

THE MYSTERY OF
JOHN WILKINS COLONNA
1877 - 1899



JOHN WILKINS COLONNA 1877-1899



John was the first born of seven children of Charles Jones Colonna 1849-1920 and Margaret Okeson Dunston Colonna 1859-1892. John was an exceptionally handsome young man taking on a likeness of his mother and lived to be only 21 years old.

For most of his life, he was raised with his brothers and sister in the old Colonna house on the shipyard property in Berkley. John had taken a job at the Jones Shipyard in Brooklyn, New York. This shipyard belonged to his great grandfather on his mother Margaret Jones Colonna side.

The Jones Shipyard had a reputation for building exceptionally fast square rigger sailing ships used in the California gold rush and in the China-London tea trade. Once a year sailing vessels left China in a race to London, England loaded with tea, the first ones to London got the best prices.

John left New York in 1899 for Norfolk, Virginia to attend his sister Evelyn Colonna's wedding to Henry F. McCoy and never arrived home.

His father Charles J. Colonna and others made every effort possible to find John sparing no expense and over the months and years that followed there were many supposedly sightings of him in different

places and apparently several people that knew someone that knew where he was but could only find out if rather large sums of cash were advanced.

All this came to a dead end with no one in the family having a clue until 49 years after his disappearance in 1948 when only his brothers and sister were alive and still interested, when one Sunday morning Ben Colonna, Jr. got a telephone call from his father, Captain Ben Colonna, Sr., (John Colonna's brother) asking Ben Jr. if he had a gun. Ben Sr. had received a phone call from a man who wanted to meet him on the old Norfolk Airport Road with information and Ben Sr. wanted Ben Jr. to follow 100 feet behind him and the unknown bearer of information. So Ben Jr. did just as his dad asked. As Ben Sr. and Ben Jr. arrived at the airport road as requested and there walking in the road was an old man with a cane not too well dressed. The two cars were parked on the side of the road one behind the other and Ben Sr. approached the man walking beside him for about 30 minutes with Ben Jr. following a short distance behind with his pistol in his pocket. Next Ben Sr. walked away from the old man in the road telling Ben Jr. to meet him back at the shipyard. Arriving at the shipyard Ben Sr. told Ben Jr. that the old man was a retired Norfolk and Southern Railroad Engineer and a friend of a Mr. Keeter, who was also a retired Railroad Engineer who had told him what happened to John Colonna in Edenton many years ago and that he, Mr. Keeter, was very old and wanted the truth known although he didn't want to tell it himself because of fear of losing his railroad retirement. The old man relayed the following information to Ben Colonna, Sr. John arrived in Norfolk a day or so before the wedding and hitched a ride on a Norfolk & Southern train having often done this in the past and knowing the Engineer he wanted to go to Edenton, N.C. to visit a girl he knew and return to Norfolk the next day. The Engineer said he could not ride in the engine as it was against railroad rules and too long a trip but told him he could ride in the refrigerated car out of site if he wanted. John agreed and the engineer said he would blow the train whistle at the switch in Edenton and John could get off.

As planned the Engineer blew the whistle and thought John had gotten out of the car and departed into the town but while shifting the car's on the tracks a body was discovered that had been run over by the train, it being dark the four men with the train were called all bringing their lanterns and to their dismay found it was John Colonna who they all knew.

It was thought that after hearing the train whistle John awoke and half asleep climbed out of the ice loading hole in the top of the refrigerated car and while climbing down the ladder attached to the car to reach the ground and the train switching cars probably caused him to fall somehow landing on the track between the cars. The four men frightened and not knowing what to do held a meeting on the spot and decided that since they all knew this was against

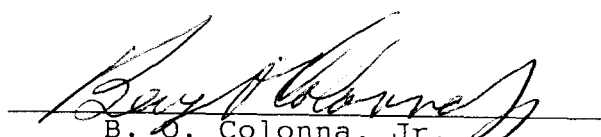
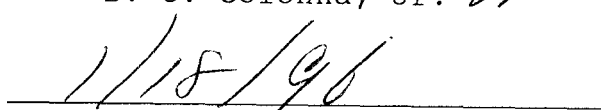
railroad policy they may go to jail and they would surely lose their railroad jobs and retirements. So it was agreed that they would bury him on the spot putting his body in a wooden packing box and burying him alongside the railroad track in Edenton, North Carolina.

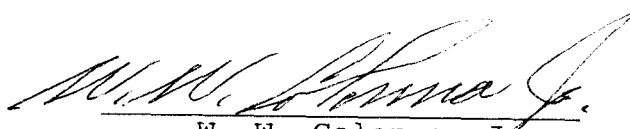
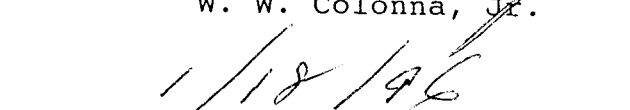
After having learned this information and believing it to be true, Captain Ben Colonna, Sr. and Captain Will Colonna, Sr., John Colonna's younger brothers, contacted the Norfolk and Southern Railroad and after signing legal papers promising not to sue were allowed to dig alongside the railroad track in Edenton for their brother's remains, who if found would be buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Norfolk alongside his father and mother Charles J. and Margaret Colonna.

The Edenton Sheriff was contacted and with his assistance and the information and location of the burial site from a local negro man who was one of the four railroad crew that helped bury John. This man was very old and very sick, he died two days later. A dig of rather large scale was started. A trench about five feet wide, three to four feet deep and a city block long was dug and the dirt sifted only a few bones were found and taken to a doctor who could not identify the bones as human and could have been small animal bones.

It was generally thought that the identified buried site by two of the 1899 railroad crew that took part in the burial was pretty well correct as the exact site had been disturbed by the widening of a highway some years before the dig.

With John's father, Charles J. Colonna's, endless effort to find his son, then the new information and extensive dig in Edenton, N.C. by John's brothers Ben and Will Colonna, Sr., the terrible family tragedy was put to rest as best it could be with at least the confidence that all that could be done had been done and finally the mystery of what had really happened to John Wilkins Colonna was known.


B. O. Colonna, Jr.

Date


W. W. Colonna, Jr.

Date