

# Discovering the Life of THOMAS H. JONES

## a Slave for Forty-Three Years

When I was growing up in Boston, our many family gatherings were usually organized, or at least attended, by my paternal grandmother, Nellie Lavinia (Russell) (Hector) (Silva) Costa (1891–1979). She was the source of almost all the family stories, and there seemed to be a constant stream of them about everyone and everything. A favorite topic was Grandma Jones—Nellie’s own paternal grandmother, Lavinia (Leslie) (Nooth) (Russell) Jones (c. 1831–1924), who my grandmother greatly admired.

[1]

My grandmother told many exciting family stories about Grandma Jones, who was said to be a Mi’kmaq Indian from Prince Edward Island. Lavinia first married William Nooth, a supposed illegitimate son of Queen Victoria’s physician and then Charles Russell, my great-great-grandfather, an English sea captain who was said to have taken Lavinia against her will and sailed with her to San Francisco. Sometime later, with her son in tow, Lavinia escaped back to New England. As I listened to these thrilling tales, I never noticed that my grandmother referred to her grandmother as Grandma Jones, not Grandma Russell. I never thought to ask about a Grandpa Jones; back then children were to be “seen and not heard.”

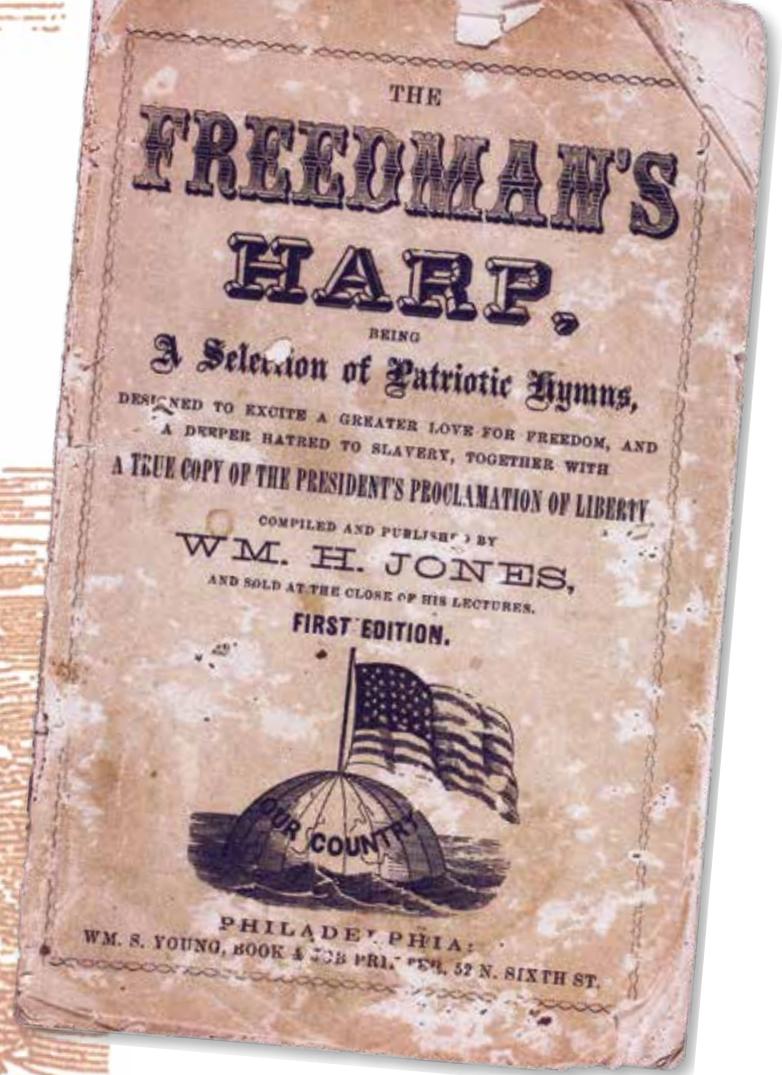
In ten years of research, I have found that many stories about Grandma Jones were not only inaccurate but far less intriguing than the facts I have uncovered about Grandpa Jones, her last

husband. In November 2006, a cousin in New Bedford gave me a packet of items that had belonged to Lavinia. When I opened the envelope, I found to my amazement and delight that I’d been given a treasure trove of papers and pamphlets:

- A March 29, 1851 letter of introduction from William Lloyd Garrison for Thomas H. Jones to carry while fleeing the reach of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.
- A first edition of *The Freedman’s Harp*, a tiny booklet containing a selection of “patriotic hymns designed to excite a greater love and deeper hatred of slavery,” a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation, and thirty-six hymns. The undated booklet written by an unrelated William H. Jones was probably published between 1863 and 1865.



**Beverly Hector-Smith** is a retired nurse practitioner who worked in Boston for fifty years.



**Left:** Detail of the frontispiece from *The Experience of Thomas H. Jones* (1868).

**Above:** *The Freedman's Harp*. Courtesy of the author.

- A September 1873 letter written by Frederick Douglass, Jr. asking for the renewal of Thomas Jones' subscription for Douglass's father's newspaper, *New National Era and Citizen*.
- Lavinia's notebook/ledger containing her business notes and articles of interest from newspapers and other sources.

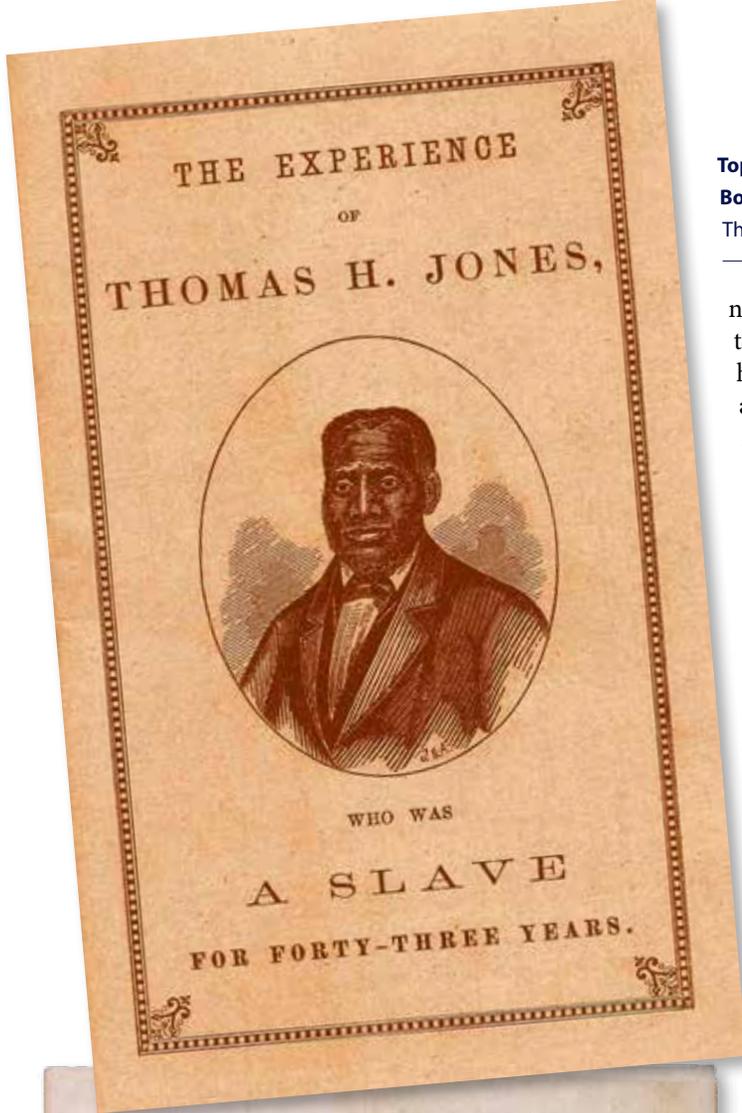
Lavinia's notebook contained an August 18, 1854, copy of *The Liberator*, with the name T. H. Jones, listed as the subscriber in the paper's upper right corner. Because the same name was written inside *The Freedman's Harp*, it occurred to me that this might be the never-mentioned Grandpa Jones, who, I thought, given my grandmother's silence about him, was undoubtedly a disreputable character.

Two days after receiving these items, I attended a meeting of the Beacon Hill Scholars, a history group led by Horace Seldon. He was in the process of reading all of the issues of *The Liberator*, so I decided to share my new treasures. Almost

immediately, Horace Seldon noticed Thomas H. Jones' signature in *The Freedman's Harp* and recognized the name because he'd recently seen it in *The Liberator*. I remember thinking, "I hope that Thomas Jones had not done anything too embarrassing."

This exchange encouraged me to try to find Thomas H. Jones online, but with such a common name I thought it would be impossible. Imagine my amazement when a Google search produced information on the correct Thomas H. Jones on the first page of results. The North American Slave Narratives website (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>) led me to his autobiography, *The Experience of Rev. Thomas H. Jones, Who Was a Slave for Forty-Three Years* and to many links to other relevant documents.<sup>[2]</sup>

Thomas H. Jones's book introduced me to his life. I learned he was born in 1806 to slave parents, Henry and Grace Kirkwood, on Hawes's Plantation in New Hanover County, North Carolina; was sold away from his family at age nine; and didn't reconnect with them until he was nearly forty. The



**Top:** Cover of *The Experience of Thomas H. Jones* (1868).

**Bottom:** The 1851 letter of introduction from William Lloyd Garrison for Thomas H. Jones. Courtesy of the author.

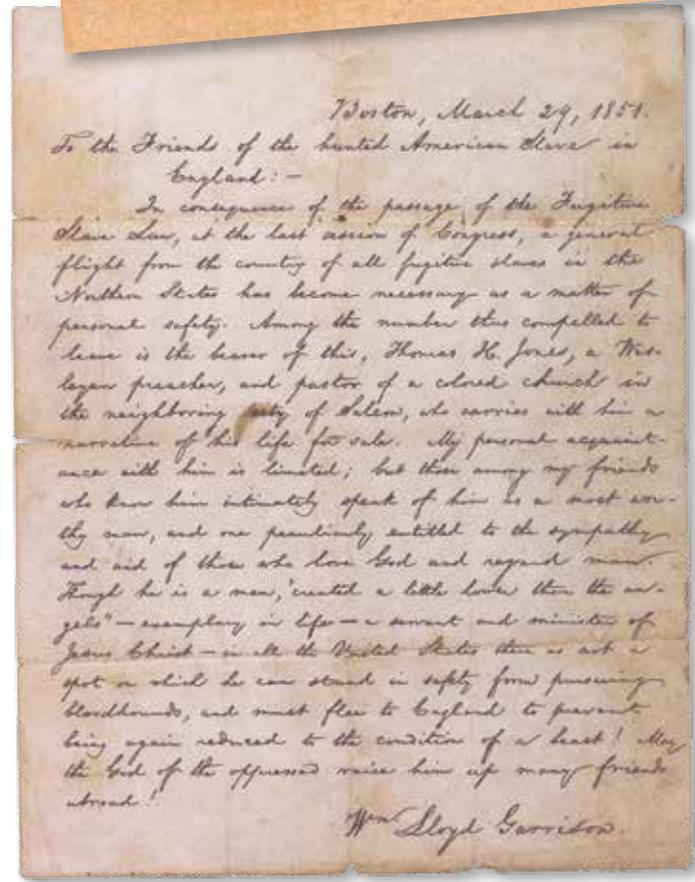
narrative provides a detailed account of Jones's secret attempts to teach himself to read and the cruel punishment he received when he was discovered with a book. While working as a house servant and then as a store clerk, Jones attended religious services on a neighboring plantation, and eventually began to preach informally to other slaves in the area.

Jones and his first wife, Lucilla Smith, had three children. Lucilla lived on another plantation and when her slave mistress moved to Alabama, Lucilla and the children went with her. Jones never saw them again. Later he married a slave named Mary Moore and they had four children. By this time Jones was working as a stevedore. Although he shared his wages with his master, eventually Jones saved enough to purchase freedom for Mary and three of the children.<sup>[3]</sup> Realizing that they were vulnerable to being re-enslaved, Jones made arrangements in June 1849 to send them to Brooklyn, New York, to Robert Cousins, a conductor on the "network to freedom." Jones stayed behind to sell his property so he could purchase his own freedom and passage to New York. Unfortunately, he was swindled of his property. In August 1849, with his last eight dollars, Jones paid a steward to hide him aboard the brig *Belle*, bound for New York City. When the vessel arrived there, Jones was discovered by the captain, who went ashore to arrange for his arrest. Meanwhile, Jones fashioned a raft and floated into New York harbor, where he was rescued by the crew of a passing ship who brought him to Brooklyn, where he reunited with his family.

Wasting no time, Jones took to the road on a speaking tour, preaching and lecturing to earn enough to provide for his wife and children. He soon learned that he was being pursued by slave catchers, so he left Brooklyn and by October had relocated to Boston. In Boston, Thomas dictated and published his slave narrative, *The Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones, who was for Forty Three Years a Slave*. The wording of the title was deliberately chosen to benefit from the popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which had been released two years earlier. Thomas Jones's book was also popular; it was reprinted nine times between 1850 and 1885.

The family was enumerated in the 1850 U.S. census in Salem, Massachusetts: Thos. 44; Mary 39; Mary C. 7; John 5; and Alex 3.<sup>[4]</sup> Following a strategy used by former slaves to avoid capture, the birthplace of each family member was listed as Massachusetts. For a year, Jones was the pastor at the Wesleyan Methodist Colored Church in Salem.<sup>[5]</sup>

At a meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1850, Jones defended William Lloyd Garrison against some critics. That action gained Jones the attention, friendship, and support of Garrisonians. After the second Fugitive Slave Law passed in September 1850, Jones' anxiety increased. In May 1851, carrying the letter of introduction from William



Lloyd Garrison, Jones left his family in Salem and fled to the Canadian Maritimes. (A week after Jones fled Salem, Thomas Sims, a fugitive slave living in Boston, was captured and led in chains aboard a ship that returned him to Georgia and his former slave master.)

Now based in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, Jones gave anti-slavery lectures and enlisted subscribers for *The Liberator*. In November 1854, Thomas Jones returned to Massachusetts. Earlier that year Mary, his wife, had purchased a home in Florence, a section of Northampton that was also home to Sojourner Truth and others dedicated to abolitionist ideals.<sup>[6]</sup> For the next few years Jones, like Sojourner Truth, traveled throughout western Massachusetts, southern New Hampshire, and Vermont on the anti-slavery circuit. By 1860 the family was

living in Worcester—Thomas 51, lecturer; Mary 45, at home; Mary 16; John 14; Alexander 12; and Addy Brown 3.<sup>[7]</sup> Thomas's wife Mary had died by September 7, 1867, when he, at age sixty, married 33-year-old widow Ann Campbell in New Bedford.<sup>[8]</sup> Ann died there October 7, 1875.<sup>[9]</sup> On December 20, 1882, in New Bedford, when Jones was 75, he married 51-year-old Lavinia (Leslie) (Nooth) Russell,<sup>[10]</sup> my great-great-grandmother. Jones continued to preach and lecture. He kept his slave narrative in print and published an enlarged edition in 1885. On June 6, 1890, Thomas H. Jones died, age 84, in New Bedford, and was buried in the city's Oak Grove Cemetery.<sup>[11]</sup> He left Lavinia sufficient funds to live comfortably until her death in 1924.

Nellie Lavinia Russell, my grandmother, was born January 2, 1891,<sup>[12]</sup> about six months after Thomas Jones

died. During the next thirty years, Nellie spent a lot of time with her Grandma Jones, so she must have known about Thomas Jones but deliberately chose not to share his story with her son or grandchildren. I will never know why she was silent about him when her many tales were chock full of details about practically everyone and everything else. But African Americans in those days were generally taught to be ashamed of slavery. Nellie Russell lived during a time when slaves and slavery were not discussed. Sadly and ironically, despite all of Thomas H. Jones's accomplishments, Nellie could not bring herself to take pride in any of them. All that she knew and could have told us is permanently lost. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "What people are ashamed of usually makes a good story," and his adage is certainly true here.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to her marriage certificate, Lavinia was born in Bridgetown, Nova Scotia, in 1831 to James and Elizabeth Leslie. (No earlier documentation of her place and date of birth has been found.) *Massachusetts Vital Records, 1841–1910, 1882, New Bedford, 334: 161*. (From original records held by the Massachusetts Archives. Online database: *AmericanAncestors.org*, New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2004.) The Massachusetts Vital Records Index to Deaths, 1921–25, vol. 77, shows that Lavinia died in Wareham, Mass., in 1924.
- <sup>2</sup> Two versions of Thomas H. Jones's book are available online: one published in the 1850s (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jonestom/menu.html>) and one published in 1885 (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/jones85/menu.html>). Both are on the Documenting the American South website (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/index.html>), a digital publishing initiative of the University Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The life of Thomas H. Jones is also examined in William L. Andrews, ed., *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives*

*of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, and Thomas H. Jones* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 187–279. Biographical information not otherwise cited in this article is taken from this source.

- <sup>3</sup> In his memoir, Jones wrote that, "We had one child while Mary was a slave. That child is still in chains." (p. 41, 1885 edition). This child, Edward, was sold, and while mention was made of efforts to purchase his freedom, it is not known what became of him.
- <sup>4</sup> Thos. Jones household; 1850 U.S. Census; Salem, Ward 3, Essex County, Massachusetts; roll M432\_312; page 171A; viewed on *Ancestry.com*.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Salem Directory* (Salem, Mass.: Henry Whipple, 1851), 180. Available at <http://archive.org/details/saledirectory03adamgoog>.
- <sup>6</sup> The Basil Dorsey/Thomas H. Jones House, at 191 Nonotuck Street in Florence, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2004. The historical section of the application was written and researched by Kathryn Grover and is available online at [davidrugglescenter.org/?page\\_id=329](http://davidrugglescenter.org/?page_id=329).
- <sup>7</sup> Thomas H. Jones household; 1860 U.S. Census; Worcester, Ward 7, Worcester County, Massachusetts; roll M653\_527; page 208; viewed on *Ancestry.com*.
- <sup>8</sup> *Massachusetts Vital Records, 1841–1910 [note 1], 1867, New Bedford, 199: 122*.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* [note 1], 1875, *New Bedford, 274: 130*. Ann ( ) (Campbell) Jones and Cora Campbell, her daughter from a previous marriage, are buried with Jones in New Bedford's Oak Grove Cemetery.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* [note 1], 1882, *New Bedford, 334: 161*.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* [note 1], 1890, *New Bedford, 409: 172*. *Thomas Jones's will names his widow and three children: William H. Moore of Wilmington, N.C. (perhaps this was the son Edward who remained behind in North Carolina); Alexander Jones of Dixon, Illinois; and Mary Catherine Bond of Newport, Rhode Island. Presumably son John predeceased his father. See note 29 of [www.davidrugglescenter.org/?page\\_id=329](http://www.davidrugglescenter.org/?page_id=329) [note 5] for more information.*
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* [note 1], 1891, *Hyde Park, 413: 465*.

