

The Descendants of William Ellis Jones (and what became of his legendary library).

Speaking with my grandmother was often a challenge. She was in her eighties, a little deaf, she lived alone, and she was stubborn as a mule. Checking in on her every few days was an obligation I took seriously, but it wasn't always easy to know what was going on with her. She assumed I knew, but mind-reading was not a skill I ever mastered.

"Connie, I have to go. The fire department is here," she stated matter-of-factly, as if the fire department came over to her house regularly for a sip of tea and a round of Bridge.

"The fire department? Why's the fire department there?"

It seemed a reasonable question.

"They're burning the store down today as a training exercise," she replied. "It's all arranged. I'm so happy to finally have that building taken down. It's a terrible fire trap."

The "fire trap" she referred to was my grandfather's old general store. The structure predated the American Civil War and had been continuously operated by our family since the 1880's, first as a textile mill commissary, then a general mercantile exchange, and finally a neighborhood grocery store. My grandfather closed its doors to commercial operation in January 1977, when he retired after running the place for fifty-some years. Since then, the building had fallen into disrepair, but that didn't stop us from using it as a storage unit for every sort of cast-off a large family like ours no longer has room for but can't seem to let go of.

The store was where our sentimentality was exiled to, and ultimately where sentiment went to die, as I learned on that overcast day in October.

This was the first I'd heard of taking the store down.

"What did you do with all the stuff in there?" I asked.

This was also a reasonable question. The massive old building's attic and spare rooms were stacked to the rafters with antiques from long-since-past abandoned plantations homes, bulky steamer trunks stuffed with tattered dresses and children's toys from another century. All the general store's fixtures remained *in situ* from a decade earlier, from the razor-sharp butcher's knives nestled in their worn wooden blocks in the meat market, to the Toledo scales used daily for a hundred years to weigh out sausage links and tenderloin. The soda fountain with its glass cases and mahogany counters; the freezers; the colorful jars still half-filled with wrapped candies and crackers; the broom my grandfather used to sweep around the cash register every morning; it stood, still propped in the corner right where he left it. All these things remained, collecting dust in the lonely store, waiting for some twenty-first century episode of *Pickers* to come along and give us fifty dollars and fifteen minutes of fame.

"There's nothing in that store but a big pile of junk," my grandmother stated flatly. Her tone brooked no opposition. She may have been eighty-something years-old, but her will was an iron rod of determination. "Good riddance to all of it."

But what about the books?

Fifty boxes of books stacked shoulder high, filled one entire room of the old general store's attic.

At one time the rooms above the retail floor of the store served as comfortable living quarters for my great-great-grandfather and his family. When they built a new home a quarter-mile down the road, the rooms above the store devolved to storage. In the late 1960's, when my parents separated and my mother returned to her hometown with two children, a cat, a dog, and a moving van packed with the material evidence of a shattered family life, much of that evidence went into temporary storage in the rooms above the store.

The books – *my father's books* – never made their way out.

“Anyway, I’ve got to run, they’re rolling out the hoses in the yard and I need to make sure they don’t break the boxwoods.”

She was off before I could get an answer about the books. For the rest of the afternoon she wouldn’t pick up the telephone. I called every hour on the hour until I got off work. By five in the evening, I was frantic. I got in my car, gassed up, and drove northeast – faster than I should have – heading toward my hometown, toward the old general store where all my best and most of my worst childhood memories still lived, and toward the ‘training exercise’ that represented the power the old have over the young, even when the old are frail and dependent. Despite their fragility, the old rule with the blind authority of despots. Sometimes, their passing whims feel like brain-stunning blows – or knives in the back.

With the benefit of thirty-plus years of hindsight, I know my grandmother’s decision to torch the store (and the books inside it) was not malicious. The old general store stood a mere twenty paces from her home and it really was a tinderbox of wood frame, dry boards, and cedar shake. Had it caught fire, it would have burned her home to the ground and probably ignited one or more of the fuel storage tanks on the adjacent property. A controlled burn made perfect sense in every regard, except for the fact that inside the belly of that beast of an antique general store lay treasures, the greatest of them being the library of William Ellis Jones of Richmond, Virginia.

On that day in October, just a few years after my college graduation, I had no idea whose books they were, who William Ellis Jones was beyond just his name, or even why I should care.

William Ellis Jones was no one to my grandmother. I knew that and so did she. At the time, I believed she might have been trying to convince me he was no one to me either.

It took ninety minutes to make the drive from my job to my hometown of Weldon, North

Carolina. Ninety minutes to consider just how this thing had come to pass. Ninety minutes to wonder how the library that had come through so many catastrophes – which was not mine to save at all – was going to meet its end on my watch.

In my mind, the first match put to those old books was placed on the twenty-fourth day of June in 1956. That's the day my mother, Ann Benn Wyche, married my father, Thomas Ellis Jones. She was the stunningly beautiful, cotillion-trained, taffeta crinoline wearing, only daughter of semi-aristocratic plantation descendants. He was the devastatingly handsome, unbelievably charming, but completely penniless son of a sharp-tongued widow who claimed to be a member of the Ku Klux Klan. He claimed his mother was only joking. It was easy to want to believe him, as he was such a honey-smooth talker and oh-so-easy to look at.

My mother's father, a pragmatic man who was never impressed by smooth-talking city-folk, refused to walk his daughter down the aisle. Her mother refused to host a wedding reception. My mother's dotting aunts (her father's sisters) took pity and threw a reception. The photographs of this event look like a scene out of a Tennessee Williams play, directed by John Waters. My mother, dressed in her powder blue silk suit (because Daddy wouldn't spring for a wedding dress), gushes, blushing, smart in her gloves and pearls, holding up a piece of teal colored China



to show the photographer. Her parents look on, smiling awkwardly, stiff as boards.

My father, languid with his long legs dripping over the arm of a chair, almost smirks, facing the camera. He peers at us through cobalt blue eyes, intense with self-satisfied smugness. His expression suggests he knows he's just pulled off something

epic. My grandmother looks on. She has his number, but no one's paying her any attention. My mother is smitten with the chisel of his chin and with her new China pattern.

That's the day the first match was laid. But that's not what stacked the kindling.

To understand how we got from William Ellis Jones of Richmond (one-time reluctant member of Crenshaw's Battery who carried on a three-year-long feud with his commanding officers, then became a lifelong member of the Pegram's Battalion Association; a founding member of the Robert E. Lee Camp, who went to the fortieth anniversary of Gettysburg in 1903; who became the publisher of record for the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, the Virginia Historical Society, and a regular subject of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* society pages), to Thomas Ellis Jones (smug, penniless, seducer of naïve southern belles), we have to traverse three generations, the first World War, the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the Great Depression, the second World War, and the Beat Generation.

A lot of American history is compressed into the fifty years between the Gettysburg reunion and the Summer of Love. That's where the kindling was laid and where the first sparks were ignited.

That's this story.

There's an old proverb that claims it takes three generations to make a gentleman.¹ Competing evidence suggests it only takes two generations to squander a great family's fortune.² Accordingly, the Jones family of Richmond mapped a predictable ascent and descent, and while their 'fortune' was not measured in exceptional financial wealth, what they had was no less

valuable and no less squandered by succeeding generations.

The fortune I refer to is the library begun by Thomas Norcliffe Jones while he was still a young man living in his parent's home in Caernarvon, Wales, years before he immigrated to Richmond. The books he collected in his youth included early Welsh language publications on poetry, religion, books on medicine, and on the physical sciences. One seventeenth century volume (in Latin) printed with movable wooden type has survived.³

Thomas Norcliffe Jones passed his collection of books to his son, William Ellis Jones, who added to their numbers considerably. Those books managed to survive the devastation of the Evacuation Fire of 1865 which consumed much of Richmond's paper history. In 1882, William Ellis Jones, by then a successful printer-publisher and a pillar of Richmond society, built his home – dubbed Summerfield – around a huge collection of books reputed to number in excess of three thousand.

While William collected and read books, published books, and sold books, he also raised a family with his wife, Ella Cordelia Smith. Together, they produced three sons. Only one of them seems to have inherited a lasting interest in the family business of letters and books.



Florence Ellis Jones, the eldest, aspired to be an author. He managed to achieve some acclaim, getting a few works of fiction published by popular periodicals of the time, including *The Argosy*. Meanwhile, he made his living for a while as an editor for the *Richmond Journal*, while also working for his father at the printing company established a generation earlier (William Ellis Jones, Book and Job Printer, Richmond).

Florence Ellis Jones (according to his son) hated his first

name. Instead, he occasionally used the pen names of Fitzgerald and Florentius in an attempt to masculinize the name. Most of the time he just used ‘Ellis Jones.’



Besides marrying (well above his station) the daughter of an ancient Virginia family (in October of 1898 he married Addie Gray Bowles, great-grand daughter of famed Revolutionary War soldier, Knight Bowles of Fluvanna County), Florence Ellis Jones’s early life had little in common with his father’s. Instead of being born to newly arrived immigrants in a spare room above a dodgy grocery store on the edge of town, Ellis’s parents were established members of Richmond society and financially well-off. His first childhood home was a spacious one on Shockoe Hill, located in the most fashionable part of Richmond.

Unlike his father who was apprenticed out at the age of thirteen, for six, twelve-hour days a week to a start-up printing company, Ellis was enrolled in the prestigious McGuire’s School in Richmond to prepare him for further studies at Virginia Professional Institute. After leaving college, he returned to work at the printing company. He was active in local politics⁴ and served as a vestryman and warden of the Church of the Holy Comforter in Richmond.

Ellis’s brother, Thomas Grayson Jones was afforded the same education and advantages of social standing and employment as his elder brother, also graduating from McGuire’s. In his late teens and early twenties, he worked as a pressman at Hill’s Printing in Richmond⁵ until determining there was a greater opportunity for profit in the business of delivering milk. Thomas became a dairyman but found making an honest go of it challenging. In 1910, he was arrested and convicted of selling illicit milk.⁶ A decade prior to that, in 1901, he married Mattie Louise Lyne and together they had four children; Margaret Osgood (born 1902), Richard Courtney (born 1906), Travers Grayson (born 1907), and Waverly Chrichton (born 1908). Thomas Grayson

Jones and Mattie Louise Lyne divorced in 1932.⁷

Fairfax Courtney Jones, the youngest of William Ellis Jones's three sons, showed only fleeting interest in the printing firm his father founded. In 1911 he married a young woman named Margaret Elizabeth Graves. As a young man he was a vestryman at the Church of the Holy Comforter⁸ and was a canvassing Democrat in the elections of 1913⁹. That same year he was arrested for engaging in a street fight, fleeing from police, and resisting arrest, but the charges were eventually dismissed.¹⁰ The 1910 census lists Fairfax Courtney Jones's occupation as a tobacco salesman.¹¹ The next time his name appears on the public record is the 1940 census, where his occupation is recorded as a bookkeeper in Richmond.¹² He and Margaret had no children.

William Ellis Jones made his eldest son, Florence Ellis, a partner in the printing business not long after the latter's marriage in 1898. The two worked together through the earliest years of the twentieth century until William's inevitable decline from advancing age.

On April 18, 1910, William Ellis Jones, our irreverent Civil War diarist who matured into one of Richmond's best-respected citizens and most prolific publishers of Southern history, died at his home at Summerfield. He was seventy-two years old.¹³

At the time of his death William employed only one of his son's, F. Ellis Jones, in the printing business he had owned since 1878. In addition to owning the printing company, William also owned a spacious brownstone on West Avenue, as well as the rambling country home "Summerfield" in the Henrico County community of Dumbarton. His library, diminished considerably by a fire which destroyed Summerfield in 1888, was rebuilt over the twenty-years between the fire and the time of William's passing.

In his will, William gave explicit instructions that his library was to pass intact to his eldest

son, and then on to his grandson and namesake, William Ellis Jones, who was a boy of just ten years of age at the time of his grandfather's death. All the other property was to be distributed equally between the three children or their heirs.

That's not how things worked out.

Why things didn't work out that way is a matter of conjecture, but a few certainties are recorded in the public record. Principle among these is the notice which appeared in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* on May 1, 1910, less than a month after William Ellis Jones's passing. His eldest son, F. Ellis Jones took out the following notice;

"A Card

To Our Friends and Patrons:

It is my painful duty to announce the death of my father, William Ellis Jones, in this city on Monday, April 18, 1910. The business of printing which he had conducted for so many years will be continued by his heirs (his widow and three sons) and I will have entire charge. It will be my constant endeavor to follow in the path of honesty and fair dealing so worthily marked out by my father.

Having been associated with him in the conduct of this business for upwards of twenty years, I think I can say that I am in a position to more nearly carry out his ideas and ideals than could anyone else.

Thanking you for your patronage in the past, and soliciting the continuation of the same, and with the assurance that all orders entrusted to me will have my best attention, I am,

Respectfully yours,

F. Ellis Jones

General Manager.”

F. Ellis Jones could not control the fact that his brothers had inherited two thirds of the company he worked to sustain and grow for two decades alongside their father. He could try to control how the world interpreted that transition. Perhaps he believed there would be doubts. His words in this missive seek to squash all concern, *“I will have entire charge. It will be my constant endeavor to follow in the path of honesty and fair dealing so worthily marked out by my father.”*

Perhaps he worried that his brother’s reputations were not quite as sterling as his father’s had been. What Ellis failed to anticipate is that bad luck and bad timing can crush even the best of intentions, no matter how sterling your reputation may be.

A decade earlier Ellis Jones had contracted tuberculosis. Because he was young and active, he was able to manage the disease, but with the anxiety of his father’s death in combination with having to take on all the responsibility for the business, the chronic illness got the better of him. Ellis fell ill within days of posting that notice in the Richmond papers. He struggled through the summer to regain his health, while also struggling to keep the printing company afloat. All his efforts were in vain.

On November 16, 1910, just seven months after his father’s death, Florence Ellis Jones died at his father’s home, Summerfield, in Henrico County.¹⁴ He left a young wife, Addie Gray, his son, William Ellis, his mother, Ella, and his beloved “Aunt Dietz” (Lemira Virginia Gibbs, nee, Smith). All three women and his young son were dependent upon Ellis’s income for their upkeep. Ella and her sister Lemira were widows. Now, with Ellis’s death, Addie Gray was also widowed with a young child to care for. These women’s lives and livelihoods were cast into the

hands of Thomas Grayson and Fairfax Courtney Jones. The results would not reflect well on either young man.

About a year after Ellis Jones's death, in July of 1911, the following notice appeared in the *Printing Trade News*;

“Richmond, Va., – Printing – William Ellis Jones' Sons Incorporated with \$15,000 capital stock: T. Grayson Jones, president, Dumbarton, Va.; W. M. Lipscomb, vice-president; Fairfax C. Jones, secretary-treasurer; both of Richmond. Will conduct general printing business.”

A similar announcement appeared in *The Tradesman* and in *The Inland Printer*.

That was the same year James Branch Cabell's *Branch of Abingdon* was brought forth from the press. The following year, Bennett Wood Green's *Word-Book of Virginia Folk Speech* was published. Following these two celebrated titles, there were a few additional volumes from the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, and a Civil War recollection from Confederate Lieutenant Colonel David Gregg McIntosh, who commanded the South Carolina Pee Dee Artillery under William Pegram (serving alongside Crenshaw's Battery, where William Ellis Jones served for the duration of the war). Beyond these publications, the productions of the newly incorporated William Ellis Jones' Sons were scant. The *Southern Historical Society Papers* published their last edition with the Jones press in 1916.

Thomas Grayson Jones had given up the business of printing and publishing in his early twenties to pursue the sale of milk, yet he felt up to the task of taking on \$15,000 in debt and taking over the printing company his father had drawn up from the ashes of Richmond's Evacuation Fire half a century earlier. Fairfax Courtney Jones never worked in the printing company, instead pursuing a profession as a tobacco salesman since leaving school.

When F. Ellis Jones announced he was taking the company in hand in the weeks following

his father's death he acknowledged Ella Cordelia Smith's role in building the company and moving it forward, yet that acknowledgement is absent in Thomas Grayson Jones's incorporation. Where is Addie Gray Bowles one third of the company? What about the part William Ellis Jones (the younger) should have inherited?

There's nothing.

The large country house at Dumbarton where both William Ellis Jones and his eldest son, F. Ellis Jones drew their last breaths, devolved into the sole possession of Thomas Grayson Jones. The towering old brownstone at 1006 West Street was quickly sold.

Addie Gray, her eleven-year-old son William, her mother-in-law, Ella Cordelia (our Civil War diarist's widow), and her recently widowed sister, Lemira Virginia Gibbs, were all relocated away from Summerfield to Hanover Avenue, far to the west of downtown in what is now referred to as the *fan* district of Richmond. They moved into a two-story duplex that was a fraction of the size of the three-story brownstone on West Avenue, and a mere shadow of the rambling country place at Dumbarton.

As the widow of a Civil War veteran, Ella Cordelia collected a small pension, as did her sister, Lemira. It appears that this meager income is all the family had to subsist upon.

Unlike many young women in her situation who might have returned to her parents' home, Addie Gray (nee, Bowles) Jones instead remained with her aging mother-in-law and her mother's older sister, Lemira Virginia Gibbs. By all accounts she was exceedingly devoted to her mother-in-law and her adopted aunt Lemira. They were equally devoted to her and to young William.

Due to their sudden and substantial financial descent, William was not afforded a private school education like his father and uncles had been. Following his father's death, William attended the public schools. When he about twelve years of age, he got an after-school and

weekend job delivering groceries for a Shockoe Hill market owned by a friend of his grandfather's. On Sunday he attended the Church of the Holy Comforter with his mother, Grandmother, and his 'Aunt Dietz' (Lemira), who had been like a second grandmother to him. On December 18, 1917, Lemira, who was seventy-three years-old, passed away. When she passed, half the household income went with her. William, who had only graduated high school the previous spring, had begun taking classes at one of the local colleges while also working part-time. His small income was not sufficient to sustain the household, but despite his youth he committed to doing what he could. He determined to join the United States Army, which was a risky proposition since the "Great War" raged throughout Europe and American soldiers were dying in muddy trenches by the wholesale. In an odd twist of fate, William escaped being sent to France to fight because he – like millions of others all over the world – contracted the Spanish Flu. He was in Petersburg, training at Camp Lee when he fell ill in the autumn of 1918. Instead of staying in camp with thousands of others who were also infected, William was brought home so his family could care for him. That autumn it seemed all of Richmond came down with the flu, along with the rest of the country, and the whole world. The influenza pandemic of 1918 killed an estimated seventy-million people worldwide, or around 4% of the global population. It still stands as one of the most profoundly destructive natural disasters in human history.¹⁵

William was nursed back to health by his mother, who opened her home to her brother and his large family, all of whom had contracted the virus. When she wasn't caring for members of her own family, Addie Gray answered the call to care for the thousands of sick and dying Richmonders who were being cared for in make-shift hospitals set up in churches, schools, and even in tents in the parks. No sooner had she seen her son, her brother, his wife, and their children make a full recovery, then Addie Gray herself was stricken with the infection. She was

not as lucky as those she cared for. She drew her last, labored breath on October 14, 1918, at the peak of the epidemic in Richmond. She was among a thousand residents of the city who died of influenza following the outbreak.¹⁶

Regarding Addie Gray's temperament, her son recorded the following in his notes,

"...She had the common failing of the ladies of the Old South; she was compelled to always be doing something for those less fortunate than herself, especially the neighboring poor and the negroes. She did a vast amount of good in a quiet way and spread sunshine in many humble homes. All... adored 'Miss Addie Gray'. A score or more persons, all unknown to her family, came to her funeral in tears, a high tribute indeed...."

Addie Gray Bowles Jones is buried at Hollywood Cemetery beside her husband. She was just thirty-seven years old when she passed. Her loss was a blow that her young son never overcame. William Ellis Jones was then just nineteen years old. He erected a simple marker at Hollywood Cemetery for his mother. Its tender inscription reads, *"To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die."*

William, who was still a teenager, was left with only his grandmother, Ella Cordelia Smith Jones, who had been bedridden for years after suffering a stroke. He returned to the Army following his mother's death, but was discharged in December of 1918, as World War I drew to a close.

On January 19, 1919, a month after his discharge from military service and just a few months after his mother's death, his grandmother, Ella Cordelia passed away. William was with her in her final hours, sitting vigil at her bedside awaiting the inevitable. She was his last, precious link to the large family that once upon-a-time showered him with love and security throughout his

brief childhood and adolescence. One-by-one in quick succession, they'd all fallen away, leaving young William completely alone, shaken, and untethered from his once rock-solid foundation. He was just nineteen years old and unfortunately, the very best days of his life were already well behind him.

William Ellis Jones was never trained as a printer or publisher. He was not educated in the best private schools as his father and uncles had been. He inherited no portion of his grandfather's estate except for the large library that had been his grandfather's pride and joy and the principal reason the sprawling country house "Summerfield" was built. The books, packed in liquor store boxes, came into his possession when he was still a boy, as soon as Summerfield passed into the possession of Thomas Grayson Jones. William never visited the old country house again after his grandfather died. He hardly knew his cousins, who he saw occasionally on the streets around Richmond.

Even the house on Hanover Street where his grandmother spent her last days, was not William's after she passed. After Ella Cordelia's death, he was turned out of it to make his own way. He was still a teenager, penniless, without higher education, and without the support structure of close family.

Over the course of his life William Ellis Jones (grandson of the Civil War diarist) had very little (if any) contact with his uncles Courtney or Grayson. The two men are recorded in the meticulous family history he began assembling in the 1930's, but only so far as their names, birth dates, marriage dates, and spouse names. These are the only two individuals in the family who William Ellis Jones (the younger) knew personally whose lives are not illuminated with extensive notes. The lack of illumination is indicative of a familial breach of some kind, most likely related to events that transpired following the death of Florence Ellis Jones. It's also telling

that in this family history William made a point of stating there had never been a divorce in the Jones family. That wasn't true, as his uncle Thomas Grayson Jones was divorced in 1932, in Richmond. Such an event was unlikely to escape William's notice, as it would have been a rare occurrence and much talked-of at the time.

After his grandmother's death, left without any family in Richmond, William briefly went to live with his uncle Charles Bowles (his mother's brother). His residence there was brief, as "Uncle Charlie" was keen to see his nephew educated and installed into a respectable profession. Charles Bowles paid for William's education at one of Virginia's public universities where he studied English literature.



After completing his undergraduate degree, William took up teaching. In his first job, at just twenty-four years-old, while teaching in the public schools around Richmond, he met the then-sixteen-year-old Dora Georgia Thomas. She was his student and by all accounts, a bright one. Despite the age difference and the inevitable scandal, the two were married in October of 1923 when Dora was still a high school sophomore. Following their marriage, William's teaching contract in Richmond was not renewed and he was forced to look further afield for professional opportunities. The couple moved around for several years while William tried to find his footing. As the couple struggled financially and he struggled professionally, their first child – Dora Ellis Jones – was born in Pulaski, Virginia in the winter of 1925 (at the home of William's Uncle Charlie Bowles).

William was a proud father who doted on his first-born child. Years later he wrote of her with touching sentimentality, also calling her a "gifted scholar". Her mother claimed that Dora was

exceptionally bright, running intellectual circles around her peers. Her two younger children, by comparison, she claimed, were merely “well above average”.

In the summer of 1929, at the absolute apex of the ‘Roaring Twenties’, when every shoeshine boy was giving out stock tips and doormen were becoming Wall Street millionaires, William Ellis Jones moved his young family to Manhattan where he planned to make his fortune as a stock trader by day and find his fame as an author by night. His timing could not possibly have been any worse.

While William did manage to meet several famous authors (Dorothy Parker was an acquaintance, and he claims to have met Hemingway at least twice), he never wrote the novel he intended to write. Instead he gravitated toward the theater and began writing short plays. He made some rather sketchy friends who introduced him to the philosophy of Karl Marx, signing him up to join the Communist Worker’s Party. He drank whiskey and smoked illicit substances at Greenwich Village parties where writers and poets hung around, talking politics, philosophy, and fine art.

Despite, or possibly because of those diversions, financial success entirely eluded William. When the stock market crash of October 1929 happened, it devastated the family’s already unsteady finances.

There may have been an element of denial or even shame preventing William from cutting his losses and returning home to Richmond following the market crash. After experiencing so much loss (beginning with his grandfather in 1910, then his father, his mother, his beloved Aunt Dietz, then his grandmother, and finally being turned out of the home he grew up in), it’s possible William just refused to accept any more disappointment. He dug in, believing the markets would recover and he would recoup his losses. When Dora became pregnant with their

second child, she – very sensibly – went home to her family in Richmond to have the baby.

Thomas Ellis Jones (my father) was born on May 1, 1930, near Richmond, at his maternal grandmother's home. A few months later Dora returned to New York with the children, rejoining her husband. Three years later, she traveled south once more to her mother's home to give birth to the couple's third child, Georgia Ellis Jones. When she returned to New York with the children in tow, Dora – then about eight years-old – was ill. All three children had contracted a terrible fever (most likely strep throat), but the baby and Thomas got over it quickly enough. The thing took hold in Dora's lungs, and it wouldn't let go.

When Dora arrived back in New York, delivered into her impatient father's arms, he found his daughter gaunt. She had a cough and was lethargic. In a month's time she recovered a little and was able to return to school. Thomas continued looking for regular work while also trying to write, spending a great deal of his time on the collected family history he began in 1930.

New York City led the nation into the gray depths of the Great Depression in the years following the stock market crash. Despite poverty, breadlines, and lack of any indication things might improve soon, Thomas hung on, refusing to return to Richmond. He wanted to make it on his own, and he was willing to risk everything to do it.

The spring of 1935 was an especially cold one in New York City. The family ran out of coal to heat their tiny apartment, and there was no money to buy more. William's young wife wrapped her hungry children in tattered blankets and prayed for warm weather. By the time the weather broke, ten-year-old Dora was already desperately ill. She burned up with fever. Her lungs gurgled with congestion. Her heartbeat was irregular and weak.

William didn't have enough money to pay a doctor to come see his daughter.

Dora wrote to her family asking for money. By the time the funds arrived, it was too late.

Dora Ellis Jones perished of rheumatic fever on June 3, 1935. Her father, who always believed everything would eventually turn out all right, was stunned. Her mother, who knew things rarely turned out all right, took her two surviving children and the body of her eldest, home to Richmond. She buried Dora in Virginia soil, near her grandparents, F. Ellis Jones and Addie Gray Bowles Jones. William joined the family a few weeks later, finally relinquishing his New York City dreams.



After Dora's death, he was never the same man again. A shadow slipped over him. His dreams – dreams he'd once nurtured and cultivated – became haunted nightmares. He adopted a resentful, fearful posture in the world. The joy slipped out of his eyes. His smile flattened to something altogether grim.

You can see the change in him in photographs. Before Dora's death he laughed. He had free moments of lighthearted silliness. After her death, his shoulders hunched like a man carrying a tremendous burden. His eyes grew sunken and dark. His countenance was rendered profoundly sad. In a few photographs, he stands apart from his companions, as if he's already departed from them.



William Ellis Jones, the grandson and namesake of our Civil War diarist, died – his wife said – of a broken heart on July 29, 1951. He was just fifty-two years old. His only son (my father) was twenty-one and already out in the world trying to make his own way. He'd started college at the University of Virginia, but when his father died, the family's income stopped. Thomas

immediately became the head of household, having the sole responsibility for supporting a mother and a younger sister who was still in school at Wytheville High where their father had been on faculty as an English teacher and drama coach.

Thomas did the same thing his father did a generation before, the thing many young men in his position did then and still do today; he joined the United States military. Service in the Air Force guaranteed him a paycheck and (at the conclusion of his commitment) an education via the G.I. Bill. Thomas sent the bulk of his pay home to his mother while he was stationed at U.S. Air Force bases in Colorado, Nevada, and California. When his sister Georgia graduated from high school, she was accepted to attend Virginia Intermont College to study drama. Thomas helped pay for that also, until she decided to quit school and marry her high school sweetheart, Donald Warden.



William E. Jones – despite his flaws, and there were many – raised his two surviving children as brave, creative individuals. His son, Thomas, completed his stint in the Air Force and applied to Richmond Professional Institute to study fine art on the G.I. Bill. After four years in the Air Force he felt up to the task of becoming a sculptor or perhaps a painter; a bold career move for a young man to stake out in the middle of 1950's America, at the height of the Cold War when artists were viewed as suspect characters, McCarthyism was rolling along at full-throttle, the Berlin Wall was going up, *On The Road* was years away from publication, and no one except a few Columbia University upstart poets had ever heard of Alan Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac, or William S. Burroughs.

Nevertheless, Thomas Ellis Jones wanted to be an artist. He admired Jackson Pollack and had ideas of going to New York to find his Lee Krasner, sign with a gallery, and become a star.



My mother, Ann Benn Wyche, graduated High School in 1955, determined to give her small town of Weldon, North Carolina something to talk about. She loved animals, Pablo Picasso, and Edgar Allen Poe in equal measure. She wasn't sure what in the world any of that meant, but she was certain that once she got to Richmond Professional Institute and learned a thing or two about art and poetry, everything in her life would fall into its proper order.

She didn't count on meeting Thomas Ellis Jones, the president of the Art Students League, a senior who also worked nights and weekends at the Valentine Museum in Richmond (because he had some distant family connection to the famous place). She didn't count on the fact that the most popular senior on campus was so strikingly handsome, charming, articulate, and dashing. She didn't count on the fact that he was interested in a gorgeous, apparently wealthy girl like herself. She heard he had a girlfriend who he'd been seeing for two years and who he'd given a diamond to. He broke up with that girl and he asked my mother out before the third weekend of her first semester as a freshman.

After a scandalously brief courtship, the two were married in the summer between my mother's freshman and sophomore years. She never made it back to school. Instead she got a job



working the China and crystal counter at Thalhimers on Broad Street in Richmond, so Thomas could go back to school and get his teaching certificate. Then she got pregnant.

Their first child (my brother) was born in December of 1959. My father was teaching school in Charlottesville, Virginia at the time. They named their son William Ellis Jones after Thomas's father. Thomas didn't really know much about his great-grandfather, and he knew almost nothing about the originator of the name, the Welsh bard, Cawrdaf, who was Christened 'Gwilym Ellis Jones' in 1785 at Tyddyn Sion in Wales. The name was one that Thomas knew had been passed down to his father. He – like his own father – felt untethered in a world always coming undone. He wanted his son to have something steady to cling to, even if it was just an old, long-used name.

A few years later, the same year the Beatles erupted onto the American scene, in another town the couple drifted to in pursuit of work, I was born without much notice. My father was less impressed with the birth of a daughter than he had been with the arrival of his firstborn, a son. He left the naming of me to my mother. Thus, I'm named after my maternal great-grandmother.

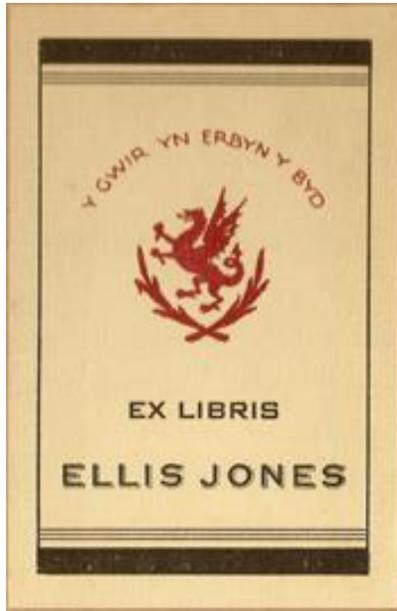
My father and his father had a few things in common. Neither were great at providing for their families, and neither felt much lingering obligation toward their daughters.

Georgia – Williams' surviving daughter, following the passing of her elder sister – always felt blamed for her sisters' demise. Years after the fact she said her father blamed her for bringing the

strep infection that eventually killed her sister into the house. She said that her father actually told her she killed Dora. When Georgia had children of her own, she recounted those stories to them.⁷

I heard the stories too, but from another point of view. My father idolized his father. He spoke of William Ellis Jones as a sort of mad genius who had volatile tendencies, and who had to be accommodated in his brooding moods. He said his father wrote beautiful poetry. He spoke eloquently. He had a soulful singing voice. He smoked almost constantly, and he drank – *too much*.

Like his own father, my father had a difficult time finding his path in life. He couldn't hold down a job for any length of time, so our family struggled financially, moving frequently, getting evicted from rental houses, having the electricity turned off. My mother, who had been raised in relative comfort and with financial stability, could not accept her new circumstances. With two small children to care for, she defied convention and refused to remain with a man who would not support his family. After getting fired from yet another job, and getting evicted from yet another house, in the tumultuous summer of 1968 she left, taking my nine-year-old brother and me (I was three) back to her parents' home in Weldon, North Carolina. My father promised her he would do better. As her brothers loaded the moving van with all our possessions and box after box of old books that had belonged to Thomas's father, he begged her to give him one more chance.



It's amazing the things a toddler recalls. I recall sitting on the floor in our house in Malvern, Pennsylvania (before the last eviction), surrounded by a stack of black, leather bound books. I remember opening a cover and peering down at an image of a red dragon framed in black. The image was the Ex Libris Ellis Jones bookplate designed, printed, and placed in the books by William Ellis Jones, the Civil War diarist and printer of Richmond.

Other kids had Lincoln Logs, erector sets, and Legos. I had books to build my forts with. My Tonka trucks climbed stacks of Shakespeare's tragedies. My Barbie townhomes were landscaped with regimental histories. My dolls rock-climbed among volumes of the *Southern Historical Society Papers* and the Virginia Historical Society collections. When I was seven, I peered into a book at an engraving of Robert Alonzo Brock, having no idea who he was, and I thought his hair looked strange. I still think it looks strange today, even though now I know he was one of my great-great grandfather's dearest friends.

The books in the attic of my grandfather's store were not my books to save or to burn, no matter how much I loved them. They were my father's books, though he never came back for them. Then they were my brother's books, though he had no real interest in claiming or caring for them. I was always told to keep my hands off the books. Maybe that made me love them more. Before I went off to college, I stole away into the attic rooms above the old store and I cherry picked dozens of volumes from the boxes stacked against the wall, just as I'd done every opportunity I got since I was old enough to sneak away without raising alarm.

Over the years I managed to rescue a trio of very nice, mid-19th century Jane Austen's, a

couple early edition Fitzgerald's, Dorothy Parker's (signed), Hemingway's, and the nicest collection of signed Edna St. Vincent Millay's I've ever seen anywhere. And then there were the Virginia histories I knew next to nothing about but lifted from their boxes because they just felt important. I took an entire box of very old books in a language I did not recognize, which were packed with a few books wrapped in tissue paper and cloth. I had no idea what they were when I pilfered them, but I recognized that at some point they had obviously been important to someone.

I saved a collection of reference books, and more volumes of poetry than I can list. I saved a book club edition of James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohican's* because I really just wanted to read it.

These were the books I saved because these were the books that spoke to me. I have no idea what I left behind because I was only twenty or twenty-two years-old the last time I peered into any of those boxes, and my understanding of what real literature or a real library was, was not even partially formed.

As I drove through the twilight that evening in October, racing toward my hometown, hoping that I'd somehow manage to get there before they set the old place on fire, my mind reeled, imagining the wonders of rare first editions and one-of-a-kind cradle-works, burning up in the flames. I begged and bargained with God to make it not so. I cursed my grandmother for being a Philistine. I cursed my father who had no appreciation for the legacy left to him, and even less concern for the daughter who coveted those treasures like they were gemstones or gold. I cursed my mother who put the books in those attic rooms, and my brother who the books now belonged to by default, who joined the Marine Corps and left them behind to rot. I cursed my grandmother again for resenting the books and the store and not realizing that the treasures inside were of greater value than she would ever understand. And I cursed myself for not growing a backbone

and taking the books away for safekeeping years ago. I was, after all, the only one who had ever cared for them. Just because someone said they belonged to my brother, didn't mean I couldn't save them.

I let them languish in the attic rooms out of spite and resentment. I resented my father who didn't see me. I took out the resentment on the books by neglecting them, just as he neglected me. Of course, this only hurt me, as I cared for the books in a way my father never did. It was myself I was neglecting. I was spiting myself but using the books as proxy.

Now that they were kindling, no one would cry about their loss but me.

Driving down the narrow lane toward the place where I spent every day of my childhood, the view revealed ahead of me was strange. The house was there, the same as it ever was, but beside it, across the long driveway, was an empty space; a square of gray, still smoldering soil. In the center was a pile of ashes tended by three burley men with shovels in hand.

I stared at the empty space where for more than one-hundred fifty years the old general store had stood. It survived a Civil War, floods, and Hurricane Hazel, which leveled half the town. Yet it could not survive the iron will of one old woman determined to see it brought down before she went into the ground. She hated that store and everything it stood for, and on that day, she finally – after sixty years – got her revenge on it.

I parked the car and got out, then walked to where the front steps of the store had once been. Nothing but rubble and charred concrete blocks remained. The three firemen with their shovels nodded, regarding me with curiosity as I slipped to my knees in the dusty ash, dropping my hands into the cold cinders, tears streaming down my cheeks.

I cried, perched on my hands and knees as evening fell around me. I cried for the books, and the family I never knew, for the father who never bothered to know me, for the lost knowledge of

where those books came from and who once loved them. I cried for that loss and for my ignorance and for all the lack of understanding those burned books represented.

Years later, I told my father about that day and what I felt. I told him about my anger, my sorrow, my manifest rage, and my regret. For the first time in all my life, he listened to me as if what I said mattered. He listened with an attentiveness I'd never gotten from him previously. From that point on – I believe – my father saw me. He recognized something he'd overlooked before. From that point on, we began to find our way. He sent me books he had saved from those boxes when he and my mother split, as well as documents, letters, and photographs his father had given him. He began to share little bits and memories, and he answered every question I posed. Sometimes he didn't know the answers, but he never failed to tell me something useful. He made time for me. He never dismissed me again.

But when he died – very suddenly and very unexpectedly in 1998 – I was not prepared.

I was still angry about being left without a father. I was angry about the loss of the books and about all the questions that had no answers and that I felt would never be answered. I was angry that so much time had been wasted. My response was to reject everything, put it away, and try to forget.

A decade later, in 2008, while unpacking following the break-up of my own marriage and a move, I opened an unlabeled box and found – to my astonishment – folios of old documents related to my father's family, photographs, books, and an entire family history I didn't know existed, including the Civil War diary of William Ellis Jones.

After all the time that had passed, I was no longer angry. My manifest rage had matured to curiosity. I unpacked the box and got to work trying to interpret the legacy my father left me.

I'd like to think my father would be as amazed as I am at all I've discovered about our

forebears, but in truth, I believe he'd just smile smugly and nod, as if he knew all along that we come from exceptional stock.

– CONSTANCE HALL JONES

ENDNOTES

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17. Georgia Ellis Jones married Donald Warden on December 26, 1952. They had two children; Virginia Lee (“Ginny”, aka “Penny”) Warden, and Sue Ellen Warden.