

3-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Norton, John E. (2006) "The Swedish "Wil(1)sons"," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 26 : No. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol26/iss1/3>

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The Swedish “Wil(l)sons” at Bishop Hill and St. Louis

A couple of mysterious early immigrants found!

BY JOHN E. NORTON

In the fall of 1854, Blomdahls Printing House of Sundsvall, Sweden, published a small pamphlet titled *Några upplysande underrättelser rörande Erik Jansenska kolonin i Norra Amerika, Samt en särskild resebeskrifning* (Some Enlightening Information Concerning the Erik Janssonist Colony in North America, And a Special Travel Description) written in part by one Charles Wilson from St. Louis, Missouri, on 9 September 1854. No further information about its author was given.

From its context, it was clearly authored by a Swede who had immigrated around 1840, and who had retained frequent contact with his homeland. But there were no additional clues about this mysterious “Wilson,” nor how he had come to visit Bishop Hill. It gave, however, a very positive and detailed account of economic and social conditions at that Swedish “prairie Utopia” in western Illinois, founded by dissident Swedish perfectionists under the leadership of Eric Jansson in 1846. It was clearly written by someone who had spent considerable time in the colony, even meeting there an old friend, Erik Ulrik Norberg, born 23 June 1813 at Ullälffa, Västergötland, and arriving New York aboard the *Clarissa* of Göteborg on 15 August 1842.

In 2001, the Wilson article was translated and published by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency in its *Journal of Illinois History*, vol. 4 nr 1, Spring 2001, but no further clues about his identity were found.

Its author Charles Wilson remained a complete mystery.

Four years later, I was visiting the Bishop Hill Colony cemetery on another research project, and came upon a tombstone inscribed “Anton Frederick Willson, born 6 June 1814 in Sweden, died 6 January 1857,” and “Elizabeth, wife of Fredrick Wilson, born 14 December 1814, Unnaryd, Jönköping, died 26 March 1898.”

The similarity of family names appeared to be more than coincidental. A meeting with Bishop Hill State Memorial archivist Cheryl Wexell Dowell quickly uncovered a Willson family history, written by a daughter and deposited by a descendant in 1996.

It described Anton Frederick Willson as having been born 14 June 1814(?), married in late 1841(?) at Unnaryd to Elizabeth Hansson, and departing Sweden with their family of four children on 14 January 1853 aboard the *Preciosa*, arriving New York on 2 May 1853, then heading for St. Louis, “...where father had two brothers, John and Charles, who were in the mercantile business...” Charles had been discovered!

But who were the Wilsons? The family history incorrectly described Anton Frederick Willson as having been born in “Härna församling, Linköpings län, Östergötland,” a clearly erroneous location. But birth-year, marriage location, immigration information, and the presence of two named brothers in St. Louis, John and Charles, gave enough information to begin an *Emibas* and *Genline*

search of Swedish records, with good help from Elisabeth Thorsell, editor of the *Swedish American Genealogist* and Helene Leaf, researcher at the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana College in Rock Island. They quickly found Anton Frederick was born Anders Fredrik Andersson, at Norra Härene socken, Skaraborgs län, on 27 May 1814, and married Lisa Hansdotter on 11 April 1842 in Norra Unnaryd, Jönköpings län. The Wilsons were actually Anderssons!

The family history reports that upon arriving in New York, Anton’s (Anders’s) family began their westward journey to St. Louis to meet his brothers Carl and Johan Otto Andersson (Charles and John Wilson). They stayed in St. Louis until 18 July 1854, when they set out by steamboat for Peoria, Illinois, with the goal of Andover, settled since the mid-1840s by Swedish immigrants, initially from Östergötland and later, Gästrikland. In Peoria, they hired a driver and a “prairie schooner” for what they hoped would be a short trip to Andover, just 75 miles away, across largely unbroken prairies.

Carl (Charles Wilson) evidently accompanied them as interpreter, and out of curiosity about Bishop Hill, which had substantial trading contacts in St. Louis, and about which he had been asked on previous return trips to Sweden.

Seven days later, they finally arrived at nearby Bishop Hill, only about 15 miles, or one day, south of their goal. They found the prospect

of an overnight at the relatively new (1852) Björklund Hotel in Bishop Hill too inviting to pass up, after seven nights in a prairie schooner. Hotel manager Sven Björklund also discovered that Anders (Anton) had skills too inviting to pass up...he was a tanner, a trade badly needed at Bishop Hill, which had large numbers of cattle, for use as draft animals, while providing meat and hides, for both local use and export. Anders, though suspicious of their communal lifestyle, was intrigued by their offer of one year's employment as foreman of the tannery, after which he could leave with a full year's pay, if dissatisfied with conditions there. He stayed until his death on 6 June 1857. His family remained, and was well cared for. Upon dissolution of the colony in 1860-61, his widow Lisa (Elizabeth) received an allotment of land in Galva Township, ten miles west of Galva, upon which she built a home, and raised her family. She lived there

until her death on 26 March 1898.

Armed with the correct patronymic of "Andersson" and birthdate of Carl as 30 January 1816 and Johan as 23 July 1819, it was now simple to learn more about their immigration. Carl arrived New York City on 30 March 1840 aboard the *Edla*¹, and Johan at Boston, aboard the *Gotha*² on 20 June 1845. The St. Louis City Directory of 1854-55 shows John Wilson clerking at C. Wilson's, and John's residence at 15th and Chestnut. As yet, not much more is known about their activities in St. Louis, beyond Carl's several return trips to Sweden, evidently on business.

Carl Anderson (Charles Wilson) was clearly impressed by what he experienced in the Bishop Hill Colony, and wrote his lengthy and very positive description of conditions in Bishop Hill, after his return to St. Louis that fall, dating it 9 September 1854. To his report, the printer also appended an anon-

ymous, and far less favorable travel report, dated Moline, 1 September 1853, about immigrant conditions in that expanding farm industry city, already a magnet for early industrial immigrants from Sweden.

Notes:

1) *In Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850* [SPAUS], by Nils William Olsson and Erik Wikén, Carl is listed as #558, and called merchant of Norrköping. He received passport in Stockholm 25 Nov. 1839.

2) In SPAUS Johan is listed as #923, a servant who received passport for Boston on 10 April 1845. He was born in Norra Härene 23 July 1819.

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View from the Tower Building towards The Colonial Store, Bishop Hill, Illinois.