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Connie Jones Pillsbury

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Faith and Freedom: Life of Harriett N. K. Jones, 1825-1903

From Harriett's diary: These gardens of the desert I have gazed upon them all—enraptured until my eyes, dilated with the sight, have taken in the “encircling vastness.”



HARRIET N. K. JONES
Courtesy of Connie Pillsbury

When Harriet N.K. Jones arrived in Kansas in October of 1855 to join her missionary husband, Harvey Jones, she brought with her a lifetime of faith, training and discipline. Raised in a devout, dedicated abolitionist family along the banks of the Muskingum River in Stockport, Ohio, she was no stranger to the frontier or to the hardships it brought along with it. Harriet was from a long line of pioneers, starting with John Alden on the Mayflower. Her ancestors founded Watertown, Massachusetts; fought in the Revolutionary War; and had been among the early settlers of the newly opened Northwest Territory in Ohio.

Harriet had already become acquainted with hardship on the frontier for five years as a teacher to the Choctaw Indians at Stockbridge Mission in the Arkansas Territory, from age 19 to 24. There she also developed a peculiar sympathy with the oppressed black slaves of the Choctaw planters.

Harriet's father had been a tanner by trade, a self-taught scholar, and a lay church elder. He was an early member and lay leader of the little Presbyterian Church of Windsor, Ohio, where most of the early homesteaders gathered to share faith, abolitionist and temperance beliefs, and the raising of children. She returned

home to Windsor for two reasons: to regain her health, and because she could no longer tolerate the oppressive slavery within the Choctaw Nation in the Arkansas Territory.

Harriet found support and inspiration for her anti-slavery views in the articles published in the *Oberlin Evangelist*. She felt directed in her faith to enter Oberlin College, one higher institution committed to graduate female students. Harvey Jones arrived at Oberlin Seminary around the same time from Franklin College in Ohio. In their late twenties, Harvey and Harriet were both primed and ready to sacrifice for the cause of freedom. They married in 1853 and dedicated themselves to fulfill Oberlin's mission statement to “train teachers and other Christian leaders for the boundless most desolate fields of the west.”

Near the end of her life, Harriet wrote in a letter to her son about her early days in Kansas:

In the spring of 1855, there was a fresh impulse given to the stream of immigration bound for the new

Eldorado, then as it seemed, in the far west. The territory of Kansas had been opened for settlement the year previous, and the rush at this time was on, for those who wished to secure the choice of lands on which to build homes or with which to speculate. There were some, however, who had other and higher purpose, to plant on the broad prairies the standard of the cross, to plant the common school, to build churches, giving to those wild lands, “the music of her Sabbath bells.”

Her husband, Pastor Harvey Jones, after graduation turned to the new territory of Kansas and became one of the founders and the first pastor of the First Church of Christ in Wabaunsee, now known as the Beecher Bible and Rifle Church.

Harriet was much more than what one may think of as a “Pastor’s wife.” She had a strong voice in the functioning of the church. She served as a Deacon, a member of the Disciplinary Committee, a delegate to conventions, a teacher, and a leader. She never was afraid to stand up for what she believed



HARRIET'S BIBLE COVER
HARRIET'S HANDWRITING
HARRIET'S PSALMS AND HYMNS BOOK
Courtesy of Connie Pillsbury

to be right. She was a “warrior,” strong in adversity, resilient in loss, never wavering in her faith amidst relocations, death, and hardship.

Harriet desired to serve from their homestead log cabin, 14’ by 14’, two miles west of Wabaunsee. The primitive building was also a meeting house, post office, and home for five years. In this log cabin, Harriet lost her first child and bore two more before moving to Ohio in 1860 to assist Harvey’s aging parents. Together, the Jones’ ministered in Ohio through the Civil War, and then returned to southern Kansas and back to Wabaunsee in 1867. Harvey rode his horse to distant churches to teach and to preach—from Alma to Dover, Harveyville, Halifax, and Zeandale.

Families stayed close together during these early times often moving, building, and worshipping together. Harriet’s younger brother, Hiram Keyes, had been very helpful to Harvey and Harriet during the difficult winter of severe illness and the death of their first child, Mary, in 1856. Hiram settled in Pavilion and was

married to Lucinda Hovey of New Salem, Ohio. Her father, Stanley, operated an underground station, receiving slaves from the Gould Station run by Hiram’s uncle, Ephraim Gould. Hiram served as Elder and Trustee of the First Church of Wabaunsee for 30 years, until resettling in Manhattan in 1883, where several of his children attended Kansas State Agricultural College.

Harriet’s two younger sisters who joined her in Wabaunsee extended her influence in the community by promoting the standards of New England scholarship. Martha and Mary Keyes were dedicated career teachers as well as loyal church members. Harvey and Harriet deeded a portion of their land to Martha for a home next to theirs, where she and Mary lived throughout their teaching years. Both sisters married widowers in their later years; Martha to Asa White, and Mary to Levi Benedict, another lifelong stalwart worker in the Wabaunsee Church. Harvey also gave land to his sister, Eliza Ann Anderson, following the death of her husband in Quantrill’s Raid in Lawrence.

Harriet’s tangible gift to the frontier lies in the preserved diaries and letters passed down through the generations. Through them, we get a first-hand perspective of how she lived on the frontier, but also what she was thinking while living it. The photographs that document her life are also insightful and provide valuable historical perspective.

This excerpt is from Harriet’s 1846 journal and speaks to the beauty of the prairies:

Have you ever seen a prairie? If not, then you have never looked upon the most beautiful of God’s works. The mountains are beautiful, aye, grand and sublime, and I have stood upon their summits and gazed upon the woodlands, the field, the stream far below me; have seen the lightning’s flash and heard the thunder’s deafening roar as it reverberated through the deep ravines from mountain to mountain, and I have been awed as if in the presence of the great Invisible and felt, too, that there was a meaning - a deep meaning in the word Omnipotence. But the prairies: These gardens of the desert I have gazed upon them all— enraptured until my eyes dilate, with the sight, have taken in the

“encircling vastness.” I have felt then what may not be described and have turned away to be alone with nature because I would not find words to express what she had revealed to me.

And then, as I have reveled in her scenes, her airy undulations covered with wavy grass and besprinkled with flowers in beauty and in number rivaling the constellations – her groves scattered here and there, seeming like islands in the ocean or oasis in the desert – ‘tis then that I have become a child again. Yes, I have forgotten my cares, forgotten, too, that I have passed my girlhood years and that woman’s duties are upon me and I have rambled and gamboled among the fragrant beauties while I have become a very child.

Such have been my feelings many times, as of a sudden I have emerged from the green wood and come at once upon the border of a seemingly boundless prairie.

Connie Jones Pillsbury is the great-great-granddaughter of Harriet Newell Keyes Jones. She is an author and a freelance newspaper writer. Retired from teaching, she is married to Dr. Norman Pillsbury, a college professor, and lives in Atascadero, California, near San Luis Obispo. She was the keynote speaker at the Beecher Bible and Rifle Church 150th Anniversary in 2007.