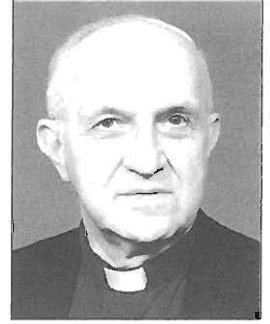


New England Finlandia and Its Finnish Enclave of Norwood, Massachusetts



William Wolkovich-Valkavicius

Finns in the United States and New England

"Finns settled in three major regions of the United States," asserts one researcher, naming "the Northeast, the upper Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest."¹ Another scholar was able to identify in the Northeast thirty-eight Finnish Churches, Mission Stations, as well as six Preaching Stations.² "Northeast" here means the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts.

An inspection of state house records in the three northern New England states provides a sampling of scattered Finnish settlements and the dates of their Incorporated religious societies. As example follows in Maine: The Finnish Congregational Church of Harrison, organized August 9, 1920; the Finnish Congregational Church of South Thomaston, December 24, 1921; and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, Suomi Synod, in Paris, April 25, 1924.

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State documents further show two burial organizations, both in Maine, i.e., Finnish Lutheran Cemetery Association, Harrison, October 14, 1913 and the Finnish Cemetery Association, West Paris, June 12, 1978. The only other groups that took pains to incorporate were: Finnish Progressive Society of Kingfield, Kingfield, Maine, April 6, 1929; Finnish Socialists, Milford, New Hampshire, September 29, 1913; a Finnish Society in Troy, New Hampshire, April 8, 1913; and Finnish Aid Society, Proctor, Vermont, October 14, 1912.³

In all, fourteen Maine towns housed chapters of the Finnish Workingmen's Association, usually of socialist bent. Twelve similar chapters arose in New Hampshire, nine in Connecticut, seven in Vermont, and three in Rhode Island. Massachusetts led with thirty-eight.⁴

In Massachusetts, Kivisto mentions Finnish colonies in Worcester, Fitchburg, Gardner, Maynard, Cape Ann, and Lanesville.⁵ Labor historians know about Worcester Finns because of a lively radical minority. Fitchburg was most likely the largest concentrated Finnish settlement in the East, if not in the entire

United States, known for its newspaper *Raivaaja*, begun as a socialist voice in 1905.⁶

The Norwood enclave

Overall, few researchers have paid much attention to Finns in Massachusetts, with hardly an awareness of their presence in Norwood. Not even the hired town historian for the Norwood centennial, makes any mention of Finns in his index.⁷

One cannot blame investigators, since Norwood Finns by and large kept to themselves, with a minimum of organized life. For instance, Finns formed at least twenty-two temperance societies in Massachusetts, though it is not clear if Norwood ever had one. Nor did they succeed in founding a church of their own. On a list of twelve Finnish bands in Massachusetts, the Norwood musical unit escaped notice in the New England history of these immigrants.⁸

When did Finns first come to Norwood and how many of them came? A Finnish source of 1926 gives us a clue.

Norwood, a factory city (actually a town to this day) in which live about half a thousand of our

people (Finns), the earliest from 1897: Isak Roswall from Eura; Oskar Harju from Kiukainen; Matti Hannula from Pyhtää; Karl Leino from Jokioinen; Adam Lehto from Hankoniemi; Nestor Ritvonen from Kiukainen; Oskar Back, and Hjalmar Lindberg.⁹

It is evident that the writer was relying on oral testimony for the date of 1897. In fact, one detects the start of a minor Finnish influx into this multiethnic town, somewhat earlier. On October 6, 1893, a Finnish immigrant and worker in the local tannery, Thomas E. Mattson, married Swedish-born Augusta Anderson, employed as a domestic. Around this same time, one of the earliest signs of religious ministrations directed to Finns relates to a certain Pastor Julin who made occasional visits, while the Lutheran congregation of nearby Quincy, Massachusetts, "aided the Finnish converts in Norwood."

Religious activity

"Between 1890 and 1908 missionary work was done in the area by various Congregational missionaries and pastors," according to Liisa A. Liedes. Beyond that time span, she records that Norwood Finns became the object of further "evangelistic work" carried on by "field workers" Wendla Pyyny, Katri Tikkala, and Esther Kokkinen.¹⁰ In 1916 the town directory¹¹ first reported a Sunday School functioning from 10 A.M. to noon at the Finn Hall. Emil Laakso was one of the teachers. Despite these endeavors, researcher Liisa Liedes unflatteringly records that "The evangelists and pastors working in Nor-

wood considered it a 'Sodom' as far as the Finns were concerned; they were not receptive to the Word of God."¹²

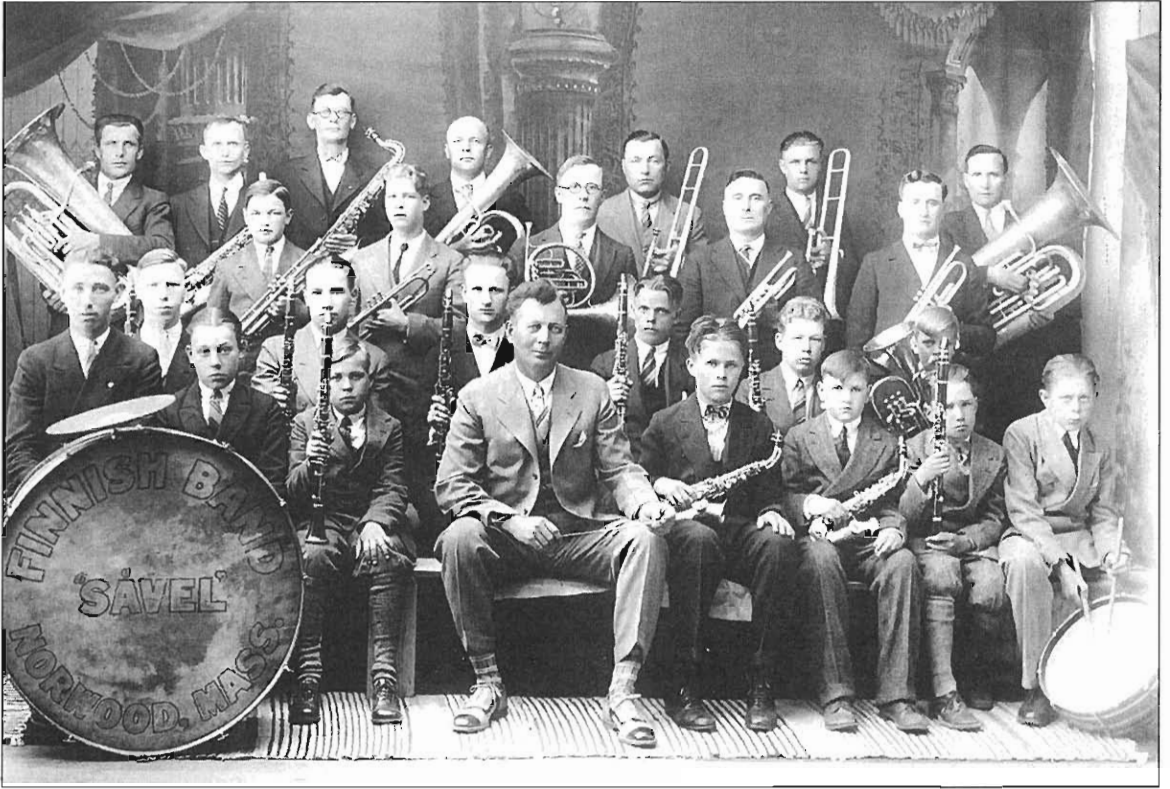
Finns who did adhere to their Christian faith joined the larger colony of Swedes in one of three Norwood parishes: Swedish Baptist Church, Swedish Congregational Church, but most of all in the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church that "offered its church for a minimum fee as a place for meetings and services." This last-named body later became the Emmanuel Lutheran Church. These congregations appeared in the early 1900s. Curiously, the news account of the last-named congregation observing its seventy-fifth anniversary, makes no mention of Finns among its early adherents, but only "emigrants from Sweden and the Åland Islands."¹³

Societies

Evidently the first and only major society was the Norwood Finnish American Labor Alliance. This association resulted from a talk given by a certain J. Laitinen, chairman of the *Imatra* Alliance. Thus, *Imatra* Lodge No. 29, began on March 20, 1904 with eighteen charter members out of some twenty-five Finns in town. The elected board consisted of: Chairman (President), Adam Lehto; Secretary, a certain Huntroos; and Treasurer, Oscar G. Bagge. As one might expect, the first sessions transpired in a rented hall of downtown Norwood that later housed the furniture store of William Aho. The *Taimi* Sewing Circle became a related auxiliary so-

ciety. In 1905 Adam Lehto represented Norwood at a delegates assembly in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, where local units banded together into a League of Massachusetts Finnish Workingmen's Chapters. These labor societies were predominantly socialist, a name inserted in the title of many of the local units.

That same year, local Finns began a collection of pledges to construct a hall on Chapel Court, spearheaded by socialists, planning for their "temple," and aiming to preserve ethnic identity and its customs. Soon Finnish social life centered around *Into* [fervor] Finn Hall, constructed in 1905 and taxed on an evaluated \$2,000, now backed as many as sixty members. Quickly, nevertheless, an ideological split occurred. When some opposition to these leftists surfaced, objectors defaulted on their pledges, delaying the completion of the gathering place. Likewise, a bank refused a loan as soon as it discovered what it perceived as a group of foreign radicals seeking to borrow. The majority had come from a rural background, while a minority brought an industrial experience to this country. Because of the strong Alliance labor-orientation, Norwood Finns in *Imatra* broke from the ranks of the Alliance in 1906, joining the Finnish Socialist Federation, then in formation. The new organization adopted the name Finnish Workingmen's Association, to which the *Imatra* property was transferred. Signatories on the new deed included: John Nykvist, Otto Kulman, Kalle Virtanen, August Lehtonen, Adam Lehto.¹⁴



Finnish band *Sävel*. Front row (l-r): Svante Heikkilä, Onni Murtomäki, Urho Wiik, Otto Waihela (director), Paul Waihela, Ahti Ylijoki, Oliver Sointu, Arvo Heino; second row: John Heino, Reino Kulmala, Paavo Koski, Veikko Laakso, Michael Kaski, John Louko; third row: Erik Lindfors, John Wiik, Toivo Korhonen, Karl Sointu, Karl Koski, fourth row: Werner Sointu, ? Heikkinen, Yrjö Rindell, Karl Kahila, ? Brander, ? Sointu.

Meanwhile, the meeting place became essential to immigrant life. When the spatial need of the original participants grew, they did manage to enlarge their quarters in 1912, though not without obstacles. A local bank refused a loan for the hall expansion when the identity of the workers' association as the borrower became known, perceived as a band of immigrant radicals. Worthy of note, unlike other Finnish enclaves that succeeded in establishing a church and a temperance association, the Norwood colony did neither, centering around the one So-

cialist lodge and its *Into* hall. Consequently, in its heyday the building accommodated daily and weekend activities as varied as: lectures, brass bands, drama groups, athletic teams, a sewing circle, religious instruction (in Finnish), and naturalization classes. At one time the hall housed a library of over a thousand titles. During World War Two, Norwood Red Cross headquarters were housed here. "Even today it [the hall] remains the center of the progressive working people," observed a sympathetic Finnish source in 1946.¹⁵

On the matter of temperance, one source remarked that the Norwood colony "may be the only Finntown which never had a Finnish temperance society."¹⁶ Another source contradicts this claim by commenting on "beautiful memories from the days when *Ihanneliitto* (temperance society) arranged gatherings."¹⁷ Perhaps the temperance group influenced the *Into* Board of Directors not to seek a liquor license. Thus, though, intoxicants were not served, to the surprise of no one, some hall patrons discreetly or otherwise brought their own supplies ac-



Calisthenic Team. First row (l-r): Aira Koski, Irene Palonen, Lily Karki, Dorothy Heikkila, Wellamo Harju, Salme Kuusela; second row: Anja Salmi, Anna Lindfors, Eleanora Kuusela, Irene Ikkela, Sally Maki, Kaisu Sointu, Sylvia Niemi, Esther Kaski; third row: Niilo Huuskonen (director), Lily Kivela, Grace Anderson, Maire Koivu, Elin Aarnio, Aili Salonen, Aino Heikkila, Aino Sulonen, Aili Kulmala.

ording to the BYOB (Bring your own bottle) custom. The hall association reached a high of over 300 members, many of whom could read and write. In fact, literacy was widespread to the extent that in 1922 there were only eighteen Finns who did not subscribe to the newspaper *Eteenpäin*.¹⁸

Leftists

Already in 1913 "divergent political opinions emerged." The majority backed the radical socialist trend during World War One, though supposedly "only a few

brawlers" continued supporting the radical labor movement known as the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). The post-bellum, infamous Palmer raids of the nation's Attorney General helped to frighten Finns into resigning their memberships. Originally and typical of many immigrant enclaves such as Poles and Lithuanians, more than a few Norwood Finns earnestly spoused radical leftist ideals. One finds an example of this leaning in the Finns' *Sävel* Band participation at the dedication of the leftists' Lithuanian Hall on Thanksgiving

Day in 1915. The musical unit formed in 1914, performed under the direction of Arthur Autio. Out of the nationwide fracture within the Socialist movement in 1919, such as occurred among various ethnic groups, most of the Norwood Finns "chose the left wing" – i.e., the communists. Meanwhile, the Finnish remnant, called Social Democrats, formed a new chapter of the Socialist Party, linking itself with other state chapters, "and remained there until 1936." In 1950 seven founding members still lived in the neighborhood, along with a member-

ship of some thirtyfive colleagues, "still spreading the ideas of the Social-Democratic movement in particular and democracy in general." Names associated with this movement included: Ocar G. Bagge, Treasurer, and Committee members William Aho, Ivar Maki, Alma Eklund, Aino E. Aho, Emil Salonen, and Carl Helsten.¹⁹

In the communist camp by 1920, the *Sävel* musicians performed again for the Lithuanians on May Day of that year at a celebration of the Lithuanian Bolsheviks of Norwood. To voice a protest that day against the tsar for the massacre in St. Petersburg, Russia, some Finns joined hands with Lithuanians, Russians, and Jews on Red Sunday, with speeches in the native languages of each ethnic group.²⁰

Gradually, townspeople became aware of the Finnish enclave, at least through the annual town directory. By 1914, the Finnish Workingmen's Association was meeting in the Finnish Hall on Chapel Court in the center of the Swedeville section of Norwood. By 1916, Finns had their own Finnish Gymnastic Club, Finnish Women's Club, and Finnish Sunday School.²¹

Influenza victims

Regardless of religious or political differences, the Finns sympathized with one another's plight when the frightful plague struck the United States and the world. In this country alone, an estimated half million victims perished. Nor did the influenza pandemic of late 1918 and early 1919 bypass the

Norwood Finns. Out of ninety-six local residents felled by the usually fatal disease, there were six natives of Finland and one American-born child. Victims' names and ages were: Fannie Elo, age 29; Emma Maki, age 42; Hilda Palo, age 29; Olga Söderström, age 30; Julia Makie, age 41; Albin Seastran, age 41; John C. Olsen, age 6. All were buried at the Highland Cemetery of the town. The case of Emma Maki was especially poignant. Earlier abandoned by her husband, she left seven children, ages five to the late teens. Fortunately, a compassionate friend, Lempi Tuomi, "devoted her time to care for the orphans, and, with her generous help, all survived this terrible period of their lives."²²

Marriage patterns

On a happier note, one can learn still more about Finns from an inspection of the town wedding records that clearly identify the Scandinavian and more specifically the Finnish presence in Norwood. Prior to 1893 there was a trickle of Swedes and Norwegians. In the earliest years, one notes a single mixed-ethnic marriage occurring as follows: Swede-American, 1881; Swede-Dane, 1891; Swede-Norwegian, 1892. The first Swedish couple married in 1888. The year 1893 more clearly marks the start of the Finnish enclave in Norwood when two immigrant Finns each married a Swede in 1893 and 1894. The latter year the first Finnish pair entered marriage. Affinity and compatibility, at least of a romantic nature, between Finns and

Swedes was quite evident in the ensuing decades as the Marriage Table indicates.²³

Cooperatives

Similar to other immigrant colonies, the Finns here too tried their hand at a cooperative. Such a society began in 1909 as a branch of the Quincy (city 25 km. from Norwood) *Turva* [security], organized five years earlier. A few years later, the Norwood venture joined the United Cooperative Society. The Finnish Norwood Cooperative Store (47 Savin Avenue) flourished for a time, grossing as much as \$200,000 in 1920. The enterprise provided meat, groceries, dry goods, shoes, and a restaurant. Furthermore, the coop maintained a milk bottling and distribution plant in nearby Walpole. The coop also furnished land for the Finnish Athletic Club. Eventually, the business declined as members moved away. The building was sold to a private party on December 30, 1953.

In addition to the cooperative undertaking, a handful of Finns operated pool rooms, variety stores, a barroom, two soft drink shops and a pair of bottling plants, a furniture store, and a shop selling upholstery, window shades, and awnings. The first public sauna originated in 1910, built by August Lehtonen, followed by two others. Nevertheless, the ravages of time took their inevitable toll.

The Finns who had held the reins of their *Into* hall and the cooperative store eventually sold their hall in June of 1959 to the American Legion, still present

owners. As to later political life, local Finns observed how the Finnish Federation abandoned the Socialist Party in 1937, changing in 1940 to the Finnish American League for Democracy at a convention held in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. The Norwood branch ceased on September 19, 1967. By the fall of 1971, there remained only some fifty "old-time" Finns in Norwood.²⁴

Despite the waning, identifiable Finnish enclave, on one occasion a quaint-sounding Us Girls ad hoc committee organized a reunion of over twenty Finnish Americans, former residents in Norwood, who came together at a private home in Plymouth, Massachusetts, for a day of nostalgia. Aira Koski Johnson showed some memorabilia collected for decades (eventually destined for the

Norwood Historical Society) for viewing by guests ranging in age from seventy-two to eight-seven. Much story-telling and amusing reminiscing characterized the conversations.²⁵

Homeland origins

Finally, it is most useful to indicate the homeland origin of these earliest Finns who arrived in Norwood and add some faces to this Finnish portrait. For this purpose, the Baptismal Register of the present Emmanuel Lutheran Church in this town provides precious and rare data. An inspection of Finns in the first twenty-five years of entries reveals places of and Hanna Konkordia, born February 18, 1895. The first spouses were: Erik August Mattsson from Finstrom, born October 11, 1866

and his wife Imanda Mathilda from Hammarland, born September 3, 1877. He arrived in the United States in 1893, whereas she came in 1896. The Eklunds – Johan August, born August 8, 1859, and his wife, Edla Wilhelmina, born June 15, 1860, from Jomala and Lappfjärd, respectively, brought their three children: Johan Alfons, born March 15, 1887; August Wilhelm Michael, born December 30, 1889; and Elsa Maria Wilhelmina, born June 20, 1892. Four more children were born here in Norwood.²⁶

These are some of the countless brave newcomers who journeyed to a faraway land to make a new home for themselves in the midst of millions of other immigrants from Europe and the Middle East. Let this study be a miniature memorial to the Norwood Finns.

Notes

1. Peter Kivisto, "Finns," in Francesco Cordasco, ed., *Dictionary of American Immigration History* (Metuchen, NJ & London, 1990), pp. 226–227.
2. Liisa A. Liedes, ed., *The Finnish Imprint: A New England Experience* (New England Finnish American Bicentennial Committee, Fitchburg, MA: 1982).
3. (non-profit) Corporations, Ch. 57, Secretary of State, Augusta, Maine, Vol. 1, p. 78, pp. 351–352; Vol. 3, p. 16, p. 532; Vol. 4, p. 271; File No. 78 ND
4. Liedes, p. 558.
5. E.g., see Frank Aaltonen, *Maynard Wavers: The Story of the United Cooperative of Maynard*. (Maynard, MA: 1941); H. C. Babson, *Finns in Lanesville, Massachusetts* (Los Angeles: 1919).
6. *Finska Amerikanaren for Swedish-speaking Finns began in nearby Worcester, Massachusetts*, in 1897, but later moved to Brooklyn, New York. In fact, Fitchburg State College houses a Finnish Room. Finns in the small mill town of Maynard became famous for their cooperative, mentioned in sociological literature.
7. Bryant Franklin Tolles, Jr., *The Centennial History of a Massachusetts Town* (Norwood, MA, 1973).
8. Liedes, p. 555–56, 560.
9. Salomon Ilmonen, *Amerikan Suomalaisen Historia III:*

- Yhdysvalloissa ja Canadassa olevat suomalaiset asutukset (Hancock, MI: 1926), p. 29–30.
10. Lieder, p. 342.
 11. Resident and Business Directory of Norwood and Walpole, Massachusetts, 1916.
 12. Lieder, p. 342.
 13. Norwood Messenger, May 2, 1973.
 14. Lieder, pp. 342, 482.
 15. Toim. Leo Mattson, Neljäkymmentä vuotta (New York: 1946), p. 172–174; Reino Nikolai Hannula, Finnish Halls (San Luis Obispo, CA), p. 81.
 16. Hannula, p. 81.
 17. Mattson, p. 173.
 17. *ibid.*
 18. Mattson, p. 173.
 19. *ibid.*; Elis Sulkanen, Amerikan Suomalaisen Työväenliikkeen Historia (Fitchburg, MA: 1951), p. 400.
 20. William Wolkovich-Valkavicius, Lithuanians of Norwood, Massachusetts: A Social Portrait in a Multiethnic Town (Norwood, MA, 1988), pp. 16, 53, 60; other fleeting references to Finns, p. 67, 77, 83, 85, 99.
 21. Resident and Business Directory of Norwood and Walpole, Massachusetts, 1913–14, p. 148; Directory, 1916, pp. 12–13.
 22. Patricia J. Fanning, "Disease and Politics of Community: Norwood and the Great Flu Epidemic of 1918," (Ph. D. dissertation, Boston College, 1995); Aira Johnson to Patti Fanning, June 6, 1993.
 23. Marriage table

In-marriages and out-marriages of Finnish immigrants in Norwood, Massachusetts		
Year	endo-gamous	exo-gamous
1893	1	1 Finn-Swede
1894	1	1 Finn-Swede
1895	1	0
1896	0	0
1897	0	1 Finn-Swede
1898	1	1 Finn-Swede
1899	3	1 Finn-Swede
1900	0	1 Finn-Swede
1901	1	3 Finn-Swede
1902	1	2 Finn-Swede
1903	3	1 Finn-Swede
1904	7	2 Finn-Swede
1905	8	3–2 Finn-Swede, 1 Finn-Norwegian
1906	8	1 Finn-Swede
1907	7	4 Finn-Swede
1908	8	3 Finn-Swede
1909	9	1 Finn-Swede
1910	9	3 Finn-Swede
1911	11	1 Finn-Swede
1912	15	2–1 Finn-Swede, 1 Finn-Canadian
1913	15	1 Finn-Swede
1914	21	1 Finn-Swede; 1 Finn-American
1915	22	2 Finn-Swede, 1 Finn-American, 1 Finn-Russian
1916	14	1 Finn-Norwegian
1917	25	2 Finn-American
1918	7	3–2 Finn-Swede, 1 Finn-Austrian
1919	5	6–1 Finn-Swede, 5 Finn-American
1920	6	2–1 Finn-Swede, 1 Finn-Austrian
1921	5	2 Finn-Swede
<i>Total</i>		<i>206 51</i>

N.B. 80 % of these marriages were endogamous, i.e. within the ethnic group; out of the 51 exogamous unions, in 40 instances a Finn married a Swede, 78% of the out marriages.

24. Willie Aho, "Norwood's Finnish Hall Once a Beehive of Activity", Norwood Messenger, Aug. 2, 1972.
25. Aino Williams, "'Us Girls' Organize a Norwood Reunion," Raivaaja (Finnish American Weekly, Fitchburg, MA) June 21, 1995.
26. Svensk Lutherska Emmanuel Församlingens, Norwood, Massachusetts, Kyrkobok.

In addition to the works cited in this article, other useful sources on Finns include:

- Reino Nikolai Hannula, Blueberry God: The Education of a Finnish-American (San Luis Obispo, CA: 1981).
- William A. Høglund, "Finns," in Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups (Cambridge, London: 1980).
- Eugene Van Cleef, "The Finns of Cape Cod (Massachusetts)," New England Quarterly.
- William Wolkovich-Valkavicius, "Immigrant Population Patterns of Finns, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians in the U.S. Federal Census of 1930," Lituanius, Spring, 1983 (originally a paper at the Eighth Baltic Conference, University of St. Paul, Minnesota, June 18, 1982).