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The Jacob Fahlstrom Challenge

“The First Swede in Minnesota” had an exciting past in another country!

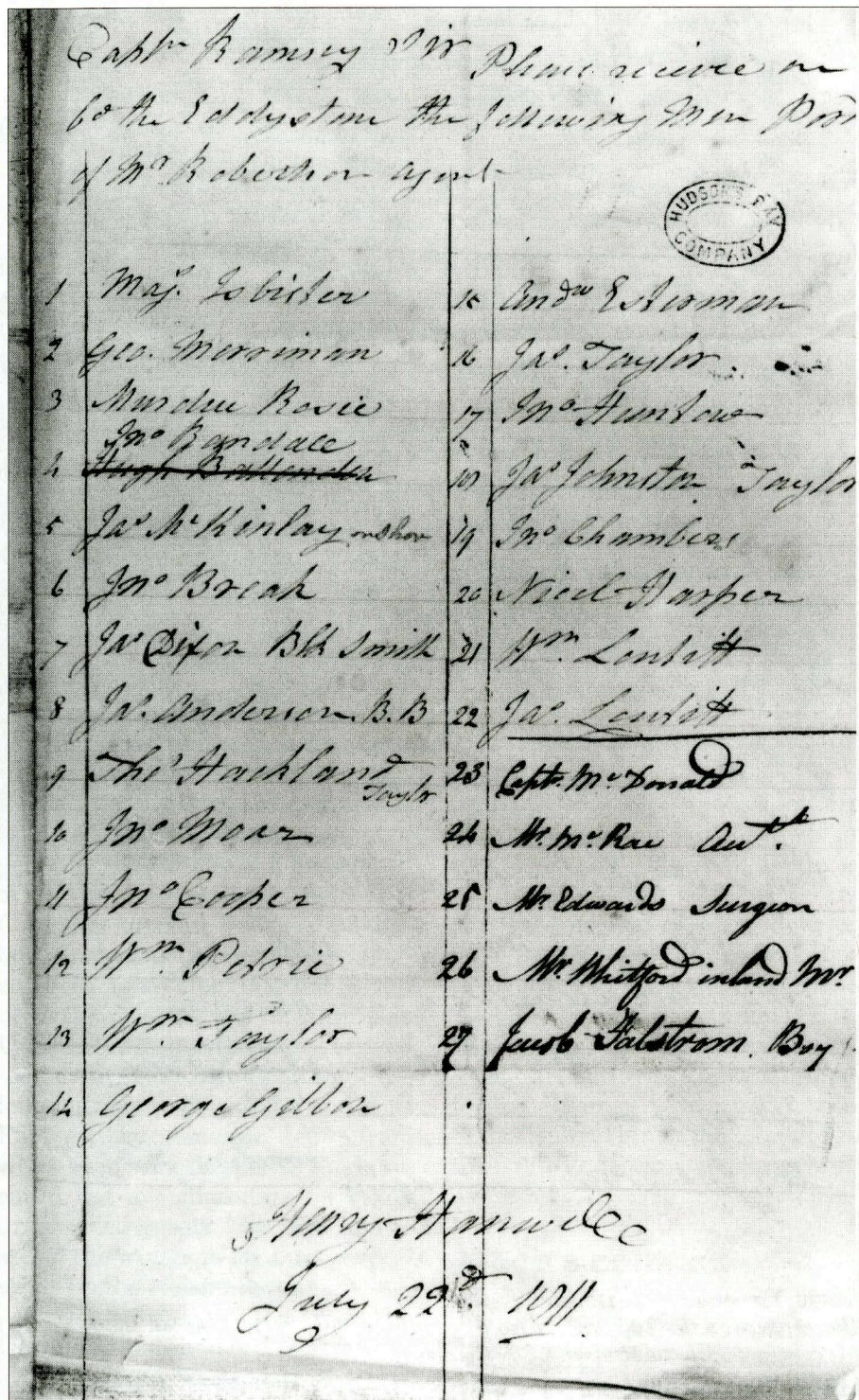
BY ELINOR BARR

So much mythology has grown up around *Jacob Fahlstrom* that we have lost sight of him as a real person. He is well-known as the first Swede in Minnesota. Not so well publicized are the seven years he lived and worked in the area that became Canada. In fact he holds two Canadian records, one as the first Swede in Manitoba, and the other as the first Swede to enter the country through Hudson Bay. This essay attempts to look beyond hearsay, and to consider documents that shed light on his life in Canada and the turbulent times he experienced at first-hand.

Considering his importance to both Minnesota and Manitoba, it is surprising that nothing is known about his early life in Sweden. We do not even know his birth place or date of birth. Hopefully two new developments will help solve this riddle – increasing online accessibility to Sweden’s church records, and the discovery in Canada of previously unexplored documents. One of these documents gives the date four days prior to sailing for Hudson Bay, and the other gives his age at the time of embarkation, so that we have, at long last, an approximation of his birth date based on contemporary documents.

“A List of Servants on the ... Eddystone for Hudson Bay ... 22 July 1811” includes Jacob Fahlstrom as number 27.

Credit: Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba, C.1/294 (end).



Names	age	Residence	time engaged	Occupation	Wages	Money Advanced	Remarks
Jas. Dickson	23	Nara	3 ^{1/2} yrs	Blacksmith	£20	£8	Wages to be advanced £5 every year
Magnus Albert	21	"	"	Laborer	£20	£7	
John Chambers	19	Walls	"	Laborer	£20	£7	
John Break	39	Bersay	"	"	£20	£8	
Jas. Loutitt	40	Nara	"	"	£20	£7.6	
W. Loutitt	40	Stamps	"	"	£20	£8.8	Wages at the discretion of his employers
Jas. McKinlay	28	Stamps	"	"	£20	£7.7	Wages at the discretion of his employers
Jas. Taylor	27	Bersay	"	"	£20	£8	
Murdoch Rodin	20	Bersay	"	"	£20	£9	
Jas. Merciman	22	Nara	"	"	£20	£6	
James Crausie	40	Eric	"	Boatbuilder	£40	£7	if found qualified
Jas. Aschland	40	Stamps	"	Taylor	£20	£8	
James Schuster	29	Bersay	"	Taylor	£20	£7	
George Gibson	30	Sandwich	"	Laborer	£20	£7	
Nichol Harper	34	Bersay	"	Laborer	£20	£7	
John Moore	26	Stamps	"	Laborer	£20	£7	
John Cooper	19	Sandwich	"	"	£20	£8	
Will. Taylor	18	Walls	"	"	£20	£7	
W. Pehr	38	Norwalk	"	"	£20	£7	
Jas. Osterman	27	Sandwich	"	"	£25	£7	
John Hunter	30	Bersay	"	"	£25	£5	
John Randall	40	Eric	"	"	£20	£7.12.6	
Jacob Fahlstrom	17 1/2	Sweden	5 1/2 yrs	"			£12. 14 2/4; 15. 3 1/4 and £20. 4 1/2 5/4

Passengers from London.

Captain - Miles - Macdonell -

Mr. Kin^d. M'Rae - Storekeeper -

Mr. Abel Edwards - Surgeon -

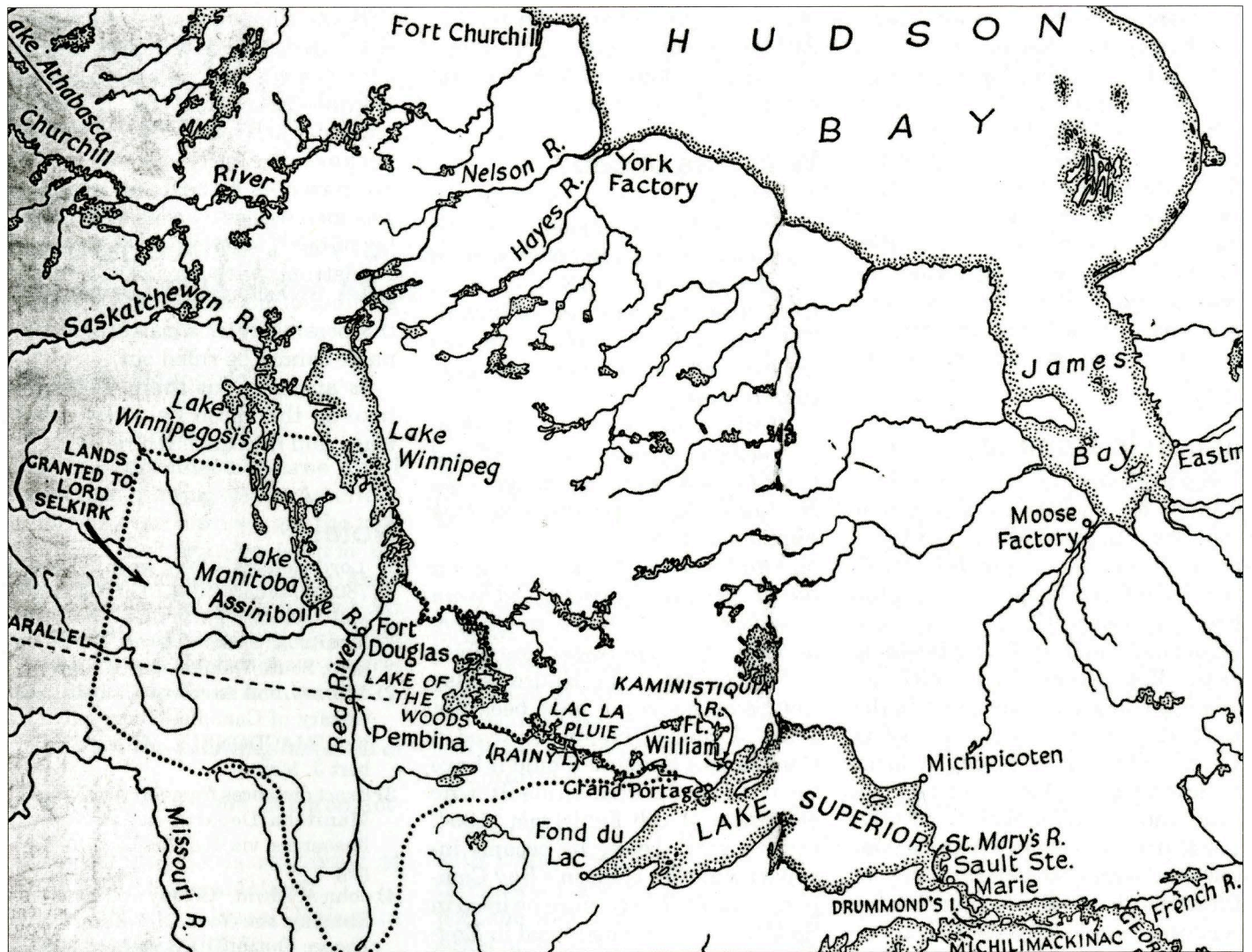
Mr. J. P. Whitford - Inland Master -

Mr. Will^m. Brown -

Mr. Jⁿ. Brickonridge } writers for Churchill - sent on board in Hudson Straits.

"Passengers on the Eddystone voyage to Hudson Bay, 1811." Line 23, shows Jacob Fahlstrom's age as 17½ and the conditions of his contract with the Hudson's Bay Company.

Credit: Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba, C.1/294 fo. 1d.



Map showing York Factory, Nelson River, Lake Winnipeg, lands granted to Lord Selkirk, Fort William, Sault Ste. Marie. The Red River settlement was located near the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers.

Drawn by C.C.F. Bond, published in *Lord Selkirk of Red River*, by John Morgan Gray (Toronto: Macmillan 1963), pages xii-xiii.

“Jacob Falstrom, Boy” is included in a list of twenty-seven men who sailed on the Hudson’s Bay Company’s ship *Eddystone* in 1811. The designation “Boy” indicates that he served as cabin boy for the voyage. His age – 17½ – and the details of his five-year contract with the Hudson’s Bay Company are included in the second document which is a list of twenty-nine passengers - six from London, twenty-two from Scotland’s Orkney Islands, and “Jacob Falstram” from Sweden. The names on both documents are the same except for two writers from London. The *Eddystone* left Stornaway, Scotland, on 26 July 1811, and anchored near York Factory on 25 September, after a journey of 61 days.

Travelling on the same ship was Miles Macdonell, newly appointed governor of Assiniboia, a huge block of land granted by the Hudson’s Bay Company to Lord Selkirk.¹ Assiniboia included the proposed agricultural settlement at Red River, near the present site of Winnipeg. Unfortunately the *Eddystone* arrived too late in the season to attempt the long journey to Red River, and York Factory, the principle depot from which furs were shipped to England, could not accommodate so many unexpected guests. The men had to spend the winter in log huts several miles up the Nelson River.²

The twenty-two men from the Orkney Islands had been hired as an advance party to prepare the pro-

perty at Red River to receive settlers. Macdonell and his party set out for Red River on 6 July 1812, poling or sailing along the waterways and portaging around rapids and waterfalls. It took them thirty-seven days to cover the 417 miles (671 km) from York Factory to the north end of Lake Winnipeg. From here they sailed 265 miles (427 km) across Lake Winnipeg to Red River, a total of 682 miles (1,098 km).³ This is the same route that the Red River settlers would follow.

Jacob’s contract

Jacob Fahlstrom’s contract bound him for five years as a laborer, earning £12 a year to start, £15 the third year, then £20 annually for the

final two years, ending in July 1816. He is named, and sometimes called "Swede Boy," in York Factory's daily journal for a period of 1½ years, from 8 February 1813 to 9 July 1814, performing tasks in support of the fur trade. During this time Red River settlers were arriving at York Factory and setting out for Red River, workmen were upgrading the route as far as Lake Winnipeg, and a schooner was being prepared to provide transportation across that lake.⁴

Jacob in Canada

Jacob Fahlstrom lived in what is now Canada for seven years, first under contract with the Hudson's Bay Company, then signing on with its rival, the North West Company. During the first five years, the two fur trade giants had squared off over the issue of the Red River colony, which lay along the latter's trade route to the west. The controversy culminated on 7 June 1816 with the bloody Incident at Seven Oaks, which left 21 people dead, most of them connected with the Red River colony.⁵ Whether Jacob Fahlstrom took part in any of these conflicts is not known, but he certainly would have heard about them. When his contract expired in July he hired on with the North West Company, whose headquarters were in Montreal.

He promptly travelled the 450-mile fur trade route eastward to the company's main depot at Fort William, on Lake Superior, arriving 10 August 1816. Was he still there three days later when Lord Selkirk, Miles Macdonell, and a group of mercenaries captured the post and occupied it for the winter, in retaliation for the Incident at Seven Oaks? If so, did they recognize him? Was he imprisoned? All we know is that the seizure left the North West Company in such a sad state of disarray that it was absorbed by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821.

"Jacob Falstroff (a Swede)" left the company's service in 1817 at St. Mary's post, the site of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario,⁶ and crossed into what became the United States

where he started working for the American Fur Company, married, and later became Minnesota's first convert to Methodism.

Who was Jacob?

The Methodist minister Alfred Brunson wrote about a personal interview with Jacob Fahlstrom, published in the 16 September 1837 issue of *Christian Advocate and Journal*. This, the only available contemporary record, poses more questions than it answers:

At nine years of age he was shipwrecked on the coast of England and fell into the hands of an officer of the Hudson's Bay Company, who took him to that Bay.

While there, a friend gave him a Swedish Bible, Testament, and hymn book, he having learned to read before he left home, his parents being pious.

The "officer of the Hudson's Bay Company" could not have been Mr. Miles Macdonell, because he lived in Canada, not England. Could it have been Lord Selkirk himself who befriended Jacob Fahlstrom c1804, several years before he became involved with the Hudson's Bay Company? Hardly likely, since he lived in Scotland. If Jacob had lived in England for eight years and therefore spoke fluent English, then why did the person in charge of York Factory call him "Swede Boy" in his daily journal? Is it possible that the shipwreck happened much later, in the Outer Hebrides, and in that way Jacob became acquainted with Mr. Robertson, the hiring agent at Stornaway?

Jacob Fahlstrom is beginning to take shape as a real person, a young man whose life's journey was changed dramatically by the vagaries of chance. First, his arrival in a strange country as a youth, not knowing the language and probably alone and penniless. Then his journey to Hudson Bay and seven-year apprenticeship in the Canadian fur trade during the most volatile period in its history. Clearly, Jacob Fahlstrom was a survivor.

Finding genealogical information offers a real challenge to anybody

with the time and expertise to take on the task. The date of his birth has been narrowed down to a single month – February 1794. His birthplace is likely on or near a harbor, because the only way to get to Stornaway is by boat. All available documents show Sweden as his country of birth, and his name as Jacob Fahlstrom, with variations in the spelling of his surname. Of course, the possibility of a patrilineal surname cannot be ruled out.

Is anybody out there willing to take on the Jacob Fahlstrom challenge and find his birth record?

Notes

- 1) Lord Selkirk's land grant covered 780,000 square miles (300,000 sq.km) and included parts of what is now Manitoba, Saskatchewan, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota.
- 2) Library and Archives Canada, Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, "MACDONELL, MILES" by Herbert J. Mays.
- 3) Exact distances from Surveys Branch, Manitoba Department of Natural Resources, via Ted Simonson, Winnipeg.
- 4) John A. Alwin, "Colony and Company Sharing the York Mainline," *The Beaver*, Outfit 310, Summer 1979, 4–11.
- 5) A concise account of the controversy can be found at <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com> under "Red River Colony."
- 6) Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba, F. 4/32, North West Company Ledgers 1811-1821.

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