***Scandinavian Immigrants***

***Introduction***


[Norwegian Independence Day
celebration, Chicago, 1907](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cdn:@field(NUMBER+@band(ichicdn+n004972)))

Leif Erickson statue,

Milwaukee



Before the 19th century, the people of the Scandinavian lands—Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland—had often visited North America. Some came for exploration, some came to launch colonial adventures, and some came to stay and follow their faith. But by the end of the United States' first century of existence, Scandinavians began to come by the tens of thousands, and they came to start new lives for themselves. In so doing, they filled the Great Plains and the cities of the North; they founded new, distinctive communities from Connecticut to California; and they helped build the America of the 20th century.

**Early Arrivals**
Travelers from Scandinavia first set foot in the Western Hemisphere more than a thousand years ago, and may even have been the first Europeans in North America. Beginning in the 7th century, the Vikings, a seagoing people from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, roamed widely over much of the planet, founding settlements in far-off lands and trading with, or raiding, the local inhabitants. Some of the Vikings' surviving sagas mention the birth of a baby boy in a distant settlement named "Vinland". Today, a few scholars have suggested that Vinland might have been an island off the coast of present-day New York, but no one knows for sure. Regardless, every October 9 many Scandinavian Americans still celebrate the birthday of Leif Erickson, the Viking captain who founded the settlement of Vinland and thus, they maintain, discovered America.

By the 17th and 18th centuries, the Vikings were a dim memory, and the people of Scandinavia began to look to North America as a possible colonial destination. As was the case with other European elites of the time, wealthy Scandinavians considered the eastern seaboard of the Americas a promising site for investment and sought to launch colonial enterprises there. At the same time, many ordinary Scandinavians, chafing at the limited religious and political freedom in their homelands, saw the New World as a land of liberty, and traveled there to found new communities where they might practice their conscience in peace.

It was in the 19th century, however, that the great migration of Scandinavians to the U.S. took place. The once-prosperous Scandinavian nations were rocked by political strife and social upheaval as regional wars and agricultural disasters created tremendous instability in everyday life. Meanwhile, official corruption, the policies of powerful state churches, and an increasing disparity between the rich and the poor drove many thousands of Scandinavians to seek a better life elsewhere. By the middle of the century, the time was ripe for mass immigration, and Scandinavians began arriving in American ports in large numbers.

Each group of immigrants-those from Sweden, from Norway, from Denmark, Finland, and Iceland-would take a different path to life in the United States.

***The Swedes***

Of all the immigrants from Scandinavia, those from Sweden were the first to come to the U.S., and they came in the greatest numbers. In the early 17th century, the nation of Sweden had become a substantial power in Europe, and it joined with other powerful nations in launching colonial enterprises in the New World. In 1637, a group of Swedish speculators, together with German and Dutch investors, formed the New Sweden Company in order to send a trade expedition to North America. The next year, the Company's two ships, the *Fogel Grip* and the *Kalmar Nickel*, sailed into Delaware Bay, where the settlers founded the town of Fort Christina, now the city of Wilmington, Delaware.


[Log cabin, Delaware Valley, Pennsylvania](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=hhphoto&action=browse&fileName=pa/pa0400/pa0412/photos/browse.db&recNum=0&linkText=-1&title2=Lower%20Swedish%20Log%20Cabin,%20Darby%20Creek%20vicinity%20(Clifton%20Heights),%20Darby%20vicinity,%20Delaware%20County,%20PA&displayType=1&maxCols=4)



Over the next two decades, the farms and villages of New Sweden spread out along both banks of the Delaware River, well into present-day New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, as more immigrants, mostly Swedes, arrived from Scandinavia. By 1657, though, the small colony was swallowed up by the larger New Netherlands, which was in turn subsumed by the massive English settlement founded by William Penn. The Swedish presence in the mid-Atlantic states continued for more than a century, though, and still survives in family names, churches, and in the distinctively Swedish notched-corner log cabins that became a staple of the European settlement throughout North America.

When Swedes returned to the United States in the 19th century, they came as part of a mass migration, not a colonial adventure. In the 1830s and 40s, small groups of farmers had begun to make the long voyage to the U.S. in search of more land or religious freedom. By the middle of the century, however, Sweden was in the throes of a national population crisis—the small country's population had doubled from 1750 to 1850, and was still growing. Tillable land became more and more scarce, and famine swept the nation, killing 22 out of every 1,000 Swedes. Emigration regulations were eased, and the 1860s saw a massive movement of Swedes fleeing their homeland; between 1861 and 1881, 150,000 traveled to the United States, 100,000 of whom came in just five years, between 1868 and 1873.

The majority of these immigrants, after arriving in East Coast port cities, quickly made their way to the new states and territories of the Midwest, drawn by the promise of open land and by the "America letters" of their compatriots. In addition, many immigrants were aggressively recruited by representatives of U.S. steamship lines and railroad companies, as well as by local governments seeking new settlers for remote parts of the country. Recruiters and correspondents alike extolled the bounties of the American landscape, and sometimes provided exaggerated accounts of the comfort and profitability of settler life. In 1850, the Swedish novelist and feminist [Fredrika Bremer](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/lhbtnbib:@field(NUMBER+@band(lhbtn+26021))) visited a group of Swedish farmers in Pine Lake, Wisconsin, and found their daily existence to be more difficult than some descriptions had promised.

It is lake scenery, and as lovely and romantic as any may be imagined--regular Swedish lake scenery; and one can understand how those first Swedish emigrants were enchanted, so that, without first examining the quality of the soil, they determined to found here a New Sweden and to build a New Uppsala! I spent the forenoon in visiting the various Swedish families. Nearly all live in log houses, and seem to be in somewhat low circumstances.

One farmer told her, "None who are not accustomed to hard, agricultural labor ought to become farmers in this country. No one who is in any other way well off in his native land ought to come hither. ."

Hard labor aside, by the end of the century Swedish immigrants had fanned out across the wheat belt of the United States, working largely as farmers, but also finding work in mining, railroad work, and urban trades and professions. In the 1910 census, nearly half of all Swedish immigrants and their descendants lived in three states: 1/5 lived in Minnesota, 1/6 in Illinois, and 1/14 in New York. Many others moved on to the Pacific Northwest states, where they found that the dense woods and rugged coastline reminded them of home, and where they could put their timbering skills to work. At the same time, more urban immigrants began arriving from Sweden, and these increasingly chose U.S. cities as their destination. In 1900, Chicago was home to 150,000 Swedes and Swedish Americans, and was widely considered the second-largest Swedish city in the world.

In 1924, Congress passed the Immigration Act, which set strict quotas on immigration to the U.S. and brought Scandinavian immigration to a virtual standstill. By this time, though, the Great Lakes states were major centers of Swedish culture, with Swedish politicians lobbying for Swedish votes at meetings of Swedish social clubs, while the members read Swedish newspapers. Meanwhile, other Scandinavian immigrants were arriving and building their own communities nearby—sometimes literally next door.

***The Norwegians***

Although Sweden sent more emigrants to the United States than any other Scandinavian country, [Norway](http://www.loc.gov/item/96681857) sent a greater percentage of its population—nearly 1 million people between 1820 and 1920. Indeed, some estimates suggest that during the great immigrations of the 19th century Norway lost a higher proportion of its people to the U.S. than any country other than Ireland.


[Recollections of an
Immigrant, 1929](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/lhbumbib:@field(NUMBER+@band(lhbum+01450)))



Emigration from Norway to North America started more slowly, however. Some Norwegian adventurers accompanied Dutch colonists to New Amsterdam in the 17th century, and members of the Moravian religious sect joined German Moravians in Pennsylvania in the 18th. Norwegian immigration's *Mayflower* moment came in 1825, during a period of particularly fierce religious strife in Norway. In July of that year, a group of six dissenting families, seeking a haven from the official Norwegian state church, set sail from Stavanger in an undersized sloop, the *Restaurationen*. When it arrived in New York harbor after an arduous 14-week journey, the *Restaurationen* caused a sensation, and the local press marveled at the bravery of these Norwegian pilgrims. Local Quakers helped the destitute emigrants, who eventually established a community in upstate New York. Today, their descendants are still known as "sloopers".

Word of the sloopers' arrival, and of other Norwegians' success in the U.S., soon reached their homeland, and America letters circulated as never before. In the 1840s, prospective emigrants could read a new magazine, *Norway and America*, that published stories of Norwegians in the New World, and successful emigrants toured Norway, some sponsored by financial concerns in the U.S. One emigrant, Andreas Ueland, described the effect that one homecoming emigrant had on his compatriots.

A farmer from Houston County, Minnesota, returned on a visit the winter of '70-'71. He infected half the population in that district with what was called the America fever, and I who was then the most susceptible caught the fever in its most virulent form. No more amusement of any kind, only brooding on how to get away to America. It was like a desperate case of homesickness reversed.

Immigration surged after the U.S. Civil War and followed many of the same patterns as the Swedish immigration that preceded it. By the end of the 1860s there were more than 40,000 Norwegians in the U.S. More than one-ninth of Norway's total population, 176,000 people, came in the 1880s. These immigrants, mostly rural families, made their way to the newly-opened lands of the Midwest, settling in Minnesota and Wisconsin, then moving west to Iowa, the Dakotas and sometimes the Pacific Coast. By the end of century, urban Norwegians had begun to arrive in substantial numbers as well, and formed lasting communities in the cities of the Great Lakes and East Coast. Norwegian immigration dropped off dramatically after the Immigration Act of 1924, and quickly slowed to a few thousand a year—a rate that has remained largely unchanged to the present day.

***The Danes***

Like the immigrants of countless other nations, many immigrants from [Denmark](http://www.loc.gov/item/99463545) came to the United States for religious reasons. The Danish immigrants of the 19th century were unique, however, in that they came to North America as part of the first mass influx of the pilgrims of a new religion: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.


[Diary of John Peter Rasmus
Johnson, 1864](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/upboverbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(dia2139)))



For centuries, small groups of Danes had visited and lived on the shores of the New World. Danes had joined Dutch expeditions to navigate the Hudson River in the 17th century, and in 1728 the Danish explorer Vitus Bering charted the Alaskan straits that bear his name. The New Amsterdam colony was home to many prominent Danes, including Jonas Bronck, whose land north of Manhattan Island became widely known as Bronck's, and, eventually, the Bronx. In addition, small numbers of Danes fled the established Dutch Reform Church to join larger, usually German, religious communities on the East Coast.

The greatest surge of Danish immigration came, however, in the wake of a small group of missionaries who arrived in Copenhagen in 1850, spreading the word of a new faith from America. In the following years, several thousand Danes converted to Mormonism, and roughly half of those converts left for the United States—nearly 20,000 by the end of the century. Once in the U.S., most joined their fellow believers on the trek to the distant territory of Utah, an arduous journey of many months, usually made on foot. The terse, handwritten diary of Danish immigrant John Peter Rasmus Johnson conveys some sense of the hardships of the trek, as the travelers endured disease, dangerous weather and terrain, and attacks by bandits, anti-Mormon vigilantes, and hostile Native Americans. By the end of the 19th century, Utah was home to the largest community of Danish immigrants in the United States.

At the same time, many Danish immigrants came to the U.S. for economic and social reasons, seeking a new beginning, insulation from European wars, or a stronger economy. Denmark had, however, avoided much of the land loss and famine that plagued their Scandinavian neighbors in the 19th century, and never lost as great a percentage of its population to emigration as did Norway and Sweden.

The Danes who did seek a new life in the U.S. settled primarily in Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, the Dakotas, and Iowa, which eventually became the most Danish of all states. Danes were more urban than most other Scandinavian immigrants, and although many tried grain and dairy farming upon their arrival in the U.S., most eventually moved to cities and towns. Some towns and neighborhoods took on an entirely Danish character, but by and large the Danes mingled within larger communities, preserving their own religious and linguistic traditions, but living and working alongside neighbors who were often Scandinavian immigrants themselves. By the 1970s, roughly 360,000 Danes had settled in the United States.

***The Finns***

For the people of [Finland](http://www.loc.gov/item/2011587043), mass emigration to the United States did not begin until very late in the 19th century, and the number of Finnish immigrants does not compare with those of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. Emigration had a tremendous effect on the Finnish homeland, however, which in a few decades lost roughly ten percent of its population.


[Finnish Salvation Army branch, Brooklyn](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/owi2001012416/PP/)



Early Finnish immigration to North America is very difficult to track, as the land that is now independent Finland was claimed by several competing countries over much of its history. Although it seems certain that Finnish explorers and colonists joined the Dutch and Scandinavian expeditions to eastern shores of the New World, they were often classified on ship's rosters as citizens of Sweden or Russia. It is known, however, that Finns were among the first Europeans to settle in Alaska, during the early 19th century, and even served as the territory's governors.

By the middle of the 19th century, Finns had begun arriving in the U.S. in significant numbers, many fleeing the increasingly anti-Finnish policies of the Russian government. Recruiters for U.S. companies and governments traveled to Finland to encourage emigration, as did some of the successful earlier emigrants. As a result of these recruiting efforts, many early Finnish immigrants were guided to very specific locations in the U.S., and small Finnish communities sprang up in locales as far-flung as Calumet, Michigan; Gloucester, Massachusetts; and Montgomery, Alabama.

At the turn of the 20th century, Finnish immigration exploded. The decades of struggle for Finnish independence from Russia were at a boiling point, and Finns fled the instability in their homeland at a breathtaking rate. Between 1890 and 1914, more than 200,000 Finns arrived, two-thirds of total Finnish immigration to that point, and more than 30,000 followed before immigration was curtailed in 1924.

The new Finnish immigrants poured into the farms and lumber mills of the Great Lakes states, the mines of the western mountains, the factories of New York City, and, later, into the auto plants of Detroit. In 1900 the Finnish population of Detroit was 15; in 1938 it was 15,000. Michigan became, and remains, the heart of Finnish America, and is the home of the only Finnish institution of higher education in the U.S., Suomi College in Hancock.

Finns faced greater challenges than many of the Scandinavian immigrants that preceded them. The Finnish language is radically different from all other European languages, and Finnish-speaking immigrants had greater difficulty learning English than those who spoke Swedish or Norwegian. As a result, many Finnish immigrants were relegated to low-paying unskilled jobs that did not require English-language skills, such as factory work and manual labor. At the same time, the decades of high Finnish immigration coincided with a period of increased public hostility towards immigrants, and Finns were often subjected to discrimination in housing and jobs, as well as public insults and physical attacks.

Despite these challenges, the Finnish communities of the U.S. grew and thrived, and continued to do so. In the 2000 census, 623,000 people identified themselves as Finnish Americans.

To hear the Finnish language spoken and sung, search the collection [California Gold: Northern California Folk Music from the Thirties](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afccchtml/cowhome.html).