



# HISTORY OF THE FINNS IN MICHIGAN

Finnish-American Historical Archives  
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Finlandia University  
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some areas of the country it has been customary to donate the receipts from Finnish Independence Day programs to the Archives.

The largest amount of space in the Archives is taken up by newspapers and periodicals, which have been published continuously since the first Finnish newspaper appeared in America in 1876. In spite of this the newspaper collection is the Archives' weakest, comparatively speaking, for the number of Finnish newspapers that have been published in America is extremely large. Periodicals have been more successfully preserved. The second-largest collection consists of documents associated with the temperance movement. They include minutes and other records of eighty temperance societies nationwide. There is also an almost complete collection of Suomi Synod publications. Finnish American literature, including poetry, is very well represented, as are books about emigration and immigration published in Finland. Others of the more important collections include publications of the labor and cooperative movements and devotional literature. Another notable collection is the pioneer library of books brought to America by immigrants, starting with the Bible of 1642, the only copy in North America.

In the fall of 1959, Professor Jorma Vallinkoski, head librarian at the University of Helsinki, and Kaarlo Lausti, head librarian of the Helsinki Student Union library, visited the Archives. This visit resulted in a permanent relationship between the Finnish National Library and the Finnish American Historical Archives. The Archives also developed reciprocal relations with the libraries of Turku University and Helsinki University. There has also been some exchange of publications with other libraries.

Most of the materials in the Archives are about the Finns of Michigan and their history, because for generations Michigan has been the birthplace and center of many Finnish American activities, both religious and secular. Also, due to the location of the Archives in the state, materials about Michigan have always been more easily obtainable than materials from other states.

Several doctoral dissertations have been based on materials in the Archives, in addition to a number of lesser graduate studies.

### **Suomi College**

The immigrant pastors who came to America from Finland in the early years were all graduates of the University of Helsinki. They were also familiar with the Swedish language. It was natural for them



to make contact with their Swedish and Norwegian colleagues in America, who had behind them many years of experience in church work among their countrymen in the new homeland. The Finnish pastors based their plans for church activities on ideas they received from these experienced men. One of the things they observed was that the Swedes had established Augustana College in Rock Island in 1860, and started Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, two years later. They also saw that both of these colleges had become centers of church work.

In 1890, the year in which the Suomi Synod was organized, the Synod Consistory chose a committee to look for a suitable place for a college and seminary, the need for which had been obvious to the founders of the Synod at its inception. New members were selected for this committee at every church convention. From 1890 to 1896 the committee inspected places offered and recommended in West Superior, Wisconsin, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Marquette, Michigan. Each of them was rejected because of a lack of local support. In the meantime, Nikander went to Augustana to learn about their operational procedures.

The problem of location was solved when unanimous agreement was reached on the idea that the future educational institution should be located where there was the highest concentration of Finnish immigrant population, namely the Copper Country. At the church convention held in Calumet in 1896 a site in Hancock was agreed on. In addition to the members of the Consistory, who served *ex officio*, and included Pastors J. K. Nikander, K. L. Tolonen, Johan Bäck, and Kaarlo Huotari, the following laymen were selected to the first board of directors of Suomi College: O. J. Larson, Victor Burman, Alex Leinonen, Jooseppi Riippa, J. H. Jasberg, August Pelto, and Andrew Johnson.

The board was divided into two sections. The Consistory, as one part, was to attend to questions concerning the church and religion, and the lay members, who were called the council, were to take care of business matters. Important general problems were to be considered and solved at combined meetings. The first meeting of the whole board was held on July 4. Far-reaching decisions were made at this meeting. Pastor Nikander was elected president of the college. He was also to serve as an instructor. Other instructors were Victor Burman and Jooseppi Riippa. The board did not go outside its own membership in its selection of teachers, except in the case of the English instructor. The president was to try to find one. The courses for the first year included religion, Finnish, English, arithmetic, geography, United States history, natural science, penmanship, drawing, bookkeeping,

voice, band, and gymnastics. Finnish history was added a little later. The question of which language to use, English or Finnish, was solved by the decision to have English, United States history, and bookkeeping taught in English, singing and band in both languages, and all others in Finnish. In actual practice, however, English was used only in the teaching of United States history and English.

The worship service marking the opening of Suomi College was held in the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran church in Hancock on Tuesday, September 8, 1896. The church had been struck by lightning on the afternoon of August 8, immediately after Jooseppi Riippa had dismissed over a hundred children for whom he had been conducting a summer school. The tower was knocked down and the newly appointed Suomi College instructor was killed instantly. Victor Burman went to his funeral in Astoria, and Nikander was the only member of the faculty present at the dedicatory church services.

The opening hymn was the Psalm "Except the Lord Build the House." President Nikander used Proverbs 8 as his text. His sermon ended with the words: "Our college, once it has gotten started and has expanded its influence will be a mother that will give birth to smaller schools. . . . Our more mature students will give inspiring talks in their home communities, and they will conduct summer schools; thus it will be a blessing to our immigrants in many areas." This program, which was the disseminator of spiritual light as well as of secular knowledge among Finnish Americans, became a permanent part of the activity of the college.

On dedication day nine boys and two girls enrolled in the new school. The next morning Nikander started classwork in a rented Jacobsville sandstone building across from the Protestant Cemetery in West Hancock.<sup>50</sup> A long time later this building housed a large public sauna, and someone started the long-lived but erroneous story that Suomi College, like many an old-country Finn, had been born in a sauna. After the school had opened its doors, Burman returned, and C. J. Barr, teacher of Latin in the local high school, was hired to teach American history and English. Jaakob Holmlund, an organist-cantor from Finland, became the music teacher. The newly established school now had four instructors. In the spring semester the enrollment reached twenty-one. Seventeen took the examinations in the spring and passed to the next class.

Most of the students lived on the second floor of the school building where Nikander and J. H. Jasberg, the business manager, also lived. The classrooms, kitchen, and dining room were on the first floor. Strict order prevailed. A regular routine, specific in every detail, was



followed: The rising hour was 5:40; before breakfast, everyone had to wash his face and hands, get dressed, comb his hair, brush his shoes, clean his room, and make his bed. Before lunch at twelve o'clock, hands and faces had to be washed again and hair combed; the same had to be done again at 5:40 before dinner. An evening prayer service took place at nine o'clock, and everyone had to be in bed by ten. Each student had to scrub the floor of his room every Saturday. In addition he had to take turns scrubbing the classroom floors. No one could leave the college without the president's permission. The tuition fee was \$10 for the fall semester and \$15 for the spring semester. Room and board cost \$2 per week. When the number of students increased, the owners of the property put up an additional small building to accommodate the larger enrollment.

Early in 1898, dissension broke out in the Hancock congregation of the Synod and even found its way into the quiet confines of Suomi College. The result was that of the twenty-eight students in attendance at the time, six refused to submit to school regulations and left. Good order was more important to Nikander than the loss of one-fifth of this student body. By the third year of the school's existence (1898-99) the enrollment was thirty. Teachers, in addition to Pastor Nikander, were Pastor Robert Ylonen, born in Leivonmäki in 1867, John Kiiskila, who had just graduated from Valparaiso, and Jaakob Holmlund.

In the meantime the board, at the request of the Synod conference, had purchased three lots for the college in a good location on the main street of Hancock and requested an architect by the name of Pierce to prepare plans for a new building and supervise its construction. A decision was made to solicit funds for the building from non-Finns as well as Finns. Among Finns, the solicitation for funds centered mostly around Hancock, Calumet, and Marquette County. There was hesitation about venturing farther afield.

Work on the project was started in the summer of 1898 by Juhani Paavola, who leveled the ground with his team of horses. In October, the construction of the foundation was assigned to contractor William Scott of Hancock. By March 1899 work had progressed so far that Scott could be given the contract for the stonework, too. The cost of the foundation and the stonework was \$6,557. The contract for the woodwork was given to Pajari and Ulseth of Calumet for \$10,037.

The laying of the cornerstone took place on Tuesday, May 30, 1899. The third year's final examinations, which in those days were real interrogations, were completed in the morning, with twenty minutes allotted to each subject. Lunch was served at the Germania Hall. The

cornerstone ceremony began after three o'clock. It was estimated that there were 2,000 people present, for railroads had made great reductions in fares for those who wished to attend the program, and the weather was fine. K. L. Tolonen, who was the president of the Suomi Synod at the time, officiated, saying: "I lay this cornerstone for the Suomi College and Theological Seminary building which is to be an institution of higher education for Finnish-American youth in the spirit of Evangelical Lutheranism. No other foundation can be laid than that which has already been laid, which is Jesus Christ."

After Tolonen had discussed the significance of Suomi College in a longer speech, a combined choir sang "Oi Terve Pohjola, Isäimme Onnela," after which A. J. Scott, the mayor of Hancock, gave a cordial speech in English. He spoke of the great progress made by the Finns of the area over a period of thirty years. His speech ended with the idea that Marquette was welcome to its normal school and prison, and Newberry to its mental hospital, for Hancock now had Suomi College, which was open to all young people of the area who wished to continue their education after completing their other schooling.<sup>51</sup>

Construction was held up for several months because the stonework contractor ran out of funds, but in January 1900, the middle of the fourth year of the school's existence, the building was completed. It was made of red sandstone from the Jacobsville quarries and was an ornament of Hancock in those days. The new building was dedicated on Sunday, January 21, 1900. Kustaa Sahlberg, immigrant pastor of the Seamen's Mission, gave the sermon at the festival worship service. In the absence of Tolonen, who was unable to attend, Nikander as vice president of the Synod dedicated the school. Then, on a cold, frosty day the instructors and students happily moved from the rented quarters to their new home.

The next year a large frame building was put up behind the college. It was used as a gymnasium, music room, and auditorium. In 1906 the newly established commercial department was housed in it. The building was torn down in 1940.

Nikander announced that he wished to resign from the presidency of the college in 1902. When Dr. Arthur Hjelt of Finland, an internationally known New Testament scholar who had a deep interest in young people, especially those of college age, visited Hancock in the summer of 1901, soon after Nikander's announcement, discussions were held with him about finding a new president. Hjelt suggested Matti Pesonen, and when Pesonen turned down the offer, he suggested Frans Evert Blomberg. When Blomberg also refused the presidency, Nikander agreed to continue in the office.<sup>52</sup>



The early curriculum of Suomi College was modeled after the Finnish "lyceum" of seven years, including grammar school and high school. In the spring of 1904 the first seventh-year class was graduated. Members were Alfred Haapanen, Heikki Haapanen, Salomon Ilmonen, Lydia Kangas, Pekka Keranen, Vintori Koivumaki, Matti Luttinen, Liisa Paavola, Vilhelmiina Perttula, and John Wargelin. In keeping with a Finnish custom, each graduate received a Finnish university student's white cap as a mark of his new status. The graduates ranged from twenty to thirty-five years in age, for in the difficult conditions of immigrant life, many had started their educations comparatively late.

In the fall of that year, a two-year theological seminary, which a student could enter on completing the seven-year course, was added. The crying need for pastors in the synod was the reason for this short training period. However, it was necessary to work exceptionally hard to complete the studies of those two years. The first generation of pastors from the Suomi Synod's own seminary completed their final examinations in the spring of 1906 and were ordained into the ministry at the annual church convention in Hancock on June 6. The new pastors were Alfred Haapanen, who was born in Karvia; Pekka Keranen, born in Puolanka; Salomon Ilmonen, born in Ilmajoki; Matti Luttinen, born in Piippola; and John Wargelin, born in Isokyrö.<sup>53</sup>

After the establishment of the seminary, the classes leading to enrollment in it were called the academic department. It corresponded to the American high school. (As late as the 1960s some high schools in the New England States were still called academies.)<sup>54</sup>

In 1910 Suomi College was ten years old. Opponents had prophesied a quick end, but it had survived and grown. The total number of students who had attended during the ten-year period was 243, of which 81 were from Hancock. The Copper Country, including Hancock, had contributed a total of 139 and other Michigan areas, 70. From other states from California to Massachusetts, 64 students had attended. Percentagewise, 73 percent were from Michigan and 27 percent from other areas, a ratio which has not changed much over the years.<sup>55</sup>

Even in the early years, the faculty of Suomi College and Seminary included many able men. Nikander was a classicist who moved easily from Latin to Greek and from Greek to Hebrew. K. A. Arminen kept the teaching of mathematics and related subjects at a high level, as did T. K. Wallenius the teaching of history, Finnish, and Finnish literature. L. W. Lund, a dentistry student, was equally capable in biology. Part-time instructors included Pastors Johan Bäck and Iisakki Katajamaa from neighboring communities; both had masters' degrees. The

high academic level of the faculty is evidenced by the fact that when the president's administrative duties began to require more of his time, five different instructors were able, over a period of four years, to teach his Latin classes of different levels, and two seminary instructors were able to take on his Greek classes.

Over many years the debt incurred by the construction of Old Main, as the new building came to be called, was a heavy burden. Nikander, however, was unwavering in his belief that the school, which had been started through great effort, was headed in the right direction. The following story illustrates his attitude. One Sunday evening, when a certain farmer was driving him back home to Hancock from a meeting in South Range, he asked his driver to stop the horse by a big tree. Nikander stepped down from the vehicle and begged the farmer to do the same. Then, kneeling together at the foot of the tree, they prayed God to bless Suomi College. The problem of the debt was taken up at the annual church convention held in New Castle, Pennsylvania, in 1918. It was decided there that throughout the synod there should be a "Suomi College Week." Within two years the debt was paid.

Nikander died early in 1919, leaving Suomi College as his permanent memorial. The student body numbered 165 in the year he died. That figure was not surpassed until twenty-seven years later, in 1946, when his son, V. K. Nikander, was president of the college.

Up to 1920, Suomi College had three departments: the academy, the seminary, established in 1904, and the commercial department, started in 1906. The commercial department grew to such an extent that in some years it included 65 percent of the enrollment. More jobs were always available at the end of a school year to those who had completed their studies in the department than there were graduates to fill them. Music, which had always been an important part of the curriculum, came into its own in 1920 when a music department was established.

After J. K. Nikander's death, John Wargelin became the president of Suomi College and held the position up to 1927. The most important development during his presidency was the changing of the school to a junior college. It was a logical development. Although the seminary had changed from a two-year curriculum to a three-year curriculum within a few years of its establishment, experience had shown that students who went into the seminary directly from the academy were not able, in many cases, to attain the maturity for the ministry that the rapidly rising educational level of Finnish Americans was demanding of persons in positions of leadership. At this point the



possibility of making the school a four-year college was considered, but that was financially impossible.

The junior college opened in the fall of 1923 with an enrollment of five students. There were 47 students in the academy and 42 in the commercial department. The beginning was difficult, for by 1926 the enrollment in the junior college was only eight. But the following year there were 36 students in the department, and a year later there were 70. Graduation from the junior college now became a requirement for enrollment in the seminary. The academy had been approved by the University of Michigan from 1920 on. The junior college also received their seal of approval.

After Dr. Wargelin left the presidency of Suomi College, Antti Lepisto was selected as his successor. Lepisto was born in Mäntyharju in 1883. He earned his bachelor of arts degree at the University of Chicago and was ordained in 1921. The most important occurrence during his term of office was the starting of a Bible school in connection with the college. Its purpose was to provide lay workers for congregations. The Bible school closed when Lepisto left his position in 1930 and Wargelin returned to the presidency.<sup>56</sup>

In the summer of 1930 a big campaign for the collection of money for capital as well as for a new building was started. The goal was \$300,000, of which only \$47,000 was obtained. The result, however, was that with the help of this money the college was able to survive the Great Depression of the early 1930s whereas other similar institutions had to close their doors. When Wargelin left in 1937, Dr. Viljo Nikander was called to take over the work which his father, J. K. Nikander, had begun.

Viljo Kustaa Nikander was born in Hancock on August 3, 1903. He completed his studies for the ministry in the Suomi Seminary in 1925 and earned his master's degree at the University of Chicago in 1928. In 1935 he completed his doctorate at Harvard University. The greatest accomplishment of his ten-year presidency was the acquisition of a new building, Nikander Hall, planned by architect Eliel Saarinen and his son-in-law, architect J. R. F. Swanson. It was planned to accommodate 150 students. It included a number of classrooms, a combination gymnasium-auditorium, a library, and a laboratory. The building with its furnishings cost \$125,000, the greater part of which was obtained through collection campaigns directed by business manager Urho W. Tervo of the college, and Dr. O. H. Pankoke.

While Nikander was in office, World War II occurred. Young men went into military service and young women into war work. Student enrollment fell to 52, rising in 1946, after the end of the war, to

174, the largest enrollment up to this time. Nikander paid special attention to the qualifications of his teaching staff. The faculty often included as many as four persons with doctorates. As a rule, the seminary instructors had doctor's degrees.

When Nikander left Suomi College in 1947 to become a professor of philosophy at Wagner College, Suomi College entered a phase in which over a period of thirteen years, five persons served it as president, indicating the weakness of the board of directors. Presidents from 1947 to 1960 were as follows: Pastor Carl Tamminen from 1947 to 1949, Pastor Bernhard H. P. Hillila from 1949 to 1952, Pastor Edward J. Isaac from 1952 to 1954, David T. Halkola from 1954 to 1959, and Dr. Raymond Wargelin from 1959 to 1960.<sup>57</sup> The enrollment remained comparatively small, being under 100 in 1950-51. The financial situation also continued to grow worse. By 1959, debts had increased to \$63,000, and credit was no longer obtainable. The president resigned and the board asked Raymond Wargelin, president of the synod, to take on the presidency of the college temporarily, until a new president could be found.<sup>58</sup>

Ralph J. Jalkanen, pastor of the Bethany Congregation in Ash-tabula, Ohio, was now called to the presidency of Suomi College. Jalkanen was born in Hancock on August 8, 1918. His parents had come to the Copper Country from Sysmä, Finland. Jalkanen completed his studies for the ministry in the Suomi Seminary in 1943 and received the master's degree from Roosevelt University in 1955. Two of his first tasks as president of the college were to recruit more students and to obtain money for the school. He was so successful in both endeavors that at the time of the merger of Lutheran churches in 1962 Suomi College was free of debt and the enrollment had risen to 250.

The next step in the development of Suomi College was the inauguration of a building program. The Lutheran Church in America, into which the synod had merged, was in a position to allocate more funds for the college than the Suomi Synod had been able to supply. Copper Country businessmen collected large amounts of money, and the federal government in Washington began to provide aid for the building programs of institutions of higher education to satisfy the needs of the rapidly growing population. With funds available from these sources, Suomi College was able to build a new student center with dormitories for men and women, a dining room, and a coffee shop. In addition, construction was started in 1966 on a new library and laboratory building. Furthermore, two private homes had been purchased for use as dormitories, and the sixty-year-old Book Concern building had been acquired in 1965 and was being used for art and music and



some commercial subjects. The college now had seven buildings, along with the increase in space there was also a rapid increase in enrollment so that in the fall of 1966 it passed the 400 mark.

Since Suomi College became a junior college in 1923, scores of persons have taught there. Of them, only a few longtime faculty members and some in special areas of service will be mentioned. Kosti Arho from Naantali, Finland, was the librarian and instructor in Finnish and Finnish history from 1922 to 1948. Ellen Ryynanen succeeded him as librarian, serving also as instructor in English. She was followed some years later by teacher-librarian Alma Van Slyke, a daughter of Victor Burman, one of the first women teachers at the college. Starting in 1940, Dr. John E. Anderson was an instructor in chemistry and related subjects for a long time, and starting in 1945, Pastor E. W. Feldscher taught German for many years. Dr. Armas Holmio served for twenty years as lecturer on the life of Christ, philosophy, and European history.

In the history of Suomi College the music and commercial departments, figuratively speaking, make up special chapters of their own. Waino A. Lehto was the head of the commercial department as well as its guiding spirit for over forty years. For the last few years of his term of service he also served as dean of the college. He was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1894. He left Suomi College in 1964, a number of years after the usual age of retirement.

In 1922 Martti Nisonen, an orchestra conductor and composer from Pori, Finland, became the head of the music department of Suomi College. Under his direction the college choir and concerts reached a level of quality higher than before. When Nisonen died in the fall of 1946, Arthur J. Hill succeeded him. The choir then began to make annual spring concert tours, even to places as far away as California, New England, and Canada. At the same time, the choir became the most important advertising medium of the college. Time after time, its tours attracted students from communities not represented at the college before. In 1963, at the time of the Lutheran World Federation Conference in Helsinki, the Suomi College Choir visited Finland, appearing in various programs under the direction of Professor Hill. It also gave religious concerts at churches as far north as Oulu, as well as in Germany, Sweden, and Denmark.

For decades, the Theological Seminary lived a quiet life of its own, giving, however, a religious flavor to the whole college. Seminarians preached at the college chapel services as well as in Copper Country churches, often accompanied by groups of singers selected from the student body. They were the backbone of the Lutheran Student Associ-

ation. They also conducted Bible study sessions. In the 1950s, after a bachelor's degree had become a requirement for admission to the seminary, the more advanced seminarians often served as part-time instructors in the junior college. Seminary instructors regularly taught the junior college classes in religion and philosophy. Over the years the seminary sponsored courses of lectures for pastors. These were attended not only by pastors of the Suomi Synod but also by ministers of other churches. Lecturers at these courses were nationally and internationally known American theologians. On several occasions theologians from Finland were among the lecturers.

In 1952 the seminary became partially autonomous, with a dean of its own. In 1955, when a layman was the president of Suomi College, the seminary was given additional autonomy. For example, its dean in person presented matters pertaining to the seminary to the board. The seminary was also given a separate budget. Dr. Walter Kukkonen was dean of the seminary from 1952 to 1955, and Dr. Armas K. E. Holmio from 1955 to 1958. After J. K. Nikander, the seminary instructors who taught the longest were Presidents John Wargelin and Viljo K. Nikander and Pastors Kalle Heikki Mannerkorpi, J. T. R. Hartman, Dr. Uuras Saarnivaara, Dr. Armas Holmio, and William S. Avery.

When four years of college became a requirement for admission to the seminary, the question of a merger with some larger Lutheran seminary came up. Such a merger would make available larger faculties and libraries to the seminarians than the Suomi Synod seminary could provide. The question was the cause of some controversy within the synod, with the older and younger elements in opposition to each other. The older people were mostly of the opinion that those concerned should quietly await the outcome of the discussions in progress about a possible merger of the synod with three other Lutheran churches, and then, when the Suomi Synod itself was past history, the question of moving the seminary elsewhere should be taken up. They appealed to the fact that the three other churches that were considering the merger were in no hurry to combine any of their institutions before the probable merger. When the matter came up before the congregations in the early part of 1958, the majority of the church members were of the opinion that the seminary should remain in Hancock for the time being. This was the unanimous opinion in Michigan, the synod's largest conference. But when the question came up before the synod convention in Detroit in June 1958, the younger people were in the majority, and the proposal that the seminary should be merged with the Chicago Lutheran Seminary in Maywood received 167 votes in its



favor; votes in favor of staying in Hancock numbered 149. The merger was accomplished that fall. The board selected Dr. Walter J. Kukkonen and Pastor Karlo Keljo to teach at Maywood as representatives of the synod.

Over a period of fifty-four years, 119 men were ordained from the Suomi Seminary. By the spring of 1966, 34 of them had died, 11 had retired, and 74 were still active in the ministry.<sup>59</sup>