

“An Exorcism of Sorts”
By John Mark Lambertson
Originally published in The Ottawa Herald May 30, 1987

Sometimes the task of a historian is to set the record straight, even if it means debunking a popular local legend.

Such legends often have vigorous lives, yet when exposed to just a little bit of common sense, they often hold together like a pile of leaves in a Kansas cyclone.

Probably no place in Franklin County has more myths attached to it than the Tauy Jones House northeast of Ottawa.

An imposing structure of 14 rooms, the house was built by the Rev. John Tecumseh (“Ottawa” or “Tauy”) Jones in the 1860s. Besides being the religious and political leader of the Ottawa Indians, he was a successful entrepreneur, a founding father of the city of Ottawa, and is recognized as the founder of Ottawa University.

Some of the stories about the Tauy Jones House are true. A trading post for the Indians was in operation on the site by the early 1840s, with a military road between Ft. Leavenworth and Ft. Scott running by the front door.

This active road also brought many visitors to the Joneses’ original two-story double log house, which was therefore operated as a hotel.

It was this house the Missouri “border ruffians” burned to the ground in 1856 after searching it in vain for John Brown. The famous abolitionist was a friend and frequent guest of the Jones and often used a campsite along nearby Ottawa Creek.

Although not proven, it is very likely that the Joneses were part of Brown’s “Underground Railroad” and helped runaway slaves to freedom.

It also is a fact that the stone of the present Tauy Jones House was hauled all the way from Ft. Scott by oxen-drawn carts, although no one seems to know why.

Another curious story that is probably based on fact suggests that John Logan Jones, founder of the Jones Store chain, was born at the site in 1859. Jones’ mother apparently went into labor while in the vicinity as part of a wagon train.

She gave birth, as the story goes, while in the wigwam of the chief of the Ottawa tribe, whose name, also curiously, was none other than Jones. The wigwam part is undoubtedly a romanticized fabrication, but the rest is highly probable.

The falsehoods repeated about the Tauy Jones House are numerous as well.

For instance, it has been suggested that an exceptionally large room on the second floor was a ballroom where the Joneses entertained.

Doubtful. It’s difficult to imagine the Rev. Jones and his prim Baptist missionary wife prancing about in a “Virginia Reel,” especially after they helped convince the Ottawa Indians to give up their “heathen” tribal dances. More likely, it was a dormitory-style sleeping room for the male travelers who were frequent overnight guests.

Other wide-eyed gullible have spoken of the “dungeon” room in one corner of the basement of the house where unknown individuals, possibly slaves, were chained.

Ludicrous. Any well-to-do home of that pre-refrigeration period had a cool cellar storeroom where smoked meats could be hung on hooks and chains.

Also of subterranean nature is the report of the tunnel leading from the house to either a barn or the creek. Supposedly this was a hiding place and escape route for runaway slaves.

This story certainly is more plausible. However, the need for such a tunnel is to be questioned. The Civil War was over and the slaves were given their freedom before the house was even completed. Also, no trace of a tunnel has been located, although there are those who claim to have been through it.

The tunnel legend, therefore, remains a mystery—and a dubious one at that.

One of the many travelers who supposedly spent the night in Tauy Jones House was Horace Greeley, the noted editor of the New York Tribune and an 1872 Democratic presidential candidate.

This time the truth is only badly bent. In May 1859, Greeley was in Kansas and a stagecoach he was on made a brief rest and mail stop at the Jones farm. The present house, however, had not yet been built.

Probably the most enduring story about the Jones House is that Abraham Lincoln once slept there. Unfortunately, the story is a complete fabrication. It's also easily disproven by the facts.

First of all, the house was not built, or, at least not completed, until well after the Civil War. Our 16th president was dead and entombed in Springfield, Ill., by that time.

Could he have slept in the previous house on the site?

Impossible. Lincoln was only in Kansas once—a brief visit in 1859 before he was elected president. On that visit he never got any closer to Franklin County than Leavenworth.

In short, Lincoln had about as much of a chance to sleep in the Tauy Jones House as did George Washington, Henry VIII, or Moses.

This myth even became more ridiculous when “Lincoln connections” were invented for two of the house's former furnishings.

During his alleged stay, “Old Abe” reportedly soaked in a bathtub later found discarded in the attic. He also allegedly slept on a “fainting couch” also discovered in the attic.

The unanswered question is: What kind of a host would force a six-foot, four-inch honored guest to sleep on a short, lady's fainting couch?

The Tauy Jones House does not need passed-down myths to make it important. It is undoubtedly the most historically significant residence in Franklin County—even without Lincoln “sawing logs” there.