

J. J. KELLER, CONTRACTOR

Paul Gettys

One of the most active builders and contractors in the York County area in the early twentieth century was J. J. Keller. This article is an attempt to provide some information on him and the buildings he built.

J. J. Keller was born on July 20, 1867 in Rutherford County, North Carolina. His parents were Jacob Alexander Keller and Sarah Jane Keller. It appears that his full name was either Joshua John Keller or John Joshua Keller, as there are records in which he is referred to as Josh or Joshua. The earliest reference found is the 1870 Census which had the family (misspelled as “Killer”) located at Silver Creek in Burke County North Carolina. The head of the household was Michael Keller, John’s grandfather, a farmer. John’s father, Jacob, was listed as a farm laborer, and John was listed as “Joshua” aged 3. There was also an infant sister. In 1880, Jacob had become the head of household, indicating the grandfather had died. He was listed as a farmer and John J. was 12 and working on the farm. The family had grown significantly. John was the oldest of six children, ranging down to two years of age. Also in the household was John’s grandmother, Mahala Keller. The 1890 Census has been destroyed and is not available.

From the 1900 Census, it can be determined that John J. Keller was married in 1893 to Hannah S. Keller, who was born in 1874 in Durham, North Carolina. We have been unable to find any record of her family name before marriage. In 1900, the couple had moved to Yorkville (now York) and were living on Kings Mountain Street. They had no children, but had lodgers named James A. Sherer, a butcher, and Mary Sherer, both aged 24. Keller in this census record was identified as Josh J. Keller and his occupation is listed as a carpenter. It is unclear how he gained the experience as a carpenter and builder, but within a few years he would become very successful in the building trades. Shortly after the Census was taken, John and Hannah moved to Rock Hill later in 1900.¹ We are not sure where they lived in the first few years in Rock Hill.

As the business prospered, John and Hannah built a new home in 1907 in the Woodland Park area, a new residential district to the south of the downtown developed by James S. White. Their

¹ Rock Hill *Evening Herald*, March 21, 1956.

home at 419 Saluda Street would serve the family for many years.² In some references, the street number is 439. In the 1910 Census, Hannah's name was listed as Mary, evidently a mistake on the part of the Census worker. The couple had recently adopted two daughters, reported in the Census as Sarah Keller and Margaret Keller, both aged 3. As far as can be determined, John and Hannah never had children of their own. It is not known at this time if Sarah and Margaret were twins, sisters, or unrelated prior to the adoption.

John's business became very successful. He began doing contracting work under the name J. J. Keller & Co., with offices in both Rock Hill and York. A review of local newspapers of the early twentieth century reveals numerous notices of contracts for construction of homes, commercial buildings, and public buildings by the company. His ads in the newspaper identified the company as Building Contractors and dealers in lumber, building supplies, paints, etc.³ The company had several office locations. In York, there was a large complex on Garner Street which included a planing mill, office, warehouse, and other buildings.⁴ During the early years of business in Rock Hill, the company had offices in the White Building above Rock Hill Supply Company on East Main Street.⁵ In 1907, the company moved to a larger building at 134 West Main Street owned by Capt. William Lyle Roddey. The 1908 City Directory for Rock Hill listed J. J. Keller & Co. with principals J. J. Keller and J. R. Logan. The firm was described as architects and engineers with offices at 134 West Main Street. There was also a warehouse on Record Place at the corner of Black Street. John J. Keller's home was listed as "Woodland Park" and John R. Logan lived in Yorkville. Logan evidently managed the York operations of the company. Shortly after moving to the West Main Street location, a fire destroyed several buildings in the area, including the Keller office. The offices were moved temporarily to a space on the second floor of the Rock Hill Telephone Company Building near the Record Building.⁶ The West Main Street building was soon reconstructed.

The business continued to grow over the next few years. By 1913, the City Directory listed J. J. Keller & Co. with three principals, Keller, Logan, and J. M. Anderson. The office had moved to the Ratterree Building at 100 East Main Street, located on the corner of Main and Trade Streets. The firm had added a new business line, serving as funeral directors and embalmers as well as general contractors. This business began at 117 Hampton Street before moving to the Ratterree Building in 1912.⁷ Also, Keller and Logan were affiliated with Catawba Lumber Company. Both Catawba Lumber and Catawba Manufacturing were located at 144 East Main Street and were listed as dealers in rough and dressed lumber. John M. Anderson, a partner in the Keller

² *Rock Hill Record*, August 12, 1907.

³ The *Rock Hill Record*, November 18, 1909 contains such an ad.

⁴ Sanborne Insurance Rate Map, Yorkville, 1905.

⁵ *Rock Hill Record*, May 2, 1907.

⁶ *Rock Hill Record*, June 8, 1908.

⁷ *Rock Hill Record*, February 8, 1912.

company, lived at 148 Oakland Avenue. Also listed separately in the directory was William Keller and his wife Mary E., who lived at 719 College Avenue. William Keller is listed as a contractor, but is not identified as part of J. J. Keller & Co. John had a brother William who was four years younger. It is probable that he had moved to Rock Hill and was working either for his brother or independently.

In addition to his extensive business interests, J. J. Keller became a leader in the civic life of Rock Hill. He became a member of the Rock Hill Public Works Commission when it was organized about 1911, was president of his Masonic Lodge, a member of the Shriners, a leader of the militia, and a steward in St. John's Methodist Church.⁸

Although we do not have a complete listing of buildings constructed by J. J. Keller & Co., a few major projects have been discovered from newspaper articles. In 1902, the company built the new graded school in York for a contract price of \$12,500. The building had been designed by local architect H. E. White.⁹ In 1907, John R. Logan of the company was supervising work on a new cotton mill in York at a cost of \$100,000.¹⁰ Also in 1907, the company undertook a major expansion of the sanctuary for the Episcopal Church of Our Saviour in Rock Hill.¹¹ The next year, work was under way on the new Wymojo Mill on West White Street in Rock Hill. This complex included the mill building and 42 cottages for workers.¹² Several residences constructed by the company have been documented in Rock Hill, including homes for G. A. Buchanan in Oakland,¹³ J. Edgar Reid at 344 East Main Street,¹⁴ Robert P. Boyd on Park Avenue,¹⁵ and Keller's own home at 419 Saluda Street. Other projects in 1908 included development of plans for the new school in Edgemoor in Chester County, a new two-story building for the Neely and Moore Livery on East Black Street, renovations to the Heeden Store on North Trade Street, and the addition of a second story to the home of Capt. W. A. Graham at 143 Reid Street.¹⁶

On the morning of February 10, 1914, Keller returned from a business trip to Columbia and went to his office for several hours of work. A little after two in the afternoon, he went to his home on Saluda Street. He greeted his wife and walked through the house to the back yard. In the garage to the rear of the house where the hearse and ambulance for the undertaking business were housed, he placed a gun to his head and fired. Hannah heard the shot and ran to the site, where

⁸ *Rock Hill Record*, February 12, 1914.

⁹ *Rock Hill Herald*, July 2, 1902.

¹⁰ *Rock Hill Herald*, September 7, 1907.

¹¹ *Rock Hill Record*, December 19, 1907.

¹² *Rock Hill Record*, January 30 and May 25, 1908.

¹³ *Rock Hill Record*, March 7, 1907.

¹⁴ *Rock Hill Record*, May 6, 1907.

¹⁵ *Rock Hill Record*, February 6, 1908.

¹⁶ *Rock Hill Record*, July 23, August 10 and August 31, 1908.

she found him. Three doctors, Hay, Fennell, and Stevens, were summoned, but they were unable to save his life. “The city was horribly shocked Tuesday afternoon about 2:30 when it was learned that Mr. J. J. Keller, one of Rock Hill’s most prominent citizens, was dead from a pistol shot through his head.”¹⁷ No indication was ever found for the act, and no note was located. It was later reported that the businesses were solvent, with no indication of a business reason for such an act.¹⁸

The adopted daughters of J. J. and Hannah would have been about seven years old at the time of his death. In the obituary, they are referred to as Ruth and Ruby. In the 1910 Census, they were called Sarah and Margaret. John Keller also left his parents, two sisters, and his brother William M. Keller of Rock Hill. The funeral service was held at St. John’s Methodist Church and burial was in Laurelwood Cemetery. The pallbearers were some of the leading citizens of Rock Hill, and the crowd at the funeral was described as one of the largest in a number of years in Rock Hill.¹⁹

At the time of his death, J. J. Keller & Co. had some large projects underway. John R. Logan reported that the contract for the new high school building was active and that work would begin immediately. This was the first of several buildings on the campus of the Rock Hill High School on East White Street,²⁰ and was located to the rear of the later 1920s high school building. The undertaking business was to continue with John R. Anderson and C. K. Chreitzberg in charge. Chreitzberg was now also affiliated with the contracting business.²¹

Evidently, both businesses were closed within a few years. They were not listed in the 1920 City Directory, and John M. Anderson, John R. Logan, and William Keller are also absent in the residential listings. Subsequent City Directories list Hannah S. Keller at 419 Saluda Street. In 1922, the daughters Ruby and Ruth are listed with her, and are described as students. Hannah was able to secure some income by taking in boarders. In the 1930 Census, the family of John L. Ash, a traveling salesman, was boarding in the house, and the family of Henry Canty was living to the rear of the lot. This was a family of seven, and Henry Canty was described as an African American who was employed as a gardener. In the 1940 Census, boarders were Bernell C. Cook, a postal clerk, and his wife Lula and son Burnell. Henry Canty was still living to the rear with his son Johnnie, an auto mechanic and his wife, who was a practical nurse.

¹⁷ *Rock Hill Record*, February 12, 1914. Information also taken from the *Rock Hill Herald*, February 10, 1914.

¹⁸ *Rock Hill Record*, March 2, 1914.

¹⁹ *Rock Hill Record*, February 12, 1914.

²⁰ *Rock Hill Record*, March 2, 1914.

²¹ *Rock Hill Herald*, February 10, 1914.

Ruby Keller became Mrs. Frank Clinton of Charlotte, and Ruth became Mrs. Dodd of Rock Hill. Ruth was evidently living with Hannah on Saluda Street. When Ruth died in 1951, Hannah went to Charlotte to live with Ruby. She died there in March 1956 at the age of 81.²² Hannah and Ruth are buried at Laurelwood Cemetery with J. J. Keller.

²² *Rock Hill Evening Herald*, August 17, 1951 and March 21, 1956.