Biography of

John Wesley Jones

1826 ... 1905

(Original Founder of the United States Volunteer Life-Savings Corp.)



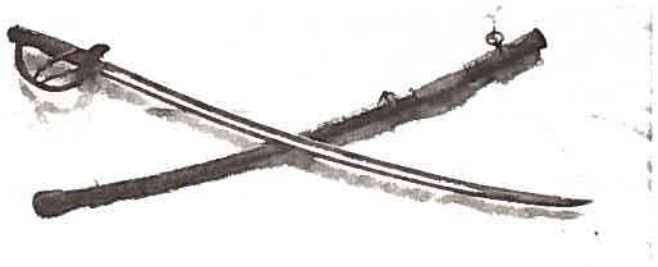
John Wesley Jones and Wife Clarissa

JONES, JOHN WESLEY, founder and managing director of the United States Life-Saving Association, famed in his youth as an abolitionist, a pioneer scout who had the distinction of being the first white man to set foot in the Yosemite Valley, afterward prominent as a lawyer, a gallant soldier in the War of the Rebellion, and at one time one of the leading Republicans of the city of Brooklyn, N. Y., was a native of Philadelphia, Pa., where he was born May 3, 1826. He was the son of Rev. William P. Jones and Ursula Lindermann. Through his father, he was descended from one of the oldest and most prominent of Amer-

ican families, his forbears having come to this country from Wales at an early date and settled in Delaware county, Pa., where their descendants became distinguished in the affairs of that section, one of them under the direction of William Penn making the original surveys and locating the lines between Pennsylvania and Maryland. The family, it is worthy of note, was of noble origin, tracing lineage from an ancient armorial bearing Welsh house whose quarterings were well-known emblems around which clustered many honorable traditions in connection with the annals of their race. The mother of John Wesley Jones was a native of Switzerland, and was married to Rev. William P. Jones in Philadelphia where the son's earlier education was received. He afterward attended McKendree College in the west, one of his fellow students being the celebrated humorist, Mark Twain, and it was during his collegiate days that he was a witness to the anti-abolition riots at Alton, Ill., wherein Owen Lovejoy lost his life, a martyr to the cause of freedom. Young Jones was himself an ardent advocate of the principles for which Lovejoy fell and was mobbed twice before he had attained his majority for making speeches opposed to slavery in southwestern Illinois. He refused to be intimidated, however, and continued to speak and labor as an abolitionist, winning distinction in the anti-slavery movement as one of the ablest young men associated therewith. When the discoveries of gold in California caused a rush to be made to that new Eldorado in 1849, he was among the first; and in the following year, when the fever was at its height, he was placed in command of a hundred and fifty stalwart plainsmen and commissioned as captain of cavalry by Colonel Sumner, then acting Governor of the Indian Territory, for the purpose of protecting prospectors between Fort Laramie and California, in which responsible capacity he performed many valiant deeds and accomplished work of the greatest value. He was the first United States Superintendent of Census for California, and as such travelled all over the State on the back of a mule, selecting census marshals for each county and otherwise fulfilling the functions of his office. On one occasion during his journeyings, he was driven by Indians within the boundaries of the Yosemite Valley, whose rare and remarkable beauties he subsequently described for the first time in the columns of the "Sacramento Union" and the "Alta California," and it is conceded that Colonel Jones was unquestionably the first white man who ever set foot in the now famous and frequently visited valley. Later on, he was prominent and played an active role in the Indian wars of the Sierra Nevadas and was assigned the task of guarding from attack the emigration from the Humboldt Valley to Salt Lake. He received no fewer than six arrow wounds in a battle with the hostile Indians, while bearing dispatches to Brigham Young, but succeeded in his mission and afterward remained in that Mormon dignitary's care until he recovered from his injuries. Then, turning to more pacific pursuits, he studied law in the office of Judge Hardin at Springfield, Illinois, where he became acquainted with Abraham Lincoln and obtained admission to the bar, and began the practice of law, in which profession he achieved enviable prominence. His ability was unquestioned, while his eloquence as an orator proved most effective in his pleadings and gained for

him a wide reputation as an attorney. He also became interested in railroad building and figured as an influential factor in the development of American transportation facilities. At the outbreak of the Civil War, he was prompt in offering his services to the government, becoming a lieutenant of General McClellan's staff and afterward serving as Provost Marshal for the city of Washington, D. C., in which capacity he guarded the White House and won the personal thanks of President Lincoln for the efficient manner in which he executed his duties. He subsequently at the request of President Lincoln, organized nine regiments in the States of Vermont and New Hampshire, and in the northern part of the State of New York, and disbursed half a million dollars without the loss of a cent. He was active, too, in repelling the Confederate invasion into Pennsylvania, and his command had the honor of firing the last shot at the retreating forces of General Lee as they fled across Falling Waters ford at Williamsport. He was severely wounded while at the front and lay in the hospital for several months, his disability being of so serious a type that he never fully recovered from its effects. He was appointed to a position in the United States customs service, upon leaving the army, and moved to Brooklyn, N. Y., where he made his home during the balance of his life. Colonel Jones was one of the founders of the Republican party. Always interested in politics, he was an energetic worker in the campaigns of that organization and was listened to in party councils with the fullest respect. His services to the Republican cause were of the greatest value. He was frequently upon the stump and his eloquence as a speaker gained him a national reputation as one of the party's most effective orators, He nominated Colonel Stegman for the shrievalty and was potent in his influence among the people at large, who respected him for his sterling worth and admired his high attainments. He was at one time postmaster of Williamsburg and would have been made Appraiser of the Port of New York, for which he had already been selected, had he not been defeated by one of those political deals which too frequently bar the right man from attaining the recognition justly due him. Colonel Jones was the founder of the Northwestern Female College in Evanston, Ill., an institution that he established and endowed with the money that he made in the California gold fields as one of the original 'Forty-niners.' In 1890, through his efforts, the United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps was formed and though it was at first confined to the harbor of New York, it gradually extended its sphere of usefulness until it included all parts of the country. Before its founder's death, the organization had a membership of 14,500, all volunteers whose services were free, and in 1904 alone not fewer than 324 lives were preserved through their instrumentality. Personally, Colonel Jones was esteemed for his unselfish work, for he sacrificed his private interests to carry on the cause of the Corps, the aid received from the authorities being but nominal and by no means adequate to the requirements of the service, which covers all the watering places, canals, lakes and rivers of the state. Colonel Jones was a member of the Congress Club and an attendant at St. Johns' Methodist Episcopal Church in Brooklyn, of which the Rev. Dr. David G. Downey is pastor. He was

scholarly in his tastes, fond of art in its various forms, and besides a great reader, endowed with high mental power and rare intellectual attainments, he was gifted as an artist and might have won distinction in that field, had he seen fit or had the leisure to devote to it. He was married to Clara Jackson, daughter of Leonard Jackson, of Melrose, Mass., and a descendant of Leonard Serrat, a prominent figure in the early history of the colonies. Three children, two daughters and a son, were born to Colonel and Mrs. Jones, as follows: Clara Ella, who became the wife of Henry N. Meeker, a well-known Brooklyn lawyer; Walter DeH., City Clerk of Melrose, Massachusetts, who married Gertrude Worth, and Emily A., who wedded Joseph W. White, prominent in Brooklyn business circles as a leading fire insurance broker. Colonel Jones died at his home in Brooklyn, from the effects of a paralytic stroke, December 15, 1905.



Sword Presented to 1st Lt. JOHN W. JONES by ABRAHAM LINCOLN in the White House Sometime Between April-May 1862

JOHN WESLEY JONES, a name that will go down in History. He was a Gallant Soldier who led his men through War and Peace. This Article we hope will tell you a little about the man and his acomplishments.

It is with Grateful Acknowledgement and Thanks to his Niece Mrs. Voorhee's (Jones) without who's help most of this information might very well have been lost.