



Samuel Collins, Stroudsburg resident and art connoisseur.

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Art and tragedy:

The story of Samuel Collins

A forgotten Stroudsburg character

Dan Papa

Stroudsburg has a fascinating history of more than 200 years, full of prominent industrialists, lawyers and doctors, but there are not many eccentric and mysterious characters to be found in our story. When I came across the life of Sam Collins recounted in a New York Tribune article from 1921, I knew I had stumbled upon something unique; a strange chapter almost completely erased from local memory.

The Tribune article is titled "The Seventh Son's Ill Luck Overtook Sam Collins at Last." Collins was born in 1846, the seventh son of a wealthy British family, and the article framed his life around the superstitious belief of a life-long curse. Apparently Sam's father even held a mock funeral for the boy, casting him out of the family for fear of taking on bad luck. The supposed curse is said to have haunted Sam his entire life.

At age 18 Collins left England for America and was a newspaper correspondent during the Civil War. He was later employed at a publishing house in New York City, quickly gaining a reputation as a rare book dealer for wealthy families. Eventually he became a top art dealer and amassed a large amount of wealth, facilitating multi-million dollar transactions. The article claimed he was a dealer for J.P. Morgan, although this fact is reported to be a falsification in other sources.

Collins married Clara Church of New York, and decided to move to Stroudsburg, as the article states, "to live the life of an aristocratic country gentleman." The writer goes on to describe the high standing Collins had in town at that time:

"Stroudsburg will never forget Samuel Collins. He was - any of the older residents tell the story with a flush of pride - the only bona fide art connoisseur who ever settled in Stroudsburg... Whenever things grew dull the town looked to Sam Collins, and Sam Collins always made good."

The main residence of Sam and Clara Collins upon arrival was Harriet Hall, an elegant Victorian house at 807 Main Street, which stood where the YMCA building is today. The house is also referred to as the Jacob Singmaster property, built in 1862. I spoke with Catherine Priest of Mulica Township NJ via

email, whose great-grandfather William Oliver Ike was employed by Collins as the caretaker of Harriet Hall for 31 years. His obituary read: "No man had greater respect from an employer than did William Ike. He was practically a member of the family." William even named his son Samuel Collins Ike, which implies they were indeed treated as family.

Collins then built Churleigh Hall as a summer home for \$100,000. It was a large building sitting atop Godfrey Ridge, overlooking South Stroudsburg, accessible from modern route 191. Churleigh Hall boasted a man-made lake, stables with thoroughbred horses, and a hanging garden. It commanded a 20 mile view of the surrounding landscape. Recently this land was acquired by the Pocono Heritage Land Trust to be preserved from future development.

Sam and Clara settled quite well into Stroudsburg life. Apparently they were painters themselves and gave their work to friends. They contributed liber-

ally to local charities. Sam often traveled for art dealing work. The couple soon adopted a daughter named Lillian. She was often seen being driven around in a pony cart.

It seems around this time the Collins' finances started to run into trouble. Churleigh Hall was converted into Churleigh Inn, a vacationer hotel. Clara Collins opened a beauty parlor on 5th Avenue in New York. In 1902, wind tore off part of the Churleigh Inn roof and damaged an expensively

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frescoed room. A Stroudsburg Times article from March of that year quoted Collins who promised the Inn would still be open for the season on schedule. The article also indicated they had sold and moved from Harriet Hall at this point, living primarily in New York.

It was in the summer of 1904 that tragedy struck the family, when Lillian Collins died under mysterious circumstances. The tribune article stated

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that she died of a gunshot wound, first reported as a suicide, then later as an accident. Upon further digging, a complicated story emerged. From the Allentown Democrat, January 4th 1905:

"The unfortunate close of the promising life of Miss Lillian Collins, the 18-year old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Collins, of Stroudsburg, Monroe County, who died from a pistol shot, self inflicted, late last summer, and which caused much excitement in that community at the time, was vividly recalled last week by the arrest of Mrs. Fannie Lambert and her incarceration in the county jail. On the day the girl committed the deed she was discovered reading a letter, and on being asked the contents by her mother she refused to reveal them and tore the letter to bits. On being reproved for her actions, which any dutiful mother would do, the girl in a fit of rage rushed to her mother's bed room, seized the pistol and fired the fatal shot. The parts of the letter were carefully gathered and placed together, and as a result an investigation was set on foot which resulted in the arrest of Mrs. Lambert. Three prominent merchants went bail in the sum of \$500 for Mrs. Lambert's appearance at next term of court."

More clues from the Reading Eagle: "Mrs. Fannie Lambert was arrested, charged with conspiracy to entice Lillian Collins, 16 years old, from her home."

It seems the incident went unresolved and caused Sam and Clara to leave Stroudsburg permanently. From the Philadelphia Inquirer, March 1905:

"Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Collins, wealthy residents of this town, have announced their determination to leave Monroe county for good and make their permanent residence New York City. The ignoring of a bill by the grand jury in which they were interested is believed to be the real reason for the change of residence. Several months ago Mrs. Collins had Mrs. Fannie Lambert arrested charging conspiracy. It was alleged that Mrs. Lambert tried to persuade their daughter, Lillian, now dead, to leave home. The grand jury yesterday ignored the bill. Before leaving town Mr. Collins said that they would never return here to live, and that the contract which had been awarded for the erection of a \$10,000 mausoleum to hold the remains of their dead daughter would be canceled and the body removed."

I was able to look at the original



Harriet Hall, the home of Sam, Clara and Lillian Collins. The home was built in 1862 by Jacob Singmaster and ultimately was acquired in 1914 by the YMCA. USED WITH PERMISSION FROM MARIE AND FRANK SUMMA



This is a bird's-eye view of Stroudsburg from Churleigh Inn. This post card image is helpful in locating the remains of Churleigh on Godfrey Ridge by following the straight line of Park Avenue from the "Y" at Bryant Street to the top of the ridge. The photo was probably taken from the tower of Churleigh Inn. PHOTO PROVIDED

coroners report of Lillian's death. Robert Gruver, Justice of the Peace, describes the events in detail. Lillian was killed by a single self inflicted shot from a revolver that penetrated her heart. Sam and Clara were both downstairs when the shot was heard upstairs, and they discovered Lillian. As the gun apparently belonged to Clara, Lillian's death was no doubt devastating to her.

Even more humanizing details emerge in a local obituary: "Dr. C.D. Gruver was summoned, he ran his horse but arrived too late, the spark of life had fled and he judged the girl had died within five minutes after the injury...he administered for Mrs. Collins who was in a state bordering on collapse." Regarding Lillian: she was "one who would draw more than passing notice from the fact that she was

very pretty and attractive. She had everything money could procure for her. Mrs. Collins had been her tutor, and the girl showed a quickness and intelligence which was a delight to her parents: She was of a passionate disposition, and at times inclined to be unruly, but was much loved by those who knew her."

What was in that letter that caused Lillian to take such drastic action, or could the shot have been fired accidentally? Who was Fannie Lambert, and why was she trying to convince Lillian to leave home? The census from 1920 shows Fannie as 54 years old, widowed, living at 405 Main St. Stroudsburg, with no listed profession. Her son and daughter were workers at the Woolen Mill.

A grand jury document in the archives states that Fannie Lambert and Harry

Mulackey could not be located to be called into trial, and so no inquiry ever happened. This is what caused Sam and Clara to leave Stroudsburg for good.

In 1908, Sam Collins was arrested in New York for selling fraudulent works of art to Francis Wilson, a comedian. Collins counter sued and the dispute was settled out of court. He was also sued for \$3,500 for selling John Beckley a fake painting alleged to be by the French artist Dupre. Collins was again arrested two years later, accused of misrepresentation by a number of his old wealthy clients. It seems Collins may have been selling fraudulent works of art for his entire career. It is likely around this time that Sam and Clara sold off ownership of the Churleigh Inn to A.C. Gorman to cover these court settlements.

In the courthouse archives I found many court cases brought against both Sam and Clara, most involving debts such as loans and mortgages gone unpaid. In one case, a doctor named Charles D. Gruver sued Clara for \$271.50 for services performed on credit from 1904 to 1907. He presented a list of all visits made, multiple times per month, which suggests Clara had chronic medical or mental health issues. He even traveled to Scranton and New York on occasion to treat her.

One fascinating document was a full transcript of a court case involving a faulty boiler installed at Harriet Hall. Sam Collins himself testified in the case, detailing all of the leaks and faults in the installation of the system, as well as the damage it caused his expensive carpets. He presented himself as a well spoken professional, with an eye for detail and obvious experience with arguing in a legal setting.

Although it seemed Sam and Clara had vanished from Stroudsburg, they reappeared on the scene in 1911. They bought up land in south Stroudsburg for \$30,000, mostly undeveloped farm land at the time, and attempted to sell lots in a planned grid called Collins Court. The plan can be seen published in the Times-Democrat Christmas Number of 1911. Interestingly, the ad states Collins Court is "property of Clara Collins," although S. Collins is the contact name at the bottom.

The plan contained streets with names such as Lillian Avenue, Clara Avenue, Collins Street and Church Street. A stone arch gateway was constructed in memory of Lillian. Ultimately, the development attempt was unsuccessful and Collins Court was sold off to new owners at a sheriff sale. The memorial archway was dismantled. It seems that the roads laid out by Collins became the grid used for modern development. The Collins Street name is the only one which



Churleigh Inn, the summer home of the Collinses. Sam Collins had Churleigh Inn built on top of Godfrey Ridge where they lived during the summer months and then in Harriet Hall during the winter. PHOTO PROVIDED

survives in south Stroudsburg today.

The failure of Collins Court was the end of the family fortune. While living in a Broadway hotel in 1916, Sam Collins attempted suicide by ingesting "170 grains of sulphonal dissolved in hot milk," with \$500 cash in his pocket. He was treated at the prison ward of Bellevue Hospital.

Around this time, friends of Clara Collins arranged to have her sent to a sanitarium under an assumed name. Reportedly the facility was in Had-donfield, New Jersey. I could not find any more information to indicate what happened to Clara at the end of her life.

In 1921, Sam was found unconscious in a boarding house in Newark, New Jersey. He was 75 years old and carried with him 87 cents and a pair of gold cuff links, all that remained of his previous fortune. He died of heart affliction in the city hospital, and was almost buried there at the Potter's Field, until according to the Tribune, the doctor contacted Stroudsburg: "Had they ever heard of a man by the name of Samuel Collins? Had they? The only art connoisseur who ever picked Stroudsburg as a home town!" He was identified and arrangements were made for him to be sent to Stroudsburg by Frederick Kerr, a former friend and art dealer from Newark.

Despite this account, the final resting place of Sam, Clara and Lillian remains a mystery. Every article about the death of Sam Collins implies that he was buried in the Stroudsburg cemetery, at the \$10,000 mausoleum previously built for Lillian. But the

Inquirer article from 1905 suggested the mausoleum contract was canceled before even being built, and Lillian's body was moved. Today, although Stroudsburg Cemetery records point to a designated Collins plot, no grave marker or mausoleum whatsoever is to be found. A probing of the grave site for coffins by cemetery staff proved inconclusive. Are they buried on this plot and the mausoleum built but later removed? Or are they interred somewhere else?

Harriet Hall on Main Street was acquired by Mrs. W. Burnett Easton, who donated the building to the YMCA in 1914. Additions were built and it seems Harriet Hall was in continual use as the YMCA until 1955, when it was replaced by the modern construction.

The Churleigh Inn could have been a sort of legacy left by Collins. In 1920 the Inn hosted a jazz ball that was a major social event for African Americans, attracting guests from out of town, and perhaps helping to establish the Poconos jazz community. At its height the Inn boasted an impressive array of facilities and buildings, as reported by the Stroudsburg Times in 1902: "45 rooms, a ladies parlor, a tiled hall and office, two dining rooms, and an elevator. The grounds contained "100 acres: a circular gateway 100 feet wide, a 60 foot wide roadway, an octagonal summer house." On a plateau sat "a gardener's cottage, two barns, a carriage house and the Moorish well-house containing a four-horse engine." There was "an artesian well bored 189 feet in solid rock...the water

is of the purest...an apple orchard and garden...a lake of 12 acres abundantly stocked." "One passes the ice house... then the gas house and thus gradually ascending 125 feet to reach the hotel and ornamental grounds." There were also hot houses, two fountains, and stables.

Sadly, none of these buildings have survived. The Churleigh Inn annex suffered a fire in 1931. A Pocono Record article indicated that the Churleigh Inn then became the Mountaincrest Lodge in 1936, owned by the Howitt family. The obituary of Benjamin Howitt mentions he ran the business for 32 years, retiring in the late 1960's. I spoke on the phone with Jack Howitt, Benjamin's son. Jack had many memories of the Churleigh property from childhood. He remembered very ornate fireplace mantles in the old section of the modernized building. He recalled the decorative gardens and grounds, as well as the old fountain and the marble stairs. The trees were cut down at the top of the ridge up until the 60's, providing an amazing panoramic view north of Stroudsburg.

As a child Jack witnessed a paint shed dramatically catch fire. He also shared how the Churleigh Inn building met its final fate: in the late 1960's it was bought by developers who didn't want to maintain it, and so it was destroyed in a controlled burn by the fire department.

I visited the Churleigh Inn site recently to see what remains. Large stone stairs are impressively still in place, mossy and almost untouched

by time. A rectangular stone foundation is all that is left of the Churleigh. More modern concrete sheds are slowly crumbling. The once panoramic Poconos view is obscured by decades of relentless growth.

I hope that local organizations in partnership with the Pocono Heritage Land Trust can transform the site into a public park with trails, some historical context, and perhaps even restore the view it was famous for. I believe a simple overlook point would give local residents more pride in the beauty of the surrounding landscape. Many people hike in the Water Gap simply for the stunning view at the top.

For me, even after discovering so much information, the incredible Collins family story raises so many questions: What is the reason for Lillian's suicide? Where is the family buried? Was Sam Collins consciously a con man? Do any of his or Clara's paintings survive, or other artwork they may have owned? Where and when did Clara Collins die? Do any photographs of the family survive? These questions will require a lot of digging, and for those curious, perhaps we can reconstruct a more complete picture of the Collins story. For now, it serves as a reminder that Stroudsburg history contains a multitude of fascinating tales. We should make sure these stories are well preserved for all of us.

Dan Papa is a filmmaker, photographer, musician and writer who grew up on Thomas Street in Stroudsburg and is fascinated by local history.

Bill Weitzmann contributed to the research for this story with assistance from BJ Bachman, Monroe County Archivist, Janis Dahlman, librarian at the Pocono Record, and Amy Leiser, Executive Director of MCHA.

THE PENNSYLVANIA FURNACE WORKS, 1911.

LOTS FOR SALE
COLLINS COURT
Property of CLARA COLLINS, Situated in
South Stroudsburg

Beautiful
Collins Court
\$8.00 to \$30.00 Per Front Foot

Now is the time to purchase this in the highest subdivision of Stroudsburg. The lots to be sold are laid out with entrance driveway, macadamized roads, ten foot concrete sidewalks, sewage lines, with streets ranging from 175 to 60 feet, ornamental trees included in price of every lot. As fast as dirt can fly the sale is being completed. Those who buy \$1000 or more purchase at a comparatively LOW figure. The price will be increased ten per cent after next month. Also is a map of the property. See further particulars apply to.

S. COLLINS, : : Stroudsburg, Penna.

In 1911, Sam Collins purchased half of south Stroudsburg, from Broad Street to present day Huston Avenue and sub-divided it into building lots. Interestingly, he put the enterprise in his wife Clara's name.

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