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# “YOU SPEAK VERY GOOD ENGLISH FOR A SWEDE”: LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND PERSISTENCE IN MAINE’S SWEDISH COLONY

BY KATHERINE HOVING

*In the summer of 1870, a small group of Swedish immigrants arrived in northern Maine with the intention of establishing a farming colony in a place they called New Sweden. Despite many difficulties, the community has persisted and maintained a strong sense of its Swedish heritage. A demographic study of those who lived in the Swedish colony during its first sixty years suggests that language retention played an important role in keeping both the community and its identity alive.*

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**A**MERICANS have long been fascinated with the idea of wilderness and the hearty souls who strove, as nineteenth-century writers so often said, to transform it into a garden. For many in the nineteenth century, the Maine woods had a special sort of wildness and mystique, promoted by the writings of Henry David Thoreau and other literary figures.<sup>1</sup> Thus, when a band of Swedish immigrants arrived to begin an agricultural colony in Aroostook County in 1870, their saga immediately caught the attention of their contemporaries. The story of these “pioneers” is a romantic one and has been told ever since in language designed to appeal to the imagination. However, the experience of this small, relatively isolated ethnic community is far more than simply a good story. A demographic study of the families and individuals who remained within the community underscores the role of language in the processes of immigration, community formation, and the promotion of population stability in rural areas. The continued use of

the Swedish language in New Sweden from its founding in 1870 to World War II is just one indication of cultural persistence in Maine's Swedish colony. Through the influence of those who remained in the community and shared their customs and culture with succeeding generations, New Sweden's "Swedishness" shaped not only its own history, but also influenced the development of communities throughout New England through the subsequent migration of its colonists.

The story of a new Sweden in Maine, as it has commonly been told, bears a strong resemblance to the American myth of the "ever advancing frontier," first promoted by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1896. In this drama, independent-minded settlers carve out of the savage, untamed forestlands an agrarian land of democracy and prosperity, unassisted by government. The reality of this community's experience, however, was far more complex. Rather than an independent effort by determined settlers, the Swedish colony—as the community has been called since its earliest days—was planned from the start, with the explicit consent and support of the Maine state legislature. In addition, although the land that the Swedes settled was, for the most part, uncleared and had not been previously settled by Europeans, it was located less than twelve miles from the bustling town of Caribou and within twenty miles of the long established Acadian towns of the St. John Valley.<sup>2</sup>

The origins of Maine's Swedish colony can be traced as much to the Statehouse in Augusta as to the streets of Göteborg, the Swedish port from which most of the immigrants sailed. The official movement to encourage immigration from Scandinavia to Maine stemmed from an interest in settling Maine's northernmost country, and began as early as 1861, when Governor Israel Washburn mentioned the topic in an address to the state legislature. Set aside during the war years and in their immediate aftermath, Governor Joshua Chamberlain picked up the theme again in earnest in 1869, when he urged the formation of a commission to study the issue. Though not without reservations, the legislature passed a resolution on March 12 of that year appointing three commissioners to visit Aroostook County and prepare a report on the most effective means of settling the area.<sup>3</sup>

At this time, Aroostook, the largest county in the state at 6,408 square miles, was still thinly populated by Europeans, and relatively little land had been cleared for farming. Political instability as well as geographic isolation had deterred settlement for much of the previous century. Prior to the signing of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842, Maine's northern boundary with New Brunswick and Quebec had been

in dispute. The border set between the English provinces and the new United States by the 1783 treaty of Paris was vague, using a river and a set of highlands to mark a border on land that had never been surveyed. Though a joint team of surveyors settled the eastern boundary in 1796, the question of the highlands remained in dispute well into the nineteenth century. By the 1830s, the issue had become explosive. The struggle for control of the forests, and particularly the white pine, was at the heart of the conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Following statehood in 1820, Maine gained control of half of the unsettled land within its boundaries while Massachusetts retained the other half. It quickly became the state's policy to dispose of the land, which it classified either as "settling land" or "wild lands," by selling it to individuals or speculators. The sale of land became an important source of revenue, funding major projects like the construction of the State House in Augusta. It also suited the objectives of Maine's political leaders, who, like most of their contemporaries, did not value wilderness for its own sake but rather wished to see the state's wild lands put into production. The state, however, could not prevent the theft, or unauthorized cutting, of timber on these distant lands, and the loss of mature white pines was particularly devastating to land values. Agents representing Maine and Massachusetts claimed that more than a quarter of the saleable white pines on public land were stolen by 1825, a figure likely exaggerated but nonetheless indicative of the very real alarm on the part of government officials.<sup>5</sup>

The loss of timber decreased the value of the state's wild lands and made it more difficult to find buyers. Even more frustrating for Maine's partisans, however, was the fact that profits from the stolen trees literally flowed out of the state and into New Brunswick. Rivers were the only viable means of transporting timber out of the Maine woods, and Aroostook County's rivers flowed into the St. John, a large river that met the sea at the New Brunswick port of the same name. Mainers believed that New Brunswickers were profiting from depredations on land that rightfully belonged to Maine.<sup>6</sup>

Several inflammatory incidents took place during the 1830s, and by 1839 the *Bangor Whig and Courier* proclaimed that Maine had "had enough of diplomacy." By February of that year, nearly two thousand members of the Maine militia were in the disputed territory, with two companies of provincial infantrymen and British regulars positioned just across the St. John. Before any bloodshed, however, American President Martin Van Buren sent the Mexican War hero Winfield Scott to dif-



This sketch memorializes the signing of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty in 1842 which established the Northeast boundary between the United States and Canada and helped to promote settlement in Aroostook county. *Collections of the Maine Historical Society.*

fuse the situation. As an outsider, Scott was able to calm tempers and allow both sides to back down while still saving face. Soon thereafter formal negotiations began, and the boundary was finally settled by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty on August 4, 1842. The northern border set by the treaty followed the course of the St. John and St. Francis Rivers.<sup>7</sup>

Before settlement of the controversy, relatively few Americans were willing to risk migrating into disputed territory. The population of Aroostook in 1840 was only about 8,000, most of whom were Acadians, French-speaking people living in the St. John Valley, with no strong ties to either government. Following the treaty, with encouragement from the Maine legislature, the population of the county began to increase. It nearly doubled between 1850 and 1860, growing from 12,529 to 22,479

in that decade. During the controversy, more land had been surveyed, roads had been built, and a great deal of encouraging information gathered on the fertility of the soil and the value of the forests. However, even this growth left the area sparsely settled, with most residents clustered along the St. John, or near the eastern border towns of Houlton, Presque Isle, or Caribou.<sup>8</sup>

In order to encourage settlement on the lands still controlled by the state, Maine's legislature passed a Homestead Act in 1850. Similar to the more famous federal legislation, which would come a dozen years later, this law offered state land in parcels of 160 acres at fifty cents an acre. A further provision added that the cost of the land might be paid through labor on the public roads. By the time the state's immigration commission came to visit in 1869, much of the land had already been sold. One township, however, known in surveyor's terms as Township 15, Range 3, remained glaringly vacant. Located about 12 miles from the town of Caribou, the township had been surveyed in 1859 and divided into lots in 1861. No takers, however, had emerged and, moreover, several families living in the northern part of the neighboring township (later called Woodland) had abandoned their claims by 1869, complaining of isolation and limited prospects for increased settlement.<sup>9</sup>

Determined to see the last of the State's land put into production, the commissioners returned to the capitol in Augusta and presented their plan to the legislature in early 1870. After presenting a glowing assessment of Aroostook's soil—described as easily worked and free of rocks or stones—and agricultural potential, the commissioners turned to the issue of encouraging settlement. Frankly acknowledging that “men do not willingly leave a mild climate for a colder one,” they all but ruled out the possibility of settling northern Maine with Americans. However, citing the similarity of the land and climate to that of Scandinavia, along with the relatively shorter winters and longer days, they predicted that “Aroostook, with its winter, which we think long and cold, will be a Southern Paradise to the Swedish settler.”<sup>10</sup>

Dwelling at length on the efforts of other states and Canada to recruit immigrants, the commissioners concluded that “it seems almost suicidal for Maine to continue longer idle.” They recommended the appointment of a Commissioner of Immigration, who would travel to Sweden, recruit a colony of immigrants, and lead them back to the chosen township. Full of optimism for the success of their scheme, they were nonetheless careful to cushion their plan with the caution that it was merely an “experiment.”<sup>11</sup>

In one of the three commissioners, William Widgery Thomas, the idea of a Swedish colony in the wilderness found its most enduring friend. The scion of an affluent and powerful Portland family, Thomas was only 23 years old when Abraham Lincoln appointed him as wartime counsel to Göteborg, Sweden. During his years in this port city, which was the center of emigration from Sweden, Thomas watched and helped facilitate a wave of immigration which by-passed his beloved Maine entirely.<sup>12</sup>

Determined that Maine should have its share of immigrants from a land he had grown to admire, Thomas campaigned untiringly for his dream of a colony of “intelligent, industrious Swedish farmers,” to settle the last of the State’s land and turn the wilderness of Aroostook County into a garden. On March 23, 1870, Maine’s legislature granted his wish, passing an act creating a Board of Immigration. Two days later, the board, which consisted of the governor, land agent, and secretary of state, appointed Thomas as its commissioner.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Thomas’ enthusiasm for the Swedes as a people, the acceptance of his grand scheme depended as much upon external circumstances as upon his promotion of the plan. For those of a more prosaic turn of mind, such as Governor Chamberlain, immigration was a solution to a very specific problem. Swedish immigrants were attractive less for their own merits than that they provided an acceptable solution for Maine’s most vexing political problem—outmigration. Though it took on increasing urgency after the Civil War, the dilemma was not new. Outmigration from Maine had begun as early as 1816, the year known locally as “Eighteen-hundred-and-froze-to-death.” That year, in which there was a frost in every month, convinced many that Maine was no place for a farmer and marked the beginning of an exodus in favor of the newly secured lands of the Ohio valley.<sup>14</sup>

The exodus continued after the “year of no summer,” peaking in the middle part of the nineteenth century. In an 1867 address, Governor Chamberlain drew the legislature’s attention to this issue. “It is a serious matter” he told them, “to have five thousand a year in excess of the number we receive from abroad . . . emigrate from the state. Yet a study of the last census returns will show that this was the balance against us for each of the previous ten years, and doubtless the proportion is even greater since the war.” In fact, a high causality rate among Maine soldiers and the decision of many veterans to seek their future elsewhere contributed to an absolute decline in population during the decade of the Civil War.

The only other state to experience a similar loss of population during this period was neighboring New Hampshire.<sup>15</sup>

Population loss was a serious concern because of its effect on both the economy and political status of the state. "Men are the wealth of a state," lamented the commissioners in their 1869 report, "and with natural facilities unsurpassed, Maine is poor for the lack of men." Meanwhile, the failure to grow meant a loss of representation in the national government, particularly in proportion to the rapidly growing western states. For decades, politicians in Maine had struggled with the problem of outmigration with little success. By the late 1860s the governor and others concluded that the only solution was to place Maine in the path of the great wave of migration from Europe sweeping over the rest of the country. As Chamberlain expressed it, "If we cannot keep our sons at home, let us bring in our cousins."<sup>16</sup>

For Chamberlain and others, the Swedes, with their fair skin, Protestant faith, and reputation for diligence and temperance, were deemed more likely to play the role of cousins than the Irish and French-Canadian immigrants who had already begun to come into the state in large numbers. "These Scandinavians are of kin with us," Chamberlain claimed in his 1868 speech to the legislature, "and nearest to us in speech of any in the world. They know the forest and the sea, and would readily assimilate with us in language, habits and institutions." In other words, they could not be more different than the forces of "Rum, Hunkerism, Catholicism, and Corruption" vilified by nativist political leaders like Portland's Neal Dow the decade before.<sup>17</sup>

Though there was opposition in the legislature to any scheme which involved direct state aid, Thomas and his allies carried the day, and he set sail for Sweden within a month's time. He established an office in Göteborg, and set agents to work throughout the country to recruit immigrants. Thomas himself "traveled extensively . . . distributing documents, and talking with the people in the villages, at their homes, by the roadside, and wherever or whenever I met them." Thomas set fairly high standards for his immigrants. In addition to paying their own passage, he required character references, testifying that each would "make a good and thrifty citizen of our good state of Maine." Despite the restrictions, candidates appeared in short order, and by June 23, the 51 chosen colonists, drawn from all parts of Sweden, assembled at Göteborg to prepare for their departure.<sup>18</sup>

The group, which included twenty-two men, eleven women, and





As commissioner of the state Board of Immigration in the 1870s, William Widgery Thomas was the moving force behind the establishment of Maine's Swedish colony. *Collections of the Maine Historical Society.*

eighteen children, set sail for their new home in Maine on June 25, 1870. All of the men were farmers, and many also knew a skilled trade; the group included a blacksmith, a basket maker, two carpenters, a wheelwright, a wooden-shoe maker, a tailor and a baker. Thomas described the women as "neat and industrious, tidy housewives, and diligent workers at the spinning-wheel and loom." Furthermore, he noted, "all were tall and stalwart, with blue eyes, light hair, and cheerful, honest faces; there was not a physical defect or blemish among them."<sup>19</sup>

On July 13, the colonists arrived on the North American coast at

Halifax, Nova Scotia. Traveling by river and horse teams, it took more than a week to reach the land set aside for them, T15 R3, now renamed New Sweden. On July 23, 1870, Thomas and his Swedes arrived at what they optimistically called *Det Utlofvade Landet*—"the Promised Land."<sup>20</sup>

The "experiment," as Thomas called his plan, was remarkable for its speed of execution; only four months after the legislation permitting the colony, the settlers had been recruited, approved, and transported to Maine. In fact, Thomas' efficiency took the Maine government by surprise. The state had promised the colonists a log house and one hundred acres of free land, five acres of which were to have been cleared before they came; but upon their arrival there stood only six partially completed homes and little cleared land. The Swedes and their commissioner passed their first night in *Det Utlofvade Landet*, "the supplies and the commissioner of immigration . . . stowed in one house, and the Swedes and their baggage packed in the other five."<sup>21</sup>

Despite the unfailing optimism of Thomas and other boosters of the colony, it was a challenging and sometimes heartbreaking undertaking from the first. Maria Bodin Sundstrom, one of the first Swedes to set foot in the township, later remembered her first impression of her new home: "New Sweden,' I thought. '*Herre min skopare som här ser ut*' [God in heaven, what a sight.] Over our heads the tree branches hung so thick and impenetrable that we could not catch a glimpse of the sky. The heat was unbearable. The water from the pools tasted bad and Thomas had forbidden us to drink such water, but as none other could be found, we all three [Maria, her brother and sister] had to drink of it."<sup>22</sup>

The very first religious ceremony held in the new community, the day after they arrived, was a sad one; the funeral of an infant, nine-month-old Hilma C. Clase, who died during the journey though Canada. Her parents refused to leave her along the way, so the child's body accompanied the wagon train and was buried in the hastily marked New Sweden cemetery.<sup>23</sup>

The midsummer arrival meant that it was too late for crops to be planted that season. With the exception of two acres of turnips sown immediately on the public lots and harvested in November, the state provided all of the colony's food and transported it from Caribou or across the Canadian border. Between June 1870 and February 1871, the state spent more than \$10,000 on the colony, much of it going for transporting goods and supplies through the forest to the settlers.<sup>24</sup>

Though the second season brought successful harvests, state aid

continued until 1873. It took most settlers a year to clear and improve the land for planting and in the meantime, families had to be fed. The small group that came the first year could not produce enough to feed friends and relations who followed. Still, new settlers continued to arrive in great numbers; so many, in fact, that Thomas felt obliged to divert some of them into jobs elsewhere in Maine, at least temporarily.<sup>25</sup>

The rapid influx in the first few years was due largely to the efforts of G. W. Schroder, Thomas' chief recruiting agent in Sweden. Following Thomas' instructions to "make your great effort . . . and pour the tide in upon us," Schroder advertised the colony widely, buying two columns in the weekly emigrant's paper *Amerika* for six months, issuing five thousand copies of a circular describing the advantages of settling in Maine, and placing ads in all of the major Swedish newspapers. A second wave of settlers began to arrive in the spring of 1871, culminating in the arrival of 260 Swedes in the last week of May, and prompting Thomas to write to Schroder, "You are to be congratulated for your success, but I fear it may prove our ruin."<sup>26</sup>

The difficulty of accommodating so many newcomers meant that many shared the experience of Pehr Larson, who came to Maine in 1872: "When we arrived at Woodstock [New Brunswick] we were met by Mr. Thomas. We did not know him. He knew who we were. He started to tell us about our journey up to the settlement, how difficult it was to transport food for the number of settlers already in New Sweden. Were we to continue up we would starve, on account of bad roads and scarcity of provisions. Therefore he proposed for us to stay over at Kingman [Maine] where he had secured jobs for us all." After a few months, Larson and the members of his group were able to make their way to New Sweden and claim homesteads in the township. Others who were similarly diverted likely settled in other parts of Maine, or continued farther west.<sup>27</sup>

Crop failures, dissension, and even an attempt on William W. Thomas' life by a disgruntled settler marked the early years of New Sweden, but settlers also remembered moments of courage, hard work, and pleasure. A story frequently told by Thomas as well as others was that of Kjersti Carlson, who during her husband's illness, cut down cedar trees, sawed and shaved them to make shingles, and then carried the bunch, weighing over sixty pounds, to the store three and a half miles away in order to obtain food and supplies for her family. Another early settler remembered his wife giving birth to their third child unaided, in the midst of a snowstorm: "I did not dare to leave my wife alone [to get help].

What was I to do? She found a way out. 'You keep the cabin warm and bring warm water, and I'll take care of myself.' And that's what she did." Observers spoke frequently of the Swedes' work ethic and their speed in carving farms out of the forest, praising them for thrift, neatness and thoroughness in their work.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the hardships, settlers found time for celebrations and social occasions. They held the first wedding in the colony within a month of arrival, and lay minister Nil Olsson led Sunday worship services every week. In June, 1871, the first *Midsommer* (Midsummer) celebration was held, in observance of the longest day of the year. In Sweden, where one-seventh of the country is above the Arctic Circle, and winters are long and very dark, the celebration of the solstice is among the most important holidays of the year. As in the homeland, New Sweden's settlers decorated the *majstång* (similar to an English Maypole) with garlands of flowers and sang and danced to familiar Swedish tunes.<sup>29</sup>

The community erected its first public building in the fall of 1870 on a reserved lot in the center of New Sweden township. Called the *capitolium*, or capitol, by the Swedes, the state of Maine owned both the building and lot, giving rise to the saying the Maine was the only state with two capitols. The capitol served for many years as a central meeting place, government center, church, and school house.<sup>30</sup>

In June, 1871, a regularly ordained Lutheran minister, Andrew Wiren, arrived in the colony and began conducting services at the capitol. By 1890, New Sweden township had churches representing three denominations. Two more Swedish congregations were formed in the neighboring town of Stockholm after the turn of the century. Sunday school, an important social organization for children, began in 1872, and although the children were expected to learn their Bible in English and Swedish, they were also were allowed to play and visit with children from other parts of the settlement. Celebrating Christmas brought particular fun to Sunday School. After 1875, the children had the privilege of selecting, cutting and decorating the community's Christmas tree.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to celebrating traditional holidays like *Midsommer* and the *Santa Lucia* festival in December, the Swedish colonists also celebrated their own unique history. On the tenth anniversary of the colony's founding, the festivities drew such notables as former Governor Joshua Chamberlain, Senator and former Vice President Hannibal Hamlin, and Governor Daniel F. Davis. The event included speeches by many of the honored guests (including one by William W. Thomas that reportedly lasted over two hours), music by the New Sweden band and a



Most of the Swedish immigrants raised potatoes which became the county's dominant crop in the 1890s. *Author's collection.*

“sumptuous collation” served by the ladies of the colony. “The Anniversary” as the date of arrival was always called, continued to be celebrated regularly, with another major observance at the twenty-fifth anniversary in 1895.<sup>32</sup>

Outside of formal celebrations, the settlers also found time for recreation outdoors. Nearby Madawaska Lake became a favorite spot for swimming, boating, and picnicing early on. In the long cold winters, too, settlers made their own fun. Many observers noted the Swedish *skidor*, or skis, as a remarkable novelty, and the New Sweden settlers are credited by some students of the sport for introducing downhill skiing to the state of Maine. In later years, the Swedes' winter carnival became legendary for its range of creative events, including an obstacle course completed while on skis.<sup>33</sup>

Marks of the community's progress came quickly. A free public school met for the first time November 13, 1871, and a school building was built in 1872. Also in 1872, a good road to Caribou was completed. In July 1873, a post office was established, and that same October, 133 men publicly declared their intention to become American citizens.<sup>34</sup>

Civil government also evolved over time. Initially, the township of New Sweden could not be legally organized under Maine law because there were no resident American citizens to begin the proceedings. For

the first two years, Thomas acted as *de facto* mayor, judge, and jury, taking it upon himself to “personally settle all disputes between the colonists, organize the labor on roads and buildings, and arrange all matters of general concern.” Finding the details becoming overwhelming as the population increased, Thomas ceded his authority to a committee of ten, nine elected by the colonists, and the pastor serving as a tenth. Finally, in 1876, after the waiting period required by law for the first settlers to become citizens had passed, New Sweden was officially organized as a plantation and elected its first officials recognized by the state.<sup>35</sup>

All direct state aid had ended in 1873, though the colony remained under the oversight of the state land agent until it achieved plantation status. At the same time, Thomas ended his hands-on role in the community, moving on to other political positions despite his continuing fondness for the people he called “*Mina barn i skogen*” (my little children in the woods). As he noted in his 1873 final report as Commissioner of Immigration, “The Swedish immigration enterprise is a success. A colony of 600 Swedes is comfortably and securely established on our wilderness domain, and 900 of their relatives and friends are furnishing needed and valuable labor throughout the state.”<sup>36</sup>

Over time, the original settlement expanded to include two more predominantly Swedish townships, Stockholm and Westmanland, and



Sunday School began in 1872 and became an important cultural activity in New Sweden. These children are attending a picnic, ca. 1946. *Author's collection.*

parts of the neighboring townships of Woodland and Perham. Most of the Swedes made their living as farmers, growing potatoes, which had become the county's dominant crop by the 1890s. The Bangor and Aroostook railroad was extended north from Caribou in 1899, passing through New Sweden and Stockholm to Van Buren on the Canadian border. Hard on the heels of the railroad, new industry began to develop. Several large lumber mills were built on the Little Madawaska River in Stockholm, which helped diversify the economy of the area, and attracted large numbers of French and English-Canadian immigrants as well as Yankees from southern Maine.<sup>37</sup>

Much of the Swedish population remained on the land, but the mills provided opportunities for younger men to earn money and buy their own farms. Mill employees also provided consumers for those Swedes who could supplement their agricultural activities by practicing a skilled trade, taking in borders, or becoming merchants. At their peak in the early 1920s, about 330 people were employed in Stockholm's mills.<sup>38</sup>

During the first two and half decades of the twentieth century, the population of the Swedish colony increased, though more slowly than in its earliest years. Swedish immigration to America slowed to a trickle during World War I and never recovered, largely due to economic and political changes within the homeland. Still, fueled by natural increase and the success of the mills, the overall population of the colony grew to an estimated high of about 5,000 in the early 1920s. The Swedish population grew as well, though more slowly than the total. All of the towns saw their number of Swedes as a percentage of the population decrease to their lowest levels ever in 1920, though Swedes remained the majority in New Sweden and Westmanland.<sup>39</sup>

Throughout the time period of this study, the Swedish colony maintained and celebrated its unique heritage, in the midst of people of other ethnic groups. The observance of traditional Swedish holidays, worship in traditional Swedish denominations, and the embrace of the history of the colony, celebrated annually, all contributed to this sense of identity.<sup>40</sup> So too, did close family ties, and the persistence in the community of a core of individuals who, deliberately or not, kept much of their heritage alive.

Though the establishment of this Swedish colony was unique in its active promotion by the state of Maine and its non-Swedish commissioner of immigration, in other ways New Sweden strongly resembles the experience of other Swedish-American communities. Lars Ljung-



Lumber mills constructed in Stockholm at the turn of the century diversified both the population and the economy, attracting new immigrants and providing opportunities for young Swedes. *Author's collection.*

mark, in his book *Swedish Exodus*, considers the process of immigration during the nineteenth century and observes that most Swedish immigration in this period can be categorized as group and stage migration. In other words, most of the initial Swedish settlement in North America occurred when groups of immigrants, most often relatives and friends, left Sweden and settled together in the same area. Examples include the Pine Lake or New Uppsala colony in Wisconsin, settled in 1841; the Bishop Hill settlement in Illinois, begun in 1846; the Vasa colony in Minnesota, founded in 1853; and significantly, New Sweden, Maine. The Maine colony differed from the other three, in that it was the only one officially organized by a state government. The others were formed through the initiative of the settlers themselves, for political, religious, or economic reasons. Each of these colonies, however, played a similar role as “mother colonies” or “way stations” for later immigrants.<sup>41</sup>

In Ljungmark’s interpretation, these “emigrant transition stations” were important because they eased an immigrant’s entry into their new country. By joining an established community that likely included friends or relatives who had made the move first, the immigrant would find a comforting familiarity in the midst of the strangeness of a new



culture. They would hear Swedish spoken, be able to take part in familiar religious observances, and to celebrate traditional holidays. Later, perhaps having learned English and something of the complexities of American society, they might move on in search of cheap land and new opportunities. In many cases, they would again move in a group, establishing new “daughter colonies,” which would still maintain a sense of Swedish identity.<sup>42</sup>

In the case of New Sweden, Maine, Ljungmark theorized that migrants left the colony and settled in cities throughout New England, often as the first Swedes in their new communities. In some cases, they too formed daughter colonies, by attracting fellow immigrants both from the Maine colony and from across the sea. These migrants also maintained a strong connection with the Swedish community in Worcester, Massachusetts, despite its independent and contemporaneous origins.<sup>43</sup>

If Ljungmark’s model is appropriate, we would expect to see differences in the population of people who stayed in New Sweden, and those who moved on. Theoretically, those who remained would be responsible for maintaining the core of “Swedishness” that Ljungmark found so critical to the functioning of a mother colony. This group as a whole would be expected to be more traditional, maintaining their language, culture, and traditions for a longer period of time. In a sense, those who remained would be responsible for maintaining the Swedish flavor of the settlement so necessary for drawing new immigrants for the first stage of their American experience. On the other hand, those who moved on, as a group, would be expected to embrace American culture, language, and ideology more quickly. In its simplest terms, this model suggests that individuals who remained in one of these mother colonies sought literally to create a “New Sweden” in America. Financial hardship or religious persecution might force them to leave their homeland, but they could recreate that community in their new land. Those who used such settlements as “emigrant transition stations” were less tied to the old ways and anxious for opportunity in any form it might take.

By using data from the federal census to compare particular characteristics of the groups who stayed and those who moved on, Ljungmark’s migration model can be tested. Census questions such as those asking about primary language, help to determine if there was any difference between those who persisted in New Sweden colony, and those who did not.

Used here, persistence is a quantitative term that describes the percentage of individuals who remain in a given geographic area for a spe-

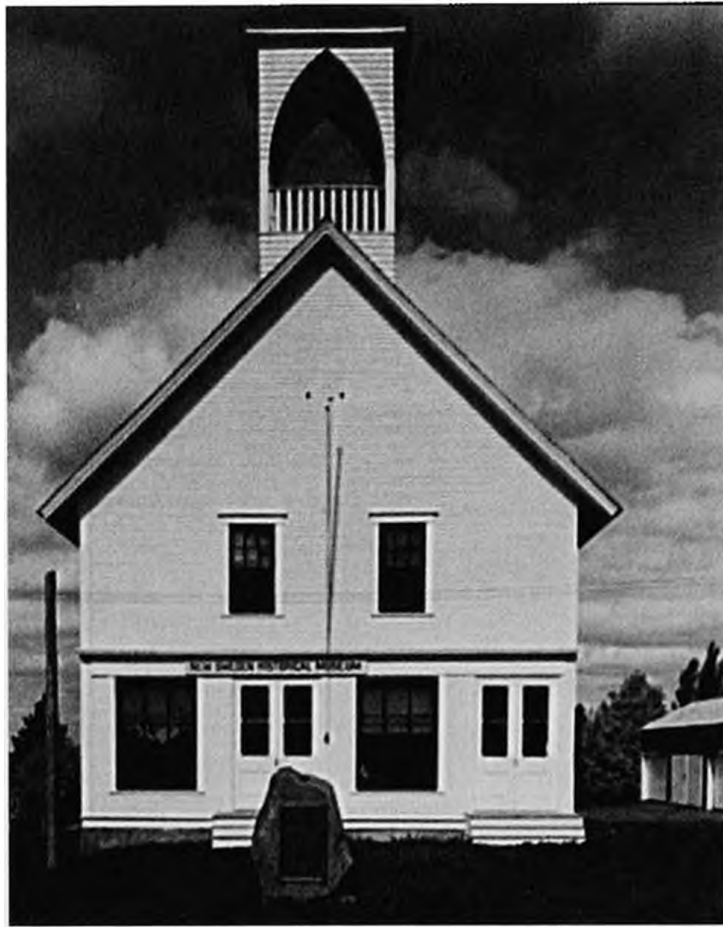
cific period of time. The geographic area under consideration includes the three historically Swedish townships of New Sweden, Stockholm, and Westmanland, as well as the adjacent portions of Woodland and Perham that are included under the broader title of “the Swedish colony.” Because the most important data source for population change in the United States is the federal census, the persistent are defined as those who remained within this community for at least one decade, between 1870, when the colony was founded, and 1920, the last year that census data is currently available to researchers.<sup>44</sup>

Census takers recorded information on the primary language spoken by an individual at the time of the census enumeration. This data is crucial because of all the information available from the census, it is the one which speaks most directly to cultural persistence. Using census data on language, however, is complicated by variation in the types of questions posed about language in different census years. In certain years the census taker asked about the primary language spoken by residents. In other years, the enumerator asked only if the respondent spoke English or not. In order to standardize these responses for the purposes of comparison, a couple of assumptions must be made. First, Swedish immigrants who did not speak English spoke Swedish as their primary language. Second, those who indicated that their primary language was Swedish did not speak English at all, or did so infrequently and haltingly.

The identification of Swedish as the primary spoken language could indicate three different characteristics. Inability to speak English could denote less education and a lower social class, which is sometimes linked to mobility. It could be a sign of age, because older generations of immigrants are often less likely to learn a new language than their children and grandchildren who are raised in a new country. Last, it could signify traditionalism and the desire to remain within a culturally similar group.

By comparing two populations from the same community, we would expect to find roughly equal proportions of English and Swedish speakers in both the persistent and non-persistent groups. The first time that they appeared in the census, however, a higher percentage of persistent reported Swedish as their primary language (23% persistent; 16% non-persistent). More of non-persistent spoke English than would be expected, while less of persistent did so.<sup>45</sup>

In this case, degree of education does not explain the variance, because both groups were quite literate, with an overwhelming percentage of each able to read and write. Most of the adult immigrants would have



The Swedish community celebrated their history of settlement in Maine and established a museum containing relics of the first Swedish settlers at New Sweden. Photograph by Jack Delano, 1940. *Collections of the Farm Security Administration—Office of War Information Photograph Collection (Library of Congress)*.

learned these skills in the Swedish compulsory schools, where attendance until age 15 had been required by law since 1842. Their children, born both abroad and in Maine, attended school in the colony, where the first free public school began in 1871. Education was highly valued in the Swedish community. An early settler who immigrated as a child remembered that in 1876, as a member of a class of about ten children in one of the district schools, he “learned to read, write, cipher, spell and behave [himself].” At the time, he was six years old. By 1900, eleven people out of a population of 868 in New Sweden alone reported their occupation as “school teacher.” Most of these were young, unmarried women, but they also included two men and a married mother of two. By 1902, a visitor noted that there were seven schoolhouses in New Sweden.<sup>46</sup>

Because of the strong emphasis on education both in Sweden and New Sweden, the inability to speak English cannot be attributed to illiteracy. Age may be a stronger component of this difference. The younger members of the community, those who learned to read and write in American schools rather than Swedish ones, were taught their lessons in English. This was often difficult, as teacher Marie Malmquist observed of her 1890 classes: "All problems were knotty when everything they had to learn was in English, and they were just beginning to learn that language." The children's progress was further hampered, she reported, by the fact that "their parents never learned to use the English language," but nonetheless, her scholars "did remarkably well in school, and their thirst for knowledge was not to be thwarted."<sup>47</sup>

Malmquist's account makes the retention of Swedish as a primary language appear generational; that is, adult immigrants were less likely to learn English than their children. But that observation does not account for the difference in language between the persistent and non-persistent populations, until another variable is also considered. Census data shows that those remaining in the community over time were likely to be significantly older when they first appeared in the enumeration than those who moved on. Teenagers and young adults were much more likely to leave the community than their elders, doing so at a significantly higher rate.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the higher percentage of Swedish speakers in the persistent population could also reflect the greater proportion of adult immigrants in this group.

The association of language retention with both age and persistence could indicate that those who remained were more firmly rooted in their own culture and wanted to stay in a community where Swedish was commonly spoken. However, it might just as easily indicate that the ability to speak English was a necessary skill, learned by those who would use it to move on. Those who had mastered this skill were more likely to have the necessary confidence to venture into communities where jobs might be plentiful, but no one else spoke Swedish.

One early visitor to New Sweden noted that "The Swedish men generally speak our language, more or less, but many of the women require an interpreter." Those who interacted with the world beyond the colony, either through school or through business, were more likely to learn English quickly. However, for many settlers in these early years of the community, the Swedish language was still part of daily life. It was spoken in the home, in the church, and even in the schools. While Malmquist's scholars were expected to learn their lessons in English,

enough Swedish apparently was spoken for her lone English pupil, John Wallace, to learn the language—much to his teacher’s surprise: “In his eagerness [to write down a problem] he spoke out loud and in the good old Scanian dialect [from the Swedish province of Skåne], ‘August, får ja läna di talva?’ (‘August, let me borrow your slate.’) And he was not supposed to know a word of Swedish! Startled, we all held our peace for a few minutes. John wondered at the sudden hush. Then there came an outburst of mirth, and not the least embarrassed, John laughed also.”<sup>49</sup>

Swedish was the primary language used in churches and Sunday Schools for many years. When Malmquist began the Madawaska Sunday School near Stockholm in 1891, she instructed her students to “bring along with them father, mother, sister and brother, and a Swedish New Testament.” In her reminiscences of the Jemtland Sunday School, the first in the area, on its sixtieth anniversary, Anna M. Johnson noted that the meetings had been held in Swedish during the first sessions in 1872 and continued to be conducted in Swedish up to the present year, 1932. Likewise, in the Lutheran Church in Stockholm, worship services, Sunday School, and church organizations all were conducted in Swedish until 1937, when one service a month was held in English. For Louis P. Larsson, as a boy in the New Sweden Evangelical Covenant Church during the 1920s and ‘30s, worship in Swedish was the natural course of things. “It seemed to me as a child,” he later remembered, “that communication with God was best achieved in Swedish.”<sup>50</sup>

Swedish books were often among a family’s prized possessions. Elise Olivenbaum Bailey remembered “a copy of the Swedish Bible morocco bound and steel engraved [and] Wallin’s Postilla, a Swedish Book of Psalms, bound in green silk and gilt-edged,” as her father’s treasures. Though their first home was a log cabin with “roughhewn walls plastered with mud and some moss for warmth,” though the beds were on the floor, and the ends of logs were used for chairs, her father had been quick to build a bookshelf that occupied one whole corner of the small dwelling. Gustaf Lindstrom, who grew up to become a minister, remembered “our only books, a Swedish Bible, a book of songs, and a Swedish primer” as “our daily food.” From these books and a Swedish weekly newspaper, as well as from his mother, Lindstrom “got my deep religious convictions, my piety, and my high regard for Swedish literature and song.”<sup>51</sup>

Though the Swedish colony never had its own newspaper, the Lindstrom family was not the only one who got their news in their native language. For one year shortly after the colony’s arrival, a newly founded

Caribou newspaper entitled *The North Star* ran the “Swensk Column” on the front page. This Swedish language column, edited by E. Winberg from New Sweden, ran from January 11, 1872 to January 29, 1873. It contained information and general interest articles, including a translation of W. W. Thomas’ report to the legislature (Wednesday, April 3, 1872), an article called “*Flickors Uppforstran*” (the upbringing of young girls, May 8, 1872), reports from the homeland (including updates on the activities of Queen Louise and Princess Eugenie, June 5, 1872), and local stories on the arrival of new immigrants and the progress of manufacturers in the colony. There were also Swedish-language advertisements in the paper from non-Swedish business owners hoping to gain business from the colonists. The column ran less frequently as time passed, sometimes appearing on inside pages. It finally disappeared all together in 1873, shortly before the paper was sold and moved further south to Presque Isle.<sup>52</sup>

For families like the Lindstroms, the weekly Swedish newspaper was imported from other Swedish communities after the demise of the “Swensk Column.” For reasons of economy, Olof Stadig and his family shared a subscription to a Swedish weekly paper published in Chicago with several other neighboring families. An important part of the emerging Swedish-American identity, such newspapers, originating out of large Swedish communities in cities like Worcester and Chicago, were usually written in “High Swedish,” a more formal language than the regional dialects spoken in immigrant communities. For a community like New Sweden, with immigrants from many regions, “High Swedish” may have been important in assisting communication within the Swedish-American community. The enduring popularity of the old joke about a recent immigrant from one province meeting a Swede from another and going away impressed by how well he had understood the “Yankee,” testifies to these difficulties.<sup>53</sup>

The use of the Swedish language declined in homes and churches during World War II and its aftermath, during an era of American patriotism perhaps reinforced by the proximity of the community to the strategically important Loring Air Force Base. The third and fourth generations, born in the colony of American-born parents, were less likely to become fluent in the language than their parents had been. Even these more Americanized children, however, often learned songs, prayers, and phrases in Swedish. Today, it is not uncommon in New Sweden to hear “*Tack*,” in place of “thank you,” or “*Var så god*,” instead of “you’re welcome,” even from those who may claim to know no Swedish.<sup>54</sup>

The maintenance of their cultural tradition and particularly their retention of the Swedish language ideally suited Maine's Swedish Colony to be just what Lars Ljungmark labeled it: a "mother colony," that would eventually provide "many New England cities and towns with their own Swedish populations." At the same time and in the same way, it fulfilled William W. Thomas' hopes by creating a stable population in the Maine wilderness and by drawing many other Swedes to settle in places like Rockland and Portland. Thomas had confidently predicted at the colony's founding that, "once the colony was fast rooted in our soil, it would thrive and grow of itself, and throughout the future draw to Maine, our fair portion of the Swedish immigration to the United States." Though Thomas could not have foreseen the changes in both Sweden and America that would cause this migration virtually to cease in the twentieth century, his prediction proved true in many ways. The New Sweden Colony did not permanently solve the problem of outmigration from Maine, or even from Aroostook County, but it did thrive and grow of itself throughout the period of this study and beyond. It did become "fast rooted" in Maine's soil, so much so that even for many of those who left, the colony, *Det Utlofvade Landet*, remains home.<sup>55</sup>

## NOTES

1. Richard Judd, Edwin A. Churchill, and Joel W. Eastman, *Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1995), 10.

2. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, ed. Harold P. Simonson (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1963). For responses to Turner, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987) and Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": *A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). For more on the history of Caribou, Maine see Edward Wiggins, *History of Aroostook* (Presque Isle: The Star Herald Press, 1922). On the development of the Acadian towns see esp. Beatrice Craig, "Immigrants in a Frontier Community: Madawaska 1785-1850" *Historie Social* 19 (November 1986): 281.

3. Wiggins, *History of Aroostook*, 224. Joshua L. Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain's Address to the Legislature of the State of Maine, January 1869* (Augusta: Owen and Nash, 1869), 20. W. W. Thomas, P. P. Burleigh and William Small, *Report of the Commissioners on the Settlement of the Public Land in Maine* (Augusta: Sprague, Owen and Nash, 1870), 1.

4. Charles Morrow Wilson, *Aroostook: Our Last Frontier* (Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Daye Press, 1937), 21. Judd, et. al, *Maine: The Pine Tree State*, 350.

5. Judd, et al., *Maine: The Pine Tree State*, 271, 348.
6. *Ibid.*, 348.
7. *Ibid.*, 350-352; also Wilson, *Aroostook*, 23.
8. Wilson, *Aroostook*, 121. George H. Collins, *History of Aroostook: Story of the Development of Aroostook Since the Period Covered by the Early History by Mr. Wiggins* (Presque Isle: Star-Herald Press, 1922), 3. Judd et al., *Maine: The Pine Tree State*, 352.
9. James S. Leamon, "Maine's Swedish Pioneers," *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* 26 (1975): 75. William W. Thomas, "Historical Oration on the Decennial of the Founding of the Swedish Colony in Maine," reprinted in *Centennial History: Maine's Swedish Colony*, ed. Richard Hede, (Caribou: Privately printed, 1970), 22 (hereafter *Centennial History*).
10. Thomas, et. al, "Report of the Commissioners," 6-9.
11. *Ibid.*, 11-14.
12. Leamon, "Maine's Swedish Pioneers," 84-85.
13. "An Act to Promote Immigration and to Facilitate the Settlement of Public Land," *Laws of Maine*, Chapter 173 (1870): 133-134. Thomas, "Historical Oration," 15.
14. Judd, et al., *Maine: The Pine Tree State*, 249.
15. Joshua Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain's Address to the Legislature of the State of Maine, January 1867* (Augusta: Owen and Nash, 1867), 33. Judd, et al., *Maine: The Pine Tree State*, 342.
16. Thomas, et al., "Report of the Commissioners," 7; Joshua Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain's Address to the Legislature of the State of Maine, January 1868* (Augusta: Stevens and Sayward, 1868), 6.
17. Chamberlain, *Address, 1868*, 6; Frank L. Byrne, *Prophet of Prohibition: Neal Dow and his Crusade* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1961), 58-59
18. Thomas, "Historical Oration," 15-16.
19. *Ibid.*, 17
20. *Ibid.*, 20.
21. *Ibid.*, 24.
22. Translated from Marie Malmquist, *Lapptäcke II*, 1929 in *Centennial History*, E-2.
23. Thomas, "Historical Oration," 18, 24.
24. *Ibid.*, 25; *Bill Book, Maine Swedish Colony*, June 18, 1870 to June 17, 1873, Maine State Archives, Augusta, Maine.
25. *Centennial History*, B-4.



26. Thomas, Letter of Feb. 25, 1871, quoted in *Centennial History*, B-3. Thomas, "Historical Oration," 32-33. Thomas, Letter of May 28, 1871, quoted in *Centennial History*, B-4.

27. Translated from Malmquist, *Lapptäcke II*, 1929 in *Centennial History*, E-5 – E-6.

28. There are several versions of the story of the would-be assassin and William W. Thomas. One version occurs in Pehr Larson's reminiscences, translated from Malmquist, *Lapptäcke II*, 1929 in *Centennial History*, E-6-E-7, and "Essays by Arne," in *Centennial History*, M-23. Thomas, "Historical Oration," 40. *The North Star*, Caribou, Me. Aug. 30, 1873. Nils Johansson, translated from Malmquist, *Lapptäcke II*, 1929 in *Centennial History*, E-4. Edward Elwell, *Aroostook: With Some Account of the Excursions thither of the Editors of Maine, in the years 1858 and 1878, and of the Colony of Swedes*. (Portland, Me.: Transcript Printing Company, 1878), 39-41.

29. Thomas "Historical Oration," 28-29, 36. For more on the observation of *Midsommer* in Sweden see Lily Lorénzen, *Of Swedish Ways* (New York: Gramercy Publishing Company, 1986), 255-259.

30. Thomas, "Historical Oration," 30.

31. *Ibid.*, 37. A Lutheran church was founded in 1906 and a Baptist church in 1908. Prior to this, churchgoers would walk the seven miles into New Sweden for services. From Richard Hede, "Stockholm" in *Centennial History*; Olof Stadig letter, c. 1935, quoted in *Centennial History*, J-29.

32. Santa Lucia day is celebrated on December 13, in honor of the saint of legend who, during a severe famine in the province of Värmland, came across the waters of Lake Vänern, bringing food for all the people. The maiden (who as a historical figure lived in second century Italy and whose name means light in Italian) was dressed in white and encircled by a heavenly light. In Sweden's dark winter, Lucia day is celebrated as a festival of lights. For more on this holiday, see Lorénzen, *Of Swedish Ways*, 197-208. Andrew Wiren, Nils Olsson and N. P. Clase, *Celebration of the Decennial Anniversary of the Founding of New Sweden, Maine, July 23, 1880*. Reprinted in *Centennial History*, 1-63. *The Story of New Sweden as Told at the Quarter Centennial History Celebration of the Founding of the Swedish Colony in the Woods of Maine, June 25, 1895*. (Portland: Loring, Short and Harmon, 1896), reprinted in *Centennial History*.

33. Glenn Parkinson, *First Tracks: Stories from Maine's Skiing Heritage*. (Portland, ME: Maine Skiing Inc., Spectrum Print, 1995). For a photograph of this unique event, see Jackie H. Greaves, Stan P. Greaves, and Frank H. Sleeper, *The Old Photograph Series: Presque Isle, Caribou, and New Sweden* (Bath: Alan Sutton, 1994), 35.

34. Thomas, "Historical Oration," 38, 43-45.

35. *Ibid.*, 43. "Warrant for Organization, 1876." Maine State Archives, Augusta, Me.

36. P. P. Burleigh, *Land Agent's Report, 1873* (Augusta: Sprague, Own and Nash, 1874). Thomas, "Commissioner's Report," *Report of the Board of Immigration for 1873* (Augusta: Sprague, Owen and Nash, 1874), 18.

37. Hede, "Stockholm," in *Centennial History*, T-3 to T-4.

38. Ibid.

39. Harald Runblom and Hans Norman, eds., *From Sweden to America: A History of the Migration*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976). Katherine Hoving, "Fast Rooted in Our Soil: Persistence in Maine's Swedish Colony, 1870-1920." (Master's Thesis, University of Maine, 2001), 111-112.

40. While neighboring Woodland and New Sweden both had churches called "Baptist," not a single Swede is listed among the prominent early members of Woodland's Baptist Church, nor a single non-Swede in the other. See Woodland Bicentennial Commission, *One Hundred and Fifteen Years in Woodland, Aroostook County, Maine, 1861-1976* (Woodland: Woodland Bicentennial Commission, 1976,) 10; *Inheritance: First Baptist Church, New Sweden, Maine: One Hundred Years* (New Sweden, 1971), 16-18.

41. Lars Ljungmark, *Swedish Exodus*, rev. ed. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 14-23. The Pine Lake/New Uppsala colony was founded by Gustaf Unonius, an upper-class and idealistic author who went to America seeking a romantic ideal. This colony lasted less than ten years. Bishop Hill was founded by a religious sect, known as the Janssonists, who left to escape persecution in Sweden. A desire for land and opportunity appears to be the motivation for those who began the Vasa colony.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. This also follows the definition used in Don Harrison Doyle, "Social Theory and New Communities in Nineteenth-Century America," *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (April 1977): 155-156. In a broader study of the Swedish colony, the persistent and non-persistent populations were identified and compared, and nineteen different variables derived from the census were analyzed statistically. Hoving, "Fast Rooted in Our Soil," 50, 78-79.

45. Ibid., 78-79.

46. Ibid. Jorgen Weibull, *Swedish History in Outline* (Stockholm: The Swedish Institute, 1993), 89. Thomas, "Historical Oration," 38. Rev. Gustaf Wilhelm Lindstrom in Malquist, *Lapptäcke II* reprinted in *Centennial History*, J19. United States Census Manuscript Schedule, 1900. Clarence Pullen, *In Fair Aroostook, where Acadia and Scandinavia's Subtle Touch Turned a Wilderness into a Land of Plenty*, (Bangor: Bangor and Aroostook Railroad Company, 1902), 72.

47. Malmquist, "Forty Scholars," in *Centennial History*, J-44.

48. Hoving, "Fast Rooted in Our Soil," 57-60.

49. Elwell, *Aroostook*, 41. Malmquist, "Forty Scholars," in *Centennial History*, J-44.

50. Malmquist, "The Madawaska Sunday School," in *Centennial History*, T-46. Anna M. Johnson, "Address by Anna M. Johnson, of Worcester, Massachusetts on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Founding of the Jemtland Sunday School", in *Centennial History*, J-38. *50th Anniversary of the Oscar Frederick Evangelical Lutheran Church, Stockholm, Maine, 1906-1956*. Reprinted in *Centennial History*, T-8. Quoted in *Heaven Headed: New Sweden Evangelical Covenant Church, 1886-1986*. (New Sweden, 1986), 42.

51. Elise Bailey, "From Mrs. Willis T. Bailey, nee Elise Olivenbaum," in *Centennial History*, J-36. Lindstrom, in *Centennial History*, J-20.

52. Arne Menton, "Arne Menton and the North Star," in *Centennial History*, C-1 – C-14.

53. Olof Stadig, "A letter from Mr. Olof Stadig to Marie Malmquist," in *Centennial History*, J-32. While Stadig does not mention the name of the paper his family subscribed to, one Chicago paper, the *Bladet*, has been discovered as the "building paper" on the walls of the old grange hall in New Sweden. *Heaven Headed: New Sweden Evangelical Covenant Church, 1886-1986*. (New Sweden, 1986), 9. H. Arnold Barton, "Cultural Interplay Between Sweden and Swedish America," *Swedish American Historical Quarterly* 43 (1992): 5-18. Malmquist, "Our Family," in *Centennial History*, J-64 – J-65.

54. As the easternmost military base in the continental United States, Loring was large and equipped with some of the air force's most important planes, including the B-52 bomber. It was believed to have been a first strike target for the Soviet military during the Cold War. At the height of Soviet-American tension in the 1960s, teenagers and young adults from the Swedish colony volunteered as plane spotters, looking for incoming Soviet jets.

55. Ljungmark, 23; Thomas, "Historical Oration," 14. See also Richard Hede, "Det Utlofvada Landet: Maine's Swedish Colony," in Anna Fields McGrath, ed., *Land of Promise: A Pictorial History of Aroostook County, Maine* (Norfolk and Virginia Beach: The Donning Company, 1989), 201.