

## RECOVERY #19

### *A report on the activities of the Colvin Crew in and around Lake Tear of the Clouds, September 11-13, 2009*

In recognition of the 400-year anniversary of the discovery of the Hudson River (1609-2009), the Colvin Crew conducted its most ambitious recovery to date by “following in the footsteps” of our namesake to the highest pond source of the Hudson River, which is located on the southwest slope of Mt. Marcy. From the outlet of this pond the waters contained within, flow southerly for 300± miles to its terminus with the Atlantic Ocean.

A brief review of the Hudson River’s exploration history shows that starting in 1609 with the simultaneous explorations of this river system by Samuel D. Champlain and Henry Hudson, it would take 263 years to have its full length explored with the last discovery of its source being performed by Colvin on September 16, 1872.

Our objective was to recover the various benchmarks Mills Blake had established in 1880 along the trail from Lake Tear of the Clouds to Sanford Lake. Additionally, the nearby primary triangulation stations located on the summits of Mt. Marcy and Mt. Skylight would be searched for. The “crew” expended twenty-one hours of hiking and searching over the course of three days in pursuit of this recovery.

#### **An incomplete history of V. Colvin’s Lake Tear of the Clouds activities:**

Based solely upon the field notes I have reviewed, it appears that Mr. Colvin and his crews visited this lake on at least five separate occasions during the performance of his official duties (1872-1900) and are presented here in chronological order:



Lake Tear of the Clouds, circa 1888,  
Seneca Ray Stoddard, Library of Congress

surface elevation by comparing simultaneous barometer readings with that of the Dudley Observatory in Albany, New York. So now with the headwaters of the Hudson River having been determined, all that was left was to give it a proper name. Colvin in his elegant writing comes through with “Far above the chilly waters of Lake Avalanche at an elevation of 4,326 feet is *summit water*, a minute unpretending *tear-of-the-clouds* as it were, a lonely pool,



Colvin (L) and Blake posing for a photo behind The “Elms” in Albany, N.Y.

**September 16, 1872---** While Colvin was certainly not the first person to see Lake Tear from the summit of Mt. Marcy; he is generally credited with the first actual visit to its shoreline. So it would appear that prior to 1872, it was only viewed by hikers from the summit of Mt. Marcy who had erroneously reported that its waters appeared to flow easterly into the Lake Champlain watershed. Colvin corrects this assumption with the following description, “the little pond was a red letter point in this survey, for we found it, as I had long surmised, not flowing to the Ausable as has been represented, but to the Hudson River - an inaccuracy of the maps, which is perhaps the best proof that we were the first to ever really visit it”.<sup>1</sup> Continuing on with this first visit, Colvin then obtained the lake’s

<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Report, detailing field work for the year 1872, submitted to the N.Y.S. Legislators on March 10, 1873 (Page 277 of Appendix D to 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report)

shivering in the breezes of the mountains and sending its limpid surplus through Feldspar Brook to the Opalescent River, the well spring of the Hudson”.<sup>2</sup> So there it is, the first mention of the name Lake Tear of the Clouds. I surmise that Colvin based it upon either a derivative of the Indian name for Mt. Marcy, “Tahawus” which has been roughly translated to mean “cleaver of the clouds” or perhaps the tear drop shape of this little pond frequently obscured by the clouds.

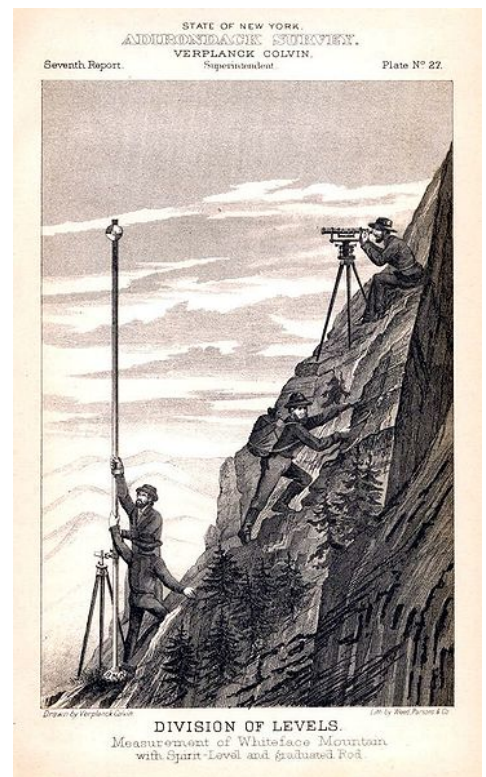
**August 28, 1873** --- Colvin is at the shores of this pond for the second time, verifying his barometric measurement of the previous year and comparing the elevation of Lake Tear of the Clouds to that of Moss



Pond, located a mile or so southerly. Moss Pond was found to be 14'± lower in elevation. Of this second visit, Colvin writes: “In verification of my previous discovery of the loftiest pond source of the Hudson, we obtain the definite and permanent settlement of an interesting question, and hand over to geography the course of the mighty river from the lone lakelet spring, downward by steps of foam, to its broad haughty and historic tide. From the loftiest lakelet of New York the water descends, gathering volume at every brook, till in full breadth it swells before the wharves and piers of the metropolis, floating the richly burdened ships of all the nations”.<sup>3</sup>

**August 31, 1874** ---Colvin writes the following in regards to his stadia measurements and mapping of Lake Tear of the Clouds, which was conducted during a period of dense smoke and haze created by nearby forest fires, “The atmosphere smoky and hazy beyond all our experience, having a fairly reddish smoke tinge it was useless to attempt any angular measurements on Marcy so I proceeded to Lake Tear of the Clouds to obtain its precise length and breadth by stadia measurements. A map of the form of this little mountain pool was also obtained and from near the eastern end I sketched the appearance of the lake at evening as the sun rather fading away in the dense haze than sinking—colored the sky with strange, lurid tints, which the darkening mirror of the lake threw back in lessened brilliancy”.<sup>4</sup>

**The year 1875** ---Wanting to firm up his barometric elevations with the more precise method of establishing elevations by level runs, Colvin undertakes the herculean task of bringing in an established elevation by spirit level. Commencing at an existing benchmark (BM 1), having an elevation of 101.988' above the tide, on the shores of Lake Champlain at Westport, N.Y., assistants Nichols and Blake began the arduous task of establishing BM 111 on the summit of Mt. Marcy (elev. 5,343.611 above tide).<sup>5</sup> While this is only a distance of 24± miles as the crow flies, the actual distance as measured along the route covered over 40± miles of extremely steep and rugged ground. A separate line was then extended off of this main line at BM 98 (Branch C) to Lake Tear of the Clouds resulting in a new benchmark (BM 1) being established on a rock 6.104' above the lakes surface.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>2</sup> 1st Annual Report, detailing field work for the year 1872, submitted to the N.Y.S. Legislators on March 10, 1873 (Page 286 of Appendix D to 2nd Annual Report)

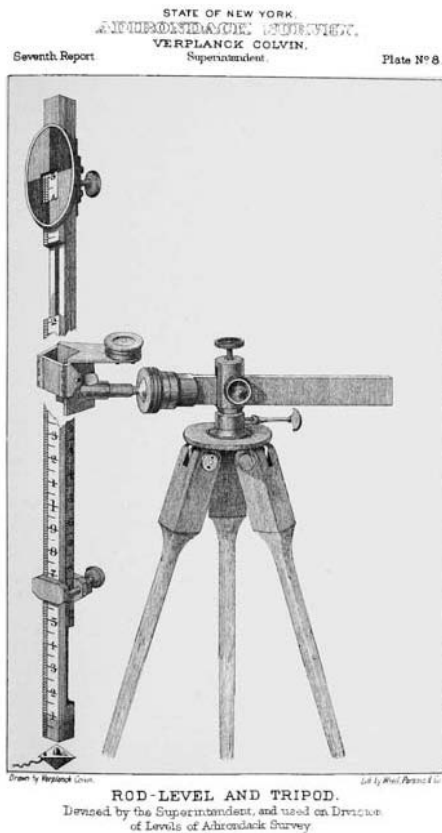
<sup>3</sup> 2nd Annual Report, detailing field work for the year 1873, submitted to the N.Y.S. Legislators on April 21, 1874, Page 159

<sup>4</sup> 7th Annual Report, detailing field work for the years 1874-1878, submitted to the N.Y.S. legislators on March 7, 1879, Page 130

<sup>5</sup> 7th Annual Report, detailing field work for the years 1874-1878, submitted to the N.Y.S. legislators on March 7, 1879, Page 259-270

<sup>6</sup> Barometer = 4,326' Spirit Level = 4,322'. A difference of only four feet, which is a testament to Colvin's procedures.

**July 23, 1880** ---The last notable visit to this pond is found in the personal diary of Mills Blake. Here we find Colvin's boyhood friend and longtime assistant Mills Blake solidly in charge of the "Division of Levels" extending the line southwesterly by way of Feldspar Brook, the Opalescent River and Calamity Brook, down to Sanford Lake. Along this line, Mills Blake would set eighteen benchmarks, mostly comprised of "circles and figures" cut into the stones.<sup>7</sup> So it is the unsung hero, Mills Blake that we owe this trip to, for it is by his efforts, which were performed in Colvin's absence that we have any marks to recover at all. In Blake's own words, this is all that he writes concerning this level line:



*July 23, 1880:* "Opens warm and cloudy, up at 5:00 AM, breakfast and shouldering our packs at 7:00 AM we start for Marcy, after a hard and warm climb we being heavily loaded reach the junction camp (4 corners) at 1:30 PM, find the roof down, send the guides back for rest of baggage. Lee and myself proceed to BM 1 at Lake Tear of Clouds, by 7:00 PM we had carried the line forward 1,295 feet, return to junction camp to find our guides have not yet returned, we make our own supper and spread the tent over the roof which is in a very dilapidated condition, while getting supper a rabbit came into camp and Lee shot it, rains very hard during the night and we get slightly wet. Mr. Pruyne has a lame foot having strained it during the day"<sup>8</sup>  
*July 24, 1880:* "Opens cloudy and cool, had the rabbit for breakfast, Mr. Prune has so far recovered from his lameness that he is able to go down to Lake Colden, we then pack up and proceed down to the mouth of Feldspar Brook and build camp, rains most of the day, do no work on the line today, quite cold tonight".<sup>9</sup>

### Recovery notes of the "Colvin Crew" -----

Friday, September 11, 2009:

Eight members of the Colvin Crew, along with the superintendent, assembled at the "Upper Works" trailhead at 10:00 AM. Packs were shouldered and the long march to our night's quarters at Lake Colden began promptly at 10:30 AM. After a steady hike of about three hours, the crew regrouped and broke for lunch next to the "Henderson Monument"<sup>10</sup> at Calamity Pond to search for our first point. Although Mills Blake tied the location of BM 10 to the Henderson Monument, no evidence of it could be found after a careful search. Upon the arrival of an additional crewmember, we set off for the Flowed Lands and Lake Colden. Arriving shortly at the Flowed Lands, an inspection was made of the old canal and dam that were used to divert the flow of water via Calamity Brook to the iron ore furnace at the MacIntyre Mines. The flow has since been returned to



<sup>7</sup> Field Book 160, Pages 1-27

<sup>8</sup> Field Book 243, Page numbers not evident

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Henderson was the manager of the MacIntyre (Adirondack) Iron Works and met his untimely death here on September 3, 1845

its normal course down the Opalescent. We then continued on to Lake Colden and by 4:30 PM we were fortunate to find two lean-to's available. After dinner, the crew took a short hike to the shore of Lake Colden and enjoyed the view of Mt. Colden. On the way back to our night's camp and in near darkness, a hiker was encountered who had come in from the ADK Lodge to the north. You can imagine the superintendent's surprise when this individual stated she was hoping to meet up with the Colvin Crew and join the group for the trip to Lake Tear. To say I was speechless is a mild understatement. There we were, miles from anywhere, standing in the dark in the heart of the Adirondacks and somebody is looking for the Colvin Crew. We now numbered eleven.

View of the Flowed Lands, looking north with Mt. Colden in the distance.  
Photo courtesy of T. Storey.



Saturday, September 12, 2009:

The big day had finally arrived and we were now in position to make the final assault on our objective. Trivial matters like a hike of 3.6± miles one-way with a vertical ascent of 1,700 feet were before us in order to reach our primary objective of Lake Tear. By 8:30 AM we were on the trail ascending along the Opalescent River. As we were in essence following the same route Mills Blake took, brief searches were made for various BM's. Two were found, BM 2 and 5. By the time the ¾ mile long 40% grade along Feldspar Brook was reached, the superintendent was thoroughly questioning his thought pattern. But at last, the outlet of Lake Tear of the Clouds was reached. The crew reformed around a large rock in the marshy area located easterly of the main body of water and had lunch. During this



lunch break, shouts arose from the crew heralding the arrival of the most senior member of our party, 76 years young, C. Donald Carpenter, Jr. With his arrival, we were now at full strength and a serious search was made for BM 1. Unfortunately, BM 1 was not ready to reveal its location to us and after an

BM 5 located at the confluence of Uphill Brook and the Opalescent River Discovered by our newest member, Gregg Pawlowski



BM 6

hour or so of diligent searching, the group gathered around the lunch rock where the superintendent then read a brief history of the Hudson River to the crew. Our two newest members were welcomed to the crew and presented with the coveted stan-helio membership pin. As the crux of our objective was now complete, the group separated into three parties. One party headed for the summit of Mt. Marcy, another headed for Skylight and the third started the long descent down to Lake Colden. As the peaks were fogged in and a steady mist had developed, the superintendent was in this third group. On the return trip, BM 6 was recovered thereby bringing our total to three points being found. A long hike ensued back to camp, but some time was spent viewing the spectacular "flumes"

found along the Opalescent River. With the last party arriving back at camp at 6:30 PM, came the news that an original "old style" Colvin bolt was found on the summit of Mt. Skylight. This happens to be the same bolt that Colvin drew a picture of and submitted in his 2nd Annual Report, however the date is different.



Sunday, September 13, 2009:

After a well-deserved slumber, the crew reformed at 10:00 AM for the hike out to our vehicles. Along the way additional BM's were looked for and the Henderson Monument area was re-visited. No additional points were recovered and the crew arrived at the trailhead by 3:00 PM. Thanks to the foresight of one of our members, properly chilled refreshments were awaiting us. The superintendent was again surprised to hear the name of the Colvin Crew spoken by a third party. This time it was by DEC Ranger looking for a lost party of hikers. He had heard we were in the same area and was inquiring to see if we had any additional information. During our conversation, a radio report came in that the hikers had been found. Our fame is surely growing!

Parting notes:

While I normally reserve this space to commend the crew on their ability and desire to "follow in the footsteps" of our namesake, I am going to switch sides here. Having completed this trip, my thoughts turn to what an incredible undertaking it must have been for Colvin to perform his work 137 years ago. The sheer logistics and remoteness of the region is incredible. It should be noted that the trail we used to access Lake Tear did not exist until three years after Colvin first visited this area. Orson "Old Mountain" Phelps reportedly cut the first trail in to Lake Tear around 1875±. In any event, Colvin's exploits in this rugged and majestic area are truly remarkable and worthy of high praise. So this time, my hat's off to Verplanck Colvin.

Respectfully submitted,  
James M. Vianna, L.S.  
Superintendent, Colvin Crew



The "Crew" standing upon the same island in Lake Tear of the Clouds as shown in V. Colvin's 1874 painting

*The COLVIN CREW is an honorable organization formed for the purpose of perpetuating the Adirondack doings and dreams of that pioneer surveyor,*

**VERPLANCK COLVIN**

[www.colvincrew.org](http://www.colvincrew.org)