

THE STORY OF
TWO FAMILIES
AND THEIR
TIMES



CHAPTER THREE

THE NILSSONS (NELSONS) ARRIVE IN BOSTON

Boston in 1852

We have no idea what impression the Nilsson family had as they arrived in Boston on that July day in 1852. The best we can do is to look at the history of the city and imagine what they saw. Much of what follows is gleaned from the book “The Hub: Boston Past and Present” by Thomas O’Conner. The city was chartered in 1822. By that time it was a port of significant global commerce. Sailing ships headed to sea loaded with salt, fish, rum, and tobacco. On their return they brought silk and tea from China, sugar and molasses from the West Indies, and gold and mahogany from Africa. The city was also known as “The Hub of the Universe” because of its intellectual prominence in the new world in the 1800s.



As the Nilssons sailed into Boston harbor they probably took note of the obelisk on Beacon Hill, erected in 1843 and a reminder of an important battle during the Revolutionary War. By this time it also marked the neighborhood where the wealthy of Boston had built large homes. Descendants of the Puritans and other early English settlers were called the “Brahmins.” They had developed Boston into the busiest seaport in the country, surpassing New York in importance until the 1860s.

Cunard began the first trans-Atlantic mail routes out of Boston in the 1840s.

The harbor itself was very different from what it is today. Though it was a major port, with places where the deepest-drawing ships could dock, large areas were swamps and shallow water. Over a period of more than fifty years, stretching into the 1900s, trains dumped load after load of landfill into the bay and created new neighborhoods and seacoast.

The population of Boston was about 175,000 in 1850. That is only a guess, however, since the port had been flooded during the decade of the 1840s with hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Ireland. Driven from their native land by the catastrophic Irish potato failure, known as The Great Famine, these poor folk were not greeted with welcome signs when they arrived. By the time they reached the shores of America they were so completely drained of energy and hope that it was said of them, “*they were too poor to move on, too desperate to care.*” In 1847 alone 37,000 poured into Boston from Ireland. One historian describes them as “*pallid and weak, half-starved, disease-ridden and impoverished, with no skills at all except a rudimentary knowledge of farming.*” The Irish lived in squalor, herded together in the congested streets of the North End or in the once-fashionable neighborhood known as Fort Hill. Reminiscent of the unkind comments

we hear even today about new immigrants, one Bostonian complained:

Foreign paupers are rapidly accumulating on our hands. ... aged, blind, paralytic and lunatic immigrants who have become public charges on our public charities.

After the War of 1812 New England had become the heart of textile manufacturing. Because of the need for cotton to feed the mills, there was a close link between the factory owners of New England and the cotton plantation owners of the South. In fact, in the 1700s it was not uncommon for some New Englanders to have slaves. On one occasion the Rev. Cotton Mather received as a gift from his congregation “a slave worth 40 pounds.” Blacks who were not slaves were relegated to menial occupations -- laborers, stevedores, and launderers.

In an infamous case that came before the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts in 1849 a Black child was denied the right to attend a white school. These kinds of incidents led up to the Dred Scott case in 1857 when African Americans were denied the right for citizenship (more about that case later when we get to Minnesota). And that, in turn, set the stage for the famous Lincoln/Douglas debates in 1858 and, eventually, the Civil War.

The arrival of the impoverished Irish, however, brought a new dynamic to Boston. They were so desperate for jobs that they were willing to work for a lower wage than the Blacks.

At the same time, anti-slavery forces were beginning to have an impact on New England and Boston. The result was frequent conflict between those seeking freedom for Blacks and those wanting to keep peace with their Southern commercial connections.

The conflict over slavery was reflected in the highest offices in the land. President Zachary Taylor was a southern slave owner. His vice president was Millard Fillmore. Though he owned slaves Taylor wanted the new states that had come into the Union after the Mexican-American War to be free states. Fillmore, in a move to appease the South, supported slavery in the new states. “God knows that I detest slavery, but it is an existing evil...and we must endure it and give it such protection as is guaranteed by the Constitution,” wrote Fillmore. Fillmore succeeded Taylor when the president died suddenly in 1850. His compromise on the slavery issue, however, caused him to lose support from the northern leaders and he lost his party’s nomination in 1852.

An Alien Place for Swedes

I dwell on these historical facts to accent how alien this place must have been for the Nilsson (Nelson) family when they disembarked in Boston in 1852. The first Swedish congregation was not organized until twenty years later in 1874. First Emerald Street in the harbor area, it is “Resurrection Lutheran Church” in Roxbury district of Boston. (Ironically, my maternal great



more than located on now the

grandparents, the Carl Lindgrens in Skåne, Sweden, supported this congregation, though they never emigrated to America.)

Boston harbor in the 1850s

Was there anyone in Boston to welcome the Nilsson family in their native tongue? To give them some food for the journey ahead? To attend to their medical needs? Probably not. My best guess is that the Nilssons (Nelsons) hurried directly from the wharf to the railroad station to begin their journey across America to Wisconsin.

The Immigration Process:

Before they embarked on their journey from Boston to Wisconsin the Nilssons (Nelsons) had to go through the immigration ordeal. From early colonial times immigrants arrived in the United States at many ports. Gradually a few places emerged as the main points of entry. Among them was Boston. Until the late 1800s individual states controlled the processing of immigrants and it varied from place to place. There were no uniform standards for how this was done.

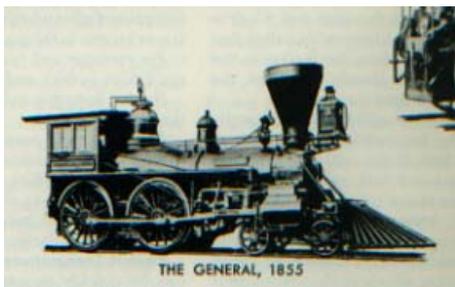
We can probably learn something from how immigrants were processed at Ellis Island which opened in 1892, exactly forty years after the Nilssons (Nelsons) arrived. Even then immigrants were subject to “*overcrowding, instances of abuse, miscommunication, endless delays, and the heartbreak of the thousands who were refused entry and deported....*” (from “Life on Ellis Island” by Renee Rebmann). So we can only imagine what Boston was like nearly a half-century earlier when the Nilssons (Nelsons) arrived.

No matter where they arrived, newcomers were subject to crude physical examinations. To check for contagious eye ailments, a button hook was used to roll back the eye lids. Women dreaded having to undress to check for lice. Scalps were carefully examined for favus, a highly contagious scalp disease. At Ellis Island, chalk marks were made on one’s clothing to identify various ailments: B - back, CT - trachoma, E- eyes, H - heart, L - lameness, P - pregnancy, etc.

Emigrants were encouraged to check their baggage when they departed from Europe. Few did, however, because of their fear of it being stolen. The burden of dragging their heavy bags through the immigration process only intensified their weariness from the long sea voyage.

Rail Travel in the 1850s

Railroad building in the United States was a haphazard enterprise prior to the 1850s. Most rail lines were short, linking cities that were relatively close to each other. Canal boats and railroads competed for passengers. With the passing of the Land Grant Act in 1850 that gave huge acreages to rail companies, longer rail lines were built. The Western Railroad of Massachusetts was completed in 1843, demonstrating for the first time that agricultural products and other goods could be transported economically.



Large cities competed for commercial dominance. The supply of cheap immigrant labor only enhanced the rapid growth of rail and canal development in the late 1840s and 1850s.

We can guess at how the Nilssons (Nelsons) traveled from Boston to Milwaukee. Most likely they took the train from Boston to Albany, New York, then either the train or the Erie Canal ferry to Buffalo, then through the Great Lakes by steamer boat.

We will leave them in Buffalo while we catch up with the Kjöllersströms.