

THE STORY OF
TWO FAMILIES
AND THEIR
TIMES



CHAPTER FOUR

THE KJÖLLERSTRÖMS (CHILSTROMS) ARRIVE IN NEW YORK

The Founding of New York City

Established by the Dutch in 1624 as a trading post, New Amsterdam, as it was first known, soon blossomed into more than a distant outpost. In this book “The Island at the Center of the World” Russell Sorto has this to say about the place that would one day become the center of the world:

If what made America great was its ingenious openness to different cultures, the small triangle of land at the southern tip of Manhattan Island is the birthplace of that idea. This island city would become the first multiethnic, upwardly mobile society on America’s shores, a prototype of the kind of society that would be duplicated throughout the country and around the world.

He goes on to say this about the unusual Dutch outpost:

New Netherland refused to remain a trading post. It was unique among the way stations of the Dutch empire in that it insisted on being a place.... It was Manhattan, in other words, right from the start.

Sorto says that at one point in colonial Manhattan one of every four buildings was devoted to the production or consumption of alcoholic beverages. Yet, it was also a haven for religious folks who were fleeing the oppression of autocratic countries in Europe and in other places in the original colonies.

New York in 1853 When the Kjöllersström (Chilstroms) Arrived

As with the Nilssons, we know nothing about the arrival of the Kjöllersströms in New York City other than the name of the ship -- the Lodebar -- and the date of arrival - July 26, 1853. We can only imagine their sea weariness after 16 weeks on the ocean and the good feeling that must have surged through their bodies as their feet once again stepped on to solid ground.

By this time the city was, more than ever, a caldron of mixed nationalities and cultures. By now lower Manhattan Island had been abandoned by wealthier families who had moved to the upper part of the Island. Charles Brace described Lower Manhattan in these words:

You have no idea...what an immense vat of misery and crime and filth this great city is. I realized it more and more. Think of 10,000 children growing up almost sure to be prostitutes and rogues.

A bit earlier Philip Hane wrote:

All Europe is coming across the ocean... all that part at least who cannot make a living at home...and what shall we do with them? They increase our taxes, eat our bread and encumber our streets, and not one in twenty is competent to keep himself.

In 1849 J.C. Myers observed:

In this mighty metropolis the stranger may...perceive the eddying throngs gathering and whirling, scattering and hurrying hither and yon, in the activity of commercial pursuits. He may become confused by the never ending turbulence and commotion, with the hundreds of mingled notes and voices which are ever rising from the multifarious trades and occupations of the thousands of inhabitants....

And Walt Whitman captures something of the human pathos of the City in this observation:

There they stretched from floor to ceiling...hundreds of them. Indeed, it is little else on all sides of you, than a great legion of human faces...human eyes gazing intently but fixedly upon you....speechless and motionless, but yet realistic. You are in a new world, a peopled world, although mute as the grave.

At the same time, Whitman recognized the power and dynamism of the city:

Who does not know that our city is the great place of the western continent -- the heart, the brain, the focus, the main spring -- the pinnacle, the extremity, the no more beyond of the New World?

As with Boston, New York in the late 1840s and early 1850s was flooded with Irish immigrants, refugees from the Great Famine. Anti-Catholic prejudice ran high among the older inhabitants. Following the Irish, there was a huge wave of German immigrants in the early 1850s, so large that the port of Bremen, Germany, became known as *Der Vorort New-Yorks*-- "The Suburb of New York."

As in Boston, the Irish competed with Blacks for jobs. Profit hungry business owners hired the Irish, and then hired Blacks again when the Irish clamored for higher wages. The result was a vicious struggle between these two lowest classes on the social ladder -- the Irish and the Blacks. As slums flourished, so did disease, especially the cholera.

In their book "New York" Rick Burns and James Sanders give this incisive picture of the City:

By 1853, every tension in the increasingly divided nation could be felt on the

streets of New York, which had become the meeting point not only of the nation's commerce but of its conflicts as well: a cauldron of immigrant energy and of anti-immigrant rancor; the center of the movement to abolish slavery, and of the powerful Southern cotton interests in the North.

Yet, in the midst of all this turmoil, the city prospered. Again, from Burns and Sanders:

By 1854, lower Broadway had become the busiest boulevard in the world and, with its high, elaborate, facades of cast iron and stone, one of the most impressive -- with nineteen grand hotels and a fleet of glittering new clothing stores, including Brooks Brothers, Lord & Taylor, and A.T. Stewart's Marble Palace.

The Immigration Process

I accent all these facts about New York City to underscore what was said about the Nilssons in Boston. This was before the Ellis Island immigration facilities were built. We have to imagine that the immigration process was crude and that every immigrant was relieved when he and his family were given clearance to enter America. Magnus and Kartina must have heaved a great sigh of relief when they and all six of their children cleared the grueling process. Now, more than ever, they knew there was no turning back, no return to their native land.

New York City, of course, was not the destination for the Kjöllersströms. This was not the place these simple country folk from rural Sweden would want to settle. Neither the rich nor the poor of the city would receive them with a warm welcome. They no doubt had only one thought in mind -- to pass through the immigration process as quickly as possible and be on their way to Wisconsin.

Again, we look to Eric Norelius for some clues to what the Kjöllersströms saw and how they felt about this new land. He arrived just three years earlier, in late October, 1850.

The scene on both sides of the entrance to New York Harbor is beautiful. Staten Island is filled with row upon row of small, neat homes, many of them of Gothic style. The harbor of New York is completed on the Long Island side, but is still under construction on the Staten Island side. Steamboats of all kinds chug here and there in the harbor. Everywhere were countless ships and vessels of every kind and description from every part of the world, and the ship masts in the harbor resembled a veritable forest. We were deeply impressed as we surveyed the broad scene of a great city and its environs.

There is much commotion and noise on all sides, with hordes of people talking and yelling to one another, no word of which we were able to understand. The moment our ship docked a crowd of people swarmed aboard, some anxious and eager to peddle various kinds of wares to the passengers, others to beg, and some to steal and pilfer if they found the right opportunity. There were several Swedish people among those who came aboard. They told us that there is a Swedish Methodist congregation in New York which uses a large ship in the harbor for its church.

In the evening of the first day we landed in New York, I...and others went to find the Rev Olaf Hedstrom on the "Bethel Ship," hoping to obtain his advice regarding our journey inland. We found him to be a very friendly man, and he counseled us in both practical and spiritual matters, but we noticed immediately his Methodist bias.

(I pause here for a moment to reflect on my own connections with New York City. I never dreamed when I was a young man that I would ever live in that part of the country. In fact, I had no desire to live there. When the call came to teach at Luther College, Teaneck, NJ in 1962 I felt certain I would not accept it. I had no desire to live in that densely-populated area. But, after a time of struggle, I could not turn down the opportunity. So for the next eight years we lived on the doorstep of New York City. After completing my master in theology degree at Princeton Seminary I decided to pursue a doctor of education degree at New York University, a historic school at the southern end of Manhattan Island. Week after week between 1966 and 1970 I drove across the George Washington Bridge, down the Westside Highway and on to the University. At that time I had no knowledge of my connection with the Kjällerström (Chilstrom) family history. I think back now and wonder: During their brief time in New York City, did they walk the same streets I walked when I was going to and from classes? As they traveled up the Hudson River, did they look with admiration on the Palisades, the lovely bluffs on the New Jersey side of the River? And when I visited churches on the Hudson River between New York City and Albany, were these places they docked for a few hours on their way to the Erie Canal? I wonder....)

From New York City to Buffalo

We have to assume that the Kjällerström family traveled to the middle of the country in the same way others did who came through New York harbor. That meant a trip by river boat from New York City to the Albany area and either by train or, more likely, by Erie Canal boat to Buffalo.

The Erie Canal

As early as 1797 Robert Fulton presented to President George Washington a plan for a canal system that would encompass nearly the entire civilized part of the country. For Pennsylvania he envisioned a system that

would have 9360 miles of Canal equal to Bringing Water Carriage within the easy reach of every house, nor would any house be more than 10 or 14 miles from a Canal.

As for the rest of the country, he wrote to President Washington suggesting that

...if each State was to Commence a Creative System it would fill the whole country, and in Less than a Century bring Water Carriage within the easy Cartage of every Acre of the American States.

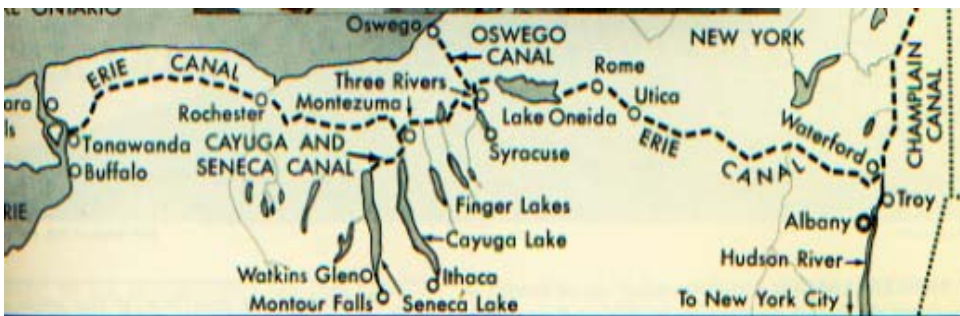


Fulton's dream, of course, never came to reality. Nevertheless, canals did play a key role in opening the interior of the country to the new immigrants. And none was more important than the Erie Canal, the first major national waterway in the U.S.

Celebration at the opening of the Erie Canal in

1825

When it was completed in 1825 it linked the Great Lakes with the Atlantic Ocean. On this waterway manufactured goods and settlers poured to the West, while timber and farm products



flowed to the East. By 1850 the canal boats were 80 feet long by 15 feet wide. A system of 83 locks raised the level of the Canal by more than 560

feet between the Hudson River and Lake Erie. Barges were towed through the Canal by horses and mules on shore. It was derided by opponents who called it "Clinton's Ditch," after the builder. When it was completed Clinton was hailed as a visionary. It continued to be an important means of transportation until the railroads became dominant in the 1860s.

It's interesting to contemplate what the Nilssons and Kjöllersströms experienced as they traveled this water route. It must have been a pleasant 360 mile summer excursion after their watery ordeal on the Atlantic. The children, especially the boys, would be fascinated by the way horses and mules pulled the boat through the canal, adding fresh teams from time to time. On their stops along the way they surely were awestruck by all they saw in the cities of their newly adopted country. And those younger boys must also have asked again and again, "Are we there yet?" Little could any of the Kjöllersströms or Nilssons have known what was to come.

A passenger boat on the Canal.



Erie