

MILITARY MEDICAL HISTORY

MILITARY MEDICINE, 180, 8:926, 2015

John Paul Jones' Autopsy

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In July 1792, John Paul Jones, the Revolutionary War naval hero, died in Paris, France. Once a captain in the U.S. Continental Navy in command of the *Bonhomme Richard*, Jones died penniless and was buried in a pauper's grave in a location that was quickly forgotten.

Jones is famous for a battle on September 23, 1779, during which the *Bonhomme Richard*, fought the 44-gun Royal Navy frigate *Serapis*. When Jones refused a British demand for surrender, he is remembered for saying "I have not yet begun to fight." Jones later took command of the *Serapis*, upon the British surrender.¹

Following the war, Jones left the fledgling United States for France in 1788. From there he traveled to Denmark, Russia, and eventually back to Paris. He remained in Paris after a scandal in Moscow, until his death at age 45, after months of suffering from jaundice and other ailments. He was buried only weeks before the French Revolution in 1789. In fact, many of the Swiss Guards who died defending the French king were buried in a mass grave adjacent to Jones' burial site.²

In 1905, Jones' body was located and exhumed by Horace Porter—a Civil War veteran, Medal of Honor recipient, and President Ulysses S. Grant's secretary. The body was remarkably well preserved, and an autopsy was performed by Victor Cornil, a professor of pathology at the Paris Medical School. The autopsy showed evidence of kidney disease consistent with symptoms Jones had been suffering right before his death, and his left lung showed signs of the pneumonia he was diagnosed with in late 1788.³

Jones' remains were returned to the United States and re-interred at the U.S. Naval Academy, in Annapolis, Maryland.

Cornil's autopsy instruments were given to the Army Medical Museum (today's National Museum of Health and Medicine [NMHM]) in 1955 by Cornil's grandson, Dr. Robert Messimy. The kit (Fig. 1) contains a group of 11 instruments in a case. It was made by F. Charriere in Paris, France. The instruments include a postmortem hammer, dissecting forceps and scalpels, postmortem knives and chisels, and various autopsy saws.⁴ The kit is currently on display at NMHM in Silver Spring, Maryland.

American Registry of Pathology, in support of the National Museum of Health and Medicine, U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command, 2500 Linden Lane, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

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doi: 10.7205/MILMED-D-15-00120



FIGURE 1. Victor Cornil of Paris, France, used these instruments to perform the 1905 postmortem examination positively identifying Continental Navy hero John Paul Jones. Jones died in 1792. The kit is currently on display at the NMHM in Silver Spring, Maryland. (M-001.00005) (Disclosure: This image has been manipulated using dodging and burning techniques.) (NMHM photo illustration by Matthew Breitbart/Released.)

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