The Joneses pledge to keep up family's 200-year-old cabin

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Dr. Tom B. Jones knew little about his father's family history until he got a call in August 2001 from Charles Soergel.

"He told me that his grandmother was a Jones and that we were cousins," Jones recalled. "I said, 'Who are you and where are you?' "

Family head has links to the region

While he has lived and worked for more than 30 years in Greenville, Mercer County, about 75 miles north of Pittsburgh, Dr. Tom B. Jones has multiple ties to the region.

His grandfather, Elias Jones, was born in what is now Franklin Park. He later operated a general store on Beaver Street in Sewickley.

An Aliquippa native, Jones was educated at Geneva College and the University of Pittsburgh Medical School. He worked as an intern in the city's Mercy Hospital where he met his wife Mary Rose, a nurse. After Army service in Korea, he practiced medicine in Aliquippa, Beaver Falls and New Brighton before completing a residency in radiology at Mercy Hospital.

In 1972, he began working as a staff radiologist at what is now UPMC Greenville. He is now retired.

Soergel, 82, is a retired music teacher who lives in Franklin Park. Jones, 70, is a retired radiologist who was born in Aliquippa but lived and practiced medicine in Mercer County since 1972.

The family roots of both men go back to a log cabin built about 1800 by their great-great-grandfather Will Jones. A veteran of the Indian campaigns during and after the Revolutionary War, Will Jones and his wife, Catherine, made their home on 350 acres along an American Indian trail near what is now Brandt School Road. They were the earliest white settlers in an area that was originally part of Pitt Township. The area had several other names before it became Franklin Township in 1823, and it has been the Borough of Franklin Park since 1961.

The cabin was expanded and renovated as members of the Jones and Neely families, direct descendants of Will and Catherine, continued to live there for the next century and a half.

The phone call that Soergel made to his cousin three years ago has led directly to an offer by Jones and his family to improve and maintain the historic building. "We hope to keep it in good shape for the next 100 years or so," Jones said.

The 15-foot by 20-foot cabin was relocated in 2002 to the borough's Blueberry Hill Park. Plans call for it to be the home of education, nature and living-history programs.

Franklin Park officials are excited by the Jones family's offer, which is being reviewed by the borough solicitor. "We can accomplish so much together," borough Manager Ambrose Rocca said. "Preliminary indications are that the agreement will be acceptable to council." He predicted action on the proposal by the end of 2004.

Money for upkeep and maintenance of what is known as the Jones-Neely Log House will be handled through Jones Charitable Foundation. Tom B. Jones, along with his oldest son, Thomas B. Jones Jr., and his youngest son, Christopher R. Jones, will oversee what the legal language calls a "donor advised fund."

Christopher Jones lives in Franklin Park, not far from where his ancestors' cabin once stood. His sister, Molly Copple, and her family also live in the borough.

Tom Jones and his wife, Mary Rose, have 11 children, ranging in age from 26 to 43, and 26 grandchildren, with another on the way. They and their families are scattered across Pennsylvania and neighboring states, but their

father said about half were able to attend the cabin dedication two years ago. That event also added impetus to the foundation idea.

"Basically I wanted to create a sense of family heritage," Jones said. "I wanted to give them a sense of their roots."

Those roots go back to Benjamin Jones, Will's father, who settled on what is now the North Side of Pittsburgh at the end of the 18th century. It was a violent time as French trappers, Canadian militia, British regulars, farmers and American Indians clashed repeatedly for control of the Ohio Valley.

According to Soergel's research, Benjamin Jones was killed by an Indian when Will was 15. Will soon joined one of Pennsylvania militia companies that battled Indians all along the frontier. Periodic warfare continued for many years. Will Jones' sister was killed by an Indian while milking a cow near the cabin, Soergel found.

Jones died in 1836, but his descendants continued to live in the cabin until the 1950s when the property passed out of the family's hands.

In 1999, a new owner donated the cabin to the borough with the understanding that it would be taken apart, log by log, and relocated. Two years later, it was rebuilt according to its original design in Blueberry Hill Park. That project cost about $16,000 and was funded with borough funds and private donations, including money from Paul Neely, of Shaler, another direct descendant who had been born in the cabin.

Descendants of the Jones and Neely families have been generous in supporting the cabin project, said Debby Rabold, chairwoman of the borough's historical committee.

Soergel collected much of the information about the building and the families who lived there, she said. Other relatives have donated antiques for display in the house. "The Jones Family Foundation will now ensure that the house is properly cared for far into the future," she said.

If the agreement is approved by council, initial work at the cabin will include landscaping to solve a storm-water problem, installation of a security monitoring system and a heating system. Those first-year costs are estimated at about $20,000 to $25,000.

The foundation also would pay for pest control, electric and heating bills and inspection of and repairs to the log walls.

Future plans call for construction of paths, gardens and out-buildings and purchase and installation of cabin furnishings. As funds become available, the foundation would like to help support programming at the cabin, Jones said.

That proposal sounded great to Rabold, who has plans for living history programs and a summer day camp featuring pioneer and Colonial-era activities.

The proposed agreement between the Jones foundation and the borough contains a provision that would give the family the right to buy the cabin if the borough ever decided to move, sell or demolish it. "It's hard to imagine that happening, but if it did, we'd like to keep the cabin within Franklin Park somewhere," Jones said.

The borough will continue to own the cabin, and officials want to make sure they maintain control over programs and activities taking place there, Rocca said. "We're in agreement for the most part," he said.

Soergel, who started events in motion with his phone call in 2001, was in the audience Nov. 3 when his distant cousin made a presentation to borough council. "It looks to me like he wants to do this thing right," Soergel said of Jones' offer.

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