

DR. RICHARD COLLINS
1725-1808

Biographical sketch given at the dedication of the
Revolutionary Soldier Marker
placed on his grave at his homestead at
Collins Mills, near Smithville, N.J., by
General Lafayette Chapter, NSDAR
June 26, 1936

By Josephine S. Gardner
A Great-great-granddaughter

When we attempt the story of the life of a pioneer, we have only a few definite, known facts,--beyond that we must draw on traditions, and even imagination, to fit the known facts to the traditions. But this we have always to guide and help us, only men of strong character and wide influence created traditions that lived beyond their day. Hence the descendants of Dr. Richard Collins take great pride in the fund of legends and traditions concerning his life and character.

When we tie ourselves down to the actually known and proven facts the story is a short one. Yet we know he lived a long and active life, replete with service for others, and that he prospered against the adverse conditions of a new land. This is a long story in itself. We know he was the first physician in this section of South Jersey, and practised over a large territory. His case records, if such had been kept in those days, would have given a cross section of the intimate lives,---the joys and griefs, the comedies and tragedies, the romances, and the sordidness,---of an entire section of South Jersey. In fact all, of what is now Atlantic County, and parts of Burlington, Camden, and Gloucester Counties.

We know that Dr. Collins was a patriot, with love of liberty so strong that it first sent him across the sea to this new land, and then made him fight for the freedom of the new country of his adoption.

As to the definite, fixed facts, Richard Collins was born in Ireland, May 1st, 1725. While still a young man, but after he had become a physician unusually well educated for his time, he came to West New Jersey. Here he took up a large grant of land on which he established his home, and built a mill.

Personal description calls him a "giant" of great intellectual and moral force, and of positive character. But with all his strength of character, he had the true Irishman's adaptability to his surroundings, together with a rare characteristic of that day - religious tolerance.

These qualities made it possible for him to live in friendship and favor in a Quaker community, though he had been reared as a Roman Catholic. For a time he even adopted the dress and speech of his Quaker neighbors.

So imagination pictures a very tall, very erect, rawboned Irishman in Quaker garb, going with force and precision about his daily tasks of healing the sick and building a business. In his day medicine was not a paying profession, and if his family was to be well reared and educated, it was necessary that business take this burden from science. Once having taken up his tract of land and established Collins' Mills, in typical pioneer fashion, Dr. Collins settled down until the end of his long career, quite content with the place he had carved out for himself in this new land. He died June 17th, 1808, at the age of 83 years.

In 1759, some time after he arrived in America, he married Sarah Griffith, of Pennsylvania. She was ten years his junior, but even so preceded him to that far country beyond to await his coming for seven years.

Five children were born of their union. One little girl died in infancy. Three sons and a daughter lived to maturity and on to a ripe age. All four married and left families. So today there are many descendants of Dr. Collins, but, so far as I know, not one of his outstanding force of character or physical strength. The eldest son, Matthew, was born in 1764. He spent his life in West New Jersey, became a famous surveyor of his day, and raised a family. John, born

in 1769, was one of the founders of Methodism in America. In 1803 he moved to Ohio and took up land there. He was noted for his eloquence and zeal as a preacher. No history of Methodism is complete without its chapter on the life and work of John Collins. Levi, born in 1772, became a prosperous farmer and land owner, remaining on the homestead, and operating the mills. He too reared a family here. Alice, born in 1766, married Abel Scull, of Scullville, and became a good mother of fine sons and daughters. Careers for women were unknown in her day, so we have no way of knowing whether Alice shared the unusual traits of character and strength of moral and mental force shown by her father and brothers.

When the Revolutionary War broke out, Dr. Collins, being an Irishman and a patriot, could not stay out of a good fight for a good cause. So, although fifty-one years of age, we find him enlisting as a private, but tradition tells us that he fought in the ranks by day, and patched the wounded and healed the sick as a physician at night after fighting stopped. And this story is in keeping with the man as we know him. Can't you just see the tall straight Irishman carrying his gun by day, and then quietly and tenderly stooping over the stricken ones when night fell, carrying comfort and healing to those who had fallen during the day. And don't you thrill with pride in the fighter, and thrill with pride for the physician, who did not let the fight interfere with the healing of the wounds, nor yet let the physician deter the fighter?

There are not many known facts and figures. A date of birth and a date of death, an enlistment in the Revolutionary Army, a marriage date, the names of children and dates of their births. Yet written between these lines is the story of a long, useful, active and influential life; a strong, unusual character, a successful business man in a pioneer world, a good physician, with a religious tolerance rare in his day and generation; and a record of the respect and love of his fellow men, so that he walked erect with pride until the day of his death.

We are told that Dr. Collins boasted that he had reared one son a Quaker, one son a Methodist, and one son a Universalist; adding that some day he would take a short cut, and beat them all to heaven. But at the last he adopted the views of his Methodist son, and died in that faith.

A good life; a good fight for the right cause; financial and scientific success; a fine family that were a credit to the parents and to the new world in which they lived,---no life story could be more complete, not more worth while to the man who lived it, or to those among whom he lived. God rest his soul in peace forevermore.

[Sketch provided by courtesy of Patty Luthy <pattyluthy@yahoo.com>, Nov. 2003].