

Talk from August 12, 2023 in Dala-Floda, Sweden, by Joseph Mathews

I'm very happy to be part of today's program here at this historic site managed by Floda Hembygdsforening. Thank you Karin Zetterquist and Lars Rehde for arranging this.

This is my second time in Floda. I was here last year and I wanted to come again this year to see your beautiful museum and town and to learn more about the background of our own homestead museum (which I will sometimes call the Swedish Farmstead or, more simply, the Farmstead), the one built in 1988 in my state of New Jersey by your former member, Gunnar Zetterquist. Why do I want to learn more background? Because, speaking generally, I get inspiration from the way Swedes honor their history and more specifically because I'm committed to the continued success of Gunnar's accomplishment in building our Farmstead. I recently realized I have been working for ten years and for two different organizations on the Farmstead. I started around 2012 or 2013 and now it's 2023: that's 10 years. And I don't see myself stopping any time soon. I'm now the Governor of the organization that also has committed itself to the Farmstead--the Swedish Colonial Society. So I thought I would tell you about my involvement with the Farmstead and that of the two organizations also.

I think it was in 2012 or 2013 that I joined the New Sweden Company, a New Jersey nonprofit. This was the organization that invited Gunnar Zetterquist to come to New Jersey to build some log cabins that would represent a typical Swedish village or farmstead. The members wanted to teach students and visitors about the 17th century colony of New Sweden on the Delaware River. Many Americans often don't know about this colony, but they should because it's a fascinating story and history.

As you probably know, New Sweden was founded 'in 1638 on a small river--now the Christina River--that flowed into the Delaware River. The colony spread northward along the west bank of the Delaware and later on the river's east side too. Today this area is part of three states--Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

Officially the colony only lasted 17 years. In 1655 Dutch soldiers came down from New Amsterdam (later New York) to defeat the Swedes, thus technically ending the 17-year-old colony. Most of the Swedes--there were only 300 or so--stayed and never left. Because the Dutch had to leave immediately to defend against an Indian attack back home in New Amsterdam, the Swedes were left in charge under a new name: the Swedish Nation. The Swedes had to pledge loyalty to New Netherland, but they could keep everything else: their land, their court, their church, and their militia or fighting force. The Indian attack was no coincidence: the Swedes and the Lenape were good allies.

Today it is estimated that 20 to 30 million Americans descend from colonial Swedes. They tended to have big families and they intermarried with everyone: other Swedes and Finns, English, Germans, and Lenape. The organization I work for now--the Swedish Colonial Society--exists because of the connection that many of those descendents feel toward their heritage.

Some of those descendents who lived in southern New Jersey decided in 1982 to organize a celebration of New Sweden for the 350th anniversary of the founding of the colony in 1638. First

the Erricksson Family Committee was organized by Dan and Betty Erricksson (they were cousins) of Bridgeton, NJ. Soon after they began to meet, they were able to get the state of New Jersey to be involved in the planning for the anniversary celebration. The New Sweden Company was formed at this time not only to promote the celebration but also to parlay it into a contribution to the cultural and economic development of Cumberland and Salem Counties.

I was not around at this time (see Note below), so I don't know exactly who invited Gunnar and his colleagues, Severin Johanssen and the mason Ake Frank. What I do know is that these three men arrived in South Jersey in the Fall of 1987, made contacts in southern New Jersey, acquired labor, logs and other materials, and got to work with a deadline in their minds: April 14, 1988, when the opening ceremony would take place with the King and Queen of Sweden in attendance.

The state of New Jersey had also scheduled many events for this anniversary year of New Sweden. There was even a showroom in Trenton, the capital of NJ, for Swedish products. The visit to Bridgeton was the beginning of a nationwide tour by the royals and the Farmstead was centerpiece of what was called the New Sweden Project, intended to signal a new era of economic cooperation between Sweden and New Jersey if not the US.

I'm sorry to say that I don't know whether the New Sweden Project should be considered successful or not. I do know the Farmstead did have success as a living history museum with a paid staff and volunteers. I believe it was in operation as a museum for 10 years or so, but it eventually closed. A few key people died suddenly and there was some conflict between the NSC and the city of Bridgeton. That is apparent in the documentary record.

Fast forward to 2013 when I appeared on the scene, the Farmstead had been closed and the city needed to do something with the buildings: either tear them down, reopen them as a museum, or move them. The NSC decided the best option would be to move them out of Bridgeton. But where? Around this time I became the chairman of the NSC. We decided the cabins were viable and worthy of preservation. We had a couple of options including one that quickly became the best option of all. This was a newly improved and landscaped Governor Printz Park in a town called Essington which is part of a township called Tinicum which is 15 miles from Philadelphia. It's right on the Delaware River just south of Philadelphia International Airport. Every 90 seconds there is a roar of a plane taking off overhead. Township officials say that that's the sound of money. I-95 which runs along the east coast of the US is 5 minutes away. It's a better site than Bridgeton for visitor potential. It also happens to be the site chosen by Johan Printz in 1643 to be the capital of the New Sweden colony. Tinicum was an island then and a good place to keep watch over the river. Part of the foundation of the impressive statehouse he built then still lies underground there. There could be no fitter place for this commemoration of New Sweden.

I won't go into the drawn-out process of the move here. If you would like to hear that story, I tell it in a talk I gave at a New Sweden History Conference from 2020. Links are below.

Here I'll just say we hired an Amish construction company named Highline Construction to move all of the cabins log-by-log to Governor Printz Park where they reconstructed them according to Gunnar's plan and made them ready again to be a living history museum. The New Sweden Company is no longer active. The organization now in charge is The Swedish Colonial

Society and because of my role in preserving and moving the Farmstead they have made me its Governor. I have a 4-year term and I'm in my second year now. It's work and a responsibility, but I enjoy it. I don't get paid. All that I do is as a volunteer, including this trip.

We have a small group of 6 or 7 volunteers who open the Farmstead to visitors. We have an open house every first Saturday of the month from 11 to 2. We are open for 10 Farmers Markets in the Park in the summer on every other Wednesday from 4:30 to 7:30. And we're open for three events the Township holds during the year. We have learned to regard the Township as real partners. And the Swedish Colonial Society holds its own events there as well.

The Swedish Colonial Society now has a small library and an exhibition room in an historic building in Tinicum. It's a beautifully restored 1799 quarantine hospital called the Lazaretto and it overlooks the Delaware River.

Now I didn't plan any of this. All I did was to be the person who lived the closest to the Farmstead when it stood abandoned in Bridgeton NJ. And I was the person who decided to advocate for it. I was failing pretty consistently until I attended the annual Christmas luncheon of the Swedish Colonial Society. I think that was 2016 or 2017. That was the first time my idea was not only seriously listened to, but warmly embraced. I was as surprised as anyone and there are still serious challenges ahead, but I never stopped feeling that warm embrace of the SCS.

Today, being here in the town of Dala-Floda and really in this entire country of Sweden that believes in and loves its own history as embodied in the buildings, artifacts, and life stories that you so lovingly preserve, learn about, and teach--today I'm thinking that the person mainly responsible for all of this is Gunnar Zetterquist who through his vision and work gave us in the U.S. something to see as beautiful, admirable, and historical. I know that our preservation methods somewhat modified the buildings from what they were originally, but enough of his vision shines through and gives us enough to be able to imagine the Swedish colony we wish to commemorate. Today I thank him for his gift.

And thank you for your attention.

Here is the link to my talk at the New Sweden History Conference in 2020 on moving the Swedish Farmstead in 2019 and 2020:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0AO7OozkQ>

I apologize for my not-very-exciting speaking style and the noise! However, I will provide the text I used for this talk.

Note:

As I say I wasn't around in 1988, but in 1991 I moved to Cumberland County, all the way south in New Jersey where some colonial Swedes settled and stayed. I was a student of American literature and history and I soon went to work part-time for Cumberland County Historical Society. The Society owned the archival papers of the New Sweden Company and the Erricksson

Family Committee. I had the job of arranging or organizing them so I got to know something of their history.

Also, this Society owns a log building that used to be called the Swedish Granary. We believed it was built by Swedes in the 17th century. In 2014 and 2016 we got a grant to do tree ring research and we found out it was built in 1783, so we had to stop calling it the *Swedish* Granary. Today we have another grant project to do new research on this building so that we can try to re-interpret it.

Through that experience I developed an interest in the history of New Sweden and much later got involved with the Farmstead.