



A HISTORY OF DELAWARE
THROUGH ITS GOVERNORS

1776 - 2008

ROGER A. MARTIN



23. JOHN COLLINS

March 1, 1776 – 1822

Collins was buried on the shores of Collins Mill Pond near Bridgeville, and over the years his wife and son came to buried there also. For years afterward, the graves were open to the elements when finally they were sealed in 1974.

He served as governor during the 45th and 46th General Assemblies, from January 16, 1821 to April 16, 1822. He became governor at the age of 44. He was a Democrat-Republican, a Sussex Countian, a miller and a Methodist.

JOHAN COLLINS WAS THE SON OF CAPTAIN JOHN AND Mary Houston Collins. He is believed to have been born in Nanticoke Hundred of Sussex County on March 1, 1776. In 1795, Collins's father owned some 4,300 acres of land on Gravelly Branch near Coverdale's Crossroads, southeast of Bridgeville.¹ He was an industrious person who spent about ten years in the Delaware General Assembly, most of it after the construction of the state house. The elder Mr. Collins was very active in the bog iron ore business, which was of considerable economic importance in this area in the last half of the 18th Century.* Captain Collins established a forge along Gravelly Branch and operated it until his death in 1804. Soon thereafter, the iron ore gave out and the forge was converted into a gristmill by Shadrack Elliott.

Though it is unlikely that the younger John Collins served in the General Assembly, he had gained enough political prominence by 1820 to be chosen Democrat-Republican candidate for governor. His opponent was his very popular Federalist neighbor,

General Jesse Green of nearby Concord. Green, a lineal descendant of Lord Baltimore, had come to Sussex in 1790, and was destined to become one of the longest serving members of the General Assembly—20 years.² Whether it was the gradual waning of the Federalist Party's power or the extreme popularity of President Monroe's "Era of Good Feelings"—Monroe had been reelected nationally by a nearly unanimous electoral vote, running effectively unopposed—Collins won by the second largest margin since 1800—3,970 to 3,520.³

During the first year of his administration northern Delaware was in a turmoil over a new law passed by the General Assembly whereby a tax of 25 cents was to be placed on people arriving in the state by land or water. The tax, called a transit duty, was to be used to finance a new college in Newark; however, it would be another 12 years before the institution was actually in operation.⁴ The wheels were also grinding slowly in the effort to establish the proposed public school system. Collins's Secretary of State, Willard Hall, was

*Note: The following is a brief overview of the Sussex County bog iron ore industry excerpted from William H. Williams, *Man and Nature in Delaware: An Environmental History of the First State, 1631–2000*, pp. 53-54. Dover, Delaware Heritage Press, 2008: "Although iron mining existed in most areas of Delaware, workable deposits were found in only a few sites. While some iron mining and smelting sites existed in northern New Castle County, particularly in the Iron Hill area only a few miles south of Newark, it was bog iron mining and smelting at the headwaters of certain streams in Sussex County, after the mid-eighteenth century, that exercised the greatest impact on early Delaware's forested landscape. In 1763, or shortly before, Deep Creek Iron Works was established in western Sussex County on a tributary of the Nanticoke River. This furnace, which was probably the first blast furnace in southern Delaware, was situated some three miles north of the present-day village of Concord. Soon afterwards, a handful of other iron works with furnaces was also established in western Sussex, only to be put out of business by the British naval blockade during the American Revolution. . . . After the American Revolution, the iron industry in Sussex made a modest comeback only to have the last furnace, which was located in Millsboro, shut down in 1836."

busy fashioning a plan which would soon be proposed to the General Assembly.

The Brandywine Creek overflowed its banks in Wilmington by 20 feet, breaking dams and damaging the mills along the way.⁵

Collins met an early end when he passed away at the age of 46 in the spring of 1822.⁶ He was buried on the shores of Collins Mill Pond. His mother outlived him by 13 years. Jane, his wife, the third daughter of Governor David Hall, later married Dr. John Carey. When she died in 1837, her body was placed alongside that of her first husband at Collins Pond.

Children of Governor Collins who survived were Theophilus (1807-1857), John, Joseph, Sarah (m. Pennival, then Solomon Prettyman), Catherine, and Martha (m. Curtis Ross).⁷ Theophilus married Mary Ann Elliott of Laurel in 1839 and tilled the Collins Estate until his death. Theophilus's grave marks the third one there at Collins Mill Pond. Mary Ann moved her family to *Rosemont*, Governor Nathaniel Mitchell's former home in Laurel. Her son, John M. Collins (1856-1940), eventually became the owner of the *Rosemont* land and was widely known for his fine horses and agricultural interests on the 150-acre farm.

He married Elizabeth Stevenson (1878-1965). When the original U. S. Route 13 came through Laurel, it was laid through the Collins property. In 1926, Collins donated a part of this land for a state armory which still stands today. In the 1950's, Collins's wife sold *Rosemont* to Mrs. William R. Money. Mary Catherine, John M. Collins's only child, died circa 1980.

Practically all traces of the Collins Estate at the mill pond outside Bridgeville have disappeared. The homestead was destroyed by fire some time after the Civil War. For years, the Governor Collins graves were open to the elements and were in a state of disrepair, hidden in briars and bushes. In 1974, the General Assembly had the grave site restored in addition to having a commemorative stone placed in the Collins burial plot in Laurel Hill Cemetery, Laurel. Finally, a state historical marker was placed alongside Delaware Route 18 at Collins Mill Pond.

During the Bicentennial Celebration, a serving table and chairs dating from the Collins household of the 1820's were placed on exhibition in the Laurel Public Library.

No portrait of Governor Collins is known to exist.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Jeanette Eckman, Editor, *Delaware, A Guide To The First State*, (New York, 1955, 3rd ed.), p. 94; J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Delaware, 1609-1888*, (Port Washington, N. Y./London, 1888), p. 1296. Collins's brothers and sisters were Robert, Priscilla (m. a Rust), Elizabeth (m. Governor Hazzard), Sarah (m. a Ross), Nancy (m. a Polk), and Lovey. As is evident, the Collins progeny as is often true of persons from well-to-do families, married persons of their own socio-economic level.
2. McCarter, J. M. and B. F. Jackson, Editors, *Historical and Biographical Encyclopedia of Delaware*, (Wilmington, 1882), pp. 245-6.
3. Scharf, pp. 306-7.
4. *Ibid.*, 306.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 653.
6. *American Watchman*, April 22, 1822.
7. Charles H. Browning, Editor, *American Historical Register*, (Philadelphia, 1896), Vol. III, pp. 516-8