Ralph Waldo Emerson Jones

Ralph Waldo Emerson Jones, the grandson of a slave, was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana on August 6, 1905, the third child of John Sebastian Jones and Maria Morrison Jones, both college graduates and teachers. John Sebastian Jones, his father, was the first dean of Southern University and A&M College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, from which Ralph W. Jones received a Bachelor's degree. His mother, the former Marie Morrison, was a school teacher in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Jones worked his way through school at Southern University, receiving a certificate in Auto Mechanical Drawing, and a degree in Tailoring in 1925. Originally Jones had not planned for a teaching career; but, because jobs for blacks were scarce, except in teaching, he accepted a teaching position at a small private school.

Jones' professional career began at a private school, Lampson College in Alexandria, Louisiana. The promised salary was not forthcoming and he left before the year was up. In the summer of 1926, Jones received a letter from Charles P. Adams, Principal of the Lincoln Parish Training School (Rosenwald School), offering him a position at the school. Jones discovered that he was not the man Adams thought he was, and the probability of not having a job again seemed like a definite possibility. But, Adams decided to give him the job anyway, in fact, many different jobs. While Jones was busy performing the varied tasks assigned to him, he continued to improve his higher education. With the aid of a General Education Board Scholarship, he attended Columbia University in New York, and received his Master of Arts degree in Mathematics in 1932.

Jones went to Grambling in 1926, when it was the North Louisiana Agricultural and Industrial School. By 1928, the school was able to offer two-year professional certificates and diplomas after becoming a state junior college. The school was then renamed Louisiana Negro Normal and Industrial Two-Year Institute. In his early years at the Louisiana Negro Normal Institute, having been a player in the former Negro League, he started a baseball team, served as Dean of Men, formed a band and held the post of Registrar. He started out as an Instructor in chemistry, physics and mathematics until 1936 at the age of 30 when he became President of the school and the baseball coach as well.

Jones was the school's first head football coach, holding that position from 1928 to 1931 and accruing a record of 4–7–1. In 1941, Jones hired the inexperienced Eddie Robinson to lead the team. Robinson amassed what was a college football record for career wins—408—from 1941 to 1997.

After the announcement that Charles Adams, Principal of the Lincoln Parish Training School, was to be replaced, there was a whirlwind of activity aimed at the possible replacement of Adams. Superintendent Richardson of Webster Parish pushed for the appointment of his friend Joseph Jones. Rumors ran rampant as to who would be chosen. Since Harris (Thomas H.) and Richardson were good friends, many thought that Joseph Jones would get the position. However, they failed to recognize the influence of A. C. Lewis, the Louisiana State Supervisor for Negro Education. Lewis had his own choice for the presidency, Ralph Waldo Emerson Jones. Lewis, as State
Supervisor for Negro Education, held a powerful political position. He had been affiliated with the school for many years. He also worked very closely with John Sebastian Jones, father of Ralph W. E. Jones, who served in many capacities: Dean of Southern University, Assistant State Supervisor of Adult Administration, Superintendent of the Jeanes Schools, and an Agent for the Rosenwald Building Fund. Lewis was well acquainted with the younger Jones and his qualifications for the presidency. Another point in Jones’ favor was that he was the only professor at Louisiana Negro Normal with a Masters’ degree. It was for these reasons that Lewis submitted a letter to Harris and the Louisiana State Board of Education on June 15, 1936, recommending Ralph W. E. Jones as President of the Louisiana Negro Normal and Industrial Institute at a salary of $150 a month for 12 months. The Louisiana State Board of Education approved Lewis’ recommendation and Ralph W. E. Jones became the second president of the Institution on June 15, 1936.

When Jones assumed the presidency of Louisiana Negro Normal and Industrial Institute in 1936, the enrollment of the school numbered only 120 students, with 17 faculty members. The legislative budget for the school that year was $24,040—$20,000 from state funds and $4,040 from the federal government, registration fees, and sale of farm products. Salaries, operation and maintenance, utilities, and any other expenses were derived from the small budget. The school was in need of “a shot in the arm” if it was to survive. President Jones said, “I became President in 1936, at a point in time when we had three choices—become just another black state college, come up with a unique program, or just simply slowly die out altogether.

A.C. Lewis, state agent for Negro education, perhaps plotted the course and provided the necessary motivation for Jones and his faculty when he said in June 1936, “Unless you change teaching methods by fall, no more state funds will be allotted to Grambling.” Jones and his faculty, A. C. Lewis and his assistant C. L. Barrow, devised a unique program for training rural black teachers. It became famous internationally as the "Louisiana Plan" or "A Venture in Rural-Teacher Education." George I. Sanchez, Rural Education Department of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, and Jane E. McAllister Minor Normal School, Washington, D.C. were temporarily employed to direct the teacher training at the school and work with the faculty in the development and implementation of the program.

In order to implement the plan, six field centers were organized at Negro high schools in the state to offer one year of post high school graduate teacher training. The program was to be under the direction of a teacher trainer with the cooperation of local Jeanes teachers and the Louisiana Negro Normal and Industrial Institute (LNNII) field service unit. The six field centers were located at Kentwood in Tangipahoa Parish, Mansfield in DeSoto Parish, Lake Charles in Calcasieu Parish, Minden in Webster Parish; Natchitoches in the Parish of Natchitoches, and, St. Joseph in Tensas Parish. The six field centers were financed on the same basis as high schools, by parish boards, always under the guidance and supervision of the Louisiana State Department of Education and coordinated with and by Louisiana Negro Normal and Industrial Institute. Jones was fortunate to have inherited a group of dedicated teachers at the college who labored with him in what seemed an impossible task. The majority of the faculty members had received their training at the Southern University or Tuskegee Institute in the areas of Industrial Education, Home Improvements, and Agriculture.
From a few modest frame structures, a faculty of 17 and a student body of 120, the campus was expanded under his administration into a multi-million-dollar physical plant, a faculty and staff of over 600, and a student enrollment which at one time peaked at 4200. Jones composed the Grambling Tigers Alma Mater. For 17 years, Wilbert Ellis, a Ruston native and 1959 Grambling graduate, was Jones' assistant baseball coach. Between 1958 and 1967, Jones' teams rumbled through conference play, winning seven titles between 1958 and 1967 and gaining induction into the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics Hall of Fame after leading his teams to national baseball tournaments in 1961, 1963, 1964, and 1967. He was National Coach of the Year in 1967. His amazing record was 816 wins, 218 losses, and a number of Mid-Western and Southwestern Conference Championships.

Jones was one of the prime movers in launching an innovative program in teacher education that gained national attention. Under his leadership the curricular offerings evolved from a single purpose institution, and the name change of the institution to Grambling College, because, as he told legislators at a football game, “by the time our cheerleaders get through saying our name, the other teams have scored a touchdown.”

Jones was a member of the New Rocky Valley Baptist Church in Grambling where he served as Trustee and an active member of the Deacon Board. He was also a member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., and a 33rd Prince Hall Mason.

Equally as important, his professional contributions were his contributions towards espousing good human relations, by precept and example, among the people of the State of Louisiana. He was known affectionately as "Prez" to everyone. Over a span of 41 years as President, he inspired many college generations that moved into the world of work and made significant contributions in their respective endeavors. His total tenure at the University covered 50 years 1926-1977.

Jones died at the age of 76 on Good Friday, April 9, 1982 in Ruston's Lincoln General Hospital of complications from gallbladder surgery. Jones was survived by two sons, Ralph W. E. Jones, Jr., and John Arthur Jones, both of Baltimore, Maryland, a daughter-in-law, Jesola Ernest Jones and three grandsons, Ralph Eldridge Jones, Ernest Emerson Jones, and Warren Waldo Jones, also of Baltimore, four sisters, Amelia J. Lewis of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Lenora J. Washington of Washington, D. C., Ogerita Humphrey of Chicago, Illinois, and Geraldine J. James of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and a host of nieces, nephews and other relatives and friends.

In May 2011, the Grambling baseball stadium was named in Jones' honor. On July 3, 2011, Jones was posthumously inducted into the National College Baseball Hall of Fame in Lubbock, Texas. In addition to the baseball stadium, the R.W.E. Jones Drive in Grambling is named in the former President's honor.
