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# A New Voice for Old Helvetia:

## Introducing the Descendants of Swiss Settlers

*by Joseph H. Smith*

**T**he Descendants of Swiss Settlers is a new lineage society that honors and celebrates the unique legacy and achievements of Swiss men and women who settled in North America prior to March 5, 1798, which marks the end of the Old Swiss Confederacy. We are excited to announce our formation and we are seeking members!

Membership is open to men and women 18 years or older, who are lineally descended from a Swiss man or woman who settled in North America prior to March 5, 1798. Additionally, the applicant may claim lineal descent from a Swiss man or woman whose descendant(s) left Switzerland and resided outside of Switzerland for an interim period before coming to North America prior to March 5, 1798.

Life Membership in the Society costs \$275. There is also a \$25 Registrar's Fee.

In an effort to minimize paperwork on the applicant's part, the Society allows applicants to use Record Copies from other lineage societies, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Society of Colonial Wars, etc. to establish a genealogical line of descent. A complete list of acceptable Record Copies is located on the Society's website under the Membership tab, which is also, where the Society's membership application can be accessed.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that satisfactory proof must be submitted proving the unbroken line of descent from the

Swiss man or woman and his/her descendant who ultimately settled in North America before March 5, 1798.

Our mission is to preserve and promote the history, genealogy, customs, and culture of early Swiss settlers who generously contributed their time, talent, and treasure to the settling of the North American Continent. The Descendants of Swiss Settlers is the only organization, which provides an exclusive focus on these early Swiss emigrants.

Our Society will have events. We hope to gather bi-annually, including once for an Annual Meeting. It is hoped members will sustain the memory of their ancestors through educational activities, such as a lecture or presentation, and by socializing with other Swiss-Americans at a reception or meal. Group excursions to sites historically associated with early Swiss-American settlement may be planned, as well.

As our membership and the treasury grows, we will also play a role in the larger Swiss-American community by providing charitable support for individuals and organizations who raise awareness about early Swiss settlers. Also, we hope to publish a Society newsletter highlighting our activities, the Swiss ancestry of our members, genealogical discoveries, archival developments, book reviews, etc.

The road to starting the Society has been a long and winding one! In the spring of 2019, I applied to join the Swedish Colonial Society and the Dutch Colonial Society. Knowing that I descended from at least one Swiss ancestor who arrived in Pennsylvania during the Colonial era, I started looking around for a Swiss Colonial Society to join, as well, but I could not find one. I got in touch with the Swiss Center of North America, and I posted a query in the Hereditary Society Community Facebook group, which serves as an umbrella group for dozens of different lineage societies, in the hope that someone would be able to shed some light on this matter. However, no one seemed to know anything about such a society. It then became apparent that a group to honor and celebrate the Swiss who arrived in early America did not exist.

At first, this thought saddened me. Then, it excited me. I could start a group! Having already been a member of a few lineage societies

for several years, I had an understanding of how they functioned. However, I had no idea how to go about starting one from scratch. Frankly, once it began to dawn on me what it would take to form a new lineage society, I was rather overwhelmed. I quietly, albeit rather wistfully, shelved the idea, but the thought of the Society never fully left me.

Then, the pandemic struck. With no events to attend, the idea of a Swiss Society rose again in my mind. I decided that if I was going to form such an organization I needed to do plenty of reading and research about Swiss history, the story of the Swiss in early America, understanding the basics of Swiss genealogy, etc. This unexpected crash course in history, culture, linguistics, religion, and genealogy was exactly what I needed. It was an excellent time of study and growth.

As I learned more about the cultural and religious make-up of the Old Swiss Confederacy, I was routinely struck by its diversity and variety. So many unique stories and narratives emerged in a relatively small place and then spread out all over the world. It inspired me to reconsider the idea of a Swiss Society. My reading and research continued.

With very limited exceptions, the Bernese Cantonal Archives have digitized all of their parish registers and uploaded them for remote viewing. Using this priceless resource, I began to do serious research on my own Swiss ancestral lines. I truly began to understand how to read, study, and use a parish register to maximum effect, as they are the primary source of information for the era we are studying. I also gained an understanding of the unique characteristics of Swiss genealogy. The old, crumpled, ink-stained Swiss parish registers genuinely grabbed ahold of me!

I live in Yonkers, New York. Recently, the Yonkers Public Library became a FamilySearch Affiliate Library. This opened up two completely new avenues of Swiss genealogical research for me. Previously, owing to ancestral research, my research had only focused on the German-speaking Canton of Bern, but now I was able to access the parish registers of the French-speaking Cantons of Geneva, Jura,

Neuchâtel, and Vaud.<sup>1</sup> I also was able to study the parish registers of Graubünden/Grisons, which are generally written in Romansh.

Like many budding genealogists, I first turned to Ancestry.com to build my family tree in an effort to learn more about my antecedents. It was helpful, to an extent, but it does not contain a great wealth of information about Swiss genealogy. Ancestry is a fee-based website. Most larger public libraries offer access to the website through an institutional membership. Ancestry does not provide access to the incomparable old Swiss parish registers; it merely references indices and databases freely available via FamilySearch. It is through the websites of various Cantonal Archives, FamilySearch Affiliate Libraries, and Family History Centers where one can access those treasure troves of information and truly get down to researching one's Swiss ancestors from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and before.

In terms of beginning to do research about one's Swiss ancestors or people who you believe might be of Swiss heritage, a Google search is best. Usually, this will lead a person to a handful of genealogical websites. Although they are user-maintained and subject to error, the data entries for individuals posted on FamilySearch, Geni, and WikiTree can be helpful in getting the proverbial ball rolling. Also, they are free to use.

Once you believe you have identified an ancestor who was possibly of Swiss birth or heritage, The Register of Swiss Surnames is a great resource to consult. Containing information about nearly 50,000 Swiss surnames, it helps establish the *Heimat/Lieu d'origine* (place of origin) where a particular surname held citizenship in different towns from the 18<sup>th</sup> century up to 1962. This place is where the family—usually the person's father—historically comes from. Citizenship, which is inherited through birth, often extends back several centuries. It should not be confused with the place of birth. The community of

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that since I began working with French-language Swiss parish registers, the Cantons of Geneva and Vaud have generously made their parish registers available for remote viewing at home.

origin may be the same as the place of birth, but this is not always the case. The digitized version of *The Register* refers to the 1989 edition. As always, when conducting searches pertaining to surnames in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, be mindful of possible variants a particular surname may have had before spellings were standardized. Think phonetically!

There are also several outstanding reference works that might be helpful to a person researching their early Swiss ancestry in North America, including Dr. Albert Bernhardt Faust's *Lists of Swiss Emigrants in the Eighteenth Century to the American Colonies*, Annette Kunselman Burgert's, *Eighteenth Century Emigrants from the Northern Alsace to America*, Cornelia Schrader-Muggenthaler's *The Swiss Emigration Book*, and Ernst Steinemann's *A List of Eighteenth-Century Emigrants from the Canton of Schaffhausen to the American Colonies, 1734-1752*.

While all of the aforementioned works have their own unique merits, Dr. Faust's two-volume work is an incomparable resource. Published a century ago and studying the Cantons of Basel, Bern, and Zürich, it contains information about thousands of families and individuals who arrived in North America during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As evidenced by Dr. Faust's area of study in the Cantons of Basel, Bern, and Zürich, this work focuses almost exclusively on German-speaking emigrants who practiced the Reformed faith. Notably light are entries about Swiss Anabaptists and Mennonites. Nonetheless, it is the foremost work containing biographical and genealogical information in this field. The book can be accessed for free online via HathiTrust Digital Library.

Most of my Swiss ancestors are from the Canton of Bern. They all settled in Pennsylvania in the 1730s and 1740s. My Swiss ancestors adhered to the Reformed faith and they were farmers. However, as I continued to learn more about them, I noticed how seamlessly and quietly they blended into the larger German-speaking Protestant agrarian communities that dotted the Pennsylvania countryside. They seemed to

get lost in the proverbial shuffle. This both frustrated and intrigued me. What had happened to their distinct Swiss identity and culture?

To my pleasant surprise, I learned that I was not alone in contemplating the idea of a vanished Swiss identity in Colonial America. I acquired a copy of Dr. Leo Schelbert's *Switzerland Abroad: Historical Contours of a Nation's People Global Presence*. In his work, Dr. Schelbert succinctly wrote "Swiss immigrants are often difficult to recognize as Swiss, however, because as speakers of German they were taken as Germans and if French-speaking as Huguenots from France. Swiss surnames, furthermore, are often indistinguishable from German or French ones, and often they became Anglicized."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Schelbert's words were a solemn charge: Rescue your ancestors from the historical abyss. Start the Society. Figure it out.

Around this same time, I had three other significant moments of discovery.

1) The date of July 4, 1776, does not mean much in Swiss history. I had initially considered it as a cut-off date for membership eligibility. However, the date of March 5, 1798, is a very important one in Swiss history. It marks the fall of the City of Bern to French forces during the Napoleonic Wars. This was the end of the Old Swiss Confederacy. For this reason, it is the cut-off date for membership eligibility in our own Society.

2) I learned there were a number of Swiss who settled in Canada and the Caribbean before 1798. To this end, I expanded the area of eligible settlement to include the whole of the North American continent.

3) Lastly, I decided that this nascent organization needed a better name. After considering a few options, I chose Descendants of Swiss Settlers.

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<sup>2</sup> Leo, Schelbert, *Switzerland Abroad: Historical Contours of a Nation's People Global Presence* (Morganstown, Pa.: Masthof Press, 2019), 225.

In the spring and summer of 2022, I began talking to friends from different lineage societies about the various legal and financial components of starting an organization. To my delight, I learned that several friends had the professional acumen and requisite ancestry needed to be a part of the Descendants of Swiss Settlers. This small band of Swiss-Americans formed the Society's inaugural Board of Governors.

Our first Board meeting was held on August 29, 2022, and we began accepting membership applications thereafter. As an aside, the modern-day Cantons of Aargau, Appenzell Ausser Rhoden, Basel Landschaft, Bern, Freiburg, and Vaud were represented on our founding Board of Governors.

We are very much looking forward to hearing from our fellow Swiss-Americans as we endeavor to keep the memory of our ancestors alive. Membership inquiries and other queries will be warmly welcomed!

For more information, please visit our website:

[www.dss1798.org](http://www.dss1798.org)

and follow us on Facebook at:

<https://www.facebook.com/swiss1798>

*~ Joseph H. Smith, Founder and Governor of the  
Descendants of Swiss Settlers, and Swiss American  
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