

# Colvill of MINNESOTA

AL ZDON



**T**HE SUN WAS ALMOST SETTING on the hot July day in 1863. The air was filled with the thunder of cannons and small-arms fire and the acrid smoke of battle. On a gentle ridge near the cemetery just south of Gettysburg, a small band of Minnesotans held a position overlooking the warfare below. The 262 men had spent the day guarding a Union battery. Now, a general was commanding them to attack a group of Confederates on the verge of splitting the Union forces and carrying the day.

It was a suicide charge. Without hesitation, the colonel formed his men up for an attack, and down the hill they went. At first they marched in perfect order but then broke into a wild run, their bayonets gleaming in the fading sun. They crashed into the surprised men from Alabama and stopped the advance cold.



Their heroic colonel lay unmoving near the whirlwind of combat, hit twice by Confederate bullets. His last order before unconsciousness overtook him was “Take care of the men.”<sup>1</sup>

**THE CHARGE OF THE FIRST MINNESOTA** Volunteer Infantry Regiment down the slope at Cemetery Ridge is an oft-told tale in Minnesota and among Civil War historians everywhere. The bloody assault that left perhaps three out every four men dead or wounded may have saved the Union’s position on the second day of the battle. It was a heroic, perhaps an epic, example of courage in a war that never lacked for heroes. Through the war, the First Minnesota fought bravely at Bull Run, the Peninsula, Gettysburg, and a dozen other places. It had been fortunate in having good commanders and, by 1863, had taken the field behind such men as Willis Gorman, former Minnesota governor and veteran of the Mexican War, and Napoleon Dana and Alfred Sully, both West Point graduates.<sup>2</sup>

On that hot July day in southern Pennsylvania, however, the First Minnesota rallied behind a man who had no military training when he enlisted in 1861. William Colvill was a lawyer, newspaper editor, and land speculator. He was a huge man, six foot five, with a frame described by others as “burly” or “manly.” He had bristling eyebrows set over “serious, mournful eyes,” a friend later wrote.<sup>3</sup>

The man who led the First Minnesota when it earned its place in the annals of Civil War history was once a commanding historical figure in the state, remembered alongside the likes of Henry Sibley and Alexander Ramsey. Now, only vestiges of his fame are left. Since 1909 his towering visage, in the form of identical bronze statues, has glowered down on the rotunda at the state capitol and from a pedestal at his gravesite in the Cannon Falls cemetery. Some 20 years after Colvill’s death, no less a dignitary than President Calvin Coolidge attended the dedication of a plaque added to the cemetery monument, and in 1994 the site was designated the William Colvill State Monument, the only such marker dedicated to a Civil War veteran in Minnesota. A Cook County township, where he homesteaded later in life, bears the misspelled name Colville. In July 1963, Red Wing’s Colvill

*Captain William Colvill, 1861 or 1862 (before promotions), and the Colvill monument in Cannon Falls cemetery*

Park, built on land he donated to the city, was established to honor him and the regiment on the hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg; in 2000, Colvill Aquatic Center opened in this park.<sup>4</sup> While his name graces civic projects, the man himself has been largely forgotten, his career and deeds known only to those who study Civil War history.

Colvill’s life is worth another look, if only because he exemplified so well both the spirit and optimism of pioneer Minnesota and the remarkable courage of the Civil War soldier. Colvill was an archetype of his times, and his story provides a remarkable window into those days.

**WHO WAS THIS MAN?** He left no memoirs to speak of, no letters, no autobiography. His few written accounts of the battles he took part in are sometimes contradictory. Research on his life is like digging for gold, finding a nugget now and then.

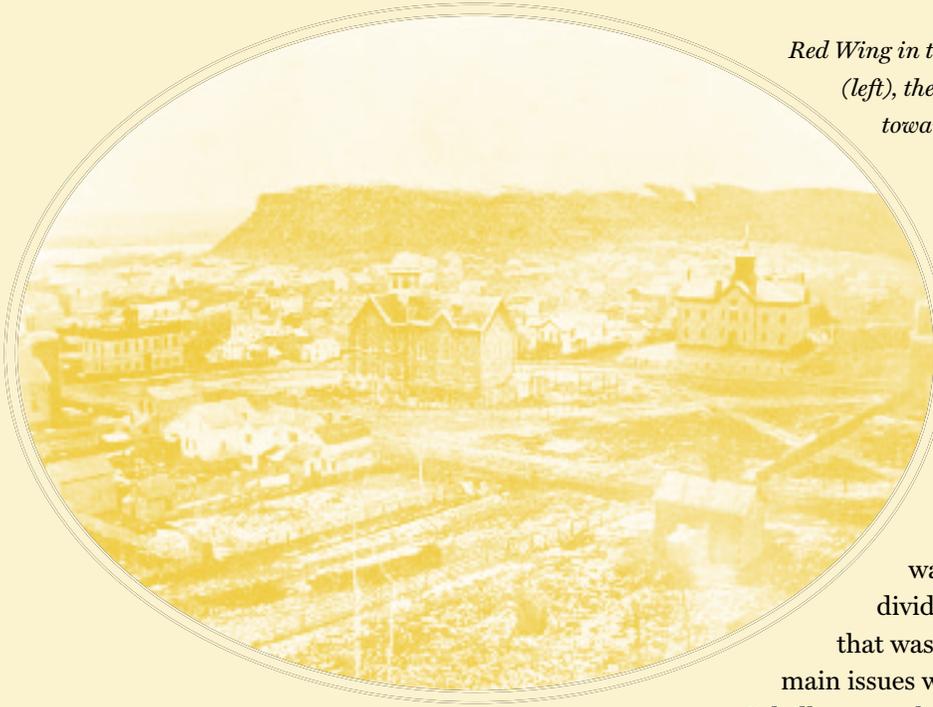
The nuggets eventually piece together an interesting and complex life. He was known by his legal peers for his clarity of thought, yet he was later recognized on the streets of Red Wing as a disheveled figure, dragging his destroyed leg down the avenue, pursued by young children and barking dogs, all of whom loved him dearly. He was a preeminent military figure, yet his demeanor and dress left much to be desired. His life after the war was characterized by a quiet, courageous struggle to stay productive despite the wounds that shattered his body.

Colvill’s family was of Scottish origin. He was born in 1830, grew up in Forestville, New York, and studied to be an attorney in the law office of Millard Fillmore in Buffalo. Fillmore was soon to be president of the United States. Colvill practiced law in his hometown for a time and then did what so many young men and women were doing in those times: he went west.<sup>5</sup>

He arrived by steamboat in Red Wing in the spring of 1854, just five years after Minnesota became a territory. He was 24 years old. For his first two years in Minnesota, Colvill split his time between Red Wing and St. Paul, where he worked at the territorial legislature.<sup>6</sup>

*Al Zdon, a Minnesota newspaper editor, is also the author of War Stories, Accounts of Minnesotans Who Defended Their Nation and One Step Forward, The Life of Ken Dahlberg. A second volume of War Stories will be published in the fall of 2009.*

*Red Wing in the 1860s, looking past Hamline University (left), the courthouse (center), and Central school (right) toward Barn Bluff*



In Red Wing, like many pioneers in his day, he held a variety of jobs as the small village grew into a robust small city. Colvill practiced law and was the county clerk, but his main work was in the burgeoning land business. Along the way, he also acquired an interest in the *Red Wing Sentinel*, and for several years before the war he was the sole editor and a voice for Democratic Party politics.<sup>7</sup>

The *Sentinel* was a feisty little newspaper, as nearly all of the Minnesota weeklies and dailies were in those days. None of the stories or editorials—it was hard to tell the difference—were signed, but it seems clear that the original efforts came from Colvill’s pen. Particularly through 1859, he seems to have hit his stride as a commentator.

**Colvill’s life is worth another look, if only because he exemplified so well both the spirit and optimism of pioneer Minnesota and the remarkable courage of the Civil War soldier.**

What might be considered somewhat outrageous today was standard journalistic style in those years. One June, for example, Colvill quoted a Chicago newspaper: “This year, 1859, it is notorious that the black-legs, the brothel keepers, and the whole class of offenders, who claim the right to violate all our laws with impunity, also

vote the Republican ticket.” In another piece aimed at James Lynd, erstwhile editor of the *Henderson Democrat* who had jumped parties, Colvill opined that the rival party “is itself mainly composed of broken down hacks and renegades from the other parties—of traitors.”<sup>8</sup>

Colvill’s real problem in those pre-war years, though, was the unbridgeable divide within the Democratic Party, a schism that was reflected in the country as a whole. The main issues were slavery and states’ rights. In 1860 Colvill gave up his editorship because he could not countenance the leadership of his own party. He wrote in a farewell piece: “Having sold my interest in the *Sentinel* to W. W. Phelps, my connection with it is with this number discontinued. During the years that it has been under my control, at least this will be allowed: That it has been independently conducted—has been subservient to no man or clique—and has preached nothing but the pure Democracy. This so far is its record!”<sup>9</sup>

The transition, however, was not without rancor. Two weeks after he sold the newspaper, Colvill was upset that Phelps editorially attacked a change in the legal system that Colvill supported. The former editor took up his sharp pen and began his piece in a rival newspaper by saying that the “newly-fledged editor of the *Sentinel* has been letting drive with all his tremendous, hydraulic power at the present system of legal practice. Now, though the editor is pretty well stuck up in the world, his underpinning is rather slim, and his stream but scanty, and as that system is elevated far above his comprehension, the result of his straining so far is that he has only made a most ridiculous spectacle of himself.” Phelps responded in the *Sentinel* that Colvill belonged to a “set of dirty dogs, whose entire *hydraulic* powers consist in squirting dirty water through a dirty squirt gun.”<sup>10</sup>

Apparently, those were fighting words. Not long thereafter, Phelps had a visit from the former editor. The rival newspaper gleefully reported on the altercation, which was a knockdown, drag-out fight that included Phelps hitting Colvill with a fire shovel and Colvill re-

taliating by pulling the editor's nose. The report listed Colvill as the victor, "and to his forbearance our neighbor [Phelps] is indebted for his ability to appear in comparatively 'good condition.'" <sup>11</sup>

This was Colvill's last foray into journalistic endeavors for a time, as he turned his attention to his law practice. That pursuit was short-lived, though, as Red Wing and the rest of the nation in the spring of 1861 were drawn into the fever of war.

**THE HEADLINE "TO ARMS! TO ARMS!"** in the *Goodhue County Republican* of April 19, 1861, left no doubt about the sentiment in the city of Red Wing.

A public meeting of the citizens of Goodhue County will be held at the Court House . . . Friday evening, the 19<sup>th</sup> inst., at 7 o'clock. In view of the public exigencies, every patriot that can attend should do so. A full complement of Infantry must and shall be organized for service of Government. —Many Citizens<sup>12</sup>

That Friday, large crowds paraded through the streets. Bands were playing and banners streaming. At 7 P.M., Judge W. H. Welch called the meeting to order. Many local dignitaries, including Colvill, gave speeches that night on the righteousness of the cause. The courtroom was packed to capacity.<sup>13</sup>

When the speeches were over, there was a call for volunteers. Dozens of young men headed purposefully to the front of the courtroom. Two of them, though, rose up and actually ran over the backs of chairs in their hurry to beat the crowd to the enrolling document. The two men were close friends: A. Edward Welch, the judge's son, and William Colvill.<sup>14</sup>

As the mad dash reached the table, Welch slipped and fell on the last seat. In falling, he reached up for the pen to be the first to inscribe his name as a Goodhue County volunteer. Just as his fingers were lurching for the writing tool, Colvill seized it. He looked down at his friend and calmly said, "You are next, Ed."

Colvill, perhaps because of his age (he had just turned 31), or his height, or his position in the community, was elected captain of the 100 men from the county. The volunteers were sent to Fort Snelling to train, and the Goodhue group became Company F of the First Minnesota, the first regiment tendered to the federal army at the outbreak of war.<sup>15</sup>

On June 22 the men boarded steamboats and headed down the Mississippi River. By the end of the month, they were in Washington, and by mid-July the regiment, along with the rest of the Army of Northeastern Virginia, was marching south to a place called Bull Run.<sup>16</sup>

The Minnesotans' role at Bull Run was to advance on the enemy and protect two batteries of federal cannon. The battle went well for the North at first, but by the time the First Minnesota was engaged, the South was bringing up reinforcements and the outcome stood in the balance on some high ground called Henry House Hill. The batteries changed hands several times during the afternoon's terrible fighting.<sup>17</sup>



*War Eagle about 1865, one of two steamboats that in 1861 carried the Red Wing men from Fort Snelling toward their encounter with war*

With more and more Confederate forces arriving, the Union forces began pulling back. Colvill was at the rear of the retreat, checking on a wounded man, when a group of Confederate soldiers wheeled onto the road just in front of him.

This startled me out suddenly as a partridge, and my movement startled them as much. Instinctively I started for the slope of the hillside towards the creek and diagonally from the road. It was but a few rods, but that distance was never made more quickly by a race horse. You should have seen me with a Secesh smooth bore on my shoulder, a large artillery sword in my hand, make my long shanks spin. There was no sign of fatigue, although before I considered myself about used up.<sup>18</sup>

As he reached the creek, he heard the chuck of muskets falling forward into the left hands of the Confederates preparing to fire.

With a mighty leap and feet thrown out I landed on my back with head crouched downwards, just below the top of the bank, and at that same instant, through the space I filled when they pulled the trigger, buzzed a hundred bullets. You should have seen the surprise—the actual astonishment in their faces, as springing up, I rushed down to and up the creek, out of fire behind the bank.

Farther up the creek, Colvill found several Union soldiers slaking their day-long thirst, but bullets soon interrupted their drinking. “A Wisconsin man dropped dead in the brook as we started. A Fire Zouave jumped the brook at my side and ran up the hill. He also dropped, but with my help reached the top and the shelter of a tree.” From there, Colvill could see the Southerners overrun the Union batteries for the final time, “leaping with huzzas.”<sup>19</sup>

Colvill joined the stream of retreating soldiers on the turnpike leading back toward Sudley Ford. There he saw Gen. Irvin McDowell. “In a quizzical humor and looking towards the enemy’s regiments, I suggested that he had better *rally* in the woods,” Colvill later said. “His face at that time was running alternately red and white with each pulsation. A whole history could be read in it at a glance. He preserved his dignity, however, and paying no attention to my impudence,” ordered a battery to retreat.<sup>20</sup>

The casualties at Bull Run were severe. In an afternoon of fighting, the First Minnesota lost 42 men killed, 108 wounded, and 30 missing—about 18 percent of the regiment.<sup>21</sup> It was a stunning introduction to war.

The day seemed to bring out the contradictions in Colvill’s personality. Laden with souvenirs, he made a remarkable escape and perhaps saved another’s life. He led his company bravely and well, and then somehow, at the end, found time to taunt his commanding general.

**THE PENINSULA CAMPAIGN OF 1862** was Union General George McClellan’s grand scheme to capture Richmond. In late March, McClellan floated his army down the Chesapeake Bay to a peninsula in southeast Virginia between the James and York Rivers. The men marched within six miles of Richmond before Robert E.

Lee pushed them all the way back to the end of the peninsula. The Seven Days Battles at the end of June were a series of sharp encounters, with the federal troops mainly giving ground.

**“When the enemy came out of the woods on the right, he had called attention to them and said, ‘Give it to them fellows!’”**

After the battle of Savage’s Station, James Wright, a fellow Red Wingite who wrote a lengthy chronicle of Company F, commented insightfully on Colvill’s character.

Captain Colvill, who had been feeling poorly for some days, had taken his place at the head of the company that morning and kept it during the day; and had said but little more than was necessary to give the required orders. He had kept close to the company while it was in action, and, when the gap was opened between our regiment and the 106<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania, he had said, “Spread out a little” and pointed in that direction. When the enemy came out of the woods on the right, he had called attention to them and said, “Give it to them fellows!” When the fight was over, he had laid down with the rest of us. He was a man of iron nerve and will, but he was not a man without feelings and sensibility. I have thought sometimes that the thermometer of his real feelings might not have registered greatly different from the rest of us if the record had been made public. But he certainly could face danger with the *greatest show of indifference* of any man I ever knew. And he was there in an emergency and ready to meet it without fuss or flourish.<sup>22</sup>

Not everyone, however, was as enamored of Colvill. Company F’s first lieutenant, Mark A. Hoyt, kept a wonderful journal full of humor and skillful drawings during that first year of war. Hoyt had quite a different view of Colvill and his orderly, Martin Maginnis, who had been a co-owner of the *Sentinel* and was a close friend of Covill. Hoyt wrote in April 1862:

Corporal Wood has been passing the day in making out muster rolls. Captain [Colvill] has had the first handling of the blanks as usual and consequently each one of them is well covered with ink and disfigured with wrinkles.

From their appearance you would presume that the Captain was an immense ink bottle sadly cracked at the bottom and that it had been rubbed over the rolls an innumerable multitude of times. The Captain is as incomprehensible a mixture of sense and nonsense—goodness and evil—precaution and carelessness, dirt and cleanliness—life and laziness as human eyes ever contemplated. Maginnis is a kind of pocket edition of the same inexplicable character. . . . What Colvill don't know Maginnis will tell you has yet to be revealed to man. The first holds the keys to the temple of universal wisdom, the latter borrows them now and then, makes an entry and an investigation and returns glorifying the inevitable Colvill. They are companions in late rising and in the love of ease they are not divided.<sup>23</sup>

On June 30, as the retreat continued, snipers were busy picking off Union troops. Colvill took a bullet in his left breast, a few inches above his heart and a serious wound. As one soldier reported in a letter home, "Captain Colville was wounded in the shoulder and compelled to leave the field. On being hit he said to those men near him, 'Say nothing about it' and picking up his sword walked away."<sup>24</sup>

*Sick and wounded, including men of the First Minnesota, Savage's Station, Virginia, June 1862*

Colvill relieved himself of command. Assistant Regimental Surgeon Daniel Hand took up the story at that point.

Before sunset I found among the wounded coming to the rear Captain Colville of the First Minnesota. Finding a quiet fence corner for him near Frazier's house, I slipped off his coat and found a ball had entered his chest two inches below the left collar-bone. It was a dangerous wound, and I told him he must keep quiet. Other wounded men occupied my attention and it was near midnight when Colonel Sully sent me word he was on the Quaker road, moving towards Malvern Hill, and for me to follow. I had left my horse hitched near Captain Colville, and when I went back and told him we were retreating, and he must be left behind, he just pulled his tall form from under the fence and said, "No he would not be left." I did not think he could



*Alfred Sully, immortalized in a Napoleonic pose by photographer*

*David Frances Barry*



make the march, and we had no sort of conveyance; but Major Morgan, of the First Minnesota, came round hunting for his men, and offered to let the captain ride his horse. Captain Colville would not accept that, but took a firm grip of the horse's tail, and off they started.

The wounded captain walked 15 miles to the James River, where the retreating Union forces were embarking on boats to leave the peninsula. He was treated at a field hospital at Malvern Hill and then taken by boat to an army hospital in Baltimore where he stayed until August. Upon release, he returned briefly to his birthplace in Forestville but soon heard that the First Minnesota was heading to the vicinity of Washington. Not completely healed, he nevertheless hurried to rejoin his company. He arrived on August 31 with four others who had been wounded in previous battles. Wright recalled in his memoir, "We were all glad to welcome back the absent ones and to see the tall form of the captain at the head of the company again."<sup>25</sup>

Colvill would not stay long with Company F, however. In quick succession he was made major and then, by the end of 1862, lieutenant colonel, second in command of the regiment. In May 1863 George Morgan, the commander, resigned after a long illness. Colvill was promoted to colonel and took command of the regiment.<sup>26</sup>

**AN AURA HAD BUILT UP** around the First Minnesota, variously called the "Old First" or the "Veteran First." Its previous commander, Alfred Sully, added to the lore at Fredericksburg when he proclaimed, "The First Minnesota never runs." Colvill himself was quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* as saying, "The First Minnesota will hold its position even if it has to load with trouser buttons."<sup>27</sup>

Historian John Quinn Imholte noted that Colvill's promotion had a mixed reception, consistent with the opinions of Wright and Hoyt. "Colvill was well liked by the men, although they considered him to be without military skill. His bravery was apparent to all, but his demeanor was immature." Other commentary supports this picture. Seventeen-year-old Charles Goddard's letter to his mother reveals, "Colvell is a very brave man, but is no very grate perrade pet." William Lochren, a veteran of the First Minnesota who later wrote the official history of the Minnesota regiments in the war, agreed that Colvill never shone in a dress parade: "[He was] careless in everything in the nature of mere display." Yet, as Imholte concluded,

"Within two months he would acquire a military reputation unrivaled by any Minnesotan before or since."<sup>28</sup>

#### **IN THE LATE SPRING**

**OF 1863**, General Lee began his most daring excursion yet. He and his army of 70,000 seasoned veterans ventured north into Pennsylvania, living off the bountiful farm-

lands. The Union army of 85,000 wheeled around, keeping itself between Lee and the capital at Washington.

The First Minnesota was part of this long march, and near Haymarket, Virginia, on June 25, an artillery shell hit Colvill's horse in the hind legs, throwing rider and mount onto the muddy road. Colvill was fortunate. He was able to clear the stirrups, and the horse did not land on him. "But he was well plastered with a coating of dull, red Virginia mud. The colonel gave a fine exhibition of the cool nerve with which he was accustomed to good or ill fortune," Wright related. Colvill ordered the horse shot and sent his orderly, Milton Bevans (Maginnis had been promoted), to save his saddle and bridle and find another horse. Carrying his personal effects, Colvill led the march on foot. Within an hour or so, "Mit" returned with another horse, and Colvill once again led his regiment while mounted.<sup>29</sup>

At the Monocacy River south of Gettysburg on June 29, the First Minnesota was ordered to avoid a crude log bridge and wade the river. Despite the heat and the knowledge that wet boots made for blistering feet, the regiment, according to most accounts, did splash through the river. A little later, however, the officer who had demanded the unpopular slog was greeted with a "barnyard chorus . . . there seemed to have been an accession of dogs and cats to the ranks," Wright reported. Colvill and the commander of the nearby Fifteenth Massachusetts were arrested and relieved of command. On the eve of what portended to be a critical battle, Colvill found himself in disgrace and deprived of his job.<sup>30</sup>

The men of the First Minnesota were angry at losing their leader. They "expressed desires to mar" the arrest-



*Charles Goddard, tintype, about 1862; the 17-year-old would be wounded in the charge at Gettysburg.*

**“The First Minnesota will hold its position even if it has to load with trouser buttons.”**

ing officer’s “visage with a boot heel or the butt of a musket, and some even suggested the use of the other end of the gun in the usual way,” Wright recorded. “However, strong as was our resentment, it was clearly understood that our colonel was in disgrace wholly on our account, and any further demonstration on our part would only make a bad matter worse.” Colvill, marching at the rear of his regiment, urged the men to “drop it for his sake.”

Very early on the morning of July 2, the Minnesotans marched off to Cemetery Ridge. After two days under house arrest and with the battle looming, Colvill rode to find the brigade commander, Gen. William Harrow. He saluted and said, “General Harrow, the prospect is that we are to have a battle today. I should like to have command of my regiment. I would be greatly obliged to you if you would relieve me from arrest.” Harrow responded, “That is right, colonel, you shall have command. You are relieved.”<sup>31</sup>

Colvill’s return “was received with a spontaneous outburst of cheering and clapping of hands,” Wright recalled. “The welcome he received ought to have pleased

any man, and no doubt did please him immensely, but he only said, ‘Keep still boys. D–n it; can’t you keep quiet?’”<sup>32</sup>

The heroism of the First Minnesota at Gettysburg is legendary. They had watched the battle through the day from the ridge. When ordered to stall a Confederate advance that threatened to take the high ground in the middle of the federal army, they charged down the hill and met the enemy head on in a lethal whirlwind of fire from three sides.

It was at this moment that Colvill was hit. “A shock like a sledgehammer on my backbone between my shoulders. It turned me partly around and made one ‘see stars.’ I suppose it was a piece of a shell.” It was, in fact, a minié ball that had entered the top of his right arm, passed under the shoulder blade, struck the backbone, and lodged in the flesh in the middle of his shoulder blade. Capt. Henry Coates of Company A rushed to Colvill’s side and said, “Colonel, you are badly hurt.” Colvill replied, “I don’t know. Take care of the men.”<sup>33</sup>

Immediately, Colvill was hit again, and it brought him to the ground. This minié ball struck his right foot at the ankle joint and crushed all the bones there. He rolled forward into the dry creek bed. “Listening among other things to the bullets ‘zipping’ along the ground, and thought how fortunate for me was the fact of the gully.”



*Colvill receiving the order to charge, depicted in Josias R. King’s painting, The First Minnesota at Gettysburg—July 2, 1863. Although a member of the regiment’s Company A, King was not at Gettysburg. Temporarily assigned to Alfred Sully’s staff, he was on the upper Missouri River instead.*

The colonel fell unconscious, and when he awoke he could hear the voices of his men looking for the dead and wounded in the darkness. He heard one man “taking his last words for home and family.” It was quiet and the stars were shining. Patrick Taylor, looking for his brother Isaac, found Colvill in the streambed.

**THE MEN OF THE FIRST MINNESOTA** carried their leader back up the slope to a field hospital. There, Colvill joined a large group of the wounded and dying behind a stone barn. He was soon placed on the surgeon’s table and readied for amputation, but he refused the operation, telling the doctor that “if his foot must go, he would go too.”<sup>34</sup> He was brought back outside and placed under a tree. It rained torrents that night, and there was no shelter.

**“The way the Senators and Congressmen, judges and jury were paying honors to the colonel, was gratifying in the extreme.”**

Another of the wounded, Charles Hubbs, recalled that Colvill was suffering intensely but did not complain; instead, he kept inquiring as to the care of his men. “Not a word from him as to his own greater wounds—no word of complaint—just words of cheer and encouragement to the many others about him. When morning and the surgeons came he asked that others be cared for before himself,” Hubbs said. “I mention this as indicating his unselfishness and his fortitude. He was ever brave, gentle, kind and tolerant.”<sup>35</sup>

Not far away lay the Confederate wounded. Colvill later wrote, “Their groans had been horrible all night. . . . Directly, one of them in a clear, sweet voice struck up a camp meeting hymn. Instantly the groans and cries ceased, and all joined in the hymn. It was evidently a favorite one to them—new to me. It was a grand refrain, from thousands of wounded men; the singer then made a prayer. After that, no groans or complaints.”<sup>36</sup>

The next day, Colvill was carried a half mile to Wolf Run, a small creek, where his wounded foot and ankle were dangled in the water and a tent fly was set up over his head. General Hancock, who had ordered the suicide charge and was himself severely wounded the following day, was brought to the same place. A staff officer of Han-

cock’s came over to inquire about Colvill’s condition, and later the general sent over his brandy flask from which the colonel “took a good drink.”<sup>37</sup>

Colvill was eventually taken to a private home in Gettysburg where he recuperated for some weeks until his sister, Mary, came from New York to care for him. Her presence seemed to be a turning point in the colonel’s recovery, and it was decided that he might be well enough to go home to Red Wing. The trip immediately proved too painful and arduous, even though nurses tried to ensure his comfort by attaching his litter to rubber supports hooked to the ceiling of the cattle car that was his transport. When the train reached Harrisburg, he was moved to a local hospital.<sup>38</sup>

By October, Colvill was able to travel as far as his hometown in New York. In February 1864 he decided that he was healed enough to attend a banquet in Washington, D.C., to honor the First Minnesota, which was nearing its mustering out date. The affair on February 6 drew a host of luminaries including Vice President Hannibal Hamlin, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Secretary of the Interior John Usher, and many from Congress. Colvill was not expected to attend because of his wounds.<sup>39</sup>

James Wright recorded the scene.

The return of Col. Colvill to the regiment for the first time since Gettysburg was one of the events of the evening. Most men in his condition would have felt it impossible to be present. He could not walk or stand, and was carried in by two of the stalwart members of the regiment. . . . His entrance into the banquet hall was unexpected, and when he was brought in, there was a spontaneous outburst of shouting and cheering, which showed the feelings of the men toward him.

Colvill had contacted Cornelia Hancock, the nurse who had cared for him in Harrisburg and was then working in Washington. “He is confined to his bed,” she wrote in a letter, “cannot put his foot on the ground yet. . . . The way the Senators and Congressmen, judges and jury were paying honors to the colonel, was gratifying in the extreme.” Hancock continued, “I always feel when in his presence, ‘Here lies a brave man.’”<sup>40</sup>

**BACK IN RED WING TO RECOVER**, Colvill tried his hand at being editor of the *Red Wing Republican Eagle*

for a short time, apparently using his wartime experience to rise above his party affiliation. In 1865, despite his wounds, he went back to war for a while, serving as commander of the First Minnesota Heavy Artillery in the South. He was brevetted a general during that assignment, but after the war he eschewed the title, preferring to be called "Colonel Bill."<sup>41</sup>



*William Colvill during his postwar days as a Red Wing lawyer*

Colvill served a term in the Minnesota House of Representatives (1865) and as state attorney general (January 1866 through December 1867) as a member of the Union Party, an organization philosophically close to the Republican slant. His endorsement of Andrew Johnson's postwar policies, however, alienated him from his new friends. A Democrat again, he failed to unseat incumbent U.S. Congressman Ignatius Donnelly in 1866, and after one more term in the state legislature in 1878, his political career ended.<sup>42</sup> He could never overcome the fact that he was a Democrat in a heavily Republican state.

In 1867, at the age of 37, Colvill married Elizabeth Morgan, a fellow New Yorker. He continued his law career in Red Wing, strong of heart but lame of body. His law partner for a time, Charles Akers, poetically recalled Colvill during those years: "A strange figure, huge of body, beetling brows, serious mournful eyes that pierced the soul of the listener. . . . When he limped along the street, his cane was a sword and shadowy soldiers rose from their mouldering graves and followed him."<sup>43</sup>

**NOT ALL THE BATTLES WERE OVER.** In 1871 Colvill went to war against the railroad. The St. Paul and Central was pushing a line south through Red Wing, right through Colvill's property along the Mississippi River. The land had been legally condemned, but Colvill thought he was being cheated in the sum that the railroad was willing to pay. He refused to budge. He built a small house on the railroad grade, directly in the way of the tracklayers. In fact, he built it over top of the temporary track that had been laid earlier.<sup>44</sup>

On a morning in June, informed that railroad workers were at his doorstep, Colvill ordered them to leave and remained in his house. The workers tried to pressure the colonel into going, but he refused. Apparently under orders from their bosses, they then began dismantling the house, board by board, with the Colvills still inside.

The *Goodhue County Republican* related, "The current report that the Colonel attempted to shoot any one is a mistake, though he had a revolver in his belt to use in case of need." The workers removed the contents of the house and carefully piled them off to the side. Then they did the same with the Colvills.

Colvill headed downtown, where it must be supposed he held some sway with the local criminal justice system, and swore out a complaint. In the afternoon, all 11 men who had participated in dismantling the house were arrested. They were later freed on bail. In the end, Colvill received several hundred dollars more than had first been offered. The "Colvill Railroad War," as the newspapers called it, was over.

**TIME PASSED, AND COLVILL BECAME** deeply interested in the geology of the Red Wing area, eventually writing a paper about it. In 1887 his years of toiling in the Democratic vineyard paid off when Grover Cleveland, the first Democrat elected president since the Civil War, appointed the 57-year-old to be federal registrar in Duluth. In 1895, after Elizabeth Colvill died, the colonel moved north to a piece of property on Lake Superior near Grand Marais that he homesteaded for several years. That same year, Congress approved a \$50-a-month pension for the now indigent former soldier.<sup>45</sup>



*Colvill at his Red Wing home, about 1900*

Old age brought him back to Red Wing in 1900, where he found himself in the courts on occasion because he was unable to pay his debts. A posthumous newspaper account explained the problem this way: “Brilliant in his grasp of the law, almost childlike in his improvidence as regards his financial obligation. He seldom had money because he parted with it so readily not for self gratification but to help anyone who needed it or asked for it. He had a heart too liberal for his own welfare. It was the quality that endeared him to his soldiers in the war.”<sup>46</sup>

In June 1905, despite failing health, Colvill journeyed to the Twin Cities to take part in the ceremonious transfer of the Civil War flags from the old capitol building to the new one, staying at the Soldier’s Home in Minneapolis. He never missed a chance to be with his old comrades. On June 13, a day before the Flag Day transfer, the adjutant of the home went to rouse the colonel and found him dead. He was 75.<sup>47</sup>

Mrs. Charles Akers, his old neighbor in Red Wing, said that Colvill’s feebleness and increasing infirmities had made life difficult in the colonel’s last years. “For many years he had dragged his shattered limbs around, and perhaps it was fitting that he should, soldier like, apart by himself in the silence of the night, answer to the roll call of his Maker.”

Newspaper obituaries brimmed with accolades for the fallen colonel. The *Red Wing Daily News* called Colvill “Intrepid, gigantic, a rugged figure, deep chested with beetling brows and shaggy beard. . . . That great, grim figure oftenest seen in his funny little Phaeton with one or two children riding beside him.” The St. Paul Commercial Club issued a statement: “Because of his being in command of that famous regiment when it made its renowned charge at Gettysburg, he was one of the most notable of all the veterans of the Civil War and one of the most prominent and best known citizens of our own state.”<sup>48</sup>

William Lochren, who had served alongside the colonel, penned a eulogy.

He was the most modest of men, without a trace of arrogance, always kind and considerate toward everyone, and ever watchful for the comfort and welfare of his men. Careless of everything in the nature of mere display, he would not, perhaps attract notice at a review, but on the battlefield he always rose to his full height of six feet and five inches, the bravest, coolest and most imperturbable of commanders, whom nothing ever



*The old soldier, about 1900, probably at a reunion*

daunted or surprised. He was just the man to lead the charge made by the regiment at Gettysburg, and had, as such a man always has, the fullest love and confidence of those whom he commanded.

Colvill’s body lay in state at the capitol, the first Minnesotan to be honored in this way at the new building. The casket, placed in the corridor outside the Governor’s Reception Room, was draped with a huge flag. A guard of honor comprised of the Sons of Veterans and National Guardsmen stood nearby as citizens and members of the Grand Army of Republic filed by. The body was then taken to the Cannon Falls cemetery, where Colvill was buried beside his wife.

**PASSING THE LARGE BRONZE STATUE** of Colvill in the state capitol rotunda, visitors might wonder who this stern man was. They might assume he had done something brave or reached some military height, but they probably would not know about the young Easterner who came to Minnesota during its territorial years, threw himself into the hustle-bustle of pioneer life, became an icon of bravery in an iconic regiment during the Civil War, and led a full life despite debilitating wounds. Colonel Bill has been largely forgotten in Minnesota, but his story reveals a complex man who was very much a part of his times and our history. □

## Notes

1. William Colvill, "The Old First Minnesota at Gettysburg," manuscript given to H. L. Gordon, Colvill folder, Goodhue Co. Historical Society, Red Wing. According to Gordon, the account was not written for publication but in response to a question.
2. Board of Commissioners, ed., *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861–1865* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1891), 1: 9–14, 17–18, 32–38. Brian Leehan, *Pale Horse at Plum Run* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), xvii, notes that his is the fifth regimental history of the First Minnesota, in itself a tribute to this band of soldiers.
3. William Colvill sketch, 3, Charles N. Akers and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS). Akers was Colvill's law partner for a time after the Civil War.
4. Sarah P. Rubinstein, comp., *Minnesota History Along the Highways* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2003), 94–97; Warren Upham, *Minnesota Place Names*, 3d ed. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 139; [http://red-wing.org/index.php?module=pagemaster&PAGE\\_user\\_op=view\\_page&PAGE\\_id=128](http://red-wing.org/index.php?module=pagemaster&PAGE_user_op=view_page&PAGE_id=128) (accessed Mar. 30, 2009). Colvill's name is frequently misspelled.
5. Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, ed., *History of Dakota and Goodhue Counties, Minnesota* (Chicago: H. C. Cooper Jr., 1910), 2: 520.
6. Madeline Angell, *Red Wing, Minnesota, Saga of a River Town* (Minneapolis: Dillon Press, 1977), 77.
7. See *Red Wing Sentinel*, 1857–61.
8. *Red Wing Sentinel*, June 4, 1859, both p. 2.
9. *Red Wing Sentinel*, Feb. 8, 1860, p. 2.
10. *Goodhue County Republican*, Feb. 24, 1860, p. 2; *Red Wing Sentinel*, Feb. 29, 1860, p. 2.
11. *Goodhue County Republican*, Mar. 2, 1860, p. 3.
12. *Goodhue County Republican*, Apr. 19, 1861, p. 3.
13. *History of Goodhue County* (Red Wing: Wood, Alley & Co., 1878), 286.
14. Here and below, Angell, *Red Wing*, 101.
15. Commissioners, *Minnesota in Civil and Indian Wars*, 1: 2–3, 58.
16. Commissioners, *Minnesota in Civil and Indian Wars*, 1: 6–8.
17. Commissioners, *Minnesota in Civil and Indian Wars*, 1: 9–11.
18. Here and below, William Colvill, *Bull Run: Address of Col. Wm. Colvill at the Re-Union of the Survivors of the First Minnesota, June 21, 1877* (Association of the Survivors, [1877?]). Colvill wrote several accounts of Bull Run, this being the longest.
19. Commissioners, *Minnesota in Civil and Indian Wars*, 1: 11.
20. Colvill, *Bull Run*, 7.
21. Commissioners, *Minnesota in Civil and Indian Wars*, 1: 13.
22. James A. Wright, *No More Gallant a Deed: A Civil War Memoir of the First Minnesota Volunteers*, ed. Steven J. Keillor (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 153.
23. Mark A. Hoyt, journal, 32–33, John F. Hoyt and Family Papers, MHS. This articulate and irreverent journal, illustrated with images of camp life, is one of the best pieces of writing to come out of the First Minnesota. Hoyt resigned in July 1862 for health reasons; [www.1stminnesota.net/SearchChoice.html](http://www.1stminnesota.net/SearchChoice.html) (accessed Mar. 30, 2009).
24. Here and below, "William Colvill," [www.1stminnesota.net/SearchChoice.html](http://www.1stminnesota.net/SearchChoice.html) (accessed Mar. 30, 2009), quoting a letter by Phil Hamlin, Co. F, and Daniel Hand, "Reminiscences of an Army Surgeon, Glimpses of the Nation's Struggle, Minnesota Commandery."
25. Wright, *No More Gallant a Deed*, 182.
26. Commissioners, *Minnesota in Civil and Indian Wars*, 1: 704, 714.
27. Newspaper clipping, Colvill folder, Goodhue Co. Historical Society.
28. John Quinn Imholte, *The First Volunteers: History of the First Minnesota Volunteer Regiment, 1861–1865* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1963), 112; Goddard to Mother, Feb. 20, 1863, Orrin F. Smith and Family Papers, MHS; *Red Wing Daily Republican*, June 14, 1905, p. 2.
29. Wright, *No More Gallant a Deed*, 280.
30. Here and below, Wright, *No More Gallant a Deed*, 284–85.
31. William Colvill, statement to William W. Folwell, Dec. 22, 1904, William Watts Folwell and Family Papers, MHS. Folwell, himself a Civil War veteran and one of the great historians of Minnesota, journeyed to Red Wing a year before Colvill's death to question the old soldier.
32. Wright, *No More Gallant a Deed*, 292.
33. Here and two paragraphs below, Colvill, "The Old First."
34. Tillie Pierce Alleman, *At Gettysburg: Or What a Girl Saw and Heard of the Battle, A True Narrative* (New York: W. Lake Borland, 1889), 102.
35. "Charles L. Hubbs," [www.1stminnesota.net/SearchChoice.html](http://www.1stminnesota.net/SearchChoice.html) (accessed Mar. 30, 2009). Hubbs, of Co. F, was wounded at Bull Run and Gettysburg.
36. Colvill, "The Old First."
37. Colvill, statement to Folwell.
38. Alleman, *At Gettysburg*, 102; Colvill sketch, 3, Akers papers; Rodney L. Halunen, "Biography of Col. Wm. Colvill Jr.," 3, paper, University of Minnesota, Duluth, 1961, copy in Northeast Minnesota Historical Center, Duluth.
39. Here and below, Wright, *No More Gallant a Deed*, 400–01.
40. Cornelia Hancock, *South After Gettysburg: Letters of Cornelia Hancock* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937), 45.
41. Bert Fesler, "Reminiscences of Col. Colvill," in William Colvill biographical sketches and letters, MHS.
42. W. F. Toensing, *Minnesota Congressmen, Legislators, and Other State Elected Officials* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1971), 23; Bruce M. White et al., *Minnesota Votes* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1977), 68.
43. Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Dakota and Goodhue*, 520; Colvill sketch, 3, Akers papers. The couple had no children.
44. Here and three paragraphs below, *Goodhue County Republican*, June 22, 1871, p. 4.
45. *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 14, 1905, p. 9; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 29, 1924, sec. 4, p. 2. In 1906, a year after his death, the township where he had homesteaded was named for him; Upham, *Minnesota Place Names*, 139.
46. Newspaper fragment, Colvill folder, Cannon Falls Historical Society.
47. Here and below, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 14, 1905, p. 1, June 29, 1924, sec. 4, p. 2, 5.
48. Here and two paragraphs below, *Red Wing Daily News*, undated clipping, Colvill folder, Cannon Falls Historical Society; *Red Wing Daily Republican*, June 14, 1905, p. 4. The Commercial Club statement was reprinted from the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*.

---

*The photo on p. 260, top, is courtesy the U.S. Army Military History Institute; p. 260, bottom, is by the author. All others are in MHS collections; p. 265, bottom, is by Barnard & Gibson and p. 269, top, by Joel E. Whitney.*



Copyright of [Minnesota History is](#) the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).