Jones, John [1]

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by William S. Powell [2], 1988; Revised October 2022

3 Nov. 1817–21 May 1879



Jones, John (1817–1879). Courtesy of Black Past.

[3]John Jones, businessman and leader for black peoples' rights, was born in Greene County [4], the son of a German man named Bromfield and his free multiracial mother. Afraid that his father would take away her son, John's mother apprenticed him to a man named Shepherd on condition that he be taught a trade. Shepherd then bound the youth to a man named Claire who moved to Summerville in northwestern Georgia. There he was taught tailoring and remained until he was nearly twenty-one; by working longer hours than required, he was able to save a little money. He found further apprenticeship employment in Memphis, Tenn., where he made friends with a free black person named Richardson, a blacksmith, and "formed a strong attachment for his daughter Mary." Richardson and his family moved to Alton, III., and as soon as he finished his apprenticeship, Jones made plans to follow. Some heirs of Claire, however, tried to sell him to planters moving to Texas. Jones appealed to his late master for aid; he obtained a horse which he rode day and night on his return to Greene County to collect evidence that he was free.



John Jones. Courtesy of the Chicago Tribute Markers of Distinction.

With abou[5]t $100 Jones settled in Alton in 1844 and soon married Mary Richardson. In March of the following year they moved to Chicago. Jones rented a cottage and a small shop where he established himself as a tailor. He taught himself to read and write and soon built up a large trade among the gentry of the city. By 1871, shortly after his retirement, he was regarded as the wealthiest black in America with a fortune of around $100,000.

Before the Civil War [6], Jones's home was a station on the Underground Railroad [7] through which he helped freedom seeking enslaved people escape to Canada; he also contributed generously to the welfare of impoverished black people. In 1865 he was largely responsible for securing the repeal of the "Black Laws" of Illinois. The previous year he had written a pamphlet, *The Black Laws of Illinois, and a Few Reasons Why They Should Be Repealed* [8], as part of a campaign for that purpose. Jones was elected a Cook County commissioner in 1871 and was reelected to a second term. He led the fight to desegregate the schools of Chicago and was victorious in 1874. The first black person to serve on the Chicago Board of Education, he donated land for a school that became the Jones Commercial School.

At his death Jones was survived by his wife and a daughter. He left bequests to relatives and friends, and an endowment to the Chicago Public Library [9] and for educational purposes. He was buried in Graceland Cemetery. An early portrait of him is owned by the Chicago Historical Society.

References:

Paul M. Angle, "John Jones and His Portrait," *Chicago History* 3 (Winter 1951–52 [portrait]).

Chicago Defender, 21 July 1951.

Chicago Tribune, 24 July 1955.

Eugene P. Romayn Feldman, ed., *Figures in Negro History* (1964).

Langston Hughes and others, *A Pictorial History of Blackamericans* (1983 [portrait]).

Unidentified newspaper clipping, 21 May 1879, from the biographic files of the Chicago Historical Society.

Additional Resources:

Jones, John (1817–1879), Black Past: http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/jones-john-1817-1879 [3]

John Jones and the Illinois Black Laws, Clarke House Museum:http://clarkehousemuseum.blogspot.com/2012/02/john-jones-and-illinois-black-laws.html [10]

John Jones, Chicago Tribute Markers of Distinction: http://www.chicagotribute.org/Markers/Jones.htm [5]

John and Mary Jones: Early Civil Rights Activists,Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago: http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2458.html [11]

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