

## **Albert D. Ports** ( - 19 Nov 1910)

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**Ports.** Suddenly on November 19, 1910 at Casualty Hospital, Albert D. Ports. Funeral from Mr. Zurhorst's funeral parlors, 301 East Capitol street on Wednesday, November 23 at 2:30 p.m. Friends invited.

*The Evening Str, November 20, 1910, p. 16*

### **Albert W. Ports Dead**

#### **Had Been Rigger at Capitol More Than Forty Years**

Albert W. Ports, 115 4th street southeast, for more than forty years a rigger at the United States Capitol, died shortly after 8 o'clock last night at the Casualty Hospital. He suffered from uraemic poisoning.

The funeral will be held at 2:30 o'clock Wednesday afternoon at the undertaking parlors of George P. Zurhorst, 2d and East Capitol streets southeast. Burial will be in Congressional cemetery. Rev. Dr. Weidly, pastor of the Church of the Reformation, will conduct the services. The pallbearers have not been selected yet.

Mr. Ports, who was sixty-five years of age, was taken ill yesterday, shortly before noon, while in his office at the Capitol. He was moved to Casualty Hospital.

Mr. Ports was born in Washington. He was regarded as one of the most expert riggers in the United States. On several occasions when the "Goddess of Liberty" which surmounts the dome of the Capitol was to be cleaned it was the task of Mr. Ports to erect a skeleton scaffold in order that the cleaners might reach the top of the statue. He was known to many of the older residents of Capitol Hill, as he had resided in Southeast Washington nearly all his life.

Mr. Ports had been a widower for many years. His son, who assisted him at the Capitol, died two years ago. He was a life member of Lebanon Lodge, No. 7, F.A.A.M. and Scottish Rite Masons.

Coroner Nevitt was notified of the death last night and will give a necessary death certificate.

*The Evening Star, November 27, 1910, p. 2*

### **Anecdotes of "Al" Ports, Known as the "Human Fly"**

A man who had a strange claim to notoriety died in Washington the other week. He was Albert Ports, a professional rigger, a "human fly," and he often remarked that he was the only man who ever had his picture taken within kissing distance of the Goddess of Liberty. This he considered more of a distinguishing circumstance than the fact that he once fell from the dome of the Capitol and lived to tell the tale. Incidentally, he bore the scars of that accident to the grave. Ports was one of the best known and conspicuous of the old-time attaches of the Capitol, and rendered untold service to the government.

About five years ago an appropriation was made by Congress for the cleansing of the statue of the Goddess of Liberty, with which the dust and rains for many years had played sad havoc. The task of erecting a scaffolding around this distinguished female was almost super-human, but Albert Ports announced he could do it -- and he did. The statue weighs 16,000 pounds and the surface, therefore, is very considerable. The timbers of the scaffolding were hoisted up from the inside of the dome one at a time, and a huge framework erected around the goddess of "Indian" as she is frequently referred to. From the base line to the crest of the building is a good 307 feet while Miss Liberty stands 13 feet 4

inches in her bronze sandals. So to be able to scrub her aquiline nose the man with the brush must be suspended 326 feet in the air. Ports was the only man willing to undertake the feat, and he made good at it.

And this he accomplished thirty years after he had fallen from the dome. It was in August 1874, that Ports climbed into the dome and made his way out upon the "light" balcony. Crawling up on the railing, he leaned far over to examine the roofing directly under the balcony. This gallery, by the way, is composed of thirteen columns, emblematic of the thirteen original states, and Ports never quite decided whether the thirteen hoodoo was responsible for his fall or whether it brought him good luck and saved his life. Not long ago he was telling some friends in the architect's office of his experience, and he said:

"I was leaning way over and thought I had a good purchase. The city, like a great wheel, lay spread out beneath me. Suddenly, I don't know how or why, I lost my balance and plunged down, down, down. I seemed to be hours falling and I know I turned a complete somersault. As I shot into space I heard the frightened screams of my two assistants. Finally, I landed in a crumpled heap in the gallery above the first order of columns. The other riggers told me afterward that they ran down the steps and climbed out on the balcony expecting to find little more left of me than a small grease spot. But I wasn't dead, nor even badly hurt and was already trying to untwist and untangle myself when they arrived. My men took me to the superintendent's office and the doctor that they called couldn't find anything more the matter than a badly broken wrist. He set the wrist, but, as you can see, it is badly maimed and discolored to this day. The doctor said that it wasn't his fault and I guess it wasn't. He wanted me to go home, and not fuss around any more, and give the bones a chance to mend, but I just had to finish that little job -- and finished it that day, too!"

Albert Ports' determination, his absolute fearlessness and reliability, made him vastly useful around such a building as the Capitol. He had a sort of free license about the place, and a little room in the basement of the building was his own particular office by a grateful government in recognition of years of faithful service. It was down a winding stairway, and when he had conducted his visitor into the queer shaped little cell, he had many amusing tales to tell and relics to display. In a curious closet which he delighted to open up, his overalls hung next to a fine black dress suit. His son, who for years assisted the father in his perilous business, was the big item and tenderness of the older man's life. When this son died a year ago, Ports was heartbroken, and went gradually downhill until his sudden death the other week. He was taken ill in the little room he called his "home," beneath the big white dome, and before many minutes was dead.

One of the exhibits Ports kept in his "home" was a bit of dark blue cloth that he said was part of the coat that "the man who walked off the dome, and didn't live to talk about it," had on at the time of the occurrence. Ports seemed to find a particular fascination in this story -- perhaps because of the similarity to his own case. His history of the affair is interesting.

"It was in March, 1875, the next year after my fall. Nobody ever found out whether this man fell or jumped from the dome. Not long before Blondin had made everyone sit up and take notice when he had crossed Niagara on a tight rope. Maybe the stranger had this in mind, maybe he had it too much in mind.

"For several days before he had been wandering around the Capitol taking in the sights and talking to the workmen and guards. He said his name was John McMahan, and that he was studying to be a priest. So when he remarked that he believed he had more faith than Peter, and could walk upon the water nobody paid much attention to him. The Capitol always has been and always will be a place for cranks, and unless they get troublesome nobody bothers them.

"On the morning that the accident occurred McMahan climbed to the top of the dome. As far as we know, it was his first visit there, and it certainly was his last. Wallace Chapman, now a messenger in the architect's office, was then the guard on duty in the dome. He had to attend to some business in the

lower gallery, and when he went down the spiral stairs he left the man standing on the gallery -- the one directly under the goddess and just over the tholus.

"A few minutes later, Chapman said, he was horrified to see a dark mass flying past him, and there being no flying machines visible in those days, he knew something had happened sure enough. In a minute he heard a crash, as the man's body hit the roof just over the tympanu of the east front of the building. I was working in that part of the building, and, following the excitement, rushed with some other employes to the place where the body was lying. John R. French, who was then the sergeant-at-arms, was the first one there, and he and Chapman dragged the body from where it was dangling over the pediment.

"Well, we carried the body down into the crypt. Every bone was broken, and to this day there are inch-deep dents in the facing of the copper where the poor fellow struck.

Ports always wound off this story with a bit of humor that he thought extremely neat. He declared that four other persons had "taken leaps for life from the dome, because two ceremonies of marriage had been performed at that sublime altitude.

When anything special or unusual happened at the Capitol Ports appeared to be always in evidence. One of his amusing anecdotes dates back to the year 1888, when a man blew in one windy morning and asked to be directed to the dome stairway. On being accommodated he commenced his upward journey and continued as far as the second balcony. There he proceeded to divest himself of his clothes, which he arranged in an exceedingly neat pile. When he accomplished the task entirely, and to his satisfaction he retraced his steps rapidly, and, as lightly and gracefully as a deer, leaped blithely into the rotunda. It was just the time of day when sightseers and visitors abounded, and his entrance was before quite a good-sized audience. The guards and guides were paralyzed with utter amazement, refusing to credit their own eyes, and no effort was made to stop the airy stranger. Reaching the exact center of the rotunda, he poised Mercury-like, his right hand pointing aloft. Perhaps he was indicating where his clothes might be found. Perfectly useless orders were shouted by confused guards. Meanwhile the stranger posed and pointed.

In those days a little curio souvenir stand was located in the rotunda. Its owner was a little old lady, a well-known character in her day. On this occasion she appeared to be the only one who had any presence of mind for, seizing a remarkable raincoat that she kept tucked away at the bottom of her stand, she ran to the poseur and promptly enveloped him in its ample folds. This weird statue that had no place either in rotunda or hall of fame was hastily conveyed to shelter and obscurity. Somewhat later he was returned to Ohio and to the asylum in that state from which he had escaped.

*The Evening Star, May 1, 1903, p. 2*

### **Painting the Great Dome**

#### **Extensive Work in Progress at the Capitol**

The great dome of the Capitol is receiving a coat of white paint, nine painters being engaged in the work. These human spiders, as they climb about the dizzy-heightened structure, attract much attention from those on terra firma. The exterior of the dome was last painted nine years ago. One thousand gallons of white paint are required to cover the exterior alone. The main or old Capitol section of the building will also soon appear in a new spring dress of snowy white. Another force of painters is engaged in painting the interior of the dome.

The intricate rigging on the outside of the dome was erected by Head Rigger Albert Ports, who several years ago performed the startling feat of standing erect with folded arms on the shoulders of the statue of Freedom which surmounts the dome. Mr. Ports ascended to his perilous perch on the statue while installing a temporary system of electric lights for use during a national celebration.