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## SCANDINAVIAN-AMERICAN ARCHIVES

By Charles Dickson, Ph.D. 01 May 1998

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America has often been portrayed as a melting pot in which people from around the globe have come to settle and, in the process, surrendered their individual identities. While such a concept contains some truth, it does not fully describe the total flavor of our multiethnic experience. While many national groups have blended into the American fabric, they have also maintained some sense of ethnic identity. Nowhere are unique national characteristics more in evidence than in the museums, libraries, and archives that are maintained by these groups. Family papers, personal letters, religious documents, photographs, and memorabilia are to be found in abundance.

One group which has become an integral part of the American historical and cultural landscape is the Scandinavian community—people who came to our shores from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Immigrants from these five nations made important contributions to the American experience. To preserve their history, now approaching its one thousandth birthday, these groups have established outstanding archival collections where everyone from beginner to experienced family historian can go to open the pages of the past. This article will present an overview of what these halls of history have to offer.

### A Little Background

Scandinavian America began around the year 1003 when the Viking explorer, Leif Ericsson, set foot on the shores of what is present-day Newfoundland at a place now known as L'Anse aux Meadows. In the next four centuries following the construction of Leifsbudier (Leif's hut) in that remote area, some thirty additional stones and structures bearing runic inscriptions were erected on the scene and are currently under investigation by scholars. Places such as Yarmouth, Nova Scotia; Cape Cod and Bradford, Massachusetts; Salem, New Hampshire; and Kensington, Minnesota provide some hints that these ancient people roamed over a considerable amount of real estate.

But long-term settlement by Scandinavians would have to wait for several centuries until the 1600s, when Danes came to New Amsterdam and Swedes to the Delaware. There has been a Scandinavian presence in America from that day until the present, and that presence is chronicled in a number of ethnic repositories which provide us not only with insight into the history of human migration, but also with an appreciation of the ways in which memoirs can be preserved.

Danish America  
 Danish Immigrant Archives  
 1357 Grandview Avenue  
 Des Moines, Iowa 50316  
<http://www.dana.edu/dwarman/archive.htm>

Located in the library of Grand View College, these holdings include Danish and Danish American newspapers and periodicals, immigrant literature, research publications, collections of private individuals, Danish American Folk School history, Lutheran church publications, Grand View College history (a college founded by Danes), and the NFS Grundtvig Studies Collection. The library also participates in DIAL (Danish Immigrant Archival Listings), which is an international reference system for locating records in the United States, Canada, and Denmark.

Danish American Historical Society  
 Danish Immigrant Archive at Dana College  
 Blair, Nebraska 68008

Located in the library of Dana College, these archives include more than one thousand books related to Denmark and Danish America. They also have periodicals, letters, memoirs, clippings, and pictures dating back to the 1850s. Many Danish American church papers are here as well, such as Dansk Nytaar and Kirkebladet. There are also thousands of letters of Danish Americans, old Bibles, hymnals, and parochial records in the special Hansen-Mengers Collection.

Danish American Heritage Society  
 4105 Stone Brooke Road  
 Ames, Iowa 50010  
<http://www.dana.edu/dahs/>

This organization was founded in 1977, making it much younger than the others listed here. Its purpose is to encourage research and collect archival materials of Danish American culture and history, with an emphasis on Danish American settlements on the West Coast.

Finnish America  
 Finnish American Historical Archives  
 601 Quincy Street  
 Hancock, Michigan 49930  
<http://www.finlandia.edu/fahc.html>

Located in the Finnish American Heritage Center adjacent to Suomi College, these archives were established in 1932 and maintained in the college library until moving to a permanent site in a renovated church. They

### Helpful Tips



Give copies of all your research and documents to relatives in case of a fire or natural disaster.

More Tips

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Finally, using the Historical Newspaper Collection at Ancestry, I found the notice of her death, and I was able to order her death certificate, which

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have seven thousand books relating to Finnish Americana, 186 periodicals, 107 newspaper titles, plus family records and documents related to the Suomi Synod, Suomi College (founded by Finns), and Finnish National Brotherhood of Temperance Societies. An ongoing genealogical program is also provided.

Finnish American Historical Society  
19885 Melrose Avenue  
Southfield, Michigan 48705

This archival collection focuses mainly on Finnish settlements in the Great Lakes area. They have more than two hundred books on Finnish America, family records, and Finnish American newspapers.

Swedish Finn Historical Society  
6512 - 23rd Avenue NW, Room 329  
Seattle, Washington 98117-5728  
Tel: 206-706-0738  
Fax: 206-782-5813  
E-mail: [sfhs@gte.net](mailto:sfhs@gte.net)  
<http://home1.gte.net/sfhs/index.htm>

This society was founded by descendants of Swedish-speaking Finns who are interested in preserving their cultural heritage. It is the repository for the International Order of Runeberg. The archives and genealogy center have over five hundred books and one hundred genealogies. They also publish a scholarly quarterly newsletter.

Finnish American Historical Society of the West  
Box 5522  
Portland, Oregon 97208  
<http://www.finamhsw.com/>

This group promotes historical research, collects pioneer stories and artifacts, commemorates noteworthy sites, and works to help preserve the Finnish language and ethnic traditions. They have published twenty-seven books relating to Finnish America in the western United States, including histories of Finnish settlements in Red Lodge, Montana; Sitka, Alaska; and various areas in California, Washington, and Oregon. They also maintain the Erik Lindgren cabin in Clatsop County, Oregon, an example of a hand-hewn, Finnish-style log cabin built in 1922.

Icelandic America  
Fiske Icelandic Collection  
Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections  
2B60 Carl A. Kroch Library  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, New York 14853-5302  
Tel: 607-255-3530  
E-mail: [fiskeref@cornell.edu](mailto:fiskeref@cornell.edu)  
<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/fiske/>

This is a collection of more than 36,000 volumes and manuscripts related to Iceland, Icelandic sagas, and North American exploration, including archaeological and ethnographic data and customs, language, mythology, natural science, literature, and religion. Catalogs of both the Icelandic collection and runic literature are available.

Everett Psychiatric Center Library  
3731 Colby  
Everett, Washington 98201

Under the direction of Dr. William Larson of the clinic, the Icelandic library has grown to nearly seven thousand books and manuscripts on Iceland and the Icelandic American experience. It has a significant amount of genealogical data, plus personal and family letters relating to Icelandic settlements in the Pacific Northwest and Canada.

Norwegian America  
Norwegian American Historical Association (NAHA)  
Rolvaag Library  
St. Olaf College  
1510 St. Olaf Avenue  
Northfield, Minnesota 55057-1097  
Tel: 507-646-3221  
Fax: 507-646-3734  
E-mail: [naha@stolaf.edu](mailto:naha@stolaf.edu)  
<http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/>

The American Historical Review has called this association "the most active historical society among the immigrant groups in the United States." Throughout its long history, these archives have been enriched by donations of books, letters, diaries, family histories, and photographs that document Norwegian-American life. The association has more than eight thousand books in its holdings, plus a significant collection of genealogical data. They have also published eighty-four books relating to research studies on Norwegian emigration.

Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum  
523 West Water Street  
PO Box 379  
Decorah, Iowa 52101  
Tel: 563-382-9681  
Fax: 563-382-8828  
E-mail: [vesterheim@vesterheim.com](mailto:vesterheim@vesterheim.com)  
<http://www.vesterheim.com/>

This museum has a generous collection of ten thousand books, manuscripts, and other documents related to Norwegian American culture. Family histories, church records, Bibles, and hymnals are all part of the collection. The museum offers online services and will do reference searches for those interested in genealogical investigations.

Vesterheim Genealogical Center and Naeseth Library  
 415 West Main Street  
 Madison, Wisconsin 53703  
 Tel: 608-255-2224  
 Fax: 608-255-6842  
<http://www.vesterheim.org/genealogy.html>

This center has more than 1,300 books, 1,200 microfiche, and two thousand films relating to Norwegian American history. The center assists in family history searches and publishes a quarterly newsletter.

Rolfing Memorial Library  
 Trinity Evangelical Divinity School  
 2065 Half Day Road Deerfield, Illinois 60015

In addition to Norwegian American holdings, this library also has Danish and Swedish materials related to the Free Church movement in America. Materials on the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Free Church Association and the Swedish Evangelical Free Church Association are part of a collection which includes books, family records, and parochial documents.

The Norwegian-American Bygdelagenes Fellesraad  
 Marilyn Somdahl, President  
 10129 Goodrich Circle  
 Bloomington, Minnesota 55437  
 Tel: 612-831-4409  
<http://www.fellesraad.com/>

This organization is the umbrella organization for approximately thirty *bygdelags* in the United States. A bygdelag is a society for descendants of people who left a particular valley or fjord in Norway. Many bygdelags hold a summer meeting so that members can explore the history of the ancestral community. The Web site listed above provides addresses for organizations representing the following provinces or cities: Akershus, Aust-Agder, Bergen, Buskerud, Finnmark, Hordaland, M&#oslash;re og Romsdal, Nordland, Nord-Tr&#oslash;nderlag, Oppland, Oslo, Rogaland, Sogn og Fjordane, S&#oslash;r-Tr&#oslash;nderlag, Telemark, Troms&#oslash;, Vest-Agder, Vestfold, and &#Oslash;stfold.

#### Swedish America

Swedish Colonial Society  
 Gloria Dei Church  
 916 Swanson Street  
 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19147  
 For membership information:  
 Doriney Seagers—Registrar  
 Swedish Colonial Society  
 371 Devon Way  
 West Chester, Pennsylvania 19380  
<http://www.colonialswedes.org/>

This organization is the oldest Scandinavian historical society—it was established in 1908. The society preserves and publishes records of early Swedish emigration. They also have an endowment fund to assist scholars in Scandinavian American studies.

The American Swedish Institute  
 2600 Park Avenue  
 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55407  
 Tel: 612-871-4907  
 E-mail: [information@americanswedishinst.org](mailto:information@americanswedishinst.org)  
<http://www.americanswedishinst.org/>

These archives are located in the thirty-three-room Swan Turnblad Mansion, a turn-of-the-century interpretation of stately Romanesque chateau architecture. Their resources include family records, a bookstore, and a library, as well as special offerings, including a Swedish-language instruction program. They engage in genealogical research and publish a newsletter ten times a year.

Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center  
 Augustana College  
 639 - 38th Street  
 Rock Island, Illinois 61201-2296  
 Tel: 309-794-7204  
 Fax: 309-794-7443  
 E-mail: [sag@augustana.edu](mailto:sag@augustana.edu)  
<http://www.augustana.edu/administration/SWENSON/>

This center has more than nine thousand books, one thousand bound periodicals, and 1,500 reels of historical data, including a large collection of Swedish American newspapers. They also have materials on the history of the Swedish Augustana Lutheran Church and on Augustana College, founded by Swedes.

American Swedish Historical Museum  
 1900 Pattison Avenue  
 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19145  
 Tel: 215-389-1776  
 E-mail: [info@americanswedish.org](mailto:info@americanswedish.org)  
<http://www.americanswedish.org>

This museum is located in a building modeled after the seventeenth-century Eriksberg Castle in Sodermanland, Sweden. It has more than 12,000 volumes relating to early emigration of Swedes to America, including records on the establishment of the "Old Swedes" churches in Wilmington, Delaware, and Philadelphia. It also houses the John Ericsson, Jenny Lind, and Frederika Bremer collections. There is a sizable amount of archival and genealogical data to assist the interested researcher.

Swedish American Historical Society  
 5125 North Spaulding

Chicago, Illinois 60625  
<http://www.swedishamericanhist.org/>

The holdings of this society include more than three thousand books, six thousand unbound documents, and 3,500 microfiche. Research is encouraged through grants from the Nils William Olsson Fund. Some thirty books have been published on family histories. They also have documents related to North Park College (established by Swedes) and the history of the Swedish Mission (Evangelical Covenant) Church.

New Sweden Historical Museum  
 Route 1, Box 60  
 New Sweden, Maine 04762  
 Tel: 207-896-3370 or 207-896-3018 (hours are seasonal)

This museum contains materials dating back to the formation of the colony of New Sweden in 1870 by fifty-one Swedes who left their homeland to work in the woods of northern Maine. The project was sponsored by William Widgey Thomas, who had served as President Abraham Lincoln's military consul in Sweden during the Civil War. There are many family records in the museum, documents relating to the founding of Swedish Baptist, Lutheran, and Evangelical Covenant churches, and a collection of artifacts and tools from the colony's early days.

Baptist General Conference Archives  
 Bethel Theological Seminary  
 3949 Bethel Drive  
 St. Paul, Minnesota 55112  
 Tel: 651-638-6282 (call for appointment)  
<http://www.bethel.edu/bgcarchives/history/>

These archives contain many valuable documents related to the history of the early Swedish Baptists in America. There are more than one thousand books in the collection; a special holding of the center is the Skarstedt Collection in Pietism. Family and parochial records are available for researchers.

Scandinavian America  
 Nordic Heritage Museum  
 3014 NW 67th Street  
 Seattle, Washington 98117  
 Tel: 206-789-5707  
<http://www.nordicmuseum.com/>

This museum has historical information on all five Scandinavian groups. The holdings are housed in a 1907 red brick schoolhouse located in the predominantly Scandinavian Ballard section of Seattle. The museum features rooms dedicated to the traditions of each of the five nations. There is a 12,000-volume library to assist the researcher.

Thus, the millennial journey of Scandinavian America is preserved in documents, artifacts, and memorabilia of a past age. But, most of all, the collections of these archival repositories serve to illustrate how these Scandinavian traditions have contributed to the richness of the total American fabric.

*Charles Dickson is a college chemistry instructor, ordained clergyman, and freelance writer whose grandparents emigrated from Vimmerby, Sweden in the 1870s.*

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