



Chicago Historical Society



# JOHN AND MARY JONES

## and the Importance of Oral History

**Grade level:** Middle school

**Estimated time:** Three class periods

**Topic:** African American life in Illinois, 1818-67

**Subtopic:** Oral history and John and Mary Jones

### Teacher background information

**A**lthough the Joneses were key players in the abolitionist movement in Illinois, many people are unaware of their major contributions to the fight against slavery. John and Mary Jones were active not only in the repeal of the Illinois Black Laws, but their home was also a major stop on the Underground Railroad. Unfortunately their home, like many of Chicago's stops on the Underground Railroad, was destroyed in the Chicago Fire in 1871. Nevertheless historical information about the couple exists in primary documents, historical artifacts, and other surprising sources.

For example, the Chicago Historical Society owns a letter written by the Joneses' granddaughter in 1955 that includes information about the Joneses and their pivotal role in the abolitionist movement. This letter gives a remarkable glimpse into the lives of John and Mary and can be a starting point for students to do further research on the lives of the Joneses and other key Chicago figures and institutions that are not widely written about. This lesson is best used after students have completed the "Meet John and Mary Jones" lesson.

### Key concepts

Slavery, abolition, and oral history

### Key questions

What role did John and Mary Jones play in the abolitionist movement? How were John and Mary Jones influential during this time period? What historical information does this letter provide that does not exist in traditional textbooks?

### Goal of this lesson

Students will learn that oral history is important part of gathering historical data.

### Objective

This lesson aims to improve students' reading, writing, interviewing, and note taking skills through the context of studying oral history.

### Materials

This lesson includes master copies of the Theodora Lee Purnell's letter and the "Letter Analysis Worksheet."

1. Letter from Theodora Lee Purnell, the Joneses' granddaughter, to the Chicago Historical Society, 1955
2. Letter Analysis Worksheet
3. Paper and pens or pencils



## Procedures

### Day 1

Distribute copies of the letter written by Theodora Lee Purnell and the letter analysis worksheet. Students should read the letter and answer the questions on the worksheet, either individually or in small groups. Close the activity by holding a class discussion about the letter and student reactions to it.

### Day 2

In order for students to understand the importance of family oral history, they will be asked to interview a family member and write a letter to a make-believe descendant based on information from their interview. Students will spend class time preparing for the interview and then complete the interview and writing assignment as homework.

As a class, brainstorm possible questions to ask adult family members about their childhood. You may want to choose one time period that students will explore in their interviews, for example the Great Depression or the Vietnam War. Students can tape record their interviews or take notes.

Then ask students to use their interview notes to write a letter to a future descendant (a person their age living one hundred years from now) describing twentieth century life as detailed in the interview.

### Day 3

Have students share their letters as oral presentations. Require students to turn in both their interview notes (or tape recordings) and written letters.

### Suggestions for student assessment

Develop a rubric for the interview and letter and share it with students before they begin their assignments. Use the rubric to evaluate the letters and compare the interview notes with the letters to confirm that the information in the letters matches that provided during the interviews.

## Extension activity

Ask students to research and write a short report about the Joneses, institutions that they were directly or indirectly affiliated with, or other activists from the mid- to late-1800s.

### Possible topics include:

John Jones, Mary Richardson Jones, Elijah P. Lovejoy, Owen Lovejoy, Henry O. Wagoner, Lyman Trumbull, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Charles Dyer, Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Allan Pinkerton, Quinn Chapel AME Church, Olivet Baptist Church, First Congregational Church, and John Jones Commercial School (now John Jones Magnet School).

### Additional Resources

Turner, Glennette Tilley. *The Underground Railroad in Illinois*. Glen Ellen, Illinois: Newman Educational Publishing, 2001.

### This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

#### English Language Arts

State Goal 1: Read with understanding and fluency.

State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.

State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information.

#### Social Science

State Goal 14: Understand political systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.

State Goal 18: Understand social systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

**History Lab is made possible through a generous grant from the Polk Bros. Foundation.** These materials were written and researched by David Harris. Images and artifacts included in this lesson are for classroom reference and research use only and are not to be used for commercial reproduction, display, broadcast, or publication unless authorized by a letter of permission from the Chicago Historical Society. *History Lab* coordinated by Heidi Moisan of the Chicago Historical Society. The Chicago Historical Society gratefully acknowledges the Chicago Park District's generous support of all of the Historical Society's activities.

September 2, 1955  
4016 7th Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C.

The Illinois Historical Society  
Chicago, Illinois

Dear Friends,

I am writing to make a request very close to my heart.

You have in your<sup>~</sup> gallery of portraits of pioneers of Chicago, Illinois, the oil painting of my Grand-father, John Jones.

I am so grateful to you for the photographic copy which you sent to me after the painting had been cleaned and restored by you. It was a wonderful likeness of him. Thank you again for your interest and your remembrance of me.

This is my request: I have the mate of this portrait, an oil painting of Mary Jones, wife of John Jones which was painted at the same sitting by Darling, the artist who did my grand-fathers. They belong together.

My Grand-mother, Mary Jones was at his side in his every endeavor and accomplishment as a citizen of the United States, the State of Illinois and Chicago in particular--after they arrived there by covered wagon from Alton, Illinois.

In her own field she made Chicago history.

She was mistress of the home where Nathan Freer, John Brown, Frederick Douglass and Allen Pinckerton visited. She harbored and fed the fugitive slaves that these men brought to her door as a refuge until they could be transported to Canada. In fact she stood at my Grand-father's side--her husband John Jones--when their early Chicago home became one of the Underground Railway Stations. She it was who stood guard at the door when these pioneer abolitionists were in conference--with the slaves huddled below in her basement.

She was a pioneer in the initial pioneer Suffrage Movement and was hostess to Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chatman Catt, Emma Chandler and Mrs. John Brown.

In later years after her husband's death, she contributed generously to the now famous Hull House Social Service Center, to

Phyllis Wheatley Home for unfortunate girls, to Provident Hospital and The Home For Aged and Infirm.

I have written at length so that you would understand that my request that [you] would accept and care for Mary Jones' partrait was not just a personal desire.

I am at this writing eighty-four years of age. I would hate to pass on and leave her portrait to set neglected and forgotten in some ones attic. You do understand.

I do not want to send it next week or next month. I want to know that when the time comes that it will find a home in the Illinois Historical Society, under the same roof with John Jones, her mate.

Please let me hear from you. Thanking you again.

I am sincerely yours,

Theodora Lee Purnell

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**LETTER ANALYSIS WORKSHEET**

1. Who wrote the letter?

---

---

---

2. When was it written?

---

---

---

3. Why did the author write the letter? What was she requesting of the museum?

---

---

---

4. List three things this letter tells you about the life and work of John and Mary Jones:

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_

5. Is this letter an example of family oral history? Why or why not?

---

---

---

6. If you could meet the author of this letter, what questions would you ask her?

---

---

---

