

D.C. Newman Collins and the “Starting Gun”

By Robert Fridlington

He was a self-taught architect and engineer who built office buildings, opera houses, schools, factories, railroad shops and bridges. He was a hunter and deep-sea fisherman. An accomplished artist and painter, he also played both the piano and cello with various bands and orchestras. In his spare time, for relaxation, he built and raced yachts. As township committeeman and township engineer, he made a lasting impression on the town of Cranford. Yet today, D.C. Newman Collins is almost forgotten.

Born in Haddonfield, NJ, Collins was a licensed engineer and architect in both New York and New Jersey. He was admitted to full membership in the American Society of Civil Engineers in 1901 and to life membership in 1936. After working for construction contractors for a number of years, he ran his own consulting architectural and engineering company in New York for eighteen years.

During his distinguished career, he designed and supervised the erection of the structural steel on many public buildings in New York City, Boston and Philadelphia. Closer to home, he was the architect for two fireproof schools in Cranford (Cleveland and Lincoln), another one in Garwood, and one in Roselle Park.

Collins moved to Cranford in 1906, and he lived for many years at 232 Walnut Avenue. In 1918, he was one of two men chosen to fill vacancies on the Township Committee created by the resignations of L.C. Dilks and Samuel H. Tool who were leaving Cranford to join the Carolina Shipbuilding Corporation during World War I, and he subsequently was elected to a three-year term on the Committee. In 1921, Collins gave up his private practice in New York, resigned from the Township Committee and became Cranford's township engineer.

Of Collins' many contributions to the community, perhaps none is more significant than his part in the river park campaign that led to the creation of the Union County Park System. He appears to have been inspired by Union County Sheriff James E. Warner who was also from Cranford. Warner was determined to save the Rahway River from the pollution that had destroyed so many other beautiful rivers in New Jersey, and during the winter of 1919 he proposed establishing the Rahway as a memorial to the young men who had given their lives during the recent World War.

Collins was quick to add his voice to Warner's proposal and by the summer of that year he was urging county ownership of "our system of streams and mountains and forests." He was not alone. Newspapers in Rahway, Westfield, Cranford and Elizabeth joined in, as did prominent citizens, clubs and civic organizations.

But Collins, who by this time was serving on the township committee, did more than give vocal support; he did something about it. At his own expense, he surveyed and mapped the Rahway River across the county and projected it as a future Union County Memorial Park. In a large (22" x 85") map, Collins traced his proposed park and visualized more than fifty miles of continuous park drives through the county. Dated March 8, 1919, the map is captioned: "Proposed-Union County Memorial Park."

The Cranford Township Committee did its part also. The Committee paid for the printing of a thirty-page booklet, showing the Collins map and containing 23 pages of photographs of the river. Continuing the ideal of honoring the war dead as expressed by Sheriff Warner, Collins wrote: "The Rahway River possesses a multitude of natural attractions, far beyond the reach of money, which

can be made a perpetual monument to those who have remained in France and an endowment of nature to those who have not.”



Mr. Sean Ryan, Landscape Architect, Union County
Division of Park Planning, looks at D.C.N. Collins'
“Starting Gun” map.

The Collins map gave great impetus to the park movement. The dream now had a blueprint. Collins traveled the county exhibiting his map and urging audiences to “think what a splendid country this would be to live in if our system of streams and mountains and forests were owned by the county and restored to their elemental purity.”

Such appeals fell on receptive ears. The Union County Freeholders put the question of the park on the November ballot in 1921. The pro-park voters easily won the day, receiving more than 57% of the vote, despite the fact that Plainfield, Westfield, Fanwood, Scotch Plains, Garwood and New Providence Township (all non-Rahway River towns) voted “no.” Cranford voted yes by an almost four to one margin. 1129 to 384.

Later, Collins presented his map to the Cranford Historical Society, of which he was a charter member and Trustee. Before presenting it, however, Collins added a subtitle just below the original. It read: “The Starting ‘Gun’ of the Union County Park System.” In a note of thanks for the publication of his park booklet he added: “Fired in 1919 by the Cranford Township Committee,” followed by the names of John G. Roach, chairman, Roger C. Aldrich, Edward Everett, D.C. Newman Collins and Hall B. Sims.

Collins continued to be an advocate of a park system, but he found that he had less and less time to devote to this dream. In early 1921, he had become Cranford’s township engineer and in this new capacity he found plenty to keep him busy.

Over the next 12 years, he oversaw the paving of many township streets (with wonderful before and after photos in his annual reports), the construction of new storm sewers and sanitary sewers, the

replacement of street signs, the removal of the tangle of electrical and telephone poles in the downtown, the installation of the town's first traffic lights and many, many other improvements. He also assisted in securing the elimination of the Jersey Central grade crossings and helped design the underpasses. Perhaps no other figure in the township's history left such an indelible mark on the face of the community.

D.C. Newman Collins was a man of many achievements. But his greatest achievement was his map, the map that was the "Starting Gun" of the Union County Park System.