

Henry Schmiedell: San Francisco Pioneer

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San Francisco has many pioneers, though not all are household names. One such person is Henry Schmiedell. He arrived during the Gold Rush, saw the development of the city of San Francisco and played a significant role in the local economy for decades.

Born in the city of Lüneburg, 30 miles south of Hamburg, Germany.¹ He grew up quickly, graduating from college at age 15. He started working as a salesman in some of the largest houses in Lüneburg. At 21 he left home to make his fortune in America. He went to Lima, Peru, by the way of Valparaiso, Chile, and there he connected himself with a commission and importing house.²

He tells the story of his arrival in California in an 1878 recollection for the Bancroft Library of the time. The original is found in today's Bancroft Library Collection and freely available for reading.³ Following the rush of so many others, he arrived by ship in San Francisco in August of 1849, on board the Hamburg bark, Helena. He tells of the high prices of many goods in demand, including pickles and sardines, as well as the nonexistent demand for other common items such as beans and even tobacco, likely due to the high price of storing bulky goods. Prices would vary wildly from store to store, with no common agreement. Interest on money could be one percent a day and for a large amount of money, fifteen percent a month was the usual rate for amounts from five to ten thousand dollars. Further recollections of gambling houses, deadly mud and expensive meals in 'tent' restaurants paint a vivid picture of the Gold Rush days.

Henry was employed as a salesperson for commission merchants and bankers Godeffroy, Sillem & Co., the San Francisco representative of the noted J. C. Godeffroy & Co. of Hamburg. After a few months in conventional business space, Henry tells of his involvement in a fascinating chapter of San Francisco history. As he tells it,

“in the beginning of 1850, the firm I was employed with bought the hull of the ‘Niantic’, an old whaler which had been towed up to the corner of Clay and Sansome Sts. and converted it into a warehouse, building on top of it to some extent. They used it for storing goods, for which the charge was ten dollars a ton per month in those days. I was the storekeeper of that warehouse.”

Godeffroy and Sillem were associated in the Niantic enterprise with the firm Ward, Mersch, and Maillard.⁴ The next generation of Maillard and Schmiedell would later become business partners.

¹ A powerful member of the [Hanseatic League](https://www.britannica.com/place/Luneburg-Germany), Lüneburg was incorporated into [Hanover](https://www.britannica.com/place/Luneburg-Germany) in 1705. See <https://www.britannica.com/place/Luneburg-Germany>.

² Details of his early life in Europe were detailed in his obituary: “His Life Ended”, San Francisco Call, August 26, 1894, 10.

³ Statement of Recollections of Cal. Matters, By Henry Schmiedell for Bancroft Library 1878, The Bancroft Library, MICROFILM BANC MSS C-D 146-156.

⁴ James P. Delgado, Gold Rush Port: The Maritime Archaeology of San Francisco's Waterfront, (University of California Press: 2009), 63-70.

Part of the Niantic hull is currently on display at the Maritime Museum in San Francisco, along with a diorama displaying the ship in use as a warehouse.⁵



Henry would move on to work in a sturdy brick building at Clay and Liedesdorff before the tragic fire of 1851, which destroyed much of the City. While the Niantic would burn to the ground, his trust in the safety of the new quarters was unfounded as he had to escape its own destruction after flames were able to get inside. As Henry recalled, a cache of liquor outside was broken or burned and the burning alcohol seeped into the building. Once again, he moved to a new location, this time on California near Sansome. After a time, he would strike out on his own in the dry goods business.

In 1862, Henry would once again contribute to San Francisco history when he was a founding member of the San Francisco Stock and Exchange Board. From a small beginning, his timing and talent were put to use in making a sizeable fortune.

In the 1910 book, History of the San Francisco Stock and Exchange Board, by Jos. L. King, there is a picture of Henry with his fellow officers of the Exchange Board in 1872.



Note the man standing in the center, B. Howard Coit. He married Lillie Hitchcock, the future benefactress of Coit Tower, though the couple would end up separating.

⁵ The museum is open daily from 10 am to 4 pm at 900 Beach Street in San Francisco. See more at <https://www.nps.gov/safr/learn/historyculture/nianticpainting.htm> and <https://www.nps.gov/safr/learn/historyculture/bathhousebuilding.htm> .

Henry died on August 25, 1894, while staying at the Hotel Rafael in San Rafael, California, likely due to complications from a stroke. He had a last chance to see friends and his wife, son and daughter before passing.⁶



⁶ "His Life Ended", San Francisco Call, August 26, 1894, 10.