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David Johnson—Chicago's First Norwegian

Rolf H. Erickson*

While David Johnson, sailor, pressman and typesetter, need never fear of losing his place in Chicago history as the first Norwegian to settle in that city, I fear that he will still remain a man of mystery.

We first meet David in Strand's *History of the Norwegians in Illinois* and we might almost pass him by, since the story is presented under the heading — "Early Norwegian Printers in Chicago":

"It may be a surprise to a good many of the craft to learn that the first pressman in Chicago was a Norwegian. He was not only the first of his nationality, but there was no other pressman before his arrival. His name was David Johnson, and he came here in 1834.

The proprietor of the first paper in Chicago was Mr. Calhoun.¹ He published the Chicago Democrat. The paper prospered and he could not very long supply the demand by printing it on one of the old-time hand presses. Consequently he bought a second-hand cylinder press from New York with an order to the seller to let a man who could run the press accompany it.

David Johnson was a young sailor. He came from Norway to New York as a sailor boy. When the ship in which he sailed was moored there he got his regular leave of absence. But he never returned to the ship, which sailed away. When his means gave out he looked around for a job and in a very short time secured one as a press-feeder. He worked at this for two years, when Mr. Calhoun's order for the cylinder press came. He was then asked whether he would like to go West with the press, and consented. In due time he arrived with the press in Chicago, where he put it up and ran it, nobody knows how long.

In his autobiography Mr. Calhoun mentions this, but does not give the pressman's name. But the Chicago Historical Society has among its possessions Mr. Calhoun's account book for 1834, and in it we have found David Johnson's name.²

Sadly, the account book, belonging to Mr. Calhoun and mentioned as being at the Chicago Historical Society, can not be found so Strand's facts can not be checked. In addition, Strand decided not to use footnotes or include a bibliography which leaves us no choice but to accept the account or look elsewhere.

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Knut Gjerset adds a bit to David's story with a brief passage in his book on the Norwegian sailors in the Great Lakes,

"The first Norwegian known to have served as sailor on the Great Lakes was David Johnson, who came to America in 1832, probably one of the 313 Norwegian and Swedish immigrants known to have arrived in that year. In 1834 he settled in Chicago, where he found employment as sailor."³

His additional tidbit that David "found employment as sailor" conflicts with Strand's testimony, however. Gjerset's footnote indicating that Rasmus B. Anderson's *First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration*⁴ was his source is not of any help since Anderson has no fuller account.

Hjalmar Rued Holand has something to say about David in his history of the Norwegian settlements,

"Already in 1834 the first Norwegian came to Chicago. He was called David Johnson and was a young sailor, who came to America in 1832. In New York he got work at a newspaper printer's. When the *Chicago Democrat*, Chicago's first newspaper was founded in 1834, the owner came to New York where he became acquainted with David Johnson and took him with him to the West's future great city to set type. He thus became the first Norwegian typesetter in America."⁵

Although Holand footnotes his sources as the *History of the Scandinavians of Illinois* (p. 186), I have been unable to identify the title. His volume contains no bibliography.

Further attempts to fill out David's story have also failed.

The best theory about David is this one. In 1832, fourteen year-old David (our "boy") sails from Arendal on the southern coast of Norway aboard the brig *Camilla* of about 17 gross registered tons for New York. The *Camilla* was the only Norwegian ship mentioned in the history of Norwegian shipping, as having reached New York that year and has been credited with opening up new trade in the United States.⁶

New York appeals to David, who jumps ship. After two years, however, restlessness makes him more than eager to accept Mr. Calhoun's offer and thus see the West. Chicago, in turn, loses its allure and he soon returns to his first calling—the sea.

Through the years David visits Chicago frequently and becomes acquainted with the Norwegians who subsequently settled there. In typical sailor fashion he recounts his story often enough so that he is well remembered. When Strand appears at the turn of the century to compile his history of Norwegians in Illinois, there are still enough old-timers around to tell him about David. They are not able to tell him anything about David's later life, since David was never a letter writer. Some think he may have been

lost at sea; others maintain that he merely returned to his native Arendal and settled down.

Other theories about David fall flat. It is not likely that David remained in Chicago permanently. He does not appear in the directories or censuses. He is not buried in Graceland Cemetery, which would be the logical place to look for him. No descendants have ever stepped forward to bask in his reflected fame. No grave has ever been pointed out as that of the first Norwegian in Chicago. And, it is not likely that David went elsewhere in the country. David would no doubt have enjoyed telling his story; some newspaper would have sought him out, and his story would inevitably have received a good press.

David Johnson was a mysterious figure in his own time. In ours he is likely to remain so. He continues, however, to be Chicago's first Norwegian and now a figure of interest as the Norwegian colony of Chicago marks its 150th anniversary this year.

¹John Calhoun (1808–1859) founded *The Chicago Democrat* 26 nov. 1833. It continued to be published with a few minor gaps until 23 June 1861, when it was merged with *The Chicago Daily Tribune*.

²Algot E. Strand, *History of the Norwegians in Illinois* (Chicago, 1905), pp. 186–187.

³Knut Gjerset, *Norwegian Sailors on the Great Lakes* (Northfield, MN, 1928), p. 18.

⁴Rasmus B. Anderson, *The First Chapter of Norwegian Immigration* (Madison, WI, 1895).

⁵Hjalmar Rued Holand, *De norske settlementers historie (The History of the Norwegian Settlements)* (Chicago, 1912), p. 100.

⁶*Den Norske sjöfarts historie fra de ældste tider til vore dage (The History of Norwegian Shipping)* I–III (Oslo 1923–1925), II, pt. 1, p. 221.

A Swedish Bible Inscription in Esthonia

On a recent visit to Tallinn (formerly Reval), capital of Esthonia, and now a part of the U.S.S.R., I happened to visit an old second-hand bookshop. Among the items for sale was a Swedish Bible, printed in Stockholm in 1816 by Samuel Rumstedt. The title page was missing (the information on the printer and date of printing was gathered from the title page of the New Testament). The Bible was in a poor condition but commanded a price of 25 roubles or the equivalent of \$32.00. On the front flyleaf was the following inscription in Swedish, here rendered in translation as follows:

“This (book) belongs to Johan Fredrik Roos, given to him for his diligent and exemplary conduct while attending the school of St. Michael's Swedish Congregation in Reval March 12, 1829.”

— Editor