

When Alfred Heston died in 1937 at the age of 83, he left behind a rich legacy of enduring achievements and service to Atlantic City. His commitment to civic service was evident in his roles as city



official, newspaper editor and publisher, historian and author, founder of the Atlantic City Hospital and trustee of the Atlantic City Free Public Library. His innovative approaches to promoting the city contributed to the continuing development of Atlantic City as a resort.

As a public official he was well known for his independence and opposition to unethical practices in city government. First elected in 1895 as City Comptroller, he served in this position for many years. In 1912, City Council ousted him from the Comptroller's office after he refused to buy stock in a city contractor's street paving company and then rejected what he believed to be a spurious payment claim from the same company. In a statement to supporters he said:

Defeated? By no means. On the contrary, I have won a great victory. Plato says that conquest of self is the greatest of all victories. By subjecting my own interests to those of the public, I have won a greater victory than that of the man who has thrust me out of office. I have refused to do the bidding of those who seemed to care little for the public but who have had an eye on the main chance.

In his subsequent run for the post of City Commissioner in 1912, he was defeated, probably because he refused to align himself with any political factions. During the election he made it clear he "had no connection with any political machine and recognized no boss other than the general public." He was elected City Treasurer in 1914 with a vote that was, at the time, the largest ever cast for a candidate for any public office in the history of Atlantic City. A legal ambiguity concerning the direct election of a city treasurer led to the Board of Commissioners rejecting the vote but then appointing Heston to the position themselves. This in turn paved the way for his ouster from office a year later after he once again found himself at odds with corrupt political interests.

Heston had a notable newspaper career in the region, beginning with *The West Jersey Press* in Camden where he learned the printing trade right after completing high school in Philadelphia. Within a few years he became editor of the newspaper and subsequently went on to *The Salem Standard* and *The Bridgeton Chronicle*. In 1884 he purchased *The Atlantic City Review*; after relinquishing his interests in that paper, he later purchased *The Atlantic Journal*.

In the late 1880s, Heston began writing and publishing a long-running series promoting Atlantic City. Heston's *Handbook: Atlantic City Illustrated* was an annual publication devoted to publicizing the City's many attractions. Heston is also credited with devising the strategy for what was ultimately a highly successful public relations gambit: the city-run Press Bureau. Through promotional events, coverage of visiting celebrities and relationships with reporters throughout the country, the Press Bureau shaped the image of the city during its heyday as a resort destination.

The history of southern New Jersey was another area in which Heston made a significant contribution. He was the editor of *South Jersey, A History, 1664-1924*, a five-volume work covering historical events leading to the development of each county in the region as well as biographies of prominent residents. As an author, he wrote about the history of Atlantic City and the Egg Harbor region in *Absegami: Annals of Eyren Haven and Atlantic City, 1609-1904*. In *Jersey Waggon Jaunts* he turned historical fact into an eclectic set of anecdotal tales about New Jersey history, including many on Atlantic City.

Heston considered his founding of the Atlantic City Hospital his greatest achievement. The hospital opened in 1898, and Heston served as secretary of its board of governors for the next 25 years. As one of the founders and trustees of the Atlantic City Free Public Library, Heston was responsible for establishing the collection on local history. In the Library's earliest days, he made a significant number of contributions to the collection. Later, his personal library of books and manuscripts was acquired and formed the basis for expanded development of the Atlantic City history collection. Through both his publications and collection of historical materials, he continues to this day to support the work of researchers who, in varying ways, carry on his legacy.

#### **Key Dates in Alfred Heston's Life:**

- April 30, 1854: Born at Hestonville, Pennsylvania, to descendants of a Quaker family who were among the original settlers of Bucks County.
- 1875: Married Abbie Mitchell, in Camden, New Jersey, with whom

he had three daughters.

- 1884: Took up residence in Atlantic City.
- November 10, 1937: Died at Atlantic City Hospital after a brief illness; buried at Greenwood Cemetery in Pleasantville, New Jersey.

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