

From Algiers to the Moon

Jeremiah Bernard Collins (born in County Cork, Ireland), a grocer of Algiers, Louisiana, had the distinction of not only being the brother-in-law of New Orleans' longest-serving mayor, Martin Behrman (October 14, 1864 – January 12, 1926), but was also the grandfather of Michael Collins (October 31, 1930 – April 28, 2021), an American astronaut who travelled to the Moon. Collins, who died this April at age 90, flew the historic Apollo 11 command module *Columbia*, circling the Moon in 1969 while his two crewmates, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, had the honor of making the first crewed landing upon the Moon's surface.



Just a few weeks after the Moon landing, a wreath is placed at the tomb of Michael Collins' grandparents in St. Patrick Cemetery No. 2, Times-Picayune, September 8, 1969.

When Jeremiah died on September 5, 1911, at age 61, he was described in the *Picayune* as "a pioneer merchant of Algiers" and one of the "Foremost Adopted Sons" of the Fifth District. For twenty-five years he "conducted a grocery store at the same corner, by square dealing and close attention to duty". His sons and grandsons would live their lives by those same principles.

Jeremiah Collins came to New Orleans by way of Cincinnati, Ohio, where he joined the Union Army during the Civil War, but "never smelt the powder of battle," he said. The "surrender came while his regiment was marching to battle, and he was mustered out of the service." He was just a teenager at the time.

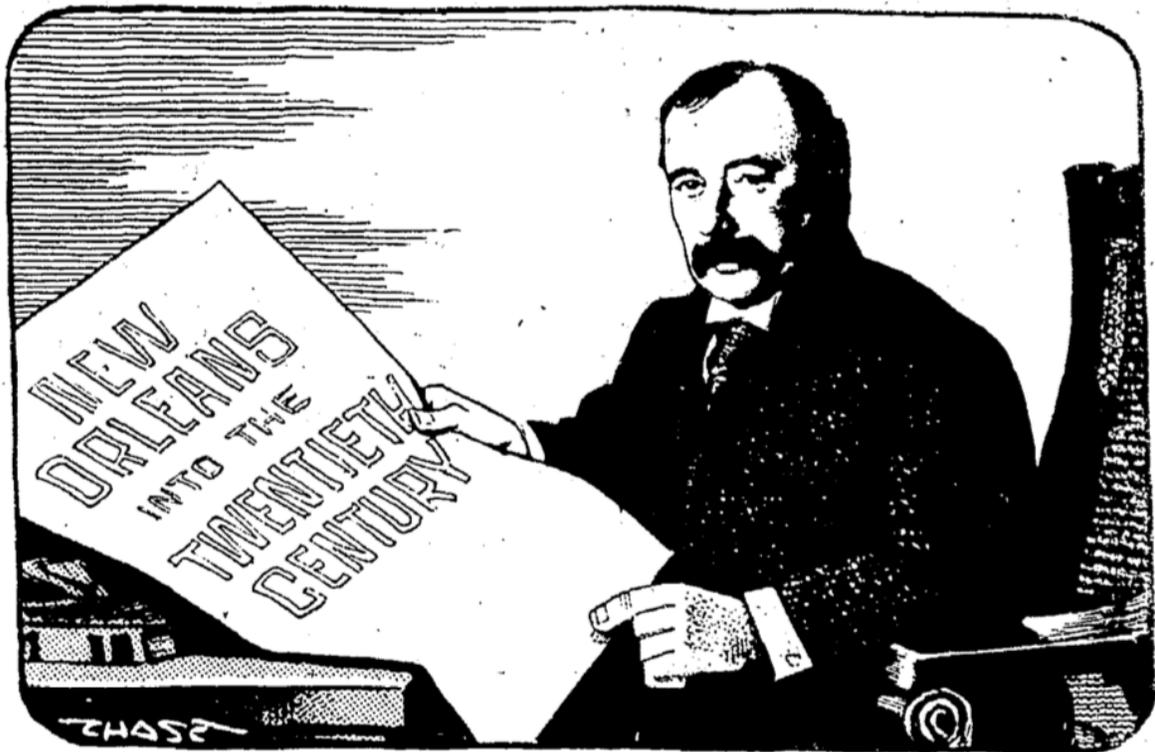
After making his way to the Crescent City, Jeremiah Collins became a business partner with James Lawton in "a merchandise store on the Lower Coast", where he was "successful there for many years". He eventually married his boss's daughter, Kate Lawton.



Martin Behrman, Mayor of New Orleans, 1904-1920 and 1925-1926

Jeremiah and Kate moved across the river to Algiers (on the West Bank of the Mississippi River in Orleans Parish), where opportunity was ripe for a hard-working Irish couple. The railroad had arrived there in 1853, later linking Algiers to the Eastern Seaboard and the West Coast, with the railroad yards and repair shops employing up to 4000 men, many of Irish descent. There, near the terminus of the Southern Pacific Railroad, the Collins family ran a dry goods store, with a pub in the rear. Their eleven children would work there too, serving food and beer to the railroad workers.

Another couple who had eleven children together was Mayor Martin Behrman and his wife, Julia Collins (Jeremiah's sister), who he married in 1887. Sadly though, only two of their children, Helen May Behrman and William Stanley Behrman, reached adulthood.



Drawing by John Chase

Mayor Martin Behrman, by cartoonist John Chase

Martin Behrman, as mentioned earlier, was an American Democratic politician and the longest-serving mayor in New Orleans history. Born in New York City to German-Jewish immigrants in 1864, the City's future mayor was brought to New Orleans by his parents as an infant just after the Civil War, where he, too, had an Algiers connection.

Behrman's father, Henry, a cigar maker, died when Martin was very young and his mother, Frederica, who operated a drygoods and novelty stall at the French Market, died when Martin was only twelve. The orphaned Martin had to eventually drop out of school and find employment, which he secured at various groceries and other retail companies, working his way up from cashier to salesman. During this period, he moved across the river to Algiers where he would live for the rest of his life. His residency there began when he became clerk for an Irish-owned Algiers grocery-saloon at the age of 14. Later, from the front room of his Algiers cottage at 228 Pelican Avenue, he is said to have run the City of New Orleans.

The young Behrman became affiliated with the powerful Regular Democratic Organization during Francis T. Nicholls' 1888 campaign for governor.

He rose up through the political ranks, benefitting greatly from the support of the Choctaw Club, founded by Democrats in 1873 along the lines of the famous Tammany Hall of New York, even to the extent of both choosing Indian names for their powerful political organizations. Behrman was deputy city assessor from 1888 to 1892, clerk of the New Orleans city council from 1892 to 1896, delegate to the Louisiana state constitutional convention in 1898, member of the board of education from 1892 to 1906, and state senator in 1904.

Behrman's tenure as mayor was almost 17 years, beginning in the years 1904 to 1920. After serving four consecutive terms, he was defeated in a close race by reform candidate Andrew J. McShane. Behrman returned to win a fifth term with the campaign slogan "Papa's Coming Home", serving from 1925 to 1926, but he died less than a year into his fifth term.

Although many found his political machine corrupt, his administration carried out many important improvements in city services and infrastructure, especially in the area of streets, sewage, water and drainage systems, public schools and the port. The Public Belt Railroad began operation in 1908 with the purpose of giving the major railroads "uniform and impartial" access to the Port of New Orleans, and in 1912 the City Charter brought about the city council's adapting a commission form of government. Though patronage powered his machine, the popular mayor's personal life was scandal-free.

Most memorably, it was during Behrman's administration that American soldiers went "Over There" to fight in World War I. But "Over Here", the Storyville red-light district was closed for business in 1917, upon order from the U.S. Navy. The city strongly protested and Mayor Behman famously remarked:

"You can make it illegal, but you can't make it unpopular."

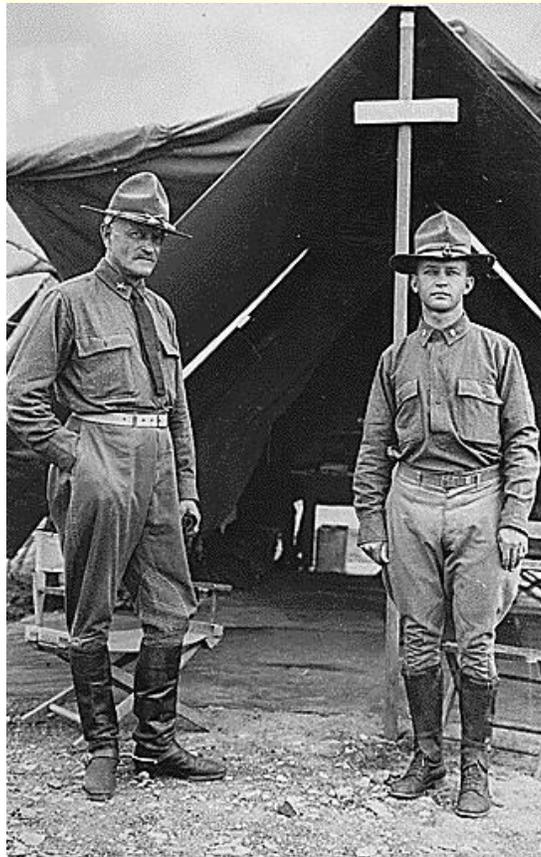


From a 1906 "Blue Book", Storyville's "guidebook to sin", cleverly co-opting the motto of England's Order of the Garter, which translates to "Shame on anyone who thinks evil of it"

On the military side, Jeremiah and Kate Collins had two sons who entered West Point. Their first-born son, named for Kate's father, James Lawton Collins, became General John J. Pershing's personal aide during World War I.

GEN. PERSHING PUTS FOUR ORLEANIANS ON STAFF FOR WAR

**Captain James Lawton Collins
to Be His Personal Aide
at Battle Front.**



*1916 photograph of General John J. Pershing
with then Lieutenant James Lawton Collins,
father of astronaut Michael Collins*

Young James Lawton Collins (born in Algiers) was a fit, athletic young officer who was very good with horses and skilled on the polo field. It was for these and other talents that he came to the attention of General Pershing. Being an excellent judge of horses, James was tasked with selecting a new mount for the general to ride.

Polo is said to be the oldest recorded team sport in history (if one discounts the activity that once took place in New Orleans' Storyville), with the first matches being played in Persia over 2500 years ago. British officers revived the game in 1862, introduced it into England in 1869, and in 1876 imported it to the States by American sportsman James Gordon Bennett. The U.S. Army would adopt polo after World War I as a promoted activity in order to improve "physical fitness, teamwork and combativeness".



James Lawton Collins (1882 - 1963) J. Lawton Collins (1896 - 1987)

James Lawton Collins had enrolled at Tulane, but when his uncle (by marriage), Martin Behrman, was asked by a local member of Congress if there was a bright young man who could "stay the course" at West Point, young Collins was recommended and he readily accepted. His

brother, Joseph Lawton Collins also attended West Point, and both became generals. They each had "Lawton" as their middle name.

James Lawton Collins (December 10, 1882 – June 30, 1963) was a major general in the U.S. Army and father of Major General Michael Collins, USAF Reserve (ret.) and Apollo 11 astronaut, as well as Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, Jr. James' brother, General J. Lawton Collins, known as "Lightning Joe", served as Army Chief of Staff during the Korean War.

James Lawton Collins married Virginia Stewart and later served as Defense Attaché to the Kingdom of Italy in Rome from 1928 to 1932. Their son and future astronaut Michael was born in the Eternal City in 1930.



Astronaut Michael Collins

Like his father and uncle before him, Michael Collins also graduated from the United States Military Academy, but instead joined the United States Air Force and flew F-86 Sabre fighters in France. After being accepted into the USAF Experimental Flight Test Pilot School in 1960, he graduated from the Aerospace Research Pilot School (Class III). In 1963 Collins was selected as part of NASA's third group of 14 astronauts. His first spaceflight was on Gemini 10 three years later, followed by the historic Apollo 11 manned space mission to the Moon

in 1969. Retiring from NASA in 1970, Collins became Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs under Nixon and quit, he said, before he got "gout and a faintly British accent". A year later, he became Director of the National Air and Space Museum and stepped down from that position in 1978 to become undersecretary of the Smithsonian. Collins completed the Harvard Business School's Advanced Management Program in 1974 and wrote his excellent biography the same year, *Carrying the Fire: An Astronaut's Journeys*. He became vice president of an aerospace company in 1980, and later started his own consulting firm

Michael Collins' peripatetic military childhood took him to Oklahoma, New York, Puerto Rico and Virginia. He was educated at St Albans boys' school in Washington, D. C., before attending West Point. An Episcopalian, while in France he married Patricia (Pat) Finnegan (d. 2014), a Catholic from Boston. Born in Rome, Italy, Michael Collins died in Naples (Florida, that is) April 28, 2021.



Apollo 11 crew, with Michael Collins in the center

In an interview in 2009, Collins said that one of his greatest fears on the Apollo 11 mission was the safety of Armstrong and Aldrin. He was deeply concerned that if the two astronauts perished on the Moon, he would be forced to return to Earth alone as the mission's sole survivor, an unimaginable role to play.

Fortunately, his two crewmates returned safely and, with all three soon back on *terra firma*, the intrepid lunar explorers were honored with a New York ticker tape parade on August 13, 1969. In 2011, the crew was also awarded in the Capitol Rotunda the highest civilian award that can be received in the United States, the New Frontier Congressional Gold Medal.

Michael Collins, once called "the loneliest person in the world", did not agree with that categorization. "I've got the world in my window," he said, having snapped a photograph of the lunar module with the Earth in the background (i.e., all of humanity, save himself). He was the second person to orbit the Moon alone, one of only 24 persons to fly to the Moon (which he orbited thirty times) and the fourth person (and third American) to perform a spacewalk, as well as the first person to have performed more than one spacewalk.

Very large steps for mankind, steps that began in Algiers, Louisiana.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"From Algiers to the Moon"
Ned Hémard
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