship's flag to halt the carnage, Jones threw a pistol at his head. Jones's all-or-nothing drive for victory, no matter the odds, no matter the cost, was a harbinger of the concept, all too familiar in modern times, of total war. Jones posed (especially for the ladies) as a chivalric knight, but his tactics at times more closely resembled those of the people's armies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than the aristocratic set-piece combat in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He excoriated the British for putting some colonial towns to the torch, and he was disgusted when his Russian allies burned to death their Turkish captives, yet he wanted to hold hostage whole British cities for the release of American prisoners. For all his avowals of principle, Jones was an opportunist. He was cunning. He understood the power of psychological warfare, that the civilian population could be terrorized by attacks on their homeland.

It pained Jones that his new nation did not try harder to win mastery of the seas. "Without a respectable Navy—alas America!" he wrote. He constantly agitated to create an officer class based on merit, not cronyism, and to create a naval establishment that would choose shipbuilders for their skill and ability, not their political connections. "I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail *fast*," he wrote a French patron who was trying to find him a suitable warship, "for I intend *to go to sea in my own harm's way*." He never got what he wanted. He fought his greatest battle in an old slow tub.

Jones complained about his lot—endlessly. His hundreds of letters and extensive campaign journals are exhaustive in their self-justification. In his self-pitying moments, he could be a tiresome crank. Yet Jones was not blind to his shortcomings. He had a vision of a better self—modest, humble, and true—and he struggled, manfully if with mixed success, to adjust his nature to his ideals. He lamented that war was eclipsing his more tender feelings and wrote flowery poetry to prove it. He was loyal to his friends, if not his mistresses. While prim and touchy about his reputation, he could be exuberant, even outrageous, especially in battle when he had outfoxed his enemies. But, always, Jones was seized with ambition.

John Adams once described Jones as "leprous with vanity." Forever on guard against shows of conceit (especially his own), Adams despairingly wrote, "Titles, Ribbons, Stars, Garters, Crosses, Keys, are the important Springs that move the ambition of Men in high life. How poor! How mean! How low! Yet how true." True for Jones, certainly. The Chevalier Jones was vainglorious. But then so were Lord Horatio Nelson ("if it be a sin to covet glory," Nelson wrote Lady Hamilton, "I am the most offending soul alive"), General George S. Patton with his pearl-handle revolvers, General Douglas MacArthur with his sunglasses, and any number of strutting great military geniuses and warriors. It can require an enormous ego to lead men to their deaths. Real-life heroes are rarely like "Lucky Jack Aubrey, the sunny, bluff, big-hearted sea captain of Patrick O'Brian's novels of the British Age of Sail. Jones's temperament—prickly, self-absorbed, and easily wounded—makes him a dead ringer for the real Jack Aubrey: Lord Thomas Cochrane, the Royal Navy captain whose actual exploits were the model for the dramatic, against-the-odds sea battles described in O'Brian's first Aubrey-Maturin novel, *Master and Commander*.

John Paul Jones's ambition—ever present, all-consuming, and limitless—was his most defining characteristic, his goad and his vice. It was a trait he shared with many of the leaders of the American Revolution—and a good thing, too. The Founders were the original self-made men, hungry for advancement and recognition. Their gentlemanly concern for honor feels old-fashioned, almost feudal, with one critical difference: they understood that honor might be inherited, but fame must be *earned*. In their scramble for glory, for lasting fame, they launched an enduring republic.

Jones and other sons of liberty came of age in a time and place when the old order and the old certitudes were cracking. For centuries, status had been largely determined by birth. But, at least in some quarters and for some classes, an Age of Enlightenment had arrived. Diverse philosophers were suggesting that virtue was not bestowed by the Almighty, but could be learned. Human nature was not

immutable but could be improved, even perfected, by a liberal education. It is more than an interesting coincidence that most of the Founding Fathers were first-generation college graduates.

The son of a landscape gardener who labored for the landed gentry, Jones could not wait to improve his place. He studied gentlemen in order to become one. He had to catch up: his threadbare upbringing in Scotland included no dancing and fencing lessons, but he made himself literate. He could quote Pope and Shakespeare and write romantic verse—though sometimes, admittedly, the same verse for two different ladies. He admired other strivers. His friends included an African-American poetess Phillis Wheatley, who had been discovered by the smart set in London and Boston. For a sweet month of May in 1780, Jones was the darling of Paris society.

Jones won titles and decorations and other marks of respect and recognition, but they were never enough. Ultimately, Jones's life was less heroic than tragic. He exulted in his moments of battle, appearing almost lighthearted at times of great peril, but then his habit of brooding would return. His many insecurities would begin to gnaw; he would pout and lash out. His temperament was self-defeating, and he knew it. He knew that he was too proud and abrasive, and yet he could not help himself. His flickers of self-awareness would vanish, replaced by theatrical posturings. He wanted to be a gentleman of the Enlightenment, able to use reason to tame his inner demons, but he never succeeded, at least for long.

Jones had much in common with another flawed genius and revolutionary climber, Alexander Hamilton. A bastard immigrant of Scottish descent, Hamilton would have sooner died than wind up, he put it, as a “grov’ling” clerk. Both dandies wrote poetry and preened for the ladies. Both Hamilton and Jones knew the surest way to get ahead. “I wish there was a war,” Hamilton wrote when he was fourteen years old. Jones found his war as soon as he could, as the first commissioned lieutenant in the Continental Navy, six months before the Declaration of Independence.

Jones was his own invention. He had arrived in America without even a name. He was traveling “incog.,” he wrote—incognito, under a false identity. He had killed a man. He was on the run.

\* Of the fifty-seven ships that sailed under the flag of the Continental Navy, thirty-four were taken or sunk by the British or destroyed to avoid capture; four were lost at sea; fifteen were sold or decommissioned; and four cannot be accounted for. The Continental Navy captured approximately thirteen Royal Navy ships, almost all of them small vessels.

# CHAPTER ONE

## “You Meet a Gentleman”

**HIS REAL NAME WAS JOHN PAUL**, inherited, along with a chip on the shoulder, from his father. John Paul Sr. was a proud and talented man. Today, he would be called a landscape architect. In eighteenth-century Scotland, he was a gardener. He had been hired—indeed, recruited all the way from Leith on Scotland’s east coast—to lay out the gardens at Arbigland, a 1,400-acre estate in the soft and wild beautiful countryside that rims the Firth of Solway, the body of water that divides England and Scotland on Britain’s west coast. John Paul Sr.’s profession was at a kind of apex: the mid-eighteenth century was a great age of landscape gardening. Abandoning the constrained formalism of the Continent, English landscape gardeners like Capability Brown created romantic vistas, ponds, glades, groves, hillocks, and glens and dales for the local gentry who hired them. At Arbigland, Paul Sr. turned nature’s gifts into murmuring brooks and fragrant ponds with lily pads and gently overhanging willows. Luxuriant flowers and Mages spilled across mossy paths that wound through a sweet-smelling wonderland. As a little boy, John Paul Jr. wandered in a man-made enchanted forest that would suddenly and breathtakingly open to the sea. Walking through the gardens John Paul Sr. laid out more than two centuries ago, it is easy to understand how John Paul Jr. formed the softer sensibility that inspired the romantic poetry and “fine feelings” he espoused.

John Paul Sr. was a manager as well as an artist. The household staff at Arbigland was enormous—over a hundred maids, grooms, cooks, gamekeepers, and gardeners, and as head gardener Paul Senior ranked roughly equaled that of head butler. But he was still a member of the servant class, required to touch his forelock to his master, Mr. Craik. The world was still stratified in 1750. Each man was supposed to know where he stood in the Great Chain of Being, the immutable social order, fixed by God. (If he didn’t, notes historian Gordon Wood, there were guidebooks. Young George Washington, growing up in the colony of Virginia, copied out instructions on how to pull off one’s hat to “Persons of Distinction” and how to bow “according to the custom of the better bred and quality of the person” in order to “give every person his due title according to his degree.”) The Scottish lived with another level of subservience. From time to time, English kings subdued Scottish uprisings. One of the most storied rebellions was crushed about a year before young John Paul was born. In April 1746, on Culloden Moor, an English army defeated the forces of Charles Edward Stuart, “Bonnie Prince Charlie,” Jacobite pretender to the crown.

William Craik, the master of Arbigland and John Paul’s employer, was not a Jacobite. He cast his lot with the ruling English. Craik was a domineering figure, “ardent to make himself complete master of whatever he took in hand,” according to his daughter, Helen. He understood Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, and Italian; he made “some little progress in Spanish,” was a “tolerable architect,” “fond of chemistry,” and “read much on learned subjects.” He had been a willful hell-raiser as a young man. “In hard drinking, hard riding, and every other youthful excess, few could equal his notoriety,” wrote his daughter. And he was a hard man who brooked no disrespect or dissent. Social tensions ran high on Scottish estates after landlords began driving tenants off the land in the early eighteenth century. There were riots as “levelers” fought back. Craik ordered his tenants to conform to the new rules of agriculture or face jail instead. Toward his gardener Craik was more respectful, but John Paul was supposed to do what he was told.

John Paul bristled against Craik’s overbearing authority, but he did so quietly, using an edge of

sarcasm to undercut his deference. His sullenness showed in an odd way. Symmetry in architecture was all the fashion in the mid-eighteenth century. It appears that Craik, who was building a manor house in the classical style, insisted on building not one but two summer houses in the garden. John Paul, raised a frugal Scotsman, thought the second summer house was extravagant, a point he made in a peculiarly subversive fashion. Upon catching a man stealing fruit, John Paul Sr. locked him in one of the summer houses. Then he locked his little boy John Jr. into the other summer house. Craik found this peculiar, and asked why the boy had been locked up. John Paul Sr. drily replied in his brogue, "for the sake of symmetry."

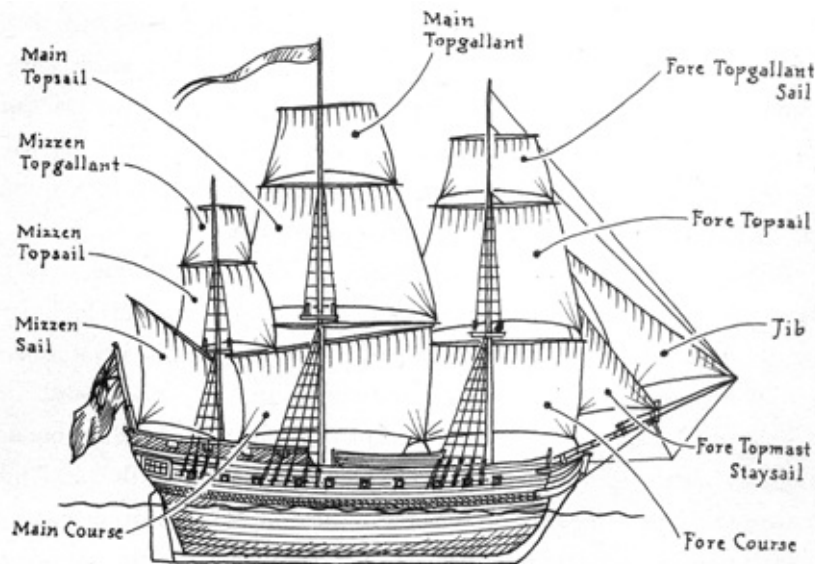
John Paul Sr. may have resented more than his laird's extravagance. For many years after John Paul Jones became famous as an American navy captain, it was rumored in Kirkbean and the small town around Arbigland that John Paul Jr. was really the bastard son of William Craik. It is true that John Paul's mother, Jean McDuff, worked as a housekeeper for Mr. Craik. She married John Paul Sr. the day before Craik married a neighboring lady, a coincidence that raised eyebrows in the village. Scottish lairds not uncommonly enjoyed sexual favors from the household help and sometimes had the progeny to show for it. Craik did have at least one illegitimate son (interestingly, in later life he became George Washington's personal physician). Was young John another? John honored his nominal father. He had built in the Kirkbean graveyard a large crypt, inscribed "John Paul Senior who died at Arbigland the 24 October 1767 Universally Esteemed. Erected by John Paul Junior." But he may have questioned his parentage. A sensitive boy, he could not have missed the tension between his proud father and the lordly Mr. Craik, especially when he was sitting locked in the summer house wondering why he had been put there. John Paul Jr. observed his father's seethings and vowed not to cringe himself. John Paul Jones's sense of resentment and wounded pride were never far from the surface in later life. He came by them naturally.

From the day of his birth, July 6, 1747, John Paul Jr. lived with his brother, three sisters, and both parents in a tidy, two-room cottage. Cramped and stuffy inside, it overlooked a magnificent vista, a field running down to the Firth of Solway. Playing along the shore, with its pungent salty smell, John Paul Jr. could imagine Viking ancestors who had landed there centuries before. On clear days, he could see across to the English coast and the mountains of the Lake District. On most days of his childhood, he could watch the great ships slipping down the firth to the Irish Sea beyond, bound for distant lands.

Young John was an eager, bossy boy. Mr. Craik's son Robert recalled watching John Paul Jr. standing high on a rock at the edge of the shore, yelling orders at his playmates in a shrill voice as they paddled about in rowboats. He was pretending to be a fleet admiral, staging a sea battle. John Paul turned twelve years old in the "Glorious Year" of 1759 when the Royal Navy under Admiral Hawke defeated the French at Quiberon Bay on the Brittany Peninsula. Hawke's flagship captain, John Campbell, hailed from Kirkbean, a small town just outside the gates of Arbigland, where John Paul attended the parish school. He heard the story of how Admiral Hawke sent the British fleet tearing after the French, ignoring the danger of a lee shore on a stormy day, ordering his captains not to open fire until they were, as close range was then commonly measured, "within pistol shot."

John Paul wanted to join the Royal Navy. "I had made the art of war at sea in some degree my study, and had been fond of the navy, from boyish days up," he wrote Benjamin Franklin many years later. The navy could be a social ladder for some poor boys. Captain James Cooke, the great South Sea explorer, had been a laborer's son, and Horatio Nelson was born in a modest parsonage. But entering the navy's officer class by obtaining a midshipman's berth—as a "young gentleman"—usually required the right social connections. The Pauls had none. The best John Paul Jr. could do was sign on as an apprentice aboard a merchant ship. John Paul could hope—after seven years of servitude—rise above the level of an ordinary seaman. But the social prestige and chance of glory for a first man

or even a master aboard a merchantman did not approach that of a naval officer. Jones swallowed his disappointment at not winning a naval commission, but not his ambition.



Young boys sometimes catch sea fever. In the eighteenth century, many boys went to sea by the age of thirteen. If they waited any longer, the philosopher of the age, Dr. Johnson, once observed, they wouldn't go. No right-minded adult would volunteer to go to sea. Shipboard life was too awful.

In 1760, when John Paul turned thirteen, he boarded a two-masted brig out of Whitehaven, a British port across the Solway (where he would return eighteen years later as an American naval officer intending to burn the place). The *Friendship* was about eighty feet long and could carry less than 200 tons; she would barely qualify as a “tall ship” today. In the wintry Irish Sea, she rolled and tossed enough to send all but the hardiest of her crew leaning over the leeward rail to vomit. Melville called seasickness “that dreadful thing.” Abigail Adams described it as “that most disheartening, dispiriting malady.... No person, who is a stranger to the sea, can form an adequate idea of the debility occasioned by sea-sickness.” Imagine being extremely drunk and hung over all at once and you have some idea: whirling, reeling, nauseous distress and lassitude.

Winter storms in the Atlantic would terrify even the bravest boy. Mountainous seas could lay a small ship over on her beam ends and tear the sails from her spars. A wooden ship rigged with rope and canvas is like a living organism: it creaks and sighs and groans. In a gale, it screams.

Belowdecks in all weathers, the ship stank from unwashed men and bilge-water. While the men were supposed to relieve themselves at the head, no more than a hole in the deck off the bow of the ship, in bad weather and illness they sometimes defecated, urinated, and vomited where they stood or slept. The water that collected in the bilge, full of excrement and rot of one kind or another, was unspeakable. In the abundance of Arbigland, John Paul had milk, butter, fresh vegetables. Aboard the *Friendship*, he dined on salt beef, dried peas, and biscuit, day after day. The beef, pickled in brine, savored vaguely of fish, and the biscuits were so full of weevils that they moved. The peas were like bullets; the butter, when it wasn't rancid, tasted like oil sludge. The water, carefully rationed (no bathing—saltwater had to do) was covered with a coat of slime after a few weeks. The damp was inescapable: wool clothes, caked with salt, held moisture for days.

Like everyone else, young John Paul was given a ration of alcohol. Typically, seamen were allowed a half pint of rum or a half gallon of beer a day (or a pint of red wine, which they disdained and called “black strap”). Four ounces of rum, served twice a day cut with water and made into “grog,” was a pretty powerful cocktail. And naturally, the men hoarded and stole rations and smuggled liquor aboard to get drunker. Drunkenness was the number one cause of discipline problems and no small cause of accidents. A slightly tipsy—or “groggy”—man could miss a step as he climbed the rigging or lose his

footing as he edged out along a spar.

~~John Paul didn't develop a taste for grog. In all his years at sea, he never touched hard spirits. His "steady drink," recalled one of his midshipmen, was lemon or lime juice laced with sugar and, in good weather, three glasses of wine after dinner. He liked to be in control of himself and, insofar as possible, his world. Too many times he had witnessed the damage caused by indulgence.~~

Like all new hands on a square-rigged ship, John Paul was sent aloft to learn how to reef and furl the sails. Creeping out along a single rope far above the deck and leaning over to gather wet and sometimes frozen canvas flailing and snapping in the wind was not for the fainthearted. Anyone who has climbed a mast on a ship as it rolls and bucks at sea can attest to a frightening law of physics: the higher you go, the wider (and wilder) the swings. Men, especially the inebriated ones, often fell. If they were unlucky, they hit the deck and shattered bones and skulls. If they were more fortunate, they glanced off a rope or the belly of a sail and landed in the ocean. Some were rescued in time, but on a large, square-rigged sailing ship is cumbersome to turn around, and ocean water temperature in the northern latitudes could freeze a man in a few minutes. Many drowned because they could not swim, and few seamen in those days could.

Some men fell from sheer exhaustion. The *Friendship* carried a crew of twenty-eight, large for a merchantman but far fewer than the ship's company aboard a man-of-war of comparable size. Merchants tried to squeeze every last penny out of their ships. Carrying the bare minimum of crewmen and stinting on food were standard practices in the merchant marine. Aside from a large winch, called a capstan, and various blocks and pulleys to take off some of the strain, eighteenth-century sailing ships relied on brute man power. The work could be perilous: men had to haul on rigid and icy ropes as they slipped and slid on slanting and shifting decks, in storms and rain and in utter darkness. The most common medical hazard was hernia, or rupture. (During the eight years from 1800 through 1815, the Royal Navy handed out an amazing 29,712 trusses.) It has been estimated that about one in seven British seamen in the navy busted a gut, literally.

Misery excited John Paul's ambition. The position of master or first or second mate aboard a merchantman may not have been nearly so grand as that of a naval officer, but it was better than that of an ordinary seaman, in part because the first or second mate was rarely required to work aloft or heave on a rope.

John Paul's deliverance from the hardship of the lower deck was a brass instrument called an octant. His ascent began the moment the master of the *Friendship*, Captain Robert Benson, summoned him to the rail of the quarterdeck one day when the sun was at its zenith, pointed to the horizon, and handed him the tool navigators used to find their way on the trackless sea.

Jones's own octant, possibly his very first, sits in the museum of the U.S. Naval Academy. Curved (an eighth of circle, hence "octant"), fixed with small mirrors and etched by degrees, an octant can tell a mariner the angle of the sun to the horizon at high noon. From these readings, taken repeatedly for accuracy, a mariner who knows a little math and has the right tables can calculate his ship's latitude and his distance from the equator. Navigation was still crude in the mid-eighteenth century. Navigators could fix their place on a north-south axis by knowing their latitude (at least when the sun was not clouded over), but they still couldn't precisely measure longitude, their position along the east-west axis. Finding one's way was still to a frightening degree a matter of guesswork—dead reckoning.

And yet elemental navigation was considered sorcery in the wrong hands. A sailor who could navigate made a much more dangerous mutineer. In the navy, the officer class did not want ordinary seamen to be able to find their way if they mutinied. The merchant marine was not quite so fearful about sailors rising above their station. As an apprentice, John Paul could entertain some hope of learning the skills required of a deck officer, though perhaps not right away, since his apprenticeship was expected to last seven years. A quick learner, eager to please, he apparently won the attention and

support of the master, Captain Benson.\* Before long, he was mastering all the intricacies of seamanship and ship handling, the proper set and trim of the sails, the uses of all the myriad ropes and spars that festooned the masts of a square-rigged ship.

He accomplished his tasks efficiently and surely but not joyously. John Paul was a self-described romantic, but not about the sea. He did not wax on about the beauty or mystery or power of the ocean, except in one batch of letters written after a particularly fearsome storm, and then only to comment that “the awful majesty of the tempest ... surpassed the reach even of poetic fancy and the pencil.” John Paul was touched or awed by the majesty of nature on his first cruises across the ocean, he failed to record those feelings. His greater concern was with self-improvement.

John Paul discovered aboard ship a place to excel. In any age, seamanship demands certain qualities of character. It rewards the careful and deliberate and punishes the loose and sloppy. The uncoiled line lying about the deck can quickly be transformed into a snare or a whip in bad weather; the sleepy lookout nodding off as the ship approaches a hidden reef is criminally negligent. In his manner and bearing, John Paul was neat to the point of primness. As a sailor he was constantly, almost exasperatingly, fastidious, incessantly fiddling with the rigging and trim to eke out more speed and make his craft more seaworthy. He may not have loved the sea, but he was very good at sailing upon it.

JONES HAD TO stoop low to climb up. In 1764, after he had crossed the Atlantic eight times in three years aboard the *Friendship*, hard times forced the sale of the ship. Released from his apprenticeship, he found a wretched job as the third mate aboard a slaver, the *King George*, out of Whitehaven, “black birder” in the cruel jargon of the time. Black birders were known for a stench so strong that ships downwind bore away to avoid it. John Paul served for two years aboard the *King George* and was made first mate of another slave ship, the *Two Friends*. No more than fifty feet long, she carried a crew of six and, chained in the hold, according to one manifest, a cargo of “77 Negroes from Africa.” John Paul sailed the infamous “middle passage” between Africa and the slave plantations of the Caribbean. “Slaves were stowed, heel and point, like logs,” Melville wrote, “and the suffocated and dead were unmanacled, and weeded out from the living every morning.” John Paul Jones never wrote a word about his time on a slave ship, but after three years he had apparently had enough of duties like “weeding.” When the *Two Friends* returned to Jamaica from a voyage to “the windward coast of Africa” sometime in 1767, John Paul asked to be paid off.

In Kingston, the unemployed John Paul ran into the captain of a brig, the *John*, out of Kirkcudbright, a small Scottish port some thirty miles from Arbigland. The captain, Samuel McAdam, offered John Paul free passage home. On the voyage, both the captain and the first mate died of fever, which was rampant in the West Indies. John Paul was the only man aboard who could navigate. When he brought home the *John* safely, the owners rewarded him with command. At the age of twenty-one, he was the master of a ship. A very small one, to be sure: sixty tons, about sixty feet long, with a crew of half a dozen men. But John Paul had crossed the line from servant to master.

John Paul was not an easy captain. He was fastidious and demanding. His standards of neatness and precision were closer to those aboard a man-of-war than on a merchant ship. His rigor and exactitude did not necessarily make him unpopular with the crew. The hands of a square-rigged ship, a fragile and complex mechanism, depended on their captain to survive. They usually distrusted captains who were slack or sloppy. Taut ships were happy ones if every man knew his duty and the captain showed steadiness and good seamanship. Captain Paul was a superb seaman whose confidence seemed to rise in dangerous moments, and he was usually mild and soft-spoken. But there was a scratchy, fussy side to him that was off-putting and which, over time, worked to undermine his authority. Jones had a temper, and he could not abide disrespect. He was bound to clash with sailors who did not know their place or challenged his.

On John Paul's second voyage aboard the *John*, from Scotland to the Windward Islands, he tangled with a carpenter's mate named Mungo Maxwell. The son of a prominent local family in Kirkcudbright, the *John's* home port on the Firth of Solway on Scotland's southern coast, Maxwell was cocky, entitled, and in no mood to take orders from someone who was the son of a gardener. Captain Paul had him flogged.

It has been said that ship captains were more powerful than the King of England in the eighteenth century, because the crown could not order a man flogged. Harsh physical discipline was a fact of life aboard ship. The lash was part of the "ancient custom of the sea." The age was violent, and not just at sea. Public hangings were spectator sports, where refreshments were served. In the Royal Navy, floggings were morality plays, staged on Sunday after church.

Floggings were less ritualistic or commonplace on merchant ships like the *John*, but the lash was still an effective tool against an unruly crew. Mungo Maxwell tested John Paul's shallow well of patience, mouthing off at him, shirking duty, and doing his work sloppily, which particularly incensed the meticulous Captain Paul. His "mildness" quickly spent, John Paul ordered Maxwell triced by his wrists to the rigging and subjected to the traditional tool of punishment, the cat-o'-nine-tails.

The "cat," nine tightly wound and knotted strands of cord attached to a piece of wood, was usually stowed in a red baize bag and never used twice. One stroke on the back would raise bright red welts; two or three would break the skin. A dozen, the usual sentence, would leave a human back looking like "roasted meat burnt nearly black before a scorching fire," according to one contemporary account. The flogger would sometimes pause to wipe the chunks of bloody flesh from the knotted strands, or change hands to make sure each stroke counted.

Aboard a British man-of-war, the spectacle would be staged with all hands standing at attention, watched by marines in red coats, the seagoing soldiers who kept order. On John Paul's little brig, the scene was simpler and drearier. The captain stood on the quarterdeck, trying to look stern and wise despite his age, glaring at the mate who wielded the cat to make sure he swung hard enough. A sullen clump of crewmen watched the blood run from Maxwell's back, then after a dozen strokes let him drop down and tended, as best they could, to his wounds.

They probably grumbled and called Captain Paul brutal, but sailors of the age generally put up with flogging. Miscreants at sea fared no worse than those on land, maybe better. A thief aboard ship might get twelve lashes; ashore he could be hanged, branded, or exiled to a penal colony. At the same time, however, Englishmen prized "liberty" and had at least a rough sense of individual rights and the rule of law, arbitrarily imposed perhaps, yet still a British birthright. On merchant ships, it was unusual—but not unheard of—for a crewman, returning to port after a beating at sea, to go to court to sue his captain, charging assault or unjust abuse. That is what Mungo Maxwell did when the *John* reached Tobago in the summer of 1770.

An Admiralty Court was sitting at the time, and John Paul was quickly vindicated. The judge examined the wounds on Maxwell's back and found them to be neither "mortal nor dangerous." The judge ruled that the carpenter had earned the stripes across his back by his incompetence and disobedience. Captain Paul was well within his authority to have Maxwell flogged.

That might have been the end of it. Maxwell angrily quit the *John* and found passage home to Scotland on another ship. After picking up his cargo of rum, sugar, and mahogany, John Paul sailed across the Atlantic, into the mouth of the English Channel, and up the Irish Sea to the Firth of Solway. In early November, as the green pastures sloping down to the sea were just beginning to yellow in the cold gales of late autumn, Captain Paul navigated the *John* up Kirkcudbright Bay, twisting through the narrow channel between the shifting mud banks, and bringing his brig and its crew safely home.

At the quay, Captain Paul was greeted by the sheriff and informed that he was under arrest. As the town people gawked, young Paul was escorted on a walk of shame. He was marched up High Street



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