

243 JONES, SKELTON

Publisher & Editor

Richmond, Petersburg

Publisher of the Richmond *Examiner* (1803-04), succeeding brother Meriwether Jones (242); intended publisher (1811-12) of *The History of Virginia* begun by John Daly Burk (063).

Skelton Jones came to Virginia's printing trade through his older brother, Meriwether Jones (1776-1806), who was printer to the Commonwealth (1798-1804) and the publisher of the semi-official *Examiner* (1798-1803). The younger Jones served primarily as writer and editor for his brother's twice-weekly paper, but his principal profession was that of an attorney in Richmond's courts.

That employment echoed family traditions and connected him politically to Republican leaders throughout the state. His father was Col. Thomas Jones (1726-86), a Revolutionary War veteran who long served as clerk of the Northumberland County court (1749-78); his older brother Catesby Jones (1760-1800) succeeded their father as court clerk (1779-1800), while commanding the county militia and serving as presidential elector in the elections of the 1790s; his mother, Sally Skelton (1730-85) was a sister of Bathurst Skelton (1744-70), whose widow, Martha Wayles, married Thomas Jefferson in 1772; his uncle, Dr. Walter Jones (1745-1815), was a life-long friend of Jefferson who was a surgeon in the Continental Army, a delegate to the 1786 Annapolis Convention and the constitutional ratification convention of 1788, often a member of either the House or Senate of the General Assembly, and later a representative for Virginia in Congress. His sisters married Monroes, Corbins, Andersons, and Lees, while his more distant relatives included Bathursts, Catesbys, Cockes, and Carters – all major planter families in Virginia.

Jones seems to have labored much of his life in the shadow of the prominence of other family members, particularly brothers Meriwether and Catesby. The presidential election of 1800 provided him with the first opportunity to exhibit his skill as a writer "of the first grade of talents" in the many pieces he provided to Meriwether's *Examiner* that year. And unlike his brothers Jekyll (also Richmond lawyer) and Bathurst (a delegate from Hanover County), who contributed anonymous essays for the journal, he wrote under his own name, making him an identifiable target for political opponents, who referred to him as "Skeleton" Jones.

As a result, Jones became involved in a series of "affairs of honor," so developing a widely-known reputation for dueling. The most infamous of those encounters came in April 1801, when Jones killed Gill Armistead Selden in a duel at the "Bloody Run Spring" (site of a 1656 Indian fight) just east of Richmond. Selden's friends had murder charges brought against Jones by a sympathetic magistrate, Pleasant Youngblood, the Henrico County justice who had presided over the trials the year before of the slaves tried and convicted in Gabriel's Rebellion; as a result of their biased testimony, he found "not a single solitary circumstance which goes to lessen the enormity of malicious and deliberate murder." The point at issue was whether Jones had fired before Selden was ready, and Youngblood believed that he had, unfairly utilizing his prior experience to gain an advantage. Consequently, Jones left Virginia for a year to avoid prosecution in the Henrico County (not Richmond City) courts; he returned only after the indictment had been quashed. In a later duel (1805), Jones was

also fortunate, being grazed in the head when his opponent that day, Dr. William Upshaw, fired before Jones was ready, so imitating the earlier affair; Upshaw fled to Louisiana, never to return to Virginia.

On his return to Virginia, Jones took on an ever larger role in conducting the *Examiner*. In the summer of 1802, brother Meriwether was engaged in a lengthy, vituperative exchange with James T. Callender (075), the former Republican polemicist turned antagonist, about his conduct of the public-printing contract in the pages of *The Recorder* of Henry Pace (319). Simultaneously, his brother was starting a new journal in Norfolk, the *Commercial Register*, with his shop foreman, William W. Worsley (462). Meriwether left town briefly that summer to help set up the Norfolk office and to deprive Callender of his favorite target; Skelton took up the journal's editorial chair, as well as the management of his brother's office. By January 1803, both Jones brothers were back in Richmond, serving on a committee charged with dividing Richmond into three wards and conducting elections for offices in the reorganized government. But as that year progressed, Meriwether's health went into decline, and he began to withdraw from the print trade. That spring, he turned over daily operation of his paper to Skelton and subcontracted much of his government work to other presses. Then in August 1803, he transferred ownership of the *Examiner* to Skelton outright, while lobbying the Jefferson administration for an appointment to a less arduous and more remunerative Federal position than the one he held with the state. Eventually, Meriwether was appointed as Federal Commissioner of Loans for Virginia, resigning his state position, and settled into a less visible life, dying in August 1806 of his protracted illness.

With his brother's retirement from journalism, Jones now had full control of the *Examiner* for the first time. But the change in its ownership did not change its unstable financial state. In taking the paper, Jones had also assumed its debts and soon found the entire proposition untenable. At the end of the year, he sold the press to Worsley, who he then contracted to print the *Examiner* for him. But when that approach did not help relieve the fiscal pressures, Jones closed the *Examiner* in January 1804 and sold his subscriber list to a young Richmond bookseller and teacher, Thomas Ritchie (360). Ritchie was not a trained printer and Worsley apparently was not interested in forming a long-term alliance with Ritchie as his tradesman in producing a successor paper; rather, he continued the business as a job-printing office for Meriwether Jones. But once Worsley's press was relieved of the public work in March 1804, he signed a one-year-long contract with Ritchie to finance and publish a new journal; Ritchie brought a New-York-trained printer named Thomas Burling (066) to Virginia from Baltimore as their foreman, so relieving Worsley of responsibility for the press work itself. Their new *Enquirer* made its debut on May 9, 1804, issued twice-weekly, except when the legislature met, when it was issued thrice-weekly. Worsley sold his interest to Ritchie at the end of their agreement in May 1805 and relocated to Kentucky; meanwhile Burling would manage the *Enquirer's* press until 1817, Ritchie the journal's editorial content until 1843, with the newspaper itself surviving until November 1877. Thus as 1805 began, neither Jones brother was a part of the print trade.

Skelton Jones returned to his legal practice, contributing occasional pieces, it seems, to both Ritchie's *Enquirer* and Pleasants's *Argus*, but he did not again assume the editorial mantle of a newspaper. He would, however, be drawn back publishing in 1808. In April of that year,

John Daly Burk, the well-known Republican polemicist, died in a duel near Petersburg. His unexpected death left incomplete his comprehensive *History of Virginia*, the magnum opus of a lengthy literary career. Designed and proposed as a five volume work in 1802, only three volumes had been issued by then – vol. 1 in 1804 and vols. 2 & 3 in 1806 – with the work stalled for the preceding year-and-a-half. In the summer of 1808, Jones was asked by Republicans in Petersburg, where Burk had toiled under their patronage, to complete the work from Burk's assembled notes. Jones accepted the offer, though intending to compress the last two volumes into one with an appendix covering the details of contemporary life in Virginia, as seen in Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* in 1786. It appears that he was convinced that the work was possible in a reasonably short time, given the forthcoming retirement of Jefferson to Monticello, one of the *History's* primary patrons and source of the bulk of its documentary evidence. So in August 1808, Jones announced his signing of a contract with Burk's estate administrator to complete the work and solicited subscriptions to finance the project. Circumstances soon intruded that delayed the project further. In the economic environment of that moment, depressed by the Embargo Act, subscriptions were hard to come by. And when Jefferson finally had the time in late 1809 to provide source material for Jones, many of the wanted items could not be immediately found, particularly newspaper collections that Jefferson had loaned out over the years since the Revolution. By early 1811, though, Jones felt confident enough in seeing publication of that final volume through that year, that he wrote to Jefferson detailing his plans to relocate to Petersburg to supervise its production there that summer and fall.

Tragically, his schedule was not met. First, Jones was evidently drawn away from the task by his legal practice. One very public example of this came in November 1811, when he was present at Norfolk Superior Court when no lawyer could be found to serve as prosecutor in eight criminal trials, as all those then present had some connection to the defendants; the unconnected and unlicensed Jones was pressed to serve as such by his peers, but would not take an oath to act as a prosecutor in which he would be compelled to renounce duels and prosecute duelists; that unhappy judicial session devolved into confusion and adjournment. By spring 1812, potential subscribers to and readers of the *History* were diverted from the project by the rush to war with Britain. And then Jones contracted an illness that threatened his life. He returned to Richmond, lingered there through the summer, before dying in late October. As with his brother Meriwether before him, nineteenth-century histories report that he died in yet another duel, but such was not the case. Both Ritchie's Republican paper (*The Enquirer*) and Davis's Federalist one (now *Virginia Patriot*) report the same thing: Jones died "after a lingering indisposition which he bore with great fortitude." But evidently the heroic legend has had far better currency than the pedestrian truth.

Jones died without wife or children, and without completing the *History of Virginia*. That task would eventually be concluded by Louis Hue Girardin (180), once professor of modern languages at the College of William & Mary and editor of the *Richmond Compiler*. But that conclusion would also be delayed again when the nearly completed imprint was destroyed, along with the manuscript Girardin had provided, in the Great Petersburg Fire of July 1815.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1775 Hanover County, Virginia

Died: Oct. 28 1812 Richmond, Virginia

Died unmarried and without children.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 5; Christian, *Richmond*; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; *Captain Roger Jones of London and Virginia*; correspondence in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (1808-11); notices in *Virginia Argus* (1800-12), *Examiner* (1800-04), *Recorder* (1801-03); and *Richmond Enquirer* (1804-12); obituary in both *Enquirer* and *Patriot*, Oct. 30, 1812.