

I wonder if John M. Coburn knew before he enlisted. The young man was born in the small town of Orwell, in a small, rural state of Vermont about 1838. <sup>[1]</sup> There were only his father, Seth J. Coburn, his mother, Lydia Morton and three siblings: Emily; James; and Almira. A rather intimate and diminutive brood compared to the average sized nineteenth century family. <sup>[2]</sup> The doctor that delivered him must have known. Someone in the community of Orwell must have known. John M. Coburn was slowly dying before he had barely begun to live.

John's mother and father were both native Vermonters being born in Berlin, Vermont in the early 1800s. They were raised in the area and married there on April 16, 1833. They had four children: Emily (1835); John M. (1838); James Monroe (1841); and Almira (1843). <sup>[3]</sup> Three of the four, Emily, John and Almira would die when they were still relatively young.

Since John's birthplace was listed as Orwell, Vermont, it was obvious that his family had made the move from Berlin to the Champlain Valley sometime before then. By 1850, Seth, Lydia, Emily (15), John (12) and Almira (6) were all living in Orwell. Seth was a common laborer. Living with the Coburn's were two unidentified people who appeared not to be relatives - a woman named Pamelar Clark and a boy named Vandan Clark. She was fifty-one and the boy was fourteen. <sup>[4]</sup> Additional research found out that they were indeed strangers temporarily living with the Coburn's while they arranged for other housing in Orwell. Parmelia Plue Clark came from Fort Ann, New York. She had a daughter, Lucy, living with her husband and children in Orwell. By the next census time in 1860, that is where Parmelia and her son, Vandon, lived. They were just boarders at the Coburn's in 1850.

When the Federal Census taker counted heads again in 1860, only John was still living at home. He was twenty-two years old. Emily, about twenty-five, was gone. She had married one Alexander Jenks from Lake George, New York, sometime between 1850 and 1852. She had her first child in New York (probably Lake George) in 1853. She died in 1861 the same month she gave birth to her third child in Orwell. <sup>[5]</sup> James had

disappeared as early as 1850 when he would have been nineteen. He had gone off to live in New York state, enlisting in the 44th New York Infantry in 1861. <sup>[6]</sup> Almira, sixteen, was living with an Orwell family called the Thatchers (BB and Ellen). She was an apprenticed tailoress. In 1868, she married an Albert M. Adams in Pittsford, Vermont when she was twenty-four. <sup>[7]</sup>

Young, and very sick, John M. Coburn enlisted in the 5th Vermont Infantry, Company H at age twenty-three. His enlistment date was August 27, 1861 in Brandon, Vermont. He was described as being a farmer, standing five feet seven and one-fourth inches tall. His complexion was light as was his hair. These were matched by a pair of blue eyes. <sup>[8]</sup> Private Coburn's company was mustered-in on September 16, 1861 at St. Albans for three years, but John was not with them at the time. He was sick in his quarters when the company was mustered-in!! <sup>[9]</sup>

In fact, John M. Coburn was sick before he enlisted, when he enlisted, after he enlisted and during the entire time he was enlisted in the army. How he passed the physical examine all volunteers had to have is incomprehensible. Someone lied, bribed, or looked the other way on that one. Less than one month after signing the official papers, John missed his company's formal induction into the service because he was too sick to attend. A month after that, November 26, 1861 he was admitted to Seminary General Hospital as a patient. Whatever treatments he was receiving there were apparently not working, for on January 10, 1862, one Jos R Smith, Assistant Surgeon at Seminary General Hospital, wrote a request to the Assistant Adjutant General of the Army of the Potomac (Williams) asking that Private John M. Coburn of the 5th Vermont Regiment be assigned as a nurse to the hospital staff. <sup>[10]</sup> From January, 1862 until his discharge June 16, 1862, Private Coburn served as a hospital attendant at the D.C. hospital. For six months, a person with an active case of tuberculosis had daily contact with recuperating soldiers who were weakened by sicknesses of their own or suffering from wounds received in combat and fighting their own battles for recovery.

Private Coburn's "Certificate of Disability" clearly stated the Private's condition: "...general debility and weakness of lungs...with predisposition to Phthisis pulmonalis...has had two attacks of Harmophytis (hemoptysis) within the last two months - had one attack \_??\_ years since..." <sup>[11]</sup> Not even the army wanted John on their hands anymore. Only after ten months of service, all of it sick, Private Coburn was turned into citizen Coburn as of June 16, 1862.

John returned to Orwell as he had left it - a dying young man with a terrible, and incurable, disease. John never married and never left any offspring behind. He wasted away until December 5, 1862 when he passed of consumption in Orwell. He was twenty-four years, four months and twenty-five days old. <sup>[12]</sup>

#### NOTES

1. [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com), Memorial #46680423.
2. [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com), Vermont, Vital Records, 1720-1908 for John M. Coburn/Seth Coburn; [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com) for John M. Coburn; [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com), Gilley Family Tree for Seth Johnson Coburn and Lydia Moulton.
3. *Ibid.*, Gilley Family Tree for Seth Johnson Coburn and Lydia Moulton.
4. *Ibid.*, 1850 U.S. Federal Census for Seth J. Coburn.
5. *Ibid.*, Robinson Family Tree for Alexander Jenks.
6. *Ibid.*, New York, Civil War Muster Roll Abstracts, 1861-1900 for Coburn, James M.
7. *Ibid.*, Vermont, Vital Records, 1720-1908 for Almira Coburn; *Ibid.*, 1860 U. S. Federal Census for Almira Coburn.
8. [Fold3.com](http://Fold3.com), Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Vermont, p. 2, image 311430056. Hereinafter referred to as Compiled Service Records...
9. *Ibid.*, Compiled Service Records..., pp. 3-4, images 311430059 and 311430061.
10. *Ibid.*, Compiled Service Records..., pp. 12 and 15, images 311430101 and 311430112.
11. *Ibid.*, Compiled Service Records..., p. 17, image 311430126.
12. [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com), Vermont, Vital Records, 1720-1908 for John M. Coburn.