

# Following in His Footsteps: A Swiss Explorer Comes to America



The car came to a stop near a warehouse on the rail line, the sun slowly diving for the horizon. My guide and I entered, making our way to the back freight elevator, passing cases of pinot, chasselas, and fendant as forklifts pirouetted in the cavernous space. The elevator creaked and whined as we made our way down. It lurched to a stop and we were let out on a lower level that smelled vaguely of moist wood and chalk.

Passing through a long hallway, we finally arrived at our destination. After a jangle of keys, and a creaking hinge, we were inside a room replete with artifacts. Spears, masks, and instruments from the four corners of the earth lined the walls. This area had become a makeshift storage area for a local museum while it was remodeled. My host searched for a moment, methodically reading inventory numbers. *Et voilà!* He took a tubular container wrapped in plastic down from the shelf and handed it to me.

I looked around eagerly for a flat surface. On a wooden crate nearby I gingerly placed the treasure down and removed its protective layer. Even in the dim light, the colors were magnificent. *Quelle merveille!* My eyes fell upon an ornate headdress of vibrant yellow, iridescent blue, deep red, and lacquered black plumage (fig. 1).

My mind was a whirl. I held in my hands a ceremonial object of singular beauty, from one of the most fearsome head-hunting tribes of Brazil. It had been brought back along with a number of other artifacts, including a trophy head

(or so the story goes), from South America in 1853 by Swiss explorer Henri de Büren. I imagined what it must have been like for him to see this object for the first time, in the rainforest 160 years ago.

Viewing this rare artifact was a great highlight in a journey that has consumed my life for the last six years, a journey that has taken many twists and turns and now feels at a crossroads. At the beginning, everything was fresh and uncomplicated. But that was a long while ago.



1. Mundurucú headdress that Henri de Büren brought back from Brazil in 1853. Photograph courtesy of the Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

In 2007, while looking through old books in an armoire at my parents' home north of San Francisco, I stumbled upon a tattered journal. A flood of memories returned to me. It was the same journal I remembered holding as a boy. As before, I didn't know the journal's provenance, but upon seeing it again I was intrigued anew. A watercolor on the first page showed the sun glistening off the surface of a blue sea, a small vessel gently rocking as it made its way to port. Mid-morning sunlight illuminated an imposing fort and lighthouse crowned by the Spanish colors. Below in elegant cursive was the word *Havane* (fig. 2).

Who had made this first-hand dispatch from nineteenth-century Cuba? As I thumbed through the journal, more locations jumped from the yellowing pages: Lima, Trujillo, Cajamarca, Iquitos, Santarem.



*Havane.*

*Le 12 au 15. Décembre. Parti  
pour l'Espagne en 82 heures, après  
avoir fait la traversée en 82 heures, après  
avoir fait la traversée en 82 heures, après*

2. Detail of journal by Henri de Büren, with watercolor of Havana Harbor (1852). Photograph courtesy of the author.

I would come to understand that the journal had been penned by my great-great-grandfather, Henri de Büren (1825-1909), a Swiss nobleman, botanist, explorer, and artist. His writings, including the journal along with letters home that I found months later, chronicle not just a voyage to Cuba and the Amazon but also a two-year journey through the Americas of the 1850s. His first-hand accounts of Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and Mexico City mention important Swiss expatriates and scientific figures, discuss race and society, and marvel at the diversity of the natural world.

Why had no one ever mentioned Henri's journey at family gatherings? Were they also ignorant of his feat? It would have seemed to be a great family story, passed down from generation to generation, told over sumptuous dinners, getting more fanciful in each retelling: "Did you hear how grandpère cleared the jungle with only his Swiss army knife?" Alas, all I knew about Henri was that he sold the family castle at the end of the nineteenth century, and I believe this choice stained his family legacy irreparably. I needed to learn more.



3a. Photograph of Vaumarcus Castle, circa 1890s. Courtesy of the author.

Henri de Büren was the only son of Baron Albert de Büren (1791-1873) and Baroness Catherine de Senarclens (1796-1857). He grew up at the family castle of Vaumarcus (figs. 3a, 3b), overlooking the lake of Neuchâtel in French-speaking Switzerland. He was a great lover of nature and a prolific artist. As did his father before him, he received his botanical training at Albrecht Thaer's Agriculture School near Berlin. Upon his return from Prussia, he also received forestry training in Switzerland, a skill that was crucial to ensure the health of the vast wooded lands that surrounded the castle.



3b. Photograph of the "Palais" at Vaumarcus Castle, circa 1890s. Courtesy of the author.

Henri (fig. 4) was born into privilege and wealth and certainly did not want for much, but unlike his ancestors he would not have a title. Social change and revolution finally came to Neuchâtel in the 1831 when noble titles were abolished. Henri knew from the age of six that he would not be granted the same status his ancestors had enjoyed. How this affected Henri is unclear, but I surmise that it was one factor that propelled him to look beyond Europe's borders to find his own place in the world.

Like many of his day, Henri was deeply moved to travel to the Americas by Alexander von Humboldt's accounts of the flora and fauna of Latin America. He was also certainly intrigued by the customs and lifestyles of the indigenous peoples of the new world. Another source of attraction for Henri was an opportunity to visit many preeminent Neuchâtel scientists who had left Switzerland in the 1840s for the more liberal scientific climate in the United States. After a period of considerable persuasion, his father and mother relented and agreed to fund their only son's wanderlust.

Henri de Büren left Switzerland in 1852. He would not return for almost two years, with sporadic letters home the only contact with his family during that time. He spent his first six months traveling the United States and parts of Canada, before sailing to Havana. After a short stay in Cuba, he traveled to Mexico, where he spent four more months (fig. 5), then journeyed on to Panama and then Lima. From Lima he had originally intended to go overland to Buenos Aires through Bolivia. However, due to political instability in Bolivia, he was instead persuaded to join a Peruvian expedition leading the first wave of German settlers to the town of Caballo-Cocha near the border with Brazil. His full journey across South America took him overland from Trujillo on the Pacific to the Brazilian state of Pará on the Atlantic, where he found a steamer back to Europe.



4. Oil portrait of Henri de Büren by Swiss artist Rodolphe Léon-Berthoud (1859). Photograph courtesy of the author.

The first place Henri visited in 1852 was Boston, where he spent a fortnight, most of it at the home of his compatriot, Louis Agassiz. Agassiz was one of the most important scientists of his day, and knew Henri and his father well. For Henri, a young man in his late 20s, it would have been a significant honor to stay at the home of such a notable figure. The relationship seems to have been respectful and supportive: "Mr. Agassiz told me that he had an extensive collection of native forest samples, and as he knew they were of great interest to me, offered to let me look at them at my leisure. I could not resist his most gracious offer because his collection would be a perfect guide to acquaint myself with the local flora before I begin my trip in earnest through the Americas."



5. Pencil drawing by Henri de Büren of Cuernavaca, Mexico, with view of the Palace of Cortés in background (1853). Photograph courtesy of the author.

Henri was a botanist first and foremost, so his biggest thrill in Boston was the time he spent with the preeminent American botanist, Asa Gray. "I visited Mr. Gray the other day at Harvard, who received me with great warmth. He is, as you are well aware, a botanical genius, and at the same time a great man in all aspects. While we walked together in the botanical garden he collected over 50 different samples for my collection, climbing the trees himself to get me the best ones."

After Boston, Henri traveled to Albany, marveled at Lake George ("the most beautiful sight that I have seen in America to this point"), and toured Montreal before heading to New York. In a letter from New York he speaks of the palpable excitement of new discoveries: "Not a day goes by that I don't feel countless new sensations here. I will try and share some of my experiences which are all so new and exciting it is hard to remember them all."

While in New York, he took in Barnum's American Museum. P.T. Barnum, later of circus fame, operated a museum that was part concert hall, part zoo, and part freak show. For Henri, Barnum's museum represented the merging of the scientific and the fanciful—a very American creation: “Our science at home is liberal; in America, it is totally different. The cities here are not willing to build monuments to science, or are doing it very imperfectly, but it is individuals ... who take care of the whole thing inspired by the immense curiosity the inhabitants of this country have.”



6. Detail of map drawn by Henri de Bûren of the Peruvian Amazon river (1853). Photograph courtesy of the author.



7. Photograph of Henri de Büren's journals. Courtesy of the author.

While Henri was focused on scientific concerns, he could not resist commenting on the social environment of his new surroundings as well. "To sum it up, with Americans, the head leads and trumps the heart. It is the head that dictates their laws and instructs them on their behavior. This industrial spirit transforms the society by reducing all relationships between men to usefulness. There are noble passions that enrich the soul, money spoils and withers it. It seems that greed is blowing a harmful wind upon America, which, focusing on what is moral within man, cuts down genius, smothers enthusiasm, perhaps down to the bottom of the heart, in order to dry the source of noble inspiration and generous impulses."

Henri continued on through the U.S. for months, by stagecoach, steamer, and train. After leaving New York, he ventured west, first to Columbus, Ohio. He continued to St. Louis and spent a number of weeks in the Swiss settlement of Highland, Illinois. After Highland he came east again to visit Philadelphia, then traveled southward by train to Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Charleston, and Atlanta before ending up in New Orleans.

He left the United States by steamer from Mobile, heading for Havana. The lengthiest part of his journal is dedicated to his voyage across the Andes and down the Amazon (fig. 6) with the first German settlers to Peru. At the end of his journey in the Amazon basin he bartered with the Mundurucú people and secured the feathered headdress that I saw for the first time 160 years later in a world far away.

Like Henri's adventure, my project concerning him has continued to evolve. When I found the original journal (fig. 7), my fascination with it took me in its grasp and refused to let go. Beyond the intellectual calculations of its historical value, there was a deeply emotional component. The journal felt viscerally part of me, a creative product that called to me, desiring to be expressed. Publishing the journal was my first thought, but I also thought of a documentary film, retracing Henri's route in the present day, and perhaps ultimately even a feature film. (As I have never made a documentary, many around me have considered me, well, crazy. Yet the project of Henri's

descendant retracing his route felt like a great story, and still does.)

The most exciting discoveries with the journal came early on. Once I realized that Henri's voyage had been ignored by his descendants, I felt I could write a new chapter in my family history. It also helped that as a man of the Americas and a French speaker, I found Henri's writings not only of great interest but also accessible. There have been times when I felt that these words were left for me. A great many other family documents—far older than Henri's journals and written in German—had been deciphered by others. If Henri had written his journals in German, I might never have realized their value.

Following Henri's footsteps, I have ventured twice to Switzerland, have introduced my project to many in Mexico and Brazil and most recently made a pilgrimage to Harvard University, Henri's first stop in the U.S. My most successful trip to Switzerland involved a stop at the ethnological museum in Neuchâtel, where I found the headdress. I also spent some time at the Natural History Museum, co-founded by Henri's father, where the director commented matter-of-factly, "Well, we do have a monkey." Taken aback, I inquired what he meant. He took me into a room full of taxidermy animals and showed a capuchin monkey that Henri had brought back from Brazil and donated to the museum.

My time researching Henri's life and journals is a metaphor for the voyage itself. In the past six years I have slowly embraced his adventurous spirit and it has allowed me to redefine how I see myself. As I followed him down the Continent, I simultaneously went deeper into myself and found out what I really wanted from this life. I still intend to retrace his physical journey, but my explorations through his words have been no less meaningful.

Certain passages are windows into Henri's soul, offering indications of the kind of man he would become later in life. During his travels, he was deeply moved by orphan homes, and by deaf and blind schools in Philadelphia. He called Girard College (founded in 1833 as a school for poor, fatherless boys), "the most beautiful building ever erected in the name of charity." And after attending a concert given by blind musicians, he remarked, "I have very rarely listened to music that touched me that much." In such passages, I see a man who cared deeply for innocence, and children in particular, and with the advent of hindsight, his passages almost seem predictive. Seven years after his return from South America, Henri would marry and become a father. Three of his eight children would be deaf and mute from birth. In order to move his family to Geneva, closer to services for his deaf children, he sold the family's ancestral castle in 1888.

I sadly do not have personal journals for Henri's later life, only anecdotes of those who knew him. One passage comes from Adèle de Rougemont, daughter of Frédéric de Rougemont, a contemporary of Henri's father and author of over 50 books on geography, ethnography, and theology. She wrote to Natalie de Freudenreich, Henri's fiancée, shortly after their engagement in 1860. "That the most gracious God blesses you abundantly, and allows you to do all the good

that you wish around the ancient manor. It's true the times of the troubadours have passed. No passing minstrel will immortalize a song of love to you beneath its windows. Hopefully in exchange however, you will hear the joyous voices of poor children, who will celebrate the goodness of their young lady of the manor. The de Bürens of Vaumarcus are well known in the area for their generosity towards the poor and Mr de Büren was very wise to choose you to become a partner in his charitable works. He could not have found a more compatible mate in caring about orphaned children or the miseries endured by the sick."

As he aged, Henri moderated many of his more strident positions and became more open. It must also be noted that he never saw his deaf children as handicapped, and only wanted the best for them. Beautiful art from his daughter Jeanne remains, as well as a boyhood journal from Albert Gustave, Henri's second deaf child. When the children were young they had tutors at the castle and their life seemed idyllic, reveling in the beauty of everyday life, as Gustave's small quote portrays: "We were very happy to find small flowers in the fields today announcing the start of Spring. Yesterday we saw butterflies who had left their chrysalis and flew happily on the breeze. As the weather warms, more insects and flowers show themselves, God is bringing them back to life." Henri made posthumous donations to the School for the Deaf in Geneva, and wanted advantages for his children. His three deaf children represented Switzerland at the International Congress of the Deaf and Mute at the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris, which spoke interestingly about the U.S. and the great achievements of Thomas H. Gallaudet.

Along the way, I have learned important lessons about Henri and about myself, traits that we share and ways in which we are vastly different, similarities that elicited pride and others that led to self-examination. Henri was a man of his time for good and ill. He cared very deeply for his family, as an early passage written from New York demonstrates: "I think of you and the family often, what you are doing, what you are thinking, and how I would like you to share in my adventure. I feel that your thoughts are with me, they give me strength and confidence to participate in all the new sensations and experiences that the new world has to offer." He did not like to see animals suffer and yet he was also a hunter. He was a great lover of nature and agriculture, but openly characterized indigenous farmers in South America as lazy for not aggressively exploiting their land. He was a cultural snob, a classist, and most painfully to me, a racist, as seen in his assertion that blacks could not "get by without the help of whites."

Passages demonstrating racial and social prejudice made me shift in my chair as I read them—it would have been more convenient for me if Henri had been a Swiss abolitionist. While I vehemently disagreed with his prejudices, simply judging him 160 years later would be too easy. Instead I needed to ask myself, why do so many of his passages stir such great emotion in me? I needed to go deeper.

Henri's views invariably made me re-examine my own. They helped me recognize,

in my younger self, my own reliance on judgment. He was quick to judge, quick to dismiss, and was fairly pessimistic about human nature. Wasn't I just like him at his age? The realization shocked me, and has helped me re-examine how I see the world.

Over time many questions have arisen for me. What is the nature of my inspiration? Why does this project hold such a special resonance for me? How can I honor a family legacy and still be true to my own values? How can I acknowledge Henri's racism, without tainting the man as a whole? These are questions I would not have thought of asking at the beginning. Something has changed for me. How did I get to a place of seeming uncertainty when my project appeared so clear?

The answer is complicated and it isn't. The project is about Henri and it isn't.

As an American, the more I sit with his work, the more I realize that it was never just about Henri. His journey provides a unique glimpse of the pre-Civil War era. One that, through his lens, highlights scientific optimism, celebrates nature, explores social dynamics, and documents racial injustice. His thoughts and observations on the nineteenth century open a larger window into the past, one that shows at times how far we have come and at others how far we still have to go.

This article originally appeared in issue 13.4 (Summer, 2013).

---

Jean-François de Buren is a designer, writer, family historian, and storyteller. He is an associate director of market development for KPMG in San Francisco and an executive board member for the Swiss Center of North America in New Glarus, Wisconsin. He has actively researched and documented his great-great-grandfather's journey since 1997.