

# Learning About Labor History

## The Botto House NHL

Marty Blatt

**N**ational landmarks and parks serve in part as this nation's collective memory. That memory needs to be broadened to include working men and women, who comprise the vast majority of America's people.

Often, these sites are not grand homes or ornate public buildings, but rather modest, "ordinary" structures such as the Botto House.

To understand the national significance of the Botto House, it is necessary to examine the history of Paterson, NJ, and the men and women who worked and struggled there.

Paterson had a critical place in the development of American industrialization. Named for Governor William Paterson of New Jersey, the city's charter was signed in 1791. The city grew around the site where Alexander Hamilton and his associates in the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures (SUM) began to harness the water-power of the Great Falls of the Passaic River in the 1790s.

Although the initial efforts of SUM were not very successful, Paterson was one of the nation's first efforts to plan an industrial city. Over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Paterson grew into a substantial industrial center with the manu-

facture of cotton textiles, railroad locomotives, and later, silk. Beginning in the 1860s, the silk industry grew rapidly. By 1880 Paterson had earned the reputation of "Silk City" or the "Lyons of America," a status that was lost by the beginning of World War II.

Immigrant labor worked in Paterson's mills. The first generation of skilled weavers in the 1860s and 1870s came mainly from Macclesfield and Coventry, England. They were followed by Germans, Italians, Polish Jews, and others. Much of the work in Paterson's silk mills was distinguished from work in other American industrial centers in that silk production required skilled laborers. This was not assembly-line production.

In the first decades of the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of immigrants came to the United States.

Many sought economic opportunity while others pursued political freedom. All sought a better life for themselves and their families.

American industry was expanding rapidly and the mills welcomed, indeed recruited, immigrants. The Botto family was a part of this great influx. Pietro Botto and his wife Maria came from the foothills of the Alps in the textile center of Biella, Italy. After 15 years of weaving in New Jersey textile mills, the Bottos saved and borrowed money to purchase a home of their own in 1908. They chose the tiny community of Haledon, a good example of the first American suburbs, growing along the trolley line north of Paterson, where many Piedmontese from Biella had already settled.

The Botto House was not just a home but also a second source of income, necessary to help pay for the house. The house functioned as a kind of public inn, providing a

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The Botto House. Photo by Al Zwiazek, courtesy American Labor Museum/Botto House National Historic Landmark.

This is the latest in a series of articles focusing on the educational potential offered by our national parks and other historic and natural sites. Previous articles in this series have discussed a wide variety of both parks and National Historic Landmarks spanning many themes and time periods in American history, and a *CRM* thematic issue, "Teaching with Historic Places," was published recently (Vol. 16, No. 2).

The subject of labor history is not well known to the American people. With the exception of Lowell National Historic Park and the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, very few areas of the national park system deal with labor history as a primary theme. This gap is now filled through the preservation and interpretation of sites listed in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as National Historic Landmarks.

The Botto House National Historic Landmark is a site that reminds us that while previous generations of American workers accepted the Industrial Revolution they did not necessarily accept the harsh conditions and lack of human dignity brought on by employment in the mills and factories of America. The men and women who worked in the textile mills of Paterson, NJ, were deeply committed to their vision of an industrial America in which technology was harnessed for human needs and the American ideals of democracy and freedom were guaranteed for all to enjoy. The Botto House commemorates not only a chapter in the American labor history but also illustrates the continuing American struggle for human rights.

Readers of *CRM* are invited to submit articles in this series. Please submit all contributions to Harry Butowsky, *CRM* (400), National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127.



A Sunday crowd in front of the Botto House listening to an IWW speaker. Photo courtesy American Labor Museum/Botto House National Historic Landmark.

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bocci court and card tables and sometimes a small band or orchestra for recreation. Maria Botto and her four daughters often served meals to as many as 100 people during Sunday excursions. Paterson workers labored 6 1/2 days every week so for many the Botto House provided a welcome respite.

Many of the silk workers had brought militant traditions of struggle with them from European textile centers. They had a strong cooperative and anticlerical orientation, and a determination not to be pushed around by the mill owners. Confrontations often erupted. Indeed, strikes occurred so commonly in Paterson that one historian found that 137 walkouts took place between 1887 and 1900—a total that does not include the small disturbances that took place on a regular basis in the city.

By far the most significant strike in Paterson's history, and a major strike in United States labor history, occurred in 1913. This strike by 25,000 silk workers shut down the 300 silk mills and dye houses in Paterson for almost five months. Unlike most textile strikes, this action did not begin as a defensive battle against a wage cut, like the 1912 "Bread and Roses" conflict in Lawrence, MA. The broad-silk weavers called the strike as a way of blocking an increase in loom assignments from two to four. As skilled workers, broad-silk weavers had fought since the 1880s for control over the rate of production. They were joined by the ribbon weavers and unskilled dyers' helpers. A central issue of the strike was the demand for the eight-hour work day. During the strike, workers successfully overcame differences of nationality, craft, and gender. Despite their unity and democratic self-management, the workers were ultimately defeated by the Paterson manufacturers.

The Paterson strike featured three vital groups coming together: the striking silk workers, organizers from the

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and Greenwich Village intellectuals. They all collaborated in the production of a successful strike pageant in New York's Madison Square Garden.

At the turn of the century, Carnegie, Rockefeller, Morgan, and others were amassing millions as corporate America prospered. The lives of many workers improved, but a substantial number lived and toiled in wretched conditions. The major working class organization of the day, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), believed in craft unionism. Many unions affiliated with the AFL openly excluded blacks and effectively excluded women and the new immigrants. Organized in 1905 in opposition to the AFL, the IWW called for the organizing of all workers into one big union. They envisioned a society controlled by workers themselves. Their brand of revolutionary unionism called for replacing the conservative motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work" with a call for the abolition of the wage system. Often relying on songs, poems, humor, and innovative tactics, the IWW found the silk workers of Paterson

receptive to their ideas, especially coming right after their great success among the Lawrence textile workers. IWW leaders Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Carlo Tresca, and Bill Haywood played major roles in Paterson.

Paterson strikers faced severe harassment from municipal authorities in league with the mill owners. There were arrests, clubbings, refusal to grant permits for parades, confiscations of literature, and threats to close halls. Freedom of speech and assembly as provided for in the United States Constitution did not apply to the striking workers of Paterson.

The workers found a place to meet freely in the neighboring town of Haledon at the invitation of Socialist Mayor William Brueckmann. Subsequently, Pietro and Maria Botto offered their house as an ideal location for mass meetings. High on a hill overlooking a large green, which was almost enclosed by a semicircle of woods, the second-story balcony of the Botto House provided speakers, in the words of Gurley Flynn, with a "natural platform and amphitheater."

Huge throngs of striking workers and sympathizers gathered on the green outside the Botto House for rallies, information updates, and recreation almost every Sunday over the course of the five-month strike.

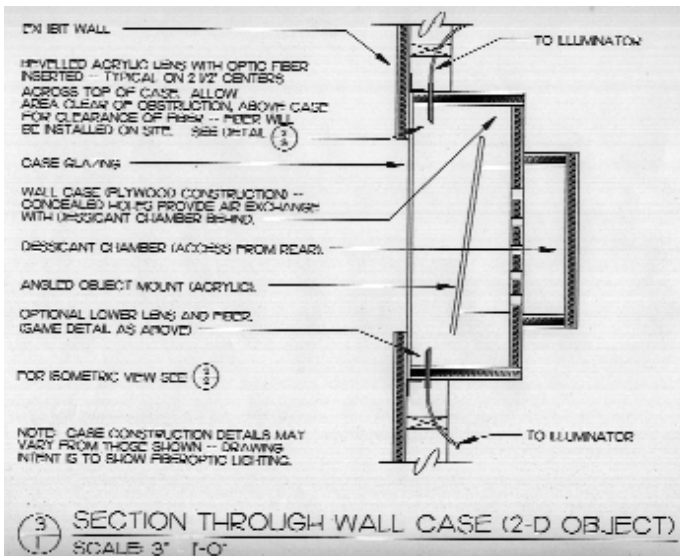
Intellectuals such as Upton Sinclair and John Reed and IWW leaders spoke to the workers from the second floor balcony of the house. Often, speakers addressed the different immigrant groups in their own languages, including German and Italian.

Bunny Kuiken, a granddaughter of the Bottos, lived in the house until 1983. In 1983 the property was declared a National Historic Landmark. That same year, the Botto House became the headquarters for the American Labor Museum (Botto House National Landmark, 83 Norwood

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bottom rear of the cases. The cables then crossed 6"-10" of open floor space, entered through holes at the bottom of the panels, and were then bundled with cables from the boxes at the illuminator. The sections of cable exposed to view behind the exhibit cases were covered with black polyethylene tubing.

The manner of fixing the fiber optics to the light source had to be considered because of the potential for heat build-up and subsequent damage to the optics. Cables were bundled into and supported by a 5"-long aluminum tube held in an aluminum collar with set screws. This provided a method of attaching the fiber optics to the illuminator and allowed sufficient ventilation of heat from the bulb.



Detail of case construction. Drawings by John Battle, Detailed Concepts.

### Future Directions

Our research and experimentation demonstrates that a simple and effective system for artifact illumination can be developed using readily available materials. More sophisticated systems may evolve as interest grows within the museum community. Future uses may include fiber optics connected to passive solar collectors, providing UV and IR-free sunlight to museum galleries and visitor areas.

The ability to get safe, effective lighting to museum objects at relatively low cost suggests that the future of fiber optics in museums looks promising.

Our application of fiber optics has allowed us to satisfy the immediate conservation and design objectives at Friendship Hill. It also has given the designers, planners, and other museum professionals at Harpers Ferry Center an additional tool with which to work.

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Street, Haledon, NJ 07508; Phone: 201-595-7935). The museum seeks to advance public understanding of the history of work, workers, and the labor movement of the United States, with special attention to the ethnicity and immigrant experience of American workers.

There is little ambiguity regarding the public commemoration of sites associated with leading politicians or business figures in American society. However, sites that focus on working class life, especially those that are connected to harsh strikes culminating in defeat, often are remembered in much more complex ways. When reporter Mel Most tried to interview 1913 survivors and their children for a story in a local paper in 1973, he met with widespread resistance. One neighbor of the Botto family in Haledon was terrified that she might be mentioned in his story. In popular memory the 1913 strike had become associated with the decline of Paterson, with violence, and with un-American radicalism. This was the case despite clear historical evidence to the contrary: the strike was democratic and non-violent in nature, the community had demonstrated widespread support, and the IWW had attracted thousands of Paterson workers to its ranks.

Even Bunny Kuiken's own grandparents did not talk with her about the strike or the role of their own home. Still, she felt something about the house and, with the discovery of an old photo (reproduced here), she began to investigate the history of the workers of Paterson and Haledon, and her own family past. With the Botto House established as a national landmark and hosting the American Labor Museum, Kuiken believes that her commitment to a public commemoration of this significant history has been fulfilled. In "The House on the Green," a video distributed by the museum, she declares: "I want this house to be here for many generations to come—to not forget those 25,000 people that were out of work. And it was forgotten for many years. Many people just wouldn't talk about it. And it bothered me that I had that one picture with all these thousands of people out front and nobody seemed to remember them. And through this I hope they shall be remembered."

The Botto House is one of the National Historic Landmarks featured in the National Park Service's book, *The Great American Landmark Adventure* (see CRM, Vol. 16, No. 1). For those interested in learning about this history in greater detail, two books might be of particular interest: Steve Golin, *The Fragile Bridge: Paterson Silk Strike 1913* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); and Philip Scranton, ed., *Silk City: Studies on the Paterson Silk Industry, 1860-1940* (New Jersey Historical Society, 1985). If you are interested in a comprehensive overview of labor history throughout the history of the United States, there is the two-volume study by the American Social History Project, *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture & Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992).

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