Peter Stebbins Craig--In Memoriam

Ellen Rye
Peter Stebbins Craig

In Memoriam – a remarkable scholar has left us

BY ELLEN RYE

The world of Swedish-American genealogy lost one of its leading researchers when Peter Stebbins Craig, 81, slipped away peacefully at his Washington, D.C., home on Thanksgiving Day.

Peter as a child listened to his great-grandmother Martha Yocum talk about how their family's roots went back to Nya Sverige, the Swedish colony established in the Delaware Valley in 1638. (The colony was overtaken by the Dutch in 1655, but almost all the colonists stayed, and that is what makes the colony's history so interesting.)

Peter tucked the stories away, never forgot them. He went on to Oberlin College and to Yale Law School, earning a J.D. degree, and then moved to Washington D.C., where he worked for many years in such positions as legal counsel for the federal Department of Transportation and for the Southern Railway.

After discovering that doing genealogy only as a sideline when you are employed full-time really doesn't work well, Peter retired in 1987 at age 59 and immersed himself in researching the Swedish roots his great-grandmother had talked about, bringing to the task his strong sense of right vs. wrong – fact vs. supposition, his remarkable ability to retain detail, and a legal background which gave him an advantage in reading and interpreting birth/marriage/death, probate, land, and court records. The quest led him to study first-hand the sources available in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, Maryland, and in Sweden. Not surprisingly – at least not to any genealogist, he found himself researching all the colonial Swedes and Finns he kept stumbling across. To keep things reasonably manageable, Peter established a cut-off date, limiting his research to the 1638-late 1700’s period.

Before long, Peter was in touch

New Sweden Settlers, 1638-1664
Part 1 (1638-1640)
Peter Stebbins Craig, F.A.S.G.*

For more than a decade, the author has been studying and assembling a list of all the settlers in the colony of New Sweden, founded in the Delaware Valley in 1638. Unfortunately, in Sweden, the late Dr. Ann Carlsson, Professor of History at the University of Uppsala, was undertaking the same project.

In late 1988, Dr. Carlsson published the first volume in her series, New Sweden, 1638-1656. She had a much more ambitious goal of covering the entire history of Sweden before the Swedish Empire was formed. The author’s project is limited to the early years of the colony, when the Swedes were just beginning to settle the Delaware Valley.

For those with an interest in New Sweden, this is an important resource. The author has assembled a list of all the settlers in the colony, and has provided a brief biography of each settler. The list includes information on the settler’s name, birthplace, occupation, and any other relevant information.


SAG 1996:1-2/3

Peter Stebbins Craig (1928–2009).

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The 1638 Census of the Swedes on the Delaware

Family Histories of the Swedish Lutheran Church Members

Residing in Pennsylvania, Delaware, West New Jersey & Cecil County, Md.

1638-1693

PETER STEBBINS CRAIG, J.D.

Fellow, American Society of Genealogists

Cartography by Shelia Waters

Foreword by C. A. Westagger

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Charter Members of the Old Swedes’ Churches on the Delaware, 1699-1700

Peter Stebbins Craig, F.A.S.G.*

Dr. Peter Stebbins Craig, Fellow of the American Society of Genealogists and a charter member of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, has written extensively on the history of the Old Swedes’ Churches.

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The day of 4 June 1699 was a day for celebration among the 1500 Swedes living along the Delaware River and its tributaries. It was Trinity Sunday and the day set aside for the consecration of a new church, built of stone and brick, near the site of old Port Chester and a woods that would later become Wilmington, Delaware. The new church, named Holy Trinity Church, was one of two churches then under construction to replace the old log churches at Crane Hook and Warrin. The new church, Gloria Dei Church at Wilmington, Pennsylvania, was built in 1699, with a similar celebration.

Today, these churches and the old Swedes’ Churches are described in the first permanent European settlement on the Delaware. They also stand as monuments to the success of the American Lutheran Church, which supplied ministers for the Swedish churches in the Greater Delaware Valley for eighty years, beginning in 1687. The two churches dedicated in 1699 and 1700 were soon followed by several others, better positioned to serve the growing and spreading Swedish settler population.

Mary Ann’s Nunnery, Cecil County, Maryland, Trinity Church is hardwood, Greensome County, New Jersey; St. George’s Church in Vineland, Salem County, New Jersey; St. Gabriel’s in the Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania; St. James of Kingding in West Philadelphia; and Christ Church of Upper Merion Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, all of them built before the Revolutionary War.

All of these churches are still standing, albeit as Presbyterian Episcopal churches, as proof of their Swedish heritage.

* Dr. Peter Stebbins Craig, Fellow of the American Society of Genealogists and a charter member of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, has written extensively on the history of the Old Swedes’ Churches.

** Under the Old Style or Julian calendar, the dates in the text are changed by one day under the New Style or Gregorian calendar. Corrections were made in 1618 and 1630 by Pope Gregory XIII’s declaration that the Gregorian calendar was the calendar to be used in the Church. These corrections were adopted by the American Lutheran Church in the United States and Canada in 1687. Holy Trinity Church at Wilmington, Del., was consecrated by the Holy Trinity Church in 4 July 1699. John Calvin City, named after the city of Calvin, France, was renamed by the settlers of Holy Trinity Church on 1 July 1700. The exact dates are marked in this manuscript by the use of the calendar of Holy Trinity Church on 7 July 1699. The Old Style dates are marked in this manuscript by the use of the calendar of Holy Trinity Church on 7 July 1699.

SAG 1996:1-2/3

SAG 1999:2/3
Recently the Swedish National Library (Kungliga Biblioteket) finally gave the public access to parts of their huge collection of old newspapers.

They have been working on this for a long time, starting with the world’s oldest newspaper Ordinari Post Tijdender, that started publishing in the 1640s, and still comes out every week as Post och Inrikes Tidningar, the official gazette of Sweden.

This effort, which also read the newspapers by computer (an OCR program), did not have any marked success, and was also difficult to search. The new effort seems to be using the same programs as the successful Finnish National Library has used, and is easy to navigate.

As this is just a beta-version, the number of newspapers is limited, but still very useful. You need to be able to read Swedish to get the benefit of it. The newspapers from the 1700s and early 1800s are printed in fraktur type face, which might not be so easy to read.

There are 28 available newspapers online now. The search is not yet perfect, but it is still useful, as you can search on a place name or a family name. I recently found an old wedding announcement from 1823 for a relative in a rural parish, where I would never have looked otherwise.

It is estimated that in due time more than 110 million pages will be digitized and made public. And then we are just waiting for the Swedish-American newspapers...