

Elmira museum honors man who helped free slaves

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He helped free hundreds of slaves during the Civil War and is primarily responsible for the establishment of a national cemetery in Elmira.

On Saturday, the museum created to honor John W. Jones and his legacy unveiled a new statue of him created by sculptor Gary Weisman.

It's an honor that's long overdue, said Talima Aaron, president of the John W. Jones Museum, at 1250 Davis St. in Elmira.

"This has been my dream, and the trustees supported it," Aaron said.

"One day I was walking through the (Woodlawn) national cemetery," she said. "I saw beautiful statues of Confederate soldiers. I looked on the ground, and there was a rock with a plaque dedicated to John Jones. Without him, that national cemetery would not exist. I was determined to get a statue."

Jones was born a slave June 21, 1817, on a plantation south of Leesburg, Virginia, according to the museum's website. In June 1844, Jones escaped and walked about 300 miles to Elmira.

The Underground Railroad, a network of homes that secretly helped escaped slaves obtain safe passage, assisted Jones in his journey, and he repaid the favor by working with the organization to help another 800 runaway slaves gain their freedom.

Jones also showed compassion toward some of the very people who were fighting to preserve slavery.

In 1859, he became sexton for Woodlawn Cemetery, and during his tenure, he buried nearly 3,000 Confederate soldiers who had died at the infamous Elmira Civil War prison camp.

Jones kept such precise records that on Dec. 7, 1877, the federal government declared the burial site a national cemetery.

"John Jones is an American hero," Aaron said. "His voice was humble. His work was grand."

Sculptor Weisman has an impressive resume, including creating statues of Mark Twain and his wife Olivia that stand at Elmira College.

Between the work Weisman did to create the bronze John Jones sculpture, a base made of 1,800 pounds of granite from Vermont, and work by Edger Enterprises to install the base, the total project cost comes to about \$175,000, Aaron said.

"Gary is a unique sculptor," she said. "He can complete a project from conception to completion."

"He spent months reading books and doing research," Aaron added. "He did a great job of bringing John Jones' spirit to life."

More information is available at johnwjonesmuseum.org.