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New England, New York & beyond



**WRITING YOUR  
FAMILY HISTORY**  
Taking the First Step

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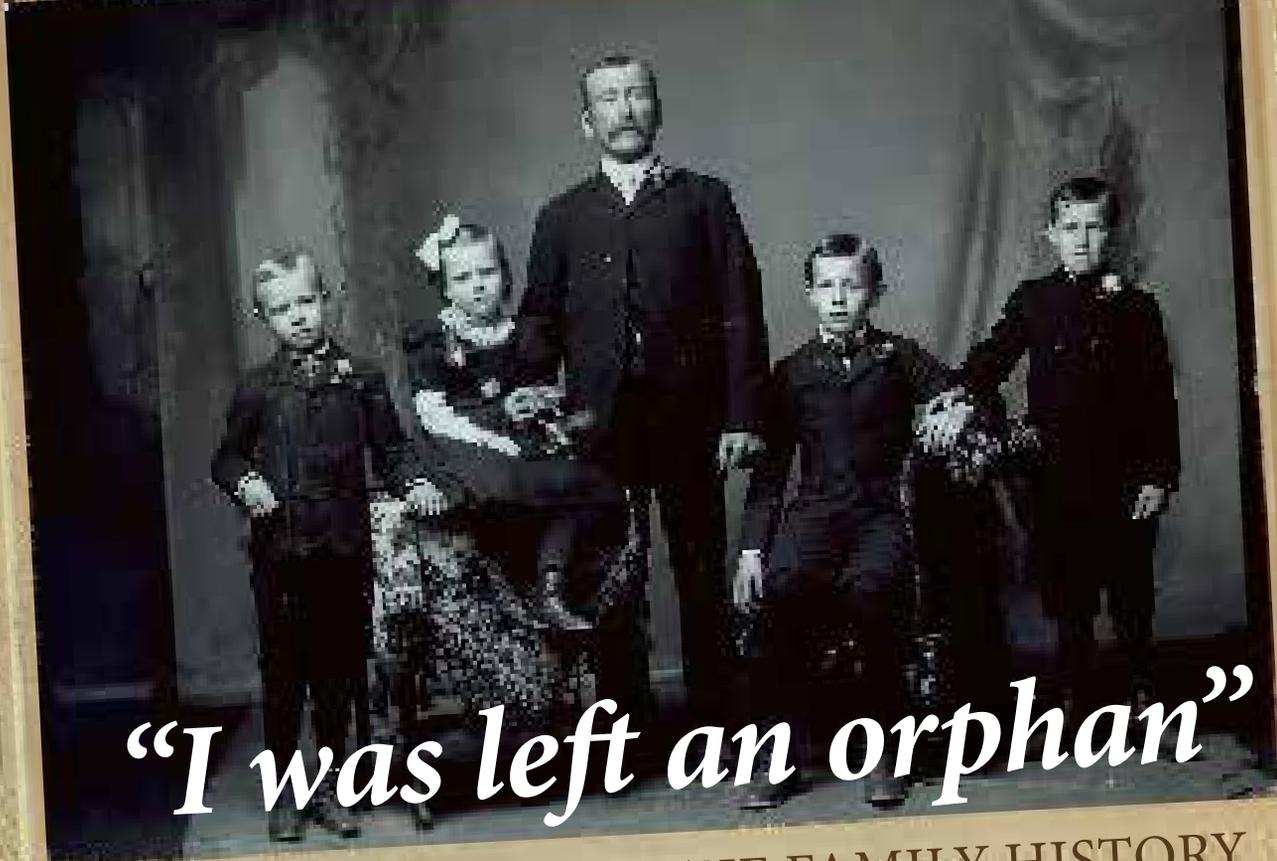
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*On the cover:* (clockwise from left) African-American boys, Washington, D.C., 1904, Thaxter Parks Spencer Collection, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, NEHGS, Mss. 1126; Ella Mabel (Clark) and Charles H. Stratton, ca. 1942, Queens, New York, collection of Richard and Penny Stratton; Charles H. Stratton, ca. 1917, Queens, New York, collection of Richard and Penny Stratton; and Erna (Smith) Virnig, ca. 1938, Little Falls, Minnesota, collection of Lynn Betlock.



*“I was left an orphan”*

RECONSTRUCTING THE FAMILY HISTORY  
OF ESTHER (RASK) BARNETT

*Esther Rask*  
MIDDLETOWN  
CONN.

In 1976, when she was 80 years old, Esther (Rask) Barnett, my grandmother, wrote a brief account of her childhood. Her daughter Marlyn, my mother, had prodded her to compose three brief autobiographical paragraphs. Included in Esther’s short story was the sentence, “My folks were born in Sweden and I have no information about them.” Instead, Esther wrote about her upbringing at the Swedish Christian Orphanage in Cromwell, Connecticut.<sup>1</sup> When Esther died in 1985, she knew little about her parents other than their names and their birthplaces in Sweden. After my mother passed away recently, I found Esther’s story, several photographs from her time at the orphanage, and a family portrait of her father and brothers. Instead of putting her memories back in the family trunk, I decided it was time to learn more about Esther’s past.



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Esther's parents were Samuel Rask and Hilda Carlsdotter. (Hilda's last name was "Americanized" to Carlson in some records.) During a visit to Boston, my daughter and I visited NEHGS for the first time and in Massachusetts vital records found Sam and Hilda's marriage in Norwood in 1888. The entry included the marriage date, their parents' names, and their occupations.<sup>2</sup> The information surprised me because I had assumed the couple had married in Sweden, and I thought they had arrived at Ellis Island in 1895. Before this discovery, I was trying to determine how the two might have met in Sweden

when their hometowns were more than 200 miles apart.

Meticulous parish records document Sam and Hilda's lives in Sweden. The Swedes recorded births, marriages, and movements of individuals inside Sweden and to and from other countries. Ancestry.com currently holds digital images of these collections, and many records are well indexed. When I was conducting my research, I accessed the records through a database managed by the Computer Genealogy Society of Sweden. The language barrier and indexing system were challenging, but, luckily, Esther left a few clues that helped me narrow down where to look for Hilda and Sam. A postcard of Strömstad contained a note stating her

father was from that city, and a cousin's letter mentioned that their maternal grandparents lived in Misterhult. With these two starting points, a Swedish dictionary, and a lot of patience, I leafed through hundreds of digital records to find several generations of Hilda's and Sam's families.

My search for the Rask family was made easier because I had to look for only one surname in the records. Sam's family dropped the conventional Swedish surname practice (adding "son" or "dotter" to your father's first name) and adopted "Rask" as their permanent surname in the 1850s. (This change happened about the time the family farm name was shortened from Rasktugen Kalfhagen to Kalfhagen in parish records.)

For Hilda's family, I found help from the Sabelskjöld Family Society—a local genealogical society near Misterhult that keeps a database of families related to Major Carl Jönsson Sabelskjöld, a famous knight from that region. Using all these sources I could trace the first chapter of Hilda and Sam's life together.

## Sam and Hilda's married life

Sam and Hilda arrived separately in America sometime after 1886, and met in Norwood, Massachusetts. At the time, Hilda was a dressmaker and Sam was a tanner in the leather industry. Norwood was attractive to new immigrants because of its solid industrial base—a furniture factory, an ink mill, a foundry, and two large tanneries.<sup>3</sup> The town had been a hub for tanning and leather fabrication since 1776.<sup>4</sup>

Sam and Hilda married in Norwood on 30 July 1888,<sup>5</sup> and lived there for



*Opposite: Samuel Rask and his children Enoch, Esther, Johan, and Joseph. The photograph was taken in November 1900 in Middletown, Connecticut, shortly before the children were admitted to the Swedish Christian Orphanage. This page, top left: Samuel Rask. Top right: Hilda Carlsdotter Rask. Bottom: Strömstad, Karlsgatan—the village closest to the Rask family farm.*



Sam and Hilda Rask with (left to right) Enoch, Johan, and Joseph, circa 1896.

two years. On 19 January 1890, the couple left America for Sweden. Return migration was common among Swedish immigrants. Twenty percent of Swedes who came to the United States in the late nineteenth century returned to Sweden.<sup>6</sup>

Sam and Hilda initially lived with Sam's mother, Cecilia Olsdotter. The family farm was located just outside Strömstad.<sup>7</sup> Sam was born at Kalfhagen 9 April 1859,<sup>8</sup> and previous generations (his father, Anders Rask, and grandfather, Hilgo Eliajson), had lived on the land since at least 1800.<sup>9</sup> By the time Sam and Hilda arrived in 1890, Cecilia's husband and all of her children except Sam had died. Sam's work in Strömstad was likely connected to the local fishing or timber industries. Strömstad, on Sweden's west coast a few miles from the Norwegian border, was a main shipping center for lumber and herring during the late nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> After a year at Kalfhagen, Sam and Hilda found a home of their own and, in time, welcomed three boys: Johan (b. 1891), Joseph (b. 1893), and Enoch (b. 1895).

The health of the fishing and timber industries in Strömstad ebbed and flowed during these years and in 1895, when Enoch was still an infant, Sam and Hilda decided to return to America. Sam went first, followed by Hilda and the boys, who travelled via Liverpool, departing on 12 October 1895 aboard Cunard's *S. S. Campania*. Hilda and her sons arrived at Ellis Island seven days later, on October 19.<sup>11</sup> Sam and Hilda

once again settled in Norwood, and Sam worked at an ink mill.<sup>12</sup>

On 16 March 1897, Esther Frideborg Rask, the couple's only daughter, was born.<sup>13</sup> Sam and Hilda had barely a year to enjoy their new addition before tragedy struck. Hilda was afflicted with tuberculosis, then the second leading cause of death after pneumonia,<sup>14</sup> and died in Norwood on 27 May 1898.<sup>15</sup>

Sam was now a single father of four children under 8 years of age. He could not both work and keep his children at home with him. He made the only choice he could—he placed his children's care in the hands of others. In her story Esther reported that she was placed in a private home because orphanages would not take children under three. Enoch was likely also placed with a private family, and the two oldest boys, Johan and Joseph, were admitted to the Boston Children's Friend Society home in Dedham, Massachusetts.<sup>16</sup>

## The Swedish Christian Orphanage of Cromwell, Connecticut

Although Sam could not keep his children with him, he wanted them to be together. When Esther was old enough to enter an orphanage, Sam gathered the four children and brought them more than a hundred miles to Cromwell, Connecticut. Here Sam had found a place where his children could be under one roof with people who shared their language and customs—the Swedish Christian Orphanage.

Cromwell was a special place for Swedish immigrants. Local businessman Andrew N. Pierson actively recruited Swedish immigrants to work at his floral empire there. Pierson made the transition to America as easy as possible for his fellow countrymen. He provided jobs, housing, a Swedish church, and an orphanage. The Swedish Christian Orphanage was founded in 1900 after several years of planning and development. Reverend M. Nilsen of the Cromwell Swedish Congregational

Church persuaded Pierson to donate an abandoned residence, three acres of land, and several buildings. Pierson even paid to have the rooms decorated. Rev. Nilsen worked with his church to secure the funding for operations and to hire staff. The orphanage doors opened on 30 May 1900.<sup>17</sup>

Sam was one of the first parents to admit his children to the new orphanage. Before he took the children to Cromwell, he stopped at a photography studio in neighboring Middletown. A fellow Swede, Gideon Appelquest, operated the studio.<sup>18</sup> Sam commissioned a family photograph that captures his pride in his family. After the portrait session, Sam took the children to their new home. The admission records for Johan, Joseph, Enoch, and Esther indicate they were the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth children admitted to the orphanage, on 3 November 1900.<sup>19</sup> Afterwards Sam returned to the Boston area.

Esther's story included some memories from her orphanage years. She wrote,

My childhood was pleasant enough as we had lots of companionship and we had a healthy and Christian bringing up. There were four women that worked at the home, all very nice, two from Sweden and two of Swedish descent. We used to have prayer meetings in the evenings—sing the hymns etc. The boys use to take the cows to pasture and come home with their blouses filled with apples.

Esther's recollections are echoed in the 1909 Board of Charities report to the Governor on the conditions at the orphanage: "The children attend the public school nearby, but have prayers and singing in the Home night and morning. There is a good sized barn and an apple orchard on the place, and the children enjoy many of the benefits of farm life."<sup>20</sup> Esther also left behind a faded newspaper article with a picture of the orphanage. In neat script she wrote, "My Childhood Home," over the photograph.

To try to find more about the Rask children's lives at the orphanage, I contacted Ädelbrook, the successor agency to the Swedish Christian Orphanage that holds admission and dismissal records. Carol Vincuilla, the agency's archivist, kindly retrieved the records for the Rask children. When she let me know the records were in the mail, she cautioned me that they were not very extensive and consisted of a single 5 x 8 card for each child. Nonetheless, I waited for her letter with great anticipation. When the letter finally arrived, I could not believe the amount of information packed into the small note cards. The records included a place for the child's name, date of birth, names of father and mother and their places of birth, the date and place of the parents' marriage, whether the parents were living or dead and their locations, the financial support provided by the parents, baptismal dates, date received at the orphanage, the dismissal date, where the child was placed, and notes.

## Sam's last years

A few years after Sam placed his children at the orphanage, his health began to fail. He suffered from progressive muscular atrophy—an affliction similar to Lou Gehrig's disease.<sup>21</sup> His prognosis was not good. Sam started to put his affairs in order by filing papers to become a naturalized citizen. This process would ensure that his three sons born in Sweden would have citizenship after he was gone. (Since Esther was born in the United States, she was already a U.S. citizen.) Sam's application was approved on 11 October 1904.<sup>22</sup>

Soon after, Sam brought Johan and Enoch back from the orphanage to live with him.<sup>23</sup> At 13 Johan was just six months from being released due to the orphanage's age limit (14 for boys and 16 for girls). Enoch was 8. Only 7-year-old Esther and 11-year-old Joseph (who may have been sickly) remained at the orphanage.

A year and half later, Sam's health had deteriorated to the point where he could no longer care for Enoch. Enoch was readmitted to the orphanage on 16 July 1906.<sup>24</sup> Johan was now 15 and too old for the orphanage. On 11 April 1907, Sam entered a Boston hospital and died eight days later, on 19 April 1907.<sup>25</sup>

The Rask children were now truly orphans. Johan was 15, Joseph 14, Enoch 11, and Esther 10. Although they had lost their parents much too early, Sam left them with American citizenship, a community that would provide jobs and housing, and a family portrait they could cherish forever. Sam also had used Johan's last two years with him to teach Johan how to survive outside the orphanage.

Johan returned to Cromwell with his younger siblings and worked at a greenhouse. Over the next few years, Joseph and Enoch joined him in the local workforce. Joseph's dismissal papers from the orphanage noted that he was left in the care of "Cromwell Ct." Census records indicate

Joseph found work at a hotel in nearby Hartford. Tragically, in 1912 Joseph succumbed to tuberculosis, the same disease took his mother's life. Enoch was released to the care of Timothy Hodge in neighboring Glastonbury; 1910 census records indicate he was employed by Hodge as a laborer.<sup>26</sup> While at the orphanage Esther completed eighth grade at the Nathaniel White School and was confirmed in the local church. When the day arrived for

her to leave the orphanage, Esther made the transition with support from Johan and Enoch, who had remained in the area until she turned sixteen. Sam taught his children well—families stick together.

Esther first worked in Cromwell, and then moved to the Boston area to be close to an aunt (her mother's sister) and cousin. Enoch served in the Navy during World War I, and after the war, Esther and Enoch followed their aunt and her family to Detroit. Enoch settled in Detroit and worked as a machinist for a shipbuilding company. Johan moved to Rochester, New York, to continue his career as a florist; he later moved to Staunton, Virginia, to open his own store. Esther became a telephone operator and met her future husband at a public dance hall. She married Guy Barnett and raised a family in Detroit. Esther's photo albums include many pictures of her siblings and cousins reuniting and spending vacations with each other throughout the country. I believe Sam would have very pleased



1100 Admission No. 17..... 1112, 1142 Dismissal No. 17.....

SWEDISH CHRISTIAN ORPHANAGE  
CROMWELL, CONN.

Child's name (in full) *Esther Friedberg Rask*

Place of Birth *Worcester, Mass.* Date *March, 29, 1887*

Name of Father *Samuel Rask* Place of Birth *Sweden*

Name of Mother *Hilda L. Rask* Place of Birth *Sweden*

When and Where were parents married *July, 8, 1885, Boston, Mass.*

Father <sup>living</sup> Date *Year 19*

Mother <sup>dead</sup> Date *May, 21, 1878, Worcester, Mass.*

Support pledged by ..... \$..... pr.....

Baptized Date ..... Year ..... by .....

Received at Orphanage Date *Nov. 3,* Year *1900*

Dismissal Date *May 6,* Year *1913*

Now in care of *Mrs. J. G. Butler, Portland, Me.*

Remarks *came from Worcester, Mass.*

Top: The Swedish Christian Orphanage in Cromwell, Connecticut, where Esther and her brothers lived. The building was used from 1900 to about 1914. Courtesy of Ädelbrook The Children's Home.  
Bottom: Esther Rask's admission record to the orphanage.



Esther Rask with her confirmation class, Cromwell, Connecticut.



that his family remained close for many years after he expended so much effort to keep them together. ♦

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Esther Rask Barnett, "Esther Rask's Childhood," January 1978, Papers of Marlyn Barnett Farley.
- <sup>2</sup> Massachusetts Vital Records, 1841–1910, AmericanAncestors.org.
- <sup>3</sup> "A Brief History of Norwood," Town of Norwood, Massachusetts, norwoodma.gov.
- <sup>4</sup> Doris J. Dickson, "WinSmith Mill Market—The Revitalization of the Historic Winslow Brothers Tannery," *Norwood Town News*, [undated], norwoodtownnews.com.
- <sup>5</sup> Massachusetts Vital Records, 1841–1910, AmericanAncestors.org.
- <sup>6</sup> Dag Blanck, "Swedish Immigration to North America," Fall 2009, Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, augustana.edu/general-information/swenson-center/swedish-american-immigration-history.
- <sup>7</sup> Rask household, Tjörnö, Göteborg Och Bohus, vol. A1:13; Husförhör (household examination); 1891, Sweden, Church Records, 1500-1941, Ancestry.com.
- <sup>8</sup> Samuel Rask birth record, April 9, 1859, Göteborg och Bohus, Tjörnö: C:3: p. 467; Genline.com, GID # 956.18.58700.
- <sup>9</sup> Hilgo Eliason birth date, February 22, 1794 (OR residence, 1835), Göteborg och Bohus, Tjörnö, Rasktugen Kalfhagan: A1:5: household examination 1835–1844; Genline.com, GID # 956.13.45900.
- <sup>10</sup> "The History of Strömstad," [vastsverige.com/en/Stromstad-Koster/Stromstad/Welcome-to-Stromstad/The-history-of-Stromstad/](http://vastsverige.com/en/Stromstad-Koster/Stromstad/Welcome-to-Stromstad/The-history-of-Stromstad/).
- <sup>11</sup> Hilda Rask entry, *S. S. Campania* passenger manifest, date of arrival October 19, 1896, at Ellis Island, N.Y., Ellis Island/Port of New York records, [EllisIsland.org](http://EllisIsland.org). On the manifest, Hilda was 35, Johan 4, Joseph 2, and Enoch 9 months old.
- <sup>12</sup> Esther F. Rask birth record, Norwood, March 16, 1897, Massachusetts Vital Records, 1841–1910, AmericanAncestors.org.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> "Achievements in Public Health, 1900–1999: Control of Infectious Diseases," *Center for Disease Control and Prevention: Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, July 30, 1999, [cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4829a1.htm](http://cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4829a1.htm).
- <sup>15</sup> Massachusetts Vital Records, 1841–1910, AmericanAncestors.org.
- <sup>16</sup> Boston Children's Friend Society (Boys Home), 1900 U.S. Census; Dedham, Norfolk, Massachusetts; roll 669; page: 7B; Ancestry.com.
- <sup>17</sup> Robert Owen Decker and Margaret A. Harris, *Cromwell, Connecticut 1650–1990: The History of a River Port Town* (West Kennebec, Maine: Phoenix Publishing for the Cromwell Historical Society, 1931).
- <sup>18</sup> Byrna O'Sullivan, "Workday Wednesday: Gideon Appelquest, Photographer," *Explorations in Connecticut Genealogy*, July 18, 2012, [charteroakgenealogy.blogspot.com](http://charteroakgenealogy.blogspot.com).
- <sup>19</sup> Admission Records: Swedish Christian Orphanage, 1900–1913, Ädelbrook Behavioral and Developmental Service Organization, Cromwell, Connecticut.
- <sup>20</sup> *Report of The Board of Charities to the Governor; For the Years Ending September 30, 1907 and 1908* (State of Connecticut, 1909).
- <sup>21</sup> Samuel Rask death record, Boston, April 19, 1907, Massachusetts Vital Records, 1841–1910, AmericanAncestors.org.
- <sup>22</sup> Samuel Rask naturalization record, 11 October 1904, *Index to New England Naturalization Petitions, 1791–1906 (M1299)* National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Ancestry.com.
- <sup>23</sup> Admission Records: Swedish Christian Orphanage, 1900–1913 [note 17].
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Samuel Rask death record, Massachusetts Vital Records, 1841–1910 [see note 21].
- <sup>26</sup> Timothy H. Hodge household, 1910 U.S. Census; Cromwell, Middlesex, Connecticut, roll T624\_135; page: 19B; Ancestry.com.