

# A life of tragedy for Northbridge woman

Sometimes parents give a name to a newborn child that expresses a hope for the baby's future. But in the case of Northbridge's Adin Alonzo Colvin, the name he gave his daughter was painfully wrong and instead of helping her added to the sufferings she endured during her relatively short life.



**James Buckley**

Writer, historian  
from Milford

When he was 24, Adin and his first cousin George Washington Colvin of Mendon happily abandoned their jobs as shoemakers and joined the 15th Massachusetts Regiment. Adin became a private in Company H while George was a member of Company K.

Like many other volunteers from both the North and South, one of their motivations for marching off to war was to see something of the world outside their hometowns and have some adventures.

It didn't take long for them to realize that the bargain they made when they enlisted was going to leave an indelible mark on their lives. George managed to serve in the Union Army unscathed. Adin was not as fortunate.

He saw an excessive amount of bloodshed in the Battle of Antietam which was later described as the bloodiest during the Civil War. And at the height of that battle he was wounded in his side. Because the process of obtaining treatment of the wounded at that battle was usually slow, it took days before Adin was seen by a surgeon.

Eight months later he was wounded in his right elbow at Gettysburg. It was with some relief that he returned in December 1863 to the mundane, but far less dangerous, job of shoe maker.

Adin waited until he was 38 to marry. This was not a union of lovers but one of necessity. A child was born two months after the marriage. Although neither parent had expectations of rising above the humble state in which they lived, they nevertheless named their daughter, "Wealthy."

The series of tragedies Wealthy suffered began two years later when her mother died. Census data indicates that Adin was still working in a local shoe factory at that time. Neighbors and relatives banded together to help Adin raise his motherless daughter. But as she left her toddler years, it became evident that she had some affliction that sometimes made her unmanageable.

Somehow, despite of the difficulties confronting him, Adin was able to protect his daughter from the ridicule that children of her age heaped upon her whenever possible.

Adin and Wealthy might have survived all their difficulties if he had enjoyed good health. But when she was 9, her father died in the Soldier's Home in Augusta, Maine, at age 47 from complications created by his war wounds.

Even at the best of times, and under ideal circumstances, it was extremely difficult during the 19th century for an orphan child of 9 to find a home. What made Wealthy's situation exceedingly difficult was that she was an epileptic.

Today, in what we would like to think is a more enlightened and humane age, the over 50 million epileptics worldwide still suffer from some form of discrimination from time to time. Even so, because our society has become more aware of this condition and its neurological causes, it has, for the most part, adopted humane ways of treating those who have this chronic neurological condition.

But in 1885, no such enlightened approach toward epilepsy existed. Instead of recognizing that her fits were a physical problem, she was promptly labeled "an insane person" and treated as such for the rest of her life. The fact that she bore the name of Wealthy added to her misery because it was used by her fellow inmates as the means of taunting the helpless girl. She was placed in asylums where children with mental retardation were warehoused.

This inappropriate and inhumane approach to epilepsy was not confined to this country. The French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot was appalled to discover that children in France with this seizure disorder were housed with the criminally insane.

It would be uplifting to relate that somehow Wealthy survived all the harsh and totally inappropriate treatment she endured at the hands of the medical profession and other agencies charged with helping children in need, and that she eventually flourished. But that was not the case.

Because of the ignorance of those who lived in the commonwealth in the early days of the 20th century, for the rest of her days, Wealthy Colvin was confined to a mental institution until her death at age 41.

*James J. Buckley may be reached at: history-buckley@yahoo.com.*