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Literature

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American Log Buildings: An Old World Heritage. By Terry G. Jordan. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985. x + 193 pp. Maps and illustrations. \$26.00.

Readers of this journal may be surprised to learn that most of the recent scholarly literature on log buildings in America either ignores, or denies, the role of New Sweden (1638-1665) in establishing that widespread tradition. Terry Jordan is to be commended for a fresh attempt at reopening this can of worms for American cultural historians—many of whom prefer to call themselves architectural historians, geographers, anthropologists or folklorists. Some few of us who toil in these academic vineyards were never fully swayed by the views, recently in vogue, of Fred Kniffen, Henry Glassie, and their numerous intellectual descendants. These latter adhere to the misbegotten credo that New Sweden had no importance to general American folk culture.

In a fundamental sense, the volume under review undertakes to do just what a religious creed is supposed to do: it responds to heresy by restating the old faith in a systematic way, and in so doing creates (for the first time) something called "orthodoxy." In the present case, the "old faith" was (a) that New Sweden gave America her first log dwellings (a widely acknowledged fact), and (b) that the New Sweden tradition of simple pioneer housing took root on the fertile American soil and spread like crab grass. For practical purposes we may say that this view became public (apart from the relatively ephemeral literature of the Swedish and Finnish American communities) in a 1921 work by Fiske Kimball. The theme was developed in some depth in a 1924 study by Henry Mercer of Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Mercer, a world-class antiquarian and collector, maintained a friendly acquaintance with Amandus Johnson, the principal scholar on New Sweden; their exchanges of information and research suggestions are documented in the works of both men. Johnson orchestrated much of the Tercentenary literature on New Sweden in 1938, in which the log cabin got its due notice. Swedish Americans might reasonably assume, from glancing through their own libraries, that the impact of the Delaware Valley colony was axiomatic.

As time passed, this turned out not to be the case. A few more contributions to the architectural and geographical literature went along with the Swedish influence, but a tide of another sort was rising. Probably it had something to do with the rehabilitation of the image of Germans as the smoke from European battlefields became less blinding on this side of the Atlantic. Be that as it may, the pro-Swedish statements (some of which, particularly those of Carl Drepperd, were openly anti-German) began to be replaced by footnotes or parenthetical remarks, intellectually equivalent to a shrug of the shoulders. This one might stand for the lot:

The contributions of the Hudson River Dutch and the Delaware Swedes were lost in a sea of alien culture, so that they do not constitute source areas. The Germans of Pennsylvania were saved from cultural extinction especially by their two major contributions: log construction methods and basic barn types, for the principal dissemination of which they enlisted the widely spreading and aggressive Scotch-Irish.¹

The serious student of genealogy or family history in the area of dispute (the "Delaware Valley," including for purposes of cultural analysis the lower Susquehanna Valley and northeastern Maryland) can spot some flaws in this assertion in a second, beginning with the assumption that numbers translate to influence. Neither the Swedes nor the Dutch were lost, though the Dutch picked the wrong river if they aspired to impart traits to the westering

pioneers of the next century (the eighteenth). The Germans did not enlist the Scotch-Irish, and were saved more by cohesive than by expansive aspects of their society. For this review, particularly, we must note that the writer (Fred Kniffen, who trained many of the serious students of folk architecture working in America and inspired more) has transferred log architecture from the Swedes to the Germans without so much as a footnote in support of the procedure. To be sure, the footnotes were not long in coming; one of the characteristics of a really good heresy is its capacity for rapid growth. Another is that it appeals particularly to the young. An especially significant convert to this view of the landscape was the young folklorist Henry Glassie, who co-authored and illustrated Kniffen's next major article. More importantly, he propagated the new faith in a book that was to become a best seller and a textbook in its field before it was formally accepted as his University of Pennsylvania dissertation, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (1968). His only allusion to New Sweden in the provocative and generally excellent work is a derisive comment on Martin Wright's attribution (which was essentially correct) of the American "dog-trot" house to Scandinavian influence.

By 1968, then, the tables had turned pretty completely against the idea that New Sweden was a source for our pioneer culture. They had turned without protest, and largely without evidence apart from the negative sort: a couple of articulate spokesmen for a different point of view failed to see the evidence that would support the Swedish-origin argument, and those who knew this evidence failed to parade it before them. A generation of geographers and folklorists was being brought up in darkness.

Suddenly, from out of the western haze, came riding Terry G. Jordan, bearing the altogether sensible notion that these various theories of European origin might best be addressed by looking in Europe; and not just on the broadest scale imaginable ("in Scandinavia, logs in walls project beyond the notch") but with specific reference to the areas of documented mass emigration to colonial America. Jordan obtained a series of travel and research grants that enabled him to publish a series of field reports; these have been revised and made to conform to a new logical framework in the volume at hand.

That new framework, while it may be of general value for the ongoing scholarly debate, has as much to do with Jordan's revenge on those who have reviewed his earlier works as it does with log buildings. It has much less to do with the concerns of this journal. One does, however, find a bit of Swedish American genealogy here and there in the book. One finds it because Terry Jordan, unlike many of his colleagues, remembers that cultural diffusion takes place mostly in families; that the locus of traditional learning is more likely to be a mother's kitchen or a father's toolshed than some more temporary but easily enumerated context such as a ship's list or a militia muster. Another thing Jordan remembers is the difference between leaders and followers, or the virtuoso and the rest of the band. Finally, he almost remembers the importance of the church: in one curious passage, he identifies all the putative bearers of the log architecture tradition *except* the Swedes and Finns by their religious affiliations (Moravians, Schwenkfelders, Lutherans, Swiss Reformed, and Mennonites).² Since the best evidence for the continuity and strength of the culture of New Sweden is found in the meticulously recorded archives of eight churches in four states (yes, Virginia, there is a Maryland) founded by Swedish Lutherans before our Revolution, one almost wishes he had dropped the other shoe and called the Delaware Valley pioneers after their church, too. But, no—we have to get by with "Fenno-Scandian."

It would be easy enough to find little things to pick on in this book. Jordan's genealogical work is completely incidental to the points he is attempting to reinforce, and as genealogy it is poorly done; however, it could be done well (as Peter Craig, Mildred Hollander, the late Ruth Springer and others have demonstrated) with the net effect of showing that Jordan is more right than he knows. His citation of sources, including my own published and unpublished

work, falls heavily on the side of proof-texting. He cites the parts of a work that support his view, ignores the points therein that might give ammunition to the other camp, and generally employs recent scholarship from the Germanic-origin viewpoint only as straw men. But, after all, they have done the same, and Jordan is in the business of creed-writing here. Who would accuse the Council of Nicaea of objectivity?

In the final analysis I have to side with Jordan on his major points, both theoretical and observational. More precisely I rejoice that he sides with me, since my own conversion experience (from the Germanic to the New Sweden viewpoint), antedates his by almost six years. On the theoretical side he is justified in applying the concept of first effective settlement to the Swedes and Finns on the Delaware; his other points proceed logically from that one (having to do with simplification of European features in the colonial environment, syncretism, and preadaptation of the New Sweden culture for the conditions of the American frontier). His observations in the European source areas from which our "Fenno-Scandian" and various Germanic colonists came agree with my library investigation of those areas, and field observations in America from the Delaware Valley westward. What he says about our log buildings is, moreover, applicable to many other spheres of the domestic economy of American frontier families.

Now, repeat after Terry Jordan:

... the greatest shaping influence on Midland American log construction was exerted by settlers from the Fenno-Scandian area.³

... In this category we would place V, diamond, square, half, and saddle notching; chink construction; the cornercrib and single-crib barn; the use of round logs and two-sided ax-and-adze hewing; the ridgepole and purlin roof with board covering; and the dogtrot and gable-entrance single-pen welling plans.³

... rather than cling to a seaboard ethnic enclave, many descendants of Delaware Finns and Swedes went west to be well represented even in the remotest backwoods of colonial Midland America. The price they paid for this diaspora was the loss of the last remnants of their ethnic identity; their reward, though they could not know it, lay in the incidental transferal of some part of their northern European culture to the Midland population at large, completing a diffusion begun before 1700 in the Delaware Valley cradle.⁴

Amen.

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¹Fred Kniffen, "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers, 55:4 (December, 1965), p. 558.

²Jordan, p. 7.

³Ibid., p. 146.

⁴Ibid., p. 151.