

***The Contest for the Delaware Valley: Allegiance, Identity, and Empire in the Seventeenth Century***

**Mark L. Thompson**

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In the seventeenth century there was a desultory contest among three groups of European settlers—Swedes and Finns, Dutch, and English—for control of the Delaware River valley, that strategic avenue into North America and its riches halfway between the Hudson and the Chesapeake. Local Native Americans played the newcomers against each other and because the Europeans were few in numbers until quite late in the century, the Indians were able to control most of the area and access to its declining fur trade for most of the century. Sweden established its colony there precisely because of access and riches and because its rivals were too weak to interfere, for a while. New Sweden's importance, in fact, derives largely from its location.

The contest heated up from time to time: In 1655, when the Dutch conquered New Sweden; in 1664, when the English conquered New Netherland; and in 1673 and 1674, when the Dutch and the English swapped the region back and forth, by war and by treaty. After 1674, so we see now, the English were going to be the winners and after Quakers began to pour into the valley from 1675 onward (founding Salem, New Jersey, in that year) all of the other Europeans and, eventually, all of the Indians who did not migrate into the west, would become secondary characters, swamped by a sea of Englishness.

Much of this story has been told before, most notably and most thoroughly by Amandus Johnson in *The Swedish Settlements on the Delaware, 1638-1664* (Philadelphia: Swedish Colonial Society and University of Pennsylvania, 1911). One of the many virtues of Mark Thompson's new book is that he carries the story of New Sweden—and this is among other things a new history of New Sweden—far beyond Johnson's upper limit of 1664 without neglecting any of the major

topics that made Johnson's big book (879 pages in two volumes, including documents translated into English for the first time, a biographical dictionary of major players in New Sweden's history, and a lot of information about Sweden's economy, and colonial religion, education, and relations with the neighbors) the last word in its field for decades.

Ethnic Finns were numerically and culturally significant in New Sweden's and the Delaware Valley's population. Finland had been a part of Sweden since the thirteenth century. In the sixteenth century the Swedish Crown welcomed Finnish migration into central and western Sweden to begin to fill up an empty country. In the emptiness the Finns practiced their burn-beating form of agriculture (*huuhta* in Finnish) that required lots of open land. But in the seventeenth century, the Swedish government found other uses for all that timber the Finns were burning off for farming—new iron and copper industries and making the charcoal that fueled them. *Huuhta* became a crime and many Swedish Finns chose or were pushed to set out for the New World. In the Delaware Valley they found lots of open forest and the native people they met there, chiefly the Lenape, practiced a lifestyle and a form of farming very similar to the Finnish way.

Johnson knew perfectly well that after 1655 most of the former New Sweden colonists remained in the valley and grew in numbers and prospered and it is with that population and its evolution into the eighteenth century that Thompson is largely concerned. For as is well known, the former New Swedenites retained their "Swedishness" and their "Finnishness" while at the same time transubstantiating themselves into reasonable facsimiles of colonial Englishmen, albeit sometimes of a particularly fractious sort. The fractiousness dates to before they were English subjects. Some of them protested in 1653 against what they deemed Governor Johan Printz's highhandedness. Printz characterized the protest as a mutiny and had its "ringleader" executed. In 1669, many local Swedes and Finns participated in the Long Finn (or sometimes the Long

Swede) rebellion, which anticipated an attack on the Delaware Valley by a Swedish fleet that existed only in the Long Finn's imagination and his followers' hopes for a Swedish restoration. In 1675, something happened at New Castle (Delaware, eventually), an angry protest over a requirement for local people—a lot of Swedes and Finns and those married to them—to build a dike on private land though for public use as a thoroughfare. Local government called it a riot and arrested one of the protesters and the Lutheran minister as ringleaders and sent them off to New York to answer charges.

The role of Lutheran religious leaders is crucial in the evolution Thompson describes. Lars Lock, the only Church of Sweden pastor remaining in the valley after 1655, probably wrote the settlers' 1653 petition and was fined for his role in the Long Finn Rebellion. Jacob Fabritius was the minister who in 1675 stood with his people against the English local government during the New Castle scum. Fabritius was not a Swedish minister (he came to New York and then the Delaware from Central Europe via the Lutheran consistory of Amsterdam) but he exercised the traditional responsibility of a Church of Sweden pastor to represent and stand up for his flock--usually peasants, which fits here--against the higher strata of society. And it is fair to note that Fabritius, like Lock, seems to have had a problem with authority--any authority. Finally, in 1693, members of the Swedish congregations on the Delaware, with Lock dead and Fabritius blind and incapacitated, petitioned Sweden's King Karl XI for ministers and religious books to help them to protect their culture, especially their religion and their language, against the pernicious influences of all the new people--think Quakers, in particular--in the valley. The king responded by beginning a Church of Sweden mission that lasted into the 1780s.

It was all ultimately to no avail, at least in terms of maintaining a little Sweden out here in North America. The colonists' descendants succumbed eventually to the lures of being English.

They “passed” by becoming Jones and Williams, by speaking English like natives, by joining Anglican or Dissenting churches, and fitted themselves into the economic, social, and political mainframe of English colonial society in New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. They certainly retained their sense of Swedishness as an inheritance and not every family gave up its Swedish or Finnish name or Lutheranism (though in the nineteenth century all of the Church of Sweden congregations became Episcopalian). But the mission ended in the 1780s when few remained who could read, write, and speak Swedish, and the churches’ American-born vestries wanted to hire American ministers, not receive pastors from a foreign place, even if that place was Sweden.

Thompson does us a number of services by focusing on that post-conquest population and the change in identity from being Swedes or Finns to English people of Swedish or Finnish descent, an experience common to so many groups that settled in what became the United States.

And he quotes that 1693 letter to good effect to show how the experience of coming to terms with an alien culture while trying to hold onto their own must have produced something like schizophrenia in members of the Swedish congregations. The congregation members described how well they all were doing in English North America and what good relations they had with the people and the powers around them. But early in the latter they wrote that they needed

two Swedish ministers that are well learned in the Holy Scriptures, and that may be able to defend them and us against all false opposers who can or may oppose any of us, and also one that may defend the true Lutheran faith which we do confess, that if tribulation should come amongst us, and we should suffer our faith, that we are ready to seal it with our blood (200).

There is little to dislike about this book. I like its relative brevity (265 pages of text), Thompson’s mastery of the primary and secondary material about New Sweden and the post-conquest population, and his succinct and insightful treatment of the crucial decades before the onset of the Church of Sweden mission in 1697. There is an intense focus on the river, though,

and it would have been good to include more than a single map, maybe some that show, a la Peter O. Wacker's classic *Land and People* (1975), where and when European populations settled in the valley and how they grew during the seventeenth century. And describing the split personalities of the ethnic Swedes and Finns with respect to first their Dutch and then their English rulers and showing in an eighteenth-century "flash forward" how acculturated they had become is not the same thing as showing us the "smoking gun" of acculturation, the mechanism by which it happened, the changes in process before our eyes. Maybe that is just not possible, given existing documentation (which is unlikely to grow much). It came in a host of individual, daily decisions that over time cemented English control of the Delaware Valley.

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