

A SWEDISH LOG CABIN



THREE CENTURIES OF HISTORY ON DARBY CREEK

With the Collaboration of
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THE LOWER SWEDISH CABIN ON DARBY CREEK

You are driving south on Burmont Road through the suburb of Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, where you find all the signs of a modern twentieth-century community, with row on row of brick and stone houses, streets filled with the traffic of cars and trucks, electric trolley lines, drive-in theaters, and shopping centers. Just before you come down to Clifton Heights (H on Map), if you turn right and go to the west end of Dennison Avenue, you come to Creek Road, which runs down into a quiet tree-lined glen along Darby Creek. The change from the bustling and noisy town is restful and welcome; but, as you proceed northward along the creek, you are in for another surprise. There at the end of the winding road you suddenly run into a quaint old log cabin (L) which seems to come straight out of the picture books of pioneer America. How can this scene exist in the midst of a busy city? Is it a genuine colonial cabin or a recent reproduction? If it is a real pioneer dwelling, when was it built and by whom? It is bound to challenge your credulity and excite your curiosity. In this booklet we shall try to answer the many questions which will be on your mind. Here is the story of the oldest home in Upper Darby.

ITS SWEDISH ORIGINS

If you examine minutely this little cabin or look at its picture (Fig. 1), you will see that the round logs are very ancient, weather-beaten and darkened by years of wind and rain and frost and sun. Even some of the original bark still clings to the logs. These logs on all four sides are fitted into one another at the four corners by V-notches (Fig. 2), and the thin cracks between the logs were originally chinked with clay and mud mixed with straw, with a little modern mortar added later here and there. Then, taking a second look at the picture, you find that there is a row of log ends from roof to ground down the middle of the front, or actually a few feet to the right of the middle. This makes you realize that it is a double cabin, both parts sharing the middle log wall. The larger left cabin is 20 x 15 x 10 feet, and the right one is only 10 feet long. The slightly lower roof ridge of the right-hand, smaller cabin reveals that it was a later addition. A two-by-four vertical beam helps to fasten the front logs of the small cabin to the side logs of the old cabin. The doors of both cabins are narrow and low, and the windows are small, probably closed and opened originally by slide boards, since glass was an unusual luxury in the earliest days. You may also see in the picture that the chimneys of stone are placed at the back end corners (Fig.3) of the two joined cabins and emerge from inside the log structures through their roofs. The stone fireplaces are in the back corners of the interior of this double cabin. The sloping roof, with board-covered gable ends, furnished additional sleeping and storage space. The upper rooms are lighted by a window in each gable end, and there is a back window for each cabin half.



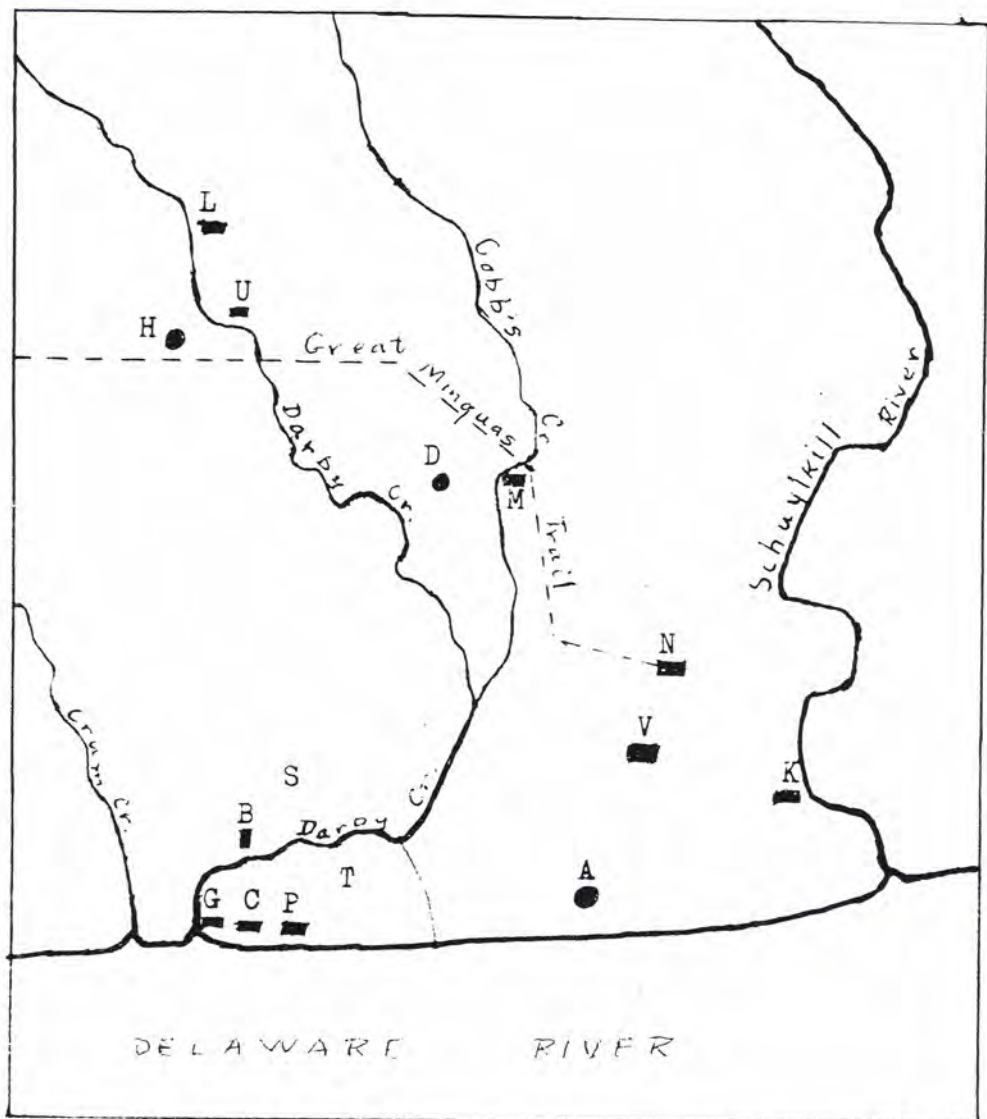
FIGURE 1

In the interior we find that the downstairs floor is of cement, the upper floors of planks, and that there is a winding stair leading to the second floor. In the left front corner ceiling is evidence of a trap door which was probably the original access to the upstairs with the aid of a ladder. Both the upstairs and the downstairs rooms were connected by doors cut through the walls. The tar-paper roofing and the cement floor remind us that the double log cabin has gone through many changes over its long life.

There are three characteristics of this double cabin which give us a hint about who built it: log sides, V-notches, and corner chimneys with corner fireplaces. If it was an early settler's cabin, then it could have been Swedish, Dutch, or English, since all three of these people in succession contributed to the settlement of the Delaware Valley, at first called New Sweden. However, C.A. Westlager (Log Cabin in America, p. 202) says that "it is correct to say that a relatively small number of Swedes and Finns first introduced the log cabin in an extensive settlement area on both sides of the Delaware." Likewise, the authors of Virginia, A Guide to the Old Dominion (p. 174) say: "The roofed pen of logs was a contrivance of Scandinavian origin and did not establish itself on this Continent until the Swedes brought it over to Delaware." Elsewhere (p.150) Westlager also says that the use of horizontally-laid notched logs, both round and hewn, as an accepted form of settlement housing, made its American debut in New Sweden." Again (p. 158) he writes that "the placement of the fireplace in a corner appears to have been a characteristic of the earliest Swedish and Finnish log houses." This Swedish log house construction with corner fireplaces is confirmed by the Swedish naturalist, Peter Kalm (Travels in North America, I, 272) and by Walter and Trindell in their article on log houses (Keystone Folklore Quarterly, XIII, 250-251). Indeed, Westlager even has a picture of our Lower Log Cabin and asserts (p. 168) that the V-notching and corner fireplaces were indicative of its Scandinavian origins. Walter and Trindell also affirm that the later German log houses had central chimneys and the English had chimneys at the gable end of their log houses (p. 265). Henry D. Paxon in his Where Pennsylvania History Began (p. 162) also identifies the companion log house, the Upper Log Cabin, on Dennison Avenue (see below) as Swedish. Thus on the testimony of these six authorities we can now be assured that our Lower Log Cabin on Darby Creek is of Swedish origin. Since Finland at that time belonged to Sweden and about half of the settlers in New Sweden were Finns, we use the term "Swedish" in referring to both Scandinavian groups.

THE THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF OUR LOG CABIN

Now that we know that our Lower Log Cabin is of Swedish origin, we may well inquire about the circumstances and appropriate dates of this settlement on the upper reaches of Darby Creek. Unfortunately, the search for this information is frustrating because no Swedish, Dutch, or English records (either reports or letters) mention specifically any Swedish settlements in this area. However, it is possible to piece together historical facts which can indirectly throw some light on our problem. Let us, then, go back to the various stages of settlement in New Sweden, extending up the Delaware Valley from New Castle to Trenton.



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|---|------------------------|---|------------------------|
| A | Airport | M | Mölnadal Grist Mill |
| B | Mörtensson's Log Cabin | N | Nilsson's Trading Post |
| C | Tinicum Church | P | Printzhof |
| D | Darby | S | Ammansland |
| G | Fort New Göthenborg | T | Tinicum Island |
| H | Clifton Heights | U | Upper Swedish Cabin |
| K | Fort New Korsholm | V | Fort New Vasa |
| L | Lower Swedish Cabin | | |

When Governor Johan Printz arrived in 1643, there were already 68 Swedes and Finns settled in the areas of Wilmington and Chester (Fort Christina and Upland). Printz brought with him about 45 new settlers, 30 of whom were adult males and 15 were women and children. In finding settlements for these new arrivals, Printz kept in mind his major purpose of increasing the fur trade with the White Minquas Indians, whose Great Minquas Trail (N) ran eastward from the Susquehanna River across south-eastern Pennsylvania to the mouth of the Schuylkill. Since some of the Minquas dropped down from this trail to trade at Wilmington and Chester, the Governor settled some more people along the creeks of these older communities. However, he also established his government headquarters, Printzhof (P) on Tinicum Island (T) half way up the shore to the Schuylkill, and located some settlers on this island, calling the community New Gothenborg (G). This brought him in contact with the White Minquas and their beaver pelts as they made side trips down the Darby Creek (Tenakon Kill) to Tinicum.

Then at the Schuylkill itself during the years 1646 and 1647 Printz tried to keep the Dutch from trading with the White Minquas at the east end of their trail and with the Black Minquas, who descended the Schuylkill, by building Fort New Karsholm (K), a blockhouse New Vasa (V) in Kingsessing, and a trading post just north of New Vasa, which for a while became the eastern end of the Great Minquas Trail. Jonas Nilsson, the owner of the post (N), was a sturdy, broad-shouldered man, six feet six inches tall, whose giant size won him the great admiration of the Indians. Hence he was able to turn much of their trade to Printz and the New Sweden Company. To the northwest of the trading post, at Møndal (M), where Cobbs's Creek (Karakung Kill) crossed the Minquas Trail (at Woodland and Island Avenues), he also established a gristmill for the use of all the colonists. At all these points, blockhouses and farm settlements were made. Curiously enough, however, no settlements are recorded at this time on Darby Creek, although it flowed right down to Printz's headquarters at Tinicum and crossed the Minquas Trail (Baltimore Pike) just east of the present Clifton Heights (H).

Printz gave up the governorship in October 1653, and his successor, Governor Johan Rising, arrived on the Swan in May 1654 with 350 more settlers and 45 crewmen and soldiers. Thus, one of Rising's big jobs was to find settlements for all these new people. He immediately negotiated with the White Minquas for a confirmation of their former land concessions on the west shore of the Delaware; and, this time, with fine gifts brought on the Swan, he was able to have the grants extended many miles inland. Holding this added territory, Rising not only began to settle people inland from Wilmington but also to fill them into the previous gap of the Darby Creek area. This now brings us to the history of our Lower Log Cabin.

Thus in 1654, having obtained Indian concessions of land upstream in the hinterland, he made settlements across the Darby Creek, north of Tinicum Island. This area was called Ammansland (S) (or Amosland). Here he granted a farm to his fellow passenger, a Finnish freeman, Mørtten Mørtensson. It was located on the northwest side of Darby Creek where Route 420 now crosses the creek (B). This man's descendant, John Morton, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and their first log home still stands on the



FIGURE 2

original site. The course of Darby Creek was no doubt a side route of the White Minquas, as were the courses of Crum, Ridley, Chester, and Brandywine creeks, and now it seems probable that it was some of the other passengers from the Swan who, like Mörtensson, were granted lands farther up the Darby Creek and that they chose to settle near the Great Minquas Trail (Baltimore Pike) where it crossed this creek. This movement in 1654, then, is very probably the origin of the two surviving log houses (L and U) in the area north of Clifton Heights (H).

While the main reason for these upstream settlements was to establish farms on this rich sloping terrain, there were at least three other attractions in choosing this location. First, the upper reaches of Darby Creek and its smaller creek tributaries offered fine beaver trapping opportunities along with the farming. Secondly, the Great Minquas Trail, being nearby, gave them a chance to purchase beaver pelts from the Indians before they ever reached Nilsson's post (L). Thirdly, this same trail gave them easy access to the Möndal mill (M) on Cobb's Creek for the grinding of their grain, raised in their new fields.

Thus, within warning gunshot of each other, at least two log houses were built on the east side of Darby Creek as centers of two farms: one, which we call the Upper Log Cabin (U), is still standing in the 3800 block of the present Dennison Avenue in the Oakview section of Upper Darby, obscured by brick row houses west of St. Charles Borromeo Church; and the other, our particular Lower Log Cabin (L), is at the end of Creek Road, just below the Garrettford section of Upper Darby, and is the better preserved of the two.

One year later, in 1655, the Dutch took over New Sweden, had the colonists swear allegiance to the Netherlands, and gave the Swedes and Finns in the Tinicum area and northwards self-government under their own officials. In the following year, 1656, more Swedes and Finns arrived on the Mercurius and found, to their surprise, that the Dutch were in charge, but they were allowed to land at Tinicum. "It seems," wrote Amandus Johnson (II, 662), "that the great majority of the newcomers remained in the colony. They were gradually given land, and as soon as they were able, they built new homes and cleared their plantations." Of 105 on this ship 98 were Finns (33 men, 27 women, and 32 children). Many of these men, until they could obtain land of their own, worked as farm hands on the farms of the earlier settlers. This may explain the extensions built on both the Lower and the Upper Log Cabins. If the new Finnish farm hands had families, they may have helped to make the additions for their own housing.

Another explanation for the additions to the two cabins may have been the need to house a newly married son of the family and his bride. The Swedish families were known to be large, but they did want some of their sons to stay and help on the home farm. Among those on the Mercurius were 11 marriageable maidens, who, in the light of the scarcity of women in newly settled areas, obviously became brides of some unmarried sons of the settlers above Tinicum.

If the cabins were not doubled in 1656, they may well have been in 1663, when again 30 Swedes and 32 Finnish farm laborers arrived.

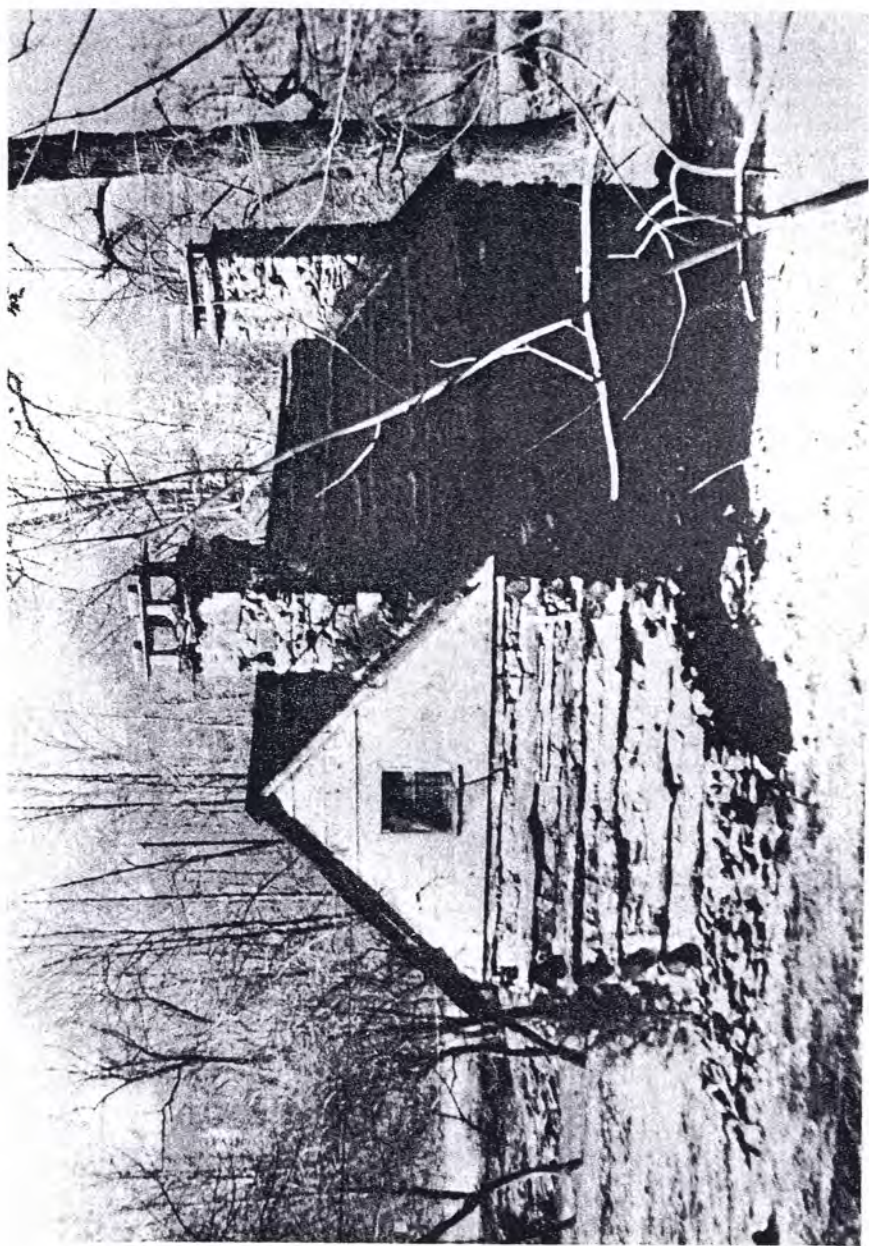


FIGURE 3

We get a good idea of what our first Swedish (or Finnish) family did after it selected its site here on Creek Road, probably in 1654. In the average family there were several husky sons besides the father. William Penn, speaking of these Swedes and Finns, wrote, "They are a people proper and strong of body...almost every house full of children...some six, seven, or eight sons...few young men more sober and laborious" (Westlager, Log Cabin, p. 154). The father, along with these sons, began to fell the tall trees of the bordering forest with just their brawn and axes. Thomas Paschal, an Englishman, settling in this area in 1683, exclaimed that with an axe a Swedish cabin builder could "cut down a tree and cut him off (trim with an axe) when down sooner than a man can saw him." He added that a Swede could fell 12 oak trees in a day (ibid.)

Forthwith our settlers cut these logs to length, notched them for tight corner fitting, and hoisted them in place upon a stone foundation. Two Dutch travelers in 1679 wrote that these Swedish block form of houses were made of "nothing else than entire trees...and placed in the form of a square upon each other." "...The ends of these timbers are let into each other... without a nail or a spike. ...The chimney is placed in the corner." These young men then built a gabled roof and with axes and wedges skillfully sliced logs into rafters for the gabled roof and into crude boards to cover the roof horizontally and the end gables. They also split the larger branches in half lengthwise and laid them vertically down on the roof boards as a cover. Later on they were able to obtain lighter building materials from saw mills near the river shore. Then they proceeded to mix moist clay with straw to fill the cracks between the logs. While making the stone foundation, they included a corner stone base for the fireplace and then afterwards built the fireplace and chimney inside the house and out the northwest corner of the roof. At first there was no ceiling other than the roof, and the floor was of dirt until they could split some more logs to lay them flat side up as a wood floor.

Then these sturdy people--men, women, and children--turned to clearing the land for agriculture. The unused trunks, stumps, and branches were burned on the future fields, and the ashes were scattered to enrich the soil. This was called svedjebruket (Johnson, Swedes in America, p. 299). The next spring (probably 1655) they planted Indian corn (maize) in hills without need of plowing. In other parts of the cleared fields they planted wheat, rye, and perhaps some tobacco. As animals, they may have had an ox as well as a few hogs, sheep, and chickens. They usually let the hogs roam in the vicinity but held the ox and sheep closeby. At night they kept the chickens in a cage in the house, and the rooster served as the family's alarm clock. They rose at 4 a.m., ate breakfast at 7 a.m. after doing the chores, the noon meal at 12, and the supper at 8 p.m. In very cold weather they even sheltered some of the animals in the house. Much of their meat consisted of fish and game.

Some of their maize and grain they ground by hand. When the men were free from planting, cultivating, and harvesting, they engaged in beaver trapping, hunting, trading with the Minquas on the nearby Great Trail (Baltimore Pike), and traveling down that trail to the Cobb's Creek Mill (M) for large-scale grinding. They may have also traveled by trail and water down to Tincicum (T) for sales and purchases, for church services, and for guard

duty required by the local Swedish officials there, whose authority was still maintained by the Dutch after 1655 and by the English after 1664. The Indians, who had been quite friendly during the Swedish period, were more hostile toward the Dutch and the English.

The next year, 1656, may have been the time when the smaller half of the double house was built by a newly arrived Finnish farm hand or by an older son, now married to one of the immigrant or resident maidens. As you recall, while it was smaller, it still had its own corner fireplace. This time they put four logs across the top, between the front and back logs. These cross logs not only supported the side walls but made possible an attic floor above, which created a low room for storage or extra sleeping space. A window was also cut in the gable at the end of this new addition (Fig. 3). It was probably in this period that the addition was made on the Upper Log Cabin (U) on Dennison Avenue. There the same methods of construction and attachment seem to have been used.

Under Dutch rule the Swedish and Finnish farmers prospered. By 1663 it was reported that in the former New Sweden area there were 110 large farms with houses, barns, 200 cows and oxen, 20 horses, 80 sheep, and several thousand swine (Johnson, II, 667). While not as developed as older farm settlements, no doubt our two Darby Creek farms could have had a few cows and oxen, and perhaps a horse. At the new end of our double Lower Log Cabin was a stone enclosure with a lean-to roof which may well have served as a stable. The occupants of the cabin probably had need for a horse since the favorite way of taking grain to the mill on the Minquas Trail was by pack horse. The Minquas Trail was increasingly becoming a route for horse riders.

The Sixties and Seventies also brought disturbing changes. The English took the area from the Dutch in 1664, but their Governor Carr reaffirmed the rights and property of the Swedes and Finns. Because the mill had fallen into disrepair, Governor Carr reconditioned it in 1671, to the great relief of the settlers east and west of Cobb's Creek. Then in 1675 the Seneca Indians from the north drove out the Minquas, whose remnants fled to Maryland and Virginia. With the later withdrawal of the Senecas, the settlers had to deal largely with the much more peaceful Lenni-Lenape (Delaware) Indians. However, the Great Minquas Trail (near Baltimore Pike) and its southern branches still remained as routes for horse riders and pack animals.

In this same year, 1675, William Edmunson, a Quaker, and his party rode horses down the trails in the back country from opposite Trenton to Chester ("Delaware Town"), fording one stream after another. The last night before getting to Chester, he recorded: "There came up a Finland man who spoke English. His house was as far as we could ride that day. There he conducted us and lodged us kindly. The next day we went to Upland" (Chester) (Ashmead, Delaware Co., p. 14). The Finn could very well have been the owner of one of the two Darby Creek log houses, because it would have been just that distance from Chester. If they had stayed at a Molndal house, he would have mentioned the mill.

Three years earlier, in 1672, the Quaker, George Fox, and his party, starting from Burlington, New Jersey, had crossed the Delaware by swimming their horses to an island (Little Tinicum?) and to the mainland at Upper Dinidock (Tinicum). Going northward, thirty miles distant from their Burlington starting point, he wrote, "We came to a Swede's house, where we got a little straw and lay there that night" (George Smith, Delaware Co., p. 98). The Darby Creek log houses are just about 30 miles from Burlington by the route they took.

Of course, in 1682 William Penn established his colony of Pennsylvania over the entire area. While he was minded to be observant of the rights of Indians and the grants to earlier settlers, yet there were overlapping grants made in the areas of these Darby Creek log houses. George Wood seems to have been granted land in 1682 which included both cabins. In 1697 he deeded the land of our Lower Log Cabin to his son William. Whether the Swedes or Finns had already abandoned these cabins by that time is not known. They may have been given grants elsewhere, as was one of Penn's practices. Since the log houses were preserved by the new grantees, it is likely that they occupied them as their temporary dwellings and, perhaps, in later years housed their farm laborers' families there.

There is evidence that there has been occupants of our Lower Log Cabin off and on during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At some period two-by-four rafters were inserted in the older left cabin between the second and third logs from the top and laid across from front to rear to make a foundation for a first-floor ceiling and a second-floor floor. This floor was nearly on a level with the floor of the smaller added cabin and made a second upstairs bedroom, which was reached at first by a ladder and trap door and later by the winding staircase and connected with the smaller bedroom by a door. A gable and window was added on the west and to give light to this new larger bedroom. Later, across the front a wooden shed was built from the west corner past the door, and from there across the rest of the front a screened-in porch was added. At some time a cement floor was laid in the larger cabin and then covered with linoleum. Also an iron cook stove was installed in the larger cabin and vented by a pipe inserted into the stone chimney above. The walls were finally plastered and covered with wallpaper. Thus the big room became a kitchen and dinette, and the small room was used as a living room. More recently a meter connection with limited interior wiring and electric lights was installed.

Early in the twentieth century the Lower Log Cabin was owned by the hosiery mill across the creek, and it was rented to one after another of its employees (Architect Report of 1937), who whitewashed its outer walls. In the late 1920's an elderly lady lived there, keeping the cabin in good repair and surrounding it with gardens of flowers in the spring, summer and fall. After the architect study in 1937, the Public Works Administration (PWA) made a complete measurement study of the Lower Cabin, and at about that

time the Upper Darby Township took over possession of it, hoping to preserve it as a historical site.

In about 1944 the township permitted the Girl Scouts of Delaware County to use it as a meeting place, and in turn the Scouts and their officials hoped to restore it to something approximating its original condition. At least they, or the township, seem to have removed the wooden covered shed, the screened porch, and the woodshed at the right end and to have planted decorative shrubbery across the front.

Evidently the arrangement with the Girl Scouts did not last very long and in the 1960's the township turned it over to an elderly man to be its custodian in return for free residence. Unfortunately, this custodian became a recluse and allowed no one in or near the place, letting the shrubbery and grass grow up around the cabin until it was entirely obscured from public view. In 1974 the poor man's health required his departure, and the township again took direct charge of this valuable historical property.

At the present time the roof has been covered with new tar paper; the plaster and paper have been removed from the interior walls, revealing their original log surfaces; the iron stove has been taken out and the pipe hole in the chimney has been filled in. On the outside, the shrubs and grass have been removed in preparation for new landscaping. This careful restoration is being undertaken by the Upper Darby Township under the direction of Mr. F. Joseph Loeper, Director of Parks and Recreation. Assisting him are Mr. Robert F. Lewis, Principal, and Mr. Lawrence Umstead, Chairman of the Social Studies Department of the Beverly Hills Junior High School. Student volunteers from this school and interested artisans and specialists from the community have added their efforts to the restoration. Notable assistance was given by Mr. and Mrs. Carl Lindborg of the Swedish-American Historical Society.

Since this Lower Swedish Cabin is probably the oldest building in Upper Darby, it is to be hoped that such a rare and valuable historical site will continue to be cherished and preserved by the public and the township.

BLUE ROUTE I-476

FROM BLUE ROUTE - EXIT 2
FOLLOW BALTIMORE PIKE
4 MILES TO MARPLE STREET
TURN LEFT ON MARPLE
AND FOLLOW SIGNS.

OAKVIEW TROLLEY
STOP

★
SWEDISH
CABIN

BALTIMORE PIKE

CREEK
ROAD

DENNISON

MARY

BRIDGE

BURMONT
ROAD

MARPLE

GARRETT ROAD

FROM WEST CHESTER
PIKE ROUTE 3

LANSDOWNE AVENUE

TO 69th
STREET

TO SHARON HILL

DARBY CREEK

TO PHILA.

