

Plato Jones: Getting to know the man behind the name

By Rebekah Davis
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Growing up in Athens, right off north Hine Street, I had often heard and seen the name Plato Jones, but it was in one context: the nickname “Box Alley” and a reputation for drug houses. The street name, right off south Hine Street, had become synonymous with drug busts by the time I was covering crime stories at *The News-Courier*.

However, I always wondered about Plato Jones. Who was he? Obviously he was respected enough to have a street named after him, a street that meandered through the heart of the southwest side of town, past the esteemed Trinity High School, several churches, parks, businesses, homes, and families large and small. Was he spinning in his grave to know what his name had come to mean?

Nearly a century ago, on April 26, 1917, the *Limestone Democrat* published this obituary that tells as much about the times and societal attitudes of the day as it does about the man:

“A Splendid Negro Dead.

The Democrat chronicles with genuine regret the death of Plato Jones, the well-known colored brick mason, which occurred Sunday morning about two o’clock. Plato had been engaged in his usual occupation Saturday and was in apparent good health when he retired. His wife was awakened during the night by his heavy breathing, but even then he was beyond medical assistance. His remains were followed to their last resting place by an unusually large crowd and flowers from white and colored friends were laid upon his grave.

Few negroes have ever lived in Limestone who commanded the respect and friendship as genuinely as did Plato Jones; he was a conscientious, God-fearing man and his death brings regret to all alike. He reared a large family and his children have inherited his good traits, we are glad to say. Plato believed that the Southern white man was the negro’s best friend and during the dark political days of the past and up to the time of his death neither threats nor promises could keep him from voting the democratic ticket with his white friends.

May his soul rest in peace and find an eternal abiding place with the redeemed.”

Plato Jones was born sometime between 1841 and 1846 – census records differ – in Tennessee to Thomas and Mahala Jones. His family had belonged to a wealthy planter named Haywood Jones prior to emancipation. Plato was one of only three African American men who were voting citizens of Athens after the passage of the Constitutional Amendment known as the ‘Grandfather Clause,’ which required all registered voters of Alabama whose grandfathers were not eligible to bear arms in 1861 to take an examination on citizenship and to be able to read and write.

Plato married Lizzie Garrett in 1869 and they lived with his parents until 1878, when they paid \$75 to L.A. Roberts for a one-acre lot between Brownsferry and Lucas Ferry roads. A photo on file at Amistad Research Center pictures the Plato Jones home, built of lumber salvaged from the first Trinity school building.

Jones was one of the founding members of the Trinity School Society, which incorporated in 1880 contract with the American Missionary Association to supply brick and labor for the building of a new school. At the time, Jones was legendary not only for his brick masonry, but also for his barbecue skills. In fact, when the United Daughters of the Confederacy raised the funds to erect a Confederate monument on the Square, Plato Jones was the pit master who cooked all the barbecue for the ceremony and luncheon.

Plato and Lizzie had 11 children: Lela, Irene, Ananias, Lizzie, Plato Jr., Hansel, Eva, Myrtle, Teddie, Arthur, and Charles R. Lela was teaching school by 1900. Irene married Dillard Collier and moved with him to St. Louis, Mo., where Dillard worked for the Pullman Car Company. In the article about their marriage, Plato and Lizzie Jones were described as “among the most highly

esteemed and popular colored residents of Athens.” Of both families, the article said that “it is just such colored people as these...[who] have kept the good feeling that exists between the races in the south at its present state.” The Colliers would return to Athens later and open a store on Coleman Hill.

Myrtle married the Rev. William Turrentine, pastor of Trinity Congregational Church, after the death of his first wife. Teddie, also known as Dora, moved north prior to 1910 to work in the household of a former Trinity teacher. The Joneses experienced their share of successes as well as tragedy, as Hansel died as a young man from an accidental gunshot, and Dora’s employer was arraigned for holding her in involuntary servitude for nearly four decades.

Plato Jr. followed in his father’s footsteps, excelling in barbecuing and brick masonry. When he died, his obituary noted that “Plato was a man of high character, which all would do well to emulate.”

Today, Plato Jones lends his name to a neighborhood in the midst of renewal, including the renovated Lincoln-Bridgeforth Park and the recently-opened Pincham-Lincoln Center in the former Trinity High School building. And a Tuscaloosa party band with roots in Athens also borrowed his name for their band. Their logo is pictured, and you might hear them cover songs by everyone from The Beatles to Snoop Dogg to Widespread Panic.

I would love for the Limestone County Archives to have more information about Plato Jones, Sr. and Jr., and the rest of the Jones family. If you have stories, documents or pictures to share, let me know so we all can learn more about Plato Jones, the man behind the name.

About the Archives:

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