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**THE SWEDES' CHURCH**

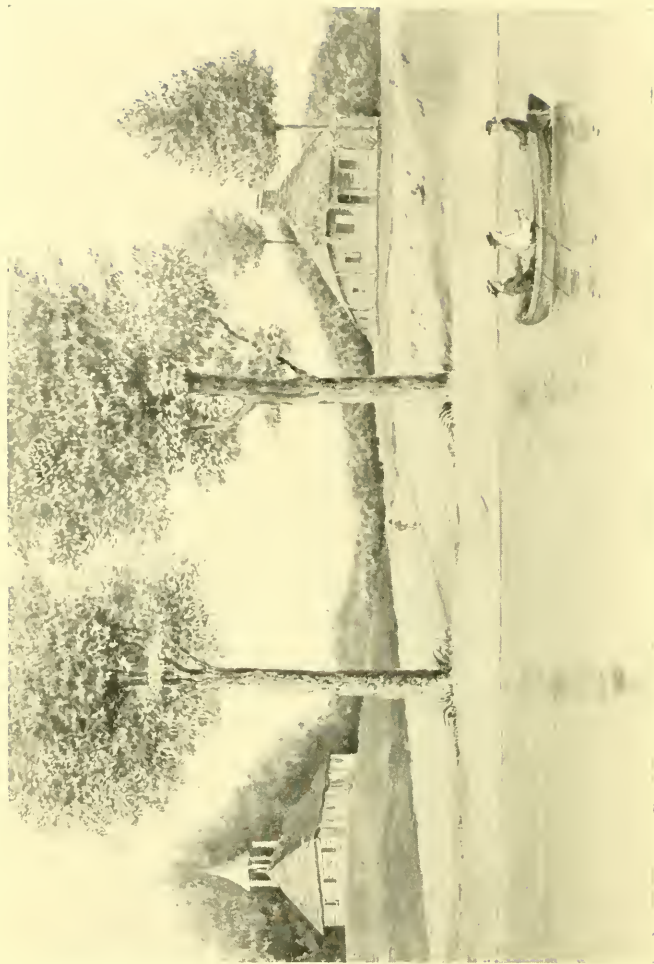
**AND**

**HOUSE OF SVEN SENER**

**1677**

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THE SWEDES' CHURCH AND HOUSE OF SVEN SENER (1677)  
At what is now Swanson and Christian Streets, Philadelphia.

' John Fanning Watson

THE SWEDES' CHURCH

AND

HOUSE OF SVEN SENER

1677

MY GRANDMOTHER WAS ONE OF THE SWEDES.—SISOM.



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1857  
D. S. Callahan

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THE SWEDES' CHURCH†  
AND  
HOUSE OF SVEN SENER.\*

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“The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleeps!”

The Swedes of the hamlet at Wiccaco, at the present Swedes' church in Southwark, having been the primitive occupants, near the present site of Philadelphia, (before the location of our city was determined,) will make it interesting to glean such facts as we can concerning that place and people. There they once saw the region of our present city scenes—

“\* \* \* one still  
And solemn desert in primeval garb!”

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\* Reprinted from “Annals of Philadelphia” by John F. Watson. First edition (one volume) 1830, pages 133-138.

† NOTE:—Prior to the erection of this Church the Swedes worshipped at the Block Houses at Tinicum and below on the Delaware (SISOM).

## THE SWEDES' CHURCH AND

Mr. Kalm, the Swedish traveler, when here in 1748, saw Nils Gustafson, an old Swede then ninety-one years of age, who told him he well remembered to have seen a great forest on the spot where Philadelphia now stands; that he himself had brought a great deal of timber to Philadelphia at the time it was built. Mr. Kalm also met with an old Indian, who had often killed stags on the spot where Philadelphia now stands!

It appears from manuscripts and records that the southern part of our city, including present Swedes' church, navy yard, &c., was originally possessed by the Swedish family of Sven, the chief of which was Sven Schute, a title equivalent to the Commandant; in which capacity he once held Nieu Amstel under charge from Risingh. As the Schute of Korsholm fort, standing in the domain of Passaiung, he probably had its site somewhere in the sub-district of Wiccaco,—an Indian name traditionally said to imply pleasant place—a name highly indicative of what Swedes' church place originally was. We take for granted that the village and church would, as a matter of course, get as near the block-house fort as circumstances would admit.

The lands of the Sven family we however know from actual title, which I have seen to this effect, to wit: "I Francis Lovelace, Esq., one of the



gentlemen of his Majesty's Honourable Privy Council, and Governor General under his Royal Highness James, Duke of York and Albany, to all whom these presents may come, &c. Whereas, there was a Patent or Ground Brief granted by the Dutch Governor at Delaware to Swen Gonderson, Swen Swenson, Oele Swenson, and Andrew Swenson, for a certain piece of ground lying up above in the river, beginning at Moyamensing kill, and so stretching upwards in breadth 400 rod, [about  $1\frac{1}{4}$  mile wide] and in length into the woods 600 rod, [nearly 2 miles] in all about 800 acres, dated 5th of May, 1664, KNOW YE, &c., that I have ratified the same, they paying an annual quit rent of eight bushels of winter wheat to his Majesty." This patent was found recorded at Upland the 31st of August, 1741.

The Moyamensing kill above mentioned was probably the same creek now called Hay creek, above Gloucester Point, and the 600 rods, or 2 miles of length, probably extended along the river.

We know that Penn deemed their lines so far within the bounds of his plan of Philadelphia and Southwark, that he actually extinguished their title by giving them lands on the Schuylkill, above Lemon Hill, &c.

The Rev. Dr. Collin has ascertained from the Swedish MS. records in his possession that the first Swedes' church at Wiccaco was built on the

## THE SWEDES' CHURCH AND

present site in 1677, five years before Penn's colony came. It was of logs, and had loop-holes in lieu of window lights, which might serve for fire-arms in case of need. The congregation also was accustomed to bring fire-arms with them to prevent surprise, but ostensibly to use for any wild game which might present in their way in coming from various places.

In 1700, the present brick church was erected, and it was then deemed a great edifice, and so generally spoken of; for certainly nothing was then equal to it, as a public building, in the city. The parsonage house, now standing, was built in 1737. The former parsonage house was in the Neck. There were originally twenty-seven acres of land attached to the Wiccaco church. These facts were told me by Dr. Collin. At my request he made several extracts from the Swedish church-books to illustrate those early times; which he has since bestowed to the historical department of the Philosophical Society.

The original log-house of the sons of Sven was standing till the time the British occupied Philadelphia; when it was taken down and converted into fuel. It stood on a knoll or hill on the N. W. corner of Swanson street and Beck's alley. Professor Kalm visited it in 1748 as a curiosity, and his description of it then is striking, to wit: "The

## HOUSE OF SVEN SENER

wretched old wooden building (on a hill a little north of the Swedes' church) belonging to one of the sons of Sven (Sven's Sener) is still preserved as a memorial of the once poor state of that place. Its antiquity gives it a kind of superiority over all the other buildings in the town, although in itself it is the worst of all. But with these advantages it is ready to fall down, and in a few years to come it will be as difficult to find the place where it stood as it was unlikely, when built, that it should in a short time become the place of one of the greatest towns in America. Such as it was, it showed how they dwelt, when stags, elk, deer and beavers ranged in broad daylight in the future streets and public places of Philadelphia. In that house was heard the sound of the spinning wheel before the city was ever thought of!" He describes the site as having on the river side in front of it a great number of very large-sized water-beech or button-wood trees; one of them, as a solitary way-mark to the spot, is still remaining there. He mentions also some great ones as standing on the river shore by the Swedes' church—the whole then a rural scene.

It was deemed so attractive, as a "pleasant place," that Thomas Penn when in Philadelphia made it his favorite ramble, so much so, that Secretary Peters, in writing to him in 1743, thus complains of

THE SWEDES' CHURCH AND

its changes, saying, "Southwark is getting greatly disfigured by erecting irregular and mean houses; thereby so marring its beauty that when he shall return he will lose his usual pretty walk to Wiccaco."

I ascertained the following facts concerning "the old Swedes' house," as they called the log-house of the sons of Sven. Its exact location was where the blacksmith's shop now stands, about thirty feet north of Beck's alley and fronting upon Swanson street. It had had a large garden and various fruit trees behind it. The little hill on which it stood has been cut down as much as five or six feet to make the lot conform to the present street. It descended to Paul Beck, Esq., through the Parahs or Parhams, a Swedish family. The wife of the late Rev. Dr. Rogers remembered going to school in it with her sister. They described it to me, as well as to a Mrs. Stewart also, as having been one and a half stories high, with a piazza all round it, having four rooms on a floor, and a very large fireplace with seats in each jamb. Beck's alley and the "improvements" there had much spoiled the former beauty of the scene along that alley. There had been there an inlet of water from the Delaware, in which boats could float, especially at high tides. There were many very high trees, a shipyard, and much green grass all about the place. Now not a vestige of the former scene remains.

## HOUSE OF SVEN SENER

Although my informants had often heard it called the "Swedes' house" in their youth, they never understood the cause of the distinction until I explained it.

The Sven family, although once sole lords of the southern domain, have now dwindled away, and I know of no male member of that name, or rather of their Anglified name of Swanson. The name was successively altered. At the earliest time it was occasionally written Suan, which sometimes gave occasion to the sound of Swan, and in their patent confirmed by Governor Lovelace, they are named Swen. By Professor Kalm, himself a Swede, and most competent to the true name, they are called Sven's-Sæner, *i. e.* sons of Sven. Hence in time they were called sons of Suan or Swan, and afterwards, for euphony sake, Swanson.

I found in the burial place of the Swedes' church a solitary memorial; such as the tablet and the chisel have preserved in these rude lines, to wit:

"In memory of Peter Swanson,  
who died December 18, 1737,  
aged 61 years.  
Reader, stop and self behold!  
Thou'rt made of ye same mould,  
And shortly must dissolved be:  
Make sure of blest Eternity!"

In the same ground is the inscription of Swan Johnson, who died in 1733, aged forty-eight years,

THE SWEDES' CHURCH AND

who probably derived his baptismal name from the Sven race.

The extinction of these names of the primitive lords of the soil, reminds one of the equally lost names of the primitive lords at the other end of the city, to wit: the Hartsfelders and Peggs—all sunk in the abyss of time! “By whom begotten or by whom forgot,” equally is all their lot!

One street has preserved their Swanson name; and the City Directory did once show the names of one or two in lowly circumstances; if indeed their names were any proof of their connection with Sven Schute.

The present Anthony Cuthbert of Penn Street, aged seventy-seven, tells me he remembers an aged Mr. Swanson in his youth, who was a large landholder of property near this Sven house; that he gave all his deeds or leases “with the privilege of using his wharf or landing near the button-woods.”

The single great tree still standing there, as a pointer to the spot, is nearly as thick at its base as the Treaty Elm, and like it diverges into two great branches near the ground. Long may it remain the last relic of the home of Sven Sæner!

They who see the region of Swedes' church now, can have little conception of the hills and undulations primarily there. The first story of the Swedes' church, now on Swanson street, made of stone, was

originally so much under ground. The site there was on a small hill now cut down eight feet. At the east end of Christian street where it is crossed by Swanson street, the river Delaware used to flow in, so that Swanson street in that place, say from the north side of Swedes' church lot up to near Queen street, was originally a raised cause-way. Therefore, the oldest houses now standing on the western side of that street do not conform to the line of the street, but range in a line nearly southwest, and also stand back from the present street on what was (before the street was laid out) the margin of the high ground bordering on the river Delaware. Those houses too have their yards one story higher than their front pavements, and what was once their cellars under ground is now the first story of the same buildings.

From the Swedes' church down to the navy yard, the high hill formerly there has been cut down five or six feet, and by filling up the wharves below the former steep banks, the bank itself, as once remembered, even twenty years ago, seems strangely diminished.

At some distance from Swedes' church westward, is a remarkably low ground, between hills, having a pebbly bed like the river shore, which shows it once had a communication with the Delaware river at the foot of Christian street; where Mr. Joseph

THE SWEDES' CHURCH AND

Marsh, an aged gentleman, told me he had himself filled up his lot on the southwest corner as much as three feet. On that same lot he tells me there was formerly, before his time, a grain mill worked by two horses, which did considerable grinding.

The same Mr. Marsh, then aged eighty-six, showed me that all the ground northward of Christian street and in the rear of his own house, No. 13, descended suddenly; thus showing there must have been there a vale or water-channel leading out to the river. His own house formerly went down four steps from his door, and now the ground in the street is so raised as to remove them all.

Near him, at No. 7, on the north side of Christian street, is a very ancient-looking boarded house of but one very low story, having its roof projecting beyond the wall of the house in front and rear, so as to form pent-houses. It is a log-house in truth, concealed by boards and painted, and certainly the only log-house in Philadelphia! What is curious respecting it, is, that it was actually framed and floated to its present spot by "old Joseph Wharton" from Chester county. Of this fact Mr. Marsh assured me, and told me it was an old building in his early days, and was always then called "Noah's Ark." He remembered it when the cellar part of it (which is of stone and seven feet deep) was all above ground, and the cellar floor was even with



the former street! I observed a hearth and chimney still in the cellar, and water was also in it. This water the tenant told me they supposed came in even now from the river, although at one hundred feet distance. I think it not improbable that it stands on spring ground, which, as long as the street was lower than the cellar, found its way off, but now it is dammed. The floor of the once second story is now one foot lower than the street.

On the whole, there are signs of great changes in that neighborhood—of depressing hills or of filling vales; which, if my conjectures be just, would have made the Swedes' church, in times of water invasions from high tides, a kind of peninsula, and itself and parsonage on the extreme point of projection.

The primitive Swedes generally located all their residences "near the freshes of the river," always choosing places of a ready water communication, preferring thus their conveyances in canoes to the labor of opening roads and inland improvements. From this cause their churches, like this at Wiccaco, was visited from considerable distances along the river, and making, when assembled on Lord's day, quite a squadron of boats along the river side there.

There are some facts existing, which seem to indicate that the first Swedish settlement was destroyed by fire. Mrs. Preston, the grandmother of Samuel Preston, an aged gentleman still alive, often told

## THE SWEDES' CHURCH

him of their being driven from thence, by being burned out, and then going off by invitation to an Indian settlement in Bucks county. In Campanius' work he speaks of Korsholm fort, (supposed to be the same place) as being abandoned after Governor Printz returned to Sweden, and afterwards burned by the Indians; very probably as a measure of policy, to diminish the strength of their new masters, the Dutch. There seems at least some coincidence in the two stories.

The road through Wiccaco to Gloucester Point was petitioned for, and granted by the Council in the year 1720, and called "the road through the marsh."

(Reprinted from Watson's Annals, 1st Edition, 1830, pages 133, &c.)

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My Grandmother was one of the Swedes.

SISOM.

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