

Jones, Hamilton Chamberlain ^[1]

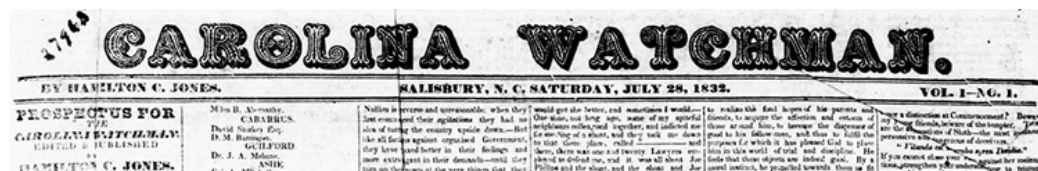
Jones, Hamilton Chamberlain

by Richard Walser, 1988

23 Aug. 1798–10 Sept. 1868

Hamilton Chamberlain Jones, humorist, journalist, and lawyer, was born in Greenville, Va., the son of William Jones, who moved to Stokes County ^[2] where he died in 1800. His widow married Colonel James Martin ^[3] of Revolutionary fame. Young Jones was graduated in 1818 from The University of North Carolina ^[4]; an exemplary student, he held the "fourth honor" in a class of fourteen, including future president James K. Polk ^[5]. For several months he remained in Chapel Hill as a tutor in Greek, then went to New Bern early in 1819 to study law with William Gaston ^[6], joining about ten other students. He paid expenses there by tutoring the sons of a nearby farmer. After obtaining a law license, Jones settled in Salisbury to practice. On 11 July 1820 he married Ann Eliza Henderson, the daughter of Pleasant ^[7] and Sarah Martin Henderson of Chapel Hill. He represented Rowan County ^[8] in the North Carolina House of Commons in 1827, 1829, 1838, and 1840; in January 1849 he replaced John W. Ellis ^[9], who had resigned.

As a young man Jones became a popular raconteur; "often at social gatherings . . . the dancing room would be deserted, while all the company would form a circle around Ham Jones, as he recited with inimitable humor 'Cousin Sally Dilliard' and other stories." Without doubt, Jones's most famous story was "Cousin Sally Dilliard" ^[10], "about an intractable witness in a law case; after the first printing of the sketch in *Atkinson's Saturday Evening Post* of Philadelphia on 6 Aug. 1831, it was copied far and wide throughout the United States. It was a favorite of President Abraham Lincoln. On 28 July 1832 ^[11], Jones published the first issue of the *Carolina Watchman* ^[11], an anti-Jackson weekly to oppose the other Salisbury newspaper, the pro-Jackson *Western Carolinian* ^[12]. The scattered extant copies of the *Watchman* contain frequent bits and pieces of humor, including two more sketches by editor Jones, "The Lost Breeches" and "A Buncombe Story."



Jones, Hamilton Chamberlain. [Masthead]. *Carolina Watchman*. July 28, 1832. North Carolina Digital Collections.

^[11]

The *Watchman* was sold on 2 Aug. 1839, but Jones continued to write. *The Spirit of the Times*, edited by William T. Porter, solicited additional sketches from Jones. Among the six printed in this popular New York sporting weekly, "McAlpine's Trip to Charleston" and "Going to Muster in North Carolina" were second in popularity only to "Cousin Sally Dilliard." All were signed "By the author of Cousin Sally Dilliard," a byline considered sufficient to whet the funny bone of Porter's subscribers. Jones's nine extant sketches are outrageous, low-keyed farces, many of them lawyers' jests, geared to the humorous taste of the period. In 1845, when Porter included "Cousin Sally Dilliard" in his collection of comic sketches *The Big Bear of Arkansas and Other Tales*, Jones's reputation became nationwide.

For six years (1842–48) he served as solicitor for the Sixth North Carolina Judicial District, and was Supreme Court reporter in Raleigh from 1853 until his resignation in 1863. Jones was responsible for volumes 46 through 60 of the *North Carolina Reports*, though the last was completed by P. H. Winston ^[13]. He was a delegate to the Convention of 1861 and signed the North Carolina Ordinance of Secession ^[14].

Despite his peripatetic life, Jones was frequently to be found at Como, his country home near Salisbury. Of his ten children, four died in infancy; the others were Martha Martin (Mrs. Samuel Tate), Julia Hamilton, Alice Johnson (Mrs. Edward T. Broadnax), James Martin, Edmund Loftin, and Hamilton Chamberlain, Jr. ^[15] He died at the home of his son-in-law, Dr. Tate, in Morganton.

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Additional Resources:

Jones, Hamilton Chamberlain, Willene Hendrick, and George Hendrick. 1990. *Ham Jones, ante-bellum Southern humorist: an anthology*. Hamden, Conn: Archon. ^[16]

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