



USS Constitution
Museum

A Healthy Constitution: **Dr. Amos Evans,** **Surgeon, U.S. Navy**

Matthew Brenckle

A publication of the USS Constitution Museum, Boston

A Healthy *Constitution*: Dr. Amos Evans, Surgeon, U.S. Navy

Matthew Brenckle

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Early Life and Education.....	2
A Navy Surgeon	4
Aboard <i>Constitution</i>	8
First Battle Against <i>Guerriere</i>	11
<i>Constitution</i> Against <i>Java</i> : A Bloody Encounter	13
Evans Defends His Reputation.....	15
Service after <i>Constitution</i>	17
An Uneasy Return to Civilian Life	19
Citing this publication.....	21

A publication of the USS Constitution Museum, Boston

“It is a trite remark, that general descriptions of battles present no distinct images to the mind. We read, with little emotion, of broadsides discharged, ships cut to pieces, and numbers killed and wounded- but when particulars are given us, when the imminent risques or piteous disasters of individuals are detailed, we fancy ourselves in their situations, and in a manner, mingle personally in the conflict.”

- Niles' Weekly Register, 1815.

Introduction

When the United States declared war on Great Britain in June 1812, the US Navy was woefully unprepared to fight one of the world's great superpowers. Its 14 seaworthy ships, supplemented with a handful of ill-maintained gunboats, faced the largest, most successful fleet ever seen. Despite the limitations of a small and underfunded force, the U.S. Navy managed to score a string of remarkable victories over its foe. These single ship-on-ship actions raised the navy in the public's estimation and catapulted a few lucky captains into the limelight and the history books.

Unlike the captains, there were many who never had their faces immortalized on medals, jugs or snuffboxes, but still played a vital role in the success of the early U.S. Navy. Among these were the medical officers, the fleet's surgeons and surgeon's mates, men who contributed the skills and know-how needed to keep the ships' large crews healthy. A healthy ship was a happy ship, and a happy ship could perform miracles - or so those in charge ardently hoped. Though given less attention and less encouragement than their counterparts in other navies, the U.S. Navy's medical department managed to attract and retain an adequate number of competent practitioners. This is the story of one young surgeon who moved from tending patients in the Maryland countryside to participating in two of the most celebrated naval battles of the War of 1812.

Early Life and Education

Amos Alexander Evans entered a world of busy prosperity on November 26, 1785. His mother, Mary Alexander, eventually bore nine children, of which Amos appears to have been the eldest. His father, John, had inherited a sizable tannery on the west side of Big Elk Creek, five miles from Elkton, Maryland. During the American Revolution, he provided tanned hides to make cartridge boxes and belts, sword scabbards and shoes, caps and straps, and a whole host of other essential items. After the war, John Evans began to manufacture nails and bar iron from the neighborhood's rich ore deposits.¹

Little is known of Amos Evans's early life, but we can presume he followed the usual pursuits of a wealthy tradesman's son. He attended the Academy in Newark, Delaware where he probably received the rudiments of a classical education, as well as studying English, math, geography, and history.

When or why Evans chose to pursue the medical profession is not known, but by the fall of 1802, when he was only 17, he began attending lectures by the famed Philadelphia physician Dr. Benjamin Rush. One of the country's preeminent medical practitioners, Rush had signed the Declaration of Independence and served as surgeon general of the Continental Army. By 1791, Rush had assumed the post of professor of medical theory and clinical practice at the University of Pennsylvania. It was here, beginning in November 1802, that Evans attended a series of 99 lectures on subjects ranging from advice on siting hospitals and education of doctors to philosophical disquisitions on reproduction and longevity.² Evans clearly hung on every sentence: his lecture notebooks are neatly written regurgitations of Rush's own words. For the most part, Evans took Rush's teachings at face value, adding little of his own commentary, even when he clearly disagreed. Occasionally the good doctor's musings produced a rise in the young student: "The Doctor thinks that Latin & Greek languages by no means essentially necessary to the study of medicine!!! [*sic*]" At other times, however, he found Rush's advice eminently practical: "A legible hand

¹ George Johnston, *History of Cecil County, Maryland and the Early Settlements around the Head of Chesapeake Bay and on the Delaware River, with sketches of some of the old families of Cecil County* (Elkton, MD: published by the author, 1881), 487.

² "Notes taken from Dr. Rush's Lectures Upon the institutes and Practice of Medicine and on Clinical Cases, Volume I-III," 1802-1803. USS Constitution Museum Collection [885.31-33]. Evan's notes only give the day and month of the lectures, not the year. The notebooks have been attributed in some sources to 1806 and 1807. A set of lecture notes by William Darlington (1782-1863) now in the library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia is, however, clearly dated November 10, 1802 to March 10, 1803 and covers the same topics in the same order as Evan's notes. See http://www.collphyphil.org/FIND_AID/D/darlingtonw10a_105.htm

writing is particularly enforced, as serious mischief has been done by prescriptions being indistinctly written.”

Having completed the course of lectures, Evans returned home to Elkton to get some practical experience. Here he studied under the tutelage of Dr. Abraham Mitchell and his son George, learning all he could about the workings of a private practice.³ In the fall of 1806, he returned to Philadelphia to attend courses taught by the aptly named Dr. Philip Syng Physick, Professor of Surgery. Two years of medical practice had apparently affected his hand writing: his book of lecture notes is full of crabbed script, cross-outs, and insertions. One suspects Evans did not lend Dr. Physick the same attention he had Rush. During this sojourn in Philadelphia, Evans lived at 31 North 8th Street.⁴ At that time, the medical department of the College of Philadelphia was housed in a wing of the old “President’s House” at the corner of 9th and Market Street, so he had a short walk to school.⁵

After five years of study, Evans secured an appointment as surgeon’s mate to the 49th Regiment of Maryland Militia. The *Chesapeake-Leopard* Affair in June 1807, in which a British warship fired into an American frigate in an effort to recover alleged deserters, had spurred a flurry of military activity; Evans probably caught a case of war fever. By the fall, when it was clear the Jefferson administration did not consider war with Great Britain a viable option, one suspects that Evans soon became rather bored with his new position.

³ Johnston, *History of Cecil County*, 488, 498.

⁴ From a note inside the back cover of Evans’s journal. “Notes from Doct. Physick 1806-7.” USS Constitution Museum Collection [885.10].

⁵ “Penn’s Second Campus, 1801-1829: ‘President’s House’ at Ninth and Market Streets,” Penn University Archives & Record Center, <http://www.archives.upenn.edu/histy/features/campuses/campus2.html> (September 2018).

A Navy Surgeon

Driven by either boredom, financial necessity, a desire to serve his county in a more useful capacity, or all of these combined, Evans sought an appointment as a surgeon's mate in the U.S. Navy. He received his commission on September 1, 1808. It was probably a bittersweet attainment: his first station was New Orleans, far from home and friends and in some of the most pestilential country imaginable. But the orders for Louisiana could not have entirely surprised Evans. The Marine Hospital (or rather the wing of the Charity Hospital apportioned to the Marine Hospital service) was administered by Dr. William Barnwell, originally of Philadelphia. Evans likely met Barnwell in 1802 or 1803; since Barnwell had importuned President Jefferson for assistants at his new post, it is probably no coincidence that the Navy ordered Evans there.⁶ On October 25, 1808, Evans sailed from Baltimore in the brig *Adherbal*.⁷ While in New Orleans, he spent most of his time looking after patients at the hospital, but also served with the gunboat squadrons at Natchez, Mississippi and Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.⁸ In a letter to his father, Evans expressed his satisfaction with both the hospital and his situation: "I have a good advantage of practice here - as the house is generally full," he wrote. "I have a room to myself and a servant to attend for me. The Surgeon... has a good library which I have the liberty of using."⁹

Having discharged his duty faithfully for 19 months, Evans was promoted to surgeon on April 20, 1810. In September 1811, he received orders to report to the St. Mary's, Georgia station, but the voyage ended in disaster on the North Carolina coast when his vessel was wrecked.¹⁰ None of Evans's surviving papers offer any explanation for why he proceeded to Washington to await orders rather than continue on to St. Mary's. By reporting to the Navy Department in person, he may have hoped to secure a better assignment. If that was his intention, his hopes were gratified. He received new orders to join the frigate *Constitution*, then at anchor in the Potomac River. As the ship's log records, Evans reported for duty on March 23, 1812,

⁶ William E. Rooney, "Thomas Jefferson and the New Orleans Marine Hospital," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (May 1956), 167-182.

⁷ Johnston, *History of Cecil County*, 489.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Amos Evans to John Evans, 13 February 1809, quoted in Harold D. Langley, *A History of Medicine in the Early U.S. Navy* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press: 1995), 119-120.

¹⁰ M330, Abstracts of Service Records of Naval Officers, 1798-1893, NARA.

taking up the duties of Dr. Samuel R. Trevett, whose resignation from the service had been accepted on March 2.

The new surgeon had his hands full. Surgeon's Mate Charles Cotton did his best to take care of the men filling the sick bay, but it appears he did not have the staff or the attention to detail to cope with large numbers of patients. According to Evans's prescription book, there were 26 men on the sick list as of March 26, all afflicted with various fevers, bowel complaints, or injuries sustained while working on the ship.¹¹ Besides administering to the needs of his patients, Evans had a number of other duties, most of which required mounds of paperwork. The printed Naval Regulations of 1802 placed these duties on the surgeon:

1. To inspect and take care of the necessaries sent on board for the use of the sick men; if not good, he must acquaint the captain; and he must see that they are duly served out for the relief of the sick.
2. To visit the men under his care twice a day, or oftener, if circumstances require it; he must see that his mates do their duty, so that none want due attendance and relief.
3. In cases that are difficult he is to advise with the surgeons of the squadron.
4. To inform the captain daily of the state of his patients.
5. When the sick are ordered to the hospitals, he is to send with them to the surgeon, an account of the time and manner of their being taken ill, and how they have been treated.
6. But none are to be sent to sick quarters, unless their distempers, or the number of sick on board, are such, that they cannot be taken due care of; and this the surgeon is to certify under his hand, before removal. If the surgeon of the hospital finds they might have been cured in a little time on board, the surgeon of the ship is to have charged against his wages for every man so sent, ten dollars.
7. To be ready with his mates and assistants in an engagement, having all things at hand necessary for stopping of blood and dressing of wounds.
8. To keep a day-book of his practice, containing the names of his patients, their hurts, distempers, when taken ill, when recovered, removal, death, prescriptions, and method of treatment, while under cure.
9. From the last book he is to form two journals, one containing his physical,

¹¹ Amos A. Evans Collection, vol. 1, William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan.

and the other his surgical practice; which are to be sent to the navy-office, at the end of every voyage.

10. Stores for the medical department are to be furnished upon his requisition, and he will be held responsible for the expenditure thereof.
11. He will keep a regular account of his receipts and expenditures of such stores, and transmit an account thereof to the accountant of the navy, at the end of every cruise.¹²

Luckily, apart from visiting his patients, the surgeon had little to distract him from his record keeping obligations while at sea. To help him with these duties, Evans had one or two surgeon's mates and a number of loblolly boys (medical attendants); a sick sailor's messmates sometimes helped with care, too. With these helping hands at his disposal, the burden of ministering to a score or more of sick or wounded men never became too onerous.

Having studied with some of the best medical minds in the country, Evans's observations and treatments were based on the most current medical theories. Physicians and surgeons possessed an exquisite knowledge of anatomy, but their medical worldview severely hampered their ability to successfully cure and prevent diseases. The theory that certain microbes caused and spread disease or infection had not yet been developed. Evans could not know that the multiple cases of dysentery in the crew were probably caused by drinking the Potomac's fresh but filthy water. For Evans and his contemporaries, physiological imbalances caused disease; only by restoring equilibrium to the system could the disease be eliminated. The millennia-old "humoral" theory formed the underlying basis of all medical thought. Articulated most famously by the 1st-century Greek physician Galen, the humoral theory postulated that the human body contained four essential "humors," or bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Each of these humors reacted to different atmospheric and environmental conditions. When one or more of the humors increased or decreased, the resulting imbalance produced the symptoms of disease. The body's internal balance depended on what went in and out of it. The amount a person perspired or vomited told a doctor that the patient's system was in a state of disequilibrium. At the same time, doctors also monitored the activity (or inactivity) of a patient's nervous and vascular systems.

Medical treatments were intended to restore the disrupted equilibrium. By releasing bodily fluids through perspiration, urination, defecation, vomiting, and bloodletting, the doctor hoped to balance the body's fluids and return it to health.

¹² *Naval Regulations Issued by Command of the President of the United States*, January 25, 1802.

The course of treatment for *catarrh* vividly illustrates accepted practice. Now called a severe cold or the flu, *catarrh* frequently afflicted seamen living in damp, crowded conditions. First, the doctor drew blood from the patient. Next, he might administer “tartar emetic,” - antimony potassium tartrate, to induce vomiting. A cathartic (a concoction to induce bowel movement), perhaps antimony salt in wine to evacuate “bad humors” with the stool, followed. A dose of barley tea soothed the system. Finally Jalap root (*Exogonium purga*), a powerful cathartic, purged the body of all lingering imbalance.¹³

Doctors and their patients thought these treatments worked because they produced noticeable effects. If the medicine did not “operate freely,” - that is, if it did not produce visible results, they were thought ineffective. Luckily, the human body is capable of bearing tremendous abuse; patients frequently improved even after submitting to such rigorous treatments. In fact, during Evans’s tenure on board, only five seamen died of disease or “natural causes.”

¹³ J. Worth Estes, “A Naval Surgeon in the Barbary Wars: Dr. Peter St. Medard on New York 1802-3,” In *New Aspects of Naval History: Selected Papers From the Fifth Naval History Symposium*, edited by Department of History, U.S. Naval Academy (Baltimore: Nautical & Aviation Pub. Co., 1985), 81-92.

Aboard *Constitution*

On June 11, 1812, USS *Constitution* left the Washington Navy Yard and sailed to Annapolis. That day Evans commenced his “Journal Kept on Board the United States Frigate ‘Constitution.’”¹⁴ Kept as a private diary and never intended for publication, the journal gives an intimate sense of Evans’s character and feelings about a host of subjects. He did not write anything elucidating until the ship reached Boston, when he revealed he was a firm supporter of Madison’s Democratic-Republicans and not inclined to suffer Yankees, Federalists, or fools. He felt particularly distressed by the lack of support for the war in New England: “Will the United States receive any assistance from the eastern states in the prosecution of the present war? Judging from present symptoms, I fear not. Good God! Is it possible that the people of the U.S. enjoying the blessings of freedom under the only republican government on earth, have not the virtue enough to support it!”

While not much enthralled with the residents, Evans begrudgingly admired Boston’s built environment: “The streets... are narrow and crooked, but well paved and clean. The houses have an air of neatness about them that in my opinion much surpasses Philadelphia or Baltimore.” Evans was 27 in 1812 and, like many young, unmarried men, always kept one eye on the ladies. “Judging of the females of this place,” he noted, “I should say they were not so handsome as those in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Their persons are not so neat nor their motions so graceful. Their complexions [sic] are rosy and healthy, and their countenances, features, sprightly and animated; or in other words, they appear to have more *mind* and less *grace* than the Southern ladies.”

The distractions of the town quickly faded from memory, however, when *Constitution* sailed on a cruise on August 2. As the ship steered north and east from Massachusetts Bay, the weather grew wet and “uncomfortably cold.” The frigate chased several small British merchant vessels, burning those they caught. Evans’s humanity consistently shined through what he called the “dreadful, concomitant evils of a state of war,” and he did his utmost to administer to the prisoners. In one instance, the supercargo (the person representing the ship’s owner aboard the vessel) of a British brig suffered from a “severe fit of the gravel [kidney stones],” but “every medical and other assistance in our power was yielded him.”

¹⁴ Papers of Amos A. Evans, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

On August 14, a surgeon's mate (either Donaldson Yeates or John D. Armstrong) inadvertently left a candle burning unattended in his cockpit stateroom; it capsized and started a fire. Evans and others leapt into action, but in the scramble to pry open the compartment door, his right hand was "jamm'd with a crowbar." "I have laboured under great pain all day," he scratched in his journal with his left hand, "and am much afraid it will terminate in *Tetanus*." His pain and the following day's activities, coupled with a lack of sleep, evidently put Evans in a foul mood. After describing a number of chases and the burning of a captured brig, Evans launched into a rant on the uselessness of war:

What an anxious [illegible] life is ours! X (X "True tis tis pity, & pity 'tis, tis true."¹⁵) What a pity that the people cannot live in peace, & not "engage in the unprofitable contest of trying which can do each other the most harm." There were not natural outlets enough to life and war, bloody exterminating horrid war was invented! A Frenchman would philosophize on the subject & point out the many benefits resulting from it. He would tell you that by the putrifaction of one mans body millions of animals are ushered into life & happiness that would not otherwise have existed... Sailors by the same rule are thrown overboard to fatten fishes. no doubt it was wisely ordered so! What say you "Jonny Crapo"? "By Gad sair, cet vrais." Deus, votre grand poetticeal ancestais Monsieur Pop say, vat ever existe is par necessitie, ver rite.¹⁶

An old medical friend of mine being call'd out of bed one night to visit a patient who was represented as then giving up the ghost replied, "let him die; the population is too great in this world"! I wonder Kings and Emperors have never given this appology [sic] for a war. It is infinitely [sic] better I think, than nine tenths of their pretexts. --- Knickerbocker speaks of two

¹⁵ "Madam, I swear I use no art at all
That he's mad, 'tis true, 'tis true 'tis pity,
And pity 'tis 'tis true—a foolish figure,
But farewell it, for I will use no art."

Hamlet, Act 2, scene 2, 92–99.

¹⁶ Alexander Pope wrote:

"All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All change, direction which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good.
And, spite of pride, in erring reason spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right."

nations that went to war about a bucket, & satyracally [sic] observes that, it was a good enough cause of war! In this enlightened era- : this age of polite, refined & sublimated feeling, the causes of war are necessarily multiplied in a direct ratio with the increase of our sensibilities. The Emperor, his Majesty, or the sovereign people, as the case may be, have their august feelings injured and oceans of blood are spilt & numberless throats cut to retrieve their honor! “Can honour heal a wound or seat a leg”? said Shakespeare- you are right old Drama. Honour in the present acceptance of the word at least, is no Dungeon. The Prince who fights for a Bucket, & the man who first insults his friend & then murders him “a la mode du Paris,” in the field; both fight for Honour. They are “both honourable men” They are “all, all honourable men”!¹⁷

¹⁷ Evans papers, Library of Congress.

First Battle Against *Guerriere*

These antiwar feelings must have been strengthened a few days later, when on August 19, 1812, *Constitution* fought HMS *Guerriere*. The fight resulted in a swift victory for the Americans. Evans's journal conveys his sense of relief that casualties were light on board the American frigate. Seven men were killed in the action, including First Lieutenant William Sharp Bush of the Marines. Shot through the head while preparing to board *Guerriere*, he died instantly. In his haste to load his gun, Seaman Robert Brice forgot to sponge out the bore to extinguish the smoldering remains of the previous cartridge. As he rammed down the next charge, the cartridge exploded prematurely, killing the young sailor. Seamen James Ashford, John Brown, James Reed, Jacob Sago, and Caleb Smith all perished in the battle as well, but how they died was not recorded.

The wounded tumbled down into the cockpit, deep in the dark recesses of the hull, where Evans and his mates waited with their instruments and tourniquets. As the whole ship shook with each successive broadside, and the dim lanterns cast flickering shadows on the bulkheads, the medical team did their best to perform triage on the wounded. First Lieutenant Charles Morris had leapt onto the taffrail as soon as Lieutenant Bush fell, and received a musket ball in his abdomen. Though the dangerous wound took months to fully heal, he made a miraculous recovery. A spent musket ball hit Sailing Master John Cushing Aylwin in the shoulder blade; in three days he was back on his feet. Seaman Owen Taylor also received a musket ball in the shoulder, which passed out near the spine, then reentered the body, only to pass out again through the opposite side. Marine Private Francis Mullin, stationed in the mizzen top, was struck in the ankle above the Achilles tendon. Though the wound healed, he remained crippled for life. A heavy object struck Seaman David Lewis in the head as he simultaneously received a musket ball in the arm; ten days passed before the searing pain in his head dissipated. Seamen George Reynolds stood in the way of a cannonball or grapeshot that ricocheted from the mainmast, striking him in the knee. A flying splinter struck Ordinary Seaman John Craig below the kneecap. Both men recovered rapidly.

Apart from Lieutenant Morris' grave wound, Seaman Richard Dunn caused the doctors the most anxiety. Struck in the left leg by a grape shot or langrage (scraps of metal fired from a canister), the blow shattered Dunn's tibia and lacerated the muscle. The day after the battle, Evans amputated the limb at the knee. According to Seaman Moses Smith, Dunn "bore the amputation of his leg with a fortitude I shall

always bear in mind. ‘You are a hard set of butchers,’ was all he said to the surgeon, as his torn and bleeding limb was severed from his body.”¹⁸

The British crew did not fare so well: “She had 15 men killed and 62 wounded, most of them very dangerously, immense mischief and destruction having been done by our grape & canister shot.” Used at close range, this ammunition rained hundreds of lead or iron balls at every discharge. In addition, the British claimed 24 men were “missing,” probably hurled into the sea when *Guerriere*’s masts toppled. Evans and his staff lent their assistance to the British wounded.

When the frigate returned to Boston at the beginning of September, *Constitution*’s officers and crew received considerable public acclaim for their victory. He took pleasure in the fact that the “vessel was crowded all day with citizens- boats surrounded us, huzzaing, &c.” His ire was peaked a few days later, however, when he encountered “a parcel of Yankees *as usual* cursing ‘Madison’s ruinous war!’ & trying to *hoax* the Navy Officers.” He ardently wished that “all his Majesty’s loyal subjects would return to their own much loved, dear old England, and not hang like a wen or excrescence on the back of our government.”

¹⁸ Moses Smith, *Naval Scenes in the Last War; Or, Three Years on Board the Frigate Constitution, and the Adams; Including the Capture of the Guerriere* (Boston, Gleason’s Publishing Hall: 1846), 35.

Constitution Against Java: A Bloody Encounter

While the ship underwent an extensive overhaul, Evans continued to explore Boston and its environs. On October 19, 1812, he rode out to Paul Revere's copper rolling mill at Canton, Massachusetts. Some years earlier, Evans's father began to roll copper pigs into thin plates, and he desired a full report on how his competitor in the north carried on the business. Evans wrote an extensive letter, describing the arrangement of the mill and the process for rolling the copper, but apologized that "time would not allow a more minute examination into the process." At the end of his letter, he noted that he expected to sail in a few days on a lengthy cruise, perhaps for the East Indies or the Pacific Ocean. This was true: when Commodore William Bainbridge (who had assumed command of *Constitution* on September 15, 1812) ordered the anchor weighed on October 27, he appeared to have every intention of sailing to those far-flung waters. An encounter with HMS *Java* off the coast of Brazil on December 29, however, altered those plans. After a short but brutal engagement, *Constitution* once again prevailed.

This time Evans found his cockpit crowded with the wounded and dying. Nine men had been killed outright, while another 29 lay wounded. Evans, along with his mates Donaldson Yeates and John D. Armstrong, worked feverishly for a week before they could take the time to record their patients' injuries in the prescription book. Some, like Private Michael Chesley and Seaman Abijah Eddy, suffered from minor contusions. Some had been burned horribly by the explosion of a cartridge. Most dangerously wounded were those struck by the enemy's grapeshot or cannon balls, including Evans's close acquaintance Lieutenant John Cushing Aylwin.

Commodore Bainbridge himself received a dangerous leg wound from pieces of shrapnel struck from the railing of the after hatchway. Thanks to Evans's ministrations, he made a full recovery. During his confinement, the commodore developed a strong affection for Evans, as evidenced by a letter written to the doctor on the eve of his departure from the ship: "Although we part at present I still hope we shall meet on service at some future day; at all events I pray you to be assured of one truth- that in me you have a warm and affectionate friend, and at all times I sincerely hope you will consider me as such."¹⁹

Lieutenant Aylwin's case proved more troublesome. Struck in the shoulder by a

¹⁹ Johnston, *History*, 491.

grapeshot round, he lingered on in excruciating pain until January 29, 1813. In his private journal, Evans penned a short eulogium for his friend:

*"A braver or better man never lived. His country has suffered an irreparable loss in the death of this young man. His many virtues have endeared him to the hearts of all who had the pleasure of his acquaintance, particularly his messmates. He bore his pain with great fortitude & was resigned to his fate, observing that he had witness^d death in too many shapes to be alarmed at his approach. He observed to me a short time before his dissolution, that if I knew the history of his life I would be astonished at what he had suffered. In his will he bequeathed me his cloaths & observed that if he were a rich man he would remunerate me for my kindness in a different way. In the evening his body was committed to the deep with the honors of war."*²⁰

In his prescription book, Evans bordered Aylwin's final entry in black.

Java's crew suffered more casualties than *Guerriere's*. Some 20 men were killed in the midst of the action, and between 103 and 107 wounded, many severely. Among the latter was Captain Henry Lambert, supposedly shot down by Marine Sergeant Adrian Peters as he attempted to rally a boarding party on *Java's* forecastle.²¹ He died on January 4, 1813, and was buried at Fort San Pedro in San Salvador.

²⁰ Evans papers , Library of Congress.

²¹ Benjamin Stevens, *A Cruise on the Constitution: Around the World in Old Ironsides, 1844 – 1847* (New York: Reprinted from the United Services Magazine, 1904), 47.

Evans Defends His Reputation

When *Constitution* dropped anchor off Boston in February 1813, another round of public celebrations and private feasts greeted Bainbridge and his crew. Despite the ebullient reception, Evans soon found himself embroiled in a transatlantic controversy. The May 1813 edition of the *Naval Chronicle*, the Royal Navy's professional publication, printed a letter by *Java*'s Surgeon Thomas Cook Jones. The surgeon accused the Americans of inhumane treatment of the wounded British prisoners. Among his charges, he claimed that they were deprived of food and frequently "thrust into the hold...the hatches at once shutting out light and fresh air, and this too in the latitude of St. Salvador." Jones further asserted that the Americans would not "allow any of our officers to witness the nature of their wounded," and that four American seamen who had undergone amputation "perished under my own inspection." This, of course, was contrary to Captain Bainbridge's official account of the action. As Jones gloated, "I have noticed these facts, that your readers may be convinced of the falsity of their official dispatches." He saved the most damning accusation for last, however. After nearly all the British wounded had been transferred from the shattered *Java* to the *Constitution*, Jones stayed "till within a few minutes of her being set on fire; one poor fellow only remained, who had received a musket ball which entered the right orbit, and remained imbedded in the brain; ...I begged the American lieutenant to let me stay with him undisturbed for a few minutes, as I expected his immediate dissolution. This Yankee son of humanity proposed assisting him into eternity; I instantly dragged him into the boat, and he expired alongside the *Constitution*."²²

Jones' account reached Evans in February 1814; as soon as he read it, he dashed off a scathing letter of rebuttal to the Boston papers, regarding it his duty, "lest silence should be construed into an acknowledgement of its correctness, to expose some of the falsehoods composing that statement." Evans saw the attack as the British surgeon's attempt to disguise his own incompetence. According to Evans, the "Ward-room officers of the *Constitution* will recollect to have heard the Dr. frequently spoken of during the cruise as an inhuman monster." To the first charge, that the British wounded were frequently shut up in the hold, Evans replied that both the American and British wounded were "slung promiscuously together on the *Gun Deck*, and every thing which humanity could dictate...was provided for their comfort and con-

²² Thomas Cooke Jones, letter to the editor, *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol XXIV (London: Joyce Gold, 1813), 414-417.

venience. The ship was cleared for action *but once* during the time they were on board,” when the *Hornet* hove in view. The wounded were on this occasion removed to the berth deck, only one deck below.

Jones’ assertion that four amputees died while he was on board was also false: “We had but 5 amputations altogether; 4 of them are now receiving pensions from their country, and may be seen almost any day about the Navy Yard in Charlestown..... It is a fact susceptible of the clearest and most positive proof, that not one of our wounded men died during the time the Dr. was on board the Constitution,” wrote Evans. As for the most shocking accusation, that the American lieutenant, the “Yankee son of humanity,” wanted to put the wounded British sailor to death, Evans felt this proved “Dr. Jones an infamous calumniator.” On the contrary, Midshipman Lewis German, acting under the orders of Lieutenant Beekman Verplank Hoffman, “repeatedly solicited Dr. J. to visit the man there spoken of, and endeavor if possible, to relieve him; but, that he neglected even to see him until they were ready to leave the ship, when he was removed into the boat at the Dr.’s request.” It is difficult from this distance to corroborate or refute either account. Evans certainly took this opportunity to vindicate his own reputation and those of his fellow officers, but he also transformed his letter into a tidy piece of propaganda. His letter ends with a vitriolic message:

*“I challenge the British to produce a solitary instance where they have given a faithful and candid relation of the result of their actions with us, since the declaration of the present war. They have of late established for themselves, a kind of national character, that, I trust, none will envy them the possession of; they have proved, that although they may not always have been able to conquer in battle, they can prevaricate, defame or mistake, with as much ease as any nation on earth.”*²³

²³ “British Veracity,” *Boston Gazette*, February 24, 1814.

Service after *Constitution*

Evans applied for and received approval for a furlough soon after returning to port. He turned over the ship's medical department to Dr. Benjamin Kissam on March 6, 1813 and left Boston to return to his family in Elkton, Maryland. Not content to sit idle even for a well-deserved rest, Evans volunteered to serve in the fortifications at Frenchtown, Maryland. In early May a British force pushed up Chesapeake Bay, bypassed Baltimore, and attacked several towns at the head of the bay. The evening before the British arrived at Frenchtown the militia withdrew to nearby Fort Hollingsworth at Elk Landing. The next day, the British sacked and burned Frenchtown unopposed. Hearing the gunfire, Evans and several companions commandeered a boat and rowed down river to the town. The enemy had just returned to their boats and spotted the Americans as they stood in the road surveying the ruins. The British fired a shot from one of their boats' guns, and the ball landed near Evans and his friends, peppering them with gravel from the road.²⁴ At the end of his furlough in June, Evans received orders to report to the Washington Navy Yard, but it is not known if he actually made an appearance there.²⁵

Evans returned to duty at the Charlestown Navy Yard by the beginning of August 1813. Because he did not have orders to rejoin *Constitution*, he assumed the role of surgeon for the Boston station. He regularly visited the Marine Barracks and the "Gun Boats employed in the harbour."²⁶ Not surprisingly, most of his cases involved venereal disease and drunkenness, the painful consequences of proximity to town. A Marine named Mcnamara was "much beaten and bruised" in a "drunken frolic," while he described another private named Upshaw as a "thin emaciated drunken wretch." These duties were not terribly burdensome, however, and he amused himself firing repeating muskets at a target in the Navy Yard and touring the surrounding countryside.²⁷ He also found time to attend lectures at Harvard Medical School and received a degree from there in 1814.²⁸

The United States Senate officially ratified the Treaty of Ghent on February 17, 1815,

²⁴ Johnston, *History*, 493.

²⁵ M330, Abstracts of Service Records of Naval Officers, 1798-1893, NARA.

²⁶ Amos A. Evans Collection, vol. 2, William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan.

²⁷ Amos A. Evans Collection, vol. 3, William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan.

²⁸ Thomas Francis Harrington, *The Harvard Medical School, A History, Narrative and Documentary*, vol. 3 (New York: Lewis Publishing Co., 1905), 1452.

bringing the War of 1812 to an end. Yet the world remained an inhospitable place for American commerce, especially in the Mediterranean, where the Algerians had resumed their harassment of American vessels. Hoping to put to rest the conflict with the North African states, Congress authorized a punitive expedition to the region in March 1815; squadrons under the command of Stephan Decatur and William Bainbridge sailed for North Africa in May and July respectively. Amos Evans served as surgeon to the new 90-gun ship-of-the-line *Independence*. He was also appointed fleet surgeon in the Mediterranean, and so bore responsibility for the health of many hundreds of sailors besides the 790 men on his own ship. By the time Bainbridge's squadron reached Gibraltar, Decatur had already wrested a treaty from the Dey of Algiers. The British and Dutch completed the subjugation of the North African states in 1816, when a combined fleet bombarded Algiers for nine hours and forced another treaty on the Dey.

Independence returned home in December 1815 and Evans resumed his duties as surgeon at the Charlestown Navy Yard. Sometime after his return he met and married Miss Mary Oliver (b. 1795 in Beverly, Massachusetts, d. 1881 in Elkton, Maryland), daughter of Elizabeth Kemble and the Reverend Daniel Oliver. They were married by Dr. William Ellery Channing at his Federal Street Church on March 28, 1816.

An Uneasy Return to Civilian Life

By July 1818 the couple had returned home to Elkton; on furlough, Evans entered private practice.²⁹ At the end of March 1821, he received an unexpected letter from Secretary of the Navy Smith Thompson ordering him to Boston to assume the duties of surgeon aboard *Constitution*. For Evans, this summons came at an inopportune time. As he made clear in his reply, the orders “took me all aback.” For years he had applied for a comfortable station on shore, appealing to the former Secretary of the Navy and Commodores Hull and Bainbridge for a position at one of the many naval hospitals. “Finding, after 9 years of arduous & constant service, that Surgeons much younger than myself and some of whom had never acted as mates or been at sea, were stationed at Navy yards & Hospitals in the different Sea Ports, with the privilege of private practice,” he had become thoroughly discouraged. It was not merely a matter of honor or justice. To support his growing family, Evans needed the pay and “perquisites” that a shore station would bring him. Nevertheless, he was prepared to follow Thompson’s orders, “if you insist on it.” He would leave Elkton for Boston reluctantly, however, because the move would “be attended with ruinous consequences to my private interests; & will defeat completely all my prospects.” His family would be left “without prospect of support during my absence,” and his rapid departure would not even allow him time to collect debts or sell his stock of medicine to defray the costs of travel to New England.³⁰

Evans’s letter bordered on the insubordinate; there is no record of Secretary Thompson’s reaction to it. He countermanded the orders, but never found a shore post for Evans. The succeeding Secretary, Samuel Southard, had no place for the doctor either. Evans lacked the influence or notoriety of his colleagues. Seeing no chance for advancement in the post-war navy, he resigned his commission on April 15, 1824.

In later years, an acquaintance of Evans wondered about this choice: “Whatever induced such a man to give up the splendid career which was open to him and settle down in a little, dull, dirty town such as Elkton must have been when he located here passes comprehension. He came here however and literally gave himself to the people of the town, and surrounding country, for about thirty years. No night was too dark, no cold too severe, no storm too violent to deter him when human suffering

²⁹ He purchased a large brick-and-stone dwelling on West Main Street in Elkton, located where the Post Office now stands.

³⁰ Amos Evans to Smith Thompson, March 29, 1821, Letters Received by the Sec. of the Navy from Officers below the Rank of Commander, 1802-1884 (M148, Roll 26, vol. 59), NARA.

appealed to him.”³¹

Evans and his wife raised four children, Alexander (b. 1818, d. 1888), Andrew Wallace (b. 1829, d. 1906), Mary, and Mary Elizabeth. Alexander trained as an engineer and later studied law. He practiced in Elkton and later served three terms in Congress. Andrew studied at Harvard until his father’s death and then entered West Point, where he graduated in 1852. He fought in the Union Army during the Civil War and in the American Indian Wars, eventually reaching the rank of colonel. Little is known of Evans’s two daughters, but it is suspected that Mary Elizabeth died young.

Without the aid of government records or casebooks, the last 20 years of Evans’s life are difficult to trace. He evidently made a name for himself in his native town and became a much-respected member of the community. His wide-ranging navy experience served him well; the injuries and small-town sickness he treated must have seemed tame after battle injuries and the diseases of improvident sailors. It is said that his friends encouraged him to run for the Maryland governorship, but that he preferred the quiet life of a country doctor.³² Evans died at home on January 15, 1848, aged 63, and was buried in the family plot behind Elkton Presbyterian Church. All of the businesses in Elkton closed on the day of his funeral.

Amos Evans and the other medical men who served in the early U.S. Navy lived and worked in a world of scarcity. In dark, cramped, and damp sickbays and cockpits, they operated on and medicated the sick and hurt. With limited knowledge about the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of disease and infection, and with a narrow range of drugs and techniques at their disposal, they nevertheless served their patients remarkably well.

³¹ William J. Jones, “Elkton Fifty Years Ago,” manuscript on file at the Historical Society of Cecil County, Maryland, <http://www.cecilhistry.org/virtuallibrary/elkton1830s.pdf>.

³² Seruch T. Kimble, “Amos A. Evans MD: Father of American Naval Medicine,” *Maryland Medical Journal* (July 1991), 587-592.

Citing this publication

APA

Brenckle, M. (2018). Outfitting USS *Constitution* during the War of 1812. Retrieved from <https://www.usscm.org/publications/outfitting-uss-constitution-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf>

MLA

Brenckle, Matthew. "Outfitting USS *Constitution* during the War of 1812, 2018, outfitting-uss-constitution-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf.

Chicago

Brenckle, Matthew. "Outfitting USS *Constitution* during the War of 1812." (2018): outfitting-uss-constitution-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf.