JOHN G. JONES,
MISSISSIPPI'S FIRST METHODIST HISTORIAN

by Myron Floyd

For twenty-four years John Griffing Jones sat securely as the most admired superannuate in the Mississippi Conference. He was a man of wisdom garnered by nineteen years on the itineracy. He had helped convert Col. Greenwood LeFlore. He had traveled the Mississippi River "Bottom" back when it was settled only by hostile French Catholics and mosquitoes. Year after year he had pushed, pulled, pried, somehow gotten his few possessions, his wife and growing family of sons and adopted daughters from circuit to circuit, station to station. As conference historian, he had written profusely and accurately. A Wesleyan, Jones strictly adhered to the doctrine of his church through his many years, accepting, preaching, and at the last comforting his gathered children by smiling and reminding them that "Death is swallowed up in victory. Thanks be unto God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." 1

His Family

Historically this venerable old father came from a long line of Mississippians. His mother, Phebe Griffing, came with her prominent and wealthy New Jersey family when they settled in Natchez in 1799.2 She and his father, Jonathan Jones, were married there on October 10, 1799. Their’s was the first Methodist marriage performed in the Mississippi Territory by the missionary Tobias Gibson.3 Eight children were born of this marriage. The eldest, born August 23, 1804, was named John Griffing Jones.4

Jonathan Jones died in 1814, and John assumed management of the farm and its slaves. Without a father’s guiding hand, young Jones drifted into a somewhat worldly way of life. His was not, however, a totally wanton youth.

While only fourteen, Jones says that he realized his education was meager. He chose from the books left him by his father a two-volume history of the Bible. He expanded on this. Soon he was reading Goldsmith’s ancient history and Parson Weems’s history of the Revolutionary War and his biographies of its leaders. He was familiar with Rollin’s Ancient History, Plutarch’s Lives, and Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. He deliberately kept a diary so that he could improve his

1 Seventy-Fifth Session, Mississippi Annual Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church South, held at Vicksburg, Miss. Dec. 5-10, 1888, (n.p.; n.d.), 5.
3 Ibid.
4 Henry G. Hawkins, Methodism in Natchez, (Jackson, Miss.: for The Hawkins Foundation by the Parthenon Press, 1937), 74.
skill at composition. He even kept a grammar book conveniently propped open so that he could learn while he was sawing.

This self-sought education was to serve Jones well after he was converted and donned the morning coat of the Methodist itinerant. For him, this conversion was dynamic and very real. At ten o'clock on the morning of September 9, 1821, while aside in the woods praying, the veil was lifted; the anguish was over. Jones was a changed man. He had been overpowered by Preacher Moses Trader's sermon on free salvation open to all who would accept it. Although reared a Calvinist by a Baptist mother, Jones says that he never accepted their faith. An old aunt, a Methodist, had encouraged him to attend her church. He did. He was convinced. After joining the local society, he was encouraged to pray publicly. He did this, too.

In 1823 Jones was licensed to exhort. That year his mother died. A year later, after seeing that his younger brothers were taken care of by aunts, sisters of his mother, he was licensed to preach. In a conference that had spanned the Mississippi Territory from the Chattahoochee River on the East to the Sabine River on the West, Jones was fortunate indeed to have as his first assignment a position as assistant on the neighboring Amite County circuit. In December of that year he was admitted on trial. His career was launched.

This career, its many hardships and joys, was shared by Miss Jane Oliphant Ross. The couple were married the last day in August in 1828. On the day of their marriage, the new Mrs. Jones was fully initiated into the life of an itinerant. From her home in Western Louisiana, she rode horseback a hundred miles to her husband's next assignment. She shared the $100 annual salary. Stretching this small amount over twelve months must have been a most difficult task. Not once, however, did she show discouragement. Indeed, she proved to be the strength behind Jones. When he considered locating in 1834 because of personal debts, she replied:

My dear husband, I sincerely hope you will not locate. I married you as a traveling preacher; and if you locate, it will blight all my cherished hopes of your increasing usefulness. I know you are troubled about the support and comfort of your family, but if you do your duty, you need give yourself no anxiety on that point, for I fully believe that God in some way will amply provide for us.

With such strong support, Jones says that he never again considered locating.

Eight sons were born of this marriage. Only five lived to adulthood. In addition to these sons, the Joneses reared seven orphaned girls. The Jones's children were reared as Methodists, and Methodist

5 Minutes of Mississippi Annual Conference, 1888, 3.
6 Hawkins, op.cit., 75.
7 Ibid.; Jones, op.cit., II, 64.
8 Jones, op.cit., II, 310.
9 Minutes of Mississippi Annual Conference, 1888, 4.
they remained. One son, J.A.B. Jones, became a minister. All the daughters married Christian gentlemen.

It was to his daughter's home in Hazlehurst that Jones retired after his wife died in 1883. The old couple had lived, he a superannuate, in Port Gibson since 1872. There he wrote his famous history. In Hazlehurst he enjoyed the role of Grandpapa in a house with ten children. He wrote, waxing eloquent in his defense of a strictly observed Sabbath:

Saturday evening the Sunday vegetables are all gathered, and the Sunday poultry killed and dressed; the Sunday fruit is brought from the orchard, and the melons from the patch, so that no work of that sort will tax their time or labor on the Sabbath.

He read his Bible and *The Christian Advocate*. He traveled the railroad to as many camp meetings as possible. He grew older and declined in health.

Health was a problem to many early preachers, especially to those appointed to serve in the lowlands around the Mississippi River and the bayou country of Louisiana. Jones seems to have been more fortunate than many of his colleagues. Only once, in 1832 while serving the Lake Bolivar Mission, did he record attacks of fever. This was his only major illness until his retreat to Hazlehurst. Here he seems to have suffered the usual problems of the elderly. He was probably partially deaf, his colds in the winter months lasted six weeks or more, and he suffered rheumatism. In September, 1887, at Sam Jones Campground, he suffered a weakening attack of pneumonia.

It was at that campground, a favorite retreat, that Jones preached his last sermon. The occasion was his eighty-fourth birthday. About a month later, on October 1, 1888, Jones died. The funeral had been prearranged by Jones himself. Eleven preachers of various denominations held services in Hazlehurst before the body was shipped to Port Gibson. There five preachers, four Methodist and one Presbyterian, preached the last farewell to the sainted father. Most of the congregation followed the casket to the grave where, after a final prayer, the Masons took charge of burying their brother.

The funeral made page one of *The Christian Advocate*. A description of the services, plus the complete text of the five sermons, was

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10 *The Christian Advocate* (New Orleans), June 7, 1888.
12 Located in Gloster City in Amite County, this campground was reached by a spur of the Mississippi Valley Railroad. In 1900 a pilgrim could secure board and lodging for the ten-day meeting for a nominal $7.50. *The Christian Advocate* (New Orleans), Feb. 5, 1885; Sept. 22, 1887; Nov. 3, 1887; July 12, 1900. *Journal of the Mississippi Conference*, 1924, 21.
given. This probably would have pleased Jones. He had been very
diligent at his task of memoir writer for the annual conference
journal. He had written profusely on the history of the Methodist
movement and its preachers in Mississippi. Indeed, it is for this
writing that Jones is most widely known today.

His Writings

In addition to his numerous articles for The Christian Advocate,
Jones is most widely known for his two books. The first, A Concise
History of the Introduction of Protestantism into Mississippi and
the Southwest, was published in 1866.15 This book traces the many
hardships and persecutions endured by the early Protestant preach-
ers.

In his second book, Jones limits himself to the Methodist Church.
Entitled A Complete History of Methodism as Connected with the
Mississippi Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, it
was written at the request of the conference:16

Resolved, That the Mississippi Annual Conference do hereby request the Rev.
John G. Jones to prepare for publication a complete History of Methodism as
connected with the Mississippi Conference.

Jones began in earnest. He told the conference it would take three
volumes to completely cover the church's history. He wrote The
Christian Advocate requesting information. As a superannuate he
was annually granted money by the conference to help finance the
undertaking. By 1876 the task had been completed. It had taken four,
not three, volumes to cover the years from 1799 to 1869. As expected,
there were requests that the book be condensed. Jones maintained,
however, that such was impossible.17

Its large size proved to be both an advantage and a disadvantage.
It was a most complete history. Complete histories are voluminous.
On the other hand, the war had impoverished many Mississippians,
so much so that they could not afford the suggested retail price of
$1.50 for Volume I. After a fire destroyed all the collected records,
it became increasingly evident that the book should be published.
The Publishing House in Nashville needed $500.00 to cover publica-
tion of the first volume. The proceeds from this venture were to
allow publication of Volume II. Realizing the importance of his
manuscript, Jones and his son, the Rev. J.A.B. Jones, raised the
money. In 1887 Volume I was published, acclaimed by the Advocate,
but not purchased on a sufficient scale to allow publication of Volume
II.18 Although this second volume was eventually published, its

15 Miller, op.cit., 76.
16 Minutes of the Mississippi Annual
Conference, 1872, 198.
17 The Christian Advocate (New Or-
leans), Jan. 27, 1881; Mar. 31, 1881.
18 Ibid., June 9, 1887; Sept. 1, 1887.
author was to die disappointed that his labors had been so poorly received by his conference.

Jones's numerous letters and articles in *The Christian Advocate* were treated much more kindly. Perhaps the most orderly were his four series: Our Boys, Our Girls, Our Children, and Reminiscences of an Old Itinerant. In these articles there is a constant theme of a venerable old preacher, revered, listened to, and yet increasingly unaware of the changing times. Jones was a devoted Wesleyan; he was itineracy oriented. Suffice it to say that his time had passed.

He proved this sufficiently in his letters. He admonished children to remember that many children die, so they had best be prepared for the hereafter. How was this to be done? Father Jones's advice was that young penitent hearts should seek conversion. He wanted all converts to be quickly trained in the art of public prayer. The idea was to get them involved before they could backslide. Family prayer was also advocated and there were lamentations because of its lack of use. Likewise he lamented the passing of the "good old" hymns. He approved of choirs and organs, but only as a complement to congregational singing.¹⁹

Singing hymns and going to church were about the only activities Jones would allow on Sundays. In another letter to the *Advocate*, he prohibited "... anything that implies Sabbath breaking, whether exposition, excursion by boat or railroad for pleasure or business. ..." ²⁰ It is easier to understand his adamant stand after looking more closely at Jones's religious beliefs and works.

**His Religion**

After his conversion Jones was licensed to exhort in 1823. The following year, at Bethel Campground, he was recommended for admission on trial and assigned to his first circuit. In December of that year Jones was admitted on trial. Two years later he was made a deacon. In 1826 he was ordained as elder.²¹

Jones's initial interest in religion proved to be confusing for him. Although he had been reared by a Baptist mother, Jones maintained that he had never accepted that faith. He questioned the method of baptism. Timothy Merritt's *Two Letters on Baptism to a Friend* taught him that affusion was also a proper Scriptural method. Moses Trader's sermon on free salvation convinced Jones that he and Calvinism would make strange bedfellows. The result was a "... clear, scriptural, Wesleyan."²²

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¹⁹Ibid., Apr. 27, 1883; Aug. 2, 1883; Nov. 13, 1884; Dec. 11, 1884; July 23, 1885; Nov. 19, 1885; Feb. 11, 1886; July 21, 1887.
²⁰Ibid., Sept. 24, 1885.
His Wesleyan views were reflected by Jones’s constant theme of preparation for the other world. In Cane Ridge, an early Jefferson County Methodist center, his solace to mourners after a yellow fever epidemic included a reminder that life is short, and eternity is not. He suggested that God’s punishment for the Sabbath breakers was the great number of steamboat and railroad disasters occurring on that day. Floods and droughts, cyclones and tornadoes, and epidemics were all contrary to God’s natural laws; hence they must have been sent by Him. He even postulated that the Civil War was sent to free the slaves from misuse by their Louisiana sugar plantation masters.23 Wherever he went in service of his conference, on circuits, at camp meetings, or at gatherings of preachers such as the annual conferences, Jones preached this theme.

Jones made his presence felt at these annual conference meetings in more ways than in his Wesleyan preaching. He wrote many of the memoirs of the departed brothers. He showed an interest in schools by serving on committees affecting the Manual Labor School, Centenary College, and Madison College and Sharon Female Academy. Twice he helped judge the character of erring colleagues. His committee recommended conference approval of the Plan of Separation. He was subsequently sent to Louisville as a delegate to that Convention. There Jones seems to have accomplished nothing of particular importance except, of course, to vote for the resolution that officially split his church.24 Slavery was not a problem for the church according to Jones. He always encouraged preaching to all men, white or black.25 He worked with a committee preparing a system of oral catechisms for Negroes. In 1865 he was chairman of a committee to consider furthering the religious interests of the newly freed slaves. Although Jones served faithfully at these annual gatherings, it was his work in the field that has secured his favored position among the early preachers. This service started the day he was recommended for admission on trial.

Armed with an old buckskin covered Bible tucked snugly into his saddle bags, Jones rode forth that day at the Bethel Campground, bursting with his Master’s zeal.26 He was a crusader of the first order. His theology determined, his admission on trial secured, Jones rode straight into the history of Methodism in Mississippi. He assisted Alexander Talley with the first Choctaw camp meeting. It went so well that Jones recorded feeling.

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23 The Christian Advocate (New Orleans), May 24, 1883; July 24, 1884; June 7, 1888.
24 A. H. Redford, History of the Organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (Nashville: by A. H. Redford, Agent for the M.E. Church, South, n.d.).
25 Miller, op.cit., 64.
26 This Bible, complete with its buckskin cover, is preserved in the Ridgeland Wayside Museum located on the Natchez Trace Parkway near Jackson, Miss.
27 The Christian Advocate (New Orleans), Nov. 4, 1886.
... as though eighteen hundred years had suddenly dropped out of the world's history and I had drifted back to the apostolic age, when the gospel was so successfully preached to the heathen nations.

Hanan's Bluff was visited by this young zealot. Thus Methodism was introduced into Yazoo County. Mount Carmel and Ebenezer churches were built under his tutorage. The Lake Bolivar area in Louisiana was organized into a manageable circuit. Moving westward, at Jones's suggestion, a society was created in Monroe, Louisiana, with only seven members.28

For the Reverend John Griffing Jones, "Father Jones" to those who venerated him, this paucity of members is not a true reflection of his life's efforts or results. If numbers are to be used in judging a man's life, however, Jones stands ready. His sixty-four years of service with the conference were unbroken.29 He read the Bible fifty consecutive times and the New Testament and Psalms more than 100 times.30 Such numbers are really empty measures of a man's life.

Father Jones has left a more exciting legacy. From his family have come lay and clerical leaders for Mississippi. From his pen came a book so vital that after a century has passed, it still stands as an irreplaceable monument to the diligence and hardships of the pioneer preachers. From his circuits, his stations, his thinking has come a community of faithful Methodists. Founded in the past, as Father Jones would have desired it to be, yet ever looking to the future, this church continues as a living testimony to so great a cleric as was Father Jones.

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28 Ibid., Dec. 24, 1885; Oct. 28, 1886.
29 Of these sixty-four years, nineteen were spent serving circuits and stations, twelve a presiding elder of districts, nine in charge of colored missions, and twenty-four as a superannuate.
30 Minutes of Mississippi Annual Conference, 1888, 4.