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History of Swedish Immigration to America

This article contains interesting facts, statistics and the history of Swedish Immigration to America. To understand the reason for Swedish immigration it helps to have an overview of the history of the people of Sweden. The Swedes (Suiones) were a powerful people who were descended from Gothic tribes. They are described as Norse, North Germanic or Scandinavian people. Other Scandinavian countries include Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland.

The Vikings formed part of the Swedish ancestry - prolific seafaring warriors from Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The Norse explorer, Leif Ericson, is regarded by many as the first European to visit the New World, nearly five hundred years before Christopher Columbus. For a short period during the Middle Ages, the countries of Sweden, Norway and Denmark were united under one monarch. Sweden later emerged as independent country and became a great power in the 1600's, the period in the history of Sweden that coincided with the first Swedish Immigration to America.

Religion

The Christianization of the Swedish people replaced the early tribal structures and the Vikings. The first Christian religion of Sweden was Roman Catholic but in 1517 Martin Luther initiated the Protestant Reformation which resulted in the majority of Northern Europe coming under the influence of Protestantism. The history of Swedish Immigration to America began with the immigration of Protestants.

The Major Waves of Swedish Immigration

The history of Swedish Immigration to America began as the first explorers, traders and colonists arrived in the New World. The Swedish settled the colony in America they called New Sweden (Nya Sverige). There were three major Swedish immigration waves to America in the 1800's:

- The first major wave of Swedish immigration was in the 1840's. The wave of immigration was sparked by economic factors and crop failure. The immigration wave was halted by the American Civil War (1861 to 1865)
- The second major wave of Swedish immigration occurred between 1866 - 1873. The surge in immigration was caused by the devastating Famine of 1866–1868 resulted in the immigration of 146,000 Swedes
- The third major wave of Swedish immigration was between 1880 – 1890 when a total of 485,000 Swedes emigrated to the United States

The Reasons for Swedish Immigration to America

Why did people want to leave Sweden and why did they want to move to America? The early immigrants of the Colonial era wanted to acquire new lands, establish Swedish colonies and profit from new opportunities for trade. The main reasons for the Swedish Immigration to America in the 1800's were disasters such as crop failures, blights and poor harvests leading to poverty. The agricultural revolution caused unemployment and the financial need to seek a better life. Others

emigrated to escape religious and political persecution or to be closer to family or friends who had already settled in America.

History of Swedish Immigration to America in the 1600's

The Colonial Era, Peter Minuit and New Sweden

Swedish Immigration to America began during the Colonial Era. At this time in history Finland was part of Sweden so the first immigrants consisted of both Swedish and Finnish people. Peter Minuit (1580 – 1638) had been appointed Director of the New Netherland (1626 - 1633) by the Swedish West Indian Company. His position as Director-General was terminated and in 1638 the Swedish government engaged Peter Minuit, working for the Swedish West India Company, to establish a colony for Sweden in America.

The Log Cabin

The Swedish settlers brought the log cabin to New Sweden. They built the first log cabins in their settlement at Delaware in 1638. The log cabins were simple, but highly practical, one room structures with a chimney and fireplace. Log cabins consisted of a single room about 12 - 16 feet square. There was one door and windows were cut into the walls that were covered by boards or animal skins. Log cabins could be built in 1 -2 weeks. Other European settlers copied this style of housing and the log cabin became the typical home of all early American settlers, pioneers and backwoodsmen.

The Colonial Era, Johan Printz and New Sweden

A group of 50 Finnish and Swedish colonists established the first small colony in Delaware Bay they called New Sweden (Nya Sverige). Johan Bjornsson Printz (1592 - 1663) was appointed Swedish military officer and colonial governor in 1643. The settlement was named 'Christina' in honor of the queen of Sweden. The colony established trading links with the Algonquian and Mohican Native American Indian tribes and beaver furs were regularly delivered to Stockholm. More colonists arrived from Sweden consisting of over 600 Swedes and Finns. Conflicts developed between the colonies of New Netherland and New Sweden and in 1655 the governor of New Netherlands, Peter Stuyvesant, attacked New Sweden with his army and conquered it. In 1657 both of the colonies fell to England but the original colonists were allowed to remain.

The Colonial Era

Swedish Immigration to America continued in small scale. The first settlement at Wicaco was built in Philadelphia in 1669. Other Swedish settlements were established including Varkens Kill in New Jersey (1641), Kingsessing in Pennsylvania (1644) and Strandviken in Delaware (1654) Then on March 4, 1681, the colony of New Sweden was assimilated into the colonies of Delaware and Pennsylvania.

History of Swedish Immigration to America in the 1700's

Swedish Immigration to America was slow in the 1700's - Sweden had lost its foothold in the New World. The political, religious and economic conditions in Sweden were stable in the 1700's compared to many other European countries and few Swedish people were motivated to take the long, dangerous journey to America to join colonies established by the English.

The American War of Independence

Swedish Immigration to America in the 1700's was further halted by the political conflict that had begun to grow between Britain and the colonies which culminated in 1775 with the American War of Independence (1775 - 1783). The country of Sweden maintained a neutral position in the American War of Independence. However, many thousands of Swedish-Americans fought on the side of the patriots. Amongst the most distinguished soldiers was the Swedish Count Axel von Fersen who served as an interpreter between General Rochambeau and General George Washington and distinguished himself at the Siege of Yorktown. It was the fate of Count Axel von Fersen to become involved in another revolution. He was destined to play an important role in the French Revolution (1789 to 1799) due to his special friendship with Queen Marie-Antoinette.

History of Swedish Immigration to America in the 1800's

The Crop Failures

Major waves of Swedish Immigration to America occurred during the 1800's. The first major wave of emigration started in the 1840's and lasted up to the American Civil War (1861 to 1865). Sweden, like many other European countries, suffered from serious crop failures including the potato blight (1845-1849) which led to great poverty in Sweden. The wave of immigration in the 1840s and 1850s was directed towards the farming areas of Illinois and Iowa. Many Swedish migrants also headed for the cities especially in Chicago where industrialization provided many employment opportunities.

The Forty-Eighters

Swedish Immigration to America also increased following the political turmoil during European Revolutions of 1848 which raised the political awareness of the poor. The clash between Swedish liberalism and a repressive monarchist regime and the failure of the revolutionists led to a wave of political refugees who fled to the United States, who became known as the Forty-Eighters. Some Swedes also fled religious prosecution. To leave the Lutheran state church led to the punishment of exile for dissenters - the law was not abolished until 1860.

The First Wave of Swedish Immigration

During this first wave of Swedish immigration to America about 20,000 Swedes entered the United States. The first flow was halted by the outbreak of the American Civil War (1861 - 1865). Swedish immigrants were generally seen as desirable immigrants. Coming from a Protestant, northern European country they were well accepted by Americans.

The Famine of 1866–1868

The Second Wave of German immigration in the 1800's occurred following the period following American Civil War up to 1873. During this period the Famine of 1866–1868 hit Sweden and Finland and the death toll reached 270,000 in three years. The Famine of 1866–1868 was called "the great hunger years", the "suuret nälkävuodet". Potatoes and vegetables rotted in the fields and about 15% of the population died. Over 146,000 people were forced to leave Sweden between 1866 and 1873. The Second Wave of Swedish immigration was halted when the financial panic of 1873 hit the United States. The Panic of 1873 led to the period in American history known as the Long Depression which lasted for six years.

The Great Migration

Swedish Immigration to America in the 1800's increased again ushering the third major wave of immigrants between 1880-1890. During this time a total of 485 000 Swedes emigrated to the United

States. The process of industrialization had resulted in the jobs of many skilled farmers and craftsmen being taken over by machines. Many Swedish families decided to join friends and family who were already established in the United States.

Ellis Island

Unemployment was rife across the whole of Europe and and between 1881 - 1890 a total of 5,246,613 immigrants flooded into the US. There were calls for the American government to restrict immigration and various immigration laws were passed to address the problem. The 1891 Immigration Act regulated immigration further introducing the inspection and deportation of immigrants and in 1892 the Ellis Island immigration center (1892 - 1954) was opened. Preference was shown to the "Old Immigrants" and few Swedish immigrants were turned away.

After 1890 Swedish immigration to America dropped dramatically as conditions in Sweden improved and the country underwent a rapid industrialization within a few years.

History of Swedish Immigration to America in the 1900's

Swedish Immigration to America rose again at the turn of the 1900's, reaching a new peak of about 35,000 Swedish migrants in 1903. Swedish immigration remained at similar levels until World War I. After WWI there were various social reforms in Sweden and Swedish immigration declined, the majority of migrants then left Sweden to join their families.

Swedish Immigration to America

Since 1820 over 1,000,000 people have emigrated to the United States from Sweden. According to the 2011 United States Census, 4,211,644 Americans, claimed Swedish ancestry. It is little wonder that Swedish immigration to America has had such significant impact on the culture of Americans.

Swedish Immigration to America Facts Sheet and Timeline

Important facts about the history of Swedish Immigration to America and US laws that effected the migrants from Sweden are contained in the following Facts Sheet and history timeline.

793: The Vikings from Scandinavia begin their raids

1002: The Norse explorer, Leif Ericson is believed to have visited the New World

1638: The Swedish government appoint Peter Minuit and the Swedish West India Company, to establish the colony of New Sweden

1643: Johan Printz was appointed Swedish military officer and colonial governor of New Sweden

1655: Peter Stuyvesant, the governor of New Netherlands, attacked and conquered New Sweden

1657: The Swedish and Swedish colonies fell to the English

1681: The colony of New Sweden was assimilated into the colonies of Delaware and Pennsylvania.

1775: The American War of Independence began. Many Swedes fought with the patriots

1789: Count Axel von Fersen plays an important part in the French Revolution (1789 to 1799)

1845: Crop failures and the potato blight led to hunger and poverty and a large increase in immigration

1848: Disillusioned Swedish revolutionaries, the Forty-Eighters, emigrate to avoid political persecution

1861: The American Civil War (1861 to 1865) halting immigration

1866: Famine of 1866–1868 was called "the great hunger years", the "suuret nälkävuodet".

1873: The financial panic of 1873 hit the US lasting for six years

1890: The last wave of Swedish immigration to the United States.

1891: The 1891 Immigration Act provided for the regulation of immigration and the inspection and deportation of immigrants.

1892: The Ellis Island immigration center was opened where immigrants from Europe, including Sweden, were required to undergo medical and legal examinations

1890's: The last wave of Swedish immigration to the United States.

Swedish Immigration to America has declined from this time