

The history of the Swedish immigration to America flowed into Florida too. In the mid-1800s, Sweden was a land of poverty, want and social frustration. Labor recruiters sent to Sweden touted America as a place to start a new life and through this promotion began a tidal wave of Swedish immigration. For the most part, these immigrants had to give up everything they owned, except for a few possessions that could fit into a steamer trunk. So great was this immigration that by the early 1900s, roughly one fifth of all Swedes lived in the United States.

The main story of Seminole County's Swedish heritage begins with Henry Shelton Sanford's labor problems in trying to establish his agricultural enterprises. In 1870, he purchased 12,548 acres on the south side of Lake Monroe, which became known as the Sanford Grant. Sanford, like many other entrepreneurs of the time, was infected by "orange fever" and the exaggerated promises of high profits for citrus growers. Due to labor problems, Sanford decided to replace his labor force with foreign immigrants under the Contract Labor Law.



Josephine Jacobs & New Upsala School Children courtesy of the Sanford Museum

In February 1871, Dr. Wilhelm Henschen approached Sanford with the prospect of recruiting Swedish laborers. The first sponsored group of Sanford Swedes arrived on May 30, 1871. This first group was promised paid passage to Florida, along with one year's maintenance for themselves and family members in return for one year of labor in Sanford's citrus groves. Later in an attempt to keep the immigrants satisfied they were promised five-acre lots to be given to the loyal

and faithful ones after a year's work. This inspired a few to write home to friends and relatives, encouraging them to make a contract and come over.

By 1873, Sanford's emphasis was on Belair grove located on the northwest shore of Crystal Lake. With the skill and labor of primarily Swedish workers, the area's pinelands were transformed into one of the most extraordinary groves in the country. Of the many citrus varieties Sanford is credited with introducing, the most important came in 1870, from the Thomas River's Nursery in London, England. This was an orange called the Tardif-Brown's Late, which was later cultivated and the name changed to Valencia. This was the basis from which evolved Florida's citrus juice industry. Belair soon became known as "The Experimental Station" or "Tropical Garden," and served as a source of nursery stock. Strains produced at Belair were rapidly distributed to growers throughout Central Florida.



New Upsala Presbyterian Church, Circa 1902 Courtesy of the Sanford Museum

New Upsala, named for Uppsala Sweden, was the first and largest of Florida's early Swedish communities. Physically, the colony was separated by a swamp,

dividing it in two parts; the upper and lower settlement. The upper settlement was built along both sides of the Upsala Road, and the lower part followed the winding curves of Vihlen Road. Most of the Swedish homesteads measured five chains by ten chains, or roughly five acres. For the land to be more useful, it had to be cleared of the native trees and thick palmetto underbrush. This labor-intensive task, along with building their homes, was often accomplished by a community effort of neighbor helping neighbor.

Within New Upsala these Swedish newcomers could adjust to the cultural differences at their own pace. The general store stocked some imported foods among which one would have found lutefisk and salt herring. Swedish continued to be the predominant language for generations. Within the population were a wide variety of occupations, including carpenters, masons, painters, cabinetmakers, blacksmiths, and horticulturist. Each of these skills contributed to the prosperity of the settlement. The settlement grew to include the Scandinavian Hall and School, its own depot, Upsala Lutheran Church and Upsala Presbyterian Church. The two congregations were entwined and often combined their efforts for social affairs. As time went on, the Swedish immigrants spread across Central Florida into communities such as the Lake Jesup Community (now Oviedo), Forest City, Maitland, Lake Mary, Apopka and Piedmont.

Change came during the winter of 1894-95, in a double catastrophe called "the big freeze." The first drop in temperature came on December 29th and severely damaged the citrus trees. But then January was warm and rainy. The groves were fertilized and already had signs of new growth. Then on the night of February 7, 1895, the area was hit with a second deep freeze. This caused total and pure devastation. The Swedes were almost entirely dependent on their citrus groves for income. Family after family became discouraged and left in search for other opportunities.

The freeze was a major turning point in New Upsala's history, although many left, the community did not completely vanish. Swedish immigrants had continued filtering into the community well after 1900. Most of these were attracted by the area's fertile farmlands. Many such as, Carl Carlson brought his family and became a successful celery grower. These farmers contributed to Seminole County becoming America's Celery Capital. Some families that had moved away later returned. After returning to New Upsala in 1906, Emma Vihlen wrote, "Yesterday evening came all the settlement people to welcome us back. There were twenty-five people and they had seven cakes with them, so I had to make coffee." Her daughter Olga wrote, "It seemed natural to be among the good old Swedes, as our family had always conversed in Swedish. My sister Signe and I conversed in Swedish until we started school in Sanford. It was then we found out that we were just dumb Swedes. We took such a kidding that we at once remedied the situation by becoming Florida Crackers... and we refused to listen to or speak the Swedish language from then on."



Swedish pioneers at the picnic gathering Courtesy of the Sanford Museum

In Sanford, new residential areas now sit where Swedes once tended vast orange groves. Evidence of our Swedish past can still be found in the names of Vihlen and Upsala roads and the old Upsala Swedish cemetery. The old Upsala Presbyterian Church still stands near its original site at the south end of Upsala Road. In December of each year, local historical societies host the Swedish Christmas tradition of St. Lucia.