

HENRY ARTHUR “AXEL” COLLIN '18 Marble Mogul

Logan M. Cheek, '60

Henry Arthur “Axel” Collin ME '18 was born in Revere, Massachusetts¹ on September 2, 1897, but was moved by his parents to Plattsburgh, NY, at or before the age of three. They rejoined as a family in 1905, and he grew up and prepped for Cornell at Plattsburgh High. Axel was the son of Hans Cornelius Collin and his wife Anna, both Norwegian immigrants. The father was a sailor for the Champlain Transportation Company.

At Cornell, Axel was president of the Intercollege Athletic Association (which managed sports teams and activities between and among the then four undergraduate colleges plus the law school, served as treasurer of the College Association, and was a member of the Adirondack and Rifle Clubs. He held Cornell national and NY State scholarships. His days on the Hill culminated with his election to the Tau Beta Pi engineering honorary society.



After graduating from Cornell, and at the time of his registration for the draft on June 1, 1918, and from his later service papers, he was inducted as a private into the Army Air Signal Service on June 13, 1918, and trained as a machinist at the US School of Military Aeronautics at Cornell. On October 16, 1918, he completed that training, and was assigned to the Naval Auxiliary

Reserve in New York for duty. Two weeks later, he was detached to the USS Texan for duty. Four days after the USS Texan was returned to North Atlantic duty, he was reassigned to the Navy Steam Engineering School at Hoboken. On February 6, 1919, he was commissioned as an ensign in the US Naval Reserve, and discharged four days later.

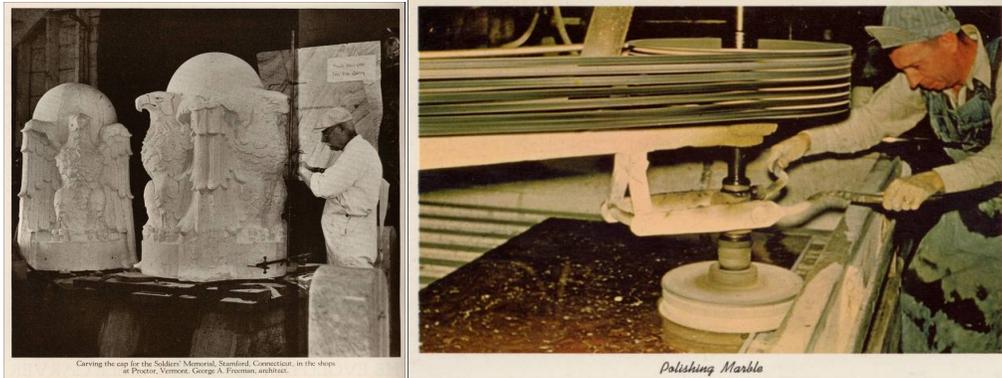
As John Milton concluded his sonnet *On His Blindness*, “They also serve who only stand and wait”.

1920 found him working at the Vermont Marble Company in Proctor village, Rutland, Vermont, as a mechanical engineer. That would be his lifetime career.

In the late 19th and early twentieth century, Vermont Marble became the largest marble company in the world, supplying very large carved architectural marble and granite for major public buildings and bridges, and for the rest of us, tombstones. Probably the major project during Axel’s career with them was the construction of the United States Supreme Court building in Washington (in 1935) whose construction had been championed and quarterbacked by US Chief Justice William Howard Taft. Other major undertakings included supplying the marble for the USS Arizona Memorial, the West Virginia State Capitol, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and the Washington Monument. If you see a public building in America today, and it is made of marble, and was built before 1960, our Axel probably has something to do with it. Especially when visiting Washington, or in the case of our alumni practicing law, if you perchance happen to argue a case before the US Supreme Court.



¹ US Census, 1910: Plattsburgh, NY April 14, 1910.



Marble carving and polishing at Vermont Marble in Proctor, Vermont. Gives a very different, indeed, sublime meaning to the term, “hand job”.



Some great American public landmarks, brought to you by Vermont Marble ... and Henry Arthur Collin, its chief engineer, general manager, and superintendent

I recall well studying their operations as a graduate student at MIT in 1960-1961, under Professor Frederick Lesieur. Lesieur was a protégé of Joseph Scanlon, another MIT professor, who had pioneered a concept of labor management workplace cooperation, with bonuses paid for productivity improvements. Vermont Marble was ripe for something new, and the approach worked well under the leadership of Redfield Proctor, grandson of the company’s founder. The challenge was that the work was dangerous (from being around all the marble dust), required highly skilled artisan carvers, with customers (particularly for public buildings) often unwilling to pay for, and American laborers were unwilling to take low wages in a highly cyclical business for what in many cases was more of an art or craft of hand carving architectural columns, lintels, and trim for public buildings and monuments. As a result, much of the carving labor had to be imported from the marble quarries around Pisa, Italy, where the necessary skills had been honed since Roman times, and had been the source of the marble used by Michelangelo. But the arrival of the Italian carvers triggered an outrage from the Congress, the labor unions, and the minorities about using foreign workers for work that should be reserved (but wasn’t getting and probably couldn’t be done) by American master stone masons – since for the most case, they didn’t really exist.

The immediate problem was that the company wanted and needed to change. Specifically, they wanted to sell the company owned marble cottages (hovels) previously provided free to their workers, who were mostly immigrants from 23 countries. The whole town struck me as surreal: I remember it as it a town built of marble: not just public buildings, bridges and drinking fountains, but houses, sidewalks, even some streets. It certainly was different, and I do hope the place hasn’t suffered too much and become dissolved from acid rain.



In Proctor, marble is everywhere.
Even the marble high school, where Axle's wife Mila taught.

Had I known of Axel being Pi Kappa Alpha, and been able to break bread with him, I would have aced my trip report back in Cambridge.

Axel remained with them for his entire career, first as a mechanical engineer, then as their chief engineer, then as their general manager, then as superintendent first of the marble operation, then as superintendent of their Callahan Can Machinery Company. His wife, Mila Adele Hinds (1898-1969) was a public school teacher at the Park Avenue and Adams Schools. They had six children: a daughter Mila, who died at birth in 1921, a son Malcolm Strawn (1922-2002); a daughter Carol Gay (1924-1939); a son Henry (1928-1987), a son Hans Christian (1928-1940) and a daughter Mary (1941-2000).² Malcolm was a Navy Lieutenant commander in World War II, and an Annapolis graduate. Henry Jr., prepped at Deerfield, and was also a US Naval Academy graduate in 1950, where he was into lacrosse and boxing, followed by a 21 year career in naval aviation.

Axel died just past his ninetieth birthday in November, 1986 in Morrisonville, Clinton County, NY, where he was living with Malcolm. Even though he lived to ninety, with the exception of Malcolm, all the family predeceased him by many years, in three cases at birth or during childhood. In reviewing their death certificates, I was struck by the dominance of upper respiratory diseases as the cause of death, probably from a life in an environment of all that marble dust.

With the exception of Malcolm, all are buried at the Saint Dominic Cemetery in Proctor, Rutland County, Vermont – their graves marked by white marble tombstones, and near the white marble church, built in 1925, early in Axel's career there.



² Find-a-Grave 79995103