

Who Was John Paul Jones?

John Paul Jones—perhaps the most famous naval officer in United States history—was born John Paul in Scotland in 1742. His career at sea began as a merchant’s apprentice when he was thirteen; by age twenty-one he was the captain of a small vessel sailing between British ports and the West Indies. Following one voyage he faced a murder charge after the death of one of his men, then in 1773 while quieting an attempted mutiny, he was directly responsible for the death of another. To avoid trial in a criminal court he fled to the colony of Virginia and changed his name to John Paul Jones.

In 1775 Jones traveled to Philadelphia to offer his services to Continental Congress. An endorsement from Richard Henry Lee of Virginia resulted in his commission as a first lieutenant in the newly created Continental Navy. On December 3, 1775, Jones raised the flag of the original thirteen colonies* for the first time onboard a naval vessel named the *Alfred*. A year later, Jones’ first commanding role on the sloop *Providence* resulted in several American successes along the North Atlantic coast. On June 14, 1777—the same day the new American flag called the Stars and Stripes was adopted—Jones was assigned command of the *USS Ranger*. Onboard the *Ranger*, Jones was again the first to hoist a new American flag at sea.



*Prior to its adoption by the Continental Army, John Paul Jones hoisted the Grand Union Flag—the first national flag of the United States of America—aboard the warship *Alfred*. The banner featured the British Union Jack in the top left-hand quarter and one stripe for each colony. The incorporation of the combined crosses of England and Scotland in the design of the Grand Union Flag represent the idea that Americans viewed themselves as Britons fighting for the freedoms trampled by their Hanoverian king. When they called themselves patriots, they meant British patriots who cherished centuries-old liberties such as jury trials, the right to hold property and parliamentary representation. As separation from the crown became inevitable, the Continental Congress adopted a new, original flag they called the Stars and Stripes.

In November 1777, the Continental Congress sent Captain Jones to Europe with orders to attack commercial British ships in the enemy's waters. Over the next two years, Jones enjoyed great victories, capturing prizes and prisoners at sea, and gaining notoriety in Britain. In France, Jones built strong relationships with Benjamin Franklin and other American ambassadors to the French court; as a result, Captain Jones' *Ranger* was the first American naval vessel to be formally saluted by France after signing the Treaty of Alliance, formally recognizing American independence.



Jones set sail from France to the Irish Sea where the *Ranger* engaged with the British sloop of war *HMS Drake*. After a fierce struggle which took the life of its captain, Jones captured the *Drake* in Great Britain's home waters, creating a furor in the British press. As one of the Continental Navy's few significant victories during the war, Jones' capture of the *Drake* held immense symbolic importance, demonstrating that the Royal Navy was not invincible and that the Continental Navy was a force with which to be reckoned.

Impressed by this victory, France

offered Jones command of a large sailing vessel formerly used in trade with the East Indies, along with a fleet of four other naval vessels and two privateers. Although the ship he was given to

command was older and slower than Jones wanted, it was the most heavily armed vessel he had ever sailed. He renamed the ship the *Bon Homme Richard*—or good man Richard—to honor Benjamin Franklin, who was responsible for his favorable reputation among the French and famously known for *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

Aboard the *Bon Homme Richard*, Jones again set sail for the British Isles to threaten the English fleet. Off the English coast near Flamborough Head, Jones captured an English fisherman and learned that the Royal Navy was escorting a returning convoy of ships from the Baltic carrying tar, pitch and turpentine—supplies essential to the English and no longer available from America. Hours after spotting the fleet on September 23, 1779, as Jones closed the distance between the vessels, the merchant ships veered away to safety, but two British warships, the *HMS Serapis* under Captain Richard Pearson and the *Countess of Scarborough*, engaged the Americans. When the ships were in hailing distance of one another Pearson called “who are you”—Jones responded by ordering the *Bon Homme Richard's* gun ports open and unleashing a barrage of cannon fire on the *Serapis*. After an intense moonlight battle, Jones boldly rammed the *Serapis*, bringing the ships close enough to grapple with one another. Once side by side, Captain Pearson supposedly called “sir do you strike,” asking if Jones was ready to surrender, to which Jones is famously said to have replied “I have not yet begun to fight!” After one of Jones' men threw a grenade onto the *Serapis* inflicting severe damage, Captain Pearson surrendered. The *Bon Homme Richard*, more critically damaged than the *Serapis*, sunk the next day. Jones and the remainder of his men took charge of the *Serapis* and sailed to the harbor of the Dutch island of Texel for repairs. Although the British immediately blockaded the harbor, and the British ambassador demanded that the Dutch surrender “the pirate Paul Jones of Scotland” or compel him to put to sea, Jones traveled on to Amsterdam where he was received as a hero. The victory proved to be the high point of Jones' career.





When Captain Pearson returned to London, he was knighted by King George III for preventing the American capture of the Baltic fleet, prompting Jones to remark "the next time I see him the king will make him a duke!"

Jones returned to America to take command of the ship of the line *America*, however as the war drew to a close, the *America* was instead given to the French to replace a vessel lost in their defense of the United States.

As the Continental Navy slowly ceased operations, Jones became a sailor of

fortune. Empress Catherine of Russia offered him an admiralty in the Russian Black Sea fleet which he eagerly accepted, but he never again achieved the success he enjoyed during the American Revolution. Jones' last government appointment was as an agent for American prisoners in Paris.

On July 18, 1792, at the young age of 45, Jones died. His Scottish Calvinist background prompted a burial in the Protestant section of the Saint Louis Cemetery, but just four years later, France's revolutionary government sold the cemetery property and the bodies interred there were forgotten.

In 1899, the United States ambassador to France began an investigation to locate the remains of John Paul Jones. Jones' well-preserved corpse was discovered six years later, wrapped in a winding cloth and straw and sealed tightly in a lead cask of brandy. An autopsy conducted by the University of Paris verified his identity by comparing his mummified head to plaster impressions taken by artist Jean-Antoine Houdon in 1780. His untimely death was determined to have been caused by the kidney ailment nephritis, complicated by pneumonia. President Theodore Roosevelt, lobbying for support to expand America's naval fleet and sensing an opportunity for a public celebration, dispatched the *USS Brooklyn* to France to bring the great naval hero back to his "country of fond election." Today Jones is interred in the chapel of the United States Naval Academy in a marble sarcophagus held aloft by four leaping bronze dolphins, in a grand ceremonial crypt surrounded by mementos of his honors and accomplishments—including his Society of the Cincinnati diploma.