

6-1-1984

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Recommended Citation

Hård af Segerstad, Nils (1984) "Genealogical Research in Sweden," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol4/iss2/3>

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Genealogical Research in Sweden

Nils Hård af Segerstad*

Doing it in the U.S. or in Sweden?

If you wish to trace your Swedish roots, you need not cross the Atlantic. You may stay on American soil by going to Salt Lake City, UT, where virtually all of the old church records, court registers and other archival materials may be found. The Mormons have microfilmed most of the Swedish archives, so you may be able to settle down comfortably in Salt Lake City in front of a microfilm reader and begin the search.

If, on the other hand, you insist on spending the money and leaving Uncle Sam's domains and travel to Sweden, you must know whereabouts in Sweden you will find the records of the particular area you are interested in.

Before planning a trip to Sweden, however, you must know exactly where and when the man or woman was born, whom you are researching. Sweden is not as big as the U.S., but vast enough, so that it does not suffice to know that your grandfather or grandmother was born in Småland (in southern Sweden). You must also know the name of the parish.

Provincial Archives

So far as the old church records are concerned, Sweden is divided into eight archival districts—the provincial archives (*landsarkiv*) of Östersund (which covers the county, *län* of Jämtland) and Härnösand (which covers the counties of Västerbotten, Västernorrland, Norrbotten and Gävleborg). These two district archives cover that part of Sweden called Norrland.

The central part of Sweden is called Svealand and here the provincial archives of Uppsala is the center. Located an hour's train ride or automobile journey north of Stockholm, this district archives covers the counties of Uppsala, Södermanland, Örebro, Västmanland and Kopparberg.

The city of Göteborg, the second largest in Sweden, is located on the west coast and its archives covers the counties of Värmland, Älvsborg, Skaraborg and Göteborg och Bohus. Lund, a city located in the extreme southern portion of Sweden, has the southernmost district archives which covers the counties of Malmöhus, Kristianstad, Blekinge and Halland.

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The island of Gotland, situated in the middle of the Baltic, has its own archives, located in the medieval city of Visby.

The northern part of Götaland, which is a geographical division of Sweden, located south of Svealand, has its provincial archives in the city of Vadstena, located on the beautiful lake Vättern. This is also an ancient city, with its archives housed in a magnificent castle, dating back to the 16th century. Vadstena is a delight for the genealogist, since the town is virtually untouched by "modern civilization". There is a charming cloister, where one may procure lodging at a very reasonable cost. The Vadstena archives covers the counties of Östergötland, Kalmar, Kronoberg and Jönköping.

The eighth district comprises the city of Stockholm, where *Stadsarkivet* (The City Archives) is responsible for the city's archival collections.

Birth and Other Records

Let us assume that your grandfather was born in the parish of Bringetofta. On a detailed map of Sweden you will find it situated in the county (*län*) of Jönköping. Regardless of whether you travel to Utah to look at the microfilms, or wish to spend the extra money by going to Vadstena, where the Bringetofta records are kept, you have to know where to begin. Of course the staffs at both the Genealogical Society in Salt Lake City and at the provincial archives in Vadstena will help you, but it is better to be prepared before you go to either of these two places.

Let us say that your grandfather, let us call him Carl Napoleon Björklund, was born in Bringetofta Parish 19 April 1844. You would begin by looking up the birthdate in the birth register (*födelsebok*), where you should find the names of the parents and the place name in the parish, where the family resided at the time of Carl Napoleon's birth. Having learned this, you then proceed to the household examination roll (*husförhörslängd*), which is the clergyman's record of the inhabitants of the parish, used mainly for the purposes of determining the general literacy in the parish, the knowledge of Bible History and parts of Martin Luther's Little Catechism. You will find that the household examination roll is divided into sections, each section covering an estate, a farm, or a smaller unit like a croft or small cabin. Once you have located the farm or croft, where the parents were living at the time of Carl Napoleon Björklund's birth, you should be able to view the entire family unit, the parents of Carl Napoleon and any siblings he might have had. For all of them in the family unit there is information as to when and where they were born, movements into and out of the parish, and sometimes ancillary information such as military service, schools attended or remarks as to handicaps that a person might have had.

Having found the birth dates and birth places of the parents, you may then wish to go backward in time, picking up the birth data in earlier birth registers and also consulting earlier household examination rolls. There are

complementary records as well, such as death records (*dödbok*) and marriage records (*vigselbok*). There are also lists of people who moved into the parish or out. For socially mobile people, these exit registers are quite important. The drawback is that they do not go back very far, usually only to the beginning of the 19th century. Luck also plays a role here. One could strike it rich, but also encounter a dead end.

If the trail continues into other parishes, you must consult the index of these parishes to be found in all of the provincial archives. Here you will find for each parish the records that are available. In some instances the original records are so fragile that you may have to use microfilms. If you are really unlucky, you may even find that the parish records you are looking for have been destroyed by fire, a fact not too uncommon at a time when the records were kept in the parsonage, usually a wooden structure, which easily caught fire in the days of the candle and later the kerosene lamp.

I spoke earlier about the exit registers going back only to the beginning of the 19th century. You will find as you move back into the 18th century that the household examination rolls also will vanish, which means that you will be restricted to the birth, marriage and death records. There are exceptions though—in the counties of Västmanland and Kopparberg there are household examination rolls which date back to the 1600s.

Baptismal Witnesses

Except for the counties mentioned above, you will have difficulties when you no longer have access to the household examination rolls. As long as your forefathers remained in the same parish—in this case Bringetofta—the problems are minimal. One problem, however, is the lack of variety in the naming of the children, particularly in the rural parishes.

There may be many persons having the name of Per Månsson in the same village of the parish. How do you tell them apart? This means that much work must be done to separate out the people named Per, so that you find the Per Månsson which fits into your family group. The baptismal witnesses (*dopvittnen*) can be most helpful. On many occasions close relatives of the mother and father served as witnesses. This is particularly true when the same names turn up at the baptisms of other siblings in the family. If you encounter problems concerning the origin of a person's father or mother, have a look at the witnesses. Here you might find a clue.

Civil Records — Estate Records

In the various provincial archives you will find various estate records called *bouppteckningar*, which in fact were inventories of a person's estate at the time of death. Unless the person was so poor that he did not leave an estate, most persons had *bouppteckningar*. These estate inventories may also include copies of the last will and testament of the deceased. These are very

useful records, in that you find recorded the close relatives of the deceased, particularly the children. If one of the sons or daughters was away at the time of death and could not be present when the inventory was held, it will state this fact, very important in cases where the relative had emigrated to America. If the children were minors, the executor had to name guardians (*förmyndare*) for the children. The guardian was often a close relative, perhaps an uncle, whose domicile also is given. This provides additional clues for further research. I can quote one example from my personal experience which might illustrate this point.

One of my forefathers was named Niclas Björkbom who lived in the large industrial city of Norrköping, located in the province of Östergötland. I had no idea where he came from. Many persons with patronymics like Eriksson or Nilsson, coming from the rural areas, changed their names when coming to the big city, in order to appear more "city-like", names like Lindberg, Bergström and Björkbom. The name often was derived from their village, farm or parish back home. I knew that Niclas Björkbom had a brother in Norrköping named Peter Björkbom. I looked up his estate inventory (*bouppteckning*) and found some interesting information. Since both Peter and his wife had died very early, the court had decided that their minor children should be brought up by their grandparents—first the paternal and then the maternal ones. They were mentioned by name as well as where they were domiciled. Björkbom's father was named Abraham Nilsson, who lived at Björke in Regna Parish (Östergötland's *län*), just northwest of Norrköping. Thus I was able to solve my problem concerning the origin of Niclas Björkbom.

The estate inventories are often indexed in the provincial archives. In the western district for Göteborg, you will find that the index also names the heirs as well, a most valuable piece of information.

Court Records and Census Registers

The court records are also to be found in the various provincial archives as well as the city archives of Stockholm. The judiciary unit in Sweden is called a hundred (*härad*) or (*tingslag*). A handwritten "copy" of the court records was forwarded to the District Court—for Svealand it was the *Svea hovrätt* in Stockholm; for Götaland, the *Göta hovrätt* in Jönköping; for Skåne and Blekinge *Hovrätten för Skåne och Blekinge* in Malmö; *Hovrätten för västra Sverige* in Göteborg; *Hovrätten för nedre Norrland* in Sundsvall and *Hovrätten för norra Norrland* in Umeå. Sometimes the original records have been destroyed, as an example can be mentioned that the city of Söderhamn on Sweden's east coast, north of Stockholm, was burned totally by the Russians in 1721, thereby destroying the court house with all its records. But the copies of the town's court records, going back another hundred years, are still kept in Sweden's National Archives (*Riksarkivet*).

The National Archives also has on file copies of the various *mantalslängder*, though the originals are kept in the various provincial archives. These *mantalslängder* are essentially the same as the census records in the U.S.

Before the days of the household examination rolls, roughly the last part of the 18th century, one could locate the inhabitants of a certain parish in the *mantalslängd*. Unfortunately, only the head of the household is named, and sometimes only his Christian name. This corresponds with the early census returns in the U.S., where only the head of the household is named. The use of the Christian name or first name was quite common in the old days, and this practice is still observed in Iceland. It was your baptismal name that counted. The patronymic only indicated what your father's name was with the *-son* added. This practice makes for very difficult research as one stretches back into time.

The *mantalslängd* will usually give the name of the married man, the existence of a wife and children over fifteen years of age, as well as farm hands and female servants. Possibly a little more. Since *mantalslängder* were made up every year, you can easily follow an individual, see if he moved, when a man or his wife died, or when a son or a daughter attained the age of fifteen.

People who moved a great deal present a real nuisance, particularly before the exit registers came into use. Farmers, however, were a quite stable group and if they moved, it was usually within the parish. Soldiers and craftsmen, though, could travel quite extensively.

Looking through old court records can often become a game. You may be able to discover a lot of interesting facts concerning your ancestor. But the likelihood of a less successful result from these efforts is even bigger. But people had to go to court often, particularly if the case involved land, the boundaries of certain land tracts or the inheritance of land. If you know that your forefather owned land, there might be some information in the court records that could help you. In inheritance cases, where members of a family sued each other over property, one can often pick up valuable clues as to family ties.

The Military

If your search turns up someone within the military, such as soldiers (*soldater*), cavalrymen (*ryttare*) or sailors (*båtsmän*), the place to go is the Royal Swedish War Archives in Stockholm (*Krigsarkivet*). In these records you might find a record of your ancestor's birth place. More often, though, there is more information concerning his horse (if he was a cavalryman) than about the man himself.

If your ancestor hunt takes you to another parish in the 1700s you might look at the censuses (*mantalslängder*) of the neighboring parishes, provided he had a family name like Lindqvist or Åkerman and not a patronymic

ending in *-son*. If he had a patronymic and a common one at that, don't waste your time, unless the patronymic is quite unusual such as Torstensson, Tostesson, Fastesson, etc., and provided the farmers listed in the census are not listed only by their baptismal names.

Printed Sources

If your ancestor belonged to the higher echelons of society, it might pay to look at the library in each of the provincial archives, before ordering manuscript materials. Many books have been written about the nobility, clergy, students at the various universities, physicians, apothecaries, land surveyors, military officers in the various regiments, well-known bourgeois families and other middle class families who have risen to the top of society.

For information concerning the more famous Swedes who are deceased one should look to the Swedish biographical dictionary called *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*. Since this mammoth undertaking is still being produced, only the volumes through the letter "L" are available. There are, of course, older biographical dictionaries which may be consulted, particularly the popularity written *Svenska män och kvinnor* (*Swedish Men and Women*). Older biographical dictionaries may also be consulted for persons living in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Genealogical Society of Sweden (*Genealogiska Föreningen*) has published among its many books and periodicals a volume entitled *Svenska släkter* (*Swedish Families*), which came out in Stockholm in 1980. This publication lists a great many bourgeois families in Sweden and if you belong to one of these, you can check in which periodical or book you can find additional information.

For Swedes who emigrated to the U.S. prior to 1851, Nils William Olsson's two volumes dealing with all ports in the U.S. should be consulted. The first volume, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850* covers only the port of New York; the second volume, *Swedish Passengers Arrivals in U.S. Ports 1820-1850 (except New York)*, deals with all the other ports, with the exception of San Francisco, whose records have perished by fire. Passenger lists are important since you can spot the port where he or she arrived as well as the date. Once this has been done one can calibrate when the person left Sweden and then check the police records in Göteborg and Malmö where all emigrants registered before leaving Swedish soil. These volumes have been indexed and go back as early as 1869. These records also give the original parish in Sweden from which the emigrant hailed.

Final Instructions

Finally, before you embark on your international safari, do your homework. Cross-examine still living relatives, look through old family papers, check for letters from Sweden containing valuable addresses and look on the flyleaf of the old family Bible. You will be glad you did.