

John Collins Covell was born at Newport, Rhode Island or Princess Ann, Maryland on December 19, 1824. The descendants are inclined to accept Newport, Rhode Island as his birthplace, under the supposition that Covell's father, the Reverend Joseph Covell, moved to Maryland when John was but an infant. His mother was the daughter of Governor John Collins, who was governor of Rhode Island from 1786 to 1789, and afterwards was a representative of that state in Congress. His father, an Episcopalian minister, moved his family to the Princess Ann (Maryland) parish while John was but yet a very young child. It was here that the boy lost his mother, and her body now lies under the pulpit of the Princess Ann church. Soon after this, his father was transferred to a parish in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where he resided until his death.

It being his father's desire that John should enter the ministry, John was accordingly carefully educated for that purpose, and was graduated from Trinity College, in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1844. It was here that he came in contact with a fellow student, the Reverend Mr. Clerc, son of Laurent Clerc, the deaf-mute teacher whom Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet brought from France to become the co-founder of American School for the Deaf. From associated in Hartford interested in the education for the deaf, John himself, became interested and elected that profession in preference to ministry much to his father's disappointment. While the Virginia Institution was yet in its infancy, Covell accepted a position as a teacher in the deaf-mute department when he was not quite twenty-one years of age.

He was married to Miss Anita Eskridge in 1832. To them were born five children, one of whom married David H. Heiskell, the parents of Mrs. Avery Baird, secretary and stenographer in the office of the superintendent for many years; another married Garrett Parsons, the parents of Mrs. Mamie Kenny, formerly the blind dorm girls' matron.

When Principal Tyler died in 1852, Covell became vice-principal of the deaf-mute department of Virginia School along with his brother-in-law, Dr. Charles Merrilat. It was during the difficult days that of the Civil War that Mr. Covell made himself conspicuous as an executive. Virginia suffered severely by the war and only with great difficulty were many of her institutions able to carry on. Covell took upon himself the arduous task of continuing the Virginia Schools for the Deaf and the Blind with a diminished number of pupils. He successfully conducted the affairs of the institutions throughout the war, notwithstanding the privations, "Old Virginnny" was subjected to from 1861-1865. It must have been for this difficult and tremendous

task that he was made “Major” in the Confederate Army under General Wise. There is no word that the commission of “Major” placed him upon any actual battlefields. His battlefield was that of a teacher, educator, and administrator during the War. For twenty-seven years, Major Covell taught in and then piloted the Virginia Schools. A disagreement with the board of governors of the Virginia institution led Covell, in 1873, to resign and accept a position at a Boys’ Preparatory school for the Deaf near Baltimore. He was there only a short time when the Virginia School, recognizing and regretting the loss of Covell’s services, successfully implored him to return as head teacher in the deaf-mute department.

His stay at the Virginia School this time was short, for on August 1, 1874, he became Superintendent of the West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and the Blind. As Superintendent, Covell made many improvements in the plant; gas lights were introduced, supplanting oil lamps; piping spring water to the institution; a dining hall, school rooms, and a chapel were erected in the back of an adjoining land were added to the grounds. In general, the institution received a new impetus of growth and improvement; the standard of instruction were elevated, and enrollment of pupil grew. Covell championed a broad and thorough education for all pupils, keeping in good balance the academic and vocational work. Having been first educated for the ministry, it is easy to understand his interest for the spiritual welfare of the pupils. He, himself, held services for the school, using the sign language.

On Saturday morning, June 4, 1887, John Collins Covell died, having served the institution for twelve years and ten months, longer than any other superintendent.