

# Ninety Years of Growth and Challenge

## The Swedish Colonial Society, 1919-2009

In 1936 an anonymous writer to the Swedish newspaper, *Nordstjernan* asked in a lengthy letter who these people in the Swedish Colonial Society were. They don't have Swedish surnames, and they all seem to be from the East. The following issue included an extensive answer as to what the Society had been up to and what it had accomplished. Although for many of them, the immigration was more than 200 years ago, they had actually managed to accomplish quite a lot..

In the 1930's, just before the Tercentenary celebrations, the Society had only 193 members. Meetings were still held in the Librarian's Office of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, with an average attendance of seven. The meetings, lasting just over an hour, consisted mainly of receiving new members and accepting resignations from the roll. At that time if someone moved to Florida they just resigned. The gentleman's academic club had already broken down in the summer of 1909 when the first woman Associate Member was received. Yet the number of Associate Members was limited to 50 at first lest they take control. By 1929 however, women were accorded regular membership. The Society had published a book by its Secretary, Gregory Keen, a revised edition of the *The Descendants of Jöran Kyn of New Sweden* and five books by Amandus Johnson: His massive two-volume *The Settlements of the Swedes on the Delaware*, (1911), a one-volume abridgement of the same work in 1915 and also in that year a biography of the last Governor of New Sweden, Johan Classon Rising. In 1925 Per Lindeström's *Geographica America* was ready and in 1930, *The Instructions for Johan Printz*.

But other things were also afoot. In 1923 they erected a monolith on the grounds of the Corinthian Yacht Club at Tinicum in honor of Johan Printz. In 1926 they cooperated with the Colonial Dames of America to build a replica Norse Grist Mill on Cobbs Creek at Baltimore Avenue in West Philadelphia in remembrance of the first manufacturing site in the Delaware Valley. Sadly two years later a hurricane swept it away but a Pennsylvania State historical marker preserves its memory.

In that same year, 1926, Amandus Johnson had gathered funds from across the country for a national museum dedicated to the achievements of Swedish immigrants. The Swedish Colonial Society found that such a project was beyond its scope but agreed with Amandus to concentrate on the time before 1800 and let the museum concentrate on the later immigration. The Museum was to be located on the grounds of the Sesquicentennial Exhibition in League Island Park in South Philadelphia. By June of 1926 the museum was ready for its cornerstone. Nearby the Swedish Colonial Society had erected a wooden replica of the Wicacå blockhouse that had housed Gloria Dei Church before 1700. Despite the drenching rains that made the Sesquicentennial an economic disaster, the block house attracted an average of 1,000 visitors a day for the six

months of the Exhibition. When Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf and the Crown Princess had seen Independence Hall and Gloria Dei Church, they dedicated the blockhouse, and presided at the Cornerstone ceremony. A Gala Luncheon for 400 guests was held by the Society at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. At the time the museum had not yet organized a local governance.

As the museum was under construction a new opportunity presented itself to the Society. Five acres of land on Tincicum island where Governor Printz had his residence, his fort and church was given to the Society by Commodore Charles Longstreth of Coronado, California. Mr. Longstreth had been a member of the Corinthian Yacht Club along with some of the Councillors and knew of the Society's interest and their monolith. The Society that had not wanted to have anything to do with real estate, and that later turned down an opportunity to use the Bellaire Mansion near the museum as a headquarters, now had property. The first thing to do was to get a charter and become incorporated which was done in the next year. The property was in poor shape with a tumble down Inn and plenty of weeds. It was soon graded and seeded and the Inn removed but funds did allow any further development for the next ten years.

The Society entered a new era when Colonel Frank Worthington Melvin, an accomplished lawyer, became Governor in 1936. He ramped up activities for the Tercentenary in his fortunate triple jobs of being Governor of the Society, first Chair of the Board of the American Swedish Historical Museum, and Chair of the of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission. He had already been active in the creation of the Brandywine Battlefield Park, the extension of Valley Forge and the re-creation of William Penn's home, Pennsbury. He wrote eight separate pieces of legislation for the state legislature concerning the 1938 Jubilee, including one in which the Governor of the Commonwealth, and a delegation from the Society went to Sweden. Six projects were accepted by the Federal government at Tincicum through the Works Progress Administration. A professional archeological investigation found the footprint of the Printzhof, Governor Printz's residence. New trees were planted and seawall built so that it was ready to be given to the State as part of the 1938 Tercentenary celebrations. Ironically enough the state deeded it back to Tincicum Township in an economy move in 2003 but the Society closely monitored the conditions of the transfer.

The Melvin Revolution had even more to do. With the cooperation of John Craig Roak, the rector of Gloria Dei, he managed to get the Federal government to declare the church a National Historical Monument in 1942, the first religious structure in the country to receive such protection. In 1958 the seven acres to the south of the church were added and it became a part of the Independence National Historical Park. Gloria Dei has been the legal address of the Society since 1994 and its Rector is always Ex-Officio chaplain of the Society. This was another change that came with the considerably altered By-Laws that Colonel Melvin promulgated. The President was now to be called a "Governor" and would usually serve for two years although the Colonel had served for ten. The term probably came from contemporary bar associations and proved acceptable, recalling the original colony, but his suggestion that the Governor be termed "Your Excellency" never really functioned.

Meetings began and ended with Christian prayer. A tradition of attending a service together each Spring at Gloria Dei Church was established in remembrance of the Forbearers. The Swedish Colonial Society is one of the few historical groups in this country that preserves this connection with a Church. The Council now had twenty-five members and the officers as we know them.. The Forefathers Banquet in April replaced the Annual meetings, beginning in 1938. Although the Insignia of the Society had been adopted in 1927, its use was now emphasized and the Governor's Star introduced.

Sometimes his enthusiasm got away from him as when he made a list of all the possible historical dates that could be commemorated in a year- eleven, mandated that the wine used for three skåls be port, or that all Society dinners should be called a "smörgåsbord" He established a Color Guard and wanted to make the Society into a patriotic organization, since during World War II, anyone who supported Swedish neutrality was suspect. Needless to say this patriotic emphasis was controversial.

The Genealogical activities of the Society dated from the beginning when Ormond Rambo, Jr. deposited lineage reports with the Society's Secretary, Amandus Johnson. In the early days members were defined s "Birthright"- those who trace their family to New Sweden settlers before the Revolution. "Pioneer"- more recent Swedish immigrants, and "Fellow"- everyone else. A distinguishing mark of the Society was that it was not limited to Swedes or Finns but that anyone with an interest in Colonial History and who was proposed by a Councillor could join. This was indeed fortunate since Colonel Melvin and some of the other Governors have had no Scandinavian roots. In 1938 the Society appointed Clarence Foster Hand as its Genealogist and after his death his wife served in the same position, yet by 1988, only sixty-seven current members could trace their lineage to New Sweden. The 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of New Sweden in that year gave new impetus to the program and soon after, the appointment of the meticulous Peter Stebbins Craig to the position revolutionized the program so that today more than 500 members have been designated as "Forefather Members." Dr. Craig's two books on the people of New Sweden are now the standard reference works for New Sweden studies: *The 1693 Census of the Swedes on the Delaware* (1993) and *The 1671 Census of the Delaware* (1999)

One of the ideas that never really developed was that the Society would have state chapters all over the country. The exception was in New Haven Connecticut where 29 members met regularly for a short time. Their legacy to the Society is in a small Endowment shared with the Apollo Singing Society from the sale of a home that had belonged to the Society (1978). The Society is basically dues-dependent for its activities.

In 1963 the 325<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of New Sweden was celebrated with Prince Bertil in attendance and delegations from Kalmar and Jönköping. A delegation from the Society repaid their visit with a trip to Sweden where a monument to Johan Printz was unveiled before 70,000 people in the Elmira Fair Grounds at Jönköping. Then another monument to Printz was dedicated near his grave at Bottnaryd Church in Småland by Amandus Johnson.

In 1967 the Society presented a Swedish red granite Cornerstone to St. James Church, Kingsessing, West Philadelphia, on the occasion of their 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary when it was discovered that the original cornerstone had been lost in a 19<sup>th</sup> century renovation. In 1969 the first Julmiddag was held. In 1972 a monumental seven foot statue of Johan Printz was erected at Tinicum, sculpted by member Carl Lindborg and unveiled by the King. Both the King and Queen came in 1988 for a major celebration of the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary took place in both Wilmington and Philadelphia. In that same year an academic conference was held at the University of Delaware with 23 presentations that showed that New Sweden studies were alive and developing in exciting new directions. Some of these presentations were published seven years later with the title, *New Sweden in America* (1995).

One of the largest events ever sponsored by the Society commemorated the landing of Governor Printz in 1643 and the selection of Tinicum as the capital of the colony. It was at the same time the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of government in the present state of Pennsylvania. In June of 1993 some five hundred people gathered at Governor Printz Park for a day of festivities that highlighted the participation of children, especially those who had internet pen pals in Sweden in an elementary school program coordinated by Beth Linnerson-Daly.

The *Swedish Colonial News* began in 1990 as an eight page Newsletter and is now a twenty-page journal, serving the widely dispersed members in this country and in Sweden. In 1957 with the enthusiasm of Governor Samuel Booth Sturgis the membership had climbed to 529, with 9 in Sweden. Yet only 65 members lived outside of the Delaware Valley. It was possible in a time before television, and employment by both spouses, to gather 177 members and 56 guests for a Forefathers Banquet on a Monday night at the Union League. Today three-quarters of our 700+ members live outside of this local area and more than two dozen live in Sweden. We are no longer primarily a Philadelphia society.

The Society's highly successful website, *ColonialSwedes.org* began under the expert leadership of Ronald Hendrickson in 1999 and now has about 15,000 users each month. Leif Lundquist in Sweden maintains our sister site, *ColonialSwedes.se*, for our Scandinavian members in *Svenska Colonial Sällskapet*. It came on-line just last year.

The New Sweden History Conference began in 2001 as a joint project between the American Swedish Historical Museum and the Society, bringing together the latest research about New Sweden, in co-operation with the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. The Delaware Swedish Colonial Society, the New Sweden Centre and Trinity Church, Swedesboro are now co-sponsors for this annual event in the autumn. In the same year an appearance by Chief Justice William Rehnquist at the annual Forefathers Luncheon marked a return to the Union League and new surge of enthusiasm for the organization that was connected with the election Governor Herbert Rambo, an expert publicist.

The Archives program hosted at the Lutheran Archives Center in Philadelphia had begun in 2000 with the work of Kim-Eric Williams and now amounts to more than 42 linear feet of materials, a map collection and framed paintings, including a fabulous large copy of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Bottnaryd Church portrait of Governor Printz, given to the Society by King Gustaf V in 1910. This painting, done in the last years of his life and attributed to Daniel von Rohlen (1660) is especially important since before it arrived, no one in America had any idea of how Johan Printz looked.

As early as 1946 women began to be more active with the first two women elected to the Council, Sarah Logan Wister Starr and A. Florence Appleberg Ingle. In the same year the first woman officer, Miss Gladys Peterson became the Recording Secretary. She served for forty years. We have revised the By-laws in the past two years to eliminate all sexist references and today we have Sally Bridwell as Senior Deputy Governor, Before her the highest rank that any woman had attained was also Senior Deputy Governor when Countess Waterman-Gherilli was elected to the same office in 1982, but never became Governor. It may have been because her only publication was a children's book, "The Travels of Bette-Lu "retelling the antics of her American cat on the French Rvereia.. The position of Junior Deputy Governor was ably filled by Esther Ann MacFarland, beginning in 1993.

Of course in ninety years there were some missteps. A major one occurred in 1967 when the Society sponsored the erection of a monolith to Johan Hanson in the churchyard of Gloria Dei Church. It sounded so good- the first president of the country was not George Washington but John Hanson, a Swede. The trouble is that John Hanson was a fine patriot but not Swedish; his ancestors came from England by way of Barbados. The beautiful bust of Hanson, sculpted by Carl Lindborg, and its monolith have now been moved to his birthplace, Port Tobacco, Maryland where he can still be seen but with no Swedish attribution. Governor Erik Tornqvist had to take a strong stand in 1988 when the original planning committee for the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of New Sweden included no representatives from this original area. A more recent member was sure that President George W. Bush was descended from Swedes but could not finally prove the point with the complexity of similar names in colonial Maryland. Still another Councillor took charge of Amandus Johnson's papers at his death and tried to make a personal profit from them, although they did get professional cataloging at the Balch Institute and are now at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. At times there was competition rather than cooperation between the local Swedish groups and once in a while a touch of Nordic superiority.

The Society's members supported the formation of the American Swedish Historical Museum, the Delaware Swedish Colonial Society, the Kalmar Nyckel Foundation, and the New Sweden Centre. The Society endowed an "Amandus Johnson Prize" at the University of Pennsylvania that is a travel grant to study in Sweden for a student who excels in language study. It has assisted with the New Jersey New Sweden Monument, and the creation of a National Park in the state of Delaware that will include the Rocks and Holy Trinity Church. During the Linnaean year (2003) it sponsored the Rambo Apple Project, designed to bring back this New Sweden Rambo apple to Sweden

where it had been extinct since 1710. It became a bi-national project with the Cooperation of the King's Fund and the hard work of Governor Herbert Rambo, Councillor James Seagers, and Swedish Councillor Hans Ling. Rambo apple trees were planted in a number of significant locations in Sweden and America.

More recently the Society published in 2004 *The Faces of New Sweden* by Hans Ling, a lawyer for the National Swedish Heritage Board and Councillor of the Society who discovered two Gustavus Hesselius paintings at the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm showing Pastor Erik Björk and his American wife Christina Stalcop. The Society restored these 1712 paintings, which are the oldest portraits in the Delaware Valley and arranged for them to be loaned to the Historical Society of Delaware in Wilmington. The Society participated in the Tercentenary of the Ordination of the first Lutheran pastor ordained in America at Gloria Dei Church in 1703 with an Anglican-Lutheran Eucharist at Philadelphia Cathedral in November 2003 and the Archivist wrote a biography entitled, *The Journey of Justus Falckner*.(2003).

At the inauguration of the new House of Sweden in Washington, DC, (2006) the Society provided for a re-created landing of the Swedes from the Kalmar Nyckel's ship's boat, *The Little Key* on the Potomac. The Swedes were met by a party of Lenape who performed a welcoming dance and smudging ceremony before the other events began. In 2009 the By-Laws were systematically revised, removing all sexist terms, and acknowledging new members by use of the website and allowing e-mail voting.

A "Fellow of the Swedish Colonial Society" award was established in 2000 and it has now been given to sixteen former or present Councillors who have made extraordinary contributions to the Society. Five of the present members of the twenty-five member Council have received the Order of the Polar Star from King Carl XVI Gustaf.

At the present time we are assisting with the World heritage UNESCO Linnaean site at Bartram's Gardens in Philadelphia, and the rescue of the deserted 1988 Swedish log farmstead in Bridgeton, New Jersey. Our long-term project to publish the Colonial Records of Gloria Dei Church that began in 1996 has issued five volumes from 1646 to 1759 and we are working on Volumes 6 and 7 at the present time. Published with the Parish under the name, *Colonial Records of Swedish Churches in Pennsylvania*, it will conclude when the records are primarily in English after the Revolutionary War. The Society continues to develop as a trans-Atlantic society but with a responsibility to the twenty-four local sites related to New Sweden.

Let me to leave you with a quote from long-time Recording secretary Gladys Peterson. She wrote this about the final Council meeting with Colonel Melvin at the Union League on May 3 1946.

*" a light collation, accompanied by an abundance of champagne was served. The old administration was skoaled. The new administration was skoaled. The ladies were skoaled and everyone departed happily from what is said To be the most unique Council meeting ever held in the Swedish Colonial Society."*

Kim-Eric Williams  
Honorary Governor, Archivist  
23 October 2009  
Centennial of the Swedish Colonial Society