Notes and Queries

The Story of Two Great Patriots—Dr. James Craik, Chief Physician and Surgeon of the Continental Army and John Paul Jones, American Naval Commander.

Arbigland was an imposing country seat situated on a headland jutting into the North Sea not far from Dumfries in Scotland. To its master on an unknown date in the year of 1730 was born a son, James Clark.

This boy grew to sturdy manhood, was educated at the University of Edinburg and in the year 1750 emigrated to America where he was to exercise upon a new world and the destiny of a nation a profound but unappreciated influence. In the year 1747, three years before James Craik left the shelter of his father's roof to travel to the new world, there was born in the humble gardener's cottage at Arbigland, another boy. The Arbigland gardener's name was John Paul, the son was christened John Paul and this youth, with Jones added onto his name, was to become the John Paul Jones who commanded the Bon Homme Richard and terrorized the Solway Firth.

John Paul Jones was but three years of age when James Craik set his face toward the West and embarked upon the long voyage to America but the 20-year old lad must have romped with the three year old child under the democratic surroundings of the old Scotch manor home, little realizing that his small play-fellow of humble birth was to achieve a fame not greater than his but by strange vicissitude of fate more enduring in the memory of the nation they served in common. For while John Paul Jones was disinterred from his forgotten grave in Paris in 1905 and brought by a mighty squadron of battleships under command of Rear Admiral Sigsbee to rest in an honored grave at Annapolis, Craik was left to slumber in the quiet shadows of the church yard of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria, Virginia, in an unmarked grave. He whom the father of our country had delighted to honor and regarded as his most intimate personal friend found none so lowly as to pay him homage.

It was left to James Craik's descendants to do that which the nation should have done from gratitude, long since. They sought out his grave in the church yard of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria where he had slumbered for 114 years and on October 14, 1928 there was dedicated a fine monument which had been erected thereon.

Of John Paul Jones no more need be recounted. His career is familiar to all but not so with the old French and Indian fighter and Revolutionary hero, Dr. James Craik. And it bears careful reading containing food for thought that a man who by one single action, that of the exposure of the infamous Conway Cabal, which sought to ruin George Washington's military career could so change the destiny of a nation and yet be so completely forgotten by that nation.

When James Craik left Scotland in 1750 he went first to the Bermudas. He tarried there only a short time and moved on to Norfolk, Virginia. But the restlessness of youth lured him still further west and he again located at Winchester, Virginia, where he saw his first military service in connection with the medical work of the Fort situated there.

Upon the organization of the Virginia Provincial Regiment in 1754, Craik was appointed surgeon. The command was at the time tendered to Major George Washington who modestly declined...
but accepted the Lieutenant-Colonelcy, the command going to Colonel Joshua Frey. The regiment was not brought together until, upon the death of Frey at Wills Creek, Washington succeeded to the leadership and the headquarters joined him at Fort Necessity. Here was begun that lifelong intimacy between Washington and Craik which was of so much advantage to both.

Craik, as medical officer of his regiment, was present at the battle of Great Meadows in 1754 and rendered surgical aid to the wounded in that action. His service extended also over the period of the ill-fated expedition of Braddock toward Fort Duquesne and he participated in the battle of the Monongahela, where he dressed the wounds of the commander of the British forces and many others of the injured upon that bloody field. Here he witnessed the singular impunity which attended his youthful chief as he performed his duties first as aide and later as commander of the disheartened remnants of the British troops. This made a profound impression upon Craik, which was strongly emphasized when some years later he met an Indian chief who related to him the story of repeated efforts upon his own part and numerous attempts upon the part of his young braves to slay young Washington, but, always failing, they became imbued with the idea that he was under Divine protection and ceased to fire upon him. Craik, with added respect for his friend and commander, accompanied the troops upon their memorable retreat to the East.

When, then, on the 14th of August, 1755, some six weeks after the operations on the Monongahela, Washington was appointed to the command of the Virginia provincial army and assigned to the duty of protecting the Virginia and Maryland frontier from the French and Indians, Dr. Craik still remained as his chief medical officer. The operations thus begun continued for more than three years, during which all the hardships and privations of the hardy frontier troops were shared by the young surgeon, whose service ceased only upon the disbandment of the little army after the capture of Fort Pitt on the 25th of November, 1758.

Upon his retirement from the Virginia provincial service, Craik purchased an extensive plantation at Port Tobacco, in Charles County, Maryland, and erected upon it a spacious mansion which was described by his grandson, the Hon. Daniel Jenifer, in 1849 as even then one of the "largest, most comfortable and agreeable residences in the country." Hither on the 13th of November, 1760, he brought his young bride nee Marianne Ewell of "Belle-Air," in Prince William County, Virginia, and here he passed in active medical practice the years which elapsed until he again followed his friend at his country's call. During this time the Craiks and Washingtons never relinquished their intimacy and the interchange of visits between Port Tobacco and Vount Vernon were the source of the sincerest pleasure to both.

In 1770 Craik accompanied his friend upon the first of two adventurous trips into the western wild to enable Washington to personally examine the lands there subject to military claims. Irving remarks that "The whole expedition was one of those hardy and adventurous kind, mingled with practical purposes in which he (Washington) delighted. This winter voyage down the Ohio in a canoe with the Doctor for a companion and two Indians for a crew through regions yet insecure from the capricious hostility of prowling savages is not one of the least striking of his frontier experiences." They rode on horseback to Pittsburgh and thence
canoeed down the Ohio as far as the Big Kanawha. It was on this trip that Craik met the old sachem who told him of the many ineffectual attempts upon the life of Washington at the battle of the Monongahela. Fourteen years later, after one had led and the other assisted in one of the most memorable conflicts in the world's history, they again toured over the Appalachian mountains and voyaged down the Ohio to the Monongahela which this time they ascended and then struck southward through the pathless forest until they emerged near Staunton in the Shenandoah Valley, having ridden nearly 700 miles about the towering peaks and through the rugged passes of the Alleghenies.

When the occurrences arose which culminated in the War of Independence, Dr. Craik was an active patriot. As early as 1774, he was conspicuous in a meeting of the citizens of his county at Port Tobacco, at which were adopted a series of resolutions in which the people pledged themselves that if the Act of Parliament to blockade the port of Boston was not promptly repealed, the inhabitants of the county would join with the several counties of Maryland and the principal colonies in America, to break off all commercial communication with Great Britain and the West Indies. Craik was a member of the committee of correspondence selected to carry out these resolutions.

So valuable to the cause was the presence of Craik in Maryland and so deeply were planted the rootlets of his social and professional relations, that Washington hesitated a considerable time after assuming command of the American forces to ask his old friend to again place his medico-military experience at the disposal of his country. But in April, 1777 in a most cordial letter he tendered to him his choice between the positions of "Senior Physician and Surgeon of the Hospital with pay of four dollars and six rations per day and forage for one horse," and "Assistant Director General, with pay of three dollars and six rations per day and two horses and travelling expenses found" in the Middle Department. The latter position the Doctor accepted and soon entered upon his duties. On the arrival of Count Rochambeau and his forces, Craik was ordered to join them at Newport, Rhode Island, and to organize their hospital department, a task which he accomplished with the most complete success, and from that time continued to be an active and efficient medical officer of the Army.

On the reorganization of the medical department, October 6, 1780, Dr. Craik was appointed the senior of the four "Chief Hospital Physicians and Surgeons", being the third officer in rank in the Medical Corps, and upon the resignation of Director General Shippen and the promotion of Dr. John Cochran, "Chief Physician and Surgeon of the Army", he was advanced to the second place under the latter title. This position he held until mustered out at the end of the War, in 1783, after personally participating in many of its most important events including the capitulation at Yorktown.

One of the most important acts of Dr. Craik during the War of the Revolution, was in connection with the expose of the infamous Conway Cabal against General Washington. His letter of warning to his commander-in-chief on the subject is one of the most valuable historical documents of the period.
At the close of the War, he returned to his home at Port Tobacco, but shortly after, at the earnest solicitation of his late chief, he removed to Alexandria near Mount Vernon, where he continued in agreeable association with the Washingtons until his death. In 1798, when war with France seemed inevitable and Washington was again summoned to lead the army, he made the appointment of Craik at the head of the medical department one of the conditions of his own acceptance of the command, remarking, "I have already been applied to by a gentleman, to recommend him for director of the hospital, which I have refused, as well on general grounds as because I should prefer my old friend Dr. Craik, who, from forty years' experience, is better qualified than a dozen of them together." Craik was accordingly commissioned Physician-General of the Army, July 19, 1798 with the pay and emoluments of Lieutenant-Colonel, but without rank. With the proverbial negligence of military legislation, the act organizing the provincial army provided only for regimental surgeons and surgeon's mates. Fortunately, however, Hon. James McHenry, the Secretary of War, had himself served as medical officer during the Revolution and in him Craik found a strong support in developing a properly organized "Medical Establishment," an act for the materialization of which was passed by Congress, March 2, 1799. The determined attitude of the United States, her prompt resort to arms and the reappearance of her illustrious soldier at the head of the army, however, was sufficient to repress the warlike ardor of France, and, peace speedily prevailing between the two nations the army was disbanded, Physician General Craik's services officially terminating on June 15, 1800.

Long before the latter date, however, he had returned to his beautiful Virginia home where on the 17th of December, 1799, it fell to his lot to close with his own hand the dying eyes of his faithful and famous friend, General Washington. For half a century their lives had run along parallel lines; their youthful commissions had been signed on the same day; side by side they had tempted the fortunes of war; their friendship was cemented by an intimacy of fifty years; and they were endeared to one another by common toils, privations and honors. Of that solemn hour, Craik himself wrote: "I, who was bred amid scenes of human calamity, who had so often witnessed death in its direst and most awful forms, believed that its terrors were too familiar to my eye to shake my fortitude; but when I saw this great man die, it seemed as if the bonds of my nature were rent asunder, and that the pillar of my country's happiness had fallen to the ground." Washington's own testimony to the relations between them was witnessed by the clause of his will which specified that: "To my compatriot in arms, and old and intimate friend, Dr. Craik, I give my bureau (or as the cabinet makers call it, tambour secretary) and the circular chair, an appendage of my study."

Dr. Craik survived this event fifteen years, the latter portion of the time in honored retirement, being remembered by his grandson at this period as "a stout, hale, cheery old man, perfectly erect, fond of company and of children, and amusing himself with light work in the garden." He remained vigorous to the last and passed away February 6, 1814, at the age of sixty-four.