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Sweden's Faithful in Jamestown, New York

The Story of First Lutheran Church

BY JANET VANSTROM

Located on the north side of Jamestown, New York, stands the very impressive cathedral-like First Lutheran Church. The original name of the church was the Swedish Evangelical Church of Jamestown as all of its members and pastor came from Sweden. Its beginnings were humble and the eventual building of the present church was the result of Swedish immigration to the Jamestown area and the hard work of Pastor Hultgren. Over the course of the last 150 years plus, the congregation grew from 63 original members to 1,800 members in the early 20th century only to shrink to the current 300 active members. Trained clergy, money, language, and theology all played a role in the progression of this church building and the congregation that worships here.

The original Swedish settlers to this area were bound for the Midwestern states but were stranded in Buffalo due to a lack of funds. The Germund Johnson family [immigrated 1849] placed their two young daughters in a public house or shelter in Buffalo so that the adults in the group could search for work. This home then placed the children in private homes in Warren, PA, and Sugar Grove, PA. Eventually the parents of these two little girls, Germund Johnson and his wife, came to love the natural beauty of the region and decided to stay. They also convinced their travel companions to move into the Sugar Grove area. As opportunities for employment existed in Jamestown, members of this group began to move to Jamestown.¹



The first log cabin church in Jamestown. (Swenson Center photo collection.)

The need for a place of worship

The early Swedish settlers in Jamestown felt a powerful need for worship and Christian fellowship and began to meet in private homes with lay speakers forming the earliest Lutheran congregation. The practice of using lay speakers continued for several years, as there were no Lutheran seminaries in the U.S. at this time. The combined informal Swedish Lutheran congregations of Hessel Valley, Jamestown, and Sugar Grove placed a call to Sweden for an ordained clergyman. Pastor Jonas Swenson answered this call. Upon his arrival in the area on July 9, 1856, he called a meeting of all persons in western Pennsylvania and New York interested in forming a Swedish

Lutheran Church. The resulting church served Wrightsville, and Swedesburg (Chandlers Valley), PA, and Jamestown, NY. Religious services were rotated between the churches. The meeting held July 26, 1856, is accepted as the official birthday of the First Lutheran Church in Jamestown.²

Pastor Swenson resigned after two years of service leaving the church without a consecrated pastor. The Jamestown congregation continued to meet for services and Bible study in the Jamestown Academy, located on the corner of East Fourth St. and Spring St. and in private homes as they did not "feel strong enough to acquire property."³

In 1860 Pastor John Pehrson was sent to Jamestown to care for the fledgling church and during his two

years of service to the local church, he increased membership and assisted the congregation in developing spiritual strength. When Pastor Pehrson left, the congregation faced another three years of only intermittent leadership. However, they remained strong and continued to look for a permanent leader.⁴

Building the first church

Pastor C. O. Hultgren's arrival in 1864 solved the issue of a permanent ordained pastor for the young congregation, as he would remain with them for the next 32 years. At the time of his arrival, the Swedish community in Jamestown was small and the church membership numbered only 63. With leadership, they were now able to tackle the building of a permanent church home and one month after his arrival in 1864 the congregation purchased a lot on the corner of Chandler St. and Center St. at a cost of \$800.⁵ A white wooden church was erected in 1866 with a picket fence out front.⁶ The completed building was 60 feet long, 38 ft. wide, and 18 ft. in height and the total cost was \$3,279.85.⁷

The Swedish community was hard-working and thrifty and members helped in many ways to keep the cost of their new church down. The Nihl's family made a generous donation of a large tree from their property. The following is a quote from the *Minnes Album*. "On the property of the Nihl family in Ashville there stood an enormous pine tree, taller than all the other trees... But one day it was struck by lightning and the top was splintered. The family agreed to cut down the tree and donate the lumber for the new church in Jamestown. The big pine yielded enough lumber to sheath the outside of the church, with some left over for the interior work. Even the old altar and the old pulpit were made of wood from this great tree."⁸

Much of the community was already engaged in the furniture business or lumbering and they helped with the actual construction in order to save money. Pastor Hultgren was

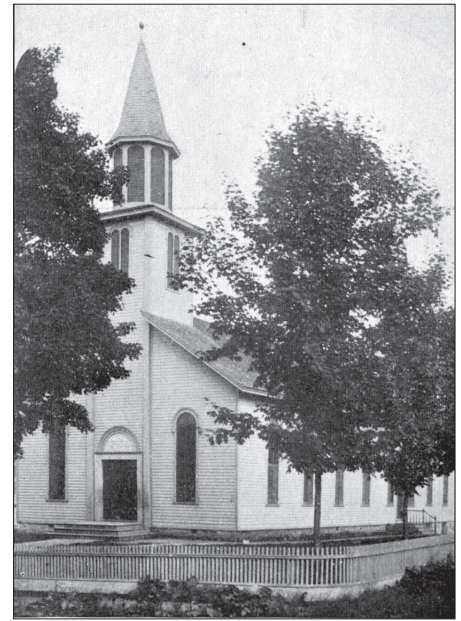
often heard to speak of this gift of labor while preaching at the funerals of these dedicated men.

The following is a quote from an undated news article found in a scrapbook at First Lutheran Church. "Love for work and a zest for religious enterprise had been so deeply instilled in the congregation by Pastor Hultgren that labor on the church cost little or nothing." During funeral services in later years for those early pioneers, Pastor Hultgren was heard to comment, "With his own hand this man nailed that beam in place." He would then point to the beam.⁹

By 1871 with Pastor Hultgren's leadership and the influx of Swedish immigrants, the church had grown to nearly 800 members and there was simply not adequate space for the congregation to meet. A decision was made to extend the length of the church 35 feet and also to add a basement under the entire church at a cost of \$1,500.¹⁰ The congregation continued to grow, fuelled partially by a revival movement in the winter of 1876. This larger and more financially secure group purchased land adjacent to the church and built a parsonage in 1881.¹¹

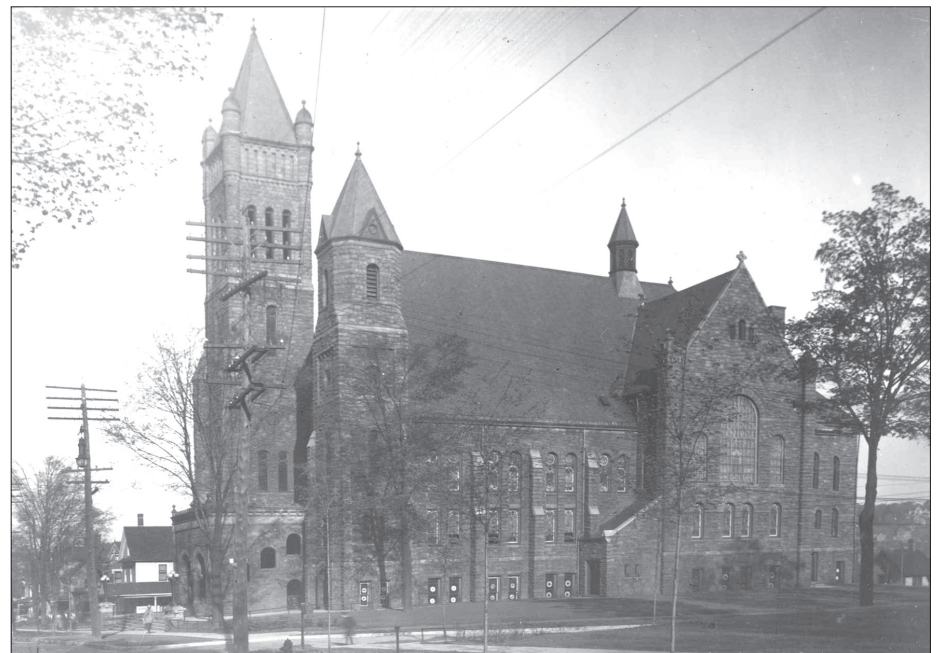
A rift in the church

A spiritual leader and a church to house the congregation solved two



The "Old church" in Jamestown. Korsbaneret 1902.

problems for the members of First Lutheran. However, the ever-growing congregation began to suffer spiritual pain and questions of doctrine began to cause a rift in the congregation. In 1879 a group of members left to form the Swedish Mission Congregation and in 1887 a group left to form the new Immanuel Lutheran Church.¹² While these groups represented a group of members lost to the First Lutheran Church, the church continued to grow and by 1887 there was discussion regarding



First Lutheran Church in Jamestown, NY. (Fenton History Center Collection.)



Interior of the First Lutheran Church in Jamestown. (From Saga from the Hills.)

the need for a new and larger church.

In 1887 C. G. Peterson was placed in charge of the fund raising, Aaron Hall was selected as the architect¹³ and over the course of the next three years money was gathered as the congregation waited on architectural plans and cost estimates.

A larger church is decided on

Finally in 1892 a decision was made to build the basement floor of the church. The men of the church again decided that they could do a great



Dr. Julius Lincoln. (Swenson Center photo collection.)

deal of the work on the lower level of the church in order to save money.¹⁴ On August 3rd of that year the cornerstone was laid and the old wood framed building moved to the back of the lot in order to make room for construction of the new church. The congregation continued to worship in the old wooden church during this time.¹⁵ In January of 1893, at the annual congregational meeting, it was decided to use Medina Stone and not brick to build the new church. This added significantly to the cost of the project and caused some division in the congregation. Then a national recession and lack of funds brought construction to a halt.¹⁶ These financial concerns as well as the splits that the church had experienced in 1879 and 1887 weighed heavily on Pastor Hultgren.¹⁷

When Pastor Hultgren submitted his resignation in 1894, it took a full year to be able to replace him, leaving the congregation needing a leader. Dr. Julius Lincoln arrived and with new leadership and the national economy recovering, construction on the new church began again.¹⁸ On June 13th 1895 the first service was held in the nave of the church.¹⁹

The new church was 138 ft. long and 64 ft. wide, the transept 84 ft., and the tallest tower was 146 ft. tall. The final cost was \$100,000. Com-

pletion of the building still left the need for the new altar and also a new pipe organ to be installed. These projects were completed in 1901.

The language question arises

The beginning of the 20th century brought a new challenge to First Lutheran. No longer were the majority of its members immigrants from Sweden, many were second-generation immigrants, born here in Jamestown. They attended local schools and worked in the greater community where English was the language of their lives.

The question of services in English had first appeared in the church records in 1887 when considering the calling of an assistant pastor. The decision at the time was that while English was the everyday language of the people, "Swedish was the religious language of the homes..."²⁰

However in 1910, services in English began to be offered every Sunday evening. These were well attended and probably contributed to the retention of many members.²¹ When it was decided in 1913 to reduce these services to every other week, there was enough dissension to require intervention from the Synod.

Again in 1916 a petition from 150 members of the congregation requesting regular services in English was presented to the annual congregational meeting.²² Adjustments were made over the years with a gradual replacement of Swedish with English in Sunday school, confirmation classes, and worship services. The final Swedish language service was held in 1953.²³

Handling the question of language tactfully and gradually over many years allowed the church to accommodate the needs of the immigrant population as well as those born in America. The church continues to honor its Swedish heritage each July when the musicians from the local Scandinavian festival held at Jamestown Community College attend church services and present tradi-

tional Swedish music selections.

Over the 150 years of its existence, First Lutheran Church has progressed from its humble beginnings meeting in private homes and local public building, and purchasing land for the original wood-framed building, to the large cathedral-like structure that now exists.

They grew from a small group of immigrants to a congregation of more than 1,800 people. Acquiring an ordained pastor was a problem early on in the church history and has continued to be an intermittent problem over the years.

The language question resolved itself in the 1950's as the last of those who spoke Swedish fluently died off. Theology continues to stir lively debate as the worship committee has experimented with contemporary services. Some members have left First over this, while members from Immanuel have rejoined us. Currently finances are in good shape due to endowments, but with a diminishing membership this will bear close monitoring.

The future is sure to bring continuing change and challenges.

Endnotes

- 1) *Seventy-five Years of History, the Diamond Jubilee*, First Lutheran Church, Jamestown, NY 1931, p. 13.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 5) *Minnes Album*, Remembrance Album, First Lutheran Church, Jamestown, NY, (translation published as part of the 130th anniversary celebration), p. 16.
- 6) "Swedish Settlers Organized the First Lutheran Church *Post Journal*, Saturday, July 25, 1981.
- 7) Moe, M. Lorimer, Editor-Principal Author, *Saga from the Hills: A History of the Swedes of Jamestown* (Jamestown, NY: Fenton Society, 1983), p. 33.
- 8) *Minnes Album*, p. 17.
- 9) Undated news article found in a scrapbook at the First Lutheran Church.
- 10) "Enlargement of the Lutheran Church," *Jamestown Daily Journal*, May 24, 1871.
- 11) *Seventy-Five Years of History*, p. 18.
- 12) Moe, pp. 34-35.
- 13) *Seventy-Five Years of History*, p. 18.
- 14) *Minnes Album*, p. 28.
- 15) *Seventy-Five Years of History*, p. 19.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 18) Moe, p. 36.
- 19) *Minnes Album*, p. 29.
- 20) *Seventy-Five Years of History*, p. 23.
- 21) Moe, p. 38.
- 22) *Seventy-Five Years of History*, p. 24.
- 23) Moe, p. 38.

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Beheaded Vikings Found in England

In the summer of 2009 more than 50 beheaded corpses were found near Weymouth in southwest England, during excavations for the building of a new road.

The corpses were all buried together. There were 51 skeletons, of which some have now been examined by osteologists. They were found to be mostly young men in their early 20s, with a few in their 30s, when they died. The skeletons are about a 1,000 years old, and the men had come from a colder climate than what is usual in England.

The men had been executed naked, as no remains of clothes or shoes were found in the grave. The archaeologists have a theory that these men were publicly executed by local Anglo-Saxons, who themselves often

became victims of attacking Vikings, and probably wanted revenge when it was possible.

It is through analysis of the teeth that it has been found that these men must have come from a colder climate, maybe even from north of the Polar Circle. The evidence from the teeth also show that their diet was rich in protein, which fits with research done on skeletons found in Sweden.

So far only 10 of the skeletons have been thoroughly examined, but the work goes on and it will be interesting to read about what more can be found out.

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