Vice presidential candidate and Georgia native Tom Watson thought highly of Sam P. Jones, the famous late-nineteenth-century populist preacher and folksy author. Watson, who practiced law as Jones once had, knew a thing or two about public speaking. In the 1890s Watson rallied blacks and whites under the common cause of Populism. His speeches won the hearts of thousands who watched the eloquent, gesticulating, wiry, redhead on the stump. As Watson burned up the campaign trail, Sam Jones kindled revival fires on the sawdust trail. The minister from Cartersville made a powerful impression on Watson, who proclaimed, “No uniformed follower of Lee or Grant ever marched with greater purpose or fought with greater pluck.” Jones was “the greatest Georgian this generation has known. . . . Brilliant, witty, wise, eloquent, profound in his knowledge of the human heart.” Moreover he rhapsodized, “No man ever faced an audience who could so easily master it.”

Reverend Jones’ power over the men and women who flocked to his meetings was never in question. Yet he had many critics. Newspapermen doubted his motives, means, and sincerity. The preacher’s showmanship and oratorical flourishes seemed calculated and crass. “Sam Jones has returned with two thousand five hundred dollars of Canadian money in his pocket,” wrote one of Puck magazine’s satirists after the reverend preached north of the border. “But he has returned; so Canada is satisfied.” Others denounced his campaigns as vulgar spectacles or religious circuses. Mark Twain was troubled by something deeper. For Twain, Jones’ sentimental theology and quaint middle-class values were pathetic and comical. Jones’ literal religion, thought Twain, was as ignorant as it was ridiculous. Twain hated Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ gushy Victorian best seller The Gates Ajar (1868). He thought her depiction of heaven as a picturesque family reunion was ridiculous. He found Reverend Jones’ version of the afterlife equally ludicrous. So at the peak of Sam Jones’ popularity in 1891, Twain put pen to paper and authored a scathing satire of the South’s acclaimed Methodist. The short
story “A Singular Episode: The Reception of Rev. Sam Jones in Heaven” recounts Twain’s train trip to heaven with the “riotous blatherskite” revivalist, who whoops and screeches “hosannahs like a demon.” Upon their arrival, St. Peter examines the uncivilized preacher’s ticket, hoping to find some flaw in it that will bar him from paradise. The apostle scolds the reverend: “Gag yourself until you are out of my hearing—this is not Texas. One of you [angels] go and show him where he can wash. Next!” In the end Jones makes such a nuisance of himself in heaven, “preaching and exhorting and carrying on all the time,” that “even the papal Borgias were revolted.” All residents soon flee to avoid his undignified braying.3

Whether he was reviled or praised, Jones’ influence and legacy were indisputable. Dixie’s celebrated evangelist was one of the most renowned figures of late-nineteenth-century America. In many ways he epitomized the unvarnished, common man wisdom of late-Victorian religious America. He was fond of proclaiming that he was not Rev. Samuel P. Jones, but just plain Sam Jones. His heavy use of humor, ridicule, and rural imagery delighted audiences and readers alike. Jones spoke directly to regular folk with homespun anecdotes and salt of the earth language. A few of his pithy expressions are still ubiquitous. Some of the one-liners he collected or invented have burrowed into the popular southern mind like a boll weevil works its way into cotton: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions”; “There is more religion in laughing than in crying”; “If you will show me a praying pew, I will show you a powerful pulpit”; “The woman that never helped the Lord never got much help from the Lord.”4

By the 1890s Jones was one of the most oft-quoted Americans. And after Dwight Moody’s death in 1899, he was America’s most famous minister. Jones died suddenly of heart trouble brought on by “acute indigestion” while traveling by train in October 1906. He was fifty-eight. As the news spread, thousands gathered in Marietta and Cartersville, Georgia, to await the return of his remains. Visitors, black and white, streamed into the Jones family parlor to pay their last respects. After that his body lay in state at the Georgia capitol, where thirty thousand flocked to wish him farewell.5 Even the New York Times, a paper that had cast doubt on the preacher’s aspirations and ministry, recognized his enormous influence. “At one time he was the most widely known of all the itinerant preachers in America,” wrote the author of his obituary. “He flung conventions to the winds and talked the language of the people he was addressing.”6

Jones’ meteoric rise to national prominence in the final decades of the nineteenth century is surprising considering his inauspicious, unpromising early years. Born in Alabama in 1847, he moved with his family to
Cartersville, Georgia, at the age of nine. The Joneses were relatively well off, owning between thirteen and fourteen slaves, and they had enough money to send young Sam to boarding school. A bright pupil, he excelled at many subjects, including rhetoric, and like his father, he went into law. He was admitted to the Georgia bar in 1869. Two weeks after that signal accomplishment, he ventured to Kentucky to marry his fiancée, Laura McElwain. They would have seven children together.7

Married life was not the Valhalla Jones had hoped it would be. He was unable to secure clients in Cartersville and nearby Dallas, Georgia. Penniless, he suffered from indigestion. He soothed his health troubles and financial worries with liquor. “Oh, the horrors of nervous dyspepsia!” he laments in the autobiographical sketch of Sam Jones’ Own Book. Alcohol had “become a passion with me, and all the ambitions and vital forces of my life were being undermined by this fearful appetite.”8 It was an appetite that would stay with him all of his life.

Jones was plagued by doubt and guilt. He came from a long line of Methodists on both sides of his family. He had attended camp meetings as a youngster, and he knew the dictates of the faith. A drunkard would never enter paradise. His father, John Jones, became increasingly devout in the early 1870s. In those years John suffered declining health. On his deathbed in 1872 he pleaded with his errant son: “My poor, wicked, wayward, reckless boy. You have broken the heart of your sweet wife and brought me down in sorrow to my grave; promise me, my boy, to meet me in heaven.” It was a classic Victorian vignette of salvation and damnation. Sam responded passionately: “Father, I’ll make you the promise, I’ll quit, I’ll quit, I’ll quit!”9

True to his vow, Jones dried up and entered the Methodist ministry. Through the 1870s he preached on the Van Wert circuit of the North Georgia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. He quickly gained a reputation as a powerful orator and a forceful evangelist. He also channeled his energies into reform. Once enslaved by alcohol, he now lashed out at liquor sellers and drinkers alike. He was a diehard teetotaler and hoped his sons would remember that their pappy fought “liquor as long as he had a fist to strike it, and kicked it as long as he had a foot, and bit it as long as he had teeth, and then gummed it till he died.”10 Like that of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, Jones’ faith was informed by social holiness. Action was more important than contemplation or theological speculation. In years to come he contributed thousands of dollars to Methodist schools and raised money for the YMCA. The denomination appointed him as the fund-raiser for the Methodist orphan home in Decatur, Georgia. In addition to the income he received for those duties, he made a tidy sum as a revival preacher.11
His reputation as a giant of the pulpit spread throughout the South in the 1880s. Jones preached revivals in Atlanta, LaGrange, and Newnan, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; Waco, Texas; Huntsville, Alabama; and Memphis, Knoxville, and Chattanooga, Tennessee. He drew hundreds of seekers to an August 1884 meeting in Iuka, Mississippi. “Since he began preaching last Monday,” one observer exclaimed, “there have been over one hundred professions, some of them the hardest sinners, and others of our leading citizens.”

In 1885 Jones became a national celebrity, soon widely known as the “Moody of the South.” In that year he packed churches and auditoriums for revivals in Brooklyn, Boston, San Francisco, and Nashville. He referred to the latter gathering as “that memorable meeting.” Indeed conversions reached into the thousands, and church membership increased tremendously. He charmed Nashvillians with his quick wit, sarcasm, and down-home humor. And unlike the typical fire and brimstone minister of the revival circuit, Jones preached a sunny gospel of hope and possibility. His stage presence and mannerisms were as memorable as his cheery optimism and pithy sayings. He kept audiences and readers riveted. He was like a runaway horse, recalled one fellow evangelist. Jones made audiences laugh uproariously one moment and consider their eternal fate the next. Congregants saw something more than just the “odd gestures, peculiar, slow, short step, [and] apparently absent-minded movement of the hand to the pocket or forehead,” remarked a Chicagoan present at one of his services. This something was “the smile of a revivalist, quaint, kindly, quizzical almost, a smile that starts in no place in particular and spreads over the face until it touches every feature and brings out the whole in a new and pleasing light.”

Such skills were on full display in Nashville. “The Georgia wonder” shouted down the devil and denounced whiskey in a three-thousand-dollar gospel tent. Five thousand men, women, and children crammed in to hear him. “Nashville has never been so shaken before,” commented one newsman.

Not everyone was so enthralled. Another journalist from Nashville wrote, “After listening to him attentively, we set him down as a ‘crank.’” Traditionalists bristled at the freewheeling preacher’s rustic humor and country anecdotes. Speaking for cooler heads, the critic commented, “Our people are past the age of being ridiculed or abused into religion.” From Atlanta to New York others dismissed Jones as a crude, lowbrow, huckster. “The question is,” scoffed a Minneapolis church leader, “whether any good can be accomplished by coarse jokes and false doctrines.” Yet Jones never flinched when challenged. He was sure of his methods, however unconventional others thought they were. With typical panache he countered one critic, who lambasted the reckless, fiery minister for encouraging extremist preachers. “Don’t you
know that dynamite can be used successfully in fishing?” Jones retorted. “Well, if a fool fisherman who doesn’t know how to use it blows his head off, is that any reason why a wise man who does know how to use it shouldn’t catch his fish that way if he wants to?” It was a pragmatic, simple message, much like that of another towering Methodist of the nineteenth century, Phoebe Palmer. Just as Palmer, from her New York home, had encouraged the faithful to claim holiness or sinless perfection, Jones prodded readers and revival audiences to simply stop sinning. “Quit your meanness,” “Quit sin,” “Quit the world,” “Quit the devil,” he exhorted. It was one part Dwight Moody, one part Horatio Alger. Jones was always practical and confident. Like the holiness people with whom he associated—radical Protestants who believed in sanctification, or a second sin-cleansing work of grace—he was not afraid to use modern means to preach an old-time religion. “If I could go through this country with Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup, and get more souls to Christ by having the sinners each take a teaspoonful,” he crowed, “I would invest every nickel I have in that syrup.”

His simple message enchanted millions. For audiences and readers across the U.S., he vividly recounted the “wickedness” of casinos, theaters, dance halls, and barrooms. He was an entertainer as much as a spellbinding sermonizer. The puritanical, populist themes he crafted would remain central to evangelicalism throughout much of the twentieth century. Jones won ardent followers among holiness folk. Like Georgia’s revivalist, they lashed out at backsliding, urbane Protestants and the “sodom-like” luxuries of Victorian Methodism. “The city churches are . . . nice gathering places for the rich and tony crowd who go to spend Sunday in a respectable place and keep up a reputation for general business,” but they were spiritually lifeless, commented a bitter holiness stalwart. Alcohol was a chief holiness target. And as prohibitionism remained a major force in American religion and politics, Jones seemed deeply relevant. With others of his generation and region, he was a paternalist. Blacks who opposed prohibition did not deserve the vote, he thought. Like Billy Sunday later in the twentieth century, Jones railed against foreign domination. He also condemned “negro rule” and unrestricted immigration. Sunday shared more than just his predecessor’s bigotry. He was also fond of the well-turned aphorism. And Sunday embraced Jones’ biblical literalism and staunch defensive posture. “I believe that the whale swallowed Jonah,” Jones once quipped. “And the only reason I don’t believe that Jonah swallowed the whale is because the Bible don’t say so.”

In 1886 when he published *Sam Jones’ Own Book*—a kind of comfort food for the soul, packed with folk wisdom and down-home observations—Jones was a national icon. Like Billy Graham decades later, Jones proclaimed
a simple message that epitomized southern evangelicalism. From the mid-1880s through the 1890s, the southern evangelist was at the pinnacle of his career. He preached in every major city in the United States. In 1886 alone he claimed to have delivered one thousand sermons to three million Americans from coast to coast. One prominent convert in Nashville, Tom Ryman, even built a large structure, Ryman’s Union Gospel Tabernacle, for Jones and other evangelists to conduct revivals in. (That edifice would later become the home of the Grand Ole Opry.) Not surprisingly Jones was one of the highest paid ministers in Gilded Age America. He boasted an annual salary of $30,000. Upon his death he left an estate worth $250,000. His lavish Cartersville, Georgia, home, Roselawn, displays that wealth and has become a popular tourist stop for travelers in the region. Today the Roselawn Museum registers approximately six thousand visitors a year.

Oddly enough the evangelist whom Democratic warhorse William Jennings Bryan praised for his “earnestness, his evident sincerity, and his plain, common sense way of putting things” has faded from public memory. And now that colossal figure of southern humor and religious wit is forgotten in most of America outside of Georgia. Besides Kathleen Minnix’s exceptional scholarly biography of Jones, *Laughter in the Amen Corner: The Life of Evangelist Sam Jones* (University of Georgia Press, 1993), and a handful of articles written in regional historical journals, Jones is absent largely from southern history and American religious history. His widely read works, non-fiction best sellers in his lifetime, remain hard to find or out of print.

Indeed *Sam Jones’ Own Book* has been out of print since it was published roughly 120 years ago. The book ably represents the folksy humorist and moralizing preacher at his cleverest. It contains a collection of his most popular sermons, a selection from his chief preaching associate—Sam Small, a fellow southerner “delivered” from alcohol—and a host of the preacher’s rich southern witticisms. (Jones dictated his books from his sermons much as he dictated the articles he “wrote” for the *Atlanta Journal* and religious newspapers.) In addition *Sam Jones’ Own Book* contains thirteen illustrations—including images of the massive venues at which he preached and depictions of various ministerial colleagues. A fifty-page autobiography recounts his conversion in 1872, his “victory” over alcohol, his early ministry in North Georgia, and his subsequent fame. The sermons included in the text are those that won him so much acclaim and admiration. Among these are “Personal Consecration: ‘Quit Your Meanness,” “Delighting in the Lord,” “The Secret of a Religious Life,” and “Sowing and Reaping.” In those and other sermons, he bluntly challenges Americans to act on their faith and help reform society. With equal fury he denounces what so many Victorian evangelicals...
considered the sources of sin: card playing, drinking, and theater attendance. He spices all his jeremiads heavily with humor. The sayings included at the end of each chapter reveal as much while reflecting his “turn or burn” outlook. “Everybody ought to keep good company,” Jones declares. “There is not an angel in heaven that would not be corrupted by the company that some of you keep.” “Whisky is a good thing in its place,” he writes with typical attention-grabbing skill, “and that place is in hell. If I get there I will drink all I can get, but I won’t do it here.” Elsewhere he jokes, “A man who believes only in what he can see, doesn’t believe he has got a backbone.”

Even Jones’ harshest critics recognized that his humor and unbuttoned style drew the crowds.

Like so many others in this uncertain era, Jones believed that a new secularism—evident in the circus, the theater, ballroom, the saloon, and other “dens of iniquity” that could not even be mentioned—posed grave dangers to society. These diversions led to perdition, he warned. In his sermon in the book titled “Sowing and Reaping,” he pleads: “Sow cards and reap what? Industrious, hard-working boys? Sow cards and reap farmers? Sow cards and reap first-class mechanics? Sow cards and reap lawyers? No! no! a thousand times no! But sow cards and reap gamblers.” Jones thunders, “Men and boys go from the bar-rooms to the gambling hell and from the gambling hell to the shameless houses, just as naturally as a living man breathes.”

In 1886, around the time that *Sam Jones’ Own Book* hit the shelves, the enormously powerful industrial workers union, the Knights of Labor, claimed seven hundred thousand members. It united skilled and unskilled labor to protest wage cuts and abysmal, unsafe working conditions. A tumultuous year, 1886 began with a wave of strikes, culminating in what was called the Great Upheaval. Railroad workers, miners, and factory laborers brought the economy to a grinding halt. On May 4, 1886, a bomb exploded at a workman’s rally in Chicago’s Haymarket. Eight died as a result of the blast. The nationwide reaction to new immigrants, laborers, and anarchists was immediate and intense. Other American cities erupted in violence that volatile summer. In the coming decade political protest took the form of third-party politics. Jones lent his support to the breakaway Populist Party, though he later wavered.

Sam Jones and millions of other evangelicals feared that the church had become an overcivilized, overeducated, irrelevant institution. He castigated both elites and “sinners,” calling for a “manly” faith that would meet the challenges of the era. In one of the sermons in *Sam Jones’ Own Book*, “Purity of Heart,” he calls for a masculine army of God to wage war against sin and impish Christianity: “Brethren, we don’t want any peace in any sense until
we have rid ourselves of those things that are cursing our city and our neighbors. Let us have war, and carry our warfare on our knees through this city.”

He had been vocal about the failure of earlier ministers. They lacked practical education, he exclaimed. “We have been clamoring for fifty years for an educated ministry,” sneered Jones, “and we have got it to-day, and the church is deader than it ever has been in its history.” Educated divines, he hooted, were little more than the sum of their degrees, “A.B.’s, Ph.D.’s, D.D.’s, LL.D.’s, and A.S.S.’s.”

Judging from Sam Jones’ Own Book, he was deeply distressed by what he perceived as the problems of the church and urban America. Though not a liberal reformer, he called on Americans to aid the poor, care for the sick, and feed the hungry.

That message appealed to his readers. Though there is no clear estimate of the number of copies Sam Jones’ Own Book sold, it is safe to assume that it went well beyond the ten-thousand mark. As historian Kathleen Minnix notes, Jones’ first book, Sermons and Sayings—printed by the Southern Methodist Publishing House in Nashville in 1883—sold 30,000 copies in just four months. In terms of America’s current population that would amount to 171,000 copies. At that point he was not yet the national celebrity he would be three years later. In the 1880s and 1890s, excerpts from Jones’ works were being reprinted in England, Sweden, Australia, and Scotland. The publisher of Sam Jones’ Own Book, Cranston and Stowe of Cincinnati, Ohio, had established itself as a leading printer of religious biographies—including one of the popular African American preacher Amanda Berry Smith—and theological works—such as the systematic theology of Samuel Wakefield. Cranston and Stowe had been in operation since the 1850s. Jones’ book, issued in 1887 as well as 1886, would have been, quite possibly, one of the publisher’s best-selling titles. It was an entrepreneurial move for Jones, too. He had suffered some financial loss and embarrassment with the printing of unauthorized, shoddy versions of his sermons and adages. “A firm in Chicago has perpetrated the boldest robbery (on my wife and children),” Jones lamented, “and burnished their deed with the most audacious impudence on record. They have copyrighted my own sermons against myself.” Hence the title he chose was meant to indicate that it was his “own” authorized version. The book was subsequently issued in Dunedin, New Zealand, by Malcolm and Grigg; in London, England, by T. Woolmer; and in Toronto, Canada, by William Briggs.

Those who had seen or heard of the “Georgia Wonder” received it favorably. Advertisements in religious and secular newspapers proclaimed, “Everybody wants to see what Sam Jones has to say.” In May 1886 an editor at the Atlanta Constitution praised the newly published Sam Jones’ Own
Book: “The admirers of Sam Jones should take notice that this is the only authorized edition of his sermons. The readers of THE CONSTITUTION are already acquainted with the merits of this book. Thousands of them have laughed and wept over his characteristic utterances. The book is selling rapidly.” The English Wesleyan Methodist Magazine heaped praise on the volume, announcing that “no one who reads the sermons of Sam P. Jones... can help feeling that much of their force is due to rough and ready putting of moral and religious truth.” He skillfully translated theological subtleties into “the language of the street-corner.”

The volume would have likely appealed to middle- and working-class Americans and those countless individuals who had recently moved from the countryside to the cities and suburbs. His books, priced at around one dollar, were not out of reach for those of modest means. He preached and wrote for the plain-folk Methodists not unlike those parodied so mercilessly by the late-nineteenth-century novelist Harold Frederic. In Frederic’s Damnation of Theron Ware (1896), Brother Pierce admonishes the new young minister of a tiny rural, upstate New York church:

“We are a plain sort o’ folks up in these parts,” said Brother Pierce. . . . His voice was as dry and rasping as his cough, and its intonations were those of authority. “We walk here,” he went on, eyeing the minister with a sour regard, “in a meek an’ humble spirit, in the straight an’ narrow way which leadeth unto life. We ain’t gone traipsin’ after strange gods, like some people that call themselves Methodists in other places. We stick by the Discipline an’ the ways of our fathers in Israel. No new-fangled notions can go down here. Your wife’d better take them flowers out of her bunnit afore next Sunday.” . . . “Another thing: We don’t want no book-learnin’ or dictionary words in our pulpit,” he went on coldly. “Some folks may stomach ’em; we won’t.”

Jones’ readers were probably like those who assembled to hear the southern minister preach. Those who crammed into Boston’s Faneuil Hall for Jones’ 1887 revival, observed the Andover Review, included “workingmen in blue blouses, and marketmen in white frocks, scattered amongst the throng, while in the crowded galleries the bright hats of small groups of ladies gave a dash of gaiety to the spectacle. . . . Here and there was a shabby individual, odorous with the mingled fumes of whiskey and tobacco.” Jones’ old-time, shouting-Methodist style was favorably received. Holiness as well as Methodist newspapers and journals regularly trumpeted his revivals and publications. His sermons and sayings have much to teach about the values and ideals of Americans in the late Victorian period, and religious historians
still consider Sam Jones’ Own Book a classic example of his preaching style and a valuable window onto an exciting and turbulent age in American history.

Notes


4. Sam Jones, Sam Jones’ Own Book (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1887; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 374, 425, 186. Citations hereafter are to the 2009 edition.

5. “Scores Look on Dead Face of Sam Jones,” Atlanta Constitution, 18 October 1906, 1; “Dead Soldier of the Cross Comes Home,” Atlanta Constitution, 17 October 1906, 1; Minnix, Laughter in the Amen Corner, 240–41.


8. Jones, Sam Jones’ Own Book, 14

9. Jones, The Life and Sayings of Sam P. Jones, 50–51


22. Parker, “Sam Jones (1847–1906).”


27. Ibid., *Sam Jones’ Own Book*, 317, 361, 78.

28. Ibid., 249, 248.


