

12-1-2000

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### Recommended Citation

Munsey, Bernice Wilson (2000) "Johannes FREDRIKSSON / Johannes WIGELIUS / John WILSON: Fifty Years in America," *Swedish American Genealogist*. Vol. 20 : No. 4 , Article 5.

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# Johannes FREDRIKSSON / Johannes WIGELIUS / John WILSON: Fifty Years in America

Bernice Wilson Munsey\*

As indicated in earlier articles,<sup>1</sup> Johannes **Fredriksson**, my great-grandfather, was born 7 July 1827 in Fröderyd Parish, Jönköping *län*, Småland, Sweden.<sup>2</sup> Taught to read the Bible by his paternal grandmother, he had no other schooling.<sup>3</sup> His father abandoned the family, and Johannes was orphaned by the age of fourteen.<sup>4</sup> At the age of nineteen, in 1846, Johannes got a job walking cattle to Stockholm. He lived in Stockholm four years, during which time he apprenticed to a piano-maker and slept on the floor beside the pianos. Later, he earned money to buy passage to New York.

In Stockholm, Johannes Fredriksson added the surname **Wigelius**,<sup>5</sup> which had been used by his paternal ancestors who were ministers. Johannes Wigelius left Stockholm in August 1850<sup>6</sup> and arrived in New York City on the *Zebra* 19 November 1850.<sup>7</sup>

Johannes Wigelius arrived with one dollar. He worked briefly in a piano factory in New York, but he wanted to get to the gold in California. He became a sailor on an American sailing ship, which sailed around Cape Horn to San Francisco. He told his children that the captain said he couldn't pronounce his name and would call him **John Wilson**. After three years in California, John

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<sup>1</sup> See Bernice Wilson Munsey, "One Swede in the Rush to California's Gold," *Swedish American Genealogist* XIX (December 1999): 265-271 and Bernice Wilson Munsey, "Wigelius: Where did John Wilson Get That Name?" *Swedish American Genealogist* XX (June 2000): 82-88.

<sup>2</sup> Birth and Christening Record (*Födelse- och Doplängd*), Fröderyd Parish (Små.), C:3-5, 7 July 1827.

<sup>3</sup> John Wilson, "Memmere of Past Lif," MS, n.d., Copied from his original notes by youngest child, Amanda Wilson Ecton, in 1961. Copy in Bernice Wilson Munsey's possession.

<sup>4</sup> Household Examination Roll (*Husförhörlängd*), Fröderyd Parish (Små.), AI:10-12, 79.

<sup>5</sup> Moving In Record (*Inflyttningslängd*), Jakob och Johannes Parish, Stockholm, BI:4-5, July 1846.

<sup>6</sup> Moving Out Record (*Utflyttningslängd*), Jakob och Johannes Parish, Stockholm, BII:6-8, 7 August 1850.

<sup>7</sup> Passenger Arrival Records, Port of New York, 19 November 1850. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Wilson returned to New York City via the Isthmus of Panama. His son Joseph's notes indicate he worked in California until he had accumulated \$1,000.<sup>8</sup>

John Wilson settled in New Sweden, Jefferson County, Iowa, bought 40 acres of timberland and, on 15 November 1854, married Inga Greta (Winnie) Samuelson. The first Lutheran minister in New Sweden, the former shoemaker from Stockholm, Magnus Fredrik Hokanson, performed the marriage.<sup>9</sup> There is no record or story of how he learned about New Sweden or how he traveled there. They cleared the wild timber along Brush Creek and farmed the land. The 1856 Iowa State Census for Lockridge Township records John Wilson (age 28, cabinetmaker, born in Sweden, two years in Iowa, alien, subject to the militia), Ingratia [*sic*], age 21; infant Frank, age 0; and Inga's sister, Caroline Samuelson, age 8.<sup>10</sup> Their first child, Frank Alfred, was apparently handicapped, for son Joseph wrote there was barely enough money to pay the doctor when they lived in Iowa,<sup>11</sup> and Alfred was referred to in John Wilson's will as already having been provided for in an asylum in Hastings and as one "who is now and always will be in delicate health."<sup>12</sup>

In his memoirs, John Wilson remembered the end of February 1856 when he heard "a dear brother...preach the true Bible doctrine." This "brother" was Jonas Hedstrom, a blacksmith and Swedish Methodist preacher from Victoria, Knox County, Illinois. Hedstrom was instrumental in John Wilson's conversion, as well as many others in New Sweden, on 2 March 1856.<sup>13</sup>

Church records indicate John Wilson joined the Swedish Methodist Episcopal Church, Salina, Iowa, on 16 March 1856. Church records and his memoirs record that he was given an exhortation as a right to work in the church. "For the first time two weeks after my conversion the Lord put his word in my mouth to blow the trumpet of his grace to a lost world." His first camp meeting, in Andover, Illinois, was in August 1857.<sup>14</sup> "His [Jonas Hedstrom's] last public appearance was at a Swedish district camp meeting held at Andover in the summer of 1857. Surrounded by ten pastors on the platform and a large representative congregation from practically all the churches of the district, from Chicago to Iowa, Jonas Hedstrom gave an unforgettable farewell address to an emotionally charged audience. He lingered for almost two years, during which the pastor of the Victoria church, Victor Witting, was a constant friend and companion."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Wilson, "Biography of John Wilson," MS, n.d. Copy in Bernice Wilson Munsey's possession.

<sup>9</sup> Register of Marriages, 1854, Jefferson County, Iowa.

<sup>10</sup> 1856 Iowa State Census, Jefferson County, Lockridge Township, July 1856.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, "Biography of John Wilson," n.p.

<sup>12</sup> Last Will and Testament of John Wilson, Polk County, Nebraska, 20 November 1899.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson, "Memmore of Past Lif," n.p.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Henry C. Whyman, *The Hedstroms and the Bethel Ship Saga: Methodist Influences on Swedish Religious Life*. Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1992, 124.

In 1858 John Wilson sold his farm in New Sweden, Iowa, for cash. While attending a camp meeting in Victoria, Knox County, Illinois, he bought a house and farm.<sup>16</sup> In October 1858 he, his wife and two children (Joseph was born in 1857), moved to Swede Prairie near Victoria. The Lincoln-Douglas debate took place at Knox College, in nearby Galesburg, that same month, with thousands of people present. John Wilson was not yet a citizen, and it is not known if he heard the debate. Church records state that on 10 September 1858 John Wilson (exhorter) and his wife, Ingar [*sic*], were members who came from Fairfield Circuit, Iowa, with two children; and, that in 1859, John Wilson was a "class leader in the church."<sup>17</sup>

John Wilson wrote, "Victoria was the birthplace of the Swedish Methodist Church the Lord converted a blacksmith Brother Hedstrom with just two hammers one to support the natural body and good work to the needy and the other to break the stone heart. God blessed his work wonderfully and many dear souls were saved in the first church. The Lord blessed us wonderfully both spiritually and financially."<sup>18</sup> Jonas Hedstrom died on 11 May 1859, age 46.

According to church records, Victor Witting baptized Johanna Matilda Wilson in 1860 at the Swedish Methodist Episcopal Church in Victoria. Witting was famous in his lifetime as a Swedish Methodist leader in the U.S. and Sweden and would write the definitive history of Swedish Methodism—*Minnen Från Mitt Liv*.

The 1860 U.S. Census lists John Wilson, Winny [*sic*] and three children (Alfred and Joseph born in Iowa; infant Hannah born in Illinois). Their real estate value was \$1,000; personal property, \$300.<sup>19</sup> John Wilson legally changed his name and became an American citizen on 2 June 1863 in Knox County, Illinois. Gustaf Bratt and C. J. Anderson, citizens, testified for him.<sup>20</sup> Joseph Wilson wrote, "He always had a conviction that he could not shoot a gun in the army if he was enlisted to join the Civil War. But providence ruled in his favor so he could hire a substitute twice." Joseph also wrote, "During the time he was associated with the Swedish M. E. Society in Victoria Ill. he would drive 7 miles on the Sabbath morning in a lumber wagon and he would hold prayer meetings in the neighborhood where he lived. The writer's mother was a sweet singer and was a great help on these occasions."<sup>21</sup>

Four children then appear in the church records—Henry was born in 1862. John Wilson left the Swedish Methodist Episcopal Church and in 1868 became a Free Methodist. He wrote, "The persecution began from a preacher in the M. E. church from every direction in order to have me declare the full salvation from all sin and drop me out from the church, which I willingly obeyed...Soon in

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<sup>16</sup> Sec. 33, T. 12N, R. 3E of fourth principal meridian, Deeds, Knox County, Illinois, 1858.

<sup>17</sup> Records, Swedish Methodist Episcopal Church, Victoria, Illinois.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, "Memmore of Past Lif," n.p.

<sup>19</sup> 1860 U.S. Census, Illinois, Knox County, Copley Township, Oneida Post Office, 21 June 1860.

<sup>20</sup> Naturalization Records, Knox County Court House, Illinois, 2 June 1863.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, "Biography of John Wilson," n.p.

February 1868 I withdrew from the M. E. church and in August joined the Swedish Free Methodist church. Then in October I joined the Annual Conference in Whitewater, Wisconsin, in 1868."<sup>22</sup> Church records indicate that he was admitted on trial at Whitewater, Wisconsin, Illinois Conference and appointed to Center Prairie.<sup>23</sup>

The memoirs end here—either intentionally or because of missing pages in his now-lost notebook. His son Joseph wrote, "They fought him to the very end for he was the fire brand in the old mother church. He was loath to part from the M. E. church but finally he left the M. E. church and joined the Free Methodist Conference at Whitewater Wis. and labored among the Swedish people of Swede Prairie Knox County Ill. He would ride horseback 10 miles on Sunday morning and preach and work during weekdays."<sup>24</sup>

The 1870 U.S. Census, Illinois, Knox County, Copley Township, Victoria Post Office, lists John Wilson (citizen, eligible to vote), Winnie and six children (Alfred, Joseph, Matilda "Hannah," Mary, Wesley, and Emma). Their real estate value was \$8000; personal estate, \$2000.<sup>25</sup> Joseph wrote that his father cleared and farmed about 100 acres in Illinois.<sup>26</sup> Free Methodist Church records summarize John Wilson's activity in the 1870s as follows: 1) 1871, appointed to W. Victoria; remained on trial through 1875; 2) 1876, ordained deacon; appointed to Swede Mission; 3) 1878, ordained elder; at own request and at own expense, appointed missionary to Sweden; and 4) 1879, Swede Mission, Galva District.<sup>27</sup>

The 1880 U.S. Census records the family in two states. In the Illinois, Knox County census, are recorded Joseph Wilson, 22; Johanna M., 20; Mary Josephine, 16; Emma, 11; Frank, 9; and Victor Emanuel, 7.<sup>28</sup> In the Nebraska, Polk County, Pleasant Home census are recorded John Wilson, 52; Winnie, 45; Alfred [*sic*], 24; John W., 14; and Nathaniel, 4.<sup>29</sup> Joseph Wilson wrote about his father, "In the year 1880 he moved to Polk Co Nebr. where he improved 900 acres of prairie land.. I also recall an instance in 1880 in the winter—myself and two brothers and three sisters were farming the old Homestead in Illinois and Father and Mother came back to stay with us over winter."

Joseph remembered a neighbor's house burning: "Father went to Mr. Bratt and offered him to move into his second story but that seemed to be too hard for him to decide as he had always been an enemy of my father—but finally he decided to move in. But he wanted to know how much the charge would be.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, "Memmore of Past Lif," n.p.

<sup>23</sup> Free Methodist Church Records, Illinois Conference, 1870. - Free Methodist Historical Center, Winona Lake, Indiana.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, "Biography of John Wilson," n.p.

<sup>25</sup> 1870 U.S. Census, Illinois, Knox County, Copley Township, Victoria Post Office.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson, "Biography of John Wilson," n.p.

<sup>27</sup> Free Methodist Church Records, Illinois Conference, 1878, 93.

<sup>28</sup> 1880 U.S. Census, Illinois, Knox County.

<sup>29</sup> 1880 U.S. Census, Nebraska, Polk County.

Father answered not one cent but if any one would get in the same condition that he would render the same assistance also. . . In the spring of 1881 when father left for Nebr., this neighbor met him on the road with tears in his eyes, bid father goodbye realizing he had stood the hardship in building up the community."<sup>30</sup> The 1880 U.S. Census lists Augustus [*sic*] Bratt on a farm next door.<sup>31</sup> John Wilson did not appear on Free Methodist Church records from 1880 to 1882 and was withdrawn from the conference.

The 1885 Nebraska State Census, Polk County, Pleasant Home Township, shows the family reunited: John Wilson, 57; Inga, 50; Alfred, 29; Joseph, 27; Johanna M., 25; Mary J., 21; Wesley J., 19; Emma, 16; Frank, 15; Victor E., 12; Nathaniel, 9; and two "servants"—S. Sunberg, 18, and Victor Anderson, 20 (Emma Wilson would marry the servant Victor Anderson). It also summarizes the following details regarding their farm: 1) land: tilled, 500 acres; permanent meadows, permanent pastures, orchards, and vineyards, 200 acres; woodland and forest, 0 acres; other unimproved, including old fields not growing wood, 500 acres; 2) farm values: of farm, including land, fences and buildings, \$25,000; of farming implements and machinery, \$1000; of live stock, \$2500; 3) fences: cost of building and repairing in 1884, \$50; 4) labor: amount paid for wages for farm labor during 1884, including value of board, \$600; weeks hired labor in 1884 upon farm and airy, excluding house, \$200; 5) estimated value of all farm productions sold, consumed, or on hand, \$3000; 6) grass lands: mown, 50 acres; not mown, 0 acres; 7) products harvested in 1884: hay, 50 tons; clover, 0; grass seed, 0; 8) horses of all ages on hand June 1, 1885, 14; mules and asses all ages on hand June 1 1885, 1; 9) cereals: Indian corn, 120 acres, crop 4800 bushels; oats, 50 acres, crop 1800 bushels; wheat, 50 acres, 900 bushels; broom corn, 40 acres, 30,000 bushels; and 10) apples, 22 acres.<sup>32</sup>

In 1890, John Wilson retired from farming in Polk County and moved into Stromsburg in the same county. He bought part and later full interest in the Farmers and Merchants Bank with a capital investment of \$25,000.<sup>33</sup> It would be a family business, with John and three sons—John Wesley, Victor Emanuel, and Nate—involved in the bank. John and Winnie apparently returned to Sweden on a missionary visit in 1894, for he wrote of it in Winnie's obituary following her death on 13 December 1894. It is not yet known how many trips they made back to Sweden.

John Wilson married a Swede named Anna Backstrom on 5 December 1895. A premarital contract was drawn up two days before the wedding.<sup>34</sup> Free Methodist Church records summarize John Wilson's activity at this time as follows: 1895, Nebraska Conference, appointed to Stromsburg; and 1896, traveling elder.

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<sup>30</sup> Wilson, "Biography of John Wilson," n.p.

<sup>31</sup> 1880 U.S. Census, Illinois, Knox County.

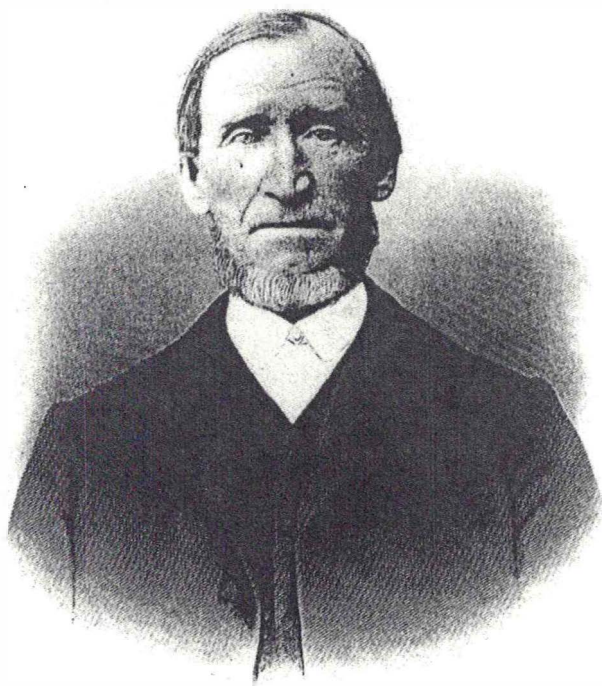
<sup>32</sup> 1885 Nebraska State Census, Polk County, Pleasant Home Township.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson, "Biography of John Wilson," n.p.

<sup>34</sup> Indenture and Marriage Settlement, Polk County, Nebraska, 3 December 1895.



The 1900 U.S. Census shows John and Anna on 9th Street in Stromsburg with two children: Anton (Wigelius), born 1897, and Elizabeth (Amanda) born 1899.<sup>35</sup> The age span between John Wilson's twelve children was forty-three years. In 1901, John Wilson began building the Wilson Block for his bank. On 28 October 1901, after an illness of some months, John Wilson died at age 74. The newspaper noted that all businesses in town were closed, printed several notices and advertisements about his passing, and reported that Victor and Helen Wilson and their two-year-old son, Allan (my father), returned from California for the funeral. John Wilson's family tombstone in the Stromsburg Cemetery includes the following names: Rev. John Wilson, Winnie, Henry (d. 1863), Frank (d. 1890, Emma (d. 1903) and Alfred (d. 1910).



**Fig. 1.** Johannes Fredriksson / Johannes Wigelius / John Wilson (1827-1901). Photograph courtesy of the author.

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<sup>35</sup> 1900 U.S. Census, Nebraska, Polk County, Stromsburg.

Although John Wilson perpetuated his family name—Wigelius—in the middle name of his youngest son, he never used the name in America and did not mention it in his listing in a Nebraska history book<sup>36</sup> or in a book about “most noted persons” bearing the name Wilson.<sup>37</sup> In both of these books, he referred to himself as a philanthropist.

There are stories of John Wilson’s frequent religious orations, his harshness as a father, his fairness and superb judgment of character as a banker, even his proposing marriage to one of the women while they were preparing his first wife for burial. But, there were other memories as well. Anton Wigelius Wilson, who was four years old when his father died, remembered, “It was Sunday and I was pounding nails in the ground (for entertainment) and my father found me and sternly stopped it, for wasn’t this Sunday.” Anton remembered also, “He said to our mother to give the children a warm glass of milk before we went to bed for it was a long night for children.”<sup>38</sup> His father had not forgotten his own childhood in Sweden.

John Wilson left an estate, valued at \$96,000 in 1901, which was divided in equal shares among all his living children, except Alfred, for whom provision had already been made.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Albert Watkins. *History of Nebraska*, Volume III. First Edition. Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Company, 1913.

<sup>37</sup> -----, *Origin and History of the Name Wilson, with Biographies of All the Most Noted Persons of that Name*. Chicago: American Publishing Association, 1902, 43

<sup>38</sup> Amanda Wilson Ecton, Notes on her transcription of John Wilson’s “Memmore of Past Lif,” n.p.

<sup>39</sup> Probate Records, Polk County, Nebraska, 1901-02.