John Paul Jones:
A Brief History with Some Masonic Footnotes

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Program Originally Delivered Friday July 6, 2018
Freedom Masonic Lodge No. 118 Lovettsville, VA

Second Presentation, Monday July 16, 2018
Herndon Masonic Lodge No. 264 Herndon, VA
In the Revolutionary annals of Masonry stand some stately and almost demi-godlike figures: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Paul Revere, and John Hancock. But there is one figure of importance who often is left out of this prestigious list who played a vastly important role in the outcome of the American Revolution, Brother John Paul Jones. This Brother is often cited as the “Father of the American Navy.” School children can maybe tell you he was a privateer during the America Revolution (a pirate to some, but he was our pirate!) and possibly cite his famous quote “I have not yet begun to fight.” But do we really know who this Masonic Brother was? After painstakingly combing through the records in the archives of Herndon Lodge, it was discovered that Brother Jones had been elected to receive the degrees of masonry no less than 247, 318 times. He had been initiated 14, 207 times, passed 897, and raised to the degree of Master Mason somewhere north of 842 times.\(^1\)

John Paul (the “Jones” was added later”) was born the fifth of seven children on July 6, 1747 in Kirkcudbright Scotland to John Paul and Jean MacDuff. His father (John Paul Sr.) was a gardener (by modern definition a landscape architect) at a country estate known as Arbigland on the west coast of Scotland and his mother was a housekeeper and maid at the same estate.\(^2\) Growing up on the sprawling grounds of Arbigland, Paul Junior would often be seen sitting on the rocky cliffs staring out to sea or playing with friends and staging mock sea battles in childhood rowboats. The nearest town, Kirkbean, was a busy seaport and tales of seaside adventures and heroism on the oceans must have attracted young John Paul Junior to join the Royal Navy. For someone of his social stature, the Royal Navy could be a social climbing ladder, however years of apprenticeship would be needed in order to be considered a First Class

\(^1\) Brother Jones is often used as a substitute name for Ritual Practice. These numbers are intended as hubris.

Seaman.\textsuperscript{3} In 1760 at the age of thirteen, John Paul Junior joined the crew of a brig and went to sea for the first time. It was common belief for the period that if a boy didn’t join the Royal Navy by 13, no right-minded adult would do so because of the harsh conditions aboard ship. In the same year, his older brother William Paul married and settled in Fredericksburg, in the Colony of Virginia running a mercantile business.\textsuperscript{4} John Paul Junior would visit Virginia and his brother several times on his transatlantic travels. However, his fortunes would quickly turn on him, first for the better, and then for the worst.

While onboard the English Brig \textit{John}, John Paul Junior was suddenly placed in a position of authority, when in 1768 the captain and first mate suddenly died of yellow fever on a return trip from the Caribbean. He managed to navigate the ship back to a safe port and, in reward for this feat, the vessel's grateful Scottish owners made him master of the ship and its crew, giving him ten percent of the cargo.\textsuperscript{5} He further led two more voyages to the West Indies making himself a comfortable fortune before running into maritime legal issues.\textsuperscript{6} John Paul Junior would be accused of murder in 1768 for having a man flogged to death on one of the West Indy voyages, and his actions were viewed as unnecessarily cruel. His defense was able to secure a release on bail and the charges were eventually dropped after proving the man had died of yellow fever, not of his wounds.\textsuperscript{7} Paul Junior then sailed for an eighteen-month tour to Tobago hoping to distance himself from the previous unfortunate incident. However his luck ran out when he had a disagreement with a sailor over wages and when attacked, killed the man with his sword.\textsuperscript{8}

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\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} (Scottish Archive Network, 2018) The Arrest Warrant of John Paul Jones
\textsuperscript{7} The man who died of his injuries was not a usual sailor but an adventurer from a very influential Scottish family.
\textsuperscript{8} Thomas, A Sailor’s Biography, 45-50.
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Wishing not to be indicted in an admiralty court, he fled to the Colony of Virginia where his brother had recently died, leaving behind his wealth and most likely hoping to hide from the law. He changed his name for the emigration to “John Jones” and eventually our common nomenclature of “John Paul Jones.” A common legend says that he adopted the surname of “Jones” in order to inherit his brother’s lands, but this is circumstantial at best. In parts of North Carolina a long-held belief that the “Jones” came from the hospitality of Willie Jones, a representative of North Carolina to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 who befriended John Paul when he first arrived in the colonies.9

Sometime between his successful voyage of the John and his legal troubles, Jones made application to St. Bernard Lodge No. 3122 at Kirkcudbright, Scotland. It was a common practice at that time to write one’s own petition for membership and is included in the appendices of this paper. An interesting note, the petition fee for the Lodge was one guinea. Jones (still known as John Paul at the time) was initiated on November 27, 1770.10 Given his desire for upward social mobility and his (at least at the time) apparent financial success after commanding the John safely back to Scotland, Jones sought the friendship, comradery, and social connections of the fraternity. Masonry would go on to play a major part of Jones’ life and his exploits into the Revolution would place him in contact with Brothers who would later play a much larger role in his later career.

In 1775, shortly after the battle of Lexington and Concord, Jones traveled to Philadelphia and offered his services to the American cause in a navy that didn’t yet exist. In October 1775, Congress had established a committee to establish the Continental Navy and officers were in

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10 Kanihack, Short Talk Bulletins – John Paul Jones
high demand. Jones might have gone unnoticed had his skills not been endorsed by Richard Henry Lee who supported his appointment. With the help of other influential members of Congress Jones’ name was submitted for a commission as first lieutenant in the Conventional Navy in December.¹¹

For the next year Jones was given command of several small ships of the Continental fleet being built throughout the newly formed United States. In early 1777 Jones saw his first military success, having captured 16 enemy vessels.¹² Returning to a US port he found himself promoted to Captain of The Ranger on the same day Congress adopted the flag of the United States: June 14, 1777. Jones wrote “That flag and I are twins; born the same hour from the same womb of destiny. We cannot be parted in life or in death. So long as we can float, we shall float together If we must sink, we shall go down as one.”¹³

He was soon ordered to European waters to assist with the American cause whenever possible and once in France quickly befriended American commissioner Benjamin Franklin who supported Jones’ proposal to engage English shipping in English waters.¹⁴ During the ensuing months he made several voyages and was victorious in all engagements, including an assault on the town of Whitehaven where he first joined the Royal Navy in 1760. For this action against Whitehaven, the British would brand Jones a pirate and view him with contempt for his actions. In September 1778 Jones turned over the command of The Ranger and assumed command of a larger French converted merchant ship dubbed Duc Le Duras. Jones renamed the 42-gun vessel Le Bon Homme Richard after his friend and fellow Mason Ben Franklin, who had written Poor

¹¹ Morison, 52.
¹² Kanihack, Short Talk Bulletins – John Paul Jones
¹³ Ibid.
Richard's Almanac which was published in France under the title Les Maximes du Bonhomme Richard. It was upon this ship that Jones literally sailed into the history books.

On September 22, 1779 off Flamborough Head, England, Jones engaged an English squadron including the frigate Serapis. Realizing the fertility of fighting the outgunned ship, Jones hoped to lock the riggings of the Bonhomme Richard and the Serapis together forcing hand-to-hand combat. It is at this moment Jones is supposed to utter his famous phrase “I have not yet begun to fight!” when the English demanded a surrender of the ship. After about an hour of fierce fighting from his Marines, the decks of the British ship were cleared and the American fleet was victorious; the English squadron surrendering to Jones. Moving his colors to the enemy Serapis because the heavily damaged Bon Homme Richard was unable to sail, Jones spent a day and a half attempting repairs. Ultimately the ship was allowed to falter and slip beneath the waves.

When the Revolution ended, Jones was unable to secure a command in the now shrinking Continental Navy. Ever the adventure seeker, John Paul Jones entered the service of Empress Catherine the Great of Russia in 1788 as a Read Admiral in the Imperial Russian Navy. Masonic Folklore imparts us with the tail that Catherine was Antimasonic, but found Jones a proud member of the Craft. Despite her misgivings on the Fraternity, she allowed Jones to be discharged in 1790 from her Imperial Navy with full pay and the retain his rank. He returned to Paris and was active in the Lodge of Nine Muses in France, which he had joined in 1780. His admirers and friends spent much time visiting the great sailor and possibly hastened his

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15 Kanihack, Short Talk Bulletins – John Paul Jones
16 Thomas, 396.
17 Ibid.
18 Kanihack, Short Talk Bulletins – John Paul Jones
19 Benjamin Franklin was Master of this Lodge during his Ambassadorship to France
death. Jones suffered from a heart condition and the constant stream of visitors exposed him to numerous illnesses. He died on July 18, 1792 at the age of 45. He was buried in a simple ceremony in a lead coffin in a cemetery owned by the French Royal Family. Two years later in the midst of the French Revolution, the property was sold and quickly forgotten. The area would be later used as a garden, a place to dispose of dead animals and where gamblers bet on animal fights.

But Jones’ story doesn’t end there. In 1905 the body of Jones was tracked down and by the American Ambassador to France after years of exhausting searching. After positive identification of the body, it was transported to the United States aboard the USS Brooklyn and reinterred at the US Naval Academy on April 24, 1906 by President (and Brother) Theodore Roosevelt. (His remains were eventually moved to the Naval Academy Chapel in 1913 where they remain today.) But in 2016 the final Masonic connection to Brother Jones would take place, when it is discovered that Brother Jones had never received a Masonic Funeral Service. The Grand Lodge of Maryland sought to right this undoing. In April 2016, one hundred and ten years after his original internment at the Naval Academy, Brother John Paul Jones received the Masonic services befitting the colorful and storied hero of the American Revolution and our Masonic Brother.

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20 Morrison, 302.
21 Kanihack, Short Talk Bulletins – John Paul Jones
22 Morison, 300-310.
Appendix I

Original text and spelling of John Paul Jones’ Petition for Membership
St. Bernard Lodge 3122 Kirkcudbright, Scotland

To the Worshipfull, the Master, Wardens & Permanent Brethren of free and accepted Masons of the Lodge of St Bernard held at Kirkcudbright.

The Petition of John Paul, Commander of the John, of Kirkendal, Humbly Sheweth

That your Petitioner, for a considerable time by-past, haith entertained a st
rong and sincere Regaird for your most noble, Honourable, and Ancient Society of Free and Acepted Masons, but Hitherto not meeting with reasonable opportunity Do now most Humbly crave the benefit of Receiving and Admitting me Into your fraternity as an Entered aprentice, promising, assuring and engaigidg to you That I shall on all Rules and Orders of your Lodge be most obsequient and observant. That I shall in all things Deport, behave, and act answerable to the Laws and Instructions of the Lodge, and in every thing to which I may be made lyable, promising faithful obedience. The complyance of your Right Worshipfull Wardens and rest of the Brethren will singularly oblidge and very much Honour, Right Worshipfull, your most Humble Petitioner and most Humble servant.

Jno Paul

I do attest the Petitioner to be a good man and a person whom I have no doubt will in due time become a worthy Brother.

James Smith
Works Cited


