

3-1-1982

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Recommended Citation

Wikén, Erik (1982) "When Did Swedish Patronymics Become Surnames?," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol2/iss1/5>

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When Did Swedish Patronymics Become Surnames?

Erik Wikén

In an article on surnames in the first issue of *Swedish American Genealogist* Nils William Olsson states, that “it was not until the latter part of the 19th century that the patronymic in Sweden congealed to become a family name.”¹

This statement is basically correct when applied to the rural population of Sweden. Among some of the families, the old system, based on the use of patronymics, continued well into the 20th century. A good example of this is the case of the Swedish Nobel laureate in literature, Harry *Martinson* (1904–1978). His father, a sea captain, was named *Martin* Olofsson.

On the other hand, one notes that among families living in cities and towns, those engaged in the iron and metal trades, as well as members of the clergy, there had appeared a clear tendency for patronymics to solidify into family names as early as toward the end of the 17th century. One of the earliest examples of this type is that of Abraham Arfwedson, b. in 1698, who was the s. of Anders Arfwedson, a merchant.²

The tendency for patronymics to evolve into surnames is so obvious, that *Riksarkivet* in Stockholm (The National Archives) has an established policy of indexing all persons, whose names end in *-son* and who were active in Sweden after 1718, the year that the Era of Liberty (*Frihetstiden*) began, under the patronymic or family name, with the Christian name following. On the other hand, all persons, whose lives and achievements occurred before 1719, have been indexed under their Christian names, the patronymic following. For a further analysis of this system, see Bengt Hildebrand, “Om personregister” in *Personhistorisk tidskrift*, Vol. XLI, pp. 157–176. The same general rule is followed in major Swedish historical and biographical works, notably the index for *Uppsala universitets studentmatrikel 1595–1817* (Register of Students at the University of Uppsala 1595–1817).

Among the emigrants and travellers to America, one finds, of course, both systems. Those coming from the rural areas of Sweden, retained their patronymics for a longer time. Those coming from cities or towns, or such communities, where the iron and metal working trades dominated, were apt to use patronymics, which by this time had become family names. This is particularly true in

the early period of migration, up to 1846, when the main body of arrivals to the United States had represented these classes of people, rather than those from the Swedish rural areas.³ A few examples will suffice.

Anna Christina Jansson, who emigrated to New Bedford, MA in 1831, was the dau. of Olof Jansson.⁴

Fredrik Olaus Nilsson, the well-known pioneer Baptist clergyman (baptized in New York in 1834), was the s. of Petter Nilsson, a farmer and fisherman.⁵

Maria Christina Olsson, who left for Boston, MA in 1839, was the dau. of Lars Olsson.⁶

John Ericsson, the famed inventor of the *Monitor*, who arrived in New York in 1839, was the s. of Olof Ericsson.⁷

Göran Fredrik Göransson, the founder of the Sandviken Steel Company in Sweden, who visited New York briefly in 1839, was the s. of Anders Peter Göransson.⁸

Carl August Zachrisson, who came to New York in 1843, was the s. of Erik Zachrisson.⁹

Bror Johan Jonzon, who visited New York in 1843, was the s. of Anders Jonzon.¹⁰

Anders Magnus Jönsson, who arrived in New York in 1843, and his brother, Johan Peter Jönsson, who came in 1844, were the s. of Anders Jönsson.¹¹

Eugen Conrad Leonard Gullbrandsson, who came to New York in 1844, was the s. of Gabriel Gullbrandsson.¹²

Carl Johan Petersson, who also arrived in New York in 1844, was the s. of Jonas Petersson.¹³

Somewhat later in time one notes that the s. of Erik Jansson, the Swedish sect leader and founder of Bishop Hill, IL, Eric Johnson, also retained his father's patronymic as his family name. He became the famed Swedish American journalist, who together with Carl Fredrik Petter Peterson, co-authored *Svenskarne i Illinois*.¹⁴

The evolution of a surname from a patronymic can be viewed in the case of Sven Månsson, s. of Måns Zachrisson. He moved into the Kristine Parish in Göteborg in 1827 and in 1831 he informed his clergyman that he henceforth planned to be known as Sven Zachrisson.¹⁵ This was the name he used when he arrived in Boston Feb. 18, 1839.¹⁶

Nils Magnus Nilsson, who arrived in New York in 1850, was the s. of Nils Olofsson (Olsson). At the time of his arrival, he is listed as Nils M. Olson on the manifest, having decided to keep his father's patronymic as a family name.¹⁷ In another case, also dealing with an immigrant who came to New York in 1850, we find that Per Jacobsson's s., Nils Persson, seemingly also followed the same pattern, since Norelius refers to him as Nils Jacobsson.¹⁸

From the few examples listed above, I have tried to demonstrate that descendants of these early immigrants may find that the original immigrant either went by his own patronymic or that of his father, which he had chosen as a surname. If the immigrant's name was Sven Johansson, his father's name would

probably also have been Johansson, if the immigrant came from the urban areas of Sweden. If he came from the rural areas, his father's first name would have been Johan and the last name probably a patronymic.

- ¹ Olsson, Nils William, "What's in a Swedish Surname?" *Swedish American Genealogist (SAG)*, Vol. I, No. 1, p. 26.
- ² *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon (SBL)*, Vol. II, pp. 160–161. Abraham Arfwedson's great grandson, Carl David Arfwedson (1806–1881), travelled extensively in the United States and Canada 1832–1834 and wrote several books on his travels. He m. an American woman in Philadelphia. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 167–169.
- ³ It was in 1846 that Erik Jansson's followers, mostly from the rural districts of Hälsingland, began their long journey to their final destination in Illinois.
- ⁴ Olsson, Nils William, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in U.S. Ports 1820–1850 (except New York)* (Stockholm and St. Paul, MN, 1979) (*SPAexcNY*), p. 50, n. 27.
- ⁵ *Svenska män och kvinnor I–VIII* (Stockholm, 1942–1955), Vol. V, pp. 441–442.
- ⁶ *SPAexcNY*, p. 9, n. 34. She was the dau. of Lars Olsson, a laborer, and Helena Gröning, according to information in *Landsarkivet*, Göteborg.
- ⁷ Olsson, Nils William, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820–1850* (Stockholm and Chicago, 1967) (*SPANY*), p. 32, n. 76.
- ⁸ *SBL*, Vol. XVII, pp. 663–668. See also Kjerstin Göransson-Ljungman, *Konsuln* (Stockholm, 1949).
- ⁹ *SPANY*, p. 47, n. 66.
- ¹⁰ *SBL*, Vol. XX, pp. 399–400.
- ¹¹ *SPANY*, pp. 55, n. 20; p. 59, n. 42; *SPAexcNY*, p. 91.
- ¹² *SPANY*, p. 59, n. 38. He was b. in Vickleby Parish (Kalm.) April 24, 1825, s. Gabriel Gullbrandsson auditor (*kontrollör*), and Hedvig Johanna Löfberg, according to information in *Landsarkivet*, Vadstena.
- ¹³ *SPANY*, p. 61, n. 51 and *SPAexcNY*, p. 93. He was b. in Karlshamn June 22, 1815, s. Jonas Petersson, ship's carpenter (*varvstimmerman*), and Carin Isaacsdotter, according to information in *Landsarkivet*, Lund.
- ¹⁴ *SAG*, Vol. I, No. 1, pp. 1–6.
- ¹⁵ According to information contained in the household examination rolls of Kristine Parish, Göteborg (AI:2, p. 475), *Landsarkivet*, Göteborg. He was b. in Lilla Hult, Ormesberga Parish (Kron.) June 21, 1813, s. Måns Zachrisson and Carin Jaensdotter, according to information in *Landsarkivet*, Vadstena.
- ¹⁶ *SPAexcNY*, p. 9, n. 32.
- ¹⁷ *SAG*, Vol. I, No. 2, pp. 68–69.
- ¹⁸ *SPANY*, p. 222. He is listed as Niels Petterson, unidentified. He emigrated from Ignaberga Parish (Krist.), but was b. in Norra Åkarp Parish (Krist.) Oct. 9, 1826, s. Per Jacobsson and Ingar Jönsdotter. Cf. Eric Norelius, *De svenska luterska församlingarnas och svenskarnes historia i Amerika*, I–II (Rock Island, IL, 1890, 1916), I, p. 50 and information supplied by *Landsarkivet*, Lund.