

Mapping Mastermind - Verplanck Colvin

Preview Segment

The star of this episode is a man named Verplanck Colvin. He was an important figure in Adirondack history. He and his team surveyed the Adirondack region. Surveying means he examined and recorded the features of the land in order to create an accurate map.

You may already know that the Adirondack Experience has maps of the Adirondacks dating back to the 1700s. So, why would Verplanck Colvin need to spend 28 years surveying the ADK to make more? Listen in and find out that and other interesting facts about this early adk mastermind.

TRANSITION - ADKX Podcast Intro - Ready to earn some extra credit? You are listening to ADKX-tra Credit, a podcast for students about the history of the Adirondack Mountains and the people that have lived, worked, and played here. The Adirondack Experience, the Museum on Blue Mountain Lake, is located in the heart of the Adirondack Park of New York State.

CONTENT

First of all, let me tell you a little bit about Verplanck Colvin. He lived from 1847 until 1920. His family was well-to-do; meaning they had plenty of money and possessions. They lived in Albany, New York. His father was a respected and well known lawyer.

Verplanck was a real geek! He was very smart and interested in finding out more about a wide range of topics. Here's just some of the topics that interested him: geology, geography, astronomy, writing, drawing, nature, mechanical engineering, and military history. He was also an animal lover and great at public speaking. Phew!

What does someone with interests that wide ranging do for a living when they grow up? Well, the truth is that Verpalnck Colvin started out working for his father in his law office, although law was not where his heart was. Luckily he had a good friend from his school days, a guy named Mills Blake. He was able to get Mills a job in his dad's law office as well. So, for a while it wasn't too terrible.

TRANSITION - sounds

Verplanck Colvin isn't remembered in Adirondack history for being a lawyer. So, his story starts for us when he began to pursue his true interests in nature and engineering.

He spent time in the Adirondack region hiking and generally having adventures when he was young. During that time he observed a few things that would affect his entire life.

One of those things he noticed was that the maps for the Adirondacks were not good at all. During his camping and hiking trips he would make note of errors on the current maps. He realized pretty quickly that new ones were needed if the area was ever going to be more populated or attract more tourists for outdoor adventures.

The other thing that bothered him during his trips to the Adirondack Mountains was that lumber and mining companies were cutting trees and clearing the land in ways that were not healthy for the environment. And this was a long time before people really started thinking and talking about the environment. He was one of the first people who said "Hey, we need to take care of the earth!" But I'm afraid he said it in a much more long winded way.

TRANSITION - another voice

The Adirondack wilderness contains the springs which are the sources of our principal rivers, and the feeders of the canals. Each summer the water supply for these rivers and canals have lessened, and commerce has suffered....

The immediate cause has been the chopping and burning off of vast tracts of forest in the wilderness which have hitherto sheltered...

The remedy for this is an Adirondack Park or timber preserve...these forests should be preserved and for posterity set aside...

TRANSITION - sounds

In 1872 he was assigned the job of Superintendent of the Adirondack Survey. This began his dream job. He left his fathers law offices behind and began to survey the Adirondack region of NY. It was an immense job and he didn't do it by himself. Again he hired his bff Mills Blake to help him. I mentioned before that he worked surveying the Adirondacks for 28 years. Some years, especially in the beginning, he had many other surveyors and Adirondack guides. He organized teams to work in different sections. They had to make very detailed reports and had very detailed processes to follow. It was kind of like a class teaming up for projects with a teacher that has really, really high standards.

Some years he only had a handful of men working for him. It depended on how much money he was given to complete the task each year. Some jobs are like that, the

amount of money that is available to pay people and buy supplies goes up and down. Some years you have plenty of money to get the job done and some years you don't and getting things done is tough. Because they had so much area to survey and had lots and lots of equipment to carry into and around the remote wilderness, they really needed a big staff.

The beginning years for Verplanck were great. Especially that first year, because he got to find and buy lots of cool tools for the job. Both Verplanck Colvin and Mills Blake were interested in mechanical engineering so outfitting the teams with equipment for the job was especially fun. And they learned a lot, which is always fun, too. In addition to clothing, shelter, food and other basics like that they need lots of technical gear to do the work. Things like compasses, thermometers, barometers, and so on. One piece of gear that they used was a theodolite. It weighed 300 pounds and needed to be treated very carefully.. A theodolite is an instrument with a rotating telescope for measuring horizontal and vertical angles. It's very delicate. Imagine carrying that up and down mountain trails!

Over the years of the survey, Verplanck also built some tools that were of his own design. More about a couple of those later.

TRANSITION - sounds

You may be wondering why the earlier maps of the area were not good. Why so much equipment? Why did it take 28 years! Of course, long ago they didn't have the technology we have today that provides us with such accurate mapping. No GPS, no satellites, none of that. Early maps relied on compasses. And early map makers could make good, not great, but pretty good maps using compasses. The problem here in the Adirondacks is that the iron ore in the rock creates a strong pull to magnetic north instead of true north. It's like getting directions to the cafeteria and ending up at the principal's office.

Verplanck realized that he and his teams would need to use a mathematical technique called triangulation. It's kind of hard to explain. Basically with triangulation you start with two points that you know. You know how far apart those first two points are. So, they are the first side of your triangle. The third point of your triangle is the place where you don't know how far it is. You use the known side to create the other two sides of the triangle. Crazy, right? Now taking 28 years makes a little more sense. It was like they were piecing together a gigantic puzzle and all the pieces were triangles. The most important thing to know about all this is that Verplanck's measurements and calculations were nearly as accurate as today's high tech calculations.

TRANSITION - sounds

Two of Verplanck's inventions really stand out. The Stan-Helios and the canvas boat.

Like triangulation the Stan-Helios is something that is a bit hard to describe. You just have to see one. They were giant reflecting devices. Colvin realized pretty early on that standing on one mountain and trying to see a signal from another mountain top was pretty hard. His team cleared the mountain tops of trees, but it was still difficult. So he created these devices, the Stan-Helios to solve the problem. They are towers that have lightweight metal on the top. The metal pieces rotate in the wind and sun creating a signal that can be seen from far away.

The canvas boat was exactly what it sounds like; a boat made from canvas; a fabric that is tough but lightweight. They needed a vehicle that would carry the men and gear, but could be easily carried into remote areas. Verplanck's canvas boat rolled up for carrying and then when unrolled the men cut tree boughs to act as the frame. When they were done they just got rid of the boughs. It was waterproof because the canvas was treated with rubber. It sounds pretty ingenious!

TRANSITION - sounds

Verplanck Colvin was, of course, more than a surveyor. He was a driving force behind the forest preservation that led to the creation of the ADK Park. On May 20, 1892 the Adirondack Park was created. He had started thinking about the need for a park to preserve the wilderness area as early as the 1860s. That's like way back around the time of the US Civil War!

Colvin had persisted for more than 20 years trying to convince legislators that creating a large forest preserve was in the best interest of the people of New York State.

TRANSITION - another voice

The Adirondack Wilderness may be considered the wonder and glory of New York. It is a vast natural park, one immense and silent forest, curiously and beautifully broken by gleaming waters of myriad lakes, between which rugged mountain ranges rise as a sea of granite billows.

TRANSITION - sounds

All great adventures come to an end. Verplanck's years as the Superintendent of the Adirondack survey came to end when the Governor of NY fired him. Yup. I guess he felt 28 years was long enough for this one project. Theodore Roosevelt was governor on

NYstate in 1900. We have an earlier podcast episode all about Teddy Roosevelt.

But like anybody, not everyone was Verplanck's friend. Some influential people couldn't see any value in continuing to survey the region. It was too expensive and Verplanck could be a hard man to work with. So, the end of the Adirondack Survey came and Verplanck moved on to other things.

Verplanck Colvin and his quest to survey the Adirondacks was very popular with many people. Some of his yearly reports were popular reading. His reports weren't just a dry retellings of work, He included stories and anecdotes and drawings of all the things that happened. We are thankful to Colvin for his work. A mountain was named after him. Mt. Colvin is the 39th highest peak in the Adirondacks.

TRANSITION - ADKX Podcast conclusion - Thank you for joining us for an episode of ADKX-tra Credit. This podcast is brought to you by Adirondack Experience, the museum on Blue Mountain Lake. Our mission is to expand understanding of Adirondack history and the relationship between people and the Adirondack wilderness, fostering informed choices for the future. If you want to learn more fun Adirondack history visit our website theadkx.org