



NAVY MEDICINE IN THE AGE OF SAIL

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, 1775-1783

- Throughout the American Revolutionary War, **Navy surgeons and surgeon's mates**—those first representatives of what we call Navy Medicine today—could be found on almost every ship of the Continental Navy, as well as colonial privateers and state vessels.
- During the heat of battle, the need for their services rang as loud as any bell announcing a declaration of freedom and independence from Great Britain. And **some 250 years since this mission first commenced, remains as relevant as ever.**

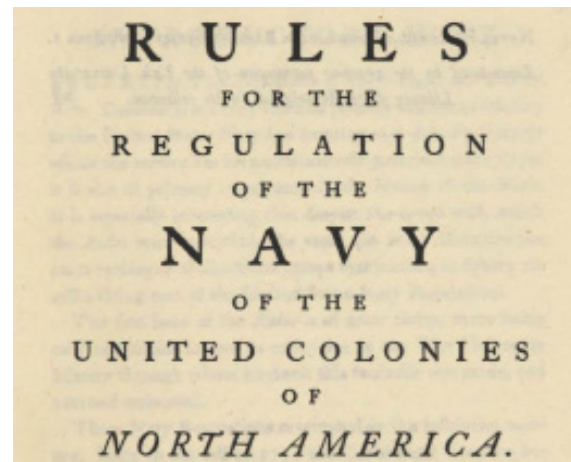


MEDICINE IN THE 13 COLONIES PRIOR TO THE REVOLUTION

- The field of medicine was divided into physicians (university-educated), surgeons (apprenticed, akin to tradesmen), and apothecaries (apprenticed, dispensed drugs and acted as general practitioners).
- Approximately 400 of the 3,500 medical practitioners in the colonies held medical degrees, mostly from King's College (Columbia University), the College of Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania), or European schools, particularly the University of Edinburgh.

THE BEGINNING OF NAVY MEDICINE

- Oct. 13, 1775:** The Second Continental Congress authorized the **outfitting of a swift-sailing vessel** with 10 guns and 80 men to intercept British supply ships.
- Nov. 28, 1775:** The **Rules for the Regulation of the Navy of the United Colonies** mandated a designated area for sick and wounded Sailors, attended by crew members responsible for their care and cleanliness.
- Nov. 1775:** Surgeon **Joseph Harrison** of Kent County, Delaware and Surgeon's Mate **Henry Tillinghast** of Providence, Rhode Island reported aboard the *Alfred* in Philadelphia becoming the **first medical personnel in the Continental Navy.**



THE NAVY'S FIRST MEDICAL PROVIDERS

- From 1775 until 1783, a total of **136** surgeons and surgeon's mates served in the Continental Navy.
- Whereas the **surgeon was a commissioned officer** who rated a wardroom aboard the ship, the **surgeon's mate was a warrant officer** who held the same status as masters-at-arms and sail-makers and typically shared the steerage with midshipmen.
- Surgeons and surgeon's mates were **signed to a particular ship for a specific cruise**. If their ship was destroyed, they would be permitted to leave the service and "sign" elsewhere.



Navy Surgeon Nathan Dorsey (1754-1806) By Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) courtesy of The American Revolution Institute



NAVY MEDICINE IN HARM'S WAY

- On Sept. 23, 1779, off Flamborough Head (Yorkshire coast), England, **Capt. John Paul Jones** commanded the 36-gun *Bonhomme Richard* in a legendary naval battle against the 44-gun HMS *Serapis*. This fierce engagement cemented Jones's reputation as a naval hero and earned him the title "Father of the U.S. Navy."
- The *Bonhomme Richard*, a converted French merchant ship renamed in honor of Benjamin Franklin, carried a crew of 347, including **Surgeon Lawrence Brooke** and **Surgeon's Mates Elijah (Elisha) Perkins** and **John Peacock**.
- Brooke, a Virginian who may have known Jones previously in Fredericksburg, had studied medicine in Edinburgh and Paris before joining the ship. He **proved to be a skilled surgeon, tending to the numerous casualties during the brutal battle.**
- Jones's squadron (*Alliance*, *Pallas*, and *Vengeance*) encountered the Royal Navy ships *Serapis* and *Countess of Scarborough*. While the *Pallas* engaged the *Scarborough*, Jones targeted the *Serapis*. **Despite the Bonhomme Richard suffering heavy damage early on, including exploding cannons and flooding, Jones refused to surrender, purportedly declaring, "I have not yet begun to fight!"** Even as Brooke reported the dire situation below decks, Jones remained steadfast.
- Seizing an opportunity, Jones grappled the *Bonhomme Richard* to the *Serapis*, and a combination of musket fire from the Marines and grenades dropped from the mainyard forced the *Serapis's* captain to surrender.
- The *Bonhomme Richard* was so badly damaged that it sank, but Jones's **tactical brilliance secured a crucial victory for the fledgling United States.**
- The victory came at a steep price, with heavy casualties on both sides. **Eighteen percent (63) of Bonhomme Richard's company were killed and 25 percent (87) were wounded;** the *Serapis* suffered 19 percent (54) killed and 27 percent (75) wounded.

NAVY MEDICINE AT SEA

- Navy surgeons at sea dealt with battle injuries (gunshot wounds, amputations, fractures, dislocations), and other emergencies. They also performed minor procedures like tooth extractions and abscess removals.
- Gunshot wound treatment involved removing the ball and stopping hemorrhage. Infections, dehydration, hypovolemic shock, and gangrene were common complications, often worsened by antiphlogistic treatments.
- Disease was believed to be caused by an imbalance in the body's humors (phlegm, blood, black bile, yellow bile). This led to antiphlogistic treatments like bleeding, cold water drenching, blistering, purgatives, emetics, and sweating/salivation inducers.



SOURCES:

Artwork:

- All artwork courtesy of Navy Art Gallery, Navy History and Heritage Command, and the American Revolution Institute

Publications:

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- Sobocinski, A.B. (Oct. 12, 2022). "Born in Harm's Way: The Advent of Navy Medicine in the Revolutionary War." *DVIDS*.