

# "John W. Jones"

## **From**

*The Essence of a People: African Americans Who Made a Difference in Loudoun County, Virginia*

John W. Jones was born on June 22, 1817, in Loudoun County on the plantation of William Ellzey, a prominent Virginian who advocated better conditions for slaves. As a youngster, Jones was the houseboy of Ellzey's daughter, Miss Sallie. At the age of twelve, he was sent to work in the fields. The overseer was a fair man, and Jones and the others on the plantation were treated in a humane manner. But when Miss Sallie's health began to decline, her relatives began to manage the estate, and Jones could see that his life would change for the worse. He decided to escape.

In June 1844, Jones, his two stepbrothers, and two slaves from neighboring plantations, left for the north. They traveled on the Underground Railroad through Maryland and Pennsylvania, arriving in Elmira, New York, on July 5, 1844. Jones immediately began to earn money in any manner he could—chopping wood, making candles, working as a school janitor. A relative of the schoolmaster helped him enroll in a public school where he learned to read and write. He married Rachel Swailes in 1856 and eventually raised a family of three sons and one daughter. He also became assistant sexton of the Baptist church and cemetery. In 1859, the townspeople purchased some farmland and turned it into a larger cemetery. John W. Jones became the first sexton of Woodlawn Cemetery in Elmira.

When the Elmira Prison Camp—which housed Confederate soldiers—opened in 1864,

Jones was kept busy. Overpopulation, disease, and a lack of food and warm clothing killed many of the prisoners. Jones and his staff buried more than 2,900 Confederate soldiers with dignity and prayer. Each coffin was clearly marked with any information that the soldier had been willing to share; the information also was placed in a sealed bottle inside the coffin. Any valuables owned by the soldier at the time of his death were carefully catalogued and stored. The graves were identified with wooden markers and arranged in a pattern that suggested soldiers lined up for inspection. They were surrounded by the graves of Union soldiers, grouped as though they were still on guard.

After the war, several Southern families went to Elmira to take their sons, brothers, and husbands home. They were impressed by the beautiful setting and the care that Jones had taken with their relatives. When the families received the precious family photographs, treasures, letters, and remembrances that Jones had kept for them, they were so moved that only three bodies were removed for reburial. When the U.S. Government turned Woodlawn into a National Cemetery, they referred to Jones's detailed records and drawings to refurbish the headstones.

Jones was active in the Underground Railroad and helped 800 people to freedom, concealing as many as thirty people a day in his home. He managed to convince a baggage car worker to allow slaves on the 4:00 a.m. train and let them ride all the way to Niagara. There the cars would be hitched to Canadian trains, and the slaves would literally ride the railroad to freedom. Jones himself made many trips between Virginia, Elmira, and Canada, returning south in 1845 to help his two younger brothers escape. Though Elmira was divided on the issue of slavery, Jones received assistance, both financial and physical, from others in the town and organized townspeople into groups that sent "care packages" to Union soldiers. One local abolitionist he worked with was Jervis Langdon, Mark Twain's father-in-law. Reference to Jones can be found in William Still's *The Underground*

Railroad.

Jones did not forget his Virginia roots. When the son of Ellzey's overseer died at the prison camp, Jones arranged to send the body back to the family. And a few years after the war, Jones returned to the Ellzey plantation and was warmly received.

It wasn't until after Jones's death that a mystery was solved. After the death of Mrs. Smith, an Elmira resident, flowers appeared on her grave every week. The tradition did not stop until John W. Jones died. It seems that Mrs. Smith's house was the last one Jones visited during his journey on the Underground Railroad and he never forgot her kindness.