

# One for the history books

## Jim Jones closes in on 54 years as an FSU tenured professor

By Wil Oakes

### James P. Jones Fellowship for Teaching Excellence

Friends and former students of Professor Jim Jones have contributed to the James P. Jones Fellowship for Teaching Excellence. The purpose of the fund is to reward as many as two graduate students per semester for their outstanding teaching of history at Florida State University. If you are interested in contributing to this fund or establishing your own named endowment in honor of a former professor or a family member, contact Assistant Dean Nancy Smilowitz at [nsmilowi@fsu.edu](mailto:nsmilowi@fsu.edu) or (850) 294-1034.

History Professor Jim Jones can still remember the day, in 1957, when the course the rest of his life would take was set in place. He was living in Gainesville, Fla., working on finishing up his Ph.D. while trying to find a job in a market that was, by his estimation, “terrible.”

Despite help from his mentors at the University of Florida, the search had not been going well, and was made all the more stressful by the fact that his daughter had just been born six months earlier. When good news finally came, it came suddenly.

“I was washing diapers in the side yard,” recalls Jones, “and up came my major professor driving faster than I’d ever seen him drive. He said, ‘Get up to Tallahassee tomorrow—they’ve got a job opening.’”

That an opportunity came up so nearby when Jones had been searching the whole country for one was a curious coincidence, but there was no time to ask questions.

“I got up here the next day,” he says. “I’d never published a word. I interviewed with the chairman, and he said, ‘Fine.’ He hired me on the spot. It’s the only job I’ve ever applied for. Two years later I automatically got tenure having still published nothing and just barely finished my Ph.D. It was a really different world.”

Jones went on to become a well-published and well-respected Civil War scholar and beloved teacher to generations of FSU students. He will soon complete his 54th year at Florida State as a tenured professor, and that kind of longevity means that he’s been able to both watch and play an active role in the development of the university over more than one-third of its entire history.

### Growing up and taking sides

Jones was raised in Jacksonville, Fla., where his interest in Civil War history took root almost inevitably.

“If you grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, in the 1930s and ’40s, you’d think the Civil War had been over for two weeks,” he says. “It was still something talked about a lot and argued about a lot.”

Jones’s great-great-grandfathers on his mother’s side both fought in the war, and his own great-grandmother was in Charleston and actually heard the opening shots. She lived to age 96, and Jones remembers talking to her about it frequently.

But, with the exception of his immediate family, Jones’s relatives were “unreconstructed Southerners,” as he puts it, whose love of the Confederacy he couldn’t share.

“I immediately allied with my parents,” he says. “And so I came along in Jacksonville as kind of an oddity. Lincoln was my hero, not Robert E. Lee.”

While Jones’s parents weren’t academics themselves—his father was a railroad engineer on the Florida East Coast Railway and his mother was entirely self-educated—they both encouraged him to learn. He remembers his childhood home as being covered in bookcases, many of which were filled with classical music, a passion of his still. That well-rounded upbringing still shows today.

“Jim is probably the most well-rounded person I have ever met,” says fellow history Professor Maxine Jones. “He talks easily about the opera, Broadway shows, The New York Times best-seller list, and sports.”

When the time came to choose a career path, Jones initially planned to become a public school teacher, so he went to Emory's Oxford College, a two-year junior college in Oxford, Ga., before moving on to Gainesville, planning to get his education degree at UF. But the material didn't suit him, and the people he knew in the history department talked him into switching over and then going on to graduate school. He credits the faculty there—particularly William Graves “Wild Bill” Carleton and his major professor, William Baringer—for teaching him not only about history but about teaching it well.

“All those guys were just encouraging and helpful, so my education at the University of Florida couldn't have been any better,” Jones says.

### Teaching history ... and living it

Jones still remembers his very first day of teaching—a Western Civilization class on Sept. 19, 1957. While a few things have remained the same, most of them, in his opinion, have changed—mostly for the better. He has seen improvement in the quality of students as well as in the facilities, and is quick to bring up one of his favorite advances.

“It's air conditioning,” he says. “When I first came here, classes didn't begin quite as early as now, but they began in September. And Tallahassee in September is hot as hell.”

But many of the changes, while much more important than air conditioning, came with more difficulty. Jones was actively involved in the fight throughout the late '50s and '60s to integrate the campus—as well as the entire city of Tallahassee, a fight led by students at Florida A&M University.

“FAMU students at that time almost exclusively were trying to integrate eating places,” he says. “I was involved in this group that raised bail money for them, because they *were* going to get arrested.”

That group included most of the history faculty, something Jones clearly takes a lot of pride in. His personal role in the struggle is still remembered as crucial by many who were there, including law professor and former FSU President Sandy D'Alemberte.

“This was a period of considerable unrest on campuses around the country due to the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement,” D'Alemberte says. “I was anti-war and pro-civil rights. As I got to know FSU students active in these movements, I also got to know the faculty who supported them, and Jim was one of that group. We became friends then and have remained friends since.”

Jones always brought what was going on outside the walls of FSU into his classroom, and his fearlessness in doing so has had a profound impact on students from the 1960s up to the present day.

“That was what Dr. Jones brought to each and every class,” says Jack Lamb, a former student who first met Jones in 1967. “If something outside of the classroom was more important, then that was what we discussed. I have not met personally any student who did not come away with a positive change about how they see the world and our country after meeting Jim Jones.”

The diversification of campus demographics, Jones thinks, makes for a better educational experience all around, but especially for a class on the Civil War.

“When I began, anybody I had in a Civil War class probably had a family member that had something to do with the Civil War,” he says. “At that time, you would get far more unreconstructed Southerners. Far fewer now, and in part it's because, of course, the world's changed. But in part I think it's because of the Gonzalezes and Ramirezes and people like that that I have in class—they don't have any family stake in the Civil War. Their families were not here.”

### A professor without borders

Jones has watched FSU change right along with the world at large. When he first came to campus, pretty much the entire thing was located east of Landis Green. The history department was located in what is now called the Williams Building (named for the first chair of the history department, Arthur Williams, in 1963).



Professor Jim Jones views an image of Josef Stalin in Irkutsk, Siberia in 1999 when Jones traveled from Moscow to Beijing on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Photos courtesy of Jim Jones



Jones made the move to Bellamy along with his colleagues in 1968, just after the building was completed.

And after so much time on campus (Jones has taught his Civil War class now an amazing 91 times), his role at Florida State has morphed and expanded. During his tenure, he has served on both the university's Promotion and Tenure Committee and the Athletic Board (an especially amazing transformation for a former Gator fan). He was part of the hiring committee that brought football coach Bobby Bowden to FSU in 1976.

Bowden wasn't Jones's only brush with fame. He also taught actor Burt Reynolds, former U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez, astronaut Norman Thagard, and pro football star Ron "Jingle Joints" Sellers, a college football All-American in 1967 and 1968.

Venturing beyond his duties as a professor of history has brought Jones to see FSU as more than just an employer. His investment in the university is much wider than his own career or even his own department.

"You get to know faculty members all over campus," says Jones. "I served on the Promotion and Tenure Committee for about 15 years, so I have really good friends in the law school, the music school, in chemistry—all over the university."

The difficulty of having such a long tenure, he admits, is that many friends have either retired or died. But on the other hand, new people are always on the way in, and Jones continues to enjoy his colleagues and the new students who show up in his classes each semester. He recently helped his friends, poets David Kirby and Barbara Hamby of the English department, plan their trip to Russia (Jones traveled from Moscow to Beijing once on the Trans-Siberian Railroad).

His colleagues and peers, some of whom started out as his students, sing his praises as a teacher, scholar, and friend as well.

"Jim Jones is one year older than my father," says Professor Ed Gray of the FSU history department. "But I relate to him not as son to father. I relate to him as bloke-to-bloke, bud-to-bud, Cardinals fan-to-Cardinals fan (even though I'm a White Sox fan ...). He's just that kind of person—a real mensch. And that's why the students love him."

Emeritus Professor Joe Richardson had Jones as a mentor before joining him on the history faculty.

"I took a graduate class with him more than 50 years ago," says Richardson. "I thought he was the best teacher I ever had. Remarkably, 50 years later students still feel the same way. He teaches students about history, but also about life and proper treatment of fellow citizens."

Stewart Edwards was a student of Jones's in the late '80s and throughout the '90s as he got his master's and doctoral degrees. He is now a professor of history at Lee College in Texas.

"I was fortunate to have many great professors both as an undergraduate and a graduate student, but I can say without exaggeration that Jim Jones was the best of them all," says Edwards. "He is hands-down the best lecturer I've ever seen, and I've modeled my own teaching style on his as closely as possible."

#### **An irreplaceable human resource**

Still, after so much time, Jones knows that retirement is an inevitable, if unwelcome, part of his near future. He hasn't decided exactly when, but the time isn't far off, and while retirement for some might be a welcome thing, Jones will miss his days at FSU more than he cares to imagine.

"The thing I'll miss most will be the people," he says. "And the classes, the teaching. I can't imagine never again lecturing on Stalingrad or Gettysburg or Lincoln's election in 1860. These are important, really important things that have made our world, and I just love to do that. With the number of people who've retired or died, I think it may now be the classes themselves and relating to students—relating to really, really good students. And I've got people in Civil War right now who are as good as anybody I've ever had."

After having a surprisingly easy time getting the only job he ever applied for, it seems the hardest thing about it for Jones will likely be letting it go.

"I don't even want to think about it," he says. "I think it will be very tough, because I still love to do it."

The loss of Jones will likewise be very tough for Florida State, which has benefited from his life and work now for more than half a century.

"I consider him my 'spiritual brother,'" says Maxine Jones. "When he leaves, he will be irreplaceable."

Professor Jim Jones walks the route of Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg in the summer of 2011.

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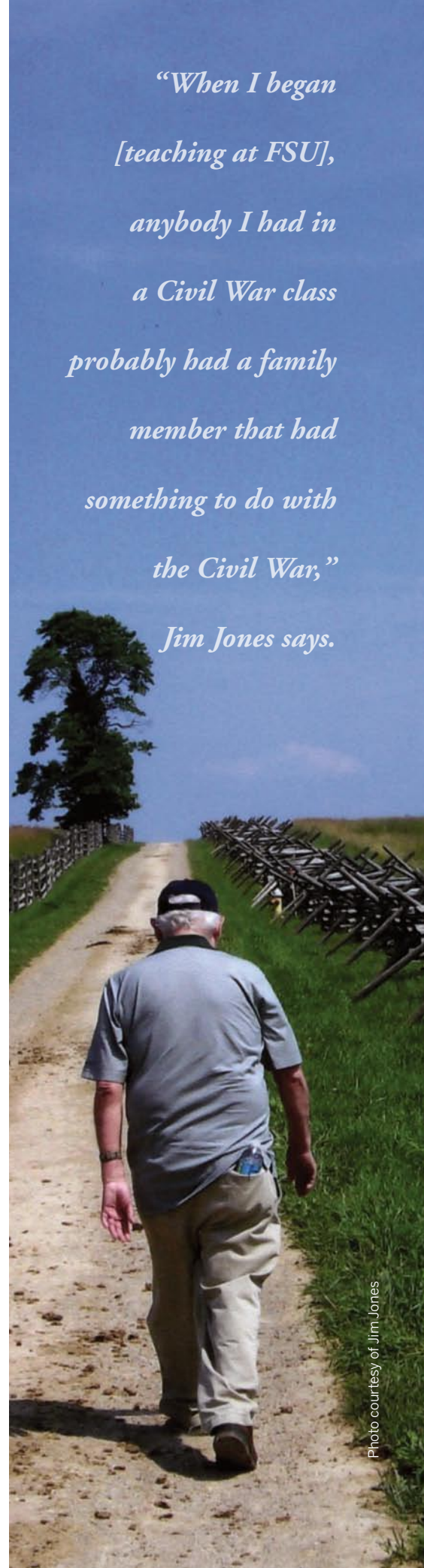


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