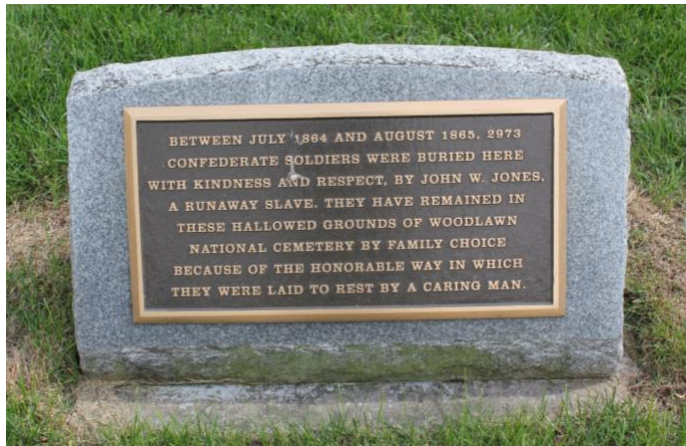


John W. Jones Monument (Elmira, New York)

By Jillian Spivey Caddell

An inscription on a small, polished gray monument in Elmira, New York, reads:



John W. Jones Monument, Photo courtesy of Jillian Caddell

“Between July 1864 and August 1865, 2973 Confederate soldiers were buried here with kindness and respect by John W. Jones, a runaway slave. They have

wn National Cemetery by family

choice because of the honorable way in which they were laid to rest by a caring man.” The monument to Jones sits near another much larger monument featuring a relief statue of a Confederate soldier, erected in 1937 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), as well as a 1911 monument funded by the U.S.

government to the more than 50 Civil War soldiers (mostly Confederate) who died in a train accident in Shohola Township, Pennsylvania, while being transported to Elmira. Each of these monuments is situated within the Confederate section of Woodlawn National Cemetery, which was established in 1877 using the records kept by John W. Jones.

As the monument indicates, John W. Jones was in charge of burials at Elmira Prison Camp, a POW camp for captured Confederate soldiers established by the U.S. in 1864. Only operational during the last year of the war, the camp nonetheless gained a reputation for its harrowing conditions and high death rate (nearly one in four soldiers imprisoned at Elmira died there). Jones, a respected Elmira citizen who was born enslaved in Virginia and escaped to freedom in the north, already served as sexton for several local churches before he was chosen for the job of overseeing the burial of Elmira's dead Confederates. The 1997 monument seeks to capture not only the captivating story of a formerly enslaved man burying men who were fighting to preserve slavery, but also the "honor" and "care" with which Jones went about his job. In histories of the prison, Jones's care is evidenced in his meticulous records, which allowed Southern families to locate the bodies of their dead sons after the war and were used to erect permanent grave markers when the U.S. government began marking Confederate graves in 1906.

The monument to John W. Jones amidst the Confederate graves of Elmira demonstrates a desire for Elmira's citizens to speak back to the earlier Confederate monument and to preserve the memory of a remarkable Elmiran whose story transcends the war itself. Jones was not merely an ex-enslaved person who showed remarkable forgiveness and empathy in his treatment of the Rebel soldiers; he was also an activist, an important conductor on the Underground Railroad, a business man, and a leader of Elmira's Black citizens. (For a more complete

biography of John W. Jones, see [here](#).) It seems fitting, therefore, that his monument was spearheaded by students at the city's Southside High School as well as other local civic leaders; for Jones, the fight for emancipation and equality started at home in Elmira.

Looking back from 1997, we can trace a long history of Civil War monumentalizing through the monuments of Woodlawn National Cemetery, from the conceptualization of national cemeteries in the immediate aftermath of the war through the reconciliatory efforts of the early twentieth century (which reached their apotheosis, perhaps, in the 1913 50th anniversary ceremonies at Gettysburg, which stressed unity and fraternity between Union and Confederate veterans). At Elmira, this sentiment was anticipated in the 1906 erection of permanent monuments for Confederates as well as the 1911 Shohola memorial, which memorialized Confederates on one side and Union soldiers on the other, effectively equalizing them. Moving past this era of reconciliation, we can witness the growing momentum of Lost Cause memory in the 1937 UDC memorial to Confederate soldiers who fell during the "War Between the States," as the monument calls it. Sixty years later, the desire to recognize the efforts of John W. Jones marks another era in Civil War monumentalizing, as historians and local groups sought to expose and remember the undertold stories of Black Americans in the war. One hundred years earlier, monuments like Boston's Robert Gould Shaw Memorial (sculpted by Augustus Saint-Gaudens and dedicated in 1884) depicted Black soldiers as

background to the valiant heroics of white generals. Finally, at the end of the twentieth century, monuments like the Jones memorial and the African American Civil War Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, placed Black soldiers and citizens squarely in the spotlight. In Elmira, these efforts were sustained into the next century as the John W. Jones Museum was established to preserve Jones's home and commemorate his remarkable life. The white clapboard home was moved to land that comprised Jones's original farm, which is located directly opposite Woodlawn, adding another dimension to the memorial landscape of the area.

The complex memorial landscape of Elmira's Woodlawn National Cemetery is further complicated by its location adjacent to a town cemetery, also called Woodlawn, which serves as the final resting place of one of the nineteenth century's most famous authors, Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens). Jones himself is buried not far from the Clemens family plot in Woodlawn, and there is evidence that Jones and Twain met later in their lives to discuss turning Jones's life story into fiction. In his life and his work, Twain had a notoriously complicated relation to issues of race, one that manifests in the plots and characters of texts like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1893). The fact that in death Twain and Jones share a cemetery and a proximity to the national cemetery that Jones effectively founded in his role as burier of the Confederate dead forces us to think about how memory, history, and art intersect in particular places through and across time.

And the transformation of Elmira's memorial landscape continues today. In the aftermath of the deadly protests over the removal of Confederate statues in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2018, Elmira was one of at least eight Confederate cemeteries given extra security paid for with federal money. According to an [NBC News report](#), the U.S. government's Department of Veterans Affairs appeared to be worried that vandals might attempt to destroy or defile monuments like the one erected by the UDC in Elmira in 1937, though no such destruction occurred. More recently, following the global antiracist protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the [removal of some 73 Confederate statues](#) in cities like Richmond, Virginia, Elmira's Confederate memorial continued to stand unmolested in the quiet grounds of Woodlawn National Cemetery. Perhaps the presence of the John W. Jones Monument, as well as his museum just across the street, is more than enough evidence of the falseness of the ideology for which the men buried all around it gave their lives.

Resources and Further Reading

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