

David Kimsey Collins: A Rough-Hewn, but Polished Mountain Man

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Grave marker for D.K. Collins (by author)



D.K. and Mattie Franks Collins, c 1880,
(Dawna Carlton and David Collins Huntley)

Like the large stone which marks his final resting place, David Kimsey (D.K.) Collins was a man cut out of mountain granite, worked to an elegant finish, but who could be a little rough around the edges when such was found needful.

D.K. Collins, the youngster

D.K. came from fine mountain stock, the ninth of thirteen children born to Elizabeth Beck and Robert Collins, for whom Mount Collins, Collins Gap and Collins Creek, all in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, are named. He was born on October 8, 1844 at what was then the uppermost home site on the Oconaluftee River, about a half-mile above the mouth of Collins Creek.

D.K.'s parents were founding members of the Ocona Lufta Baptist Church, and Robert was one of two original church deacons. Robert was also involved in the construction and maintenance of the Oconaluftee Turnpike, a toll wagon road which ran "from the top of the Smoky Mountain, down the Oconaluftee river, as far as the house of John Beck."¹ The turnpike was constructed by both whites and Cherokees, with the latter providing the overwhelming majority of the labor, according to records maintained by Robert Collins.

The turnpike was opened for travel about five years before D.K.'s birth, and his father Robert served as the original toll keeper. The legislature authorized tolls ranging from seventy-five cents for a "four wheeled carriage of pleasure" as well as a "six horse wagon", and six and one-fourth cents "for every traveler on horse back." There was a one cent charge for each hog or sheep. As a lad, D.K. certainly didn't watch the world pass by; travel across the Smokies was minimal. In spite of living alongside the Oconalufy Turnpike, he was raised in what was, at the time, one of the more remote areas of the Smokies.

In the late 1850s, Arnold Guyot, a professor from the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), came to the western North Carolina mountains to map and measure elevations of peaks and other features of interest in the area. The measurements were made by mercury barometers – one located at the "upper Robert Collins home" and the other carried by a party composed of Guyot, his guide Robert Collins, and Robert's teenage sons D.K. and Joseph Alexander Collins. Mercury-based thermometers were also required, since pressure imposed by the column of air above it is a function of temperature. Guyot broke a thermometer in the vicinity of a peak whose modern name memorializes the accident – Thermo Knob.



Guyot, with barometer case like that carried in the field (findagrave.com)

Today, the well-maintained Appalachian Trail is traversed by thousands of people each year; vegetative obstacles are not an issue. It was not so in the 1850s. As Guyot noted, the only semblance of trails were bear tunnels through laurel hells.

Four souls – a pair of teen-aged youngsters (were teenagers back then like those of today?) and a matched pair of middle-aged men – not only made their own way through uncharted and incredibly challenging vegetation and terrain, but carried bulky precision scientific instruments and provisions along with them. Meanwhile someone – exactly who, we don't know – faithfully recorded pressure and temperature readings back at the Collins home on a regular basis to provide a reference measurement against which the field data could be compared to allow elevation computation. The only training the Collins home recorder would've had in such matters would have been that provided by the good professor, a French-speaking native of Switzerland. While his written English occasionally bordered on elegant, Guyot's spoken English was reportedly as flawed as his scientific practices were precise.

The entire arrangement was not the sort of thing that one would think ideal for scientific work, but the results were nothing short of phenomenal. Guyot's field-measured, base station-adjusted calculations of peak elevations were so accurate that in multiple cases, his estimates of the 1850s were closer to today's accepted standards than were the USGS estimates of the early 1900s. As a pertinent

example, Guyot reported the elevation of Mt. Collins to be 6,188 ft. The 1912 USGS Mt Guyot quadrangle shows it at 6,255 ft. The accepted modern value matches Guyot exactly: 6,188 ft.

Guyot not only instructed in science at Princeton, he also lectured on spiritual matters at Princeton and Union Theological Seminaries. Both were Presbyterian, well-aligned with Guyot's Swiss raising in the shadow of the Swiss Alps and the light of John Calvin's theology. Regardless of language challenges, the Presbyterian professor and the Baptist backwoodsman clearly hit it off; finding in each other a shared love of God and old mountains not made by hand.

After completing his work, Guyot expressed his gratitude to numerous leading citizens. His warmest and clearly most heartfelt thanks and appreciation were:

“quite particularly that of my excellent friend, Robt. Collins, Esq. of Oconaluftee Valley, for the Smoky Mountains. Mr. Collins placed himself and his sons at my disposal for more than a month and without his intelligent aid I scarcely could have succeeded, as I did, in exploring to my satisfaction that most wild and difficult portion of the mountains of North Carolina.”²

Collins' early adulthood

At the outbreak of the Civil War, D.K. along with brothers John Tatham, Joseph Alexander and Robert Harrison took the part of the Confederacy. Joe was wounded, and Harrison died during the war. Their father, Robert, also died of pneumonia contracted while overseeing construction work for the Confederacy on the Tennessee side of the mountain. D.K. was twice captured by Yankee forces. He also twice escaped.

In the years after the war, D.K. moved from the family's home on Oconaluftee in what was then Jackson County to neighboring Macon. According to his granddaughter, Catherine Pulliam Huntley, he traveled there to continue school which had been interrupted by the war³. In 1870, he and his wife, Martha “Mattie” Franks, were living with her parents, J.D. and Sarah Franks in the Mill Shoal section of Macon County (northeast of Franklin).

Siblings marrying siblings was a common occurrence in that day. D.K.'s younger brother, Andrew Thomas, married the older sister of Mattie Franks, Sarah, and they were living nearby in 1870. As an indication of the respect and affection both brothers had for their father, both D.K. and A.T. had young sons named for their grandfather Robert – double first cousins – by the time of the 1870 census.

Settling in Swain; Business life

In 1871, Swain County was formed from parts of Macon and Jackson. Shortly thereafter, D.K. and family moved from Macon to the county seat of Swain County, Charleston. The county commissioners, who had purchased the town property on the south side of the river from Lucy Ann Cline in 1873, sold lot 5 to Collins on April 6, 1874. This was the second recorded town lot sale, acquired two months after Epp Everett purchased the adjacent lot 9, to the east. The following year, Collins acquired lot 1. The two lots stood on the south side of Main Street, adjacent to the town square and across from where the courthouse stands today. The property was bounded on the west by Gushing Street (now Rector Street) and extended southward to Church Street (now Bennett Hill Street).

It was on these two lots that D.K. Collins built his home, store, and outbuildings. The store was originally a wooden structure, but in 1889, at about the time when Charleston became Bryson City, Collins had a new two-story brick building, 30 feet wide by 100 feet deep, constructed. The store was 16 feet from floor to its varnished chestnut ceiling. The store was described as “the handsomest store west of Asheville” in 1890⁴ and included solid construction features such as granite door and window sills.⁵



D.K. Collins store, on the southeast corner of the square (Bryson City Centennial); Pressed glass vase from the store purchased by Ora Hughes Dougherty (courtesy of Beth Eckstein)

D. K. COLLINS,
DEALER IN
General Merchandise
AND
COUNTRY
PRODUCE.

Customers will find our stock complete, comprising many articles it is impossible here to enumerate, and all sold at moderate prices.

When you have bought \$25.00 worth of GOODS in CASH at

D. K. COLLINS

from the day you take this PUNCH CARD, you get choice of

Nice Line of BOOKS FREE, any of them are worth \$4.00,
besides you have the LARGEST AND BEST

STOCK OF GOODS

to select from, this side of Asheville. Compare our GOODS, get

PRICES, and we will risk RESULTS.

Ads from the 1889 Swain County Herald (left) and 1896 Bryson City Times (right)

With his store located not only at the county seat, but in the immediate proximity of the county courthouse, the majority of the county population would've passed in front of, if not through, the doors of his store.

In addition to the store on Main Street in Bryson City, Collins also owned a store in Yellow Hill (Cherokee). That store was managed by his fellow Oconaluftee native T.I. Hughes from around 1890 until just after the turn of the century,⁶ when Hughes moved to Bryson City and started his own store diagonally across the town square. The Hughes general merchandise store would later become the M.C. Close Hardware and today is N.C. Clampitt Hardware. If there was any sense of competition between Hughes and Collins, it must have been of a friendly sort; Walter Mingus Hughes, son of T.I., worked for Collins in his tanbark operation⁷. Collins' daughter, Minnie, and son-in-law, Wade Pulliam, took over operation of the Cherokee store on a partnership basis in 1910⁸ and remained there until the 1920s.

In 1904, D.K. Collins, G.W. Maslin, S.W. Black, and A.H. Elmore incorporated the Bryson City Bank. Collins, who acquired 40% of the corporation's stock, was named President, an office which he held until his death in 1924. Originally operated out of Collin's store, in 1907 the bank acquired property on the northeast side of the town square⁹ from Lee and Mattie Gibson Marr, bordering on what is now Everett Street, and erected a fine two story brick building. That structure, today occupied by Cork and Bean, was used for banking and law office purposes until the late 1960s. Ironically, and frankly sadly, the D.K. Collins building was torn down and a new structure erected to house the Northwestern Bank, which had acquired the Bryson City Bank in a 1965 merger. The single story building erected to replace "the handsomest store west of Asheville" is now occupied by the Chamber of Commerce.

Community life

Active in civic, political, and church life, D.K. was the charter Worshipful Master of Oconee Lodge 427 at its founding in 1890 and a 32nd degree Mason. In the political realm, he was elected "permanent chairman" of the Democratic Executive Committee of Swain County¹⁰, and served at least one term as Mayor¹¹ of Bryson City.

His involvement in multiple areas of community life and the respect with which he was held is succinctly indicated in an 1877 deed for town lot 32 to Collins from H.P. Brendle, Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners. The deed, which was made to Collins personally, specified that the property was "for the use of the United Baptist Church and public school and free Masons¹²."

Collins did, in fact, erect a multipurpose building. Orene DeBord noted that "About the year 1882 a schoolhouse was begun and when completed was used for Church services", with the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations all using the structure, and "a Union Sunday School with D.K. Collins as Sunday School Superintendent" also was held in the building.¹³

No close-up photo of the structure is known to the author, but the building can be spotted in a pair of early twentieth-century photographs. In one photo taken from the eastern portion of Black Hill in around 1900, a two-story structure with a belfry just west of the current location of the library is clearly visible. A second photo, shown below, was taken from Schoolhouse Hill in the eastern part of the cemetery. Using the combination of terrain shown in the background (cropped from this photo, but visible in both originals) and triangulation, the structure in the upper right portion of the photo was

clearly on lot 32, the one which had been deeded to Collins. In 1889, Collins deeded a portion of the lot to A.B. Allison. In 1900, he sold the balance of the lot and the structure to the Masonic Lodge and the School Committee for \$1500. That deed described the structure as “a brick building consisting of two stories, the lower story being for school purposes and the upper story for the Masonic Lodge” and further noted that there was “a bell and belfry attached” to the building.¹⁴ In 1904, the Swain County Board of Education sold their portion of the ownership to the Masonic Lodge for \$500. The deed noted that the “lot is commonly known as the school house lot.”¹⁵



**View from the BC Cemetery. The photo likely dates to 1910-1920.
Photo courtesy of Mrs. Jean Douthit**

Collins was the Baptist Church Trustee when the central section of the Bryson City Cemetery was sold by Lucy Ann Cline et al in 1884. He was one of four deacons named as trustees (the others being J.S. Elmore, J.G. Thomas and J.M. Welch) when in 1888, T.D. Bryson sold one lot and donated another to the Missionary Baptist Church at Charleston¹⁶. It was on this land, at the corner of Bryson and Collins Streets, that the original First Baptist Church sanctuary was erected. It might be noted here that although no record has been found to validate this, Collins Street was almost certainly named for D.K.

Family life

His first wife, Mattie Franks, died in 1883, having given birth to James Robert and two girls, Minnie and Jennie. In 1890, he married Ellen Sheffey of Alabama.

Like all of us sinners, D.K. stumbled. In 1905, he fathered a child, Russell McLean by his housekeeper, Mattie McLean. Abundant evidence indicates that D.K. did not attempt to shirk responsibility. A family photo acquired by Friends of Bryson City Cemetery member and g-g-granddaughter of D.K., Dawna Carlton, shows D.K. with several family members. Standing close by his side is young Russell. Ironically, after his daughter Minnie and her husband sold the store in Cherokee (a few months after D.K.'s death), it passed through a couple of short term owners before being acquired by Mattie McLean in 1930¹⁷. The property remained in the McLean family ownership for seven decades.

Leftovers

As noted earlier, D.K. served with the Thomas Legion during the Civil War. One of the outfits with which the Legion had engagements¹⁸ was Kirk's Raiders, a notorious group of bushwhackers organized by George Kirk as the 3rd NC Mounted Infantry Regiment. One member of Kirk's band was Robert L.D. Burchfield¹⁹. Burchfield apparently continued his bushwhacking ways after the close of war. Alfred Cline, the earliest marked grave in the BC Cemetery, was "shot down in cold blood....by a band of marauders from Tennessee, known as the Robert Burchfield robbers"²⁰ in 1866.

Burchfield was subsequently convicted of counterfeiting, thanks in part to testimony of D.K. Collins. After enjoying the hospitality of the Albany (NY) federal penitentiary, Burchfield returned to the Swain County area and reportedly threatened both Collins himself and his property. Collins caught Burchfield attempting to break into his granary at around midnight one Saturday night in 1876, almost a decade after the death of Alfred Cline. After Collins hailed him down and asked what he was doing, Burchfield attempted to draw his pistol and shoot him. Although Collins had been a sharpshooting 2nd Lieutenant in the Civil War, those sharpshooting skills weren't required on this occasion. Forewarned and thus forearmed, Collins cut loose with his double-barreled shotgun, promptly terminating the attempted break-in and Burchfield's life²¹. Deeming it justifiable homicide, a grand jury declined to have Collins prosecuted²².

The Burchfield shooting episode brings to mind another shooting episode which drew scant to no attention from the law. It did not escape the eye of the press however. Appearing just above a report in the Swain County Herald report on a five-foot long rattlesnake with ten rattles and a button which had been killed on Noland Creek by A.J. Cline (who brought it to town to show off) was a tale of extreme depredation sponsored by civic, church, political; and community leader D.K. Collins:

"A grand rat killing took place in D.K. Collins barn yesterday. 127 were killed. Eight or ten boys and men led on by Mr. Collins were the slaughterers."²³

David Kimsey Collins, the rough-hewn mountain youngster raised on the upper reaches of the Oconaluftee, grew into a polished man and contributed mightily to Bryson City and Swain County from its founding days until his death in 1924.

We are in his debt.

Cemetery connections

Most of the individuals noted in this account are buried in the Bryson City Cemetery. Immediately on either side of D.K. are his second wife, Ellen and his first wife, Mattie and their son, James Robert. Within 100 feet, and on roughly an eastern course from his grave is his fellow Mason E.M. Scruggs; halfway between them is the third of the three church trustees who acquired the cemetery property in 1884, W.T. Conley. About 20 feet to his southwest is his brother-in-law, Joshua Ammons Franks (brother of Mattie). Some 60 feet further south lie the remains of fellow Oconaluftee native, T.I. Hughes. Eighty feet to the north and a few rows east is his banking partner and successor as bank president, Stanley Black. Lee and Mattie Marr, who sold the bank property to Collins and Black, are buried near the top of the driveway, also within 100 ft of Collins. Alfred Cline, killed by RLD Burchfield's raiders, is 90 feet east, and a bit to the north. His early Charleston Township neighbor, Epp Everett, is buried less than 70 feet to the north.

Acknowledgments

Mrs. Jean Sandlin Douthit, born a couple dozen or so years ago in the southeast corner room of the Entella Hotel which her Fry ancestors operated, a lover of local history and the people who share this place that she calls home, and a member of the Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery, provided the panoramic photo taken from Schoolhouse Hill and personal insights.

Beth Sossamon Eckstein, granddaughter of Ora Hughes Dougherty and daughter of Ora Lee Dougherty Sossamon provided the photo of the beautiful pressed glass vase. Beth recalls her mother saying that the vase cost 50 cents.

Many thanks go to Dawna Carlton, 2-g granddaughter of D.K. who has visited Bryson City only once, but whose family knowledge is outstanding. Dawna, a charter member of the FBCC has, over the course of many years of diligent labor, accumulated an extensive history of the Collins family which she has been exceptionally gracious in sharing.

¹ Chapter XCV, Laws of North Carolina, 1831-32

² Guyot letter to the editor, Asheville News, July 18, 1860.

³ Catherine Pulliam Huntley, *'Neath the Haze of the Smokies*, p 19.

⁴ *The State Chronicle*, June 29, 1890.

⁵ *Swain County Herald*, July 25, 1889.

⁶ Dinah D. Carpenter, "Thomas Irvin Hughes" in *The Heritage of Swain County*, p 186.

⁷ Dinah D. Carpenter, "Walter Mingus Hughes" in *The Heritage of Swain County*, p 185.

⁸ Catherine Pulliam Huntley, *'Neath the Haze of the Smokies*, p 24.

⁹ Swain County Deed Book 30, p 339-342.

¹⁰ *Blue Ridge Enterprise*, Aug 7, 1884.

¹¹ *Swain County Herald*, Mar 14, 1889.

¹² Swain County Deed Book 1, p550.

¹³ Orene DeBord, article on First Baptist Church in *The Heritage of Swain County*, p 45.

¹⁴ Swain County Deed Book 22, p 160-162.

¹⁵ Swain County Deed Book 51, p 496.

¹⁶ Swain County Deed Book 10, p 377-378.

¹⁷ Swain County Deed Book 59, p 254-256.

¹⁸ *North Carolina Troops, A Roster*, Volume XVI.

¹⁹ Military service records, fold3.com

²⁰ *The Charlotte Democrat*, October 9, 1866.

²¹ "End of a Bad Man," *The Wilmington Morning Star*, August 27, 1876.

²² Fall term, 1876, Swain County Superior Court (NC State Archives).

²³ *Swain County Herald*, May 23, 1889.