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The Start of New Sweden

New Sweden, Maine, is mostly the result of the efforts of one man

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

During the 1860s the governing men of Maine discovered that their state was the only one losing people, except New Hampshire. All other states increased their number of inhabitants, either by births or by immigrants. Most of the immigrants that arrived in the U.S. from Europe preferred to settle in the Midwest, where lands prices were low or even free, and the climate temperate. Also they discovered that many of the new settlers of Maine were French Canadians, and they became worried that the northern part of Maine would become French-speaking.

The solution to the problem appeared to be to make sure that prospective immigrants were told about the good sides of Maine as a farming country, also to promise them free land and a cabin and other benefits, if they decided to go to Maine.

What kind of immigrants did the government wish for? They wanted tall, stout, and hardy men, used to hardship, frugal, and religious and the same qualities in the women. In fact, they wanted Scandinavians, as they were regarded as good workers, and also were used to the type of climate.

On March 23, 1870, the Maine House of Representatives passed a law authorizing a Board of Immigration, consisting of the governor, a land agent, and the secretary of state. Within two days they appointed *William Widgery Thomas, Jr.* as their commissioner. He had earlier lived for three years in Sweden and felt he knew the country and its people.



William Widgery Thomas, Jr.
(1839–1927).

Mr. Thomas immediately put his affairs in order and sailed for Sweden on 30 April, and landed in Göteborg on 16 May.

Now he was faced with the problem of letting the public know about the favorable conditions for emigrants to Maine. He hired captain G. W. Schröder as his agent in Göteborg, and he himself travelled all over the country, giving talks in Swedish. He had special agents hired for the northern counties. He produced notices, advertisements, brochures, and circulars, and sent them all over Sweden.

Prospective emigrants were told that they were to pay their own passage, and that they must have a testimony of good conduct from their clergyman, and that they should know a craft, like carpentry, besides

being experienced farmers.

Soon people applied from all parts of Sweden and by Midsummer 1870 the first group of colonists gathered in Göteborg. The group consisted of twenty-two men, eleven women, and eighteen children. To cite Mr. Thomas "All were tall and stalwart, with blue eyes, light hair, and cheerful, honest faces; there was not a physical defect or blemish among them, and it was not without some feelings of state pride that I looked upon them as they were mustered on the deck of the *Orlando*, and anticipated what great results might flow from this little beginning for the good of Maine."

Where were the homes of the emigrants?

The group has been found in the Göteborg Police Chamber lists of emigrants, all with tickets for Halifax. However, only 45 of them were listed, the others may have been missed in the keyboarding into the database which is not unusual.

The surprising thing is that they came from such different areas of the country. There were 8 from Nordmaling in Västerbotten (the Jonas Bodin family), 1 from Uppland, 1 from Östergötland, 1 from Småland, 14 from Skåne, 9 from Halland, 7 from Västergötland, 2 from Karlstad and 2 from Mora in Dalarna. It is amazing that the info in a few weeks had reached so many different areas, in a time without Internet or TV or other fast ways of communications.

Over the North Sea and further

According to Mr. Thomas' story the group had a bad crossing over the North Sea, and did not reach Hull until on 27 June, after three days. Next day they took the railway to Liverpool, where they had to wait for another three days until boarding *City of Antwerp* on 2 July. The ship belonged to the Inman Line.

On the Wednesday 13 July they all landed at Halifax, where the inhabitants were shy of the new immigrants, who had to spend the night in a vacant warehouse. Next day they travelled on to the city of St. John, where they boarded a steamer on the St. John river, bound for Fredericton. There the river was too shallow for boats, so their baggage had to be put on barges and towed along, which took six days before they got to Tobique Landing, where they all debarked. After resting they left the next day for the final stage by teams of wagons to go to Maine. At ten o'clock they reached the border and "beneath us lay the broad valley of Aroostook. The river glistened in the sun, and the white houses of Fort Fairfield shone brightly among the green fields along the river bank." When the party crossed the border they were greeted by a cannon shot from Fort Fairfield, and the land agent gave a speech. At noon they reached Fort Fairfield and were greeted by all the inhabitants, and given a big meal. Then they continued west and reached the town of Caribou, where they spent the night.

Arrival

The next day, 23 July, less than a month after leaving Göteborg, they found themselves at a crossroads in the forest, where they were told that the center of New Sweden was going to be. The arrival was celebrated by speeches of Mr. Thomas and others, but there was work to be done.

The group of emigrants had come much earlier than the land agent had expected, so of the promised cabins, one for each family, only a few had yet been built. The land agent had

surveyed lots of 100 acres, one for each family, and had workers clear 5 acres in one corner, adjoining the neighbor, so they could build their cabins within easy walking distance.

The first day in the colony was a Sunday and celebrated by a service, sadly enough also by a funeral of baby Hilma Clase, who had died along the river.

On Monday work began, after the distribution of the farms, and every family started on their place. But as they arrived in late summer, they must be supplied with food until the first harvest next year. This was paid for by doing work on roads, building houses and felling trees, and each man got \$1 a day, which he could use in the colony storehouse.

In late July the first letters from the home land came, and also the first settler, who did not belong to the group, Anders Westergren. In October the structure of the first communal building, the Capitol, was raised, which often was used for housing new settlers when they first arrived.

Next year and then

During the winter the settlers had corresponded with family and friends, and next year several groups of new settlers came. And the next year and the next and the colony grew. Some stayed on and still have descendants living there, others left for more southern places, somewhat disappointed after having found that the farming soil was very thin and the growing season short.

Many stayed in Maine, but many others heard the lure from the huge factories in the Worcester, Mass., area and moved there.

Mr. William Widgery Thomas always kept an interest for the well-being of the Swedes in Aroostook, "his Children in the Woods" and visited them often.

Some Census figures

1870–1950

Swedish born in

Aroostook County

1870	6
1880	597
1900	889
1910	824
1920	684
1930	465
1940	298
1950	161

Source: University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. United States Historical Census Data Browser. ONLINE. 1998. University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/> May 2004.

Further reading:

Centennial History 1870–1970, compiled by Richard Hede.

Declarations and Naturalizations in New Sweden, ME, (1873–1900) by Nils William Olsson in SAG 1981:3.

To New Sweden on Her Centennial, by Arthur Landfors, in SPHQ [Swedish Pioneers Historical Quarterly] 1970:4.

Maine's Swedish Pioneers, author James S. Leamon, in SPHQ 1975:2.

Letters from New Sweden, ME, ed. and transl. by Per-Olof Millgård, SPHQ 1975:2.

More Letters from New Sweden, ME, ed. and transl. by Per-Olof Millgård, SPHQ 1979:4.

A Visit to New Sweden, ME. Reminiscences of an Era, by Lilly Setterdahl, SPHQ 1975:2.

A letter of Tribute to Grandfather (Farfar) Lars Jonsson Stadig, by Clinton C. Stadig and Linnea Stadig Staples, SPHQ 1970:4.

Swedish Colony in the Maine Woods, by Evadene Burris Swanson, SPHQ 1966:1.

Church records

For *New Sweden* there are records from 1st Baptist Church (1871-), Evangelical Covenant Church (1886- and Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran Church (1871-). For *Stockholm* there are records from 1st Baptist Church (1904-) and Oscar Fredrick Lutheran Church (1906-).