New Sweden: Sweden's Failure to Colonize

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Before the seventeenth century, Sweden was not an integral part of Europe, much less a great power, but the ascension of Gustav II Adolphus to the throne changed this. Gustav was an intelligent man who established the Swedish Empire through domestic reforms that modernized the country's economy and its military. After the establishment of the Swedish Empire, the new power had to seek new economic opportunities to pay for its professional military and domestic reforms. Sweden's inexperience with the mercantile system made it a potential investment opportunity. Dutch investors persuaded the fledgling empire to invest in a joint colonization effort with Dutch and Swedish stockholders under the new Swedish South Company. New Sweden, established in present-day Wilmington, Delaware, along the lower Delaware River, was the first colony. The organizers of the colony intended it to be self-sufficient and for it to send raw materials such as beaver pelts and tobacco back to Sweden. Sweden's inexperience with the mercantile system and underdeveloped transport system made it incapable of handling colonial demands. Without proper support and supplies, the administration of the colony had to focus on survival, causing it to ultimately fail. New Sweden's Swedish and Finnish settlers remained in North America under Dutch, then English, control and contributed new building and carpentry techniques that spread throughout the continent. Liberal policies ensured future generations of Americans could trace their heritage to the New Sweden colony. Much like the Swedish Empire, the New Sweden colony did not last long, but its Swedish and Finnish settlers made lasting contributions to America's frontier.

Political and Economic Security in Sweden

The dominant power of the Baltic region controlled trade and warships working in the area, ensuring economic and border security. In 1523, Sweden became an independent kingdom from Denmark, and its foundation created a new competitor for the Baltic region. Compared to Denmark, Poland, and Russia, Sweden was poor, underpopulated, and lacked a bureaucratic structure.[1] Sweden had powerful enemies, and its primitive state made its political and economic security uncertain. Without security on the home front, Sweden could not attempt

colonization.

As a competitor for the Baltic region, Sweden remained in a tense or warring state with Poland, Russia, and Denmark. Sweden's weakness made it insignificant in mainstream European politics. Under Charles IX, Sweden's fifth monarch, national actions and policies created a three-front war with Poland, Russia, and Denmark. He relied on mercenaries to fight these wars, but their loyalty belonged to the highest bidder and not the throne. His war efforts ended in constant failure and drained the kingdom of already limited money and resources. Sweden remained weak and vulnerable. Gustav II Adolphus assumed the throne after his father's death, and he inherited the three-front war.[2]

Skillful diplomacy neutralized the war fronts and created the Swedish Empire. To appease Denmark, Gustav agreed to remove his father's controversial foreign policies and pay one million *riksdalers* for Fort Älvsborg, which secured passage to and from the Baltic Sea.[3] On the Russian side, Tsar Michael Romanov and Gustav signed the Treaty of Stolbova. Under the treaty, Sweden gained Livonia, Estonia, and Finland.[4] On the Polish front, Gustav managed to broker a truce, but the relationship was fragile.[5] Gustav's diplomatic skills secured control of the Baltic region, but he had to enact reforms to ensure the continuation of Sweden's dominance.

Figure 1. *Gustavus Adoplphus,* oil on panel by Jacob Hoefnagel, c. 1624. From the collection of The Royal Armoury, Sweden.

Gustav disliked mercenaries since the terms of their agreements were open to different interpretations, and they may not follow orders. In 1620, Gustav passed the Ordinance for Military Personnel. This required males fifteen years of age and older to organize

themselves into units and to rally to the king in times of war.[6] The law served two purposes: first, it ensured a continuous flow of recruits; and second, it made military service a decree of the king. Men were fighting for their sovereign, and refusing to do so was an act of treason. Gustav's soldiers trained and fought with modern military techniques and weapons. Infantry and cavalry learned to coordinate with each other, and soldiers performed drills to act in unison. Strict discipline prevented disorder within the ranks.[7] Gustav increased the production of lighter guns and artillery to improve mobility. He wanted his soldiers to be properly armed to ensure a strong, modernized force.[8] Furthermore, Gustav wanted to protect Sweden's interest in the Baltic Sea and coastline, so he built a well-armed fleet. His fleet, equipped with modern guns, was trained to perform in coordinated attacks.[9] His military reforms transformed Swedish troops into a professional fighting force that could protect Sweden's political and economic interests. On the downside, the professional military was incredibly expensive to maintain, and it forced Gustav to explore different ideas for new sources of revenue. With the homeland secured and in need of income, the Swedish Empire finally turned to colonization to meet its needs.

New Sweden and Its Problems

Charles IX's chaotic reign made it impossible for merchants from other European powers to establish commercial trade with Sweden, but new investment opportunities blossomed with the emerging imperial power. William Usselinx, a Flemish merchant who co-founded the Dutch West India Company, wanted to win the support of Gustav in establishing a trading company. Countries such as England and the Netherlands developed their economies around the mercantile system. Over time, their trading systems developed into effective networks that stimulated commercial activity. Sweden's economy had no basis for the mercantile system. Usselinx declared, "All the merchants in Sweden are not so rich as three in Holland, nor a hundred of the farmers as rich as one there."[10] He understood Sweden was an emerging power that needed revenue and had no experience in the widely used mercantile system.

Gustav granted Usselinx an audience. The merchant proposed that Sweden establish a trading company that would expand its operations to North America, Asia, and Africa. He emphasized that the Delaware River region had the commercial advantages needed for a successful colony, and it would be a suitable location for a source of revenue. Intrigued, Gustav invited Swedish investors to contribute to the company based on the idea of spreading Christian doctrine and

establishing Swedish power abroad.[11] Investors contributed to the project, and officials crafted a charter. In the meantime, Gustav had left for war in Germany. He died in the battle of Lutzen in 1632 before he could formally sign the charter. After Gustav's death, his daughter, Kristina, ascended the throne, and like her father, she supported the colonial project. Sweden's government appointed Usselinx the commissioner and chief director of the new Swedish South Company. The Swedish and Dutch were to work together.[12] Under their agreement, the Swedes would establish a colony in North America to generate income for the empire.

Dutch merchants limited their cooperation with the Swedish government to transporting settlers to North America. Sweden had the responsibility of recruiting settlers and establishing the colony. Atlantic voyages were dangerous and difficult, which made recruitment challenging. To have their sentences lowered, Swedish criminals convicted of adultery and destruction of forests volunteered.[13] Other settlers included soldiers, whom the government ordered to go, and Finns. Finland was a part of the Swedish Empire. Finns along the Russian border moved to Varmland in Sweden because they angered officials with their burn-beating agricultural practices. Finnish farmers in Varmland burned an acre of forest a year to increase food production. In the 1630s, the Swedish government needed the forests for mining and foraging, so they started to regulate the practice. Finns continuously acted against the policies, and the Swedish government had them imprisoned or sent to New Sweden.[14] Throughout the colony's existence, Sweden recruited soldiers, criminals, and Finns to settle in New Sweden.

In 1638, the ships *Key of Kalmar* and the *Bird Griffin* set sail for North America from Gothenburg. Swedish and Finnish settlers, weapons, provisions, and gifts for the native population filled the ships' holds. When they arrived, they managed to purchase land from the Indians on the western side of the Delaware River. Later that year, Peter Minuit, the colony's first governor, built Fort Kristina in a strategic location away from the Dutch New Netherlands settlement. The New Netherlanders already competed with the English for resources, and now the Swedes were another competitor for those same resources. They protested the arrival of the new settlers, but they were not strong enough to defeat them.[15] Fierce competition for valuable resources inevitably led to conflict between the Swedes, Dutch, and English.

Under the first two governors, the colony endured, but it relied on the English, Dutch, and the Indians for advice and supplies. The third governor was Johan Printz, and he spent about a decade in office. During this time, ships arrived from Sweden only three times. The first ship, the *Black Cat*, delivered ammunition

and merchandise for the Indians; the second ship, the *Swan,* brought emigrants; and finally, the *Key* and *Lamp* both arrived with supplies.[16] The Indians provided the Swedes with much of their foodstuff. Settlers offered gifts to the natives to maintain good relations. Infrequent shipments from Sweden made it difficult to have an adequate number of gifts for the Indians, which weakened the colony's bargaining ability.

Printz dedicated himself to expanding and securing New Sweden's political and economic interests. The Swedish government expected the colony to send raw materials such as tobacco back to Sweden after it became self-sufficient, like the tobacco-producing English colonies. He wanted New Sweden to imitate their success. However, Printz found tobacco cultivation difficult without adequate food and supplies for the farmers. Because of this, settlers focused on trade with the Indians for supplies rather than putting energy towards cultivating tobacco. Even if the settlers cultivated and stockpiled the tobacco, Sweden's underdeveloped shipping system meant that the arrival of Swedish ships was unreliable and too infrequent to ensure prompt return of the raw materials to Sweden. Goods awaiting transport would remain in storage for lengthy periods, and they were easy targets for destruction by vermin.[17]

Figure 2. *Johan Printz*, artist unknown, seventeenth century.

Conditions in the colony deteriorated during 1643-44. An unknown

epidemic spread throughout the region, and along with food shortages, it killed many of the settlers. Researchers believe that the unknown disease may have been dysentery or yellow fever.[18] Starving settlers started to hunt on the native peoples' land, and this caused skirmishes between the two sides. Food shortages, a high mortality rate, and conflict with the Indians made the settlement an unattractive destination. Printz purchased maize from the Lenape Indian tribe to address the food shortages, but he had no control over the epidemic. Some of the provisions that made it to the colony were damaged and unusable. Moths and mice damaged linen stockings because workers neglected proper care for the items in Gothenburg, a port city in Sweden.[19] Supply shortages made it difficult for Printz to carry out any agenda other than survival. He worried the colony's deteriorating condition would damage its reputation and prevent further support.[20]

Rather than cultivating tobacco, Printz focused his efforts on securing the beaver fur trade. English and Dutch colonies were close to New Sweden, and the three competed for territory along the river for beaver pelts. Whoever controlled most of the territory also controlled the beaver fur trade. The Swedes and the Dutch united to expel the English from the mouth of the Delaware River called Varkens Kill, now known as Salem Creek, in southern New Jersey. Printz turned his attention to the Dutch after the removal of the English to ensure Swedish dominance over the fur trade. He thought the New Sweden settlers could easily overrun the weakened Dutch. He was concerned, however, about how the Swedes would hold onto the territory without reinforcements. Messengers were sent back to Sweden multiple times explaining the state of affairs, but Printz received only silence. Indians were unreliable allies without adequate gifts.

Frustrated with the lack of support, Printz resigned from his position. In 1652, he returned to Sweden on a Dutch ship, and left his son-in-law John Papegoija in charge until the new governor arrived.[21] Their heavy reliance on the fur trade put them in direct competition with the Dutch and English settlers. Competition for beaver pelts created tensions between the three, and this added to New Sweden's vulnerability. Properly supported with manpower and supplies, the Dutch and English colonies grew strong. Dominance over the beaver fur trade would have secured the colony's position and prospects.

Johan Rising became the fourth and last governor of New Sweden. He quickly assessed the poor conditions of the colony. He discovered more than half of the settlers could not feed themselves. Most of the land remained uncultivated as settlers planted few crops. The Lenape tribe provided maize, and deer meat, and the New Englanders provided bread to the New Sweden settlers.[22] Many of the settlers were unskilled peasants rather than the artisans needed to make pottery,

bricks, lime, and furniture.[23] The conditions were less than ideal. The Dutch and English settlers traded finished goods for provisions from the Indians, but the Swedes were not receiving enough goods from Sweden to take part in this trade network. Rising arranged for the Swedes to enter the trade network as middlemen by "buying trade goods from other European colonists, trading them to Indians with furs to sell, and reselling furs for transport to European consumers."[24] This arrangement was successful for a short time but unsustainable. In a letter to the Swedish government, Rising wrote,

> I will now also humbly report concerning our present condition, namely, that everything is still in a fairly good state and especially since all here have the sure hope that a good succor from the Fatherland will soon relieve and comfort us, especially through Your Excellency and the assistance of the High Lords. If people were not animated by this hope, there would be danger that a part of them would go beyond their limits, or that indeed a large number of them would desert from here, not only because many necessaries are lacking, but also because both the savages and the Christians keep us in alarm.[25]

Rising's letter continued to explain the delicate relationship with the Indians. The settlers had to purchase the Lenape's friendship with daily gifts. If the Lenape purchased anything from the settlers, they asked for half-credit and paid the rest begrudgingly. Then the Lenape took the New Sweden goods to the Minque tribe for beaver and elk-skins. The Minque then sold the skins to traders in Manhattan for a large profit.[26] Rising's letter emphasized his awareness of the colony's vulnerable state. Indians and settlers took notice of it, too.

Rising's reliance on the Lenape for food and supplies meant he could not afford ill relations with the tribe. Furthermore, New Sweden's deteriorating conditions put it at a disadvantage in bargaining trade deals. Conditions in the colony were less than ideal, and Sweden offered little support for the colony; consequently, colonists left for the English or Dutch settlements.[27] To add to their problems, the relations with the Dutch deteriorated because the Swedes built new forts and seized a Dutch settlement. The Dutch viewed this as an act of war and forced the Swedes to surrender. Swedes could either safely return home or remain as faithful subjects of the Dutch, but this marked the end of the Swedish government's involvement in North America.[28]

Legacy of the New Sweden Colony

Sweden ratified its first written constitution in 1634 and it incorporated Lutheranism as part of the supreme law of the land. It granted permission for the churches to act independently. Churches reinforced Swedish laws, including the prohibition of idolatry, lying, witchcraft, and fraud. The New Sweden colony adopted the homeland's regulations, and the governors ensured homeland practices were maintained.[29] For example, Johan Printz ordered that church services must adhere to Swedish church ceremonies and customs. He wanted to teach proper Christian faith and maintain good church discipline.[30] Ministers performed their sermons in Swedish with Swedish texts, which reinforced their native language and customs. In 1655, after seventeen years of neglect, New Sweden's five-hundred Swedish and Finnish settlers joined the New Netherlands colony. Already a heterogeneous population, New Netherlands tolerated Swedish and Finnish customs, allowing the newcomers to maintain their congregations and religious identity.[31]

Within thirty years, however, New Netherlands weakened and succumbed to the English. William Penn became the first English governor of the colony, and while he expected the New Sweden settlers to remain loyal to the English Crown, he continued to allow worship in their churches, which was crucial in reinforcing the Swedish traditions, religion, and language. Penn wrote,

> The first planters in these parts were the Dutch, and soon after them, the Swedes and Finns. The Dutch applied themselves to traffic, the Swedes and Finns to husbandry. The Dutch have a meeting place for religious worship at Newcastle; and the Swedes three; one at Christina, one at Tinicum, and one at Wicacoa, within half a mile of this town.[32]

The liberal policies of the Dutch and Penn ensured that the New Sweden settlers and their descendants continued practicing their traditions. On behalf of the original New Sweden colonists and their descendants, the settlers sent a letter asking, "The government to send Swedish priests, prayer books, and hymnals to the colony so that Swedish religion and culture would not diminish in North America."[33] In 1697, three new priests arrived to renew missionary work from Sweden. For the next century, more priests followed to minister in North America.[34] Long after New Sweden ceased to exist, thousands of present-day Americans can trace their heritage to the colony.

The Finns adapted to the mainstream Swedish culture and language while

continuing to practice their own distinct culture. Swedish was the official language of New Sweden, but the Finns spoke Finnish. Most learned Swedish to take part in church services. In public, they practiced Lutheranism but their religious beliefs centered around shamanism. Swedes frowned upon these practices and accused some of witchcraft.[35] Similar to the Swedes, the Finns hunted, fished, and raised cattle, but their burn-beating cultivation technique made them unique. This technique required the farmer to burn an area to prepare it for agriculture. Once the farmer depleted the soil's nutrients, he or she had to move to another location and repeat the process. Finns adapted this technique to grow Indian maize. It was an effective technique, but it required the Finns to move regularly.[36] Thus, the Finns lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle and explored the land.

Their semi-nomadic lifestyle encouraged simple, quick structures and explained why their building techniques expanded outside of New Sweden. Their log structures had distinct board roofs. This roof design existed in Finland and then carried over to American log structures. Boards, about one meter in length, supported roof beams. Each row of boards had a weighted pole to keep them in place. The weighted pole stayed in place with a piece of wood called a knee.[37] Another structure was the hunter's shanty. The structure "consisted of three log walls covered by a single-pitch, lean-to roof. The front tallest side of the hunter's shanty faced the campfire, and remained completely opened."[38] Finally, the Finnish designed the zig-zag fence, which required no posts. It gained "stability from the tripod principle."[39] In Finland, the fences directed game in the desired direction. American settlers as far west as Utah used the fence.[40]

Both the Indians and Finns practiced shamanism and trance techniques that involved the spirit leaving the body. They utilized charms and incantations in their rituals. Shamans were leaders, healers, and sources of wisdom in both cultures.[41] The Swedes considered these practices blasphemy. For the Finns, the common elements in their religions ensured friendly relations with the Indians. The Swedish government wanted the settlers to convert the Indians to Christianity,[42] but the poor state of the colony made this a secondary concern. On the other hand, the Finns shared a bond with the Indians based on the similarities of their religious practices. Most Finns spoke Finnish, Swedish, and typically an Indian language.[43] Their knowledge of the land and language allowed the Finns to act as interpreters and guides for other Europeans.[44] This helped to expand European interests. The Finns had an oral tradition, which made it difficult for their descendants to hold onto the language and customs.[45] Over time, the Swedish Lutheran Church reinforced the Swedish language and culture into the Finns. The Finnish left their mark on American structures.

Conclusion

Because of its short life, research surrounding New Sweden is scarce, but this does not mean New Sweden was insignificant. The Swedish government expected it to generate income and spread Swedish influence in North America. However, Sweden lacked experience in the mercantile system. Nor did it have a developed transport system to handle the demands. Its inexperience and lack of support weakened the colony and made it vulnerable to competing settlements. The colony itself may not have contributed much to colonial America, but the people certainly did. Both the Dutch and English allowed the Swedes and Finns to remain if they pledged their allegiance to Dutch, then English rule. Religious freedom preserved the settlers' heritage. Under English rule, they established themselves and passed on techniques such as the hunter's shanty and the zig-zag fences from their homeland. These techniques spread throughout the American frontier. By establishing a life in America, they also ensured future Americans could trace their ancestry to the New Sweden colony.

Notes

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3. Michael Roberts, *Profiles in Power: Gustavus Adolphus,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1992), 47.

4. Eric Gustave Geijer, *History of the Swedes* (London: Whittaker and Co., 1845), 240.

5. Roberts, *Profiles in Power: Gustavus Adolphus*, 20.

6. Ibid., 114.

7. Brian Sandberg, *War and Conflict in the Early Modern World: 1500-1700* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 34.

8. Jan Glete, *Swedish Naval Administration 1521-1721: Resource Flows and Organizational Capabilities* (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2010), 545-550.

9. Roberts, *Profiles in Power: Gustavus Adolphus*, 108.

10. J Franklin Jameson, *American Historical Association Vol. 2, no. 3: Willem Usselinx* (New York: GP Putnam's Sons, 1887), 115.

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17. Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Scandinavian Colonists Confront the New World," in *New Sweden in America*, ed. Carol Hoffecker, Richard Waldron, Lorraine Williams, and Barbara Benson (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1995), 70.

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22. Marshall Joseph Becker, "Lenape Maize Sales to the Swedish Colonists: Cultural Stability During the Early Colonial Period," in *New Sweden in America*, ed. Carol Hoffecker, Richard Waldron, Lorraine Williams, and Barbara Benson (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1995), 106.

23. Ibid., 104.

24. Kupperman, "Scandinavian Colonists," 72.

25. Jameson, *Narratives of Early Pennsylvania, West New Jersey and Delaware 1630-1707*, 160.

26. Ibid., 161.

27. Ibid., 160-162.

28. Ibid., 139.

29. Frank Blomfelt, "The Lutheran Churches and Their Pastors in New Sweden, 1638-1655," in *New Sweden in America,* ed. Carol Hoffecker, Richard Waldron, Lorraine Williams, and Barbara Benson (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1995), 228.

30. Ibid., 229.

31. Robert Mitchell, "The Colonial Origins of Anglo-America," in *North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent*, ed. Thomas McIlwraith and Edward Muller (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 149.

32. Thomas Holm, *Description of the Province of New Sweden* (Philadelphia: M'Carty & Davis, 1834), 67.

33. Blomfelt, “The Lutheran Churches,” 250.

34. Ibid., 250.

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39. Ibid., 76.

40. Ibid., 76-77.

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42. Ibid., 278.

43. Tvengsberg, “Finns in Seventeenth-Century,” 260.

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