

From New Sweden in America

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The Forest Finns as Transmitters of Finnish Culture From Savo Via Central Scandinavia to Delaware

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FINNISH PARTICIPATION IN THE HISTORY OF NEW SWEDEN

“Nova Suecia eller the Swenskas Revier in India Occidentali” is the title of the famous map that Peter Lindeström drew for his *Geographia Americae*.¹ New Sweden is, of course, historically the correct name of the colony founded in 1638 under the auspices of the Swedish Crown. However, people of Finnish origin played a crucial role in the colony from the very beginning. The main owners of the New Sweden trading company formed in 1637 were Axel Oxenstierna of Queen Christina’s court and the Finnish-born Admiral Klaus Fleming.²

Swedish and Finnish history are, of course, interrelated. Finland was a part of Sweden from the period of the Crusades—officially since 1216, when the pope promised Finland to the King of Sweden—until 1809, when Finland was ceded to the Russian Empire as an autonomous grand duchy. During Queen Christina’s reign (1632–54) the bonds between Finland and Sweden were friendly. Per Brahe, the governor general of Finland (1637–40 and 1648–54), influenced Finnish cultural and economic life by founding the Turku Academy (now the University of Helsinki) in 1640, by establishing trade connections across the Gulf of Bothnia, and by founding several new towns along the Finnish coast. Swedish remained the official language of Finnish cultural, social, and economic life until the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The history of New Sweden has generally been written from the Swedish point of view for two reasons. First, when Amandus Johnson published his monumental work *The Swedish Settlements on the Delaware* in two volumes in 1911, he scarcely emphasized the role of the Finns on the various expeditions and gave no references for the origins of the Finnish colonists.³ This is not surprising because Finland was not an independent country when Johnson’s work appeared. Second, most of the

Finns who settled in New Sweden had not moved directly from Finland but had spent several decades in central Scandinavia. During that time many changed their Finnish names to Swedish or Norwegian ones, a practice that has caused considerable trouble for those studying the background of the Finnish colonists. However, in the oldest records of New Sweden, it was usual to indicate Finnish origin by adding "the Finn" as in "Anders Andersson the Finn," "Anders the Finn," "Evert the Finn," "Lasse the Finn," and so on.⁴

Thus it is difficult to identify the first Finnish colonists in New Sweden. According to Finnish tradition canonized by Finnish author A. Järnefelt-Rauenheim (1861–1932), the first commander of Fort Christina, Lieutenant Måns Nilsson Kling, was a Finn.⁵ It is known that he spoke Finnish because one of his assignments was to recruit Finnish-speaking immigrants from central Scandinavia to New Sweden. Solomon Ilmonen, the historian of the American Finns, mentions three Finns who participated in the second expedition of the *Kalmar Nyckel*: the seaman Lars Andersson from the Åland Islands; the soldier Maunu Andersson; and Peter Rambo, a soldier who had escaped from military service.⁶ Estimates of the number of Finns who came to Delaware vary from source to source. According to some estimates, the majority (from 50 to 75 percent) of seventeenth-century settlers in New Sweden were Finns. Ilmonen found 295 Finns in the lists of immigrants who moved to New Sweden.⁷

While living in central Scandinavia, many Finnish people probably became bilingual. Professor Pehr Kalm (1716–79), a scientist from the Turku Academy who lived briefly in the area of the former New Sweden in the mid-eighteenth century, found no Finnish speakers. Because the "official" language of the colony was Swedish, the first Finnish generation had to learn that language. Swedish retained a certain preeminence in the Delaware Valley in the eighteenth century due to the influence of Lutheran ministers who continued to be sent to Delaware from Sweden.⁸ Thus it can be said that colonists with Finnish origins became Americanized via Scandinavian languages.

WHERE DID THE FOREST FINNS COME FROM?

An aspect of the yet-unwritten history of the first Scandinavian colonization of the New World concerns the Forest Finns, *metsäsuomalaiset* in Finnish, *skogsfinnarna* in Swedish. It is, therefore, important to study their cultural history in the Old World to understand the role they played as part of the first Scandinavian colonization in the New World.

The term *Forest Finn* was probably coined by Swedish and Norwegian farmers living in the river valleys of central Scandinavia to describe the

Finnish-speaking people who settled the neighboring forest areas. According to historical sources, most of these newcomers came from Savo, a Finnish district located far from the sea and isolated from the capital of Sweden.⁹ From the Middle Ages until the sixteenth century Savo was the border province between Finland (that is, Sweden) and Russia. There were successive wars between the two kingdoms in 1493–95, 1555–67, 1570–95, 1609–17, 1656–61, 1700–21, 1741–43, 1788–90, and 1808–9. The boundary, first drawn in 1323 by the Treaty of Pähkinäsaari, was confusing because the treaty boundary was also designated as the boundary between two religions: the Roman Catholic and the Russian Orthodox. During the course of history the Catholics—after the Lutheran Reformation, the Protestants—were to live on the Swedish side while the Orthodox believers were to live on the Russian side of the border. Every new negotiation meant obligatory population movements across the boundary, either to the west or to the east. In some cases completely new Finnish settlements were formed far outside of Finland.

In religious terms the people in Savo belonged to the Catholic/Protestant part of the population and were obliged to move several times. During the Middle Ages the forest area of St. Michael was the center of settlement and the economy was based on local forest resources. It combined hunting, fishing, berry-picking, tar-burning, and cattle breeding. But above all, the most distinctive Finnish activity was the use of burn-beating methods for cultivating the land. When the Finns first moved to central Scandinavia, their way of life was nomadic or seminomadic because the resources they used were available in different regions during different seasons. However, even after people had settled down, the Forest Finns were obliged to move periodically because their agricultural methods depleted resources within two or three generations. Medieval sources state that Karelian peasants moved every ten or twenty years.¹⁰ Thus an integral aspect of their life-style was the willingness to migrate when necessary.

Gustav Vasa was the first Swedish king (1523–60) to recognize the positive political effect that the Forest Finn economy might have on a centralized government. The Lutheran Reformation and the settlement of the wilderness in the Finnish regions of northern Savo, Häme, Satakunta, and Karelia, as well as Kainuu, were completed during his reign. His principle was that all wilderness belonged to the Crown and could be distributed to new settlers who would then become taxpayers. People from Savo who spoke an eastern Finnish dialect formed the majority of newcomers in what is now central and eastern Finland. Most moves across the borders of Savo Province were voluntary; nevertheless, migration was strongly encouraged by the Crown during Gustav Vasa's reign and on into the seventeenth century. These moves promised economic

advantages to the immigrants. When problems arose between the newcomers and the longtime occupants of the wilderness, the solutions usually benefited the newcomers. For this reason the original residents, the Saami people and their reindeer, were pushed north beyond the circumpolar zone in Finland. A similar fate befell those Finns who preferred hunting and fishing to permanent agricultural settlements.

During this same period, the Crown and the Lutheran church organized local administrations in the wilderness. They built churches and founded extensive parishes like Rautalampi, where people speaking Savo dialects were in the majority. It was from this area that the primary Finnish immigration took place to the forests of Värmland and its neighboring provinces in central Scandinavia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

THE IMMIGRATION FROM SAVO TO CENTRAL SCANDINAVIA

At the 1987 Nordic Symposium, Kauko Pirinen, professor emeritus of the University of Helsinki, discussed the people who formed important links between the Crown and the emigrants from Savo. Gustav Vasa had given Gustav Fincke, the commander of Savonlinna Castle, the task of engaging men from Savo to build fortresses in Sweden during the 1540s and 1550s.¹¹ Thus in the latter half of the sixteenth century several men from Savo worked in different capacities in Stockholm Castle. However, the great immigration to the forests in Värmland did not occur by way of the capital of the country; it was a direct continuation of the previously described moves.

The first document about immigration across the Gulf of Bothnia to Sweden is in an appeal to King Johan III in 1578, which stated that several soldiers and other men conscripted for the war between Sweden and Russia (1570–95) had been obliged to leave the country with their families for other areas.¹² The migration continued despite a war that lasted twenty-five years and a king who opposed it. The movement seems to have been led by Duke Carl (later King Carl IX, 1550–1611), who, for political and economic reasons, encouraged the peasants from Savo to move to the central Scandinavian forests. It is likely that his chamber secretary, Måns Jönson Auvinen, who came from Sulkava parish in Savo, acted as the necessary link coordinating the early waves of immigration at the end of the sixteenth century.¹³

Encouraging immigration from Savo to the uninhabited forest areas on the border of Sweden and Norway became the policy of the Crown during the reigns of Carl IX and Gustav II Adolf (1611–32). Most of this immigration took place between 1600 and 1620, and the number of the

Finnish people who came and remained in central Scandinavia exceeded ten thousand.

The once huge parish of Rautalampi in Savo is often mentioned in literary and historical sources as the main point of departure for Finnish immigrants¹⁴ to the Swedish province of Värmland.¹⁵ This is only partially true. As the ethnologist Richard Broberg has shown in his careful studies of the roots of the newcomers and their settlements, the immigrants originated from a much wider area of Finland and settled in many provinces. They formed an almost unified belt from Ångermanland and Jämtland to the lake area in central Sweden.¹⁶

THE FINN FORESTS AND THE FOREST FINNS

The districts that the Finnish newcomers inhabited are called *Finnsko-gen* (Finn forests) in Swedish, and, as mentioned above, the people themselves are termed *skogsfinnarna* (Forest Finns). Both names refer to a specific way of life and form of culture. To non-Finns the forest was the natural environment for the Finns and the main focus of their culture since they were thought to be perfectly adapted to the ways of forest life. When Finns from Savo, Kainuu, and central Finland came to central Scandinavia, they found surroundings that, at least ecologically, were very much like their native lake country in Finland. Both the old and new milieus included hills and slopes, lakes and streams. In the new environment these Finns could practice the same combined economy to which they were accustomed.

In the new areas were virgin forests for burn-beating cultivation, *huuhta*, and *kaski*, a woodland path cleared by cutting trees and brush and then burning the debris. These are the special slash-and-burn techniques of cultivation that the Finns brought with them first to Sweden and then to the New World, as historian Per Martin Tvengsberg, a descendant of Forest Finns, has shown in his studies.¹⁷ This type of economy brought good harvests—many times more than what was sowed—but also meant a short-term use of the resources. It took two or three generations (sixty to eighty years) before an area could be used again in this manner.

People coming from Savo used a special technique (described by Tvengsberg), different from other Finns, when practicing *huuhta* and burning *kaski*.¹⁸ As a result they were exceedingly efficient in utilizing the forest resources for agricultural purposes. They were not poor peasants; rather they were rich farmers who traded their harvests as far away as the coastal towns of Sweden and even abroad. They used the same wooden tools for agriculture that they had made in Finland.

Another important use of forest resources was tar burning, a cash crop for the Forest Finns. In addition they kept the same domestic animals they had in Finland: cows, horses, pigs, and sheep. Hunting, fishing, berry- and mushroom-picking were carried on much the same way as they were in Finland.

A common story is told by the Forest Finns about a Finn who migrated a long time ago:

He had an axe and a sickle in his bag and some salt. He also had a small bag made out of a bird's skin and some barley there. He had another bag of bark when he went hunting in his forest. He immediately started to make his "huuhta," to burn it down when it was ready. He built his sauna and then the smoke house. And sometimes the Swedes came and wanted to send him back where he had come from.¹⁹

This story could also describe the experience of the many Finns who responded to a new appeal from the Crown to sail to the colony in America. The Finnish population had increased as rapidly in Scandinavia as it previously had in Savo. In Scandinavia the Finns and the native inhabitants had quarreled from the beginning over rights to land and its use for the Finnish type of cultivation.²⁰ The statute of 1647 that prohibited Finnish slash-and-burn cultivation, with the exception of making new fields, coincided with the active mission of encouraging Forest Finns to move overseas. They left in great numbers, particularly in the 1650s, when about two hundred Finns went to America in a single boat. In fact, on the twelfth expedition to New Sweden in 1655, many more than the ninety-two Finns who were accepted at the harbor of Göteborg had wanted to go. The leader of this expedition, Lieutenant J. Papegoja, felt it "both sorrowful and shameful that they could not be taken along. For these people, disappointed in their hopes, had sold their property for nothing, they had used their resources for the long journey to the coast, and now had to take up a begging staff and go on unknown ways, such a cry and weeping began as can seldom be heard."²¹

When those who had been fortunate enough to be selected finally arrived in America, they learned that the New Sweden colony already belonged to the Dutch. The Dutch permitted the immigrant members of the expedition to remain, but the crew and the soldiers had to return to Sweden. This expedition had, however, started such a great "American fever" among the Forest Finns that many of them tried to move to America during the following decade. Thirty-two people finally succeeded in arriving at Delaware in 1663, and another group of 140 arrived in 1664 via Amsterdam.²² These people are easier to identify as Finns because they kept their original names.

Oral tradition about this first "American fever" has survived until recently among the Forest Finns of Central Sweden. Thus the Swedish priest E. G. Fryxell, who collected material on the Forest Finns from Ösmark in Värmland, reported in 1889 to Albrekt Segerstedt, writer and collector of folktales, that "perhaps the first Finns and Swedes to move to America during Queen Christina's time came from here."²³ Because of this "American fever," Finnish people from Värmland and the neighboring provinces left for America when new opportunities arose, in the process nearly emptying Forest Finn villages in Sweden and Norway.

ASPECTS OF FOREST FINN CULTURE

Two important elements in the definition of a *Forest Finn* are the ecological environment of forests and "Finnishness" itself. It is possible to reconstruct the culture and worldview of those men and women who left Savo and the neighboring provinces in Finland to move to central Scandinavia—and then after from one to three generations in Scandinavia to move on to Delaware.

Their language was Finnish. More strictly speaking, it was a dialect called "Savo," very different from western Finnish, which is the basis for the literary Finnish language. Many of its archaisms have been preserved in the central Scandinavian forests until modern times—a survival of more than ten generations. Some speakers of this dialect still live in the Finnish forests. Maintaining such a linguistic tradition in formal oral communication is quite rare anywhere in the world today.

A culture that survives in this kind of isolation, surrounded by another language, tends to be quite conservative, including its manifestations of material culture. This is especially true in the traditional set of buildings, for example, including the smoke house (*savupirtti*), threshing barn (*riihi*), tools, furniture, hunting weapons, and fishing implements. Interestingly enough, the sauna has almost disappeared from the area due to the activity of the Lutheran ministers. The clergy considered the sauna a manifestation of witchcraft; it was too barbaric for men and women to bathe naked together.

Segerstedt wrote in his 1889 report that Finns in general were religious and devout people,²⁴ active and faithful members of the established church. He also praised their honesty, but at the same time felt that the Finns did not care enough for religious education in their homes. In his opinion they too often practiced witchcraft because even without that mystic way of behavior, they had succeeded financially.

Early folklore collectors were able to find many other archaic elements of ancient Finnish culture among the Forest Finns. They were particularly

capable in charms, incantations, and other expressions of witchcraft. They surely practiced shamanism, archaic trance techniques, during which the soul of the shaman left the body. The shaman was called *tietäjä*, a man of knowledge. He was the leader of the society and could occupy temporarily the status of healer, judge, and clergyman. Even in the twentieth century the Forest Finns can give quite thorough descriptions about the wedding of the bear—a multi-episodic drama in the course of which the bear was killed and then sent to his celestial home in the star of the Great Dipper or Otava, and then returned as the totem animal worshiped by the clan.

Segerstedt was also interested in the folk music of the Finns. They played the violin and two types of native stringed instruments, *kantele*, and had their own special melodies. Later research has shown that traditions of folk music and dance have undergone change though some Finnish songs, tunes, and dances still continue. Savo people living in central Scandinavian forests were able to sing old tunes, accompanying themselves with the *kantele*.

An important manifestation of family bonds was the ancestor cult. The relationship between the living and the dead members of a family was so intimate that the family was a whole, “one part of which lived above earth, another underground.”²⁵ The Finns brought with them to Scandinavia the ancient custom, known only in Savo, of marking a fir tree to commemorate the deceased when his body was transported to the graveyard, “the village of the dead ones.” Those members of the New Sweden churches who buried their deceased on river banks and on hillsides, according to Hans Norman, could very well have been the descendants of the Savo people.

Forest Finn society was very family-centered. The institution of extended families has survived until this century. As in Savo, Finnish families in central Scandinavia lived far from their neighbors. Village settlement is quite recent because the economy demanded migration over wide areas. As the family grew, the succeeding generations remained under the same roof or moved, as a unit, to another forest or perhaps overseas. Thus two of the early families who arrived at Grue Finnskog, Lehmoinen (cow) and Mullikka (ox), had descendants who later migrated to the Delaware River valley, as can be seen from the names preserved there. The families gradually became mixed with Norwegian and Swedish neighbors, lost their original names, but are once again now aware of their cultural roots.

It is, however, a fact that the Forest Finn language had almost disappeared before anyone became interested in preserving it. Nowadays some of the young American descendants of the Forest Finns have started studying Finnish, prolonging the linguistic connection to the Fin-

nish forests at the last moment, just before it had almost totally disappeared as an oral tradition learned at home.

NORDIC RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE CULTURE OF THE FOREST FINNS

In May 1986 a Nordic fieldwork seminar was organized in the Finn forests between the rivers Glåma and Klara, on the boundary between Norway and Sweden. This area, studied by Carl Axel Gottlund in the 1820s and by many other ethnographers after him, seems to be a relic area where many elements of the Forest Finn culture have survived longest and where at present the Forest Finn identity seems to be strongest. Åsta Holt, the most famous author of Forest Finn origin, lives in this area, and *Finnskogsdagarna* (Finn Forest Days) are annually celebrated here.

In spite of acculturation, there are still several characteristics of the Forest Finn culture left in the speech, placenames, music and other arts, houses and utensils, habits and customs of central Scandinavia. The Finnish language is not spoken in everyday communication. Some older members of the communities, however, seem to understand Finnish questions even if they prefer to answer in Norwegian or Swedish. Some genres—for example, songs, dirty jokes, and riddles about neighboring peoples—are still told in Finnish to tease those who do not understand the message of the folklore in question. Fieldwork has disproven the formerly accepted idea that the last speaker of Finnish died in the 1960s, although this dating may well concur with the death of the last person who could speak Finnish fluently.

More interesting questions are what makes a language live so long and what are the codes and messages of communication when the language is no longer a part of a group's common knowledge.

The seminar produced many questions about the ethnicity of the Finns, their identity, and the nature and characteristics of Finnishness in the Finnish forest. The research is interdisciplinary and is trying to answer both old and new questions about the processes of their earliest Finnish immigration. The culture is being studied primarily on the following five levels: ecology and sources of livelihood; internal and external communication; origins (family roots); organizations; and worldview.²⁶

THE FOREST FINNS IN THE NEW WORLD

Why was it so easy for the Nordic newcomers to adjust to the cultures they encountered in the New World? The native American life-style was

very similar to that of the nomadic Arctic Saami or the Lapps, with whom these settlers had been in contact on the Finnish peninsula since ancient times. They had, therefore, developed skills in communicating with a culture very similar to that of the Native Americans.

During one phase New Sweden was also a target for missionaries wanting to convert the Native Americans, although they had limited success. In the later phases Swedish ministers who were sent to America were the primary tradition-bearers of the Swedish culture and the Lutheran church for the immigrants.

No one knows how Lutheran the Forest Finns really were. In respect to religion, as in other things, they probably kept alive the system they had in Scandinavia. They were members of the Lutheran church, but at the same time they kept their old customs, habits, and beliefs. Their worldview was pre-Christian in many respects. They practiced shamanism, for which they became famous, and buried their dead on hillsides and river banks because for them the realm of death was behind the river of death. In the New World as in the Old, some of them were accused of and condemned for practicing witchcraft.

One interesting topic for future study would be comparative research on shamanism: the similarities and differences between the religious concepts of the Finns, the Forest Finns, the Saami, and the Native American groups. In this respect there probably are many more similarities between the views of the Forest Finns and their Native American neighbors than between the Forest Finns and their own ministers and the officials and soldiers in the fortresses.

NOTES

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2. Amandus Johnson, *The Swedish Settlements on the Delaware: Their History and Relation to the Indians, Dutch and English, 1638–1664*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Swedish Colonial Society, 1911), 1:15–16, 79–83, 111–16.
3. Johnson, *Swedish Settlements*, 20.
4. Solomon Ilmonen, *Delawaren suomalaiset* (Hameenlinna: Karisto, 1938), 157.
5. Akseli Järnefelt-Rauanheimo, *Before William Penn* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Co., 1929), 7–8.
6. Ilmonen, *Delawaren suomalaiset*, 26.
7. *Ibid.*, 52.
8. Pehr Kalm, *Pehr Kalms resa till Norra Amerika*, ed. F. Elfring, 2 vols. (Helsinki: Mercators Tryckeri Aktiebolag, 1929), 2:330.
9. Ilmonen, *Delawaren suomalaiset*, 30–31.

10. Kauko Pirinen, "Förutsättningarna för savolaxarnas utflyttning," paper delivered at the Symposium on Skogsfinnarnas Kultur in Stockholm, 4 April 1987, 3.
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12. Ibid., 9–10.
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15. Terry Jordan and Matti Kaups, "Architecture in Cultural and Ecological Context," *Geographical Review* 77 (January 1987): 69.
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17. Per Martin Tvensberg, *Skogsfinnene på Finnskogen: Värmlandsfinnar* (Stockholm: Kulturfonden för Sverige och Finland, 1986), 37–64.
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21. Ilmonen, *Delawaren suomalaiset*, 49.
22. Ibid., 51–52, 95.
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24. Ibid., 65–67.
25. Juha Pentikäinen, *Kalevalen mytologia* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 1987), 260.
26. "Rapport från det förberedande fältseminarieti Finnskogen, Norge 19–25.5.1986, angående det samnordiska forskningsprojektet om skogsfinnarnas kultur," 7–8.