

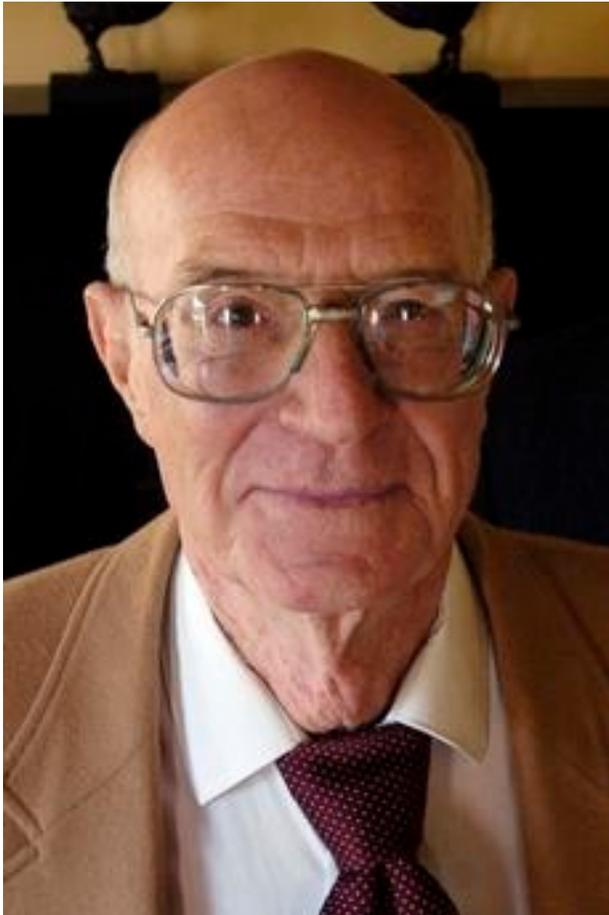
# Father of community college system dies

Local attorney worked to establish opportunities through education

By Ben Sheroan

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The attorney whose dream gave birth to Kentucky's community college system died Monday after a bout with cancer. James M. Collier of Elizabethtown was 92.



A native of Crab Orchard in Lincoln County, Collier's remains will be interred there following cremation. A public memorial service is being planned locally for mid-October.

In 1956, shortly after opening a law practice in Elizabethtown, Collier came up with the idea of asking the state to develop a four-year liberal arts college in Hardin County. He championed the idea among community and business leaders by conducting more than 200 informational meetings.

"I had a lot of people who said, 'You're crazy for aspiring to this,'" he said in a 2006 interview. "But no one was against me. If they were, they stayed in the closet."

In a recorded interview for the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral

History, Collier described state political influences that were part of pursuing the college dream.

He worked on behalf of Gov. Bert Combs' campaign and the idea found enthusiastic support although it eventually developed in a different form. His four-year university proposal gave birth to a community college network.

"My surmise is that they figured out this would be a popular issue in Kentucky. And I feel like they went to other communities and discussed this situation with

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them; because when we got the community college system, we had several on the board, rather than just the one in Elizabethtown,” Collier said. “Although we did get the first one here in Elizabethtown when we started the program. Well, we were elated over the fact that we had got this commitment.”

Collier would work with legislators in drafting the enabling legislation for the community college system, which passed the General Assembly in 1962 but without funding. Financing came under Gov. Ned Breathitt, Collier said.

The first building in what is now the Kentucky Community and Technical College System was built in Elizabethtown. The University of Kentucky managed the two-year schools in those days and Collier considered their support to be less than enthusiastic.

While willing to construct the buildings, Collier said UK leaders said the communities must provide the land. He helped establish the North Central Education Foundation, which raised the money to buy 227 acres of farmland. About 55 acres were deeded to UK for the community college.

“It forever changed the complexion of this community,” said Al Rider, who heads Kentucky Community Foundation, which succeeded the NCEF.

The foundation eventually provided property for the vocational-technical school that eventually was merged with the community college to form Elizabethtown Community and Technical College. Its property also provided land for the U.S. 31W Bypass and the Hardin County Public Library.

“He was about providing opportunity for people to improve themselves,” Rider said. “He thought of education as the best way for people to improve themselves.”

In addition to his community involvement, Collier operated a successful law firm and co-founded Collier Title Services, a leading title research firm.

Before opening his law practice, Collier worked briefly as an instructor at Baylor University, Mercer College and Campbellsville College. He also taught government classes at ECC and pursued a lifelong passion for history.

“He loved to talk politics and history. We spent many hours talking on those subjects,” said Jerry Coleman, who was a student in one of Collier’s ECC classes and eventually became his law partner. “He was very, very knowledgeable. He really was quite a scholar in that regard.”

Collier, who practiced law in Elizabethtown for 52 years, attended the University of Kentucky and graduated from its law school. He earned a doctorate from Rutgers on the G.I. Bill after his military service in World War II.

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He is survived by three children, James M. Collier III of Lexington; Sara Pitney of Vertrees and Susan Collier of Lexington. He was preceded in death by his wife, Nancy Melba Bailey Collier, who died in 2009.

Coleman said he came to regard Collier as a father figure.

"I'm deeply saddened by his death," Coleman said Tuesday. "He was the greatest man I ever knew."

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