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Ethnic Enclaves: Westerdahl's Swedish Store

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. It was first published in September 2021.



Westerdahl Park at West Fourth and Poplar streets is the last vestige of Erie, Pennsylvania's once thriving bayfront Swedish community.

During seventh grade, I managed to acquire an Erie Times paper route. The route included West Second Street from Cascade to Poplar streets as well as the southerly streets between Second and Third (Plum, Liberty, and Poplar). As I was learning the names of customers, I encountered several Poplar Street residents with last names I now recognize as Swedish. When I asked about their origins, I was not surprised to learn about another group from a European country living near each other. Nearer my home in the 900 block of West Fourth Street, there were similar pockets of Italian, Portuguese, Hungarian, and German ethnic groups. In most cases those enclaves were composed of people who were related or knew each other before they emigrated. One of my best friends, Jim Costa, for example, had four families of cousins all named Costa and living within a two-block radius. All of the Costa families had originally arrived from the same small town in the Azores.

The Swedish people who lived on the east end of my paper route (Poplar Street) had similar emigration stories. Their families had been in the United States for a longer time than the Portuguese or Italian families closer to my house, but their arrivals in Erie, Pennsylvania featured similar connection narratives: families traveling together from Europe to the East Coast or friends and relatives coming to Erie to join people who were already here. The primary attraction in Erie was good jobs, and arriving Swedes lived with friends and relatives while they saved money and looked for nearby places to live. As I began to understand my new customers, they occasionally gifted me with Swedish treats: cookies, crackers, and small pastries with names that I could barely pronounce. They also encouraged me to visit the neighborhood Swedish Store. Westerdahl's was at the corner of Fourth and Poplar streets, just a few blocks south of my paper route and on the way home. So, I visited often and found a wonderful glass counter filled with amazing treats. Eventually, the store became one of my customers and I became a regular. The Westerdhals were beyond generous, often giving me treats, which were probably left over but certainly appreciated. Mr. Westerdahl sometimes gave me a bag of treats to take home to my family.

The roots of Swedish-American immigration began with the formation of New Sweden on the Delaware coast. Like more familiar European countries that settled the New World (England, France and Spain), Sweden was eager to participate in the wealth and opportunity associated with the Americas. To that end, two square-rigged sailing ships set sail for the Americas in an operation called the Swedish West India Company. The new settlers landed on the Delaware coast in 1638. Sailing up the river, they stopped near today's Wilmington and claimed the territory in the name of Sweden. The settlers disembarked, began to build homes, plant crops, and trade with the local Indians.

Unfortunately for America's new Swedish Colony, the members were inadvertently settling on land that had already been claimed by Holland. The Dutch were in a much more powerful New World position than the Swedish, having arrived earlier with a larger contingent of settlers, military support, and war ships. Within a few months of the creation of the new Swedish Colony, the Dutch informed them that they were trespassing and would have to leave immediately. The leaders of the new Swedish settlement decided that the Dutch would not be inspired to make them move so they originally ignored the demand.

In 1655, however, the Dutch decided they would have to make good on their order to vacate and initiated a military movement that ended the Swedish colony. Most of the Swedish emigrants decided to move west toward frontier opportunities that were presenting themselves in Pennsylvania. The Swedish people eventually followed the river and trail systems along the Susquehanna River. A large number of Swedes ended up in the Warren, Pennsylvania area, attracted to inexpensive plots of land and mature hardwood forests that reminded them of their homeland. In a bit of irony, much of the property that they purchased and settled was sold to them by the Holland America Land Company.

One of the most surprising contributions of America's Swedish settlers was the log cabin. Variously attributed to other frontier travelers, the traditional American log cabin, with pine logs anchored by layers of bonding and insulating cement was a Swedish tradition. Using crude tools, the Swedes were often able to construct a log building in just a few days, using tall, straight pine trees. As the settlers chopped the trees down and then sectioned them into wall-sized individual logs, they mixed the resultant wood chips and sawdust into a mixture of mud and used it, along with wooden stakes, to cement the logs into place. This seemingly "American" architectural style originated in the forests of Sweden and Finland with the settlers and came to Delaware in the 1600s.

Like most European settlers, religion was a unifying force for Swedish people. Sweden was a Roman Catholic country until the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther. Going a step further than most other northern European countries, Sweden's federal government drove the transition to Lutheranism by establishing the official "Church of Sweden." Among ordinary Swedish people, however, there was substantial resistance and resentment associated with the government's takeover of their religion.

That attitude followed the Swedes who settled in Erie and, while several opted to join Erie's established neighborhood Lutheran church, St. Matthew's at West Seventh and Cascade streets, several others decided to start their own church. That small group purchased a small house and began meeting at Seventh and Holland streets, where all of the services were held in Swedish. In 1895, they officially declared themselves Erie's "Swedish Baptist Church." The congregation grew rapidly and, in 1906, they tore the house down and built a small church.

In 1959, parishioners decided that ministering to the larger Erie community was more important than retaining their strict Swedish roots, which included holding services in Swedish. Purchasing a large property in Millcreek, they built a new church and began a sustained period of growth. They renamed their church Grace Baptist and eventually began a very clever “Who is Grace” internet campaign that was responsible for revitalizing the parish and helping it to grow even larger. Today’s Grace Church has expanded to a remarkable size and moved to an even larger facility.

Eventually, Erie’s bayfront Swedish community suffered the same fate as most of its neighboring ethnic enclaves. The affluence and growth of the 1950s and 1960s motivated individual families to move from the bayfront and toward South Erie’s modern neighborhood developments. One by one, Swedish (like Italian, Portuguese, German, Hungarian, Finnish, and other ethnic groups) left their inner-city homes.



Erie’s original Swedish Baptist Church was at Seventh and Holland streets.



The new tall ship, Kalmar Nyckel, is a representation of the vessel that delivered the first Swedish emigrants to Delaware.

In recent years, there have been two remarkable gifts to Erie's Swedish history. In 2017, Erie Insurance gifted the original Swedish language church at Seventh and Holland back to Grace Baptist Church after acquiring it during expansions in the late 1970s. The new Grace Baptist church, which has grown to the size and strength that would allow it to do something significant with its historic origin building, is currently rebranding the landmark downtown building as a church leadership institute. In 2020, a coalition of neighborhood groups acquired the blighted remains of Westerdahl's Swedish grocery at Fourth and Poplar, demolished the building, and converted its footprint to a neighborhood pocket park.



Westerdahl's Swedish Grocery Store was at the corner of Fourth and Poplar streets for more than 40 years.

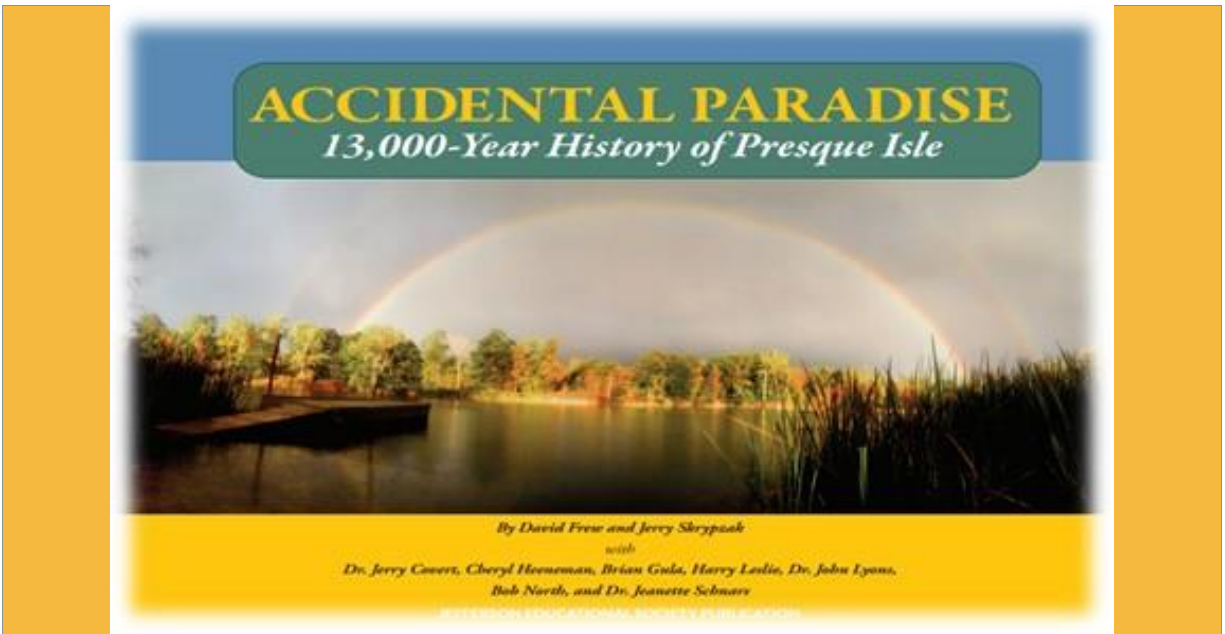
One day during the 1970s, I was at the Downtown YMCA sitting in the sauna warming up for a handball match when a familiar man entered and sat next to me. He was the son of Mr. Westerdahl, the original store owner. We recognized each other and began to chat. Sadly, he shared that he was in the process of closing the store. "The old neighborhood is not the same," he remarked. "Old customers are gone forever."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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