

The Back Story[†]

Jeffrey I. Seeman, *University of Richmond,
Richmond, VA*

Henry Carrington Bolton and James J. Bohning were two of a kind in many ways. Both left important legacies to the history of chemistry and to a broader community. Both were producers and collectors.

Bolton (1843-1903) came to history of chemistry early in his career. His first article in the history of chemistry was published in the same year as his first bibliography/ catalogue, in 1870. His *A Select Bibliography of Chemistry, 1492-1892* is considered to be his most important of over 300 publications, books and notes. He studied with Dumas, Wurtz, Bunsen, Kopp, Kirchhoff, Hofmann and Wöhler. He operated a private laboratory in New York City, then taught at Columbia School of Mines, the Woman's Medical College of the New York Infirmity, and Trinity College (Hartford, CT). In 1874, Bolton suggested and then led the centennial celebration of Joseph Priestley's discovery of oxygen at Priestley's home in Northumberland (PA), that led to the founding of the ACS, of which Bolton was a charter member. In 1887, Bolton resigned his teaching position, subsequent to receiving a significant family inheritance, and began a full-time research and literary career. His scholarship extended to folklore, genealogy, and musical sand, alchemistic paintings, and of course, bibliography. He was a grand collector of engravings of famous chemists and of rare books on alchemy and chemistry. After his death, his widow gave the collection to the Library of Congress, but past inquiries of this institution find no record.

Bohning (1934-2011) came to the history of chemistry in the second half of his career after teaching at Wilkes College (Wilkes-Barre, PA). In 1980, Bohning retired from academics and joined the Beckman Center for the History of Chemistry [later the Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF), now the Science History Institute (SHI)] as a fulltime oral historian (five years), then was a staff writer for the ACS (three years) before retiring to a fulltime occupation of research, writing, and collecting. At the age of 64, he joined Lehigh University as a visiting research scientist, a position he held for the rest of his life. He conducted over 90 oral histories, made some 50 presentations at ACS national meetings, organized numerous symposia of the ACS Division of the History of Chemistry (HIST), and published original research in the history of chemistry, one publication receiving HIST's Outstanding Paper Award for 1989. He was an expert in



*James J. Bohning at the
grave of Henry Carrington
Bolton, December 1, 2003.
Photograph courtesy John
Sharkey.*

the history of the ACS and of HIST and served as HIST's historian and archivist for decades. Simultaneously, Bohning was the founding editor of *Boltonia*, the newsletter of the Bolton Society (see below), editor of *Mudd in Your Eye*, the newsletter of Lehigh's Department of Chemistry, and editor of *The Metzger Times*, the newsletter of past genealogy and current events for the descendants of Jacob Metzger (1734-1827), one of whom was Bohning. He conducted research on steam railroads, anthracite mining, and the 19th century industrial revolution. His large book collection was accessioned into Lehigh University's library. He collected antique chemical instruments which went into CHF's museum upon his death. His collections of pocket watches, license plates, silver christening spoons, nut crackers, blow torches, train sets, patent medicine bottles, mantle clocks, and carved wooden gears, were all dispersed upon his death.

These two gentlemen, a century apart, shared the love of knowledge, history, a wide berth of interests, and a respect for and dedication to the memorialization of human accomplishment.

The Bolton Society of SHI, named for Henry Carrington Bolton, encourages and promotes the individual love for and collection of all types of printed material devoted to chemistry and related sciences. On behalf of the Bolton Society, on December 1, 2003, Bohning and John Sharkey placed a wreath on the grave of Henry Carrington Bolton in Tarrytown, NY.

[†]Based on the following sources.

1. C. A. Browne, "Henry Carrington Bolton," *J. Chem. Ed.*, **1940**, 457-461.
2. W. Jensen, "Some Late 19th- and Early 20th-Century American Historians of Chemistry," unpublished manuscript, Cincinnati, OH, **pre-2019**.
3. N. Heindel, HIST Remembers James J. Bohning, <http://acshist.scs.illinois.edu/roster/officerbios/BohningJamesJ.pdf> (accessed Feb. 13, 2019), reprinted from HIST, *Newsletter*, 243rd ACS National Meeting, San Diego, CA, March 25-29, **2012**, pp 6-8.