TOWN GROWTH IN FINLAND

By

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Although it is known that there were several small market places along the coasts of pre-Christian Finland, the first true towns did not appear until after the country's invasion by the Swedes in 1155. This invasion took the form of three so-called "Crusades", of which it was the purpose of the first to establish a bridgehead on the southwest coast, of the second to subjugate the southern interior of the country, and of the third to expel the influences of Novgorod from the eastern borderlands. It is interesting to note that each of these "Crusades" gave rise to a fortress that later was to become the nucleus of a town. Thus, the fortress of Turku dates from 1229, that at Hämeenlinna from 1249, and that at Viipuri from 1293.

Following the Peace of Schlüsselburg in 1325, by which Novgorod acknowledged Swedish sovereignty over all of Finland southwest of a line running from the inner and of the Gulf of Finland northwestward to the Gulf of Bothnia, a great influx of Swedish colonists took place to the coastal districts of the south and west. It was in these districts, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, that Finland's six medieval cities came into existence. Oldest of these was Turku, which dates its origins to the early 1300's. As its name implies, Turku was originally a market place (from the Swedish word, torg), but the building of a Swedish cathedral and fortress there in the early thirteenth century likewise ensured its importance as an early religious and political center. Porvoo, on the south coast, had also been an ancient trade center, and its rights as a city date from the year 1346. On the Bothnian coast, the valley of the Kokemäki River had early been the site of such market places as Ragvalda and Telje, hence it is not surprising that the Swedes chose to build one of their first settlements there as well. Under the name of Ulfsby, this settlement received the legal status of a town in 1365. In the same year, the town of Rauma was founded on a small harbor between Turku and Ulfsby. Likewise an ancient market place, Rauma did not obtain its charter until 1442. The last two of Finland's medieval cities apparently had no commercial origins. They were the eastern border fortress of Viipuri, which won its rights in 1403, and Naantali, near Turku, which was given its privileges when a Birgittine cloister was established there in 1443. In the eastern interior of Finland, however, the erection of a Swedish fortress at Savonlinna in 1475 provided a medieval core for the later growth of a town.

As Sweden expanded her dominions in the Baltic during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the establishment of new towns became a conscious policy of the crown, not only in the home country but in the subject territories as well. Beginning with the reign of Gustavus Vasa in 1525, Finland entered an era of town building unparalleled in either its earlier or later history. The first two towns to be founded during this period of
Swedish expansion were both situated on the south coast, Tammisaari being founded in 1528 and Helsinki coming into being by royal decree in 1550. The founding of Helsinki, in particular, offers a good example of the lengths to which royal intervention could go in town building, should it wish to. In this instance, the Swedish crown desired a more suitable port along the south coast than either Porvoo or Tammisaari provided. In order to ensure the growth and prosperity of Helsinki, it was commanded that the burghers of all the other towns then in existence (apart from Turku, Viipuri and the ecclesiastic center of Naantali) move to the new town. Six years later, when the permanence of Helsinki seemed assured, the king decreed that those wishing to return to their former towns would be permitted to do so. Thus, with the exception of Ulfsby, all of the earlier towns were re-established. In the instance of Ulfeby, the opportunity was taken to found a new town nearer the mouth of the silt-laden Kokemäki River, and in 1558 the town of Pori was chartered in its stead.

One of the first records of the relative size and importance of the early Finnish towns is to be found in the tax register of 1571. There, Turku is shown to have had about 3,000 inhabitants and Viipuri, slightly over half as many. However, the population of all eight towns taken together made up only a modest 2.8 per cent of the country’s total in that year.

A readjustment in Finland's eastern boundary in 1595 gave the Swedes political control over the entire Bothnian coast and the northern interior of the country, allowing them to exert their town-building energies in both of these regions during the seventeenth century. Under the leadership of King Karl IX and Governor-General Per Brahe, no less than eight towns were founded on the north Bothnian coast in the first half of the seventeenth century. At least three of them--Oulu, Vaasa, and Tornio--occupied ancient trading sites and all of them were situated at or near the mouths of rivers. In the northern interior, the town of Kajaani crystallized around a Swedish fort.

After the Swedes won control of the Karelian Isthmus through the Peace on Stolbova in 1617, five new towns also won their rights in the eastern borderlands of Finland. They were Savonlinna and Lappeenranta in the interior Lake District, Sortavala and Käkisalmi on Lake Ladoga, and Vekkelahlti (now Hamina) on the south coast. In addition to the towns that arose in the newly incorporated territories of Sweden, however, two more cities also were given their privileges in southwestern Finland. They were the coastal town of Uusikaupunki, which supplanted the old market center of Kalais, and the interior fortress town of Hameenlinna. Thus, during the period of Sweden's political greatness, no less than eighteen cities were founded in Finland, bringing the total to twenty-four.

About the middle of the seventeenth century, the population of the Finnish towns amounted to some four per cent of the country's total. Turku remained the largest city in the land, having at the time something more than 6,000 inhabitants. Viipuri occupied second place with a populace of 5,500 and Helsinki ranked a poor third with 1,250.
Just as the expansion of Sweden during the seventeenth century had found its reflection in the establishment of Finnish cities, so did the rise of Russia in the eighteenth century leave its mark on the town growth of Finland. In 1721, by the Peace of Uusikaupunki, Russia regained control of the Karelian Isthmus and with it she fell heir to three of Finland's border towns—the key defense bastion of Viipuri on the Gulf, and the two Ladoga towns of Sortavala and Käkisalmi. Through a second annexation in 1743, she extended her frontier westward along the south coast until three more Finnish towns came under her dominion—the two fortress towns of Hamina and Savonlinna and the interior trading center of Lappeenranta. For the six towns thus lost to the Swedish realm much more than a mere change in allegiance was involved, however. Their absorption by Russia meant stagnation and decline, for not only were they cut off from their natural hinterlands by a political boundary but the Russians also devoted their chief energies to the building of St. Petersburg. It would be erroneous to conclude that the Russian advance had only a negative influence on Finnish town growth, however, for in 1745, in response to the threat it posed, the Swedes founded the town of Lovisa to serve as the new anchor for their contracting eastern defenses. Four years later, the construction, by the Swedes, of the Suomenlinna fortress in the harbor of Helsinki further spurred the growth of that city as well.

A census taken about the middle of the eighteenth century showed that Turku still ranked as Finland's largest city, having then about 5,700 inhabitants. In second place came the north Bothnian port of Oulu with 2,000 and ranking a close third and fourth were Porvoo and Helsinki, both with about 1,500. The population of Russian-occupied Viipuri likewise totaled about 1,500, having fallen to less than half of what it had been a century earlier. In the twenty-five towns then in existence there lived only 4.8 per cent of the Finnish population.

In the peaceful decades of the late 1700's, four more towns were founded in Swedish Finland. Significantly, two of them were in the eastern interior near the new frontier, Heinola becoming a provincial administrative center in 1779 and Kuopio being founded as a market town three years later. In western Finland, the market place of Tampere won recognition as a town in 1779 and the Bothnian port of Kaskinen received its privileges in 1785.

Early in the nineteenth century, a short but decisive war put an end to Swedish dominion in Finland and in 1809 the country was incorporated into the Russian Empire as a Grand Duchy. The abrupt change in Finland's political status had several immediate effects on the growth of Finnish towns. The eastern frontier cities, which had languished under Russian control, suddenly received a new lease on life when they were returned to their mother country in 1812. The growth of Lovisa, on the other hand, was sharply checked, for now its principal raison d'etre had been lost. Also in 1812, the Czar decreed that Turku, which had always been the heart of Swedish Finland, was to be stripped of its political functions and that hereinafter the Finnish capital would be located in Helsinki. Obviously it was the desire of Finland's new masters to transfer the seat of the government from a city where pro-Swedish sentiment was strong to one which was nearer St. Petersburg. In 1827, Turku's prominence was further diminished when, after a
great conflagration had leveled the city, the government took the opportunity to move the national university to the new capital. Thus stimulated in its growth, Helsinki finally surpassed Turku as the most populous city in the country during the 1830's.

The Russian period in Finland saw the introduction of two new and vigorous town-building forces, namely industry and improved communications. While many or most of the existing towns benefited from their introduction, other new towns likewise arose. The classic Finnish example of a town grown large with industry is Tampere in the southwestern interior. Situated at an important waterpower site, it ranked nineteenth among the cities of Finland when the British industrialist Finlayson founded his textile factory there in 1820. Yet, by the turn of the century it had climbed into third place behind Helsinki and Turku, thanks to the preferential economic treatment it had received from the Czars. During the same period, four other interior towns, all of them strategically located in terms of lake communications, won their rights as cities. Along the coast four port towns were likewise granted municipal privileges during the latter half of the nineteenth century, reflecting a marked upswing in Finland's foreign trade. Of the latter, Hanko become the country's chief winter transit port while both Kemi and Kotka owe their establishment and growth to the timber trade. The last city to chartered during Finland's union with Russia—indeed, the last Finnish city to receive its rights -- was the railway junction town of Lahti, founded in the southern interior in 1905. Since that time, no town has been accorded the legal status of a city, although numerous town-like agglomerations have grown up as industry and railway communications have developed. The fact that fully ten of these agglomerations have more than 10,000 inhabitants each and that twelve others have more than 5,000 each clearly demonstrates that in Finland, as in the Scandinavian countries, town status is purely a political privilege and that it is quite unrelated to the size of the community. The most recent development to affect Finnish town growth has, of course been the Second World War, and its most direct consequence has been the loss, once more, of the three Karelian cities to Russia. Though statistics are incomplete, it is known that all three of these cities lost from a third to a half of their population in the decade between 1940 and 1950.

Surveying the growth of Finnish towns during the period from 1850 to 1950, we find that only one out of every sixteen Finns was a town-dweller in the middle of the nineteenth century but that today one out of every four Finns lives in a city. Though in 1850 the town population of Finland scarcely exceeded 100,000, by 1950 it had grown to more than one million, nearly a ten-fold increase. Whereas only two Finnish towns had more than 10,000 inhabitants each in the middle of the last century, today there are nineteen. In 1850 the three largest cities were Helsinki with 20,000, Turku with 17,000, and Viipuri with less than 9,000 inhabitants. By 1950 Helsinki had far outstripped its nearest competitors and led all of them with its population of more than 360,000. In second place was the interior industrial city of Tampere with 103,000, but Turku was a close third with 101,000. The loss and decline of Viipuri, following the second World War, left Lahti, Finland's youngest city, in fourth place with nearly 45,000 inhabitants.

Within the last century, rather marked changes have taken place in the regional distribution of Finland's town dwellers. In 1850, sixty per cent of Finland's urban folk
lived in the towns of the south and southwest coasts and nearly 36 per cent of the total lived in Helsinki and Turku. Today 57 per cent of all Finnish towns-people still live along the coasts of the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea, though of the total almost 36 per cent live in Helsinki. Thus, apart from the Finnish capital, most of the towns of the south and southwest coasts have suffered a decline in their relative importance within the last century.

A similar decline in relative importance has been experienced by the towns of the northwest coast. Although they had more than 16 per cent of Finland’s urban dwellers in 1850, today they have less than 13 per cent. On the positive side, the greatest relative gains, apart from those in Helsinki, have been made by the towns of the interior. From less than 13 per cent of Finland's town dwellers in 1850, their share of the total had swelled to almost 30 per cent by 1950.

Taking the towns of Finland as a group, we find that their population increased at an average rate of 26 per cent per decade in the century from 1850 to 1950. A study of the individual towns shows that, with three exceptions, only those in the interior and the four coastal cities founded since 1850 have exceeded the average national rate of growth during the last hundred years. The three exceptions were Helsinki and the two Bothnian towns of Vaasa and Pietarsaari, though the latter two exceeded the national average by only a slim margin. All of the other coastal towns grew at rates less rapid then the national average and nine of them showed a rate of increase less than half as great as the national average. It is interesting to note that seven of the latter towns have only devious or indirect connections with the Finnish rail system, that one other (Uusikaarlepyy) did not receive rail service until 1949, and that the last (Tammisaari) was largely superceded as a transit port by Hanko. Thus, all nine of Finland's slowest growing cities may well ascribe their fate, at least in part to the inadequacy of their communications position.

From this brief survey of town growth in Finland, we may draw the following conclusions: first, that the founding of Finnish towns has been intimately associated with the country’s political geography, having been initiated by the Swedes in the south and west and later extended to the north and east; second, that the eastern border towns, which were founded and built to serve Swedish and Finnish interests, have experienced stagnation and decline both times they have been annexed by Russia; third, that although most of Finland's towns date from before 1850s their most pronounced growth has taken place during the last century, thanks largely to the expansion of industry and the improvement of communications; and fourth, that as new towns have arisen, a marked shift in the concentration of Finland's urban population has taken place, resulting in the increased importance of the interior as the expense of the coasts.

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