

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE DEATH AND INTERMENT OF JOSHUA BARNEY

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“THESE bones live in the patriotic affection of the American people. Clothed in the image of God, and animated with the spirit of their departed heroes, they were the public property of the nation.”¹ Thus spoke William McCandless on May 12, 1848, as he gave the funeral oration upon the removal to Allegheny Cemetery of the body of Commodore Joshua Barney, renowned naval hero of the American Revolution.

Few residents of Pittsburgh are aware that their city is the last resting place of Joshua Barney, a colorful naval officer of the Revolutionary War. Barney, whose portrait hangs in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, had several links with the state of Pennsylvania and, although they are far from the sea, it is fitting that his bones rest in Pittsburgh. This article will highlight Barney's career as it pertains to this state and area, and detail the circumstances surrounding his death and burial in Pittsburgh.

Barney's naval career was varied and interesting. Born in Maryland in 1759, he followed his boyhood obsession with the sea and was commissioned a navy lieutenant in 1776. He was twice captured by the British and served a year in an English prison but escaped back to America. He served with distinction in the navy until 1784 when he left voluntarily after a dispute over his rank. For the next ten years he engaged in commercial ventures, until in 1794 he bought an estate in Kentucky. Barney then entered the merchant service and sailed as a privateer until 1796 when he was appointed a commander in the French navy. In 1802, he again returned to private enterprise and was twice nominated for Congress. Barney distinguished himself at the Battle of Bladensburg in 1814, when his troops valiantly tried

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¹ *Allegheny Cemetery — Historical Account Reports of 1848 & 1857* (Pittsburgh, 1873), 152.

to keep the British from overrunning Washington, D.C. Barney was wounded in the thigh, and for his heroic attempt to defend the city was presented with a sword of honor by the city of Washington.

Barney's first link with Pennsylvania came when he defended the Delaware in 1782 in one of the most brilliant naval actions in American history. Philadelphia shipowners, frustrated and angry at the plundering by British privateers, began building their own naval fleet to protect themselves. Barney was placed in command of a converted merchantman, the *Hyder Alley*, mounting sixteen six-pounders. As the small fleet anchored off Cape May at the mouth of Delaware Bay in April 1782, a large English force approached the American ships and Barney ordered a retreat up the bay. One of the English ships, the *General Monk*, twenty guns, came up fast on the *Hyder Alley*. Recognizing that he was outgunned, Barney planned to entice the British ship to follow him closely. He told his helmsman to execute his orders in reverse, yelling "Hard a-port," after which the *Hyder Alley* went to starboard, swerving toward the *General Monk* and colliding. The *General Monk's* jib entangled the rigging of the *Hyder Alley* and consequently the British guns could not be fired effectively. After a short battle, the *General Monk* and the rest of the British fleet struck their colors. The state of Pennsylvania gratefully presented a sword of honor to the twenty-three-year-old commander. A painting of the battle now hangs in the United States Naval Academy, completed in 1807 by the French artist L. P. Crepin.²

A Pittsburgh resident, Captain Edward Scull, helped Barney during the battle. The *Pittsburgh Gazette* said, "On this occasion [Barney's death], it is but justice to observe, that Captain Barney received the most important aid from Captain Edward Scull, brother to Mr. John Scull, late editor of this paper. — Captain Scull commanded a body of marines recruited by himself, and behaved in such a manner as to merit the particular thanks of the Commodore."³

Barney's second and final link with Pittsburgh came as he was traveling with his family to his Kentucky estate in 1818. As he made his way down the Monongahela River from Brownsville to Pittsburgh, low water slowed his progress to such an extent that it took three weeks to make the short journey. Said his daughter-in-law, Mary Barney, "The fatigue to which he exposed himself during this passage, and the anxiety under which he labored for the safety and

² Ralph D. Paine, *Joshua Barney: A Forgotten Hero of Blue Water* (New York, 1924), 170-72, 188.

³ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Dec. 4, 1818.

comfort of his family, brought on before the second week, a violent attack of bilious fever. . . ." ⁴

Barney arrived in Pittsburgh in somewhat better health but was unable to leave his boat. Because of a sore throat and persistent pain in his back, a blister was ordered by a Pittsburgh physician. After a few days, Mary Barney wrote, "he was seized, on a sudden, with violent spasms of the wounded limb [which he had received at Bladensburg]. On the Morning of Tuesday, the 1st of December, he sat up and bathed his feet: immediately after returning to bed, another spasm seized him, which lasted but for a moment, but in that moment, his gallant spirit returned to Him who had given it." ⁵

Barney had ordered "this cursed ball extracted from my thigh" upon his death. ⁶ The physicians who had attended him, Dr. Dawson and Dr. Peter Mowry, attributed his death to the effects of the battle wound, whereas the *Statesman* printed, "it was not a bilious cholic, as was reported, but lumbago and inflammatory sore throat." ⁷ Both physicians found the ball a few inches from where it entered the thigh, flattened next to the bone. "Those experienced in such matters, who have seen the ball, pronounce it to have been discharged from a rifle — a fact which may serve to settle the disputed question among the British soldiers [as] to which corps belonged the honor of having brought down the American commander." ⁸

The *Pittsburgh Gazette* carried an obituary notice on December 4, 1818, and the *Statesman* followed a day later, saying, "His remains were interred in the burial ground of the first Presbyterian Church, on Wednesday, with military and masonic honours. The procession was one of the largest and most respectable ever witnessed in this city." ⁹ A monument to Barney was built at the First Presbyterian Church "under the tasteful direction of James Riddle, Esq., of Pittsburgh, composed of a plain marble slab, resting upon a granite base, and supported by six handsomely turned pillars, or balusters, of the same material. It is unostentatious, but neat and durable; and a plain and simple inscription tells the spectator upon whose earthly habitation it is that he stands to gaze. . . ." ¹⁰

There Barney lay for thirty years until 1848, when the managers

4 Mary Barney, ed., *A Biographical Memoir of the Late Commodore Joshua Barney from Autobiographical Notes and Journals* (Boston, 1932), 295.

5 *Ibid.*, 295.

6 *Ibid.*, 293.

7 *Statesman*, Dec. 5, 1818.

8 Barney, *Biographical Memoir*, 296.

9 *Statesman*, Dec. 5, 1818.

10 Barney, *Biographical Memoir*, 297.

of the Allegheny Cemetery dedicated a spot in "the most commanding position in the grounds" as a burial spot for naval heroes, naming it Mount Barney.¹¹ Arrangements were made in March of that year to remove Barney's remains from the First Presbyterian Church to the new resting place, and, on May 12, 1848, his bones were moved. "At an early hour the streets through which the procession was to pass, began to fill with citizens . . . and at eleven the crowd was very dense."¹² The bodies of Barney and Lieutenant James L. Parker, a sailor who had died off the coast of Mexico, were carried to Allegheny Cemetery in a procession that included judges of the state court, faculty and students of both Western University and Duquesne College, and the mayors of both Pittsburgh and Allegheny.¹³ "The whole procession was imposing," the *Gazette* continued, "some of the displays of uniforms were very gorgeous, and the procession was one of the most showy we have seen."¹⁴ McCandless delivered the funeral oration at Mount Barney for both heroes. The speech, according to the *Gazette*, "was not too highly colored."¹⁵

"Here on this mount," it was solemnly announced, "they will repose; and the tall column, carved with the emblems of their great deeds, will rise to animate their countrymen in all future struggles for the preservation of constitutional liberty."¹⁶ As the bells of the churches tolled, "The long train of carriages, the numerous company of Odd Fellows, the train of Firemen, added to the Military, gave the spectator an impression not soon to be erased."¹⁷

The monument that stands today on Mount Barney in Allegheny Cemetery was erected in 1880 but, with its carved relief of ship and eagle, it still reflects the patronage and honor Pittsburghers felt for their war dead of the early nineteenth century. It serves as a reminder that, indeed, "these bones live" in our history, and, as McCandless stated, "to us, and to our successors, is confided the sacred trust of preserving them inviolate, until the last trump shall call the dead to judgement."¹⁸

11 *Allegheny Cemetery — Historical Account Reports*, 72-73.

12 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 13, 1848.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Allegheny Cemetery — Historical Account Reports*, 153.

17 *Pittsburgh Gazette*, May 13, 1848.

18 *Allegheny Cemetery — Historical Account Reports*, 152.