

The Swedes and Finns in New Jersey

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The Story of the Swedish Church

THROUGH the corn and tomato fields of rich Gloucester County, a narrow macadam road runs southwest about five miles inland from Delaware River. The road makes few turns as it dips into ravines where small creeks take a serpentine course toward the nearby river, and as it passes occasional clumps of trees with honeysuckle running wild through the underbrush. Were it not for the weathered milestones and occasional stone houses that served as taverns or homes before the Revolution, there would be nothing to indicate that this road is part of the old King's Highway.

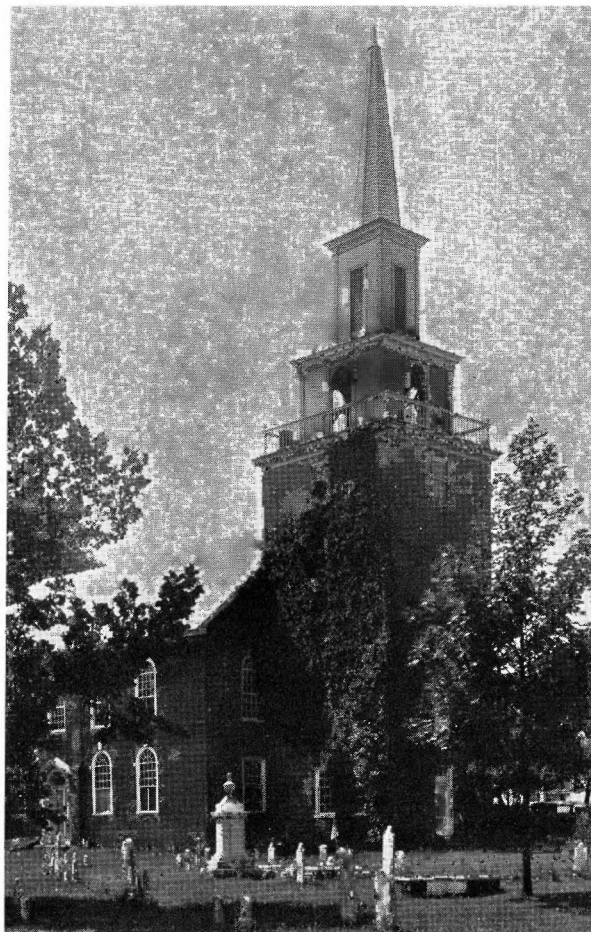
Ten miles southwest of Woodbury, the Gloucester County seat, the traveler on the King's Highway comes to a somewhat broader valley, although even this one is little more than a ravine. Through the bottom twists Raccoon Creek, which carried the boats of early Swedish and Finnish settlers. A railroad embankment and bridge spans the gap, entering the town of Swedesboro on the opposite

shore, where the huge gray sheds of a packing plant are the chief signs of industry.

A MEMORIAL TO NEW SWEDEN

There are no tall buildings in Swedesboro, but above the treetops and housetops rises the steeple of a landmark for generations: Trinity Church. The dignity of sturdy old age surrounds the unpretentious building. Its ivy-covered tower with the open gallery atop its pent roof; its white-sashed, small-paned windows set into the red brick of its walls; the surrounding churchyard with its simple marble slabs, all mark Trinity Church as a survivor of a half-forgotten epoch.

Yet the church is much more than an interesting remnant of early American architecture. Its history, along with that of the town, goes back nearly to the beginning of New Sweden, the colony which the Swedish Crown attempted to establish in the Delaware River Valley 300 years ago.



TRINITY CHURCH, SWEDESBORO

Trinity Church was founded as a center of the Lutheran faith, the faith of the early settlers of this region.

The present edifice, however, was not dedicated and ready for use until 1784, after British soldiers had occupied the town and burned the church schoolhouse. A simple little log cabin near the site had preceded the church and had served as a prayer house for Swedish Lutherans of the region of Raccoon, as it was first called.

Raccoon parish was destined to become one of the largest Lutheran congregations in the Delaware Valley. For a short time it was even the seat of the provost who administered the whole Swedish Church in America. But the Swedes and Finns became submerged by successive waves of immigration from Holland, England and Germany. Raccoon Church in turn began to serve the spiritual needs of these later settlers as well. And a scant two years after the present structure was erected this church and the other Swedish church in New Jersey were taken over by the Protestant Episcopal Church.

For 150 years Trinity parish has been the religious and social center of Swedesboro, just as in the preceding 80 years it had been the center of Swedish culture in South Jersey. The attempted preservation of the Swedish tongue, of Swedish customs and traditional Scandinavian culture during that period may be traced primarily to one single agency: the Swedish Lutheran Church. The history of the early settlements along the lower Delaware and its tributaries is told in old parish records and in the diaries and journals of their pastors. And the remaining traces of the pioneers may partly be attributed to the lasting influence of the Swedish churches. Many settlers of New Sweden strove to maintain their

faith and language long after their province had slipped from Sweden's grasp and had become a Dutch possession, then part of an English colony, and finally an integral part of a new Nation.

The Swedish and Finnish founders were a deeply religious people. Martin Luther's doctrine had become the State religion of their home country as early as 1527. It was an intensely personal religion that theoretically abolished all intermediaries between a worshiper and his Lord. This militant faith seemed particularly well adapted to a life in the wilderness, far from any house of worship, although in the home country the settlers had become accustomed to the attendance of a resident pastor.

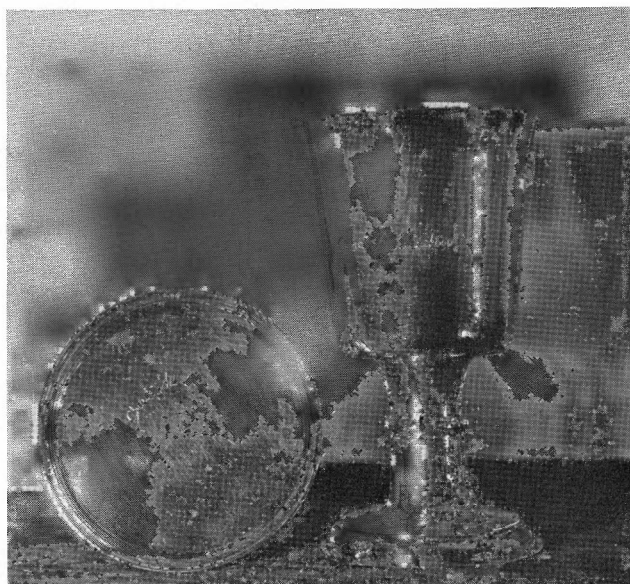
THE FIRST PARISH

When Johan Printz came to the shores of the new world in 1643 there were among his retinue, besides sundry other officials both military and civil, two clergymen. Printz had been instructed to spread the Lutheran faith in America. The Consistory at Uppsala was the official head of the Swedish church, whose acts and appointments were ratified by the Crown. The government had long subsidized candidates for the ministry.

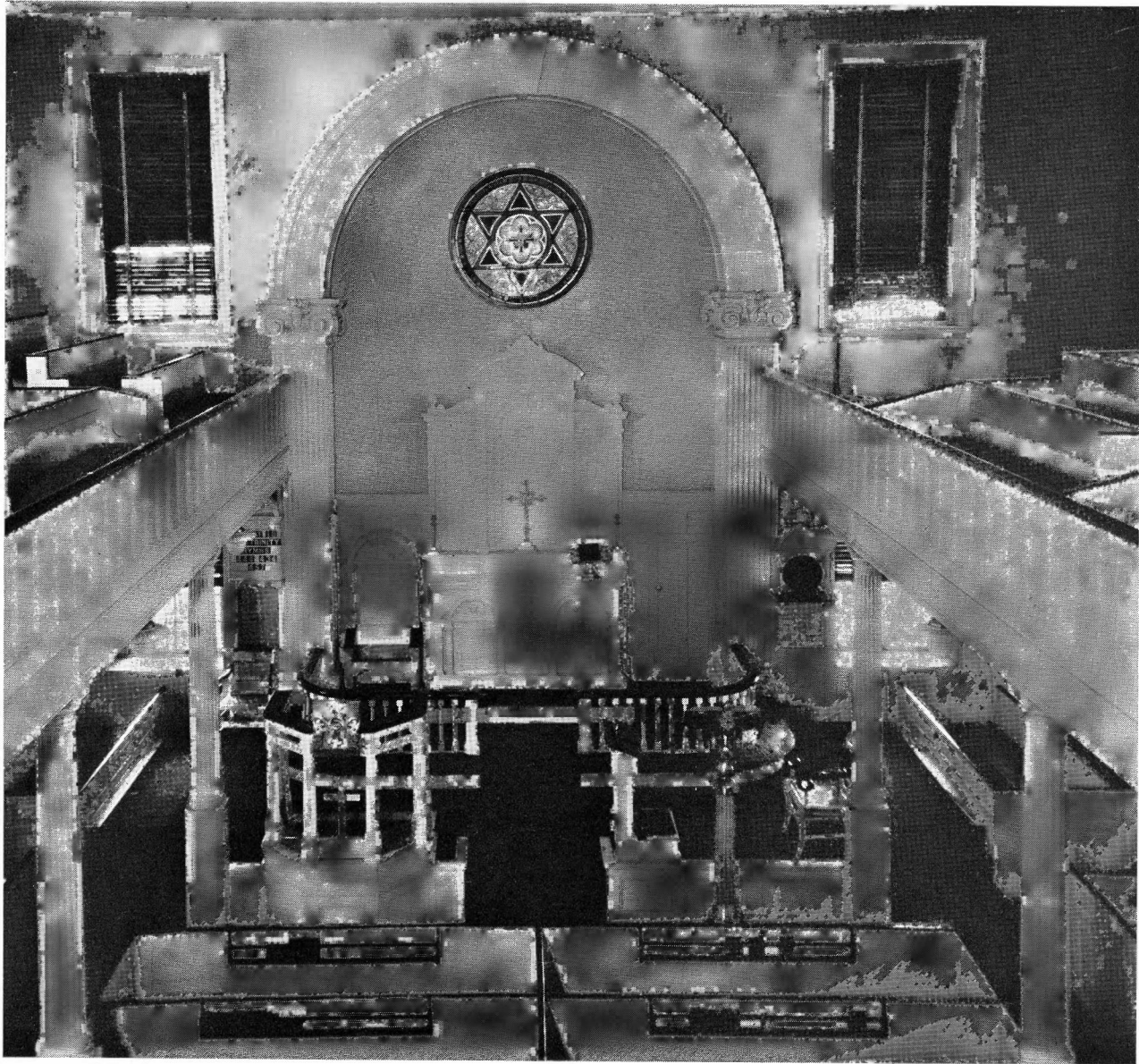
Magister (meaning master of arts) Reorus Torkillus, who came on the *Kalmar Nyckel's* second voyage in 1640, was the first Swedish Lutheran minister to serve in America, and it was he who laid the foundation for the Swedish churches in this country. The two ministers whom Governor Printz brought with him in 1643 were Johan Campanius and Israel Holg Fluviander. Campanius was the pioneer missionary to the Indians. Fluviander became the first settled pastor of any faith in South Jersey, for within two weeks after his arrival in New Sweden Governor Printz started the building of Fort Elfsborg, near Salem, and there established Pastor Fluviander and a garrison.

Subsequent expeditions of the New Sweden Company brought more colonists, and after the Quaker land development under William Penn many of the Swedes and Finns preferred the New Jersey shore for the site of their homesteads. Still later, small settlements began to dot the virginal wilderness from Egg Harbor and Maurice River in the south to Burlington Island in the north.

Throughout what may be called "The Swedish Period" of the Delaware River settlements, throughout the decade of Dutch occupation and even for many years after the establishment of English rule, the Christina (Wilmington) and Wicacoa (Philadelphia) parishes, and the auxiliary church at Tinicum which lasted till about 1700,



TRINITY'S SILVER COMMUNION SERVICE



INTERIOR OF TRINITY CHURCH FROM THE BALCONY

were the only centers of the Lutheran faith in the far-flung colony.

It was a long journey to these churches from the outlying districts of New Jersey. It necessitated leaving behind the homesteads freshly won from the wilderness, spending time that should have been applied to work on the land. The faithful had to walk and ride along trails and paths newly blazed through the woods. At the river's edge there awaited them the crude, open flatboats and dug-out canoes that would ferry them across, bucking the wild freshets of spring and fall and dangerous ice floes in wintertime. All these hardships endowed the simple enterprise of going to church with the earmarks of dangerous adventure. Visits to church were supple-

mented occasionally by the irregular tours of traveling parsons.

DISCONTENT IN NEW JERSEY

Grumbings against these natural hardships were heard among the colonists in New Jersey, who from the first moved to build a church on the east side of the Delaware. The long distances and great difficulties of travel made it practically impossible for the Swedes and Finns from New Jersey to attend services regularly.

John Fenwick brought his Quakers to Salem in 1675. They were soon followed by the establishments of other faiths, notably the Church of England, Presbyterians,

Moravians, German Lutherans, and later the Methodists. It was no more than natural that the unchurched Swedes in New Jersey should avail themselves of the services of ministers of kindred faiths that were, so to speak, brought right to their front doorstep.

The establishment in 1677 of the Swedish mission at Wicacoa (Philadelphia) by the Rev. Jacob Fabritius caused little change in these conditions; nor did the building of the new church at Christina by the Rev. Eric Björk in 1699. These two parishes appropriated and divided between them the Lutherans on the New Jersey side, Christina retaining those living south of Raccoon Creek, and Wicacoa embracing all living to the north. It was as hard as ever to reach either one of the two churches, particularly in wintertime, when storms and snowdrifts blocked the primitive roads. Although four New Jersey Swedes were included in Christina's church board of seven members, there was still a wide river to cross whenever a Jersey settler wished to attend Swedish Lutheran services.

The discontent of the Jersey members of the Wicacoa and Christina parishes was raised to fever heat during the closing years of the seventeenth century when both those churches decided to build new houses of worship. Here were two churches being built across the river and not even an effort to erect one in New Jersey. The secession movement throughout the region had reached almost the breaking point in 1701 when Pastor Björk, in an effort to placate the Raccoon members of his flock, nominated Hans Stolt (Stahl), a member of his Christina parish, as schoolmaster and lay preacher. Stolt founded his school, the first established in southern New Jersey under Swedish auspices, and the people were instructed to sit before the teacher on Sundays and church holidays in divine service. These regular weekly gatherings were the first semblances of a separate church body in southern New Jersey, but the result was meager. The unchurched Jersey Swedes felt that their numbers and needs deserved much more, and rebellion continued.

TOLLSTADIUS SEES THE NEED

This discontent, ever on the increase and finally fanned into open flames by an ambitious young preacher, eventually led to a secession of the New Jersey Swedish-Finnish Lutherans from the Wicacoa parish and brought about the establishment of the Swedesboro church, the first and most famous of all Swedish Lutheran edifices in New Jersey.

The preacher who thus cleverly capitalized upon existing dissatisfaction in order to get a church and a flock of his own was Lars Tollstadius. He was a colorful character, to say the least. He stayed in New Sweden for

less than five years, but during that time he was the center of incessant strife and wrangling with the Swedish ecclesiastical authorities. An indictment before the Burlington Court seemed a fitting culmination of his stormy career. And his sudden and tragic end was as spectacular as had been his life. His body was cast up by the Delaware River one day in May 1706, and it was never definitely established whether his death was suicide or an accident.

Tollstadius came to the Delaware Valley against authority from the Consistory. When he arrived in July 1701 and presented himself to the Rev. Andrew Rudman of Gloria Dei Church at Wicacoa, he lacked even the slightest documentary proof of his theological qualifications. Rudman, ailing in health, was probably only too eager to have assistance in his arduous duties from a man who, whatever his shortcomings, certainly did not lack either the energy or willingness to fulfill his assigned tasks. Whatever doubts Rudman held, he permitted Tollstadius to preach and catechize children, but not to administer the offices of the church.

A JERSEY CHURCH AT LAST

Tollstadius' career in the Delaware River Valley seemed doomed to sudden failure with the arrival of Johan Sandel, the first provost of the Swedish churches in America, newly appointed by the Uppsala Consistory. When Sandel, who had met Tollstadius in Europe, immediately relieved him of his duties, the youthful preacher became rebellious. Ordered to leave the country, he crossed the river instead and enlisted the aid of some friends at Raccoon. Tollstadius did not have to argue to convince the Swedes in New Jersey that it would be better to get a minister of their own than to await patiently the rare visits of a divine from the other side of the river.

Provost Sandel and Pastor Björk of Christina, who from the very beginning had had doubts concerning Tollstadius, untiringly admonished their followers regarding their duties toward the established churches. Letters of complaint and denunciation were dispatched to Sweden. Yet Tollstadius was able in a short time to wean enough members away from the Wicacoa flock to establish his Raccoon parish.

Twenty acres of land, and later 80 more, were purchased as a church site, and in the early fall of 1703 the self-styled pastor was able to ascend his own pulpit to preach one of the long sermons so much in vogue at the time. The little log church stood within a few feet of the new King's Highway, in the plot from where stately Trinity Church today overlooks Raccoon Creek.

The sudden death of the pioneer parson failed to allay

the demands of New Jersey Swedes for religious home rule. Even during the rectorship of Tollstadius' successor at Raccoon, the Rev. Jonas Aurén, residents to the south agitated for a church of their own.

When the Rev. Aurén arrived in 1706 he was accompanied by a young scholar, Carl Brunjen, a relative who had been a schoolmaster in Sweden. Brunjen established a school at Raccoon before the end of the year. His classes met in a small log building within sight of the church. The site of the school has been used for education ever since, one of Swedesboro's grammar schools standing there today.

A SECOND JERSEY PARISH

Aurén died after seven years at Raccoon and was succeeded in 1713 by the Rev. Abraham Lidenius. Lidenius sympathized with the parishioners to the south, and helped them prepare a letter to Bishop Svedberg at Skara, asking

permission to establish a parish at Penn's Neck. Pastor Björk at Christina posted notices and called meetings, threatened and cajoled, to halt the withdrawal of his parishioners. They were determined, however, to have a church and pastor of their own.

Permission finally came to establish St. George Parish at Penn's Neck, now Churchtown, and in January 1715 land was bought for a church and a burial ground. Building materials were donated for a log church 24 feet square, but construction was delayed by the lack of expensive iron nails, and the lack of money to buy them. The church was dedicated in March 1717 by Provost Sandel.

The churches at Raccoon and Penn's Neck had a common pastor except for two years. It was, therefore, necessary to make some convenient arrangement for sharing him. Pastor Lindenius had married soon after his arrival. For a time the couple lived with various members of the congregation, but the birth of two children



THE FORMER PARSONAGE FARM, OR GLEBE, NEAR WOODSTOWN

made it necessary to provide a parsonage. After much arguing back and forth the two parishes in 1720 bought a farm in Pilesgrove Township, about midway between the two churches. The members helped build a house, stocked the farm, and even supplied two servants. In 1764 the farm was rented out, and in 1795 sold at auction and the price divided between the two parishes. This "Half-Way Parsonage" is still known in upper Salem County as the "glebe", or rectory farm.

In addition to the living from the glebe, the pastor was promised a cash salary. The parishes, however, were usually in financial difficulties. Not only was there a shortage of cash among the colonists, but the help promised by the Consistory often failed to materialize. Nearly every pastor had to ask for his salary frequently, and occasionally his family was in real want. One lay preacher, Malander, left after being unpaid for many months.

Lack of money also made it hard to keep the churches in repair. When hogs broke through the graveyard fence the members merely set the decayed boards back into place, and the hogs broke through again. At another time ghouls were robbing corpses of the petty trinkets buried with them, and this went on until two members each promised a lock for the churchyard gates.

Lidenius returned to Sweden in 1724, and was succeeded after two years by the Rev. Peter Tranberg at Raccoon, while St. George for the first and only time had a pastor of its own in Tranberg's assistant, the Rev. Andrew Windrufva. The latter's death in 1728 of an epidemic of "pricks and burning" that also carried off a great many residents of Finn's Point and other settlements in the river front marshes imposed on Tranberg the double duty of serving both parishes. But when Tranberg in 1740 was transferred from Raccoon, where he had lived for 15 years, to Christina, New Jersey's Swedish Lutherans were again pastorless, as they had been before Tollstadius staged his dramatic secession, although they had two churches. Again they had to look to the other bank of the river for spiritual guidance or turn to other faiths in their neighborhood. Their pulpits stood empty and the deplorable financial situation of their churches seemed to make it unlikely that new pastors would arrive from the mother country in the near future.

MORAVIANS LEND A HAND

Aid from the Swedish Crown was even less than in earlier years. Thus German Moravian Brothers stepped into the breach that Tranberg's transfer had left.

Moravians had begun to migrate to the New World

in the late 1730's. Under the leadership of Paul Daniel Bryzelius, Moravians opened a number of missions and prayer houses in South Jersey. Originally they had no intention of winning converts, attempting only to supply religious services to places that were too poor to afford a minister. Zion Moravian Church, on the King's Highway at Oldman's Creek, the dividing line between Gloucester and Salem counties, stands today as a memorial to the missionary zeal of these Moravian preachers. Bryzelius was Swedish by birth, but had embraced the faith of Count von Zinzendorf, restorer of the Moravian Brotherhood.

Their well-meaning efforts to administer to the pauperized and orphaned Swedish parishes met with vociferous resentment rather than with loud acclaim on the part of the Swedish Church. The Uppsala Consistory regarded the Moravians as intruders, but could not obtain the Swedish King's assent to oust them from the pulpits they had occupied. Local Swedish church authorities finally succeeded in 1745 in having the Gloucester County Court expel Bryzelius from the province on penalty of imprisonment.

NEW PASTORS AND A NEW TONGUE

The Swedish parishes, however, were no better off for the belligerent attitude of the local pastors. Still left without the offices of a minister, many Swedes definitely joined neighboring congregations. Inter-marriages between Swedes and Finns and their English and German neighbors depleted the parishes even more. The acceptance of American habits and customs, aided by an almost universal adoption of the English language, was leaving its mark on the old traditions.

The Consistory in Sweden finally took cognizance of this drift away from the Swedish tongue and traditions, and in 1748 sent to Raccoon the Rev. Johan Sandin, with instructions to check the movement and revive the Swedish faith and language. Sandin had been appointed Provost, and during his term of office all the churches in New Sweden were administered from New Jersey. He died, however, before his efforts showed any result.

Peter Kalm, the famous Finnish naturalist, who visited and preached in New Jersey in the late 1740's, during the course of his botanical studies for the University of Turku, Finland, found Repaupo the only place where Swedish was still spoken "in its purest form . . . without one word of English being mixed in." The Rev. Israel Acrelius, when he became provost at Christina in 1750, bewailed his discovery that in all the New Jersey region there were barely 200 persons still able to speak Swedish.

In the church registers and record books he noticed the frequent use of English, German and Latin words mixed into the Swedish.

Acrelius wrote in the book at Raccoon that "the old script is now dead and the SW [Swedish] language, in America, now on its last leg, may be saved." To that end, and to the saving of the last vestiges of the cultural heritage that the original settlers had passed on, he directed all his efforts. His untiring work is attested by his renowned *History of New Sweden or the Settlements on the River Delaware*, published at Stockholm in 1759.

Equal ardor endowed Acrelius' assistants, the Rev. Eric Unander and the Rev. Johan Abraham Lidenius. The latter was the only member of the Raccoon clergy who was of American birth. He was the son of the Abraham Lidenius who had served the New Jersey parishes from 1713 to 1724. After four years of service as a curate, he was inducted into the pastorate and served Raccoon in that office from 1755 to 1762. Raccoon was then the largest parish in the territory.

Lidenius was succeeded in 1762 by the Rev. John Wicksell, who was strictly orthodox. His efforts were not helped when the parish was granted an English charter in 1765. Antagonism against the mother tongue increased. Since Wicksell could not speak English well, it was difficult for him to compromise, even if he had wished to. The Consistory, whose authority was by that time almost negligible, made a further attempt to save the Swedish church in America. Wicksell was named vice dean of the Delaware River parishes, while his assistant at Raccoon and Penn's Neck was to be Nicholas Collin, who had shown much promise in his native land.

Collin was a brilliant young scholar who succeeded to the Raccoon pastorate at a highly critical point of its history and that of the country as a whole. A series of conversions to other faiths had beset the Swedish churches on the Delaware. Such separatist movements were hardly avoidable in a land where religious freedom had equal footing with personal and political liberty.

Collin had sojourned in England for six months before embarking for America, adding English to a long list of languages he already knew. A few weeks after landing in America he preached in English at Raccoon and Penn's Neck, which made an immediate good impression on the parishioners. The energy that he devoted to his work increased the esteem in which he was held throughout his long stay. He frequently traveled 30 miles to conduct services at Maurice River, and preached to the Stangers, German Lutherans who had opened a glass works 17 miles away.

With his duties as pastor of Raccoon and Penn's Neck,

Collin combined a vast number of outside interests. These threw him into the company of such noted contemporaries as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and Noah Webster. He conducted original research in medicine, botany, the natural sciences; studied languages, old and modern, and delighted in inventing ingenious mechanical contrivances of various kinds. The latter earned him the coveted gold medal of the American Philosophical Society, and Franklin was as proud of his friend's achievements as was the recipient himself.

Fate seemed to have made a particularly happy choice by installing this man of many achievements in a spot around which much of the coming conflict would center. Already in 1774 the attitude of the people of South New Jersey had become so warlike that, probably from the fear of the authorities that sedition might be preached from the pulpits of the foreign-speaking congregations, British regiments were employed in hampering all services except those in English churches. For four years, from 1774 to 1778, worship at Raccoon was conducted only at rare intervals. Collin was arrested several times, although he had taken no part in political activity.

COLLIN BUILDS THE PRESENT CHURCH

In the meantime the community had become a virtual parade ground for British and Colonial troops alike. Along the King's Highway the armies marched and countermarched, as much military action centered around Gloucester and Salem counties. A sigh of relief went up from the whole countryside when the arena of war was moved northward. As the people turned to more peaceful pursuits and Raccoon began to rebuild the schoolhouse that had been burned by the British, Collin busied himself with the erection of a new church. Although his little wooden building had escaped the torch, nearly 80 years had passed since Tollstadius laid the foundation, and the structure was considered unsafe.

The community was hard hit by incessant British requisitions for grain, cattle, draft animals, food supplies, and even silverware and money. But Collin's appeal for building funds resulted in the subscription of £1,418, of which £1,310 were collected. With this the erection of the new church was undertaken. The untiring pastor himself inspected all bricks, lumber, stone and other materials and added his own labor to that of the bricklayers and other mechanics.

A scant two years after the new church had been dedicated, however, it was transferred to the Episcopal diocese of New Jersey. Its name was changed from Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church at Swedesboro to Trinity

Episcopal Church. Collin was asked to remain until an ordained Episcopal rector could be found.

In the summer of 1786 Collin transferred his labors to Gloria Dei Church in Philadelphia (still standing as one of South Philadelphia's oldest landmarks), and the days of New Jersey as a stronghold of Swedish Lutheranism were ended. Collin visited the New Jersey parish from time to time, but with him went the last vestige of the authority of the Swedish Consistory in the new State.

Only the church itself remains as a symbol of the past, standing in a corner of the old graveyard that slopes away toward the creek bottom lands. Although the church seems simple today, at the time it was built it was the most elaborate edifice in the region. The square tower and steeple at the gable end were added in 1836.

Large enough to have accommodated under its gabled roof the contemplated membership growth for a century, its interior is a revelation of Colonial splendor and simplicity of design. The walls, except where two rows of small-paned windows and the doors in front and on the south side interrupt them, rise straight, without any pilasters. A balcony supported by wooden Grecian col-

umns is suspended around the sides and rear. Two aisles, one on either side of the auditorium, lead to choir stalls and the altar in front. The pews are of the old box-style, each with its own gate. The marble baptismal font stands about midway in the aisle. To the right rises the lectern above a low balustrade, with the uncanopied pulpit opposite. The altar, back of the balustrade, is set in a little niche, on either side of which are the robing and choir rooms. The entire interior is painted a gleaming white and trimmed with thin mahogany strips.

As Lutheran, all the Swedish churches in the Delaware River Valley passed away except that at Friesburg, Salem County. This one survives because local German Lutherans helped the Swedes at the organization, while the German Lutheran Synod granted financial aid when the Consistory in Sweden ceased to be interested. The church, at what is now Port Elizabeth, Cumberland County, the center for Swedes in the extensive Maurice River Valley, is now known only by its burial ground. On the back road between Woodstown and Sharptown still stands the glebe or Half-Way Parsonage, though modernized out of all semblance to the original.

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TERCENTENARY CELEBRATION, 1938

Sweden and Finland, like England and the Netherlands, were mother countries of New Jersey. Though soon passing under the political control of the Dutch and the English, the Swedes and Finns remained and made important contributions to our State and Nation. The year 1938 will mark the 300th anniversary

of the establishment of New Sweden, when the governments of Sweden and Finland and the United States will join with the states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware in a three-month celebration, beginning June 27, 1938, when, at Wilmington, the Swedish Crown Prince will unveil a monument presented by the Swedish people. President Roosevelt and commissions from all sections of the United States will participate, as well as guests from Sweden and Finland, estimated at about 3,000, who will accompany the royal party. New Jersey's part in this celebration is directed by the New Jersey Swedish Tercentenary Commission, appointed by Act of Legislature and constituted as follows:

Senators: D. STEWART CRAVEN, Salem, *Chairman*; ALBERT E. BURLING, Camden; ROBERT C. HENDRICKSON, Woodbury; GEORGE H. STANGER, Vineland.

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