

The First Norwegian Church in The New World

By K. R. “Skoot” Larson



The author beside the Old Viking Tower of Newport

It is accepted fact that the Vikings of Norway and Iceland found their way to the shores of North America a millennium ago. It is a lesser known fact, and pooh-poohed by some American scholars, that many Vikings remained in the Vinland colonies of the eastern American seaboard for 200 years or more, possibly even longer after “going Native” and blending in with the aboriginals tribes.

The best proof of the Vinland colonies so far is the remains of an extensive settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland. A far more interesting remnant of the Norsemen’s stay on America’s shores is found, however, in the “Old Stone Tower” of Newport, Rhode Island. This enigmatic circular stone structure, over 26-feet tall, 25 feet across and resting on eight arched pillars, was thought to be old by the first Puritans

arriving on the Aquidneck Island in 1639. Rhode Island's first leader, Governor Coddington is said to have made inquiries about the tower among the Indians there.

What the local native couldn't tell was many years later found by Scandinavian scholars in old church records. Norwegian Christians had arrived in the long established Vinland colony of Høp sometime around the year 1121 commissioned by King Sigurd to build a cathedral as a religious center for the country's outermost trading post. The lack of records attesting to this area of settlement and trade are thought to result from Vinland's wealth being kept secret by Norway's ruler so other kingdoms would not come to take a share in the plunder of lumber, furs & gemstones.

The religious expedition was lead by Eric Gnuvsson, appointed the Bishop of Greenland by Pope Paschal II. According to the Icelandic Sagas, Bishop Eric departed Greenland in 1121 not only to serve the faithful in Vinland, but also to bring the faith to the "Skraelings," the native inhabitants of the area.

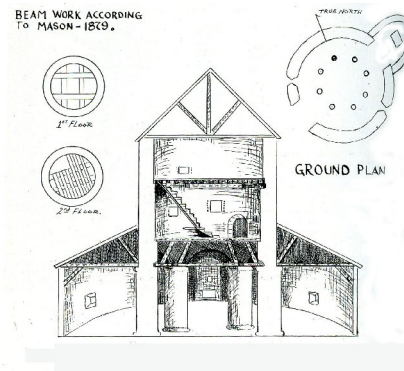
With the help of Viking settlers, Bishop Erik's clerics were said to have constructed a church of native stone and wood. Norsemen who had accompanied King Sigurd on a crusade to the Holy Land in 1109-1110 fashioned their design after Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In resemblance to the original structure they had seen, they created a domed circular nave surrounded by columns. Their church also took in account that some of the area's Skraeling population remained hostile. As other Viking's had done before them on the islands of Orkney and Bornholm, they placed the clergy's living quarters on a first and second floor above the nave in a multi-windowed tower from which the church could be defended against attack. These



How the Tower might have appeared 800 years ago.

rooms above the main church were heated in Winter by a unique fireplace connecting to a pair of flues built into the stone wall to vent smoke out of the tower's upper reaches.

As with other churches of that age, the columns at the building's foundation were aligned with true north. A large tower window faced out to sea in such a manner that the light of the fireplace could provide a beacon to arriving ships. On the ground floor, the church's main body was enclosed in a larger circle constructed of wood in much the same way the Stave churches of Norway had been built. The roof beams



The Newport Tower restored as a Norse round church of the XII to XIV centuries.

of the wooden outer church were set into the tops of the tower's eight stone columns. The tower's dome was a wooden cone extending skyward.

220 Years later, another newly appointed Bishop of Greenland, Ivar Bardson arrived in Greenland on route to Vinland to find no inhabitants left in settlements occupied only by some stray remnants of the area's former livestock. It was assumed that as the climate grew colder, Greenland's settlers had migrated en-mass to Vinland. Bishop Bardson's report to Rome stated simply that, "The Greenlanders gave up Christianity, renounced their virtues and turned to the people of Vinland."

The next documented contact with the Norsemen of Høp appears in 1524, when Giovanni de Verrazano sailed north along the American coastline. An Italian national commissioned by the king of France, Verrazano landed on Aquidneck Island, which he christened "Refugio." In the shadow of the tower Verranzo tells us, "We spent many days with the natives, who were friendly and generous, beautiful and civilized. They excel us in size, and are of a bronze color, some inclining more to whiteness and others of a tawny color. Their faces are sharply cut, and there were among them two kings of so goodly stature and shape, as is possible to declare, the eldest being forty years of age . . . The women are very handsome and fair. We saw many of the men wearing breastplates of

copper.” Verranzano also reported that these natives had cultivated fields surrounding their village where they grew corn, peas, squash and pumpkins. Yet, as Verranzano’s men continued up the coast, they found no more of the fair and friendly natives.

Upon his return to France, Verranzano told the French Monarch about the “tall stone Norman Villa” he had found among the natives, like those built by the Vikings of Normandy which also served as a combination living quarters, defensive fortress, church and lighthouse.

Although the English settlers less than 100 years later reported finding one tribe of natives that were fair complexioned, friendly and more cultured, they didn’t connect these natives with the Stone Tower. Illnesses brought by the English killed off large numbers of the local Indians while other natives were sold as slave and sent away to the West Indies. In time, a man named Benedict Arnold acquired the village land surrounding the Stone Tower. He later converted the old church tower, which by then had lost its wooden outer structure, into a crude windmill to serve the town of Newport. By the time of Arnold’s death, the tower was known only as Arnold’s Windmill. As new settlers came, it became common belief that Arnold had built the Stone Tower as a tribute to a similar tower he’d known as a boy in England.

During the American Revolution, the Stone Tower became a magazine for the storage of gunpowder. Retreating British troops attempted to destroy the tower, igniting the powder as they departed. The ensuing explosive served only to lift the wooden roof from the tower, which took about three feet of the uppermost stone with it as it caught fire and burned. The nearly 600-year-old tower remained standing firmly on its hilltop, where it still stands today.

In the past three centuries differing theories have been popular as to the tower’s origin and purpose. Scholars not happy with the idea of Europeans in America before Columbus have looked for facts to support Arnold or some other post-Columbian builder. While no vast store of Viking artifacts have surfaced in or near the tower, archeologists from various universities around Scandinavian have found old runes carved into the

stones of the structure. The areas surrounding Rhode Island and Cape Cod have also provided further traces of the Viking presence. Mooring holes, shallow pits drilled into boulders along the shoreline to which ships could be tied with an eye toward quick release and escape, line the banks of the Bass River in Massachusetts. Also on the banks of Follin's Pond on that waterway, archeologists have found the site of a Viking hearth and ship shed in an area that conforms to Karlsefni's geographic descriptions of a Viking camp's location in the Icelandic Sagas. Other runic inscriptions mark the rocks on riverbanks and shorelines of New England.

The evidence that remains from our past is, of course, always open to interpretation. In the case of the Old Stone Tower in Newport, Rhode Island, the evidence points a powerful finger at the theory that this structure is what remains of the first Norwegian Christian church in the new world.