

Mrs. George M. Jones and Her 'Monumental Reality'

BY JENI SANDBERG



Stained glass window representing PHILOSOPHY, commissioned by Mrs. Jones and designed by New York artist Charles R. Lamb for the George M. Jones Memorial Library, is on display at the new Jones Library on Memorial Avenue in Lynchburg, Virginia.

One of Lynchburg's major architectural achievements, the George M. Jones Memorial Library, stands majestically like an aging patriarch overlooking for the past century the changing downtown scene. The Classical Revival building was constructed in the early years of the twentieth century by Edward Graham Frye and Aubrey Chesterman. The architects effectively translated the desires of the library's patron, Mrs. Mary Frances Watts Jones, to memorialize her husband into monumental reality. Though most citizens of Lynchburg recognize the building, few may know of the strong guiding hand of the woman behind the project and the many difficult circumstances before and during its construction.

Lynchburg, despite its wealth and cosmopolitan ambience, was one of the few major cities in the country lacking a public library. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the construction of many such institutions financed by various public and private patrons. The Carnegie Foundation funded libraries erected all over the country, providing many communities with access to public book collections. Such commissions were prime opportunities for communities to display their civic pride through procuring of the books, as well as through the architectural manifestation of the buildings. A highly visible and prominent building such as a library, which provided both educational opportunities and gathering space for the community, was a highly desirable investment for cities like Lynchburg that viewed themselves as on the move.

Less often, but sometimes with more spectacular architectural results, libraries were funded by private sources, such as the Handley Library in Winchester of 1904, which was supported by a local entrepreneur. Lynchburg can boast of just such a privately financed institution, the George M. Jones Memorial Library. The driving forces behind the construction of the new library were Mr. and Mrs. George M. Jones. Mr. Jones was a prominent local business man who made his fortune in land development and hardware. The boom years of the early 1890s brought Jones a sizeable fortune, and though much of it was lost in the short term, his assets continued to grow over

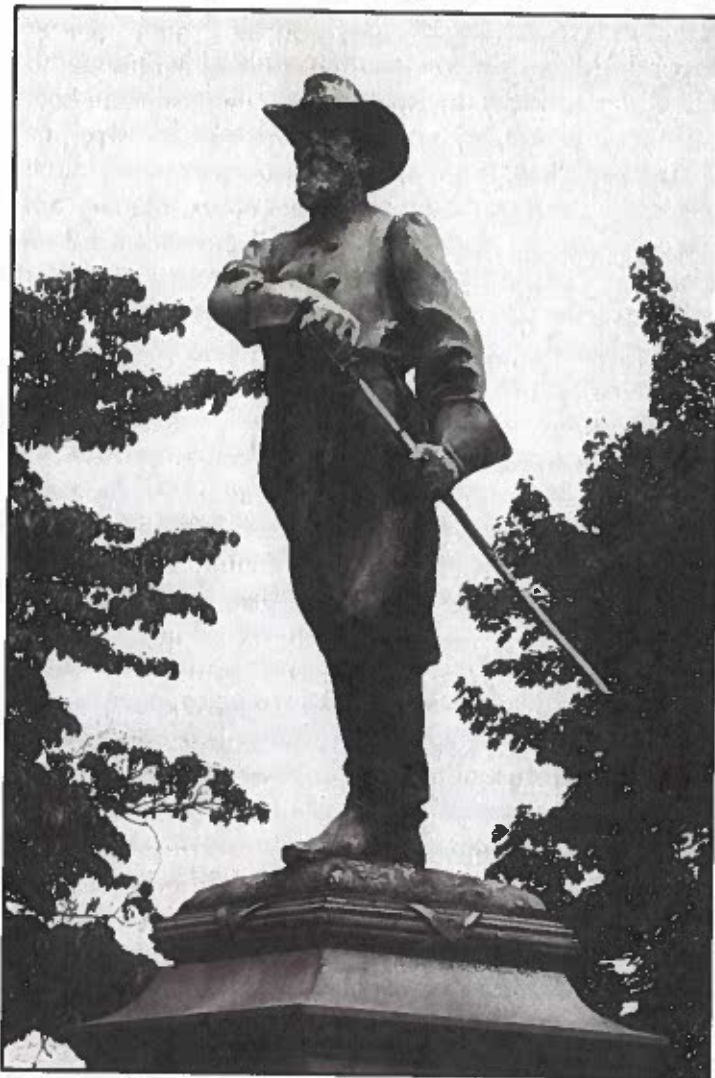
time. One of his most lucrative investments was the Rivermont Company which bought land and sold parcels to the many people coming in to the Lynchburg area. Rivermont, a highly desirable area just across Blackwater Creek from the city, was connected to downtown by a new bridge and stood as a significant example of garden suburb planning in Virginia. Affirming the desirability of the district, in the 1890s the Jones family had an impressive new house built two miles past the city limits by the Knoxville, Tennessee architect George F. Barber. Rivermont Avenue would soon be the location of some of the area's finest new houses, and eventually, Jones Memorial Library.

The couple's financial gains in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, aided by their Rivermont land speculation and other interests in cotton, coal and banking, stood in direct contrast to their personal and emotional losses. Tragedy struck the Jones family in 1884 when their elder daughter Georgie Lee, then just 19 years old, died suddenly after an illness. The patriarch of the family was distraught and withdrawn at the loss of his favorite child. Jones grew even more devoted to his remaining daughter, but his time with her was not to be long-lived. Lillie, too, became ill, and in an attempt to salvage her health, her parents took her to the restorative waters in Carlsbad, Germany. Lillie died on August 12, 1885 "at the age of 16 in a foreign land." The entry on Jones in the *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*, written in 1915, stressed Jones' forlorn state and inability to function in the time following the death of his children:

"He was literally bowed down by his sorrow and the alert, erect, well-dressed business man so familiar on the streets of Lynchburg was gone, and in his place an old man passed, stooped and tragic eyed."

Despite his despondence, Jones set about finding a way to maximize the philanthropic impact of his fortune, which could no longer pass directly to his children, but could be spent on a memorial to them.

The notion of improving the level of public education was foremost in George Jones' goals in dispensing his fortune to the city, possibly due to his regrets over his own lack of formal education, which ended when he began work at the age of 15. One of the leaders in the founding of Randolph-Macon Women's College, he also gave the institution money for the endowment of a memorial library room which was dedicated to his daughters, as well as donations for books. As told in the *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*, "he determined to keep his estate intact to abundantly meet some need of the city where he had made his money," because of his philosophy that men of means who had no direct descendants owed a responsibility to



Mrs. Jones commissioned Solon Borglum, brother of Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mount Rushmore, to produce a statue of her husband. Two standing figures of Jones in Confederate uniform were furnished by Borglum; one was placed at the Library, the other on the campus of Randolph-Macon Woman's College.

confer great public benefits. In 1899, Jones consulted a lawyer in reference to the endowment of a public library in Lynchburg, an idea which he had clearly been considering for some years. In his will, dated April 15, 1892, Jones set aside \$35,000 to establish a library in Lynchburg which he wished to be called the "Georgie and Lillie Library" after his two deceased daughters. This first will, in addition to his philanthropic gifts, also left rather sizable bequests to various family members, including the children of his brothers and sisters, whom he had apparently assisted financially over the years.

Trouble began just around the turn of the century, with what seemed like a kindly action on the part of the aging Jones couple. According to a newspaper account, the Joneses had considered the adoption of a child after the death of their own daughters. In 1900, the Women's Chris-

tian Association placed a six-year-old orphan named Gertrude Mabel Kelly with the couple. The young girl, called Mae Lillie by the Joneses, was officially adopted by Jones on June 12, 1902, just six days before his death.

It was perhaps not the adoption itself, but the drafting of a new will on the day George Jones died, June 18, 1902, that caused such furor in the ranks of the Jones clan. Jones left the bulk of the estate to his wife, Mary, who also served as the executrix of the will. Instead of individual family members receiving chunks of the Jones estate, as had been directed in his first will, now bequests were minimized and in some cases eliminated. Anna L. Jones and E. L. Bell, niece and nephew of the deceased, whose portions of the estate had been cut, contested the second will. Together they claimed that Jones was too sick at the time the new will was drawn up to be in his right mind, and indeed had no affection for the young adopted girl who in turn received a large bequest in Jones' second will. According to an account of the dilemma in the evening *Daily Advance* of 1 February 1904, the amount left to Anna L. Jones was cut from \$5000 to \$1000. Also, in the first will, Miss Jones had been assigned to work as the librarian in the new library George Jones planned to build. In the second will, however, no provision for a library was formally made, and Mrs. Jones was left to make a decision about all aspects of any future library. Unhappy with the new will and the adoption of Mae Lillie, who as a legal child of Jones eventually stood to inherit a sizable portion of the half-million-dollar estate, Anna Jones would not visit her sick uncle in the last days of his life and did not help with his funeral arrangements. Despite the report that George Jones "had a kindly feeling for all of his kin by blood," Anna contested the second will in an attempt to have the first document, which was more financially and professionally beneficial to her, reinstated.

The trial over the two wills took place in June 1904, but after more than two weeks of testimony, an eleven man jury could not reach a verdict. After a summer postponement, witnesses again presented to the court evidence of the strong mind of George Jones in the days before his death. The *Lynchburg News* reported that a jury of seven men finally decided the "Celebrated Jones Case" on 8 October. Both the adoption of Mae Lillie and the second will of 1902 were recognized and affirmed as legal. As a result, Mae Lillie received \$5000 with Mrs. Jones serving as trustee for the child. The bulk of the sizable estate went to Jones' widow.

As another facet of the settlement, Mrs. Jones agreed to give \$50,000 to build a library for the city of Lynchburg, one that was to be "wholly for the use of white people without respect to religious distinction." The money went to the George M. Jones Memorial Library Association, newly established to oversee all matters concerning the

Library. Strong-willed and determined, Mrs. Jones controlled the site, construction, decoration and endowment of the emerging institution. Over the following four years, Mrs. Jones would provide the land, and money for the building and operating costs of the new library, an amount which totaled well over \$100,000.

The first matter of business was the site the new building would occupy. According to the minutes of the Library Association meetings in early 1905, Mrs. Jones wanted to donate an impressive parcel of land adjacent to her second Rivermont estate, which was situated closer to



Window representing POETRY designed by New York artist Charles R. Lamb for the George M. Jones Memorial Library.

downtown than her previous residence. Lower Rivermont, annexed to the city in 1870, was apparently not an ideal location in the minds of the members of the Library Association, and they wanted to reject Mrs. Jones' donation of the property. Mrs. Jones, though, held the leverage in the situation by making her sizable \$50,000 endowment contingent on the acceptance of the Rivermont site. If Mrs. Jones would not agree to give the money for the endowment unconditionally, the Library Association felt strongly enough about the siting of the building that they were prepared to approach the City Council of Lynchburg

and ask for funding for daily upkeep of the library in place of Mrs. Jones' gift. In the end, the Library Association conceded, and all parties agreed on the Rivermont site. Whatever her reasons for selecting the prominent hillside location, the results of Mrs. Jones' insistence provided the city with an architectural beacon visible from both downtown and the suburbs. The endowment was invested and the income it generated would be utilized to support library operations.

Once the site was chosen, the building itself became the next task. In February 1905, the Library Association requested preliminary sketches and plans from five architects, and provided each with a topographical map and photographs of the lot. Each architect was paid \$100 for the sketches. On 5 May 1905, the committee convened to choose between the different plans and decided on the designs of the local architectural firm of Frye and Chesterman. The decision caused immediate excitement in the city. Just two days later, the *Lynchburg News* reported that the drawings for the library were displayed on Main Street in the window of H. Silverthorn and Company, Jeweler, and the proposed structure won instant approval. "It can readily be seen that the building will be one of the most beautiful in the South, and an ornament to Lynchburg," declared the *News*.

The choice of Frye and Chesterman was not surprising considering the reputation of the firm. Even before the successful partnership of the two architects, Edward Graham Frye had earned local acclaim for his many private, civic and religious commissions throughout Lynchburg. Frye was responsible for shaping the distinctive look of the Garland Hill district, having built several Queen Anne style houses with corner turrets and a proliferation of applied decoration. In the 1890s Frye also designed the Eighth Street Baptist, First Presbyterian and Court Street Methodist Churches and the old Lynchburg High School on Federal Street. Frye was also responsible for many of the jobbing houses that were built on Jefferson and Commerce streets in the same years, with these important, but unfortunately now neglected, commercial works complementing the wide spectrum of his commissions in Lynchburg.

Frye's highly successful partnership with Aubrey Chesterman, a native of Richmond, began in 1901 and the two men continued to design buildings all across the commonwealth. Together, their reputation grew. In 1902, Frye and Chesterman, along with the architect John Kevan Peebles and the firm of Noland and Baskervill, designed the additions to Thomas Jefferson's Virginia State Capitol Building in Richmond, a challenging and much sought-after project. The importance of this commission secured their position in the top echelon of Virginia architects. By



RELIGION is represented in this stained glass window. Mrs. Jones bought five allegorical windows and four ornamental ones.

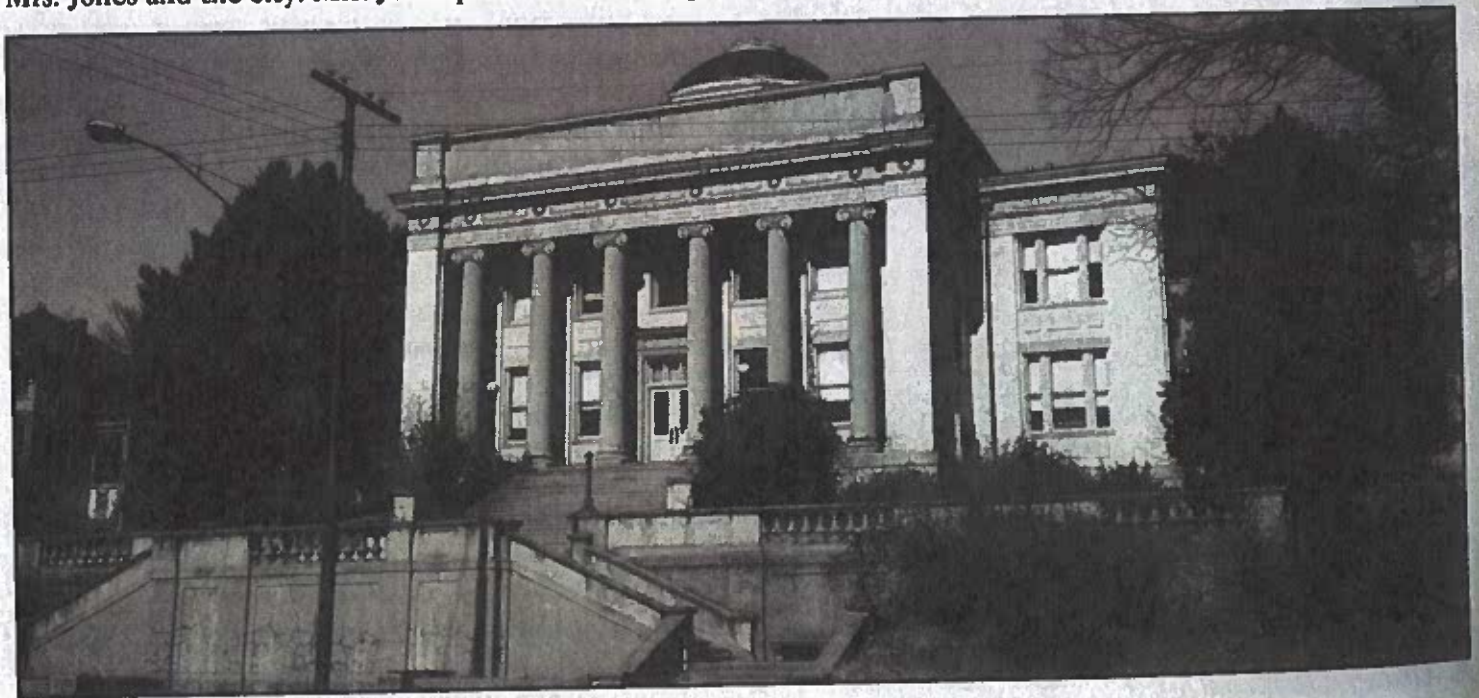
the time Frye and Chesterman were awarded the Jones Memorial Library commission, they had worked in Roanoke, Danville, Clifton Forge, Lexington and Winchester, and were highly esteemed statewide.

The initial designs of the Library were in a "Grecian-Ionic" style, with a pedimented ionic porch projecting from a domed central block. This scheme was eventually eliminated in favor of a more restrained ionic colonnade set in the facade and topped by a flat entablature and parapet. Construction began in July 1905 and the contractor, W. B. Snead and Company, gave an estimated date of completion of 1 January 1906. The "long wished-for, much-talked of library" would not be finished for some time to come, but received considerable coverage in the local press during its lengthy construction. The *News* reported that the "near completed" Jones Library "stands there on the brow of the hill, a monument to culture and dignity." The wet weather of the summer and a scarcity of labor, however, delayed progress.

In the meantime, though, Mrs. Jones was making further decisions about the appearance of the Library, especially the treatment of the interiors. At the solicitation of Mrs. Jones, the New York artist Charles R. Lamb traveled to Lynchburg in June 1906 to examine the library building and prepare designs for the treatment of the dome, wall murals and importantly, several stained glass windows. The Lamb Studios in New York rivalled the prestigious Tiffany studios in Arts and Crafts stained glass design around the turn of the twentieth century, and to bring such a renowned artist to Lynchburg was a coup for Mrs. Jones and the city. Mrs. Jones paid Lamb to design

five full-figure allegorical windows representing History, Philosophy, Romance, Poetry and Religion, as well as four ornamental windows with architectural and floral motifs. The murals were apparently never executed, but the nine stained glass windows were completed and installed in the Library in 1907. The allegorical figures were placed in the front second story windows, just beneath the similar inscriptions of the frieze: ORATORY, HISTORY, DISCOVERY, SCIENCE, and POETRY. The windows would not spend much time in their original location, however. The decorative windows were removed shortly after the Library opened because the thick colored glass did not permit enough daylight into the building. Two of the windows, History and Philosophy, are on display at the new Jones Memorial Library on Memorial Avenue.

In another attempt to bring the work of the best artists to Lynchburg to work on her husband's memorial, Mrs. Jones commissioned Solon Borglum to produce a sculpture of her husband for the library. Borglum, the brother of Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mount Rushmore, presented a standing figure of Jones in Confederate uniform which was placed directly in front of the Library. A duplicate structure was given to RMWC, where it still remains, in honor of his interest in that institution. In November 1906, Mrs. Jones purchased the lot of land just east of the library from the Lynchburg Traction and Light Company with the intention of turning the space into a park. She would make no moves to improve the land, however, until the city improved the streets around the library. The new eastern terrace was finally built in the 1920s and became the final site for the Borglum statue of Jones.



Mrs. Jones' "Monumental Reality," the George M. Jones Memorial Library building on Rivermont Avenue as it appears today.

As the interiors were being completed, librarians filled the shelves with books purchased with the initial \$5000 allotted in Mrs. Jones's budget. The exterior of the building suffered many delays due to difficulty in procuring the materials necessary to finish the approach. By August 1907, more than a year and a half after the scheduled completion date, the patron of the library was becoming anxious for the memorial to her husband to open. In October of that year, the library opened its doors, but only for the day and no books could be taken out of the building. Trouble in opening the library was apparently due more to financial adversity than construction problems. By May 1908 the library still had not officially opened its doors and Mrs. Jones told the trustees of the library board "that she desired to have the library opened." The board responded that the interest on the \$50,000 endowment had not come in yet and the money they had left over from construction costs was not sufficient to enable them to open the library. After some deliberation, the board gave the remaining \$379 in their possession back to Mrs. Jones with the understanding that she was to operate the library and incur any additional expenses herself. This was evidently acceptable to Mrs. Jones as the George M. Jones Memorial Library was opened to the public less than a month later, on 3 June 1908.

The facilities of the new library were numerous. A large amount of space was given to the circulation desk in the center of the main floor, along with the card catalogs. The stacks were located to the rear of the building and were furnished with glass floors so that light could penetrate through the multiple stories. The Library offered numerous rooms for specialized purposes, with two large rooms for the Children's Department and a Veteran's room which was given by the Garland-Rodes Camp of Confederate Veterans. Another room provided space for the meetings of the Book Club and Women's Club. Despite the various amenities, the library was not a success from the librarian's point of view because of the poor arrangement of the books and other problems with circulation. Improvements came when additional stacks were constructed in 1967-68. Earlier, in the 1920s, the eastern terrace was built and a monumental stairway from Rivermont Avenue was added to the front of the building.

Since the closing of the building just a few years ago, the Jones Memorial Library has fallen into disrepair, though still majestic in appearance. Currently up for sale, the grand building is ripe for an adaptive reuse similar to that of another structure by Edward Graham Frye located in Roanoke. There, the newly-renovated City Market has been transformed into the center of a thriving downtown revitalization project and serves as an excellent model for the possibilities of Jones Memorial. As the appreciation of



George M. Jones: His original plan was to honor his two daughters.

Frye's architecture grows throughout Virginia, it is hoped that the future owner of the library will find a use worthy of its auspicious founding and history.

While Mr. Jones' plan for the Library was to honor his two daughters, Mrs. Jones did not mention that in her memorial. The bold inscription on the front of the building reads:

GEORGE M. JONES MEMORIAL LIBRARY
ERECTED AND ENDOWED
BY MARY FRANCES JONES
IN MEMORY OF HER HUSBAND

JENI SANDBERG grew up in Manassas, Virginia, studied art history at New York University, and returned to Virginia to work on a master's degree in architectural history at the University of Virginia. She is currently completing her thesis on Edward Graham Frye and the Jones Memorial Library. She wishes to express "extreme gratitude" to Architectural Historian and Lynchburg native S. Allen Chambers, Jr., for his help and encouragement both with this article and with her thesis. Upon completion later this year, the thesis will be made available to readers at Jones Memorial Library.



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