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H. Arnold Barton

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# Many thoughts on Nils William – friends remember this remarkable man

*H. Arnold Barton*  
Professor emeritus, Carbondale, IL:

I first met Nils William at a conference forty years ago, in 1967, and he has been very much a part of my world ever since, especially after I became active in the Swedish Pioneer (now the Swedish-American) Historical Society) in 1970. He was, to the best of my knowledge, its longest surviving founder. We served for several years together on the Society's Board of Directors and then, after 1981, also on the Advisory Committee of the Swenson Center in Rock Island. It was Nils William, together with the late Franklin D. Scott and Wesley M. Westerberg, who persuaded me to take on the editorship of the *Swedish Pioneer* (now *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*) in 1974 (for the next 16 years), and he long contributed to it his periodic "Personal Pioneer History," the forerunner to the *Swedish American Genealogist*.

Nils William was a phenomenon! Through the two volumes of essays in his honor, *An Ancient Folk in a New Land* (1984), and *Essays Presented to Dr. Nils William Olsson in Honor of His 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (1999), in both of which I had the honor of participating, I became ever more aware of his long and varied career as a diplomat, foundation director, historian, and inspirer of others, including not least myself. In all of these areas he leaves his lasting legacy. As a historian, I shall always remain deeply indebted to his painstaking, indispensable scholarship on the early history of the Swedes in America and on Swedish-American genealogy. To this day I constantly refer back to it.

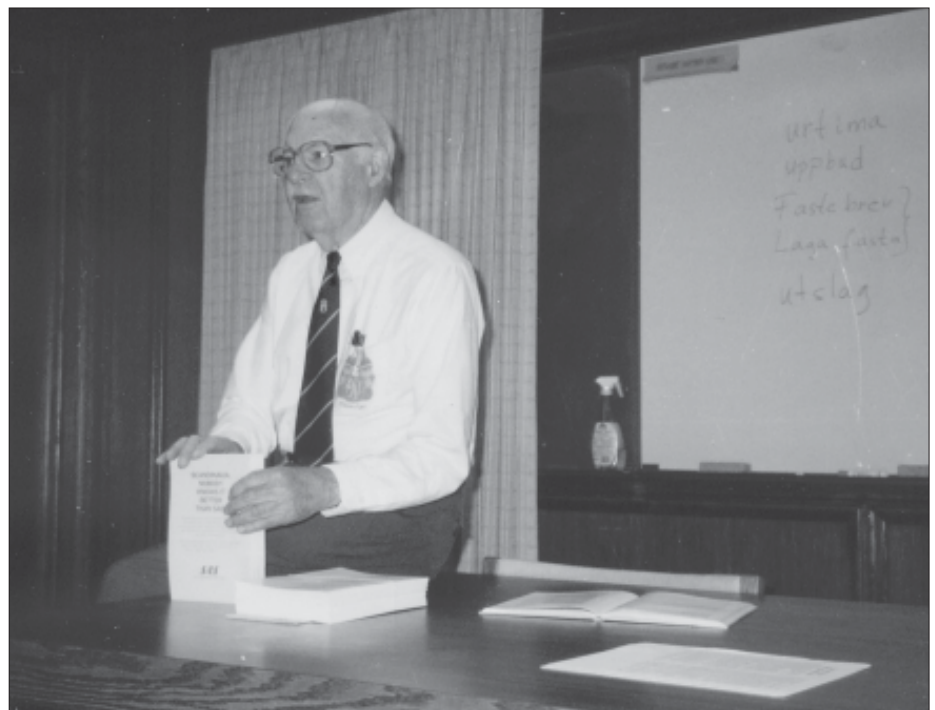
*Philip J. Anderson*  
President, Swedish-American Historical Society, Professor of Church History, North Park University:

A very long life lived well and with distinction (and class) is reason for celebration and the shared recollection of pleasant memories, even as the loss of a friend and colleague is deeply mourned. Almost a quarter-century ago, Arnold Barton described Nils William Olsson as "surely the most protean figure on the Swedish-American scene." This was arguably true since the close of the Second World War, and the legacy of his scholarship, diplomatic service, and organizational entrepreneurship will continue to endure.

The Swedish-American Historical Society will honor Nils William among its founders and sustainers. The American Swedish Institute will

remember him as an efficient executive director with a very visible presence. Swedish Council of America will look to him as the most articulate voice of its stated mission to a growing number of affiliate organizations. Students, scholars, and family researchers will have reason to thank him every time they hold one of his books or explore the materials of his genealogical collection at the Swenson Center. And readers of this magazine, and those who mine its prior issues, will be reminded of the vision of its founding editor and publisher. There is so much more to learn about the abiding significance of Nils William Olsson's life, and future scholars will no doubt have much to say.

Those who knew him personally, however, encountered one with so many rich facets to his person, and the public persona (commanding, eloquent, dignified, and determined) gave way to the more private ele-



*Nils William Olsson lecturing in Salt Lake City 1993.*



ments of friendship (warmth, concern, sensitivity, and intellectual stimulation). I first came to know Nils William in 1984, when he was a young seventy-five and I was a slightly younger thirty-five. Our growing friendship would have different dimensions. I was just beginning my involvement in the SAHS and I succeeded him as president in 1989. I learned much from him and have relied on his support and encouragement through the intervening years. Just watching him in action was inspiring and intimidating at the same time. We are saddened now to have lost our president-emeritus. His presence will be writ large in the telling of the Society's history.

An important dimension to our friendship was rooted in our common origins in the Covenant Church as well as life at North Park University, where I have taught since 1979. On several road trips together to Rock Island and visits in Chicago and elsewhere we often discussed his experiences growing up as a second-generation Swedish American and his experiences with North Park beginning in 1929. His memory was unfailingly detailed and he was for me a living source of the history of so many people and issues germane to my life and work. I also worked closely with Nils Williams's younger brother Karl (1913-1996), who had been president of North Park and the preeminent historian of the Covenant Church, teaching a course together for close to a decade. These brothers have blessed and enriched my life considerably, and I suspect there is a book waiting to be written by someone about this highly unusual group of brothers and friends (e.g. Paul Elmen, Harold Jacobson, Paul Varg, Jean Hagstrum, Paul Holmer, Leland Carlson, Walter Moberg, and others) who went on to distinguished public and academic careers, the children of Swedish immigrants raised and nurtured in the same community. Besides being an interesting read, it would be an additional way to contemplate dimensions of Hansen's Law and its generational theory.



Nils William outlived virtually all of his contemporaries, and there is considerable truth to the notion that an era has finally come to an end regarding Swedish America. In gratitude I join my voice with many others in bidding our friend and colleague "Hail and Farewell!"



*Bruce Karstadt  
President / CEO  
The American Swedish Institute:*

When I began my work as executive director of the American Swedish Institute in 1990, one of the first persons to call and offer congratulations and advice was Nils William Olsson. Nils William had served as head of the Institute from 1967 through 1973, and I discovered quickly upon arriving in Minneapolis that his tenure and accomplishments here, even though nearly 3 decades in the past, were well-remembered.

Nils William and Dagmar moved here after his retirement from the U.S. Foreign Service. Much was accomplished during his leadership: membership grew from 2,200 to 5,300 households, considerable renovation work to the historic Turnblad mansion was completed, and the Institute's charter flight business in-

creased from two flights during the summer to Scandinavia to eight flights! Equally important, in my estimation, was his encouragement of programs and classes for children.

Nils William wrote in the Institute's November 1971 newsletter that "Seeing happy children cavorting about the Turnblad mansion learning Swedish and something about their cultural heritage is an inspiring sight and we are pleased as punch."

To say the least, Nils William was a formidable force. The changes and expectations that he had or brought about for this place were not easily accomplished. Many were actively resisted by those who saw it more or less as a private club. Some people discontinued their support, but as Nils William wrote in March 1973 near the end of his ASI tenure, "As we approach our annual meeting, I want to thank you all for the superb support you have given the Institute and its programs. If an occasional grumbler drops out, his place will be filled by others, who believe in and work for our cause." (Wise advice even for today.) The Institute is a better place because he persevered in his commitment to opening it up to a broader community.

Looking over the news articles and materials covering the Olsson years at ASI, there were many highlights. Perhaps the most significant was the Midwest premiere of the Jan Troell film, *The Emigrants*, which was shown in Minneapolis under the sponsorship of the Institute in the presence of HRH Princess Christina in 1972. Nils William and Dagmar had hosted a reception for all of the actors and crew when they were earlier in Minnesota for the filming, and we retain many wonderful photographs of Max von Sydow, Liv Ullman, and others being regaled in the Olsson home by friends of the Institute.

The American Swedish Institute benefited greatly from the wise leadership of Nils William Olsson. His credibility with a wide network of friends and associates well-positioned here and in Sweden did much



to strengthen the bonds of friendship between this museum and Sweden. Personally, I valued highly the times we had together in discussing the challenges and opportunities for this place, and I will miss his sage counsel.



*Ann Munsey*  
Leesburg, VA:

Nils William Olsson lived in the Washington, DC, area when I first met him decades ago. I always met him at Swedish American events and he most always was involved with the organization sponsoring the event.

And always he took time to talk with me alone, first to answer my earliest questions about my immigrant ancestors. I first learned he had put thousands of immigrants in his *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850*. That included my two first immigrants - a couple with six children and then a bachelor. That research had taken Nils William Olsson thousands of laborious research hours.

Whenever I was with him and asked a question he could not answer right then, he would telephone me from home later with a response. How fortunate we all are that there is the Swenson Center - the recipient of his answers to so many questions.

Later, I was able to follow his lead to the Swedish-American Historical Society genealogical trip to Sweden where we had evening lessons in Jönköping from Nils William Olsson and Per Gösta Lindquist. I remember Nils William drove us down to town to the bookstore where he introduced us to the topographical green maps and also to the *Bilatlas*, then drove us back up that high hill again. In those years we were able to hold in our hands the original church books in the regional archives. Some were written, perhaps, by my minister ancestors.

We were delighted when Nils William Olsson introduced us to his son



Chris who was in Vadstena the same time we were there.

Nils William asked us to write and to read aloud what we had written one evening. SAG and the *Swedish American Genealogist* Workshop in Salt Lake City are the creative results of Nils William Olsson's recognition that genealogical research is historical research of persons and persons' participation in history in the midst of whatever sizes of circles of history one wants to view.

Nils William Olsson returned to Washington, DC, one time when it was a luncheon honoring Justice Rehnquist. Nils William had done genealogical research on Justice Rehnquist's paternal ancestry and one ancestor's behaviors with results most interesting to the Chief Justice!

Nils William was always interested in data beyond simply the begats. His interest, his patience, his sharing of the results of his research is his gift to us each time he did it.

Though in obvious pain, Nils William Olsson attended the launching of the *Kalmar Nyckel* in Wilmington, Delaware.

Nils William Olsson visited his SAG Workshop in Salt Lake City a few years ago and it was a joy to welcome him then. He could witness

its quality, excellence, its strength. It is superb in every way, in every detail. For example: each person learns to document data. SAG/SLC Workshops are like family reunions and a person is missed who cannot come that year.

Nils William Olsson will be sorely missed but never, never forgotten.



*Ronald J. Johnson*  
Chairman  
*Swedish American Historical Society:*

If there were a Grauman's Swedish-American Theater in Hollywood, Nils William Olsson would long since have had his handprints and a star in the cement of the forecourt. In his many faceted life, the Swedish-American Historical Society is only one of the many galaxies in which he shone and left an indelible imprint. But since I happen to be the chief officer of that organization right now, I wish to remember Nils William in particular for the critical rôle he so often played in the history of the Swedish-American Historical Society. To

extend the movieland analogies, he was at the very least the Godfather of the Society.

The Swedish Pioneer Historical Society, as it was called until 1983, was founded on October 15, 1948, as a permanent organization growing out of the Swedish Pioneer Centennial Celebration of 1948. The planning began in December 1945 at a meeting at the Swedish Club of Chicago. Among those present on that day over 61 years ago were Conrad Bergendoff, president of Augustana College, who became national chairman, Vilas Johnson, Chicago chairman, and a young man by the name of Nils William Olsson, already well versed in Swedish Americana. Nils William became the Executive Director of the celebration, and thus was a principal architect of the success of the 1948 observance, which ended in Chicago with a huge gathering featuring President Truman, Prince Bertil of Sweden, Swedish Archbishop Eidem, and Carl Sandburg. (He arranged Prince Bertil's cross-country tour, making sure to give him a day of rest each week. When he asked the Prince years later about what he had liked best about the tour, Prince Bertil replied "the day off.")

Upon organization of the new Society that same year, its first Executive Secretary was: Nils William Olsson. In 1950 the Society began its publishing program with the first issue of the *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, and it put out its first book, volume 1 of the *Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius*, translated by J. O. Backlund and – Nils William Olsson.

The fledgling society had great aspirations, but in the 1950's finances were lean. Nils William Olsson had left for Iceland on government service in 1950. Membership slipped. But in 1956, – quoting Paul Varg, 1979 –, Nils William "came home for a 4-year appointment in Washington, and on his return quickly went to work on getting membership. What he did was truly phenomenal. If I remember correctly we went from 500 or 600 to something over 1,300. It is almost wholly his doing. He

really put the Society on a firm footing." Karna, Chris, and Greg Olsson will remember their father's persuasiveness in co-opting new members. Better financial times also came through the sponsorship of charter and group flights – which Nils William proposed and managed. These began in 1960, and continued through some 35 flights until the early 80's.

The 80's were again tight financially, and the Society was put on a strict financial diet. Governance and management of the Society were reorganized and Nils William Olsson returned from 1986 to 1989 in the new office of President of the Society. Under his guidance these changes eventually paid off, with the organization on a sound footing again since the 1990's. In the meantime, the Olssons had also donated the capital to establish the Nils William and Dagmar Olsson Research Fund, through which the Society has continued to make periodic awards to support the work of researchers of Swedish-American history. As long as Nils William was able to travel, he was an enthusiastic participant in the activities of the Society, in which he has been honored as President Emeritus for many years.

On a more personal note, I wish to add that Nils William Olsson was my mentor. His work in immigration research is the model for everything that I have ever tried to do, and after I received an award from the Olsson Fund in 1980 and began attending Swedish Pioneer Historical Society meetings, he graciously took me under his wing. I am sure he was the one responsible for me becoming a member of the Society's Publications Committee, from which, over a period of many years, I graduated to the Board of Directors and to the Chairmanship of the Society. I was fortunate enough to participate in a two-week genealogical workshop under his leadership in Sweden in 1983 and to attend several of the Swedish American Genealogist (SAG) Workshops in Salt Lake City while he lead them and as Karna Olsson has continued them. He

"forced" me to write for SAG by giving me books to review, and since then I have also written a few articles for SAG. His influence on me and upon the avocation we had in common was enormous. Some have known Nils William Olsson as "Bill"; I feel privileged to have called him "Nils William." The Swedish-American Historical Society, the organization which he helped birth, will by its very existence honor his memory. Blessed may it be!



*Siri M. Eliason*  
*Chairman*  
*Swedish Council of America:*

The Swedish Council of America mourns the loss of Nils William Olsson, its first executive director. He played a pivotal role in the founding of the Swedish Council of America and he was definitely the right man at the right time for this auspicious occurrence. He was given the task to plan for a Swedish-American national organization, to assemble a board of directors, secure funds, and outline a purpose. No small order, but it was an assignment that suited Nils William exceedingly well. The idea of a national organization had been talked about for a long time and in the beginning of the 1970s, the then Ambassador of Sweden, Hubert de Besche, encouraged vigorously the establishment of such an organization.

Nils William thrived with his calling and with his background in diplomacy and with his connections with leading Swedish-Americans, he soon had accomplished what had been asked of him. During his time at the helm, the Council prospered, and over time and with a dedicated and talented board of directors and staff, the Swedish Council of America is today the pre-eminent Swedish-American umbrella organization that exists to assist its close to 350 affiliated member organizations.

Nils William will always be remembered as the man who initially



put the Swedish Council of America on its course and we, who follow, shall never forget that. Those of us who are fortunate to remember those early days, remember Nils William as an elegant yet modest gentleman who had the conviction and passion to pursue a goal that all Swedish-Americans can be proud of today. In April the Swedish Council of America celebrated its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary and we sent grateful thoughts to Nils William.



*Eric Lund,  
Swedish-American  
Historical Society:*

The success of the Swedish Pioneer Centennial celebration of 1948, involving tens of thousands of participants at multiple events in seven states, was attributable in no small measure to Nils William Olsson, recruited from the University of Chicago to be its executive director. He signed on Carl Sandburg as honorary chairman, worked tirelessly to coordinate all of the activities, and was serving as shepherd to the Swedish delegation led by Prince Bertil. And it is unlikely that the Swedish-American Historical Society, which grew out of the celebration and is now in its fifty-ninth year, would have survived without him.

One of the society's founders in 1948, he left in 1950 for a six-year assignment in Iceland and Sweden with the U.S. State Department. On his return he found a society with less than 300 members and only \$500 in the bank, its existence tentative at best. Through personal recruiting and imagination (a flight program), he was responsible for bringing about financial health and increasing membership to a high of almost 2,000 at the end of the Sixties. Later, as president from 1986 to 1989, he played a major role again in restoring financial stability.

At all times, over more than half a century, he was an active participant in society board and committee

discussions. He served until his death as a member of the publications committee and in 1967 his monumental *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York, 1820-1850* was the society's eighth published book. He established the society's Nils William and Dagmar Olsson Research Fund. In 1982 he received the society's Sandburg Medal and in 1989 he was named President Emeritus, the first person so honored. His advice and counsel will be missed.

My own acquaintanceship with Nils William goes back 34 years. I treasure the hours I spent with him ten years ago tape-recording his recollections of society history. I enjoyed his sense of humor, his stories, his frank appraisals of individuals. His life was a string connecting us to the Centennial and the beginnings of the society. His passing leaves a void that can't be filled.



*Peter Stebbins Craig, F.A.S.G.  
Washington, D.C.*

I first met Nils William Olsson about 21 years ago when he came to Washington, D.C., to address a meeting of the National Genealogical Society held at the National Archives.

I was very impressed by his talk

and went to the stage to talk with him afterwards. Then began a close friendship which lasted until his death on March 20, 2007, in his 98<sup>th</sup> year.

An ex-diplomat, Dr. Nils William Olsson pursued a relentless and enthusiastic career in his retirement promoting the histories of Swedish-Americans, be they 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrants or settlers of the New Sweden colony on the Delaware in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

When I first met Nils William, I had only recently completed the first of many family histories that I have written about the New Sweden colony's settlers and their colonial descendants. That first effort was "The Yocums of Aronameck," published in the *NGS Quarterly* in December 1983. Nils William provided the leads that led to a succession of other articles – "The Stille Family in America," published in *SAG* in December 1986, "The 1693 Census of the Swedes on the Delaware," published in *SAG* in six parts, 1989-1992, and republished in book form in 1993; and "New Sweden Settlers, 1638-1664," an 8-part series published in *SAG* 1996-1999, as well as a series of shorter articles. At each step of the way, Nils William always had excellent suggestions to improve my drafts.



*Peter S. Craig and Nils William Olsson on the SAHS tour of New Sweden 1997.*

In addition, Nils William kindly invited me to be a speaker at each of the SAG workshops which began in 1991. This kindness continued as long as he could manage these workshops himself. Even after Nils William turned over SAG and the SAG workshop to others, he maintained a close and supportive association with me. He was the first contributor to the costs of translation involved in my current project (the *Colonial Records of the Swedish Churches in Pennsylvania*) and personally called me last summer to thank me for the first two volumes, *The Log Churches at Tinicum Island and Wicaco, 1646-1696*, and *The Rudman Years, 1697-1702*.

As a friend and a mentor, I shall never forget Nils William Olsson.



*Fred and Phyllis Wohlfarth  
Covington, WA:*

I became acquainted with Dr. Olsson and his lovely lady Dagmar, when Phyllis and I joined one of his Swedish Genealogy Tours to Sweden in 1991. Having just begun her search for her father's "Erickson/Lindholm" parents and my mother's Swedish "Swanfeldt/ Anderson" family lines, she was eager to visit Sweden.

Though I had little interest in genealogy or taking a research trip by ourselves, after my wife found an advertisement in the *Swedish American Genealogist* publication of one led by Dr. Olsson, I agreed to go with her.

He met us at the Copenhagen airport and from then on, I knew we had made a wonderful choice as we got to know him and Dagmar, and the others taking this trip to the land of their forbearers. Soon we seemed like a family as he introduced us to elderly aunts whom he and his brother had lived with in the 1920's and other friends. What a wonderful time we had, seeing the Sweden he knew and loved so much. We celebrated birthday's and anniversaries with him and Dagmar, and the

others, all of whom we have continued to share friendships throughout these ensuing years.

Needless to say, like you all, we have lost a dear friend and teacher.



*Ted Rosvall, President  
Federation of Swedish Genealogical Societies  
Falköping, Sweden:*

In 1972 I visited the U.S. for the first time. I was 20 years old, had an ambitious travel agenda with stops here, there, and everywhere to visit relatives and archives. One stop was in Minneapolis, where I visited the American Swedish Institute and met Nils William Olsson for the first time.

He immediately invited me for dinner at his home, where I also got to meet his wife Dagmar, with whom I shared an interest in church and organ music. Nils William gave me quite a lecture on how to do family research in America: which archives and libraries I should visit, and gave me contact information to various genealogists and "useful" people in several states.

A few years later I visited the regional archives at Vadstena, and stayed over night at the local youth hostel. In the same room was a man whom I had seen in the research room at the archives. His Swedish was almost perfect, but I could make out that he was probably from the U.S. I asked him, and, sure enough, he lived in Minneapolis and presented himself as Christopher. "I know a genealogist in Minneapolis," I volunteered, "his name is Nils William Olsson."

"He is my father," Chris answered.

Since then I have been in touch with Nils William and his family. My wife and I have visited him in Florida on a couple of occasions and he and Dagmar have been to our home near Falköping a few times. We also met at several genealogical gatherings and classes, including the genealogy course at *Södra Vätterbygdens folkhögskola* in Jönköping.

When Nils William started the *Swedish American Genealogist*, he invited me to write articles for the magazine, which I gladly did. We also cooperated on a series of articles about the "Inheritance Cases in the Archives of the Swedish Foreign Ministry of Swedes Who Died in America" (Dec. 1997 through Dec. 1998 issue of SAG).

Nils William Olsson was a man with knowledge, visions, and creativity. If he set his mind on something, he would always see the project through. And he did it well. He was also a good storyteller, with a great sense of humor! And a most worthy recipient of the Federation's prestigious genealogy prize: the "*Victor Örnbergs Hederspris*" which he was awarded in 1994.



*Glen E. Brolander  
Past Vice President  
Augustana College, Rock Island,  
Past Chairman of the Advisory  
Committee,  
Swenson Swedish Immigration  
Research Center:*

Of the many aspects of Nils William Olsson's activities in Swedish-American affairs, his interest in genealogy covers the longest time period and probably represents his greatest legacy. It began in 1934, when he received a letter from his grandfather in Sweden. This sparked his interest in researching his own family history and began his interest in genealogy, an interest that grew during early visits to Sweden.

Nils William soon became a resource for persons interested in their own family history. Beginning in 1958, he provided a regular section in the *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* on "Personal Pioneer History." This section continued until 1980. In 1962, he wrote a definitive article for the *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* on "Tracing Your Swedish Ancestry." This guide was then published by the Royal Ministry for Foreign Affairs in 1965 and

revised in 1974. Countless Americans of Swedish descent have used this little personal volume as they researched their own family history.

In 1981 Nils William fulfilled a long-held dream to develop a journal devoted to Swedish American genealogy. In that year, he founded the quarterly publication *Swedish American Genealogist* and served as its publisher and as the editor. This journal quickly became the leading publication for anyone interested in Swedish-American biography, personal history, or genealogy.

*Swedish American Genealogist* became a true labor of love for Nils William, and he personally wrote a large number of the articles. In 1992 the function of publisher was transferred to the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center. He continued as editor until January of 1998, when the function was turned over to James E. Erickson, later followed by Harold L. Bern and Elisabeth Thorsell. Nils William was then named Editor Emeritus.

In 1981 the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center was organized at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois. Nils William took an immediate interest in what was to become the largest center in America for preservation and interpretation of records regarding Swedish immigrants. He became a charter member of the Advisory Committee, a position he continued to hold during the rest of his life.

In 1986 he suggested that he might be interested in transferring his vast personal collection of Swedish-American books and files to the Swenson Center. The collection consists of over 4,000 volumes and is particularly strong in Swedish-American genealogy and local and regional history. The transfer was made possible partially by a gift from the Olssons and partially by contract purchase. The bulk of the collection was transferred in 1991, and cataloging was supported by grants from the Wallenberg Foundation.

Certainly there is no other person who has done more to identify the persons who were included in the

Swedish migration to America and to assist Swedish Americans interested in knowing more about their Swedish ancestors or relatives. The results of his work will live on in the strong personal relationships that have developed between the United States and Sweden.



*Melinde Lutz Sanborn, F.A.S.G.  
Secretary  
American Society of Genealogists:*

Fellow Dr. Nils William Olsson has passed away quietly at his home in Winter Park, Florida, March 20th. He was several months short of his 98th birthday.

Dr. Olsson was elected as Fellow number 93 in 1968 and was ASG's fourth most senior member, after John Frederick Dorman, Cameron Harrison Allen, and Francis James Dallett.

Dr. Olsson was a prolific contributor to the *Swedish American Genealogist* and author of more than a dozen books, including *Tracing Your Swedish Ancestry* (1985).

He will be greatly missed by us all.



*Lars O. Lagerqvist  
Museum director (retired)  
Strängnäs, Sweden:*

A learned and good friend has left us. He meant very much for Swedish-American relations, as a scholar and genealogist, but also as a leader of many visits to his family's old homeland. Personally I had the great pleasure of knowing him during his years at the U.S. Embassy in Stockholm. I was then Curator of education at the Central Office and Museum of National Antiquities (*Riksantikvarieämbetet och Statens historiska museum*), where he was a frequent and inquisitive visitor. How many things we discussed! And later on his publications became very useful to me as an historian (I even

found a couple of relatives among the earliest Swedish emigrants).

He was also interested in another of my subjects, numismatics, and we have a common friend in the well-read dealer in coins and medals, Ulf Nordlind in Stockholm, whom he always visited when he was back in Stockholm, in order to find something for his modest collection of Swedish objects, coins, or medals with portraits of famous Swedes, preferably with American connections. And he was very kind when I had genealogical problems touching his special subject, Swedes in the U.S.

Yes, he was a remarkable man; thank you Nils William for all the things you have done!



*Dag Blanck, Director  
Swenson Swedish Immigration  
Research Center  
Rock Island, IL:*

Nils William Olsson was truly one of the giants in Swedish America. He was both a part of the Swedish-American community and a student of it. His deep interests in Swedish and Swedish-American personal history and biography were combined with a profound understanding of both Swedish and American society and culture. His network of contacts in Sweden alone was truly amazing, and included many of that country's leading historians, librarians, and diplomats from the past half century. Having spent significant and formative parts of his life in both countries, Nils William was truly a bicultural person.

I first met in him the mid 1980s, when he was in his 70s, and I was immediately struck by his curiosity and inquisitive mind. He was a true gentleman, always with "*glimten i ögat*" as the Swedish saying goes. Over the years I had the privilege and joy of talking and working with him in a number of Swedish-American contexts on both sides of the Atlantic. I was particularly happy for



his support of the Swenson Center, the transfer of his library to us, and for the establishment of SAG. I will miss him greatly.



*Per Clemensson,  
1<sup>st</sup> archivist (retired)  
Göteborg, Sweden:*

Thank you for sending the news about Nils William, this death touched me deeply. He was a welcome guest during the summers at the provincial archives in Göteborg, either as a researcher working on SPAUS, or as a travel organizer. I remember him from my earliest years at the archives, and he had a most cordial connection to my father, (Gustaf Clemensson, chief archivist) which was transferred to me. The archives had an ongoing research contact with him, and he became a part of the emigration research that was initiated by and done by the Göteborg Archives.

He came as a certain token of spring and occupied a seat in the research room, where he put our janitors to work in fetching books from the stacks and also engaged the archivist staff, especially me, in helping with his research. Gösta Lext, the chief archivist at that time, was also most interested in immigration research, and invited him to the lunch room and to his home and the gentlemen carried on deep conversations about the sources for Swedish immigration history, which was very inspiring for a young archivist, who was allowed to be present and listen to them. His demands of service from the staff could be exacting and a lot of our time during his visits was spent on serving him. I learnt a lot and had endless discussions with him on registration of immigrants and subtle genealogy problems. It always felt like an honor to work with him. Sometimes our research room held a number of immigration researchers: Nils William, Sten Aminoff, Allan T. Nilsson, and Axel Fri-man. Their conversations could be

carried on loudly, and we had to ask the gentlemen to be quiet and continue discussions in the researchers' lunch room.

While on a journey to America in connection with the Göteborg Immigration Project in 1992, we were received cordially by Nils William and his wife Dagmar, and we have met at a number of conferences and immigration meetings.

Nils William sometimes also was a travel organizer and in that capacity liked to take the road by Göteborg, where I was the guide in Göteborg and at the archive. Sometimes he came in the middle of summer, even on Midsummer Day, after late Midsummer Eve festivities in Dalarna, when his group of Americans were to be entertained in the evening, after a very short time for preparation, because of a change of travel route.

The last time I had the opportunity to meet with Nils William was at the symposium "America – back and forth," organized by the Göteborg Immigration Project on September 18-19, 1996, when he, as the nestor of Swedish-American immigration research, held a lecture, enthusiastically received, about the Swedish sailors in American sources like the crew lists in the National Archives from as early as 1803.

A big *Tack!* goes to Nils William for his efforts for the immigration research and for his friendship.



*Folke Sandgren  
Assistant Chief Librarian (retired)  
Stockholm, Sweden:*

Nils William Olsson had after World War II kept strong ties of friendship with some of the senior staff members at the Royal Library (*Kungliga Biblioteket* = KB) in Stockholm, especially the Chief Librarian Uno Willers and the 1<sup>st</sup> Librarian Olof von Feilitzen. His first big volume on the Swedish emigration to the U.S., *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850*, was thus published in its

Swedish edition 1967 in KB's scientific series *Acta Bibliothecae Regiae Stockholmiensis*, even though it did not fit in with the other volumes in the series, concerning bibliography and "book history". The case was the same with the two consecutive volumes of *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in U.S. Ports 1820-1850 (except New York)* and especially the amalgamated finishing volume *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850*, published in 1995. This volume was written in cooperation with Erik Wikén, Ph.D., a retired senior teacher, now deceased, who put in lots of efforts to find errors in the earlier volumes and correct them and also added many new finds in the sources to the history of the older immigration.

During the two last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century I served as the editor of KB's own scientific publications and was deeply involved in the work preceding the publication of the above mentioned concluding mastodontic volume (628 pages!), which included contacts with Olsson and Wikén.



*On Sundays NWO sometimes made Swedish pancakes for his guests. 1994.*

KB was Nils William Olsson's Swedish central point and scientific home. He did visit Sweden regularly during the summers and it was a joy to see him come into the library. All of us came to have a high regard for the generous, amiable, and elegant grand seigneur, who to the last spoke a totally perfect Swedish. In the winter of 1997 I was invited by him to Florida and spent a memorable week in a summery climate in January with him and his wife Dagmar in Winter Park, in the company of a younger relative. NWO was then 87 years old, and like Dagmar, still sharp intellectually and in good shape; he drove his car, picked us up at the airport, and did everything to make our stay a good one.

When the Royal Library was inaugurated in June of the same year after a major rebuilding, he was one of the Guests of Honor!



*Ulf Beijbom*  
*Professor, Director (retired)*  
*Swedish Emigrant Institute*  
*Växjö, Sweden:*

Nils William Olsson was the first Swedish-American migration researcher whom I worked with. He was also an advisor to the Swedish Emigrant Institute from its start more than 40 years ago. My first meeting with the elegant American diplomat and Ph.D. in Nordic languages from the University of Chicago was during my employment at the provincial archives of Uppsala. NWO was in 1963 working on his *Swedish Passenger Arrivals* and was fighting with several tricky genealogical questions concerning various individuals. I had then started the work on my thesis *Swedes in Chicago* and was preparing my first trip to the U.S. Need I tell that NWO became an invaluable helper? Thus my first report from Chicago was sent to NWO, who already then had assumed the role of a mentor in my thesis work. The relations were

strengthened by the fact that my teacher, Professor Sten Carlsson, soon became one of NWO's closest friends.

Before the start of the Emigrant Institute in Växjö I travelled to Oslo, where NWO then was a counselor at the American Embassy. He soon came for a reciprocal visit and soon won the confidence of Gunnar Helén, the Institute's founder. NWO's advice was "work systematically and carefully!"

He was also the guiding star of his own research work. NWO was the basic researcher with the unselfish goal of excerpting and making public the primary sources, rather than do compilations. In this way he made pioneering research for Swedish immigration research. Especially remarkable are his publications of the *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States* (last version in 1995 in cooperation with Erik Wikén), an outstanding work without any equivalents either in Sweden or America. The biographical detective work, of which he was a past master, also led him into other Sisyphean labors like *Swedish Voters in Chicago 1888*. But besides his work on publishing important source material on migration history, we must not forget his numerous publications of articles in learned journals and conference reports.

NWO's enormous capacity for work and his organizational skills made him, after the Swedish Pioneer Centennial Celebration in 1948, where he was the executive director, one of the founders of the present-day Swedish-American Historical Society (1948) and its *Quarterly*. His brilliant idea of the Swedish Council of America gathered most of the Swedish-American organizations. The need for Swedish-American genealogical research also gave him the idea of *Swedish American Genealogist*.

During a period at the end of the 1960s the untiring man also worked as the director of the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis. Among his many engagements, the one for the Swenson Swedish Immigration



Research Center at Augustana College must also be mentioned, that is where he placed the major part of his huge library and where he founded a scholarship.

Above all the fantastic things, this powerful man created shines the star of friendship, good humor, and intellectual brilliance. NWO's talent for company and pleasant conversation did not always reveal a stalwart adherence to principles without compromise. If NWO was convinced about something he did not give way to a confrontation. Part of his greatness was also the understanding smile and the reconciling handshake.



*Curt Hauffman,*  
*Colonel (retired)*  
*Järfälla, Sweden:*

It was sad to read about the passing of my friend Nils William Olsson. We knew each other since 1962, when the then Swedish cultural attaché in Washington, Gunnar Lonaeus, had invited us both to lunch at Blackies House of Beef as he thought that Nils William and I ought to become acquainted. He himself was prevented from coming but Nils William and I had a nice meal together and enjoyed ourselves. After that we have

met many times, both in Sweden and in the U.S., but unfortunately not during the later years. Nils William introduced me both to the Library of Congress and National Archives. It was a good start for me, as he knew his way about both places and was a well-known and esteemed researcher there. He was a kind, generous man, who willingly shared his knowledge.



*Jill Seaholm, Head of Genealogical Services, Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College:*

The first time I met Nils William was when he came to Rock Island for a Swenson Center Advisory Committee meeting in 1993. I admit that I was a bit scared of him in the beginning. I had heard a lot about him and knew how revered he was, so as the fledgling genealogy researcher at the Swenson Center, I was convinced that he would be wondering who this kid was who would be entering his field. I remember my mom, a long-time SAG subscriber, being impressed that I would be working with him. He was very nice to me; a bit stern and formal, but the first thing he wanted to do was call his wife, Dagmar, and tell her that he had arrived. I thought that was pretty sweet and it made me less nervous around him.

That same year in October I attended his SAG workshop in Salt Lake City and was fortunate to learn a lot of things from him and his hand-picked group of lecturers and friends. Nils William was quite in his element during his week there and his sense of humor really came out. I still remember the time during one of his lectures there that he happened to use the words “night and day,” which reminded him of the song by the same name, so he stopped everything and sang a couple of bars. I got to know Dagmar a little, too, and found her to be a very nice lady and full of good humor herself. The next year

Nils William asked me to be on the staff of the workshop because of the growing number of participants. I accepted gladly and have been a part of it each year since then. After several years, Nils William was no longer able to travel so his trips to SLC and Rock Island stopped, but he was still around via e-mail and phone, and still cranking out books and SAG articles. What a presence he was and what a legacy he’s left. I am proud to have known and worked with him.



*Elisabeth Thorsell,  
SAG Editor  
Järfälla, Sweden:*

Most of the the things that can be said about Nils William have already been said by the previous writers, but I also agree that it was and is a privilege to have known and been a friend of this remarkable man. He was a great scholar, a diligent researcher, but also a kind and fun-loving man, who was meticulous in little details, like remembering birthdays, fixing books for the writing of reviews, and such. He also was very well organized and kept track of new

books that could be useful for the Swenson Library. Many times when we met in Salt Lake City my suitcase was much lighter when I left. I think he enjoyed the workshop week just as much as we all do and did.

When I accepted to become the SAG editor, I told him that I wanted to change a few things, and explained my ideas. He very generously supported my ideas, and seemed to be very pleased with the outcome, and I felt that a heavy load was taken away from me; I had been worried that he would not like the changes.

Another memory is the time he came to our house in Järfälla, and we served him fried salted herring with onion sauce, a meal he said he had not had since his childhood, and he did enjoy his dinner.

I will often miss my kind and thoughtful mentor, but have many good memories.

Donations can be made to the *Dagmar and Nils William Olsson Fellowship* at the Swenson Center, by just sending a check and marking it Olsson Fellowship. In Sweden use the SAG Plusgiro 260 10-9, and we will transfer the money to the fund.



*Nils William Olsson and Elisabeth Thorsell in the Old Swedes church in Douglassville, PA, in 1997.*