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# Bengt Aronson, Swedish Master Builder (1845-1922)

Lawrence G. Hammerstrom\*

When residents of Minneapolis awakened on 8 November 1922 they read a headline in their morning newspaper, *The Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, which startled them, not the least the citizens who had a Swedish background.

“Man Who Built City Hall Here Dies in Squalor”

The sub-head went on to say that Bengt Aronson, Swedish immigrant, who once had been the biggest contractor in Minneapolis, had spent his final days in a shabby room.

Who was this man who at one time had been ranked as one of the most successful citizens of Minneapolis and then had reached the end of his life as a virtual unknown?

My interest in this man began while researching for more information concerning the well-known Swedish-American newspaper publisher, Swan J. Turnblad. I discovered that Bengt Aronson had been the mason contractor for the construction of Turnblad's mansion at 2600 Park Avenue, which today is the home of the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis.

Bengt, whose name also has been shown as Ben and Benjamin in various records, was born on the farm Svalungebyn in Ör Parish in the Swedish province of Dalsland 3 Dec. 1845, the son of Aron Jansson and Karolina Forsell. The couple had three other children—Amalia, born 2 Oct. 1843; John (Jan), born 8 Nov. 1847 and Louis (Lars), born 23 Oct. 1850. Bengt emigrated to America in April 1867 and his brothers John and Louis followed in April 1870.

It is not known where the brothers learned the mason's trade, whether in Sweden or America, but before coming to Minneapolis Bengt had worked for the Sioux City Railroad, constructing bridge foundations and later one season in Scott County. He arrived in Minneapolis in 1872 and worked for a while for a George McMullen. He then started on his own, forming the firm of Patterson and Aronson in 1877. By 1881 he was his own contractor. Later his brother Louis joined the firm as a partner. His brother John died in February 1882.

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In 1884 the Aronson brothers constructed two brick and stone business blocks at 29 and 31 East Hennepin Avenue, at that time known as Central Avenue. These blocks were considered among the finest in Minneapolis. In one of them they built for themselves a suite of rooms, a bedroom, a living room and a little office. This was to be Bengt Aronson's residence and business address for the rest of his life and it was here that Bengt died alone and penniless.

The brothers worked hard and saved their money. As Minneapolis grew they became wealthy. At one time Bengt was worth more than \$100,000. Everybody knew Bengt then. Between 1885 and 1916, he was listed in the *Dual City Blue Book*, a "private address directory and ladies calling and shopping guide for Minneapolis and St. Paul." In 1897 Bengt Aronson was a member of the executive committee of the John Ericsson Memorial Association.

As early as 1877 he had joined the Swedish mutual benefit association known as The Swedish Brothers. It was also reported that he had been able to visit his homeland a couple of times.

The Aronson brothers were awarded contracts for most of the building in those days. One of their biggest contracts was the Minneapolis City Hall. Construction of this massive five-story municipal building began in 1888 and was completed at a cost of \$3,500,000. One of the architects of this building, F. K. Kees, said at the time of Bengt's death, that he was "Minneapolis' biggest contractor." John Swift, a member of the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners when the Courthouse was erected, also stated that "Bengt was one of the most picturesque figures in Minneapolis."

The Aronsons have also been credited in the erection of the first three floors of Minneapolis' first skyscraper, the Guaranty Loan Building, later known as the Metropolitan Building, at that time the city's most prestigious business address. Unfortunately, this twelve-story Romanesque landmark was demolished as recently as 1962. Among other notable buildings constructed by the Aronsons were the Glass Block and the Temple Court. Both of these buildings have since been demolished.

Fortunately two other notable buildings still remain from the Aronson construction era—Dania Hall and the Turnblad mansion. These two buildings as well as the Courthouse are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Dania Hall was built in 1886 by Danish immigrants at the corner of Cedar Avenue and Fifth Street. The building permit shows that Bengt Aronson was the contractor and that the cost was \$20,000. The most important feature of this four story building was the auditorium on the third and fourth floors. It had a three-sided curved gallery and a proscenium stage. One of the most popular entertainers to appear in Dania Hall was the Swedish immigrant Hjalmar Peterson, or as he was more familiarly known, *Olle i Skratthult* (Olle of Laugherville). Today many still remember with fondness this rustic comedian and his popular song *Nikolina*. The Turnblad mansion at 2600 Park Avenue in Minneapolis, home of the American Swedish Institute, is today the active cultural center for Swedish Americans in the Upper Midwest. It was in December of 1929 that Swan J. Turnblad founded the institution under the name of American

Institute of Swedish Arts, Literature and Science, later changed to its present name. His donation consisted of the building, his newspaper *Svenska Amerikanska Posten* and the Posten Building, where the paper was published.

The remarkable story of Swan J. Turnblad is well known, born in Vislanda in the province of Småland in 1860, the son of a farmer, who at the age of eight accompanied his family to Minnesota in 1868, growing up in Vasa Township in Goodhue County and then moving to Minneapolis in 1879. Here he worked as a typesetter for Swedish newspapers and in 1886 was asked to manage an almost defunct pro-temperance newspaper, *Svenska Amerikanska Posten*. By 1897 he was the majority stockholder and eventually the sole owner of the newspaper. Under his leadership this newspaper became one of the leading Swedish American publications.

In April of 1903 Turnblad bought six lots at 2600 Park Avenue in Minneapolis. A building permit was granted to him in July 1903 for a "stone dwelling and barn," estimated to cost \$50,000, which included \$10,000 for the barn. The permit states that the builder was Ben Aronson, a mason. The architects Christopher A. Boehme and Victor Cordella designed the French chateausque styled structure, built of Bedford limestone. With its gables, round towers, finials and ornamental carvings it is one of the most impressive buildings of its kind in the Midwest. What then happened to the contractor of this magnificent edifice that he years later was to be found dead in a shabby, bare room over a pool hall, a broken-down old man?

Things began to fall apart for the brothers Aronson in the panic of 1893. Construction came to a standstill. In looking around for something to do, they became interested in a gold mine in British Columbia and proceeded to invest thousands of dollars in it. This was the beginning of the loss of their fortune. The brothers did not give up, they resumed their contracting business, straightened out their affairs and began to get back on their feet. In 1904 another contractor gave them a sub-contract to construct a big grain elevator, but the contractor failed and the brothers lost thousands of dollars. From that moment on, things went from bad to worse. In 1907 their firm failed, but the brothers refused to seek protection in bankruptcy and insisted in paying off all the debts, until they found themselves penniless. From that time on Bengt lived in a humble room on Nicollet Island until the time of his death. At first his body was unidentified and preparations were made to bury him in the potters field. But Louis Aronson came forward, identified his brother and he was thus buried with a simple service in Minneapolis' Lakewood Cemetery. He was almost 77 years old at the time of death. His brother Louis lived on until 12 January, 1930 when he died at the age of 79. Apparently none of the three brothers ever married.

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**The Minneapolis City Hall and Courthouse.**