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# New Sweden Featured at ASHM Talk in Philadelphia

BY DENNIS L. JOHNSON

Nearly 370 years ago, two small sailing ships, the *Kalmar Nyckel* and the *Fogel Grip*, were chartered by a Dutch and Swedish trading company to carry a small group of Swedes to North America to settle on the banks of the Delaware River, on lands that are now part of Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. This colony, established in 1638, followed closely after English and Dutch settlements in Massachusetts, Virginia, New York, and a few other locations in the early decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The small settlement slowly grew and became absorbed into the later founding by William Penn of Philadelphia and the surrounding region.

New Sweden was largely lost to history for over 200 years as the original colonists intermarried with other groups and their descendants participated in the growth of the area and took part in events leading to the founding of the United States of America. However, many records, buildings, and objects dating to the Swedish colony remained to be rediscovered and celebrated in more recent times.

The past, present, and future of the local organizations existing today as a result of this rediscovery were highlighted in a talk given recently to the Genealogy Club of the American Swedish Historical Museum by Dr. Kim-Eric Williams, currently Governor of the Council of the Swedish Colonial Society, based in Phila-



*Kim-Eric Williams.*

delphia. (Dr. Williams did not learn of his own Swedish roots until later in life, when he discovered that he is a descendant of at least three colonial families.) While the present outlook for these institutions, including the Swedish Colonial Society, the American Swedish Historical Museum, the Kalmar Nyckel Foundation, and Old Swedes' Churches in Philadelphia and Wilmington, is bright, Dr. Williams raised some danger signals for the future. The Colonial Society is thriving, the American Swedish Historical Museum is alive and well, the replica sailing ship *Kalmar Nyckel* serves as a sea-going ambassador for Delaware, and a number of churches and historic

sites exist in the area which can trace their origins to the colony in some way.

## The Early Years

At the time of the New Sweden settlement, the Dutch and the English were competing for ascendancy on the northeast coast of North America. By 1638, Sweden had embarked upon her "age of greatness" beginning with King Gustav II Adolf in 1611. When he fell at the battle of Lützen in 1632, he was succeeded by his daughter Christina, first as regent (1632-44) and then as queen from 1644 until her abdication in 1654. Through the Palatine dynasty that followed with Karl X Gustav, Karl XI, Karl XII, and Ulrika Eleonora, ending in 1751, Sweden continued as a major power in Europe. While the little colony in North America was struggling to survive, some of the greatest classical castles and manor houses in Sweden were being designed and built. These included Drottningholm Palace begun in 1662, Skokloster Castle, begun 1654, The House of Nobles (*Riddarhuset*) in Stockholm (1641-74), and many others. During this period, Sweden was also heavily engaged in foreign wars and territorial expansion in the Baltic, and it had little interest in or support for the small colony in North America.

After a shaky start with many deaths from disease or famine, the

little colony was reinforced over the next seventeen years by twelve more expeditions that left Sweden for the new world and by 1655, a total of eleven sailing ships and about 600 Swedes and Finns had arrived in the Delaware Valley. Soon the colony had spread into many farms and small settlements scattered along both banks of the Delaware River from below present-day Newcastle, Delaware, to as far as present-day Trenton, New Jersey. The Finns among the colonists were usually identified separately but, since Finland at the time was part of Sweden, they were also Swedish citizens. The Swedes and Finns, being primarily rural people interested in agriculture, maintained good relations with the Native Americans, unlike several of the other colonies at the time.

The year 1655 ended their independence as a Swedish colony, when the Dutch colony in New Amsterdam (now New York) asserted its power and took over the colony without bloodshed. Swedes continued to govern themselves with little interference until 1681, when William Penn received his charter for Pennsylvania and Delaware. Control then passed to the English, again without conflict. Although a small number of Swedes continued to come to the area, they were soon vastly outnumbered by English and other colonists. The small group of Swedes and Finns, by then into their second and third generations, began to blend into the expanding population as the cities grew and many more people settled the rural areas on both sides of the Delaware River.

## Blending in

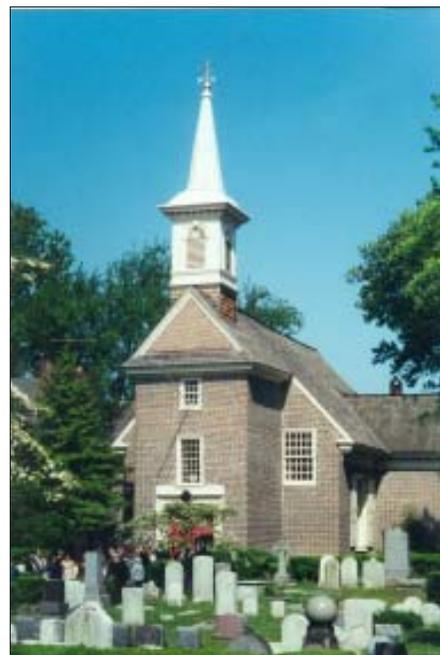
The Swedes had clearly left their mark, however, particularly in the form of the various churches, fortifications, and some houses that have survived from these early days. The first temporary log churches have been lost, but by 1699 a permanent stone church, Holy Trinity (Old Swedes') was completed on the burial ground of Fort Christina in present-day Wilmington, Delaware. This

church was built by the oldest Christian congregation in the Delaware Valley. The following year, 1700, Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') was completed at Wicaco in what is now South Philadelphia. This new brick church replaced an earlier church on Tinicum Island that dated from 1646. Gloria Dei is now the oldest church in Pennsylvania, and is listed on the National Register.

These churches were followed in later years by St. Mary Anne's in North East, MD, Trinity church in Swedesboro, NJ, in 1783-6, St. George's in Pennsville, NJ, in 1801 (log church 1735), St. Gabriel's in Douglassville, PA, Christ Church in Upper Merion, PA, and St. James in Kingsessing, Philadelphia, in 1763.

All were initially formed by Swedish congregations and illustrate by their locations how the descendants of the New Sweden settlers spread in various directions over the first century of their presence in the Delaware Valley. Pastors ordained in Sweden served these churches, with some interruptions, up until the time of the American Revolution. After this date, Sweden did not send pastors and all of these churches looked to the Episcopal Church for clergy, and joined that denomination, in which they remain today. Today's congregations now reflect the present makeup of each of their neighborhoods; only the buildings and congregational histories reflect their Swedish colonial tradition.

The Swedes that formed these congregations over the five to six generations between the original colonists and the Revolutionary War had scattered around the Delaware Valley. Many others began to join the westward movement of their fellow Americans to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Inter-marriage became much more common, and the Swedish language had all but disappeared. Original surnames sometimes disappeared or spellings were altered. Records and histories took little notice of the fate of the presence of these early Swedes. By 1838, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New Sweden, there was no mention of this event



*Gloria Dei in Philadelphia.*

to be found in the newspapers of the time. Nils Collin (1746–1831), the last Swedish Lutheran pastor of Gloria Dei in Philadelphia, had earlier begun trying to create a sense of history about New Sweden, and this was picked up on by some of his associates, but little came of these efforts.

In 1835, Jehu Curtis Clay wrote his *Annals of the Swedes on the Delaware*, the first English language history of the colony to be published. Holy Trinity Church actually closed for a few years from 1836 to 1842. (It was restored in 1899 to recreate the original pews and pulpit.) Later, in the 1890's, Charles Janeway Stille, provost at the University of Pennsylvania, became interested in the history of New Sweden after having discovered his own Swedish roots in Roslagen, Sweden. In 1890, Horace Burr, a vestryman at Holy Trinity, wrote translations of the records of Holy Trinity Church, but these are thought to be poor translations. 1888 saw the first celebration of the anniversary (250<sup>th</sup>) of the New Sweden Colony, but in Chicago, not in Philadelphia!

## The Reawakening

It was not until after the arrival of Amandus Johnson to Philadelphia in 1905, that any serious research or

work began in the recognition of the history of New Sweden. Amandus Johnson (1877–1974) was born in Småland, Sweden, in 1877. He grew up in Rice Lake, Minnesota, and graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, in 1904 with a degree in English literature and a preaching certificate. He became interested in the New Sweden Colony, and he came east to Philadelphia in 1905 to earn a Ph.D. in history at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn). His doctoral dissertation was about the New Sweden Colony. He then joined the faculty at Penn, and established a doctoral program in Scandinavian Languages. By 1908, Dr. Johnson and others had founded the Swedish Colonial Society.

Amandus Johnson continued his teaching at Penn and his research, writing, and publishing about New Sweden. In 1911, he completed his 2-volume, 900-page work, *The Swedish Settlements in the Delaware Valley*. A few years later, he was appointed to a committee to plan ways to preserve the memory of the New Sweden colony. This led to the formation of the Swedish-American Sesquicentennial Association, headquartered in Chicago, with Dr. Johnson as president. He soon had a national campaign organized to erect a Swedish museum on land in the city where the sesquicentennial of the Declaration of Independence was to be celebrated in 1926. As a scholar of New Sweden, he knew that these lands were part of a land grant from Queen Christina of Sweden to Sven Skute, one of the New Sweden colonists, in 1653. Without the leadership of Dr. Amandus Johnson, it is unlikely that The American Swedish Historical Museum would have been built.

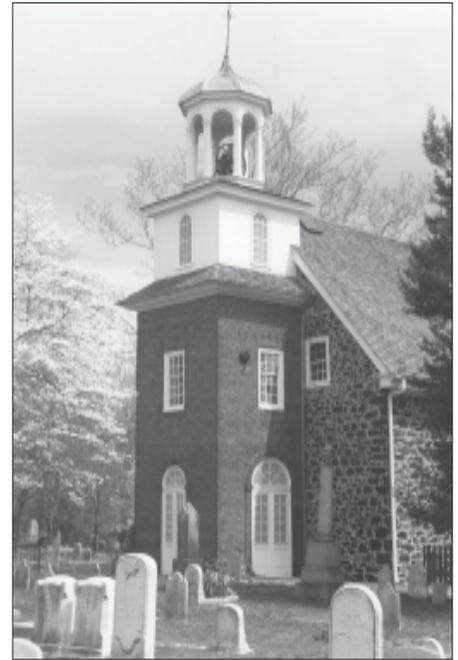
On June 2, 1926, Sweden's Crown Prince, (later King Gustav VI Adolf) placed the museum's cornerstone on the present site in South Philadelphia, now part of Franklin Roosevelt Park. By 1927, the exterior construction work was nearly finished. Work slowed dramatically on the interior finishing due to the Depres-

sion in the 1930's, however. In June, 1938, as part of the 300th anniversary celebration of New Sweden, the building was finally dedicated, with Prince Bertil and Crown Princess Louise present. This museum, designed by Swedish-American architect John Nyden of Chicago in the style of a 17th century Swedish manor house, continues today with permanent and changing exhibits that highlight the contributions of Swedes and Swedish-Americans to the United States. Today, the museum's members and activities bring together not only local Swedish-Americans, but visitors, recent migrants from Sweden, descendants in the U.S. of the great migration of the 19th century now living in the Philadelphia area, and others. There is also a growing interest in Sweden about the New Sweden colony. Recently, Daniel Lindmark of the University of Umeå in Sweden, who studied at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1990's, wrote a book about the New Sweden people.

Through the activities of the Swedish Colonial Society, a granite monolith was erected at Tinicum in 1923. Finally, the site for Governor Printz Park was acquired in 1927, developed, and given to the State of Pennsylvania in 1938. In 1942, Gloria Dei Church in Philadelphia became a National Landmark. After some years of austerity in the mid-20th century, the American Swedish Historical Museum has become a leading historical museum and cultural center for Swedish-American activities on the east coast of the United States, the first of only four such museums in the nation. (Chicago, Minneapolis, Seattle, and Philadelphia.)

## New Sweden Today

The Swedish Colonial Society continues to grow by 50 or more new members every year. Thanks to the internet, two thirds of these new members do not live in the Delaware Valley, but are scattered throughout the U.S. Kim-Eric Williams estimates that there are as many as 20



*Holy Trinity, Wilmington.*

million people in the U.S. who can trace their ancestry to one of the original colonial Swedish families. The Colonial Society continues its work in research and publication of material about New Sweden, most recently two volumes of translations into English of original Swedish and Dutch documents of the Swedish churches in Pennsylvania. This translation work, known as the Gloria Dei Records Project, will continue and up to eight volumes are planned.

The Swedish Colonial Society welcomes all members who have an interest in their work and the history of New Sweden. Members who can trace their ancestry to one of the original settlers of New Sweden are known as "Forefather Members." This has prompted quite a bit of genealogical research among possible descendants, and this research must be verified by the Society's historian, Dr. Peter Craig, to be acknowledged as a Forefather Member. Among its other activities, the Society publishes a biannual newsletter, maintains an internet website, and hosts several activities throughout the year including an annual Forefathers' Luncheon where members honor their own Swedish and American heritage. The Society is primarily a research organization and while it owns no property it has

a large collection in its archives of materials about New Sweden. These materials are currently housed in the Lutheran Seminary at Germantown, in Philadelphia. There is also a separate but cooperating sister organization, the Delaware Swedish Colonial Society, formed to honor descendants whose ancestors or present members live in Delaware.

Six years ago, the Swedish Colonial Society in cooperation with other Swedish-American organizations in the area began a series of annual history conferences on New Sweden. The next conference will be this year on October 16, in Swedesboro, New Jersey: *Carl Linnaeus, Pehr Kalm, & The Early American Scientific Community*. Part of its focus will be on Pehr Kalm, a student of Swedish scientist Carolus Linnaeus. Kalm lived in the Delaware Valley for several years (1748-51) among the colonial Swedes and collected many samples of plants and animals to add to the classification efforts of Linnaeus. Kalm published three volumes on his travels in North America between 1754 and 1761. Another recent project was to locate and identify the portraits of Eric Björk and Christina Stalkop in cooperation with Hans Ling of Uppsala, Sweden. These had been painted in America in about 1714 by Gustavus Hesselius, younger brother to Andreas Hesselius, second pastor to be assigned to Holy Trinity Church by the Church of Sweden. (See *The Faces of New Sweden* by Hans Ling, English translation by Kim-Eric Williams, Philadelphia, 2004.)

## The Future

Kim-Eric Williams, in his talk, felt that there had been much progress in the recognition of New Sweden since the 1800's, but also that many challenges were ahead.

The Swedish language continues to be taught at some fifty colleges in the U.S., but this is declining. The program in Scandinavian Studies at Penn since the time of Amandus Johnson has declined to the point of only one course and one part-time instructor (Dr. Williams). People of Swedish ancestry from the 19th century, like their 17th century colonial predecessors from Sweden, will continue to intermarry with other ethnic groups and their ethnic identities will be diluted, changed, or even disappear. This will present a challenge for all Swedish-American organizations to sustain the interest and loyalty of future generations in the midst of these inevitable changes.

Dr. Williams identified the greatest challenge for the Swedish-American organizations in the Philadelphia region, which he sees as financial. Each of the major organizations needs to strengthen and build their endowments in order to be financially self-sustaining in the future years, and be less dependent on the receipt of annual grants, uncertain from year to year. For the American Swedish Historical Museum, memberships provide only a small part of the annual budget and other income is essential to maintain programs at their present levels. The Kalmar Nyckel Foundation, which

maintains the replica of the sailing ship *Kalmar Nyckel*, is heavily dependent on support from the State of Delaware in order to continue, and the Colonial Society relies principally on memberships and a few grants to support its activities. All of these organizations require a major increase in their endowments. Dr. Williams estimated that the Museum alone should have an endowment on the order of \$10- to \$15,000,000 for reasonable financial security in the future.

While there has been a great deal of progress and growth in most of these Swedish-American organizations in the Delaware Valley in the past century, many new challenges are ahead. The Museum, the Colonial Society, The Kalmar Nyckel Foundation, the churches, and several smaller organizations in the area are all committed to upholding their respective missions. Together, all of these institutions and their members contribute greatly to the awareness of the role in the recognition of the New Sweden colony, their descendants, people in Sweden, and all other Swedish-Americans in the building of our nation beginning over three hundred and sixty years ago. It will require a great effort on the part of all to insure that these organizations continue to inform following generations of the history of Swedes in North America beginning with New Sweden and throughout the continuing development of the United States of America.

**See also: The Swedish Colonial Society**  
**<http://www.colonialswedes.org/>**

**American Swedish Museum**  
**<http://www.americanswedish.org/>**

**Delaware Swedish Colonial Society**  
**<http://members.aol.com/sakerthing/sr-dscs.htm>**