

Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 19
Number 2 *Double Issue*


Article 17

9-1-1999

The America Letter

Ulf Beijbom

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>

 Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Beijbom, Ulf (1999) "The America Letter," *Swedish American Genealogist*. Vol. 19 : No. 2 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol19/iss2/17>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

The America Letter

Ulf Beijbom*

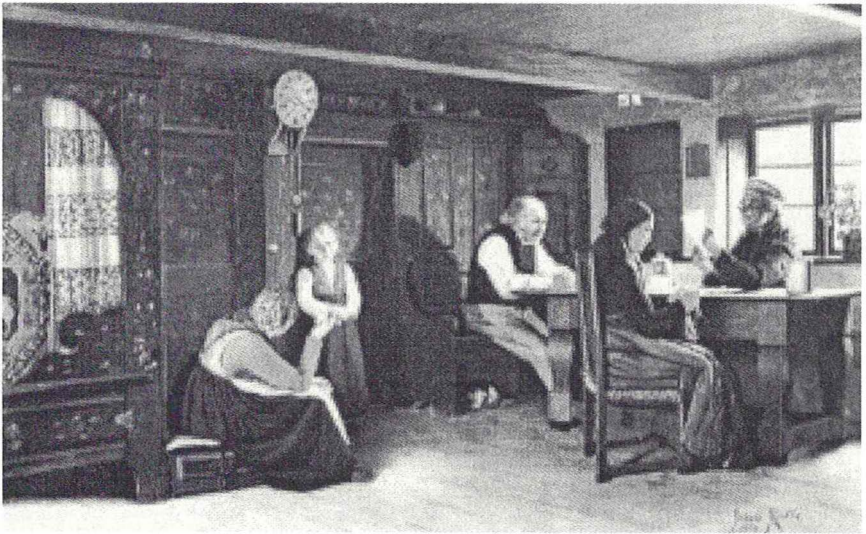
In the animated 1881 painting *Amerikabrevet* (*The America Letter*) by Jacob Kulle, the folklore painter from Skåne, the farmers have sent for the school-teacher to have the letter from the emigrant child read and interpreted. Father is listening with his hands clasped as if in devotion, but Mother listens without letting it interfere with her needlework. Most likely, it is one of the maids at the farm (or an adult daughter) who sits on the clothes-trunk at the end of the family bed and explains the letter to the youngest girl. The beautiful living room is charged with excitement, relief, and happiness that everything is working out so well for the farm's first emigrant. Maybe, in a few years, the young daughter, who listens with such a transfigured face, will become the next link in the chain that already connects this farm with the Promised Land. The captivating landscape of Skåne glimmers through the window. Soon it will be one of Sweden's many emigration districts.

I imagine that Kulle's famous scene is from the 1850s, when emigration was a new phenomenon and America a rather unknown concept to the peasants. If this is the case, *The America Letter* signifies the beginning of the unique era when more than one million people left their native country—from Skåne to Norrbotten; and from a lingering 1840s primitive economic society to the industrialism of the 1930s. According to Vilhelm Moberg, the emigration split the Swedish people into an eastern part, where people stayed home, and a western part, where people left for America. One can also say that the Atlantic split families and friends, who later had to depend on pen and ink if they wanted to keep in touch.

To us, in the present time, who try to look into the emigration era, the America letter serves as the storyteller of how ordinary people shaped their lives abroad. The emigrants' letters make up the first extensive source materials that have sprung forth from the people. The state church and regulations for elementary schools were responsible for the general public's ability to write, when the time came for the big break-up. While postage was long beyond the means of people in general, most people could afford to write letters from the years of famine in 1868-69, which marks the beginning of the Swedish mass emigration. Also, in America, postage for a letter equaled a manual worker's daily income. Karl Oskar's frustration over not having enough cash to pick up his letter from the businessman in Taylors Falls became history when the

* Dr. Ulf Beijbom is the managing director of the Swedish Emigrant Institute (Svenska Emigrantinstitutet), Sweden's national archives, library and museum on emigration located in Växjö.

international postal union decreased the costs of postage considerably in the beginning of the 1870s. This gave wings to words, which could now fly across the Atlantic to comfort worried parents and young people suffering from America fever. Letters from Sweden traveled in the other direction—preserved only sporadically and never evaluated—with answers to the questions from those who still wanted to return home and wanted to know if everything was the same in the old country. In this way the letter became the fine lifeline between individuals whose lives were previously tied together but were now divided by two irreconcilable worlds.



Jacob Kulle, *Amerikabrevet (The America Letter)*, painting from 1881. Photograph of painting courtesy of Swedish Emigrant Institute, Växjö.

All one can say about the number of America letters is that it must have been enormous! The Danish postal service's statistics of international letter packages 1872-1914 give us an idea of the magnitude. According to this unique source, close to two million letters were received during one single year in Denmark, a country that was insignificant in the emigration movement, especially compared to Sweden. Assuming that several million America letters were sent to Sweden each year between 1880 and 1914, the total number must be astronomical. Despite the fact that the letters were treated like treasures for a long time, most of them were lost, when the time came for distribution of estates and cleaning up of attics. Only a few percent of the treasure of letters were saved. At the Swedish Emigrant Institute, for example, about 30,000 America letters probably comprise the largest collection in the country. However, one consolation is that most of the letters still are to be found outside

of the archives, that is, with private people who it is hoped will allow their America letters to end up in the Swedish emigration's national institution in Växjö some day.

It seems that emigrants wrote most of their letters soon after arriving in America. Later, the letters became less frequent as individuals were absorbed into American work and life. The Danish emigrant researcher Kristian Hvidt, who has studied the letters' statistics, is of the opinion that the enthusiasm for writing was dependent upon the state of the markets, in that more letters were written during the good years than during the bad. On average, the Danish emigrants wrote four letters a year between 1875-1914. According to Hvidt, the signals that encouraged emigration decreased or ceased in relation to times of economic decline, when the emigrants chose to be silent instead of confessing that the emigration appeared to be a mistake. For those who still heard their parents' words of warning in their ears, it was certainly difficult to confess to defeat!

It is not easy for today's reader to peel off the layers to the core of the America letter. This is because most of the letters offer stereotyped and awkward reading. Most of those who wrote had never before attempted to describe happenings and feelings in written words. After just a few short years in school, they had not used a pen to write much more than their signatures. It was solely for the need to keep in contact with friends and relatives on the other side of the ocean that their hands, unfamiliar with writing, picked up a pen. Writing a letter was a difficult task for manual workers and the letters and words were formed in agony. Swedish spelling and sentence structure were not made easier by the English language buzzing in their ears. It sometimes would take weeks until the letter was ready to be sent off on its long journey in the opposite direction of the emigration. And it was read and marveled over in the gray cottages! In order to put together an answer, the addressee had to bring out the guide to letter-writing book or engage a writing assistant as depicted in the painting by Kulle. This was the case, especially in the beginning of this remarkable time, when the two Swedish parts of the population—those who sat at home and those who traveled to America—wrote letters to each other.

The America letter remains sealed to those who are not able to acquire an insight into the environment of the writer and the reader. In order to do this, one has to struggle through an entire series of letters; for example, a decade of successive letters to a relative or a heterogeneous collection of letters that has developed at the local archive. The few researchers who have compiled and analyzed America letters, such as the Americans Theodore Blegen and Arnold Barton, the Swede Albin Widén, the Dane Erik Helmer Pedersen, or the Norwegian Orm Øverland, are all of the opinion that they document self-experienced history. Even those who consider the letters subjective and containing very little, cannot deny that the writer stood in the middle of his own life. Irrespective of the time interval, the letters provide direct glimpses into the emigrant's life. Historians' traditional sources, such as statistics and printed

material, don't go very far; but, when supplemented with America letters, the individual's reality can begin to be reconstructed.

The immediacy of the letter made it an unbeatable emigrant recruiter. The America-fever was frequently spread by the letters, because they were considered reliable. They had been written by friends and relatives who supposedly didn't lie to those at home. The trustworthiness of the authors of the many emigrant guides and books about America during the time of the emigration was another story, as was the trustworthiness of the authors of the well-worded letters published in the newspapers. Here it was often suspected that the motive was to make money on behalf of the emigrants or to attract them to various colonization projects. The emigration industry may have been behind the pens of many seemingly normal America letters. When, for example, the state governments of Wisconsin and Minnesota tried to organize the immigration, they used the immigrants' natural wish to be united with their closest relatives. This was done by engaging famous Swedish-Americans like Colonel Hans Mattson, who was hired by the Minnesota Board of Immigration in 1867, and later by various railroad companies that wanted to colonize the areas around the railroad. In 1871, when the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad came through areas that had been farmed by Swedish pioneers since the 1850s, Mattson started handing out money for the expensive postage. The only thing he asked for in return was that the "Karl Oskar generation" would tell those at home about their success. In this shrewd way, the population numbers of "America's Småland," Chisago County, and "America's Dalarna," Isanti County, were reinforced.

Archivist Steinar Kjaerheim, one of the editors of the Norwegian national archive's publication of Norwegian emigrant letters, believes that the America letters written during the pioneer period served as countermeasures to the often anti-American press. Orm Øverland thinks that Norwegian peasants received more dependable information about the land in the West thanks to America letters than the more educated readers, who most often fueled their anti-American prejudice with strongly biased travel books. This was also the case in Sweden, where the popular network of letters brought America into the manual laborers' homes, while the conservative picture of the world, with its German overtones, remained the guiding star for the group that governed and controlled the country. Because of circumstances like these, Minnesota was better known than Stockholm in Vilhelm Moberg's Småland. Øverland's observations are also relevant to Sweden, when he points out that the successful emigrants are overrepresented in the preserved material of letters. The reason for this might be that emigrants born to succeed were also more verbal. Also, positive letters were more often saved than those that conveyed discouragement and pessimism.

During the time of the pioneer emigration, which was so important for future development, the letters often had an official tone because the writer addressed a considerably larger readership than the addressee alone. Despite the personal introductions such as, "Beloved parents and sisters and brothers.

Prosperity and God's protection, spiritually and worldly, are my biggest wishes for you," the pioneers' letters were often intended to circulate among the neighbors, to be read at the market, printed in the newspapers or even form the basis of "reliable" emigration guides.



Geskel Saloman, *Utvandrare anländer till Göteborg* (*Emigrants arriving to Gothenburg*), oil painting from 1872 copied by Gunnar Johansson. Courtesy of Swedish Emigrant Institute, Växjö.

All this was true for Peter Cassel, from Kisa in Östergötland, who founded the first Swedish colony west of the Mississippi in 1845 and later wrote many tempting letters from Jefferson County in Iowa. The long epistle published in our second oldest emigration guide, *Description of North America's United States* (Västervik, 1846), was undeniably intended for all those in the home district who were inclined to emigrate. "A Swedish farmer, brought up in oppression and familiar with distress and need, finds himself as if moved up into another world, where all his previous confused understandings of a better life more in conformity with nature's laws all at once become reality," observed Cassel. The founder of New Sweden, Iowa, also promised to assist the emigrants in a practical way: "If you inform us beforehand about your departure from Sweden and the approximate time of your arrival in New York, one of us will meet you in this City and accompany you the entire distance here." The letter was written the ninth of February 1846. On the fifth and twelfth of August the same year, about one hundred people from Östergötland disembarked in New York.

The wish to convince people back home to follow is just as obvious in the correspondence made into a system by the prophet Erik Jansson and his proselytes. In spite of the fact that the first colonists in Bishop Hill, Illinois, suffered from famine, cholera and death, Anders Andersson from Torstuna began a letter in 1847 as follows: "I pick up the pen, touched by the spirit of the Lord, as I consider how God has blessed us hundred fold here in the new land, both in spiritual and bodily good, compared to what we owned in our native country. . . So here we have purchased property that couldn't be exchanged for a fourth of the entire country of Sweden."

The leader of the first-known group of emigrants who unquestionably met at Åkerby crossroads, Magnus Jonasson from Kuppramåla farm in Linneryd Parish, wrote a comprehensive America letter on 26 October 1852, shortly after his arrival, which without doubt was intended to be read aloud to the people of stony Kronoberg, who wanted to know more about the possibilities in the West. The "real" Karl Oskar tells about taking a homestead just south of Chisago Lake consisting of at least one hundred acres of tillable land that he regarded "as much more advantageous than all four parts (farms) in Kuppramåla." The farm land is "unbelievably fertile and rich and consists of black topsoil with clay bottom without any rocks, somewhat hilly, no fertilizing." The recommendation to follow can be clearly read between the lines in the epistle that is proudly signed by "Farmannen (the farmer) Magnus Jonasson, Chekago-lek, Tälersfall, Mennessotta, Nord Amerika."

The praises of the farmers' possibilities in the Promised Land flow like a stream of honey through the period of homesteading. In a letter from Stockholm, Kansas, the day before New Year's Eve 1892, C. A. Liljegren painted the following picture of his domain: "The other day I went and inspected my land, and I was almost tired after walking from one end to the other and the reason for my tiredness was probably that I began to think of all the work required to plow such an area of land."

A farmer from Värmland reported from Holmes City, Minnesota, in the 1880s that "it doesn't matter what one sows and plants, one doesn't have to fertilize. . . . We have 80 acres of land, but it's only flat country. . . . we have been very successful with the cattle; we have never been without milk. . . . we have three cow-calves, we have butchered one of them, and then ten chickens. We recently butchered a fine pig. The firewood is right by the house." The same enthusiasm radiated from the farmer Paul Södergren's letter from New Sweden, Maine, in 1883 to "Honored Relatives and Friends in Stamgårde." After giving a detailed description for the Jämtlanders at home of the year's plentiful harvest, he concludes by noting that "if I was offered free travel to Undersåker to live and reside, I would refuse."

Other testimony in letters must have influenced the majority of the Swedish people under forty who were considering emigrating. "Here is a good land for

poor people if they conduct themselves well" (1905). "Here is free land to be had for nothing by anyone who wants it. It is like the song: America is a free country where no king exists and no petty clergymen" (1894). "You see, the farmhand is allowed to eat at the same table as the family" (1884). "The country is beautiful, if any country in the world deserves such a description. And if one compares the conditions here with those in Sweden, there are no similarities at all. But I certainly could not have made the kind of money in Sweden that I have made in this short time" (beginning of 1880s).

Even if some uncritical naiveté shines through such quotations, the most unrestrained optimism is quickly subdued by critical opinions—to conceal the truth in an America letter was synonymous with dishonesty. Therefore, there are also words of warning and descriptions serving as deterrents. "You'd better believe it's been difficult for us," wrote one woman from Texas in the 1880s to her sister. She continued: "It is true that this was the case many times in the beginning. . . . It would have been hard for me many times if Fred hadn't been so kind. I know that when I needed money for food and living he gave me all that he had." The sense of not belonging in a callous and money-fixated immigrant country shows in Anton Petersson's letter from Iowa to Beloved Sister and Brother-in-law: "But you must consider that it isn't any better for us who live in a strange land among strangers and mostly opportunists. Who hardly hold anything for holy if there is money to be made. . . . Many times in my loneliness I have thought about the past and many tears have run down my cheeks, not less bitter because they were seen by none" (1897).

In a letter to their sisters, the brothers Karl and Fredrik complained about the bad times and the lawlessness in New York: "We can barely make enough for food, so you should know our wallets aren't bursting with money. I place my wallet under my pillow every night so I don't need to worry if burglars come; there are plenty of burglars. Here, they murder people almost in broad daylight. There have been two murders since we arrived, one on the same street where we live, and here they hang people who have done something bad" (1879).

The desire to emigrate probably wasn't stimulated by letters where the emigrant asked for money from home either—an overdue debt, an inheritance, or a call for help from the destitute. "It would be good if you could send me some money, because I am now too old to do any kind of work," wrote a recently widowed woman to her niece in 1894. The Skåning [native of Skåne] Oliver Nelson in Cambridge, Minnesota, tried for many years to free his claims in his home area. The money was needed for the development of the farm. He wrote: "I have begun to work up my farm or land and have so much to do at home that I hardly can go away to work for money" (1869). All the expenses that followed the generous offers of the Homestead Law, including free land, are explained in detail by a farmer from Småland in 1882: "A pair of oxen cost about two hundred dollars and one should have two pairs for a plow, that is four hundred dollars, a plow 25 dollars, a wagon 75 dollars, a cow 35 dollars, these things are

necessary to start farming, this is 535 dollars, or 2,000 crowns in Swedish money. . . . Then there are many other machines here that a farmer should own, such as a reaping machine, sowing machine, mowing machine and a rake." One can hardly get any closer than this to a homestead owner's financial agony!

The trip across the Atlantic, which was often dreadful for the landlubbers, was often described in the emigrant's first letter home. An expressive example of a letter about seasickness would be the detailed letter about the misery written by the emigrant sister of Vilhelm Moberg, Signe, which became the basis for the scenes showing seasickness on the brig *Charlotta*. "As I have now experienced the trip to America, I can inform you that there is nothing to brag about," Johan Carlsson verified tersely, before he painted the following unpleasant picture: "It was a horrible sight when everybody had their heads in the aisles in nausea and vomit" (1869). This letter was also rounded off with a reassuring statement that the trip is now only a memory that will fade as a new life begins.

The readers' sympathy for the Promised Land may also have been subdued by numerous accounts of the incompatibility of the English language—only the prophet Jansson's disciples and those surrounding Danjel in the novel *The Emigrants* believed that they would be able to speak English fluently at the time of arrival. A maid in Minneapolis told her sister in 1888 that the hardest time "is the first half-year when one does not know the language." The language difficulties were made considerably easier by the helpfulness of the surroundings, according to Johan Carlsson in Oakland, Wisconsin: "The language is not a problem here in America, there are many Swedes and Norwegians here so when the Englishman hears what language one speaks, he learns to adapt his speech so we understand each other's meaning" (1869). In an undated letter, a maid notes that it is "much nicer to speak English than Swedish and it shouldn't be too difficult to learn now that it doesn't sound so funni" [*sic*], which she proves with a few lines in English: "I can say that we *häfd Swid parti last Sandi najt and de must fun we was nott mor and two girls but latse boys o wi just meck fam for erve day*. I will end with many dear greetings to you greet mother and father and everyone I know. Signed by Emma Anderson."

Because women often wrote, the America letter is our best source of information about how the emigrants experienced the family and home life. The farmer's wife's hard work is pictured in many letters. For example: "I wash clothes for other people almost every day all year, but I have several little ones and a lot to do, as you can understand. . . . I sew all the children's clothes and knit everything for all of us, both for our hands and feet. . . . I have washed clothes for other people every Christmas Eve . . . and on the day after Christmas I usually iron clothes" (1913).

A growing number of single young women were drawn to "American families" in Chicago, Minneapolis, New York and other magnets for girls,

where the "Swedish maid" became the trademark for dependable and cheap help in the home. However, from the girls' perspective, the conditions were fit for a queen, with their own rooms, days off and, on top of that, good wages. Because the most attractive maid positions were in the city, the daughters of the country and small towns often became city people. This was particularly noticeable in Chicago, where the big Swedish colony was characterized by a surplus of women for long periods of time. From 1880 at least every tenth maid in Chicago was from Sweden and, at the turn of the century, 62 percent of America's 57,000 working Swedish-born women worked as maids or waitresses.

The female emigrants, who were bullied in their home country, became busy writers of letters, openly encouraging their sisters at home to follow them. The greetings from America's "Swedish maids" are probably our best example of the America letter's power as emigration recruiter. The letters' reliability was raised above all doubt for the female readers, who wanted to leave milk stools and domination by master farmers. These letters were written by close acquaintances and could hardly be questioned!

The sensational facts that the hired girl could quit her position at any time and draw weekly wages are discussed in a letter from a woman from Västergötland in 1891: "I still have the same position as I took before Christmas. Here, it is not like in Sweden that one has to stand (stay employed) until the end of the year. Here, no one has to stand more than a week if no one likes it. Here, one is paid at the end of the week." The generous wage conditions inspired Mina Wibeck in Chicago to write the following extravagant wording in a letter to her sister Cari in Västervik (1871): "A woman here can do rather well with her own earnings support herself and her husband without the husband's earnings. Because this is what I have done ever since I came here."

The light duties of the maid are apostrophized several times in the many letters from Lina Eriksson, a farmer's daughter, to her parents' home in Bräcke-Hoby in Blekinge. For example on 10 December 1882 she explains that men's lives are harder than women's in America and further notes: "the girls here have good lives. I shouldn't complain because I couldn't have it any better, we are three maids so we have a lot of fun. I have even been to the circus and looked around and have seen many nice things since I came here." In a letter written by Lina a few days later, the maid's position is praised in the following passage: "I certainly don't have much to do here compared to a maid in Sweden. . . . there are positions here where the maids live very well, yes, like the most distinguished ladies."

It must have been considered unbelievable by readers, who were pushed around by stingy employers, that a maid enjoyed Sunday and Thursday afternoons off and also was left to herself and enjoyed a warm and nice home. "My employers went out, so I'm in charge here now," begins a letter from Elisabeth Lindström in Brooklyn to Gertrud in Hofors in 1914. In a later letter

she jadedly notes that "today is Sunday again, so I'm as free as a bird and have nothing else to do than write."

The enthusiasm from the "Swedish maids" in the cities was sometimes replaced by discouraged, sometimes bitter outpourings. The letter writers' sense of not belonging in an environment where danger might lurk in the street corners could be noticed between the lines. Many girls had the misfortune to end up working for demanding employers. Klara Andersson in Chicago wrote the following to her sister in 1883: "Well, you'd better believe that I work harder here than I ever did before so I'm sweating profusely, that's what you have to do when you come here."

Also the young men's work and living conditions are outlined in the treasure of letters from America. It was common that newly arrived young men went to work at the enormous railroad construction sites. Others were recruited to working teams in the big forests. The continuous demand by the construction industry made even more young men into city people. The necessity to save cash for investments also forced many farmers to accept seasonal work of various kinds.

Frank Pettersson writes in 1882 about the hard life of a greenhorn in Minnesota who neither knew English nor had any professional skills: "You wonder what kind of work I do, I work at the railroad at Kennedy, a station south of Hallock and a day's wage is one dollar and 65 cents a day and board costs \$3.75 a week. . . . we are six men and mostly Swedes but have an English foreman so I learn how to speak English here." Young John A. Andersson, who together with a friend worked hard for a mining company in Colorado, found an expressive way to describe the hardship: "We hardly think about girls now, much less see any, but we are paid well here, so we'll have to hang in here until spring at least" (1887). Andrew Melin in Spencer Brook, Minnesota, also had a hard life: "As you have heard, we have been in the timber forest this winter. We finished there in the middle of March. This was hard work, because I was new and was hired by the toughest driver (foreman) in this county (Isanty) [*sic*], he had two camps, or *kojor* in Swedish. There were 14 men in each camp."

In this way, it seems an endless number of stories and feelings can be found in the deep well of America letters. Sometimes, the fates of the emigrants covering several decades will emerge to the persistent reader. Some successions of letters stretch from generation to generation and prove the durability of the chain stretched across the Atlantic by the emigrants. However, the majority of the wealth of letters provide only glimpses into the life of the emigrant. The letter writer emerges partly in sporadic letters, and then he or she is again surrounded by the silence of history. If one attempts to lay a mosaic picture of such pieces, however, a timeless and deeply human picture of breaking up from the old and adjusting to the new emerges. With the America letter in hand it is

possible to perceive, like the King of Flowers, Carl von Linné, did, how the general picture is depicted in the seemingly unimportant and insignificant.

Sources and Literature

The Swedish Emigrant Institute's collection of letters.

Anderek, Eric H. "Emigrationen från Pjätteryds socken." *Hyltén Cavallius-Föreningens Årsbok*, 1941.

Barton, H. Arnold. *Brev från löftets land. Svenskar berättar om Amerika 1840-1914*. Askild & Kärnekull, 1991.

Beijbom, Ulf. *Svenskamerikanskt. Människor och förhållanden i Svensk-Amerika*. Emigrantinstitutets Vänner, 1990.

———. *Mot löftets land. Den svenska utvandringen*. LT, 1995.

———. *Amerikaminnen. Berättelser i utvandrabygd*. Norstedts, 1996.

"Breven berättar om dalfolk i Amerika." *Emigration från Dalarna. Dalarnas hembygdsbok 1966*.

Lindblad, Hans. *Tur och retur Amerika. Utvandrama som förändrade Sverige*. Fischer, 1995.

Widén, Albin. *Amerikaemigrationen i dokument*. Prisma, 1966.

———. *När Svensk-Amerika grundades*. Borås (no date).

Øverland, Orm, and Steinar Kjaerheim, *Fra Amerika til Norge. Norske utvandrerbrev 1-III*. Solum Forlag, Oslo, 1992-93.