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The Jenny Lind Chapel in Andover and its Successor

PAPER WRITTEN BY JILL SEAHOLM
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Andover, Illinois, in rural Henry County, was originally settled and named by the English, but it is now considered a Swedish settlement with the Jenny Lind Chapel. Because of the large number of Swedes who settled after the English, the Swedes were more influential in making a name for the town.

The first group of Swedes to come to Andover in the 1840s were told that it was an already well-developed city. The pamphlets that they read said that the port on the Edwards River would be an ideal place for them to receive shipments from anywhere. From the descriptions they heard of Andover, they had to assume there would already be a place for them to worship in their Lutheran faith. They had no idea what hardships they would face just to get a church built.

No Lutheran church

A Swedish Methodist congregation was also founded in Andover and one already existed in nearby Victoria, Illinois, but it was important to Andover's Swedish immigrants to carry on their Lutheran faith. They had no church building, but they continued to worship in various residences around the township. The size of the congregation continued to grow so that it became impossible to accommodate everyone who wished

to be involved and it was difficult to find a place for all to worship. The people thought that if they could only build a church their troubles would be over and nothing could harm them. Getting the church built was to be the hardest part.

It would have to be a sanctuary as well as a place of worship. It would have to be a school, a hospital, and a home for new immigrants. But it had to be done soon, and at first there was no money to build such a building. It was decided to build a chapel. According to the preserved original architect's sketches done by A. Wintram Inn, it was to be forty-five feet long by thirty feet wide. There are four drawings on the architect's plans.



*The Rev. Lars Paul Esbjörn (1808–1870).
Photo courtesy of Special Collections,
Augustana College, Rock Island.*



The plans show an outside view of the front and side of the chapel, plus a floor view of the first story and the basement.¹ The chapel would be built on ten acres of land that a real estate company had donated.²

L.P. Esbjörn collects money

During the summer of 1851, Pastor Lars Paul Esbjörn made a trip to the East Coast to solicit donations, "visiting chiefly German and American Lutheran synods and congregations and their members in the distant, more populous, and well-to-do states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts." To his delight, "Esbjörn was met with sympathy and generosity... not only from Lutherans, but also from many non-Lutherans."³ He raised about \$2,200 for the chapel.⁴

At that time, Jenny Lind was on the East Coast doing benefit concerts and she donated some money to Esbjörn. The chapel was named for the “Swedish Nightingale” because of her monetary contribution to the building of the chapel. Of the \$2,200 Esbjörn collected, \$1,500 came from Jenny Lind. She asked him to use it to build Swedish Lutheran churches for immigrants and to use his judgment to decide where they were needed the most.⁵

The settlers do most of the work

To save money, the settlers would provide labor and materials themselves whenever they could. They built a sawmill on the Edwards River, or creek, and a brick kiln in which they fired the bricks they made themselves. During Esbjörn’s journey in the East, “the people of Andover were already making bricks for the new church. But bad weather had set in and ruined the unbaked bricks. The floods came and washed away the sawmill along the Edwards River. And now the timbers had to be hauled from more than thirty miles away through a swamp.”⁶ Also cholera took some of Esbjörn’s best skilled laborers.⁷

The builders of the chapel had every intention of building a bell tower for the chapel, “pointing toward the heavens, reminding everyone by whom and for whom it was erected.”⁸ The original drawings of the plans to the chapel show a small bell tower over the doorway of the chapel that closely resembles that of a one-room school’s bell tower. According to G. Everett Arden, in construction of the chapel, a ten by ten foot hole was left in the roof for a bell tower, but the wood they intended to use for it was needed instead to build coffins for the many who died of cholera, and the victims were buried in a mass cholera cemetery east of the chapel. Especially after all this, there wasn’t money for a bell either.⁹

The dedication of the chapel

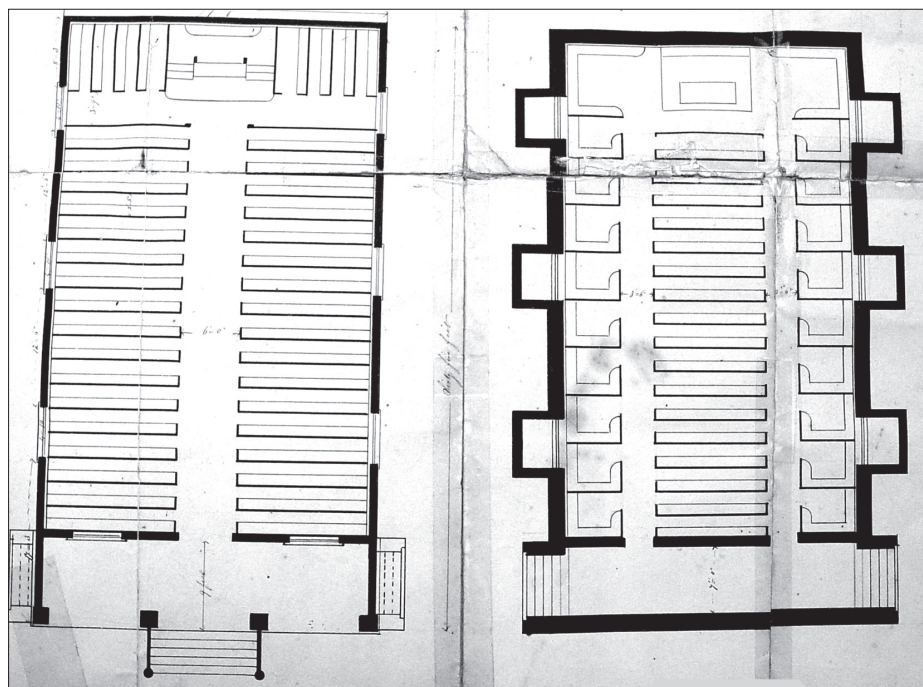
The chapel, later to be named for Jenny Lind, was dedicated on December 3, 1854, before the building was completely done. Many people now can’t believe how important such a plain, insignificant little building could have been to so many immigrants, not only symbolically as the first Swedish-Lutheran congregation in the U.S. “It is not at all built in

churchly style – one can hardly imagine a more prosaic and unattractive form, either outside or inside...the ground floor was a dark hole,...the pulpit reminded one of a kitchen cupboard formerly found in rural Sweden.”¹⁰ It may not have been a cathedral, but it was all they had, and to many, it was home. The little chapel without a steeple or bell attracted more and more Swedish immigrants until soon there was not enough room in it.

The altar, pulpit, and altar rail are all similar in design to those of the church in Oslättfors, Sweden, where Esbjörn came from.¹¹

Even though their numbers became too many for the chapel, the people of Andover still had it to fall back on during construction of the next church, “the big church,” unlike when the chapel was under construction. Arden talks about the desperate need for more worship space during the big church’s construction.¹² One of numerous emergency meetings was held to decide how to accommodate the growing church population while the big church was built. A quote by their pastor, Jonas Swenson, in a memorial anniversary album of the Augustana Lutheran Church says, “a hole shall be made in the aisle of the church (chapel) to permit the sound from above to be heard in the lower story of the church so that those who can’t find room in the church can go to the lower room and still be able to hear what is being said in the church.”¹³ The original architect’s plans show a row of long benches in the center of the basement floor below where the hole would later be placed. The benches were probably originally there for small vesper services.

The architect’s drawing of the chapel shows the outdoor stairway to the chapel as one single center stairway leading straight ahead up to the doors of the chapel. However, the chapel now has two cement side stairways facing each other on either side of the doors. Also, instead of the two stairways to the basement shown in the plans on each side of the back of the sanctuary, there is only one



The floor plan of the Jenny Lind chapel. Main floor to the left, basement to the right.

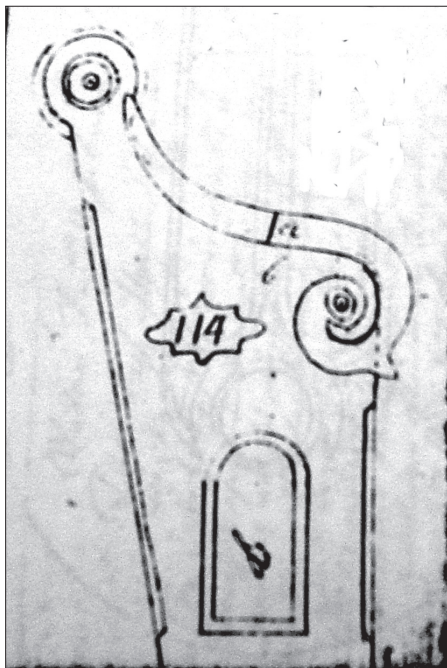


Gustaf Fair (1824–1910).

basement staircase in the southeast corner of the church. There is now a balcony over the back end of the first floor, but it is not shown in the plans. Perhaps it was added as another measure to relieve the overcrowding before or during construction of the “new” church.

The chapel is too small

In September 1864, a building committee was established from the congregation at the chapel to begin plans for building “a structure of cathedral-like proportions to seat over 1,000 people...a bell tower, bells, and a



The pews in the new church.

great organ.”¹⁴ Construction was to begin the following spring, but due to various decisions that had to be made, such as whether to build it out of brick, who would build it, costs, etc., it was not until 1867 that the wooded lot was cut for the foundation. In a personal letter from a member of the building committee, my great-great-grandfather, Gustaf Pettersson Fair, to family in Sweden, he stated, “It will cost at least \$20,000 and everything has to come as free-will gifts within the congregation.”¹⁵

The building committee hired architect Charles Ulricson of Peoria, Illinois, to make the church plans. They specified to him that the “ceiling and windows should be half-round in shape...and there should be a tower in the south entrance to the church...there should be entrances also at the east and west walls.”¹⁶ As when they built the chapel, they decided to use their own materials to build the church, and again they made their own bricks. Every man in the congregation was required to donate one day of brick-making in order to prepare for the building of the church.¹⁷ Gustaf Fair wrote, “200,000 bricks have been formed this summer, but another 300,000 will be needed and will be made next summer.”¹⁸ The building committee decided to hire the architect to also do the construction. Mr. Ulricson agreed to the committee’s condition that he furnish only the labor and use none of his own materials; only those he could find in the town.¹⁹

The building committee was very impressed by the work the architect was doing. “The roof is self-supporting, with eight rafters, each weighing 5,000 pounds, connected with cross-ties, boards, and shingles... hopefully impervious to water.” Completed, the roof was thirty-five feet from the center aisle to the top of the ceiling. All of the interior walls were to be plaster over brick, and Pastor Jonas Swenson built the temporary pulpit and altar himself to be used until more money was available for a more professional job.”²⁰

The spire dispute

One thing that caused a bit of a stir in the large congregation was the top of the spire. The architect had finished the plans for the point of the tower with an urn. Pastor Swenson wanted a cross instead, but some argued that this might lead some to believe that the church was Catholic. At first they went along with the cross idea, but later, because of conflict among members, they voted to have the cross removed. However, the builder would not do it and no one else would climb the spire. Again, a vote was taken and they kept the cross, but managed to set a copper globe below the cross.²¹

In the spring of 1868, the brick-laying was complete and the workers could begin the interior. The benches were nearly in place and the walls were almost all plastered. The completed church was 125 feet long, sixty feet wide, and 136 feet tall to the top of the spire.

In another letter home to Sweden, Gustaf Fair sketched some of the finished details of the church’s interior designs, such as the woodwork of the pews and the stained glass windows. He wrote that the pews were of ash and black walnut and that the number 114 is “a number tag attached to the outside” and that there were no doors on the pews as in Sweden.”²² Church construction was completed in 1870, but the windows were not fitted with stained glass until 1891. An annex was built onto the east side of the church in 1949-1950.

Keeping the old church?

In the early 1870s after the big church (Augustana Lutheran Church) was completed, there were some people who thought that the old church should be torn down. A resolution was even passed to do so in 1874, but some of the old-timers who built it strongly protested. Eventually they decided not only to *not* destroy it, but to restore it. By 1895, the chapel was again in need of extensive repairs, and there was again talk of tearing it down, but it

was again restored and renovated.

In 1948, to honor the visit of Archbishop Erling Eidem and Bishop Arvid Runestam, the chapel's planning committee went so far as to remove the old pews, "which had been so picturesque a part of the original furnishings," and replaced them with more modern, darker-stained wood pews.²³

The Augustana Lutheran Church and especially the Jenny Lind Chapel are important to the history of the Swedish-Lutheran church in America. Every Swedish-American who comes to this area has made or should make time to stop and see the Jenny Lind Chapel. The Andover people will never again think of having the chapel torn down, and because of their current interest in the preservation of it, the Jenny Lind Chapel is now on the list of national historic sites, and it may not be too long before the "new" church is, too.

Footnotes:

1) Inn, A. Wintram, Jenny Lind Chap-

el architectural drawing, ca. 1850/1851.

2) Weber, Erwin, Jenny Lind Chapel: pioneer church at Andover: "an historic shrine of Swedish-American Lutheranism," Rock Island, Ill. 1975, p. 26.

3) Arden, G. Everett, The Story of the Jenny Lind Chapel, Andover, Ill., 1955, p. 3.

4) Norelius, The Pioneer Swedish Settlements and Swedish Lutheran Churches in America 1845-1860, p. 89.

5) Setterdahl, Lilly, A Pioneer Lutheran Ministry: L.P. Esbjörn and his family in Andover, Illinois, 1986, p. 9.

6) Weber, p. 26.

7) Arden, p. 3.

8) Weber, p. 28.

9) Arden, p. 4.

10) Norelius, p. 105.

11) Setterdahl, p. 20.

12) Arden, p. 6.

13) Augustana Lutheran Church 115th anniversary booklet, 1982.

14) Arden, p. 6.

15) Jacobson, Birgit, Sweden-America Private Letters from the Emigrants 1858-1910, p. 283-284.

16) Augustana church anniversary booklet, 1982.

17) Otto, Mike and Mary, Our Future is in our Heritage, 1985, p. 54.

18) Jacobson, letter from Gustaf Fair p. 284.

19) A Noble Cathedral: Century Tested, Augustana Lutheran 100th anniversary booklet, 1967.

20) Otto, p. 54.

21) Otto, p. 54.

22) Jacobson, p. 285.

23) Arden, p. 6.

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Noak Olsson – the Swedish “American”

To have travelled across the ocean was often an accomplishment that the traveller was proud of, and if he/she had done it a couple of times it might have become the biggest thing in that person's life.

While visiting the Edsleskog cemetery in Dalsland on a completely different mission, we saw the tombstone on the cover. And once a genealogist, you can not rest until you find out a little about this person.

Noak Olsson was born 1860 Aug. 8 in a dugout on Törserud lands in Edsleskog, the fourth child of Olof Olsson (b. 1823 Aug. 18 in Mo, Dals.) and his wife Stina Bengtsdotter (born 1826 Aug. 29 in Edsleskog. Life was hard for poor people, and during 1869 Olof and Stina lost two children. When Noak was older he left and moved up to Bräcke in Jämtland, where he married Kerstin Danielsdotter, born 1855 Jun. 9 in Gräs-

mark, (Värml). They had two boys, Olof Gotthard, born 1888 May 5, and Gustaf Adolf, born 1891 Jan. 5, both in Bräcke.

In 1893 Jan. 5 they all left Bräcke and immigrated to Manitoba, Canada. In the Canadian census of 1911 the Olsons lived in Winnipeg, as well as in 1916. Noak is listed as a laborer and the sons are both carpenters. Wife Kerstin is now called Christina, and they all lived at 159 Harbison Avenue.

Christina died 1925 Jan. 3 in Winnipeg, and in 1929 March 31 Noak is back in Edsleskog, and lives with his sister Stina (b. 1853 Aug. 27) and her husband, *torpare* Johannes Olsson (b. 1862 June 16 in Edsleskog) at Lindheden. In the Edsleskog church records Noak is recorded as being a former railroad guard (*banvakt*) and a member of the Lutheran Zion Church in Winnipeg. Noak soon left

again, on 1930 April 2 he went back to Winnipeg. Nothing is known about this period of his life, but 1933 April 29 he is back in Edsleskog, again moving to Lindheden, where he probably lived with his sister again (records for this time are not available online).

Noak died 1942 October 14 and is buried in the Edsleskog cemetery under a nice stone, where he is given the title "Svensk-amerikan," Swedish-American. Perhaps "svensk-canadensare" would have been more correct, as he was a Canadian citizen. Still to find out is the fate of the sons, maybe there is an estate inventory for Noak that will tell more?

Thanks goes to Chris Bingefors of Uppsala, Sweden, for help with the Canadian information.

Elisabeth Thorsell



A scene from a Stockholm tavern in 1830. By Hjalmar Möller.