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News from the Swenson Center

Käbblät (*the disputes*) in Sugar Grove: the search for answers about a community's history through the difficulties of its ministers

BY JOHN EVERETT JONES
2017 OLSSON SCHOLAR

Very little is known about the first decade of the Swedish immigrant experience in Warren Co., PA, and Chautauqua Co., NY, and, despite a centennial celebration in 1946, our local histories provide few details. Ours was one of the first Swedish settlements¹ in America and by 1860 there were nearly a thousand Swedes in the area around Jamestown, NY. They established the foundation for a community that would support the flood of Swedish immigrants who began to arrive in 1866 after the close of the American Civil War. Uncovering the stories of these early Swedes is the aim of my research.²

Early histories focused on the important figures who played a role in establishing the Methodist and then the Lutheran congregations in our area: Olof G. Hedstrom, Tuve N. Hasselquist, and Jonas Swensson. However, their collective biographies shed little light on our early settlers and reference (without elaboration) discord within the community. Lutheran church histories have indicted B.G.P. Bergenlund³ as the culprit for problems within the Lutheran congregations. Eric Norelius, in his history of the pioneer Swedish settlements,⁴ blamed Bergenlund for the difficulties that Jonas Swensson encountered when he arrived in 1856 to serve his first American congregations in Sugar Grove, Wrightsville, and Jamestown.

Norelius also blamed Bergenlund for the difficulties that Lars P. Esbjörn experienced in his last years at Andover. Aside from the complaint made by Norelius that Bergenlund wore long gloves during one of his sermons and that he had experimented with shortening his surname to *Berglund*, I am still trying to determine the issues behind the dissension and the

extent of the divisions among the Swedish pioneers. To gain a further understanding of these difficulties, I was able to go through the correspondence of Norelius at the Swenson Center as well as the correspondence of Hasselquist in the Special Collections of Thomas Tredway Library on the same campus at Augustana College.

Many questions arise from this one-sided history. Was Bergenlund a scapegoat for a congregation that was marked by intractable factions? Was Norelius blaming Bergenlund for a situation that rattled Swensson and nearly made Swensson return to Sweden? Were the Swedish settlements in our area divided by religion or class identity or regionalism? Did these problems arise because some of the original settlers were *läsare*? Was the situation of the Jamestown community similar to the division found in nearby Sugar Grove?

I am looking for clues about this turbulence within the letters that I found in the Swenson Center archives and in the Evangelical Lutheran Church Archives in Elk Grove, IL, that were written by Swedes from our area to these ministers. My hope is that once I complete transcribing and translating these letters I'll be able to account for the forces at work that affected the Swedish community in Sugar Grove in the 1850s. By the end of that decade, almost half of the original Swedes (including Germund and Catherine Johnson who were the first family to settle in Warren County) had moved West, primarily to Goodhue and Carver counties in Minnesota. Coincidentally, the Johnsons were neighbors for decades of Eric and Inga Norelius in Vasa.

My most significant finds at the Swenson Center turned out to be in the personal files of Evald B. Lawson (1904-1965) a

president of Upsala College in New Jersey. When that college closed in 1995, its theological collection was transferred to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, but the remainder became part of the archives at the Swenson Center. Lawson had been involved with plans for the 1946 centennial celebration in Chandlers Valley and published biographical material about Jonas Swensson. His files contain extensive notes about sources of information about Rev. Swensson's work in Sugar Grove and Jamestown as well as his later career. The original membership list made by Jonas Swensson in 1856-1858 for the congregations in Sugar Grove, Wrightsville, and Jamestown was found in the Evald B. Lawson files.

Advancements in the study of immigrant communities are made through genealogies and, vice versa, discoveries in family history through community studies.

This retelling of the stories of the first settlers in the Jamestown area is being accomplished through a reconstruction of the Swedish community. I have been parsing census and other references with family genealogies to build a database of these early Swedes. This effort has identified Swedes who were in our area during this time period (1844-1865), their arrival in the United States (the name of the vessel) and their emigration from Sweden (the parish of origin). These data are usually extended to identify their birthplace and date, their parents and siblings, and their death place and date (usually in the U.S.).

My research has identified two regions of origin for most of the Swedes in our area before the Civil War: 1) the border parishes in southern Östergötland, northwestern Kalmar, and eastern Jönköpings *län*; and

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2) parishes in northwestern Älvsborgs län. This research has also identified the Jamestown area as a significant waystation for Swedes who later moved West.

While individual genealogies have provided important information about the Swedish community in our area, in return, this regional study have been providing clues about individuals whose origins were not established in previous research by their descendants. Common families, common origin parishes, and common emigration has enabled identification of a substantial percentage of the Swedish immigrants in our area. The staff at the Swenson Center and their resources made it possible to identify a few more of the remaining “stone walls.” And that seems to be a specialty of the staff - assisting researchers who already have extensive knowledge push through to new insights and discoveries.

* * *

Last year I found two articles in *Hemlandet* thanks to the search feature of the Swedish-American Newspaper collection a joint project of the Minnesota Historical Society, *Kungliga biblioteket* (National Library of Sweden), the American Swedish Institute, and the Swenson Center. The *Hemlandet* articles were written in 1877 and contained source material from Frederick J. Johnson, one of the original settlers in Chandlers Valley, and provide details about their settlement that had not been included in later histories nor referenced

in other works. Research at the Swenson Center also provided me with a translation of these articles – the translator was not identified. This translation was of an article written by Rev. H.O. Lindblad that was among his papers. Rev. Lindblad had worked in the Hessel Valley congregation and his article had been a slightly edited reprint of the two earlier articles printed in *Hemlandet*.

Endnotes:

- 1) The first settlers in our area were from the same area as Peter Cassel and left a year later (1846) aboard the *Virginia* to join Cassel in Iowa. Three out of four onboard lacked the funds to complete this journey west and ended up in Buffalo, working as farm laborers. This group that was left behind never made it to New Sweden, Iowa, and after a year or two working near Buffalo, settled instead in Andover, IL, or in Sugar Grove, PA.
- 2) My ongoing research, see link on p.26.
- 3) Bengt Gustav Pehrsson Bergenlund (b.19 Feb 1821 Norra Åkarp, Kristianstads län, d. 25 Dec 1889 Solberga, Göteborgs och Bohus län). Bergenlund returned to Sweden in 1861 and wrote about his experiences and disappointments in his autobiography *Den faderlöse främlingen* published in Göteborg in 1871.
- 4) Eric Norelius’s discussion of B.G.P. Bergenlund begins with his history of the congregation in Andover, Illinois (pages 164-171), and then is extended in his his-

tory of the congregations in Jamestown and Sugar Grove (p. 520-522). In Bergendoff’s translation, see pages 106-114 (Andover) and 236-240 (Sugar Grove and Jamestown). Eric Norelius, *De svenska luterska församlingarnas och Svenskarnas historia i Amerika*. Rock Island, IL, Lutheran Augustana Book Concern, 1890. Digital edition: see link on p. 26. Translated and edited by Conrad Bergendoff: *The Pioneer Swedish Settlements and Swedish Lutheran Churches in America, 1845-1860*. Augustana Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Historical Society, 1984.

The author:

John Everett Jones is an architect living in Collegeville, PA, and a native of Chautauqua Co., NY (Jonsson > Jones). He has cowritten an article with Donald Sandy and Jennifer Liber Raines about their discovery of documentation of the orphans of the passengers of the *Virginia* in 1846; see “The Buffalo Orphan Asylum and the Settlement of Swedes in Northwestern Pennsylvania and Western New York” *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (October 2016), p 216-240.

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