

Michael Berry



## Delaware 350: Some Observations

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I would like to begin my comments by thanking the speakers for their interesting presentations. They have raised a number of important questions. My task, as I understand it, is to contribute to the discussion of the historical significance of events leading up to and evolving out of the settlement of New Sweden. I would like to focus on three aspects of this development as they relate to the topics in the papers and to the larger issue of different ways to approach the study of New Sweden.

First of all, I hope that we will have time to discuss the assumptions underlying the research done by the speakers and the sources that they have used. Secondly, I would like to emphasize the necessity of placing research on the New Sweden settlement in an overall interpretive framework – not because I believe that the speakers have overlooked this point, but because it is essential to any discussion of New Sweden. We cannot afford to lose sight of the connection between the local and the specific, on the one hand, and a larger interpretive context, on the other hand, even if that relationship often remains exclusive. Thirdly, I would like to suggest that we move beyond a national or ethnic point of departure in our examina-

tion of New Sweden and add an ecological perspective to the Finnish, Swedish, and American perspectives in the literature on New Sweden.

### Assumptions and Sources

Mr. Olin introduced two themes that deserve further elaboration: To what extent did an oral history tradition about the Finnish experience in Delaware influence the emigration of Finns from Ostrobothnia in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, and what might further research tell us about the flow of ideas from North America, not necessarily from Delaware, to Finland? As is so often the case in the history of New Sweden, we are blessed with many interesting questions but cursed with limited sources. What sources are available to throw additional light on these problems?

Dr. Hulan's presentation leaves no doubt that there has been and continues to be considerable American interest in historical aspects of the founding of New Sweden. The historian Robin Collingwood emphasized that every statement is an answer to a question. With the exception of the research by Jordan and Kaups, I remain uncertain about the questions that American researchers are trying to answer. Is the emphasis on genealogical research a goal in itself or a means to another goal?

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To what extent is the activity in the United States, which seems to focus on local history and genealogy, primarily translation into English of documents already known or primarily investigation of sources previously been unknown to historians?

Put another way, to what extent are the researchers and authors to whom Dr. Hulan referred seeking a better understanding of ethnic roots, local history, religious history, colonial American history, etc., and to what extent are they making explicit the questions that they are attempting to answer? We will inevitably tend to read history backwards through the prism of our contemporary interests. Making explicit the questions we hope the answer will go a long way, however, to giving meaning and balance to our study of New Sweden. Dr. Hulan's own interest in New Sweden represents a combination of interest in family history, folklore, and colonial history. I hope that he will be able to tell us more about his approach to New Sweden during the discussion.

I am intrigued by Dr. Tarkiainen's reference to the survival of bilingualism among the Savo-Karelians in Värmland and wonder whether there is any way to follow up on this insight or whether there are studies of the survival of bilingualism under similar circumstances. I am also curious about his views on how many generations of residence in Sweden it takes to turn a Finn into a Swede – both 350 years ago and today. A related question is the use of the word "finne". Swedes used the term, but did they always place both the burnbeaters from Savo-Karelia in Värmland and the Swedish-speaking population of Ostrobothnia together in the "finne" category? Apparently the burnbeaters and the Ostrobothnians did not use the term themselves, and it is even more unlikely that they went to North

America with a shared sense of being Finns.

I agree with Dr. Tarkiainen's conclusions about finding any significant new sources on the burnbeaters. I wonder if he is equally pessimistic about other sources related to New Sweden. I suspect that the next task is to ask new questions.

These are but a few questions that one could ask the speakers. I hope that the audience will raise other questions during the discussion session.

### **A Larger Interpretive Context**

But before we move on to the discussion I would like to suggest an overall interpretive framework for our discussion today.

Any examination of Finns in Delaware naturally focuses on the Finns but the context should be Finland as a part of Sweden, Sweden as a part of Europe, Europe and North America as a part of an Atlantic region, and the interaction between Europe and colonial America.

### **Peripheral America and Peripheral Finland**

Both North America and Finland were on the periphery of the western European-centered core in the 17th century. The historical forces that permitted this usual link – first between periphery and periphery and later between core and periphery – have not been adequately studied, but they remain an important aspect of any discussion of Finnish-American relations during the past 350 years. The key link has been Finland's relationship vis-à-vis the western European-centered core until the 20th century and the changing American relationship with Europe over the past 350 years. The periphery to periphery relationship of the 17th century also helps to explain why the Nordic log cabin served

as a prototype for American frontier architecture. Logically the Finns and Swedes who left the forests of the periphery in Europe were best equipped to adapt to the forests of the periphery in North America.

### **The Setting in Sweden**

Three hundred and fifty years ago Sweden was a small great power, and expansion was an important feature of European mercantilism. Sweden was expanding southward and westward and building an infrastructure with Finland: Finnish soldiers by the thousands fought under the Swedish flag on the continent, a colony was established in North America, and the introduction of regular mail service between Stockholm and Finland constituted an important symbolic and concrete element in Swedish efforts to develop an infrastructure between the metropolis and the hinterland.

In this era of state building and mercantilistic expansion settlers went to North America in the service of European states that were competing for a piece of North America. There was, however, cultural diversity within the states of Europe that sent settlers across the Atlantic. As Michael Kammen has pointed out in another context "colonials didn't come from Europe. They came from East Anglia, Bristol,... Nantes". He could have also added, from Savo-Karelia via Sweden. Too often the research on New Sweden and the funding for such research has been preoccupied more with contemporary concerns of national identity and a confused sense of ethnic roots than with the realities of national or cultural identity 350 years ago. Consequently, Finns tend to write about the Finns in Delaware rather than about the Swedes, the Savo-Karelians or the Ostrobothnians in

Delaware, and the Swedes tend to write about the Swedes.

### **The Setting in North America**

Delaware had its drawbacks from the start. The Delaware Bay was full of shoals and the waterway did not lead into the hinterlands. The French were gaining a foothold in the far north, the English were taking control of regions to the north and south of Delaware, and the Dutch considered the New York region their first priority in North America.

Just as in the case in the late 19th century when Finnish migrants arrived in the Great Lake Region after all the good farm land had been taken, the Finns arrived when the best had been taken. In both cases, however, the significance is that Finns were in some ways the last of the first, a role determined by the peripheral position of the Finnish part of Sweden in Europe.

### **The Significance of New Sweden for Finland**

When I was doing research on Finns in Wisconsin in the 1970s, I discovered Bohemians in the rural, cut-over region of that state. Was it an accident of history that the bulk of immigrants from Europe at the turn of the century were Catholics or Jews who settled in urban areas, but that the Bohemians and Finns were Protestants, many of whom eventually settled in rural areas? Was it an accident of history that the early stages of Finnish migration overlap with the late stages of Swedish migration? Was it an accident of history that Finland's periphery-core relationship affected Finland differently from the way it affected other countries along the Russian border? And was it an accident of history that Czechoslovakia and Finland were the

only two Soviet neighbors to remain outside the Soviet bloc up to 1948 and that Finland remains the only Soviet neighbor to escape the dire consequences of the postwar division of Europe?

If we take the concept of Finland's peripheral position in western Europe and examine that it from the perspective of being the "last of the first", we can ask ourselves whether there has been an historical link between Finnish participation in the settlement in Delaware, the timing and nature of industrialization in Finland, the timing of early stages of Finnish immigration to North America, and Finland's exceptional position on the interface periphery between Western and Eastern Europe.

Finland has long been geopolitically important to Russia/Soviet Union, but it has participated in and been affected by the great waves of European commercial expansion, industrialization, overseas migration, and nation building in ways that set it apart from other states located geographically in eastern Europe. In the larger context, perhaps this is the significance of the arrival of the offspring of Savo-Karelians in North America in the mid-17th century. Rather than trying to demonstrate that the Finns somehow played an important role in the founding and development of the United States, we might be on safer ground if we ask how the emigration of Swedes of Finnish origins throws light on Finnish and Swedish history. I would argue that the presence of settlers of Finnish origins among the first emigrants to North America is historically significant in and of itself.

### **Delaware 350 – An Ecological View**

I would like to build on Dr. Tarkiainen's presentation about Swedish-Finnish burnbeaters. First, I want to thank him for

refraining from contributing to one of the great myths of the Delaware celebration – that somehow the settlement of North America would have been different had there been no Finns in New Sweden 350 years ago. And secondly, I would like to turn the glorification of the burnbeaters as pioneer heroes on its head and suggest that we also apply an ecological perspective to our analysis of the historical significance of New Sweden.

We know that many of those who left Sweden to settle in North America were part of a migration and settlement pattern with roots going back to Savo-Karelia. Why this interest in migration? An important explanation for the burnbeaters' willingness to move to Delaware was the efforts of the Swedish government to limit and eventually to prohibit the practice of burnbeating when it began to threaten the interests of new forms of agriculture and, in the case of Värmland, the emerging interests of the mining industry. In short, the Savo-Karelians moved from the Finnish part of Sweden to Delaware via Värmland because of push and pull factors – limited forest areas to burn and official encouragement to move to and develop an other region where they could continue their traditional way of life.

Seen from the perspective of the relationship between man and his physical environment, this pioneer spirit is not entirely positive. Perhaps these people, whom many celebrate because of their ability to adapt to a wilderness environment, were also individuals who were unwilling to adjust to a new relationship between society and natural resources. Rather than changing their way of life, they choose to move on to an unknown world. As such, they resemble somewhat Aleksis Kivi's seven brothers who tried to escape the control of society, but unlike the seven brothers these burnbeaters

never returned to come to grips with society and the implications of limited resources. If the burnbeaters represent the frontier spirit of American society, they also represent a way of life based on waste of abundant natural resources.

That side of American society appears to be incapable of recognizing limits and operating within them. Kivi's seven brothers returned home over a century ago. Today Americans are still looking for new frontiers unaware of how close they might be to burning down the pirtti. There is perhaps a time and place for everything. What happens when that time and place are no longer appropriate? Put another way, what is the relationship between the way we celebrate the past and our perceptions of the requirements of the future?

The setting in Sweden – migration patterns, military and economic imperialism on the European continent and in North America, and the gradual integration of

the Finnish province into Sweden proper – and the setting in colonial America – rich natural resources and local tribes incapable of effective resistance to European penetration – lends itself to an interesting case study over time and across space. This study could focus on the relationship between man and his physical environment against a backdrop of the rise of international trade, urbanization, and industrialization. A comparative, multi-disciplinary history of the conflict between burnbeating agriculture and the assumptions underpinning that way of life in these three countries and the responses in these three countries to assumptions about abundance could help explain how different societies react when practices based on abundance and territorial expansion come into conflict with obstacles to those practices. This approach would place the Savo-Karelians in a meaningful historical context and would address itself to contemporary problems that we all face.