

Karl-Gustav Olin



Delaware 350 – A Finnish View

Let us make the whole of America Christian – and Swedish.” The mind behind this magnificent vision was no less than Per Brahe, who about 350 years ago, in his capacity as Governor-General more or less saved Finland at the last minute.

Count Brahe was no doubt a great gain to Finland, but on the other side of the Atlantic his visions came to nothing. New Sweden, as our American 17th-century colony was called, turned out a major economic and to some extent political failure. During the 17 years when the Swedish flag fluttered over the small settlement in the Delaware region, 12 expeditions made their journey over the Atlantic. None of these were able even to cover their own costs, and it is no surprise that the investors and the rulers of Sweden-Finland started to tire of their project.

New Sweden was however far from being Sweden-Finland’s only attempt to establish itself as a colonial power. Finland itself could in some ways be considered as a colony, and on the south side of the Baltic Sweden-Finland had by means of war captured an important part of Europe. At the same time as New Sweden, we also had a colony in Africa,

Cabo Corso, in what today is Ghana. There were even plans to make the pirate islands of Madagascar and St. Marie a Swedish possession.

Nor did the dream of capturing a part of America die with the fall of New Sweden. There is evidence that there was a Swedish attempt to establish a colony on the island of Tobago in the West Indies; and apparently an expedition also tried to buy land from the Indians living on the Barima River in South America. These attempts have provoked speculations whether Sweden-Finland was planning to use Tobago as a bridgehead for much larger-scale establishments on the South American continent. Out of all this came nothing. The only colony Sweden-Finland obtained in the Americas was the tiny island of St. Barth, ceded by the French in 1784.

When St. Barth became a possession of Sweden-Finland, something strange happened in the Finnish part of the kingdom. Thousands of peasants left their homes and went down to the ports, hoping to obtain a passage by sea to the new colony the king had obtained. This, inevitably, led to a great many tragedies, as no attempt had been made to organize a mass emigration.

In order to trace the origins of this rumour about a paradise in the sun – or the St. Barth’s fever as the phenomenon was called – we have to go back to the times of New Sweden.

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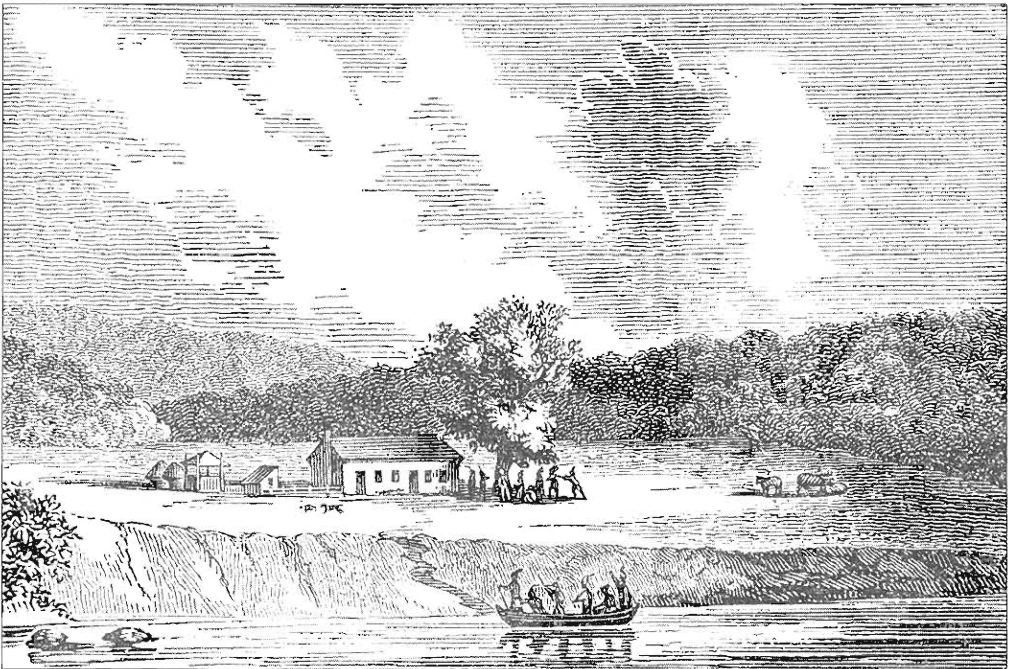
Traditionally it has been claimed that most of the Finlanders in New Sweden were burn-beaters, who had become an undesirable element in the forests of Sweden. It has also been clear, however, that many settlers came directly from Finland. Myself I have taken an interest in the people coming from the Swedish-speaking coastal area of Finland. In my book *Våra första amerikafarare* 40 names are listed which can be linked with both this area and New Sweden. The identification of half of these names can be considered positive, while the other half are less certain.

One of the most famous in this group is Lieutenant Sven Skute, who apparently came from the parish of Kronoby in northern Ostrobothnia. Skute was second-in-command during most of the period of the

colony. He was also sent back to make an oral report of the Queen and the Council of State, and played a key role when the colony fell into the hands of the Dutch in 1655.

Skute had served for many years on the battlefields in Europe under Major Johan Printz, and it is no surprise that Skute followed his master when Printz was appointed Governor of the colony. Printz had also tried to recruit emigrants from Ostrobothnia, as he lived on an estate in Korsholm near Wasa.

An other important person in the history of New Sweden who also recruited people in Finland was Admiral Claes Fleming. Fleming, who had been born near Turku, was the head of the New Sweden Company and a large personal shareholder.



An old drawing of the Delaware River Valley. Photo: Peura Museum, Rautalampi. (SIIVA 3014/USA)

It was Fleming who signed the instruction for the first Governor of the colony, Peter Holländer Ridder, who came from Ekenäs (Tammisaari) in southern Finland. Fleming also obviously recruited his nephew Christer Boije, from Pernå, for the dangerous journey over the Atlantic. One other emigrant who can be linked with Fleming is Matts Hansson of Borgå (Porvoo), who was deported for a minor crime. The persons listed above thus include a soldier, a Governor (even if he did not have that title), a noble, and a criminal, who all went to New Sweden.

There were also emigrants from Finland with other backgrounds, however: for example, sailors, craftsmen, officials, shipbuilders, captains etc. In fact it is noticeable that almost every grouping in society and every coastal region in Finland was represented in the colony.

We know that initially the authorities had great trouble in recruiting people to make the dangerous journey across the Atlantic. Special agents were appointed to recruit emigrants, but they were not very successful, and many emigrants were sent to New Sweden by force. The most striking case is that of the soldier who was sentenced to death, but who was given the opportunity to choose between that fate and being sent to New Sweden: not a difficult decision to make.

Little by little, knowledge about life in New Sweden spread, and when the two last expeditions were about to leave, there was not enough room for everyone on-board the ships.

After the Dutch took over the colony, the new masters quickly recognized the Finn's ability to survive in the wilderness. Some evidence also suggests that the Dutch even took active measures to entice Finns to come to America, and in this way at least one, perhaps even two or three groups of Finns came to join their fellow-

countrymen in the Delaware region. This was looked upon with great irritation by the Swedish authorities, and led them to forbid emigration from the kingdom.

There was also a stream of people going in the other direction, however, as many of the colonist, officials and soldiers returned to their old country. The people returning must have brought with them many stories about life in America. As we know from a later date, the stories as a rule were exaggerated; and as the common people of this time had no sources of written information, they could only trust the oral tradition, which must have been passed from generation to generation, on the basis of which they formed a picture of the good life in America – or the West Indies as the whole New World was called at time.

So, when towards the end of the 18th century it became known that the king had obtained a new colony in this wonderful part of the world, people naturally wanted to go there. This could perhaps be the explanation for the phenomenon called St. Barth's fever. This happened more than one century after the fall of New Sweden; and one more century onwards in time, we have the next epidemic of America-fever ravaging the country, especially Ostrobothnia.

Out of the more than 300 000 Finlanders who emigrated before World War I, more than half came from the province of Wasa, and most of these emigrants came from the countryside. Could it be that the many connections between New Sweden and Ostrobothnia were one of the causes for this extremely high number of emigrants from the western part of Finland?

Dr. Hulan has explored the influences Finland may have had on early American history. Working on my own book, to my surprise I also found some influences in

the other direction. For example the pietist pioneer Peter Schaefer spent a short time in the Delaware region before returning to Turku to take up his fight against the oppressive church of that time. In America Schaefer became a personal friend of the famous Quaker leader William Penn, and after Schaefer's return to Sweden–Finland the two of them corresponded in Latin.

Schaefer is today known as one of the founders of the pietistic movement that took root amongst the freedom-loving peasants of Ostrobothnia and later became one of the most important revivalist movements in the Finnish church. One other example was Anders Chydenius, the famous politician, writer, economist and priest from northern Ostrobothnia. Chydenius was clearly influenced in his work by liberal American ideals, implanted by his teacher Per Kalm. Kalm, who also came from Ostrobothnia, became famous all over the world for his travels in and description of North America in the 18th century.

In parenthesis, it could be mentioned that Anders Chydenius also tried to introduce the Indian canoe into Finland. Canoes made from birch bark could become an important mean of transportation in the land of the thousand lakes, suggested Chydenius and other enthusiasts. The innovation did not become popular amongst the country people, however, when Chydenius tried to introduce canoes in his own parish, he was laughed to scorn by the parishioners. He was even given the nickname *Näver–Ant*, i.e. *Birch–Ant*, a name that has survived to the present day; for instance when the mayor of my hometown, Mr. Nicke Andersson, started his former job as the head of the Chydenius

Institute in Karleby, he was asked by an elderly lady if he was going to organize *Näver–Ant's* paper.

It has been said of Anders Chydenius that if he had written his works in another language, it might have been he, and not Adam Smith, who would have received the credit for the foundation of modern political economy. It is indeed amazing that the new political and economic order which had been created in America, was set down in words not on that side of the Atlantic but in a small out-of-the-way vicarage in northern Ostrobothnia.

The reason for these references to Ostrobothnia is not, however, local patriotism, but that is that I would like to have a hypothesis tested. The hypothesis is that the emigrants returning from New Sweden planted an oral tradition in Finland about America or the West Indies. This tradition could later have been one of the causes for the St. Barth's fever, and also for the concentration of mass emigration in Ostrobothnia in the 19th century.

I would also like to suggest that New Sweden had an influence on the political and religious life of 18th-century Finland, especially through Anders Chydenius and Peter Schaefer. These two contacts I found after only a brief study of the subject; more extensive research would no doubt reveal other interesting aspects in this field.

Although Per Brahe's dream of an America entirely Christian and Swedish did not come true today we can at least say that we have a claim in the earliest American history, though this is perhaps of more importance to us than to the Americans.