



2-2016

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Recommended Citation

Smyk, Edward A. (2016) "Remembering Albert Bartholdi Passaic's SwissAmerican Historian," *Swiss American Historical Society Review*. Vol. 52 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol52/iss1/5

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Remembering Albert Bartholdi

Passaic's Swiss- American Historian

by Edward A. Smyk
*Passaic County Historian**



Albert Bartholdi, 1881-1954.

Credit: De Young Studio,
New York, N.Y., 1930.

For most travelers, Switzerland conjures spectacular images of the snow-clad Alps; a place where rugged, commanding vistas coexist with an abundance of pure mountain air, exhilarating in its alluring crispness. Yet there is more to the story than picturesque scenery and quaint villages, which time seems to forget. The Swiss are a proud people, who through the intervening centuries, generation after generation, carefully nourished and guarded their love of freedom and independence. This sturdiness of mind and intellect was transplanted to America with the early Swiss settlers. They came and prospered, achieving distinction in numerous fields of endeavor.

In 1889, Dr. Adelrich Steinach published in German an account of the Swiss settlements in America, and while useful, it lacked an in-depth commentary on individual pioneers. This omission was remedied in 1932 when the recently organized Swiss-American Historical Society published a 266-page volume, *Prominent Americans of Swiss Origin*. The compiler of this ambitious undertaking is now more or less buried in obscurity, but his memory revives when one wishes to research the

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Herbert Clark Hoover
1874-1964

Credit: Bachrach Studio, 1928.

remarkable accomplishments of the Swiss in America. Also forgotten is where he lived. Albert Bartholdi (1881-1954), a distant relative of Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, the renowned sculptor of the Statue of Liberty, conducted much of his research and writing at 272 Broadway, in the city of Passaic. The book contains seventy-two profiles of prominent Swiss-Americans. Bartholdi wrote eighteen of the essays. In the last sentence of his Introduction, he summed up the publication's essence, "we have paid our tribute to those characters of humble pretention, in the belief that true greatness is estimated in terms of one's usefulness to mankind."

Even now, with the passage of eight decades, Bartholdi's pioneering compilation can be read with profit. The book's main deficiency is that it does not discuss the life and accomplishments of even one Swiss-American woman—and there were probably many worthy candidates. Unfortunately, the exclusion of women from compilations of this sort was a common place occurrence. Still, the book retains its instructional merits. Bartholdi contributed profiles on a wide spectrum of people. In his essay on then President Herbert Clark Hoover, he discusses in detail the research findings on Hoover's Swiss ancestors, who for centuries inhabited Oberkulm, (before 1798, a part of Berne, Switzerland). Religious persecution drove these hardy progenitors north to the safety of the German Palatinate.

Andreas Huber, the first American ancestor of President Hoover, then fifteen years old, arrived in Philadelphia on September 9, 1738. Like many before and after him, his surname would be changed. Bartholdi speculates that "the ship agent evidently entered the name of emigrant Andreas as it sounded to him, for on the passenger list, which still is in existence, his name was entered as 'Hoover' instead of Huber." Hoover, unmercifully, and in many instances unjustly, criticized for the way he handled the Great Depression, is arguably among the greatest Americans of Swiss descent: mining engineer,

international businessman, humanitarian, historian, translator of an ancient Latin scientific treatise, and philanthropist.

Bartholdi put his study lamp on the lives of others, among them Augustus Louis Chetlain, Brevet Major General in the Civil War, who successfully recruited and organized regiments of African-American troops in Tennessee and Kentucky; Admiral Edward W. Eberle, who was graduated from the US Naval Academy in 1885 and retired, in 1927, as Chief of Naval Operations; Coke and Steel Magnate Henry Clay Frick; and the famed Delmonico family of New York, "America's restauranters par excellence." After 1902, the rich and well-heeled flocked to the Delmonico's at Fifth Avenue and Forty-Fourth Street, for elegant and elaborate meals. Bartholdi noted that "when the famous restaurant finally closed its doors in 1922, a brilliant social page in American social history was closed."



Albert Henry Heusser
1886-1929

Credit: Heinrichs Studio,
Paterson, N.J., 1923.

The reader can discern that scholarship, leavened with a sense of adventure, was part and parcel of Bartholdi's intellectual predispositions. He was born in the Canton of Thurgau, in the northeast section of Switzerland, where across the magnificent expanse of Lake Constance, stands the majestic contours of Germany and Austria.

History and legend still hangs heavily over Thurgau. Perhaps the stunning locale influenced Bartholdi's choice of vocation. Ambitious, he earned a doctorate in history at the University of Zurich, but instead of seeking a cloister-like academic career, he opted instead for the hectic life of a journalist. He found employment on the staff of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, a prominent daily newspaper. When World War I erupted and then metastasized into the first truly global conflict of men and machines, Bartholdi was assigned the task of reporting on political, military, and other war-related happenings in Zurich and in the Near East.

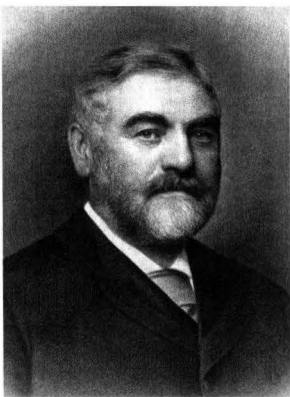
In 1921, Bartholdi, now a seasoned journalist, arrived in the United States as a foreign correspondent. His father too had immigrated and settled in Passaic, where he established himself as an importer and manufacturer of embroidery. Young Bartholdi followed in his

father's footsteps. He became his father's business representative and applied for American citizenship. When he retired in 1946, Bartholdi owned the company. He often lectured on the history of the embroidery industry. The work no doubt had its rewards, but most of Bartholdi's free time was claimed by the ever beckoning muse of history, where he spent countless hours compiling accounts of persons of Swiss ancestry who made their mark on American society.

Emancipated from the daily routines of business, he became totally absorbed with his studies. In 1947, Bartholdi, now an established and well-respected authority on the Swiss-American experience, began a series of broadcasts for the U.S. State Department's Voice of America station on the contributions of the Swiss to American life. The program was aired on Thursday afternoons from VOA studios in New York. It was carried by all radio stations in the American occupation zone of Germany, and also broadcast to Switzerland by short wave.

Ever generous with his time, in 1951, he was invited to give an address before the History Club of Passaic High School. The student newspaper reported how Bartholdi noted his "first important accomplishment, research into the history of the International Red Cross." Nothing was pretentious about Bartholdi. He told the history enthusiasts, "anyone can become an authority on a subject if he is willing to devote himself for years to the accumulation of knowledge

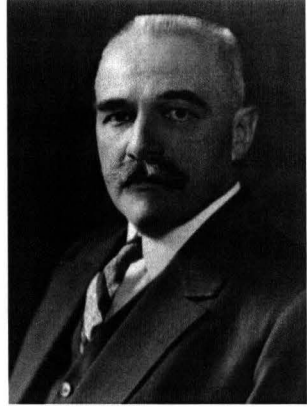
about it." The historian was busier than ever. He was contributing articles to a New York Swiss-American newspaper, and completed two books, the second volume of biographies, and a book scheduled for release in 1956 concerning the Swiss who staffed the Royal American Regiment in the French and Indian War. Unfortunately, the dedicated historiographer did not see the book published. He became seriously ill, dying in Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, New York, on October 12, 1954, but much of his tireless exertions in memorializing Swiss-American accomplishments found their way onto the printed page.



Jacob Weidmann
1845-1911

Credit: *History of the Silk Dyeing Industry in the United States*, 1927.

The Swiss, then as now, enjoy a well-deserved reputation for technical accomplishment in the chemical sciences, and here, we have a local connection—Paterson, N.J., as the “Silk City of America,” was known the world over for its silk dyeing establishments. In 1932, Bartholdi touched upon Paterson’s preeminence in this field of endeavor when he profiled the career of Jacob Weidmann, one of the industry’s giants, noting that his subject “was one of the most forceful businessmen in Paterson’s industrial history, and in every respect an outstanding and representative man of his generation.” Bartholdi used as one of his



Emil S. Halter
1898-1969

Credit: Park Lane Studio,
New York, N.Y., 1929.

sources the encyclopedic *History of the Silk Dyeing Industry in the United States*, a hefty, almost five-pound tome that issued from the pen of Albert H. Heusser, himself of Swiss descent. Heusser, an amazingly gifted writer and historian, was the organizer and first curator of the Passaic County Historical Society. With elegant succinctness, Heusser wrote, “the Swiss people—whose chief characteristics seem to be thrift, common sense and a marvelous capability for attending to their own affairs—have ever offered hospitality to Europe’s outcast and oppressed.”

If Albert Bartholdi lived long enough, he might have written about Emil S. Halter, a distinguished-looking Swiss whose thumbnail biography appears in Heusser’s book. Halter, a graduate chemist, came to the U.S. in the autumn of 1897, settling in Paterson two years later. In 1908, as Heusser formally relates, Halter “connected himself with the Weidmann enterprise.” Halter retired in 1930, dividing his time between Paterson and Europe. Having never married, in 1910, Halter took up residence at Paterson’s storied Hamilton Club, the social domain of the city’s industrial, professional and business elite. The doughty chemist was still living in one of the club’s upstairs suites when he died on September 12, 1969, at age 98. In his will, Halter bequeathed the club \$25,000 for them to do as they pleased, with an additional \$5,000 for distribution among the club’s employees, as an

“appreciation of the faithful service and attention” given him during his more than half-century of residency.

Albert Bartholdi teaches us there is a moral to his story as an indefatigable chronicler of Swiss-Americans, that drive, ambition, and an undeniable affection for knowledge reaches across time and space, and pronounces with steady assurance, here was a life worth living.

~ Edward A. Smyk
Paterson, N.J.

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