



**The man who built Petaluma : Brainerd Jones designed much of what is now the city's historic section**

By Dave Weinstein - 02/19/2006

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Petaluma was a prosperous town at the start of the 20th century, filled with poultry farmers, grain dealers, one of the busiest ports in Northern California -- and not an architect in sight. So it's not surprising that when one finally hung up his shingle, he would get plenty of work. For years Brainerd Jones was the only architect in town. "If you see a nice building in Petaluma," says local architect Shawn Montoya, with some exaggeration, "it's probably Brainerd Jones."

Katherine Rinehart, author of the new book "Petaluma: a History in Architecture" (Arcadia Publishing, \$19.99), suggests that an incredible 80 percent of the buildings in the city's historic core have been designed by Jones, though many have been lost. "The man who built a city," the Petaluma Argus-Courier once called him.

It didn't hurt that Jones was a local boy or that he quickly joined the Elks and Rotary clubs, where he went decades scarcely missing a meeting. But it was more than bonhomie that made Jones so successful. Not much is remembered about Jones' personality, but his architecture makes clear that he was highly skilled and knew how to have fun. His houses are sassy. His buildings vary in style and are well-built, sophisticated and surprising. "He designed for what the client wanted," says Connie Hammerman, president of the Petaluma Woman's Club, of Jones, who designed the building, "so everything is not a cookie-cutter Brainerd."

His earliest houses are standard, if imposing, Queen Anne Victorians, complete with gables and shingles and corner turrets. By 1905, when Arts and Crafts bungalows and Edwardian-era Colonials became fashionable, Jones hit his stride. He knew each style's formula, and how to tweak it by adding amusing, idiosyncratic details -- and by emphasizing strong, elemental forms. Typical Jones details of the 1905-1920 period, seen in dozens of houses throughout town, include roofs that flare out at the end like Chinese pagodas, giving even his most Eastern of Colonials a curious Asian flavor. Dormer roofs often flare as well, and he loved paired dormers and heavy window boxes.

Nationwide, bungalow porches are usually supported by trapezoidal piers. Jones preferred squat columns, often supporting a series of low arches. Bungalows everywhere used exposed roof rafters to create rhythmic interest. Jones added syncopation, often by doubling his rafters or treating them like giant dentils, the toothlike decorations used in classical architecture. These Jonesian motifs can be seen everywhere in this very walkable town, which suggests that Jones was shockingly prolific -- or that others took them up as well.

Particularly noticeable is what Montoya calls Jones' Union Jack X-shaped window pattern, found in porch and dormer windows on almost every residential block, and in many of his schools and commercial buildings. He used the motif in glass-fronted cabinetry, and even in the form of three-dimensional pyramidal beam ends in fireplaces and cabinets.

But it's not by details alone that Jones works his magic. His forms are strong, simple and well proportioned. His brick houses of the 1920s, several of which line stately D Street just past downtown, are wonderful compositions of arches and arcades and gables. Inside his homes, rooms are large, doorways wide, plans simple, often with a sunroom behind the living room.

Jones loved bands of windows, a la Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Style, and arranged windows in a peculiar style all his own: small windows sandwiching tall windows. Plentiful windows are a Jones trademark. Stephen Hohner, who lives in a Spanish Villa from the late 1920s designed by Jones, loves the way it opens to the garden with almost floor-to-ceiling windows, complete with sunburst patterns in the transoms. "I like the feel of it," Hohner says of his villa. "The rooms are well proportioned and of good size. It has a lot of soul, in my opinion."

One of Jones' notable houses, a brick castle with a crenellated entry on C Street, has curiously tall windows and a two-story living room to match, complete with a Juliet balcony and a lavish brick fireplace. "When you walk in, it's pretty much of a showstopper," owner Joan Brandt says of the room.

Owners praise Jones' houses for their spaciousness, ease of movement and generous storage. "It's hard to find a house with as nice a plan as this," says Dennis Callahan, who's lived in his shingled Jones house, which has a stairway surrounded by bedrooms and a view deck, for more than 30 years. "It feels like a home," Steven Peterson says of his shingled Arts and Crafts house. "The flow of it is just perfect."

The quality of Jones' work -- his knowledge of Prairie Style, the way the columns on his Carnegie Library bulge slightly so they appear to be straight, his deft touch at classical detailing -- suggests to Montoya that Jones was well schooled. But it's unlikely Jones received formal education in architecture.

The son of a prosperous Chicago lawyer, Jones came to Petaluma in 1875 at age 6 with his mother after his father died, and began making his mark nine years later when the Fourth District Agricultural Association honored the boy for "best pencil drawing," "best mechanical skill and workmanship" and "best painting in India ink."

Jones worked as a bookbinder in Petaluma, then apprenticed in San Francisco with the MacDougal Brothers architects. In 1900, at 31, he married Jeanette Gibson, the daughter of a "local pioneer," the Argus reported (the newspaper didn't become the Argus-Courier until 1953). "A quiet, simple home wedding," the paper said, no attendants or decorations. After their wedding breakfast, the Joneses honeymooned in San Francisco.

He opened his Petaluma office around that time to quick success, remodeling the opera house in 1901 and designing a series of mostly two-story classical buildings that define Petaluma's historic downtown, along with earlier Victorian-era cast-iron retail and commercial blocks.

In 1904 the Argus reported: "Great honor fell upon the city when the library trustees, after examining the plans submitted by the leading architects of California, accepted those of a Petaluma boy, a man young in years but old in experience who will be among the great builders of his day." The Carnegie Library, with its stained-glass dome and classical facade, serves today as the Petaluma Historical Library and Museum. Jones was soon designing most of the town's schools and many of its clubs, including the Petaluma Woman's Club, beating out Julia Morgan. Hammerman suggests he may have gotten the job because Jeanette was one of the club's leaders.

Jones established his office in one storefront of his own design, and then another, on Washington Avenue, one of Petaluma's main downtown streets. His second office building, which still stands, had two spacious, light-filled apartments upstairs, with art-tiled fireplaces and arched doorways. Jones and his wife lived in one and rented out the other. Downstairs, next to a retail space, Jones' office had a waiting room and an extra bedroom directly behind the drafting room, presumably for between-client napping. By all accounts Jones was a hard worker.

But he also enjoyed socializing. "He was a man with whom real men were delighted to associate," the Argus editorialized after his death in 1945, adding: "He could engage in repartee with his fellows with a quiet and pointed wit and never crack a smile as he did it. And we loved him for these qualities."

"A true and noble Rotarian," Jones served on the club's board and worked as hard as any member, the paper reported. Jones helped oversee the city's air raid shelters during the First World War, served on the planning commission and accompanied nine prominent Petalumans on a trade delegation to Mexico in 1923. The delegation, along with a larger host of San Franciscans, met the president, visited the floating islands of Xochimilco, art museums, a bullfight and the Pyramid of the Sun. The Petalumans, who were well supplied with cigars and "soothers of the liquid variety," according to one of their number, behaved one evening in a manner befitting jackasses, they were told. The result was the town's Jackass Club, with Jones a founding member.

The Joneses, who never had children, were socially active. The Argus called Jeanette, who died in 1942, "one of Petaluma's most prominent women." Despite heart problems, Brainerd Jones never retired. He designed the Columbarium for nearby Cypress Hill Memorial Park in 1940 and an Art Deco-style fire station, and was designing civic improvements on behalf of the Petaluma Lion's Club when he died after a heart attack at age 76.

The city has never forgotten its favorite architect. "Petalumans are known for liking their antiques and history," says broker and property manager Tom Maunder, who owns and lives in the building that housed Jones' home-office. Several of Jones' buildings, including the Carnegie Library, are on the National Register of Historic Places, and many others contribute to the city's National Historic Districts.

In the mid-1990s two fans, Montoya and Ron Bausman, began documenting Jones' work. They were able to document that 150 or so buildings in town were designed by Jones. Based on architectural appearance, they know hundreds more are by him as well.

Maunder, a no-nonsense type, takes great pleasure in Jones' house and office. "The building has a good vibe," he says. "I know that sounds silly, but anybody who has lived here will tell you it's a happy space, and a productive space."

### **Brainerd Jones (1869-1945)**

**Style:** Arts and Crafts, Colonial, Shingle and Mediterranean houses, Beaux Arts and Eclectic commercial and institutional buildings.

**Active:** Brainerd Jones was Petaluma's most prolific architect from 1900 through the 1930s, designing hundreds of houses, stores, schools and more. His buildings can also be found in Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, San Rafael and environs.

**Known for:** Many of his houses have a distinct look -- squat columns, pagoda-like roofs, grouped windows, stylish rhythms. He also gave Petaluma a wonderful collection of 1920s brick houses and much of its commercial downtown.

**Resources:** Petaluma Historical Library and Museum, 20 Fourth St., in the Brainerd Jones Carnegie Library, has a photo of the architect by the front door, and has archival material about him. The museum also offers tours that pass many Jones buildings. (707) 778-4398, [www.petalumamuseum.com](http://www.petalumamuseum.com). "Petaluma: A History in Architecture," by Katherine J. Rinehart (\$19.99, Arcadia Publishing), has a frontispiece of Brainerd Jones.

### **A Brainerd Jones tour**

#### **Petaluma**

Downtown landmarks include the **Petaluma Historical Library and Museum**, 20 Fourth St.; the Petaluma Woman's Club, (518 B St.); the old Post Office Building, which extends from 22 to 34 Petaluma Blvd. North; and the addition to the McNear Building, 7 Fourth St. His schools include Philip Sweed (331 Keller St., which is being converted to condos).

**The Must Hatch Incubator**, 401 Seventh St. (which now house offices), shows Jones' elegance of proportion.

He designed the Art Deco-style **firehouse** at D Street and Petaluma Boulevard; the **Columbarium** at Cypress Hill Memorial Park, 430 Magnolia Ave.

Notable homes include **226 Liberty St.**, a Queen Anne used for the movie "Peggy Sue Got Married"; a characteristic bungalow at **300 Kentucky St.**; and a Colonial with touches of Asia at **215 Prospect St.**, at Liberty.

Jones' home office is at **226 Washington St.** Several beauties are along **C Street**, including **609, 617, 641, 823, 910 and 1040**, and "the castle" at **101 Seventh St.** at C Street. Other gems include a Southern plantation at **901 D St.** and an imposing bungalow at **500 Western Ave.** The Martin farmhouse, at **1197 E. Washington St.** by Hwy. 101, is a landmark that will become the focus of a residential development.