



# John Jones:

## *Cook County's first elected Black official*

In 1871, John Jones was elected Cook County commissioner, the region's first black public official. But Jones was more than an elected official; for many years before, he had been an important local merchant and a tireless advocate of racial justice.

Although Chicago was founded by a black man in the late 1700's, the roots of the city's burgeoning African American community can be traced to the 1840's, when a small band of fugitive slaves settled here, along with growing numbers of southern black freedmen and women.. Although there were only about 350 blacks in the city in 1850, they were a militant bunch. Proclaiming themselves ready to die for freedom, they organized the Liberty Association, which set up patrols to chase away slave-catchers, helping to earn Chicago the reputation as a hotbed of abolitionist activity. The warm welcome that Chicago afforded run-away slaves prompted one Downstate newspaper editor to refer to the city as "a sinkhole of abolition", and fist fights between abolitionists and slave-catchers were not an uncommon sight in the city's streets.

The local black community made many important early contributions to civic life in the city. For example, Chicago's public library system is believed to have been founded by a black man, John Johnson. In 1841, Johnson donated a room over his barber shop at Clark and Lake for the Young Men's Association to open a reading room.

*John Jones, Cook County's first black elected official and one of the most prominent civil rights advocates of his day. Photo courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society.*

norm in public schools. By 1870, a year before the Chicago fire, the city's black population of 3,700 made up just over 1% of the population, largely within the region south of the Chicago river to 17th Street.

It is from Chicago's south side black community that the city's first prominent civil rights leader, John Jones, hailed. Jones, the son of a freed slave mother and a German father, came to Chicago from North Carolina in 1845, only eight years after the city's incorporation, to avoid being sold into slavery. He set up a tailor shop with a stake of \$3.50, and by the time the company was ravaged by the Chicago fire in 1871, Jones' business was valued at \$85,000.

Jones reportedly guided hundreds of fugitive slaves to Canada, and among his many credits as an abolitionist, wrote "The Black Laws of Illinois...Why They Should Be Repealed" in 1864. Jones also lobbied tirelessly in the legislature and on the city's streets against repressive local Black Codes, which institutionalized discrimination, and by 1870 local blacks had won the right to vote. In 1871, Jones won election to the Cook County Board of Commissioners, Cook County's first elected black official. In 1874, again with Jones helping to lead the charge, the school system was desegregated, and he also won appointment as the first black on the local school board.

The political doors that Jones opened encouraged others. In 1876, John W. E. Thomas, a teacher, became the first African American to serve as an Illinois State Representative. He was followed by William L. Martin in 1898, John (Indignation) Jones in 1900, and Edward H. Morris in 1902. By 1875, Chicago could also point to its first black policeman and fireman. Cook County's African American community owes much to the pioneering work of these early freedom fighters, and John Jones certainly stands at the front of their ranks. Sadly, Jones' great contributions to the struggle for racial equality in Cook County are little remembered today, and his most enduring memorial is probably Jones Commercial High School, for which he donated the land.

Biographical information drawn in part from "Chicago, Illinois," *Microsoft® Encarta® Africana*. 1999, Microsoft Corporation; and from the *Chicago Tribune Magazine*; May 23, 1976.

