The earliest map to show the Adirondack region was one drawn by Abraham Ortelius, geographer for Philip II of Spain, in the year 1570. Northern New York was then called "Avacal;" the lack of knowledge about this region was evident in the cartographer's work. Then came a map of New Netherland, dated 1616, which gave to the area the name of "Iroquoise," changed in later editions to "Iroquois." Then in 1771 appeared a map ordered by Governor Tryon, but this did not indicate any lake or mountain in the Adirondacks—only an unknown wilderness. Next, in 1776, a map of the British colonies reported that the vast tract to the north was called "Couchsachragh," one of the four beaver hunting countries of the Six Nations and not yet surveyed. Finally, a map dated 1777 sketched in Tryon and Charlotte counties, and also attempted to trace the Hudson River and to suggest the location of a few of the major lakes.

With such meager information at hand, colonial surveyors had little to work with. Nevertheless, they established the boundaries of the Totten and Crossfield Purchase—one of the first recorded surveys of the north country; the south line of Macombs Purchase Great Tract #11; the south line of Great Tract #1; a resurvey of Township 11, Old Military Tract, and such other surveys as were required by the commissioners of the Land Office.

All of this was piecemeal work, and it was not until 1837 that a large scale geological survey was started by Professor Emmons, assisted by William C. Redfield and Ferdinand M. Benedict. That survey continued for four years, and during the course of it many of the major Adirondack peaks were named and measured, among them Whiteface, Marcy, Seward, Dix, McIntyre, Henderson and McMartin (later Colden). Although conspicuously inaccurate in many respects, the reports of this survey summarized virtually all of the knowledge of the topographical and physical character of the region of the State up to that time, and for that matter, up to the year 1872 when Colvin embarked on his project. Between the Emmons survey and that of Colvin, there appeared only fragmentary and sketchy information, some of it published and some not, some of it reliable and some not, circulated by tourists, hunters, guides and miscellaneous authorities who visited the Adirondacks.

Suffice it to say that when Colvin began his land survey he had very little established and authentic material to work with. There was no reliable map; blazes and stakes and other boundary markers had in many cases disappeared. Lines delimiting State and private properties were often a matter of opinion or guess work, and there was nowhere in the records of the State a total picture, even approximately accurate, of the topography and geography of the region.

Colvin was convinced that to remedy this situation nothing would suffice but "A survey with theodolite or transit, entirely independent of the magnetic compass, the object in view being the discovery by trigonometrical measurement of the relative angular position of the mountain summits and other important land marks for use in the preparation of a map of the wilderness." And he went on to say that "the vastness of such an undertaking necessitated the retraversing of so great an extent of wilderness, the ascending of numerous mountains several of which have a height of 5,000 feet, the labors and fatigue, the
dangers of exploration in the great ocean of woods, of accident and of hunger, can only be appreciated by the surveyor who has passed through such an ordeal."

Even so, Colvin probably underestimated the difficulties of his job. Field work began in the neighborhood of Lake Pleasant (Hamilton County) in late July, 1873, and right at the start appeared the difficulties which were to plague him throughout the survey. Some of these were of his own making, some were unavoidable.

The difficulties of his own making appeared to have stemmed from the character of Colvin himself; he simply could not be bothered with many of the details necessary to the organization and administration of such a project. Therefore, he and his men often had nothing to eat but dry bread, no prepared camp to sleep in, no adequate provisions to take care of the delicate instruments required for the work, no definite schedule of activities nor any well thought out itinerary, no competent leader to take Colvin's place when he left the job and went back to Albany (which he frequently did), no overall objective which could be communicated to his men so that they might share his enthusiasm for the task.

On the other hand, many of the difficulties encountered by Colvin were the products either of his times or of the officials in Albany to whom he was responsible. His surveying instruments—although he insisted upon the best available and usually got them—were primitive according to present standards, and the support he received from the Legislature was to say the least precarious. In more than one instance he had to resort to his own personal funds in order to pay his crews, and the completion of his survey was indefinitely postponed due to lack of appropriations by the Legislature. A combination of his own shortcomings and those of the government for which he worked often resulted in poorly outfitted crews, unnecessary suffering, defection in the ranks, failure of instruments, false alarms and excursions, disease and hardship.

Furthermore, Colvin confronted many of the problems which beset surveyors in the same field today. There was a maze of trails and blazes made by hunters, trappers and lumbermen for their own mysterious purposes, and it was necessary for him to sort out the wheat from the chaff before establishing what he considered to be the true line. And to cap it all, there was the annual variation of the magnetic needle, as well as minor variations caused by ore deposits. Such mechanical difficulties were particularly trying to Colvin and were perhaps the cause of some of his major mis-

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Surveyors were distinguished from axemen by the type of headgear; bowlers were standard equipment for the intelligentsia of the crew.
Top left: A blaze “blocked” out to determine its age.

Top right: “Taking morning observations” after a snow storm in October, 1883.

Above: Orson P. Morse and his crew, with Snowy Mountain in the background.

Right: Frock coat and polished boots on the shore of Lake Placid.

Far right: Trouble with blackflies at the joint corner of Townships 34, 35, 6 and 40, Totten & Crossfield Purchase.
"When the high mountains had been measured and the location of lakes and the sources of the major rivers determined, the glamour wore off and his reports lost most of their popular appeal." The critics over the years have found much of his work to be of uneven scientific value. Resurveys have proved many of his lines inaccurate (he tried so hard to prove old lines correct); his successors could do little with the great mass of material he accumulated for the simple reason that he had no organization or system for handling such material; his Albany office is said to have looked more like the dressing room of a sporting club than the office of a surveyor, what with its confusion of pack baskets, snowshoes, trophies and bric-a-brac.

Nevertheless, there seems to be general agreement that as a surveyor Colvin was tops. As Mr. Wilson of Deerland said, "Colvin was one of the greatest men I ever saw to locate a spot on a tree. He could locate one that you couldn't see any sign of—one that might be 5, 6 or 7 inches grown over. But he could see it, and we couldn't."

Colvin was born in Albany in 1847, was tutored at home, later attended Albany Academy, then studied law, then developed a taste for the sciences. First practical application of the latter was on the headwaters of the Sacandaga, where he made mining surveys, studied geology and in general interested himself in the physical aspects of his environment. He taught higher surveying, geodesy and topographical engineering at Hamilton College, published over 30 volumes of notes and records, and in 1920 died in an institution in Troy seriously crippled in mind and body. He had never married.

The bare facts about Colvin's life do not suggest the importance which he assumed in making and writing the history of the Adirondacks. During the course of his professional activities, he evidently did a great deal of constructive thinking about the future of our State and its citizens; he was one of the first, if not the first to suggest the idea of the Forest Preserve, and in 1872 he became secretary of the State Park Commission appointed to investigate the possibilities of creating such a preserve. He did much of the work of this commission, and wrote its reports.

But when Colvin retired from the Adirondack survey, the dreamer in him supplanted the surveyor; he became president of the New York Canadian Pacific Railway, an organization that never progressed beyond the paper state, and when this failed he retired from public life to live and die in seclusion.

—Roland B. Miller