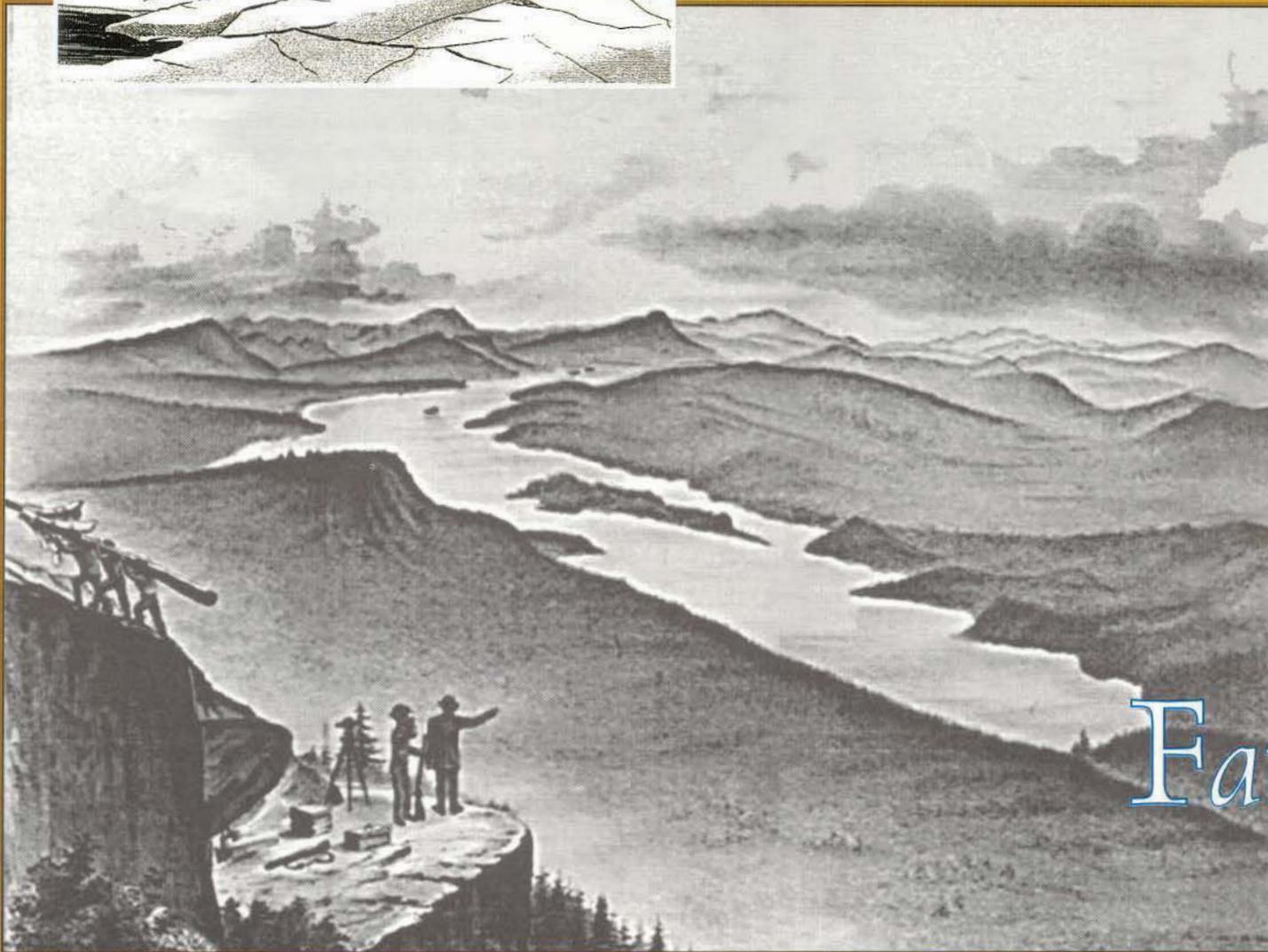




*Oven Lake boat accident puts men, baggage and instruments in danger. (Adirondack Survey 1873-74)*



**Verplanck Colvin's** influence on the Adirondack Park is depicted in an exhibit of photographs and artifacts at the New York State Museum in Albany that continues through September 1998. Also see page 22 for book reviews.



When the New York State Museum in Albany asked me to be a guest curator to assemble a special exhibit about the Adirondacks, I immediately chose

Verplanck Colvin. Far too little is known about this gifted man who can properly be called the "Father of the Adirondack Park."

If it hadn't been for Colvin, I wouldn't be living and writing in a log cabin by a lake at the edge of wilderness. I wouldn't be guiding people into the "forever wild" Forest Preserve of the Adirondack Mountains. In fact, there would be no Adirondack Park for anyone to enjoy.

Who was Verplanck Colvin? Born in Albany in 1847 of Dutch and Scottish descent, the young lad received an excellent education from his lawyer father. With his boyhood chum, Mills Blake, he became interested in geography and surveying. Colvin first visited the Adirondacks at age 18. He was smitten. He started speaking out for the establishment of a state park and forest preserve when only 21.



*Colvin and Blake, life-long friends and colleagues, are immortalized today in the Adirondack Park they did so much to shape in the names of side-by-side mountains in Essex County, Mount Colvin and Blake Mountain.*



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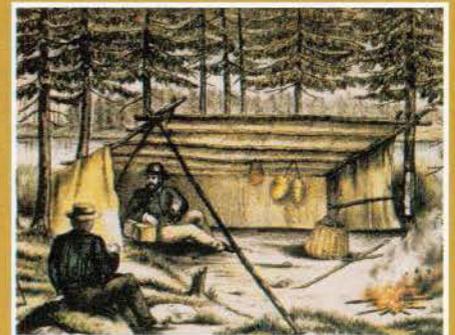
# Adirondack Park

By Anne LaBastille

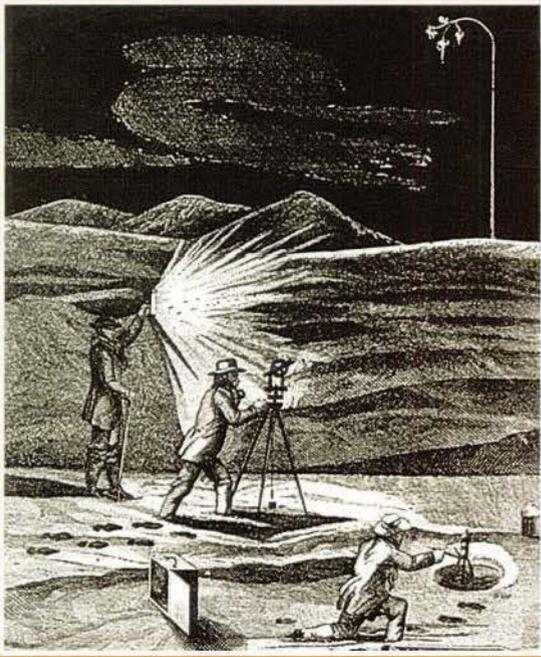
*Drawings by Verplanck Colvin, photographed by John Yost, NYS Museum,*

*Fulton Chain of Lakes viewed from Mt. St. Louis or Bald Mountain (1879-80)*

Colvin envisioned "a perpetual and refreshing summer resort for our people, and a vast natural and healthful pleasure ground for our youth ... who [will] acquire skill and endurance ... [A]t the same time, preservation of the timber and the conservation of the waters, [will] secure to the state vastly increased wealth, importance and power."



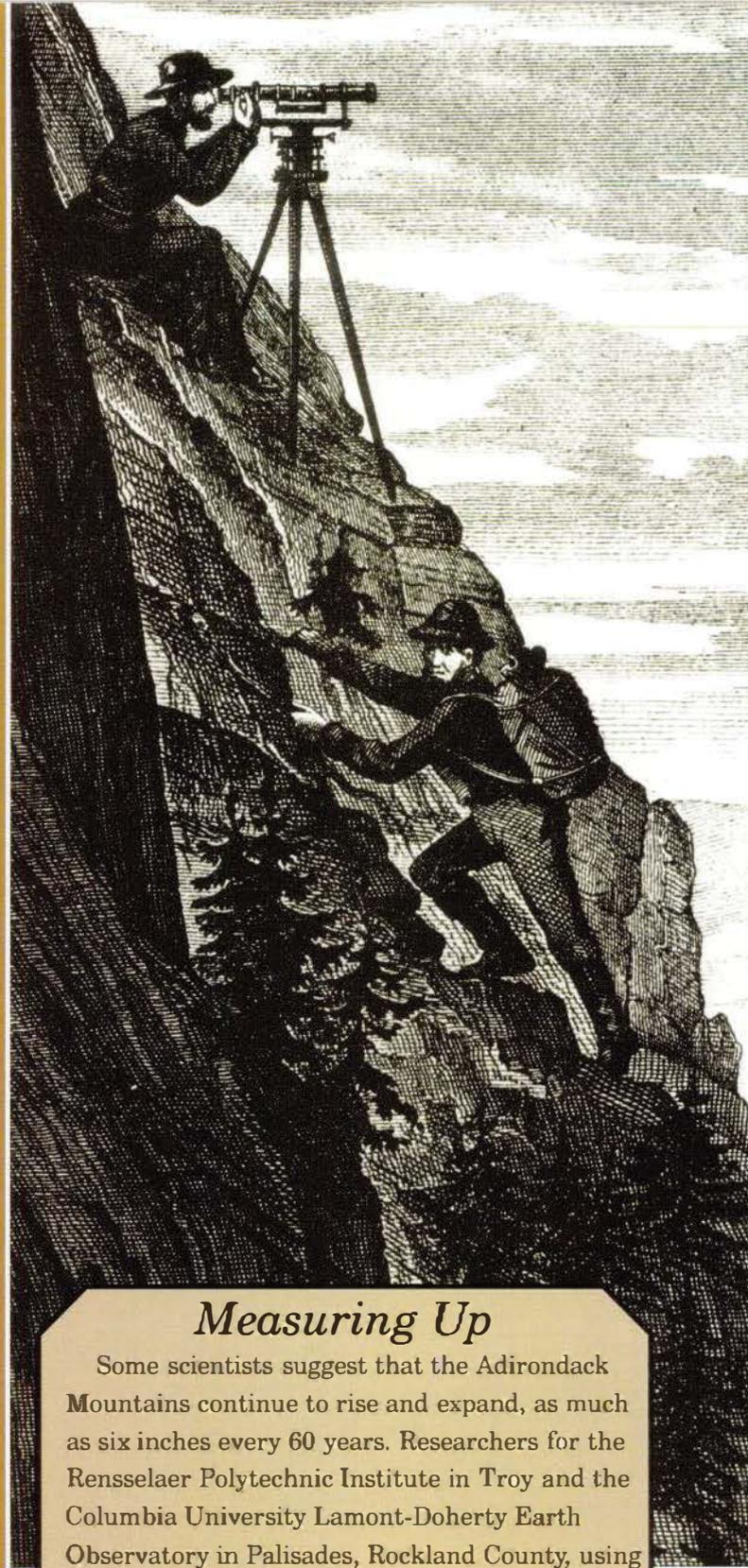
*Exploration: Camp on Hawk Lake (1879-80)*



The rocket signal was a method of approximating the location of lakes in the woods. (1873-74)



Measurements of distances using barometer and spirit-level (1873-74)



## Measuring Up

Some scientists suggest that the Adirondack Mountains continue to rise and expand, as much as six inches every 60 years. Researchers for the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy and the Columbia University Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, Rockland County, using the computer-guided Global Positioning System, take extremely precise measurements (within 1/1000th of a meter) of peak elevations, distances and angles. One early conclusion: Verplanck Colvin's surveys, more than a century old using much less sophisticated equipment, were amazingly accurate — to within one meter.



*Whiteface Mountain is measured with spirit-level and graduated rod (1879-80)*

In 1872, at the age of 25, he was appointed superintendent of the State Land Survey and joyfully undertook the massive task of mapping the almost six-million-acre “howling wilderness” of upstate New York. Colvin labored for 28 years with Mills Blake as his trusted assistant. He produced 20 annual State Reports filled with inventions, calculations, vivid prose, lithographs, maps and observations on Adirondack natural history. He was a veritable genius.

Logistically, Colvin faced a staggering job. He wrote: “It is immense, this woodlot of ours. Three million acres of tangled forest in the interior occupy the center of the district .... The State of New Jersey ... [would] fall far within the limits of ... this vast northern territory. It is essentially a geodetical survey, a vast and intricate system of triangles ... and thousands of miles of distances measured ... for the purpose of obtaining a correct map thereof .... ” It became his life’s work.

His labor force ran as high as 100 men — guides, packmen, teamsters, boatmen and assistant surveyors. A surveyor earned \$104 per month and 30 cents a day was allotted per person for provisions. Alcohol was prohibited. Fatal accidents might otherwise have occurred.

The crews endured dreadful hardships — hunger, winter cold, insects, injuries, diarrhea, fevers and sore feet. In his 1886 Report Colvin stated: “It is safe to say, that in no other portion of [the] state are such ... difficulties to be encountered as in the Adirondacks.” However, exploring and surveying showed Colvin and Blake rare wonders and beauties. They thrilled to summer sunsets, rainbows, thunderheads, clear pools, unnamed lakes, deep gorges.

Colvin greatly admired his faithful guides “who labored ... long into the dark night, hewing the great fire-logs that ... made the wild winter forest laugh with their light and heat.”

Colvin gradually obtained a solid,

factual base of true positions, distances, elevations, and ownerships, and an accurate map, so that the State could move ahead with purchases and protection of the proposed park. He continually lobbied for “ ... the creation of an Adirondack Park or timber preserve ... as is the Yosemite for California .... ”

While superintendent of the survey, Colvin took pains to describe to the Legislature the razing and burning of Adirondack forests by lumbermen. It led to less water flow to the canals and for domestic use. It also caused soil erosion, clogged rivers, local droughts and the extirpation of certain wildlife and fish. Gradually, public and political support arose for a park. On May 15, 1885, the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves were established; in 1892, the Adirondack Park. The “forever wild” clause to protect state lands was approved in 1894.

Colvin’s post was abolished in 1900. He became a bitter man who continued to reside in Albany. In the winter of 1916, at the age of 69, Colvin slipped on the ice while running for a trolley. He suffered a severe concussion and grew steadily more incapacitated. Blake tried to nurse his friend at home, but eventually Colvin was declared a lunatic and committed to an asylum in Troy. There, in 1920, the energetic woodsman, surveyor, inventor, author and artist weakened and died.

Now you know about the man who helped create this breathtaking, beautiful park for all to enjoy and who helped preserve for millions of New Yorkers clean drinking water and fine recreational opportunities. We can show our appreciation and gratitude by cherishing and protecting this special place. As Colvin wrote: “The Adirondack Wilderness may be considered the wonder and glory of New York.”

**Anne LaBastille** lives in a log cabin in the Adirondack Park with her two German shepherd dogs. She is a wildlife ecologist, lecturer and author whose latest book is *Woodswoman III, West of the Wind* Publications, Westport, NY 12993.

*Footsteps Through the Adirondacks: The Verplanck Colvin Story*, by Nina H. Webb. 193 pages. North Country Books, 311 Turner St., Utica, NY 13501. \$25.

*Adirondack Explorations: Nature Writings of Verplanck Colvin*, compiled and edited by Paul Schaefer. 254 pages. Syracuse University Press, 1600 Jamesville Ave., Syracuse, NY 13244-5160. 1-800-365-8929. \$29.95.

### Reviewed by Edith Pilcher

Two new books about Verplanck Colvin, New York State's first surveyor, will delight those interested in the Adirondacks. Both are fascinating to read and they complement each other.

Nina Webb already is known throughout the North Country from popular lectures and workshops relating to her replication of Colvin's portable boat and some of his signaling devices. Her "informal biography" reflects her interest in Colvin's character and motivation as she strives to identify the driving forces behind Colvin's lifelong dedication to surveying and mapping the Adirondacks.

She explores the formative influences in Colvin's life, including some previously unpublished bits of information about his family life, early education, youthful friends and hobbies, his adventurous spirit, remarkable stamina and frustration at being too young to soldier in the Civil War. Colvin emerges as a vibrant, sensitive young man, bored by routine work but keen on outdoor rambles and explorations. He is frustrated in love, humiliated by rejection and striving for recognition of his extraordinary abilities in such diverse fields as literature, applied mathematics, science and outdoor skills.

Paul Schaefer's book is largely a compilation of some of Colvin's most descriptive writings, particularly those seminal documents which helped mold political thought and public opinion, and which contributed to the establishment of the Adirondack Park and the Forest Preserve. These include:

- ❖ A short autobiography from the 1882 Legislative Manual;



Verplanck Colvin  
"Father of the Adirondack Park"

- ❖ Background and methodology of the Adirondack Survey from the same source, with a brief history of earlier Adirondack maps and their many flaws;

- ❖ Colvin's 1885 speech at the New York Board of Trade & Transportation that explains the relationship between water-storage capacity of the Adirondack forests to water supplies for the cities; navigable water levels in the Hudson River and the Erie Canal, and power generation;

- ❖ Early explorations in the Helderbergs and Colorado;

- ❖ Albany lectures about a bear hunt, his portable boat and Mt. Marcy winter fauna.

Readers will enjoy Schaefer's selection of some relatively obscure Colvin writings (many drawn from DEC archives), as well as some complete reports and generous excerpts from longer books. Of particular interest is a description of the earliest Adirondack surveyors working on the boundaries of the Totten and Crossfield Purchase:

*Equipped with rude magnetic compasses and clumsy chains; burdened with weighty packs of provender; and armed with axes, knives and rifles, we see the first surveyors in the wilderness ... [T]hese worthy servants of King George the Third, having left behind them the navigable waters, scrambling on hands and knees up ledges and the steep sides of nameless mountains, struggling under packs more heavy than those of any pilgrim; dragging the chains up slopes ... [T]hey unconsciously entered the region of magnetic iron ore...when the needle, as though bewitched, ... turned every way under the influence of the strong polarity of the loadstone rock ...*

Colvin's history of Adirondack mapping in his 1882 survey report traced a century of confusion and disputes about boundaries and locations to the mistakes caused by magnetic deflection. He marveled that explorers and travelers of his day were more interested in the remote areas of the polar regions of darkest Africa than in the unexplored wilderness of "our own great State of New York, ... the topography of which we knew proportionately as little as the heart of Equatorial Africa."

Adirondack enthusiast and schol-

## Letters

ar Schaefer, who died in 1995, planned this book over many years but did not live to see it in its final form. He includes a touching acknowledgment of assistance from David Greene, a grandson, whom he describes as "his eyes and ears during the last couple of years."

It is no coincidence that prefatory material in both books has been written by Norman J. Van Valkenburgh, retired director of lands and forests for DEC. Himself an author and Adirondack historian, Van Valkenburgh is a longtime Colvin admirer and a friend to both authors. It was his own writings on the history of the Forest Preserve and the "Blue Line" drawn by Colvin around the great Adirondack watershed which first directed attention to the historic significance of Colvin's work.

Although Colvin's last years were darkened by detractors, he never doubted the importance of his self-chosen mission. His description of himself as "indomitable" has been cited as mere evidence of vanity. Most readers will see it, rather, as evidence of his sense of destiny.

Edith Pilcher of Eagle Bay, Herkimer County, is the author of three histories and numerous articles on the Adirondacks and is one of the founders of the Adirondack Research Library in Schenectady.

### Write Here

Send your letters and questions to: *The Conservationist*, 50 Wolf Road, Albany, NY

The fax number is (518) 457-0858. Include name, address and daytime telephone number. Letters may be edited for length and clarity. Photographs and other materials will be returned only if accompanied by SASE.

### NYS Parks Guide

It's been several years since I've lived in New York, but *The Conservationist* always reminds me of what I miss most. Thank you for the special edition on New York State Parks (April 1997). I have many fond memories of pleasant times spent at these wonderful places. I especially recall visits to the terrific island campgrounds of Lake George and weekend excursions to the Catskills. New York's state parks are truly a treasure.

Shirley Langman  
Venice, Florida

### Sock Yarn

Since I've heard from two distant pals in other states in the last week asking about my health and employment, maybe I need to get the record straight after reading the Editor's Note in the February edition.

I am the R.G. Case who wrote the letter to the magazine in 1979 about the painting "A Soldier's Socks." I was then — and continue to be — employed by the Syracuse Newspapers, since 1979 as a columnist for the *Herald-Journal* and *Herald American*.

And yes, that *New York Folklore Quarterly* article of mine in 1967 is still the most complete story on this very unusual piece of folk art.

Dick Case  
Syracuse

### Cover to Cover

The quality of the photography is always one of the great delights of *The Conservationist*. But I beg to differ with your choice of covers for the April 1997 edition. True, the scene of the mallard mother and her brood on the front cover is charming. But I would have

swapped it with the striking lake scene with the lighthouse on the inside back cover. It was a tasty dessert at the end of another fulfilling issue.

Maria Torres  
Queens, New York City

*Editor's Note: Both photos were taken by Neil Satterly, the chief of audio/visual services for DEC in Albany. The Conservationist invites contributions from freelance photographers, artists and writers. For more information, send a stamped, self-addressed, business envelope to: Contributor's Guide, The Conservationist, 50 Wolf Road, Albany, NY 12233-4502. Please do not send samples until you've read the Guide.*

### White Robin

As lifelong residents of New York, we have truly grown to love the seasonal changes. As spring approached, we waited for the robins to return and what we saw was unique. You may want to share this photograph with your readers. Could you tell us if this white robin is rare or unique?

Carl & Cory Arson  
Eden, Erie County  
Alan Mapes, head of environmental education for DEC in Albany and an experienced birdwatcher: Rare, perhaps; unique, no; but certainly uncommon.

