

Jones, Alexander ^[1]

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by Joan J. Hall, 1988

14 Oct. 1802–22 Aug. 1863

Alexander Jones, physician, author, and journalist, was born in *Rowan County* ^[2], the son of Samuel Jones, a planter and schoolteacher who guided his son's early education. In 1818 young Jones went to live with his brother, Dabney, in Washington, Ga., where he was employed as a store clerk. Deciding that he wanted to become a physician, Jones began studying under a Dr. Dunn in Lexington, Ga. In the fall of 1820 he entered the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania. Soon after he was graduated in 1822, his father died and his estate was to be equally divided among seven children. Alexander, thinking that the shares allotted to his two sisters were insufficient to ensure their proper support and education, relinquished his portion to them.

Immediately after the settling of his father's estate, Jones and a fellow student sailed from New York City for Savannah, Ga., where Jones practiced medicine until 1837. In 1823 he was made an honorary member of the Georgia Medical Society, and two years later he was named dean of the Board of Medical Examiners of Georgia. In 1826–27 he served as secretary of the Central Medical Society of Georgia. In 1831 Jones asked the Georgia legislature for funds to enable him to complete a history of Georgia that had been begun by Joseph V. Beven in 1824. The appropriation was not passed and the project died.

During his residence in Georgia, Jones became interested in cotton culture and subsequently made several improvements in the cotton gin which were successfully adopted in the South. In 1840 the British East India Company sought to employ him and several other Americans to help establish a profitable cotton culture in India. These men went first to England, but, shortly before arrangements for sailing to India were completed, Jones decided that it would not be patriotic to contribute to the expansion of a crop that would compete with an important southern staple. He refused the \$6,000 annual salary, plus expenses, offered by the British government, but not before providing a Parliamentary committee with information concerning American cotton culture. At least some of the other men went to India; it was reported, however, that the project failed because the "Hindoos" did not work well and they observed too many religious holidays to permit proper attention to the cotton fields.

Soon after returning from England, Jones settled in New York because the southern climate adversely affected his health. Under the pseudonym ^[3] "Sandy Hook," he served as a correspondent for the New York *Journal of Commerce* as well as for several British newspapers. In 1846 Jones wrote the first news story to be transmitted by telegraph from New York to Washington, D.C.; it dealt with the launching of the *Albany* ^[4], a U.S. sloop of war, at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. He quickly grasped the importance of the telegraph in transmitting news reports. By 1847 a cipher code that he developed was used effectively to reduce the cost of transmitting news by telegraph. In an attempt to prevent telegraph operators from monopolizing the distribution of news by providing their services only to the highest bidder, six New York newspapers formed a cooperative news service. Jones became the first general agent for this organization, which later developed into the New York Associated Press. At his small office at 10 Wall Street, Jones received dispatches from the telegraph terminal in Jersey City and forwarded them to member newspapers. After three years in this position, he resigned in May 1851.

Also in 1851 Jones published two books: *Historical Sketch of the Electric Telegraph* ^[5], a detailed account of the history of the telegraph from the discovery of electricity to the organization of the New York Associated Press; and *Cuba in 1851* ^[6], an exposition of the trade advantages to be gained by the annexation of Cuba. From 1851 until his death twelve years later, Jones was a commercial reporter for the New York *Herald*.

Concurrent with his journalistic career, Jones continued to practice medicine. As an outstanding member of St. David's Society in New York, he pursued his interest in the history and welfare of the Welsh people. He was the author of *The Cymry of '76: Or Welshmen and Their Descendants of the American Revolution* ^[7], published in 1855. Jones died in New York after a year's illness. Following funeral services in St. Alban's Episcopal Church, he was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn. A lengthy, front-page obituary in the New York *Herald* made no mention of a wife, children, or other family.

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