



**COLLINS C. DIBOLL**

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*a biographical sketch*

THE COLLINS C. DIBOLL PRIVATE FOUNDATION



**COLLINS CERRÉ DIBOLL, JR.**

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*1904–1987*





## FOREWORD

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COLLINS DIBOLL *was a very well liked man in his hometown of New Orleans. A lot of people knew a lot about Collins, his prominence as an architect, his penthouse apartment atop his Holiday Inn hotel, his love of good food, good friends, and good times. While he was living, though, people didn't know a lot about Collins' philanthropy.*

*He was very private about his giving during his lifetime, so perhaps many people, even those who knew him well, were surprised when he left the bulk of his estate to form the Collins C. Diboll Private Foundation at his death in 1987. Since that time, Collins' foundation has distributed more than \$13 million to his charities. As his trustees, we came to realize that, today, far more people are aware of Collins Diboll's philanthropy than of Collins' life as a man.*

*Collins didn't prepare very well to have a biographical sketch written about him posthumously. He didn't leave diaries or memoirs or even very good files. However, with Dr. Nicholas Bloom, Associate Professor of History at New York Institute of Technology, we offer a biographical sketch of Collins Diboll himself.*

*Now people who never knew Collins will have some feeling for the kind of man he was. We hope they will also see that a great guy like Collins can do some pretty great things for the world in which he lived.*

*New Orleans, Louisiana*

*April 30, 2005*

THE COLLINS C. DIBOLL PRIVATE FOUNDATION

*Donald W. Diboll, Paul T. Westervelt and David F. Edwards, Trustees*



**C**OLLINS CERRÉ DIBOLL, JR, born to Collins Cerré Diboll and Mary Jesse Diboll on June 20, 1904, spent his youth in a comfortable but not pretentious home on Jefferson Avenue in the Uptown section of New Orleans. The Diboll family may not have been rich, but it was already prominent in civic affairs. The family could also look with great pride to a number of distinguished ancestors.

Collins C. Diboll Jr.'s paternal great grandfather, for whom he had great admiration, was Dr. Joseph Slemons Copes (1811-1885), a graduate of Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia and a cotton farmer and broker. Copes became a leading figure in New Orleans both before and after the Civil War in sanitary reform and medical treatment (particularly vaccines) to control diseases such as smallpox, yellow fever, cholera and typhoid that wreaked havoc upon the city's population during the nineteenth century. Dr. Copes was also a leading figure in the establishment of public education in Louisiana and nationally one of the founders of the American Medical Association. In New Orleans he became a Presbyterian elder and like many of his generation supported the growing Sunday school movement that aimed to spread Christian ideals and acculturate growing



immigrant populations. The Collins C. Diboll Private Foundation, inspired by Dr. Copes' achievement and Collins' admiration, has created the Copes Chair in Epidemiology at Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

Collins C. Diboll (1868–1936), Collins' father, was a partner in one of New Orleans's leading architectural firms of the early twentieth century, Diboll and Owen (known also as Diboll, Owen, and Goldstein when Moise Goldstein was part of the firm). Buildings of note completed by the firm include the United Fruit Company Building, Notre Dame Archdiocesan Seminary, the much loved and admired Academy of Sacred Heart complex on St. Charles Avenue (1900), the Prytania Street Presbyterian Church (1901), the administration buildings at St. Stanislaus School in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi (1904 but destroyed by Hurricane Camille in 1969), the New Orleans Public Library at Lee Circle (1905 but now demolished) and the Warren dormitories on the Tulane University campus (1927). The firm specialized in the eclectic styles of the early twentieth century, showed a great sensitivity to the needs of clients and sites, and made great and lasting contributions to the urban fabric of New Orleans.

Not only was Collins' father an accomplished individual, but his mother had a reputation as a talented singer and had performed at the 1884 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition held on the site of what is now Audubon Park. Collins was very close to his mother and lived with her on Jefferson Avenue until she passed away. His sister, Frances, was a fine



pianist. The Collins C. Diboll Private Foundation has endowed a music scholarship at Newcomb College in honor of his sister.

Collins attended a variety of schools including public grammar school, a prestigious, military style school on St. Charles Avenue known as Rugby Academy, and also the Gulf Coast Military Academy. After com-

pleting secondary education he attended Tulane University where he studied architecture (then part of the School of Engineering). Collins' father, as might be expected, hoped that Collins would follow in his footsteps and was disappointed with his early, and initially mediocre, performance at Tulane. Collins refocused on his studies (including retaking a mandatory "structures" class at the University of Wisconsin after he had failed Tulane's notoriously difficult version of the course) and did graduate in 1926. While at Tulane, Collins met his future partner, Jack Kessels, and they developed a strong friendship. Kessels had come from Holland (and a successful merchant family) to study in the United States and stayed longer than planned. Kessels married a Newcomb student and showed great talent as an illustrator and designer that led him to select architecture as his major.

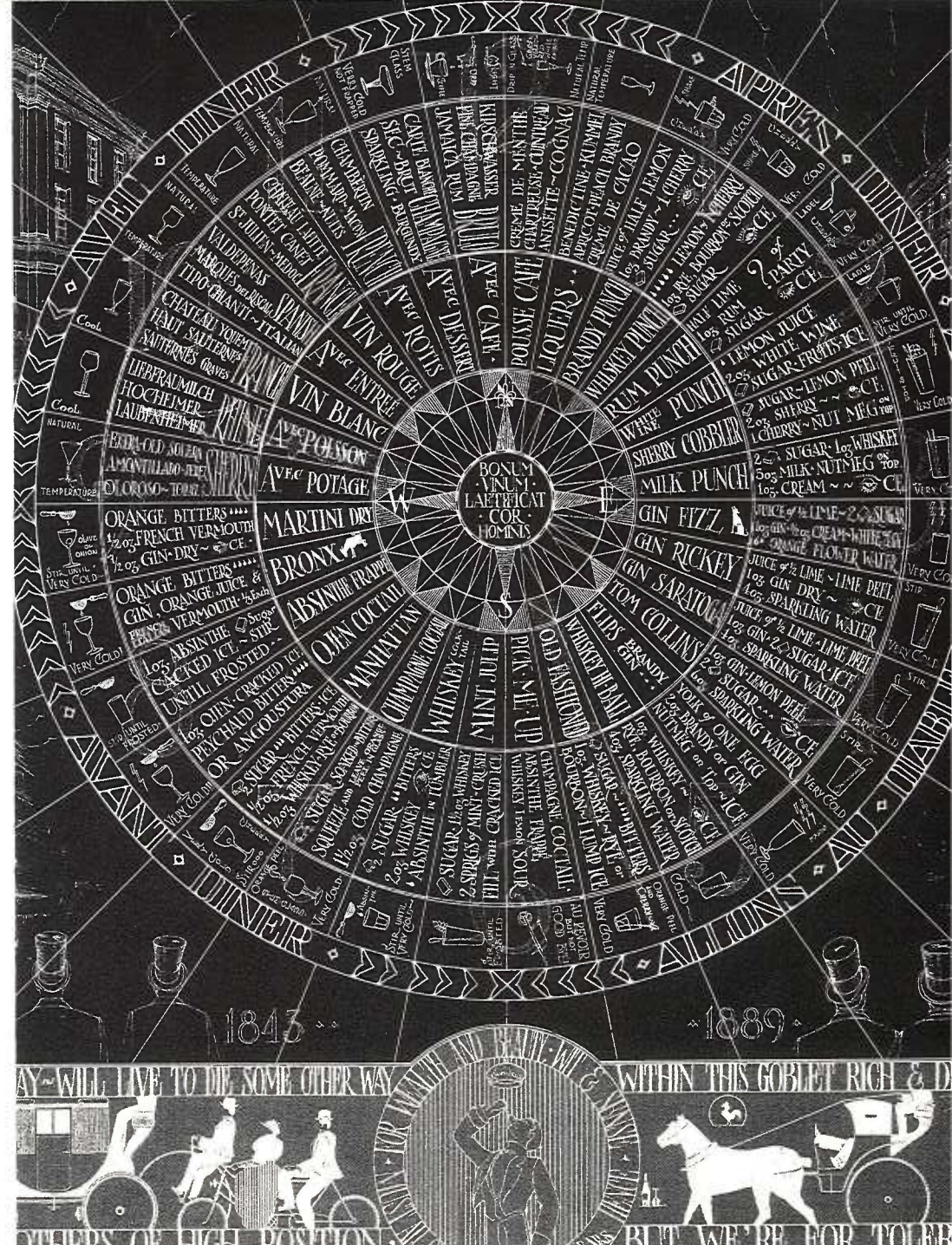
Collins apparently found ample time for non-academic pleasures during his years at Tulane. He played football, wrestled



and was a member of the Architectural Society. He was also elected Class President in 1924. In the 1926 *Jambalaya* yearbook it was said, "Collins Diboll in his masterful way, will design us a brand new gym some day." Those familiar with the Tulane University campus will know that this humorous prediction turned out to be nearly right: the Collins Diboll Memorial Complex, a combination conference, office, and parking structure made possible by a gift from the Collins C. Diboll Private Foundation, is adjacent to the Reily Student Recreation Center.

Collins, like the majority of Americans, faced lean years during the Great Depression. He and Kessels worked in the father's firm but times became so difficult that Collins' father encouraged Collins and Jack to be creative in seeking work, which included chasing fire trucks, in order to locate potential renovation and rebuilding jobs. They apparently found enough work during this time through this method to support themselves while still remaining associated with the father's firm.

In a different bid to make extra money Collins designed in 1931 an illustrated guide to mixing New Orleans cocktails, two years before the repeal of Prohibition. The guide (detail, right) includes attractive renderings of "high society" pleasures and local landmarks such as the Absinthe House. One of the phrases in the border offered some humorous political commentary on the nation's "dry" situation: "Some are fond of drinking and others of high position, but we're for toleration and down with Prohibition." Collins gave these charts over the decades as gifts to







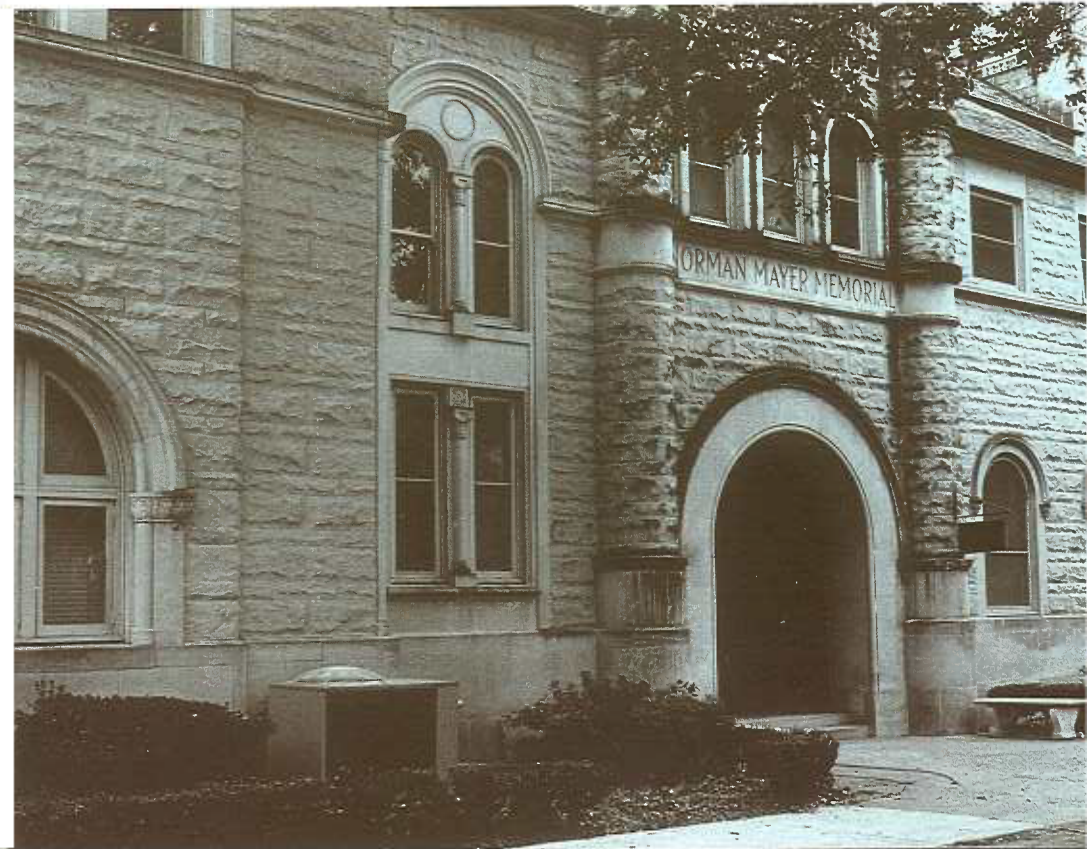
friends, sometimes framed under a glass tray suitable for cocktails.

Collins C. Diboll died in 1936 and the generational shift in the firm's work is best seen in the circa 1930s streamlined Greyhound Bus Terminal at Tulane and Loyola (unfortunately demolished), a leading example of International Style design. The Greyhound Corporation built similarly modern terminals in many cities at this time, reflecting its search for a cutting-edge, hyper-fast image, but the New Orleans terminal was certainly one of the best in the country.

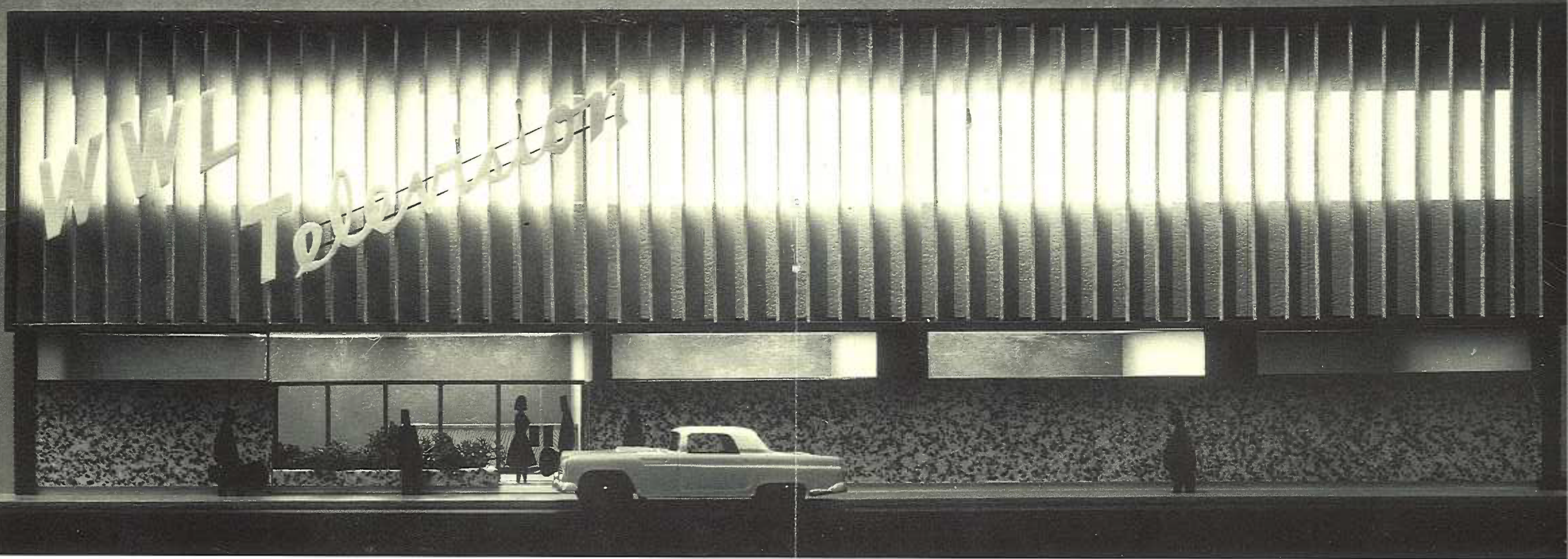
The firm, if called upon to do so, during this period still designed buildings in the historical style associated with Diboll and Owen. Norman Mayer Hall, constructed in two phases between 1942–1949, was a sensitive addition to the Tulane University campus and continued, to great effect, the Richardsonian Romanesque style of Gibson and Richardson Halls.

The building, clad in limestone, helped create a dramatic quadrangle that is the most attractive part of the Uptown campus.

Collins, like many in his generation, served in the United States Army during World War II in the Engineering Corp. Either Jack or Collins had to serve and Collins decided to enlist because unlike Jack he was single and did not have a family to support. While in Holland he had the good fortune to help restore the bomb-damaged home of Kessels' family in Well, Holland that had lost all of its windows. Collins organized a restoration of the windows







only to have a cow set off a landmine nearby that destroyed them once again. One of his friends also remembers him saying that he jumped “hedgerows in Germany.”

During the 1950s the firm increasingly designed buildings in the popular Modernist style that stressed clean lines, structural expression, and materials such as concrete, glass, and metal—an approach to design already seen in previous works such as the Greyhound Bus Terminal. A favorite among local architects in town is the Blaise, Inc. parking garage from 1950 on Rampart Street.

Visible conical shaped steel and concrete columns made this building stand out and still give it a certain rakish charm. The WWL-TV studios, also on Rampart Street, preserve their appearance from the 1950s when they were first built. Sharp dormitory (1958) and Monroe dormitory (1958) on the Tulane University campus, the latter designed with the firm of Koch and Wilson, also reflect the Modernist style of the 1950s considered ideal for low-cost housing needs in everything from dormitories to public housing. These dormitories are still in use over thirty years later,





remain campus favorites and have been little altered. Collins used his numerous connections to secure work from financial and other civic institutions; Jack Kessels proved quite adept at securing numerous commissions from the Catholic Church.

Piet Kessels, Jack's son, joined the firm in 1962 after graduating with his Master's in Architecture from M.I.T. Collins and Piet had already developed a close bond, and Piet viewed Collins as almost a father figure. Over the years Collins remained close to Piet's growing family and wife Margaret. Collins spent many good times with the family over the decades. The firm had been renamed Diboll, Kessels and Associates during the 1940s (also known affectionately as Eyeballs and Vessels because of the

unusual appearance of the two partners) and became Kessels, Diboll and Kessels after Piet joined the firm. Jack Kessels died in 1971 at the age of 65, leaving only Piet and Collins to run the business. It was the aim of the partners of the firm over the decades to stay small and maintain a high level of personal service to their clients. Piet told his wife Margaret, "I like people knowing me."

The firm specialized in parking garages (including the Tulane Hospital Parking Garage). Piet, in particular, became known as the "guru" of parking garages in the region. Although utilitarian buildings with a minimum usually spent on design, they are nevertheless important to the economic well being of a modern city such as New Orleans; parking garages helped rejuvenate the New





Orleans Central Business District during the 1960s and 1970s.

Collins and the firm completed extensive designs for the Ochsner Foundation complex in East Jefferson Parish over many decades. Collins conducted an important site survey in 1950 that selected, out of six possible locations, an East Jefferson "Riding Academy" property near the Mississippi river as the best choice for the new clinic and hospital. This turned out to be an excellent choice because the owner was willing to sell. The rapid securing of the property, what eventually became today's Ochsner main campus, allowed the founders of the hospital to secure Hill Burton funds from the government. Ellerbe and Company

architects of Minnesota designed the main hospital and clinic buildings, but the Diboll firm in time designed parking garages and later clinic buildings. The firm also designed satellite facilities for Ochsner in Kenner and Metairie, what were affectionately known as "Doc in the Box" operations. Over a number of decades the firm served as Consulting Architect to the Clinic and Foundation and Collins served on the Board of Trustees.

Another building of note from the 1960s is the Canal/LaSalle Building now known as the Tidewater Building on Canal Street. The Tidewater Building was one of the first of the modern office towers in the New Orleans Central Business District and attracted quite a bit of attention in its time. Fittingly, the Tidewater Building presently houses the Tulane University Health Sciences Center and School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, major beneficiaries of Collins' generosity during his life and after his death.

The firm also designed a number of strip shopping malls in the New Orleans area during the 1950s and 1960s including the shopping center that now houses "Rock 'n' Bowl" at Tulane and Carrollton Avenues. The firm was also involved in the design and construction of Bon Marche Shopping Center, a large strip mall, in Baton Rouge.

Collins' greatest financial coup was the design and development of the Holiday Inn French Quarter on Royal Street during the late 1960s. Collins convinced his friend, Kemmons Wilson, founder of the Holiday Inn chain, to allow him to design and build the hotel to Holiday Inn's specifications. At the time he told his





cousin Donald Diboll that he would “either go broke or become a millionaire” based upon this deal. Collins convinced Whitney Bank in 1968 to lend him \$1,000,000 on a \$50,000 investment of his own money. Collins developed a lucrative blend of ownership and leasing over the decades with the Holiday Inn organization. The design for the buildings was made in 1968 and the hotel opened in 1969. Collins, through engineering sleight of hand, minimized disturbances to surrounding buildings during the creation of the building’s foundation.

The Holiday Inn was the first modern hotel in the French Quarter and although of undistinguished design, it did include the innovative feature of a concealed parking garage on the first nine floors, thus adding no pressure to parking in the rest of the French Quarter and allowing auto tourists to park adjacent to the French Quarter. The top eight floors were devoted to hotel rooms and Collins had a special penthouse on the roof in which he lived during the 1970s and 1980s.

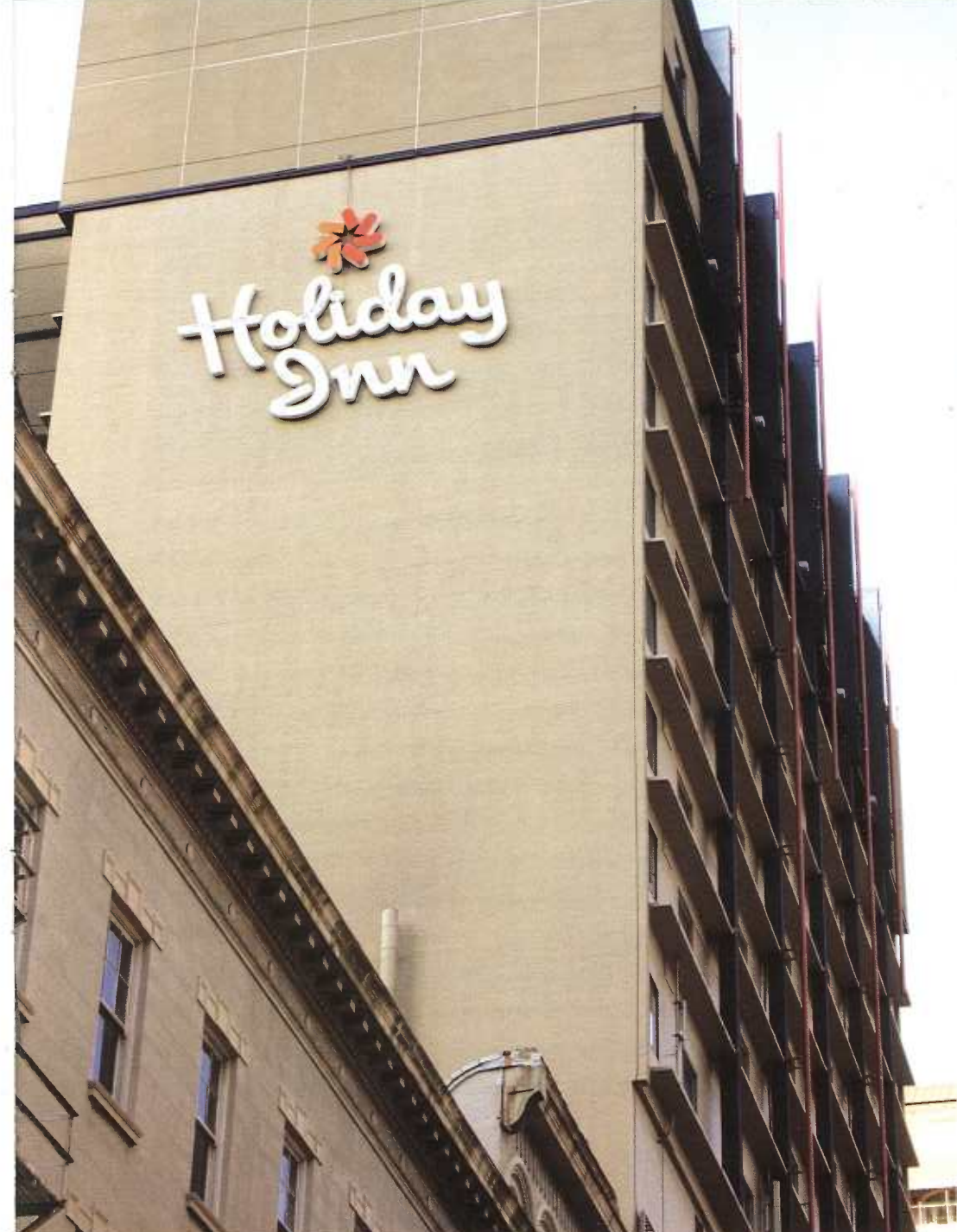
The success of the Holiday Inn encouraged other chains to build their far larger hotels on the edge of the French Quarter. It can be said with some certainty that Collins, in his quiet way, ushered in the age of mass tourism to the French Quarter. The hotel has undergone extensive renovation since it opened (Campo and Associates, ca. 1999) and has been the most profitable of all the hotels in the chain. Collins’ firm also designed the Howard Johnson’s Motor Lodge on Loyola Avenue. Sale of the Holiday Inn by the Collins C. Diboll Private Foundation in large part made possible the many



bequests of the organization. Many other buildings in New Orleans have since been built with parking on their lower floors as an economical and satisfactory solution to the high cost of creating underground parking structures in New Orleans' swampy earth.

Through these diverse and numerous projects, for both commercial interests and non-profits, the firm set much of the modern style and tone for the redeveloping areas of New Orleans and new suburbs during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Many designers during the past few decades have leveled strong criticism at the style of Modernist design for which Collins is best known, but the simple fact is that during the 1950s and 1960s his designs meshed well with the "forward thinking" approach among the business community of New Orleans that had tired, for the most part, of historically inspired, eclectic design. For developers working within limited budgets and short time frames, the economical aspects of modern design also proved quite attractive.

Those who knew Collins remember him as an unpretentious, skillful practitioner of his craft who still took an informal attitude to even some of the most serious situations. The head of the firm in 2003, Anthony Taffaro, remembered that when he arrived for a job interview in 1973 with Piet Kessels, he was greeted by an older gentleman in a fishing cap who was leisurely reading a magazine in his office. This gent turned out to be Collins, then in semi-retirement but still a partner in the firm, who directed Taffaro to find Kessels at a nearby job site rather than wait nervously. During his semi-retirement Collins played a role in assembling and





locating projects for the firm through his many contacts in local civic organizations, but primarily occupied himself during the 1970s and 1980s with his growing number of properties and investments.

For nearly two decades Collins lived in a large, modestly furnished penthouse apartment he designed on top of the Holiday Inn. In order to prevent hotel guests from accidentally finding his apartment, he never installed an elevator extension and walked the final flight from the floor below even as an older man. He very generously permitted newlywed couples he knew to use a private suite that was part of his apartment after their wedding and before their honeymoon. Collins only requested that the groom leave his boutonniere as a souvenir; over the years, Collins developed an impressive collection of these he displayed proudly in his kitchen. Another personal eccentricity of his home life was that "he never tied a tie, his ties were already tied on the bedroom wall" and he washed his own clothes by hand. He also had his older long sleeve dress shirts converted into short sleeve shirts and even had his fraying collars reversed to give them a bit more life.

Collins also refused to buy new cars because he thought they were too expensive. He particularly liked older Cadillacs and took them to a body shop where he had the tail fins rounded off for smoother styling. Collins primarily walked from his home to office, cooked little, patronized fine local restaurants (he had a reserved table at Antoine's and enjoyed Pascal's Manale), and yet had a particular fondness for the simple cooking of Wise's cafeteria on Jeff Davis Parkway. Although careful with his money



and conservative in his habits, he was in no way stingy with his friends and relatives and enjoyed treating them to meals and other pleasures. During the height of peach and Creole tomato season he even ordered cases of ripe fruit and vegetables for friends.

Collins loved cards and maintained a regular gin rummy group at his penthouse. As a sportsman he made frequent trips to the Suburban Club in the countryside and was a fine raconteur according to most accounts. For a time he kept a specially outfitted barge for fishing and hunting vacations where he entertained friends. He later donated the barge to the Boy Scouts.

Collins loved New Orleans, was a member of a number of old-line Mardi Gras Krewes, served as King of one of them, and prominently displayed in his apartment a 1929 picture of the Queen and Consort of Rex. He was active in local clubs and a member of both the Boston and Pickwick Clubs. Throughout his life Collins participated in the direction and management of a

great number of professional and civic organizations. He served on the board of trustees of the National Small Business Association, was a founding member of the National Parking Association, and became a member of the American Institute of Architects. Locally, he was Chairman of the Corporate Division of the Tulane University Development Council and served on the Tulane University Medical Center Advisory Committee. Collins was a leading member of the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce and served terms as President of both the Vieux Carré Commission and the New Orleans Athletic Club.

Collins died at Ochsner Foundation Hospital in 1987.



*Writer Nicholas Bloom received his Ph.D. from Brandeis University and is the author of books on the history of city and suburban planning.*

TIDEWATER BUILDING, TULANE HOSPITAL PARKING GARAGE: Tulane Photography Services. GREYHOUND BUS TERMINAL; WWL-TV STUDIOS, Frank Lotz Miller; NORMAN MAYER HALL, Roy Trahan: Courtesy of Tulane University Archives. BLAISE, INC. PARKING GARAGE, BRENT HOUSE HOTEL, HOLIDAY INN FRENCH QUARTER: Eugenia Uhl. COLLINS DIBOLL AT NEW ORLEANS CITY COUNCIL MEETING: The Times-Picayune.

**THE COLLINS C. DIBOLL PRIVATE FOUNDATION**

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