

Ye sons of New Jersey
On, on to the fray,
Where foemen are gathered
In battle array:
The Union to sever, -Dark plans
they have laid,
And Sumter has fallen!
But be not dismayed.
With Army and Navy,
And brave volunteers,
We'll vanquish the rebels
In less than three years.
Be true to the Union,
And stand by the laws,
And conquer or perish
In Liberty's cause.
Oh! bear the bright standard
Of freedom afar,

The Blind Poetess *of* Jersey City

by Maureen Wlodarczyk

*“To be blind is not miserable; not to be able
to bear blindness, that is miserable.”*

- John Milton

Many years later, she told a newspaper reporter that her last view of a “human face and nature fair came as the slow-going ship was passing the Staten Island shore.”

Those were the words of renowned 17th century English poet John Milton, who wrote his epic poem “Paradise Lost” after losing his eyesight in his forties, most likely the consequence of glaucoma. Two centuries later, another English-born poet would lose the ability to see but live a life of creativity and independence that was the very example of Milton’s premise that blindness needn’t equate to misery. Her name was Alice A. Holmes.

Miss Holmes was born in February 1821 in the Parish of Winfarthing, Norfolk, England to William Holmes, a sawyer (tradesman who made his living by sawing timber into boards) and his wife Mary, a granddaughter of one Lord Lefevre who disinherited her for marrying beneath her social station.¹ Alice’s paternal grandparents were Thomas Holmes, a hatcheller (flax comber) and his wife Alice, who are found listed in the 1801 Winfarthing census as the parents of 5 sons and 2 daughters living in the Glandfield’s Houses.

Shortly after Alice’s birth, her family moved to nearby Shelfanger and it was there, at the age of 5, that her parents enrolled her in Miss Martin’s school for girls. Many decades later, Alice reminisced about “loitering” on the way to that school, stopping to pick wildflowers and berries or watching little fish swimming in a brook and arriving late to school with wet feet and clothing decorated with dirt and berry stains. She also remembered Miss Martin’s patience with her detours to pursue her love of nature.²

In 1830 William Holmes, having heard talk about the opportunities in the United States, became set on leaving England and immigrating to America despite his wife’s and mother’s reservations. By late April, Alice and her parents and siblings were making their way to London where they booked passage on the ship *Brunswick* headed for the Port of New York. During the seven-week sea voyage, smallpox broke out and 9-year-old Alice was stricken. She would survive but the disease left her blind. Many years later, she told a newspaper reporter that her last view of a “human face and nature fair came as the slow-going ship was passing the Staten Island shore.”³

Alice, still critically ill as the *Brunswick* approached New York on June 19, 1830, was taken by smaller boat to the Quarantine Hospital on Staten Island. She was accompanied by her brothers and sisters who were recovering from much milder cases of smallpox. Mary Holmes was permitted to stay at the hospital to assist with the care of her children. After seeing his family safely to the hospital, William Holmes made his way to Jersey City to find a place to live. It would be two months before Alice recovered sufficiently to be released from the Quarantine Hospital and make the trip to Jersey City with her mother and siblings. For many



THE INSTITUTION FOR THE BLIND, NEW YORK



Frances Crosby

months thereafter, Alice continued to believe that she would recover her eyesight but eventually had to accept that she would remain blind after an examination at the Eye Infirmary of New York offered no real hope of the return of her vision.⁴

Despite her blindness, Alice was very anxious to return to her schooling and was accepted to a private school run by Miss Jane Provost. She was also warmly invited by Reverend Dr. Edmund Barry to join Sunday-school religious instructions at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Jersey City. She expressed the fondest memories of those days and of the kindness of her fellow students and friends who took her by the hand to join in their activities including outings to the shore near the Edge Windmill where they took off shoes and stockings to walk in the sand and play in the lapping waters.⁵

Alice's desire to learn only increased as she grew into her teenage years and it would be a serious attack of inflammation in her eyes when she was 16 that would lead to a perfect opportunity for her to continue her education. The physician in New York who treated her severely inflamed eyes, Dr. Condict, recommended a school for the blind located in an "old mansion" in Manhattan near 34th Street and 9th Avenue. Alice applied, was accepted, and left her family to live at the school for what she expected to be a year or two. In fact, she would spend seven years at the New York Institution for the Blind where she would meet Frances Crosby, who became her roommate, life-long friend and a well-known poet and hymn-writer.⁶

T H E
BALLAD CONCERT
 FOR THE BENEFIT OF
MISS ALICE HOLMES
 WILL BE GIVEN IN THE
T A B E R N A C L E .
 ON
TUESDAY EVENING, DEC. 3.

MRS. MORRIS,
 SIMPSON, CASWELL,
 MESSRS. THOMAS,
 KEENAN AND GREGORY.

Particulars Hereafter.
TICKETS,.....50 CENTS.
 216-4f.

In 1844, Alice graduated from that school and returned to Jersey City and her family. Alice's father's health had been failing and in 1847 he passed away. About that time, Alice became acquainted with a local poetess, Miss Jean Bruce, who read poetry to her and encouraged her to take up writing as a diversion. Under Miss Bruce's persistent tutelage, Alice tried her hand at writing and one of her early poems was published in the *Jersey City Telegraph*. Inspired by that small success, Alice continued to write poetry and, in 1849, published a small volume of her work under the simple title *Poems by Alice Holmes*, which she dedicated to the managers of the New York Institution for the Blind. Not long after that, Alice made plans to have a musical and literary festival in Jersey City with the assistance of friends and supporters. That was the beginning of an annual concert event that would be held for over 20 years, the proceeds providing assistance to Alice herself and also funding the publication of books for the blind in Braille. One of those concerts featured an all-blind cast of performers including accomplished musicians and vocalists along with poetry readings by Alice and her old roommate Fanny Crosby.

Alice continued her writing and published a second volume of poetry in 1858 titled *Arcadian Leaves*. She suffered the loss of her dear mother in 1865, who she once wrote was the source of "tender care, love and sympathy" that "soothed every sorrow and cheered life's dark and rugged road."⁷ Alice turned to her love of music for solace and was soon determined to become a professional music teacher. In a short time she had a dozen or more students coming to her home on Wayne Street and a vocation that brought much happiness to her life.

In 1868, while living with her younger sister Mary Wright and Wright's two sons, Samuel and David, Alice published her third volume of poetry titled *Stray Leaves*. It was at this time that the *Evening Journal* newspaper reported three arson attempts over a one-year period at 114 Wayne Street, the building where Alice and the Wrights were living over a grocery store, Coykendall Brothers. All three fires were curtailed quickly and without injuries. Speculation centered on two theories, the first being that the fires were part of a robbery scheme. The second was supposition that the arson was aimed at injuring Alice, a theory that the *Evening Journal* dismissed, calling it "ill-founded" as it was impossible to believe that the blind poetess had "even one enemy." Three decades later, Alice would survive a fire deliberately set in her rooms by her own nephew David Wright, who grew up to be a n'er-do-well living off Alice's good graces in anticipation of inheriting her estate upon her death.

Alice continued teaching music and writing poetry over the next decade and published her fourth volume of poetry, *Lost Vision*, in 1888




Alice A. Holmes, c.1912.
Image: Jersey City Free Public
Library, New Jersey Room



but was plagued by health problems that caused her to curtail much of her activities. Hernia surgery alleviated her major health issues but her fortunes were no longer as favorable or secure. That changed in 1897 when Alice's younger brother, a very successful businessman who had relocated to California many years earlier, passed away leaving her one-fourth of his estate. The *Evening Journal* reported the story under the headline "She Gets a Fortune," with the subtitle "Miss Alice Holmes Receives a Handsome Legacy" and stating that the deceased Mr. Holmes's entire estate was valued at about \$125,000. The article described Alice (then age 77) as an "authoress" and music teacher, "well-advanced in years, wonderfully well-preserved, with snow-white hair" and said that she had taught music in Jersey City for 25 years.

In 1900, the same newspaper reported that Alice, approaching her 79th birthday was "still hale," had an ambition to learn how to use a typewriter, remained "skillful" with her knitting needles and had donated some of her "handiwork" for an upcoming fair being held to benefit St. Joseph's Home for the Blind in Jersey City. Over the ensuing years, it was common for Alice to receive well-wishers at her home on her birthday and for those events to be reported in local newspapers.

In October 1911, a very special reunion took place at Alice's home on Jackson Avenue when her life-long friend and fellow poetess Fanny Crosby came to visit. Alice, age 90, and Fanny, age 92, spent a pleasant afternoon together and the *Journal* waxed poetic for its own account, describing the two grand ladies as "sisters in physical afflictions and mental blessings" and calling them "a force unto themselves who by their intelligence and cheerfulness had overcome many obstacles in what was once considered a forlorn and helpless state." Alice Holmes passed away quietly in her sleep in January 1914, just a few weeks before her 93rd birthday and was laid to rest at the Jersey City Harsimus Cemetery. 

Following are three poems selected from Alice Holmes's published works. In this issue of *Garden State Legacy*, my "History & Mystery" column talks about the unplanned, unexpected, serendipitous discoveries that often occur in doing genealogical research. Case in point: the first poem below titled "To Company C, Sixth Regiment, N.J. Volunteers" that I happened upon while researching this article. I am the great-great-granddaughter of John J. Flannelly, born in Ireland, who arrived in Jersey City in 1846 at age 5 fleeing the Great Irish Famine. John grew up in Jersey City and, in 1861 at age 19, enlisted in the Union Army during the first months of the Civil War. And, yes, he served as a Private in Company C, Sixth Regiment, N.J. Volunteers.

Company C, Sixth Regiment.

NO.	NAME.	RANK.	COM. OR ENROLLED.	MUST'D IN.	PERIOD	MUST'D OUT.	REMARKS.
1	James B. Hughes.....	Captain.....	Sept. 9, '61	Sept. 9, '61	3 Yrs..	.....	Resigned July 11, '62—Wounds received in action at Williamsburg, Va.
2	John Willian.....	"	July 11, '62	Jan. 2, '63	"	.....	1st Lieut. Co. D, Sept. 9, '61; Capt. vice Hughes resigned; promoted Maj. April 6, '64.
1	Jacob J. VanRiper.....	1st Lieut....	Sept. 8, '61	Sept. 9, '61	"	.....	Promoted Capt. Co. F, March 23, '62.
2	John Howeth.....	"	April 12, '62	Jan. 2, '63	"	.....	2d Lieut. Sept. 9, '61; 1st Lieut. vice VanRiper promoted; died at St. Aloysius Hosp., Washington, D. C., May 15, '63, of wounds received in action at Chancellorsville, Va.
3	Joseph C. Lee.....	"	June 9, '63	Sept. 21, '63	"	Sept. 7, '64	2d Lieut. Co. G, July 11, '62; 1st Lieut. vice Howeth died.
1	Edwin Hughes.....	2d Lieut....	April 12, '62	April 12, '62	"	.....	1st Serj. Aug. 24, '61; 2d Lieut. vice Howeth promoted; resigned June 7, '62.
2	Rufus K. Case.....	"	June 23, '62	Jan. 2, '63	"	.....	Qr. Mr. Serj. Jan. 1, '62; 2d Lieut. vice Hughes resigned.; promoted 1st Lieut. Co. G, Jan. 1, '63.
3	John H. Hoagland.....	"	Jan. 16, '63	Mar. 2, '63	"	.....	Serj. Co. G; 2d Lieut. vice Case promoted; dismissed July 14, '64.
1	John Finnerty.....	Sergeant....	Sept. 9, '61	Sept. 9, '61	"	Sept. 7, '64	Corp. Jan. 9, '64; Serj. June 1, '64.
1	John Quirk.....	Corporal....	Aug. 9, '61	Aug. 24, '61	"	"	Corp. Jan. 1, '64.
1	George Brandon.....	Musician...	"	"	"	"	
1	.....	Private.....	"	"	"	"	
2	Flanelly, John.....	"	"	"	"	"	

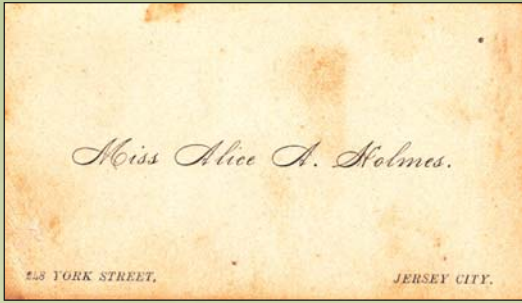
The author's great, great grandfather served in Company C, 6th Regiment!

"To Company C, Sixth Regiment, N.J. Volunteers"

(published 1868 in *Stray Leaves*, pg. 23)

Ye sons of New Jersey
 On, on to the fray,
 Where foemen are gathered
 In battle array.
 The Union to sever,—Dark plans they have laid,
 And Sumter has fallen!
 But be not dismayed.
 With Army and Navy,
 And brave volunteers,
 We'll vanquish the rebels
 In less than three years.
 Be true to the Union,
 And stand by her laws,
 And conquer or perish
 In Liberty's cause.
 Oh! bear the bright standard
 Of freedom afar,
 Unfurled to the breeze
 Each stripe and each star,
 Till again o'er our land,
 "The home of the brave,
 The star-spangled banner

In triumph shall wave!"
Success to each regiment,
All hail to the Sixth,
Whose colonels and captains
Will find out the tricks
Of treason and traitors,
And put them to flight,
With bayonets now flashing
In Liberty's light.
If e'er in great matters
Ye should not agree,
Go straight to the captain
Of Company C,
Who all your dilemmas
At once will perceive,
And by his wise counsel
Your errors retrieve.
A right gallant captain,
And brave man is Hughes*;
Whose well-given orders
None dare to refuse.
Van Riper* and Howeth*
Are valiant and true,
Determined like heroes,
Their duty to do.
And woe to the traitor
Whose lot it may be
To fall in collision
With Company C,
Whose love for the Union
Is stronger than life;
Their watchword is conquer,
Or die in the strife.
Then, sons of New Jersey,
On, on to the fray,
Where foemen are gathered
In battle array.
Hunt down the foul traitors,
And drive them afar;
Hurl back with confusion
Their weapons of war.
And when on the ramparts



Miss Alice A. Holmes.

253 YORK STREET,

JERSEY CITY.

Ye gallantly stand,
Deal death to the foe,
Whose traitorous hand
Assailed the fair Flag,
That's destined to wave
"O'er the land of the free,
And home of the brave!

* Captain James Hughes and Private John J. Flannelly were both hospitalized at Williamsburg, VA after the battle there in May, 1862. Jacob Van Riper was promoted to Captain and transferred to Company F in March, 1862. Lieutenant John Howeth was wounded in battle at Chancellorsville, VA and died in May 1863.⁸

"ERIN"—Dedicated to my Friend, Charles Taggart, MD

(published 1888 in *Lost Vision*, pg. 80)

Oh! tell me a tale of that sunny isle,
Whose shores are kissed by the ocean wave,
Where the shamrock blooms and the daisies smile,
'Tis the home of the noble, the true and brave.
Oh! tell me a tale of the bards that sung,
To Erin's heart in the days of yore,
To the harp whose silvery cadence rung,
Through the vine-clad bowers of that Emerald shore.
There are thoughts that come in the twilight dim,
When the bird sings low in its quiet nest,
When Nature is chanting her vesper hymn,
Ere she sinks on the bosom of the night to rest.
And they whisper soft of those halcyon hours,
When thy young heart dreamed and thy step was free,
When the wild sweet music of Erin's bowers
Was weaving a mystic charm for thee.
There are crystal drops that in silence start;
And oft in the beams of a favorite star,
Full many a sigh from thy yearning heart
Is borne away to that land afar.
Oh! tell me a tale of that sunny isle,
Whose shores are kissed by the ocean wave;
Where the shamrock blooms and the daisies smile,
'Tis the home of the noble, the true and brave.

“Farewell to my Native Land”

(published 1849 in *Poems by Alice Holmes*, pg. 35)

Farewell to the cottage, the garden and flowers,
Where oft in my childhood passed frolicsome hours;
Farewell to the meadow, the brook and the trees,
Where the music of birds is borne on the breeze;
Farewell to the lane, the green hillside and glen,
Whose paths I have trodden again and again;
Farewell, dear companions, so joyous and gay,
For alas! I must go away, far away.
Farewell to the schoolhouse, and the church with its bell,
That echoes so sweetly o’er vale, hill and dell;
Farewell, holy ground, where my kindred do sleep,
May angels the brightest a watch o’er it keep;
Farewell, dearest friends, first loved of my heart,
For the changing of time now bids us to part.
E’en though we are severed, let this be our trust,
That again we shall meet in the realms of the just.
Oh! fare thee well England, dear land of my birth,
May the triumph of freedom soon fill thee with mirth:
I go where its banner in splendor doth wave,
And hope from oppression thee too it may save.

Endnotes:

¹⁻⁷ Holmes, Alice A., *Lost Vision*. New York, NY: The De Vinne Press. 1888. 12–32.

⁸ Stryker, William S., *Record of Officers and Men of New Jersey in the Civil War 1861–1865—Vol. I*. Trenton, NJ: John L. Murphy Steam Book and Job Printer. 1876. 275.

Genealogical research for this article was done and interpreted by the author through the use of resources including Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.com, and other relevant public genealogical sources.