

The History & Influence of T. J. Collins & Son Architectural Firm in Staunton, Virginia

Perhaps no single person influenced Staunton's physical appearance more than T. J. Collins. From 1891 to 1911, Collins designed and remodeled over 200 buildings Staunton and many others in Virginia, including Harrisonburg, Lexington, Waynesboro, and Orange County. After retiring, his son Sam went on to design and remodel hundreds of buildings in the Staunton area and beyond until his own retirement in the 1950s. Joseph Johnson, grandson of T. J., currently runs the family firm and in 1997 donated the Collins' drawings and historic support materials to Historic Staunton Foundation.

In 1889, a real estate boom hit the Shenandoah Valley and although it collapsed less than four years later, the Staunton Development Company was formed as a speculative venture in 1890. While the company also failed, its formation had a lasting effect on the town by bringing Thomas Jasper Collins to town as a draftsman. When the company folded, Collins and a fellow architect named Hackett joined together and opened their own architectural offices. Hackett left the practice in 1894, and Collins' son Will joined the firm. T. J. Collins & Son received a number of prestigious commissions at the turn of the century, including the walls and gatehouse for Thornrose Cemetery, St. Francis Catholic Church, Augusta County Courthouse, the C & O Train Station, and other prominent commercial and residential structures.

Collins' prolific work during a time of economic vitality greatly affected the town's appearance. He was familiar with major architectural journals of the period such as American Architect and Building News and Brickbuilder. Collins was also familiar with the work of A. J. Downing, H. H. Richardson and other nationally known architects of the late 1800s. His library and reference materials provide a glimpse into the diverse styles and trends of the period. Collins incorporated these influences into his own style and created variations on popular styles of the times, such as the Beaux Arts, Chateausque, Second Empire, and others. His works in Staunton shows how one local architect reacted to these varying influences and how they affected his practice and design. This in turn affected the cityscape of Staunton, where many buildings have a unique style, unusual for a small town. He was the quintessential late-nineteenth century architect, experimenting freely with the myriad of styles often collectively labeled "Victorian".

T. J.'s son Sam joined the practice in 1906 and continued the family firm after his father's stroke and subsequent retirement in 1911. Sam retired in the 1950s, after designing or remodeling hundreds of local commercial and residential buildings himself. He was well known for his excellent execution of the Colonial Revival style and Gothic Revival churches throughout the state; but like his father, Sam enjoyed experimenting with a variety of popular styles including Spanish Colonial and Prairie style. Many, if not most, of the Collins-designed structures remain as reminders of an important architectural legacy in Staunton and as a reflection of architectural design from the late 1800s through the mid-1900s.