

Conclusion

Scandinavian immigration floodgates opened into the Midwest after 1870. Over the next half-century, more than two million Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes came to the United States and changed the ethnic makeup of burgeoning cities such as Chicago, Saint Paul, and Milwaukee. For agricultural and industrial workers, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark were undesirable places to live in the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the emigration of more than 10 percent of each country's population, and America, with its growing territory and population, was perceived as an ideal destination. What many Scandinavian settlers had in common were visions of America as a place with opportunities for land-ownership, social mobility, and central citizenship rights such as voting.

As Erika Jackson has demonstrated, Scandinavian immigrants soon became established near the top of a racial hierarchy in the Midwest due to Anglo-Americans regarding them as "pious," Protestant, property-owning businessmen – and not least white.¹ This Anglo-American acceptance aided countless Scandinavian newcomers in attaining property and a sense of belonging. In time, a number of these immigrants helped shape American debates over landownership, labor, and progressivism.

In 1860, however, fewer than 100,000 Scandinavian-born settlers lived within American borders, and only approximately 10,000 Scandinavian

¹ Erika K. Jackson, *Scandinavians in Chicago: The Origins of White Privilege in Modern America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 41. Describing Scandinavian immigrants, the *Chicago Tribune* in 1886 claimed that "no other nationality assimilates with the American more rapidly." See "Our Scandinavian Citizens," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 6, 1886.

men served in the Union army. The contribution of Scandinavians to the overall Union war effort was therefore marginal, but the ones that did serve established important toeholds in mainstream American society. The Civil War connections, in a relatively short time span, elevated Scandinavian veterans such as Knute Nelson, Hans B. Warner, Hans Mattson, Christian T. Christensen, and Hans Borchsenius to leadership positions of greater regional significance, and the political views that they established in the Civil War era left important imprints on Midwestern politics and eastern business/philanthropy in the years after the Civil War. Many Scandinavian-born leaders and voters, however, pushed their antebellum advocacy for racial justice and (to a lesser extent) gender equality to the margins of political discourse in the post-war era. Consequently, continued engagement with these early immigrants' understandings of citizenship and American empire, and the echoes of what George Lipsitz calls "the complexity and contradictions of whiteness," remains critical to constructing well-informed contemporary conversations.²

Among Scandinavian and American historians, the past decades have witnessed a wealth of important scholarship that engages the questions, and structural factors, surrounding Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish immigrants' socioeconomic experience in an American ethnic hierarchy. As an example, Torben Grøngaard Jensen, in a recent study offers settlement patterns, occupation, marriage, and religion as variables that explain Scandinavian immigrants' relative success in the United States.³ Such explanations, however, must be accompanied by an increased understanding of the historical factors related to citizenship and American empire, such as skin color, territorial expansion, and landownership opportunities that Scandinavian immigrants, implicitly or explicitly, benefited from.

In the Civil War era, Scandinavian immigrant men's dreams of citizenship rights, liberty, and equality were often attainable almost upon arrival to the United States due to their Northern European, Protestant background, but from 1862 and forward the prospect of forced military service

² George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 213.

³ Torben Grøngaard Jeppesen, *Fra Skandinavisk Immigrant Til Amerikaner [From Scandinavian Immigrant to American]* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2017), 8, 14–15.

led an increasing number of Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes to oppose the citizenship duties of military service.

Scandinavian immigrants resisted the draft, even in the face of broadening citizenship definitions by the federal government, to such an extent that ethnic leaders feared a Civil War scenario where lack of willingness to serve in the United States military would be perceptible to larger American society. Thus, the draft issue was front and center in the Scandinavian press until late in the war, but dissent was quickly forgotten after the conflict.

When Scandinavian immigrants did fight after the end of hostilities in 1865, they increasingly engaged in a predominantly white (working) class struggle for economic equality. As such, the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish immigrant community played a significant role in the rise of Robert LaFollette, whose strand of socially and economically progressive Midwestern politics paid little attention to the plight of nonwhites.⁴

Thus, Scandinavian immigrants after the Civil War proved hesitant to fight for universal equality. This limited sense of interracial and gender equality, as we have seen in previous chapters, had roots stretching back to the Old World. Scandinavian immigrants' support for Homestead legislation, due to the importance of landownership, led to tension and at times outright violent conflict with American Indians, as evidenced by the 1862 US–Dakota War. In this era, immigrants from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark supported an American imperial project premised on white settlement and expansion west across the American continent but were less interested in noncontiguous expansion into the Caribbean.

Still, at the political level, prominent Republican politicians within the Lincoln and Johnson administrations continually took steps to increase American empire, and their overtures regarding the Danish West Indies were generally well-received by Danish politicians who had little concern for freedpeople's wishes. As it happened, however, Danish policy converged almost entirely with the islands' populations wishes, as Denmark had by the late 1860s become a *Kleinstaat* while the United States was an expanding nation of increasing international significance and perceived economic opportunity.

⁴ Jørn Brøndal, *Ethnic Leadership and Midwestern Politics: Scandinavian Americans and the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, 1890–1914*, 6–10. See also Jørn Brøndal, "The Ethnic and Racial Side of Robert M. La Follette Sr.," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10, no. 3 (2011): 342.

This change in the international balance of power between Denmark and the United States, which made the latter more attractive to the islands' population, also complicated annexation. Denmark lost one-third of its territory after the Second Schleswig War in 1864, and, when Old World hostilities broke out between Prussia-led German troops and France in 1870, the Danish fear of being incorporated into the German Confederation reached a climax. In Denmark, there was a real sense that the declining nation might be annexed by an expanding German *Grossstaat*. An annihilated Denmark then might have to be reborn culturally and physically on "American soil," a Danish-American consul in Wisconsin suggested.⁵ Such Danish fears never fully materialized, but the concrete ramifications of *Kleinstaat* diplomacy and psychology time and again showed their importance in an age of expanding empires.

The United States, conversely, reincorporated the seceded Southern states and purchased Alaska in 1867. The end of the Civil War thereby solidified American *Grossstaat* status, which was a contributing factor to the United States Senate in 1870 declining to ratify a treaty signed with Denmark three years earlier. In this diplomatic struggle between a *Kleinstaat* and a *Grossstaat* over the purchase of the Danish West Indies, there was little the former could do.

It would be several decades before American politicians were ready to revisit a treaty centered on the Danish West Indies, but on March 31, 1917, the islands were finally transferred and became the US Virgin Islands. By then important new questions of citizenship and American empire had emerged. Yet, many remained the same.

⁵ Quoted in Torben Grøngaard Jeppesen, *Dannebrog På Den Amerikanske Prærie* [*Dannebrog on the American Prairie*] (Odense: Odense University Press, 2000), 10.