

Chapter 2. The historical geography of an archipelago of polar explorers³

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Abstract

An outline of the rationale for a workshop, held in Oslo, Norway, from 12-13 May 2015, to discuss the historic place names of the High Arctic archipelago of Franz Josef Land. The islands contain hundreds of place names that amount to a virtual catalog of polar exploration and explorers of the mid- to late-19th Century. As an example, three American expeditions spent seven years there between 1898-1905, in failed attempts to try to reach the geographic North Pole. However, in the process, they left behind a record of the American Gilded Age that survived even 70 years of Soviet Communism.

Keywords

Franz Josef Land, historic place names, historical geography, polar exploration, Oslo NSF workshop

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This project started, one could say, in 2006, when I met Magnus Forsberg on board the Russian nuclear icebreaker *Yamal* during a voyage to Franz Josef Land and the geographic North Pole. Over two weeks of breaking through the polar ice cap, Magnus and I had a lot of time on the bridge of the ship to look at the charts of the islands and begin to ask questions about the origins of the place names there, since so many of them were clearly related to the history of polar exploration. At some point we conceived of the idea of a ‘place names of Franz Josef Land’ and had the audacity to think might rival that essential work of polar toponymy, *Place Names of Svalbard*, produced in several editions here in Norway by the Norsk Polarinstitut.

At the time we thought the whole effort might take about 30 days, since we were talking about no more than 300-400 place names. Little did we imagine that we would be here in Oslo, nearly 10 years later, with two articles published⁵ but still very much a long way to go before we

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⁴ About the author: P.J. Capelotti is professor of anthropology at Penn State University, Abington College. He is the author or editor of twenty books and his research has taken him several times to Svalbard and Franz Josef Land and twice to the North Pole. A retired Master Chief Petty Officer in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve, Capelotti was decorated by the Coast Guard with the Arctic Service Medal and twice with the Meritorious Service Medal.

⁵ See: P.J. Capelotti and Magnus Forsberg. 2014. “The Place Names of Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa: the Wellman polar expedition, 1898-1899.” *Polar Record* FirstView: doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0032247414000801> and: P.J. Capelotti and Magnus Forsberg. 2015. “The Place Names of Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa: Leigh Smith’s *Eira* expeditions, 1880 and 1881-82.” *Polar Record* 51(1): 16-23. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0032247413000429>.

have anything like a comprehensive database of the place names of Franz Josef Land, much less the history of the origins and connections with (and between) the various expeditions that explored the islands between their discovery in 1873 and the end of the Ziegler Polar Expedition in 1905.



Fig. 1. P.J. Capelotti at the grave of Bergljot Wellman, second wife of the American journalist-explorer Walter Wellman, at Vestre Gravlund, Oslo, Norway, 10 May 2015 (© Amanda Lockerby).

I started, as many of you know, some 30 years ago, to research and write the story of the American journalist-explorer Walter Wellman. That work eventually took me to Danskoya in Svalbard 22 years ago, and that eventually led me to Wellman's second expedition, which was staged in Franz Josef Land. Susan Barr was one of the few people at the time who had actually been to Franz Josef Land,⁶ and Andreas Umbreit had written of Franz Josef Land in his *Guide to Spitsbergen*.⁷ But to those of us who were neophytes in Svalbard two decades ago, Franz Josef Land was always a mysterious place even further east and north, one that almost no one visited because it was hidden behind the impenetrable Russian wall. And there it kept all of its secrets.

⁶ See: Susan Barr. 1991. Soviet-Norwegian Historical Expedition to Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa. *Polar Record* 27(163): 297-302. doi:10.1017/S003224740001305X.

⁷ See: Andreas Umbreit. 1991. *Guide to Spitsbergen*, 1st edition. Bradt Travel Guides.

Over the past twenty years, I have worked on and off to research each of the three American expedition to Franz Josef Land, beginning with Wellman's in 1898-99, continuing with the Baldwin-Ziegler expedition of 1901-02, and concluding with the Fiala-Ziegler expedition of 1903-05.⁸

But each time I got very far into that massive project I had to put the American project aside to deal with the British explorer who kept getting in the way, Benjamin Leigh Smith, who had he left his own set of place names in Franz Josef Land. There was quite an interesting time looking at some of those. We're still, I don't think quite certain, why Cape Flora was so named. We all assumed it was because of the flowers there, and because it's kind of the only green spot on the island.

But his great, great, great niece is convinced that it's named after Benjamin Leigh Smith's great aunt Flora. She was the wife of Valentine Smith, a person rich beyond the dreams of avarice in Victorian England, much richer than Leigh Smith himself, and who put forward the money to launch the rescue expedition of Leigh Smith after the *Eira* sank, off Cape Flora, in 1881.

After finally getting Leigh Smith off my plate three years ago,⁹ it was time finally to turn seriously to the Americans.

Americans, American history, and American polar history in particular, can be extremely problematic. This is nowhere more true than in Franz Josef Land, where three American expeditions spent seven years, all but aimlessly trying to reach the North Pole while spending larger and larger sums of money and throwing more and more people at that monumental problem in increasingly more futile effort to reach the Pole from Franz Josef Land.

However, in the process, they left behind a record of the American Gilded Age that has survived even 70 years of Soviet Communism. There are the names of American bankers on capes and islands and Franz Josef Land, who ... some of them wound up in prison at the end of their days for extortion and various financial malfeasance. But their names are still in Franz Josef Land, having survived the scrub by the Soviet communists and then the collapse of communism. It really is an extraordinary story of the survival of geographic place names in the face of every conceivable tide of history.

And now, of course, we once again have a very stressful relationship, between an attempted resurgent Russia and the West. In a sense, events have come full circle because now

⁸ See: P.J. Capelotti. 2016. *The Greatest Show in the Arctic: the American exploration of Franz Josef Land, 1898-1905*. American exploration & travel series, University of Oklahoma Press.

⁹ See: P.J. Capelotti. 2013. *Shipwreck at Cape Flora: The Expeditions of Benjamin Leigh Smith, England's Forgotten Arctic Explorer*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, Northern Lights Series. On-line at: <http://uofcpress.com/books/9781552387054>.

we have tours through Franz Josef Land, tours that cater to a sort of second Gilded Age of individuals able to afford these very expensive tours to what is still a very remote place.’

So that, in a nutshell, is the genesis of the project that Magnus and I began nearly a decade ago. He will talk about some of this work, but let me give you one example of the difficulty in this toponymic research. We had sorted through the Leigh Smith names and then tackled Walter Wellman, and we were very lucky to find some original archival information—in the archives of the National Air and Space Museum in Dulles, Virginia, of all places, which sounds unusual since Wellman's Franz Josef Land expedition was an land/over-ice expedition.

But of course these papers wound up at an aeronautical museum because of Wellman's later aeronautic expeditions. So the Franz Josef materials are basically lost there, because anyone looking for information about the Franz Josef Land expedition wouldn't think to look in an air museum. But that's where they are.

So we are here, in Oslo, talk about how we might approach a more global place names project, with all of the national expeditions from all these different countries. And we are supported here with funding from the Office of Office of Polar Programs at the National Science Foundation, which decided that such a workshop, one that includes our undergraduate students from Penn State University, is a worthwhile endeavor.

Over the next two days, we will begin a discussion leading towards an agenda to proceed with this project. And before we begin, I would like to mention two things.

The first is to show a potential model for a way forward in the work of David Rumsey and this is his website where he has been for years now adding historic charts from places all over the world. Rumsey is President of Cartography Associates, a digital publishing company based in San Francisco, which specializes in digital publishing, online library building, and software development. Rumsey has been collecting historical maps from the world over for decades, and this collection now amounts to more than 150,000 maps, of which more than 30,000 are on digitizes and on-line as the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection at www.davidrumsey.com. The site is free to the public and updated monthly.

Figure 2 is an example. This is, you may recognize it, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, from a 1931 map. What Mr. Rumsey has done scanned these and placed them online so that you can magnify them to incredibly fine levels of detail. As his website says:

“Here viewers have access not only to high resolution images of maps that are extensively cataloged, but also to a variety of tools that allow to users to compare, analyze, and view items in new and experimental ways.



Fig. 2. Cape Cod, by B. Ashburton Tripp (1931). Source: www.davidrumsey.com.

“Maps are uniquely suited to high-resolution scanning because of the large amount of detailed information they contain. In their original form, maps and atlases can be large, delicate, and unwieldy. Digitization increases their accessibility, and when combined with online catalogs, they can be searched in a variety of ways. The site allows public access to rare maps that have been hidden or available only to a few.

“Multiple maps from different time periods can be viewed side-by-side. Viewers can also create their own collections of maps that hold particular interest by saving groups of images. Complete cataloging data accompany each image, enabling in-depth searches of the collection.

“Materials created in America and that illustrate the evolution of the country's history, culture, and population distinguish the collection. Close inspection of the maps often reveals the growth and decline of towns, mining excavations, the unfolding of the railroads, and the “discovery” of the American West by European explorers. The collection also includes European imprints containing maps of the Americas that were influential to American cartographers, as

well as maps of other parts of the world distinguished by great craftsmanship, significance, and beauty.”¹⁰

So one avenue we should consider is a similar project for the whole range of historic maps and charts from Franz Josef Land in order to create a similar free and public Internet archive. Secondly, while we will have the chance to hear from my students later, and see the remarkable work they have done, I would like to point out one of them now, as it relates specifically to this issue of mapping and its accessibility.

When I was in Gothenburg in October, I had the great fortune to meet Tyrone Martinsson and see the incredible work that he's doing on the interplay between the past and present in visual and cartographic representations of Svalbard.¹¹ And the inspiration from that work led directly to Penn State art student Jacqueline Lanning's work that she has brought here.

Jackie took 24 large-scale charts of Franz Josef Land that Heddi Vaughan Siebel, an artist and descendent of one of the Americans from the Fiala expedition, had copied from the Harvard library and kindly made available to us. And you can see what Jackie has done: she's created the first large-scale mosaic of Franz Josef Land. This is a totally unique document, one of a kind. When it is finally printed at full-size, it will be some 8 feet tall and 14 feet wide.

So we are here in Oslo, in very real terms, not necessarily on account of anything Magnus and I have done, but because of the work of Jackie and her fellow students. And Oslo, as it always does, has welcomed us with open arms. It's a magnificent city and justly famed as the city of explorers. After we arrived on Saturday morning, we first visited the Kon-Tiki Museum, where Reidar Solsvik offered us a tour through the archives, where our students were able to see the original log book from the *Kon-Tiki* raft, as well as of course the raft itself.

The logbook, ironically, and I never knew this, was written in English. Even though Heyerdahl's grasp of English wasn't perfect at the time, he wrote the log in English because he had at least a sliver of doubt in his head whether they would survive. And if the raft was going to sink they were going to make sure that the logbook was wrapped and if anything was to be found, the logbook would be found, and it would be in English so that the whole world could understand why he had done what he had done. So this was the chance to see what few have seen: a truly unique and remarkable document and to hear about their progress in digitizing their entire archival collection.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.davidrumsey.com/about>

¹¹ See: Tyrone Martinsson. 2015. *Spitsbergen Past and Present*. University of Gothenburg: unpublished.

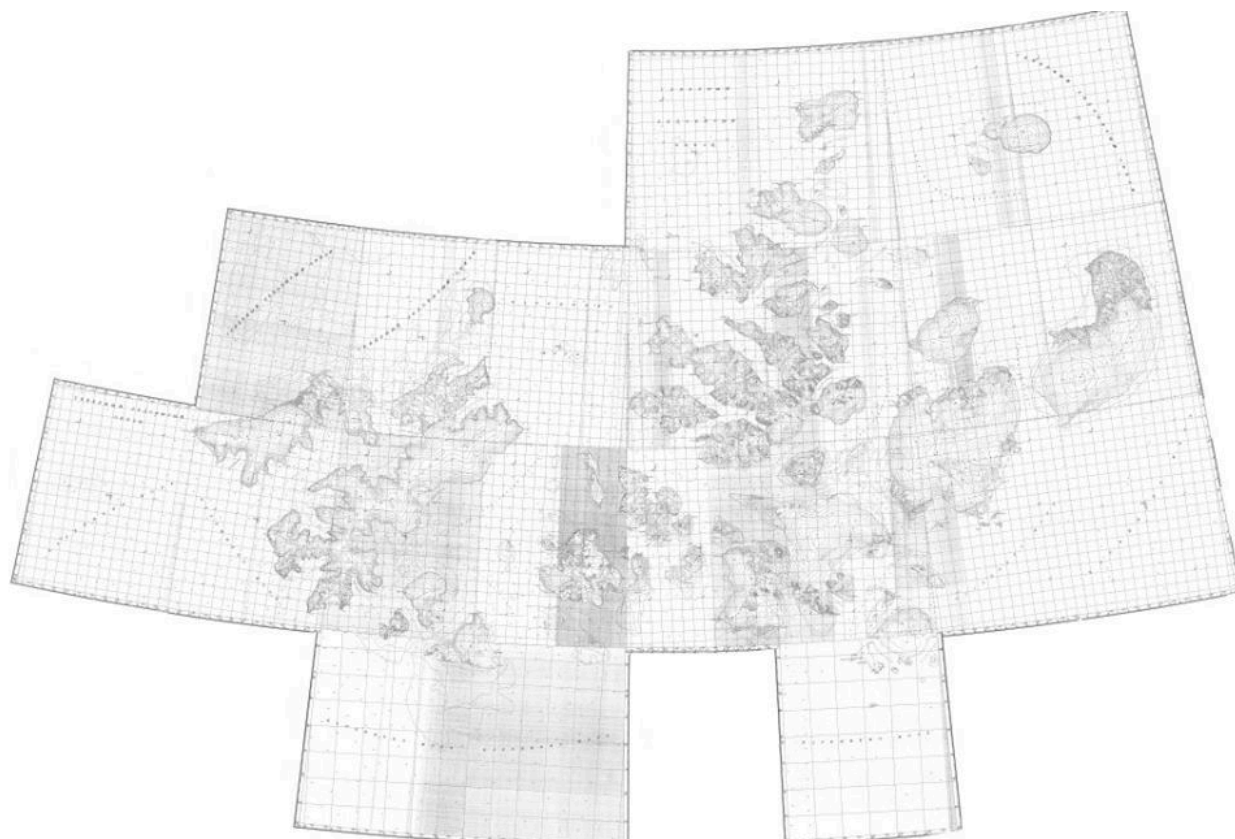


Fig. 3. Franz Josef Land, composite chart (© Jacqueline Lanning (2015)).

We then visited the Fram Museum and saw both the Fram and the Gjoa in its new home. We were absolutely impressed by the new work that's been done at the Fram Museum. The new exhibit text, much of it written by Susan Barr, is some of the freshest, most vibrant writing about polar history in years. It's just amazing, amazing work.

On Sunday, we were able to take advantage of the Munch-Van Gogh exhibit that just opened at the Munch Museet, which was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our students to see some of the greatest works of art in human history in one exhibit space.

In the afternoon, we fulfilled one of our other purposes in coming to Oslo, and that was a visit to Vestre Gravlund near Majorstua. There we tried, successfully as it turned out, to search for the grave of Walter Wellman's second wife and widow, the Norwegian woman Bergljot Bergersen (see Figure 1). Wellman died in 1934. All that his descendants remember is that he was cremated. They don't know where his ashes were placed, whether they're in a formal grave or were simply scattered somewhere.



Fig. 4. Penn State student Alejandro Cruz with Penn State Associate Professor of Biology and Oslo trip chaperone, Dr. C.L. Devlin, on board the *Fram* at the Fram Museum, 9 May 2015 (© Amanda Lockerby).

Wellman was 74 when he died, his Norwegian wife about 20 years younger, though she herself passed away just a few years later, in 1938, and she was laid to rest right here in Oslo. We wanted to find her, and also thought that because Wellman died in 1934 and was cremated, that there might be an off chance that she might have taken his ashes to Norway with her and that we might find his name on this stone.

We did find the grave, however you can see that the obelisk that's supposed to sit on top of this marker has toppled and it's sitting by the side of it. There's nothing on the three sides except a small Germanic cross. We chose not to try to roll it over, as Anders Larsson informs us that such markers are often deliberately taken down by graveyard authorities for precisely the reason that they have fallen or turned over and killed or injured people.

But we had nevertheless found a direct connection between Norway and the United because of the American exploration of the Arctic. And there are others that involve the direct connections between American polar explorers and their contemporaries in both Norway and Sweden. As Anders Larsson also told us, Eivind Astrup is also buried in Oslo and Evelyn Briggs Baldwin visited his grave here while he was on his way to Spitsbergen in 1897.

This was Baldwin's self-described epic expedition to race to reach the basket of the Swedish balloon expedition in July of 1897 so he could accompany Salomon Andrée to the North Pole. This was an event that existed only in Baldwin's mind. And it gained in importance the older that he got. With each retelling Baldwin's story became more elaborate, and his time between his arrival at Virgohamn and the departure of the balloon became shorter and shorter, until in the end he was only minutes late for the departure of the balloon, when in fact Magnus Forsberg and Anders Larsson has pinned Baldwin's arrival at the launch site to no earlier than two weeks later.

There is in fact a fascinating and brief series of letters at the Library of Congress that has Baldwin pleading with Andrée to let him on the expedition, Andrée's very terse replies, basically saying "We have no room. It's a Swedish expedition. Go away." And Baldwin continuing to say, but I would be really good on this expedition, and Andrée finally writing very curtly, "I'm sorry, sir, to say that there is no room in the basket." Baldwin mutated this exchange in future years to mean that if only for a little bit more space in the basket he would have been on the doomed expedition, which was never even a remote possibility.



Fig. 5. The Penn State University group at Uranienborg in Oppegård, Norway, 11 May 2015
(© Dr. C.L. Devlin).

Yesterday, through the kind efforts of Henrik Smith, we were able to visit Uranienborg, the home of Roald Amundsen that has been left close to how it was when he flew to the rescue of Umberto Nobile in 1928 and was lost.

Randi, the lovely woman who lives adjacent to the home, has been leading tours of the home for 43 years. And so we met Captain Amundsen (Fig. 5) and then drove to nearby Oppegård kirke. We had especially looked forward to these two visits as the students had watched the entire series “The Last Place on Earth,” several scenes of which had been filmed at the home and the church graveyard, had read much of the screenplay from the film, as well as the article that Susan Barr and I had published in *Polar Record* on this graveyard scene.¹²

¹² See: P.J. Capelotti and Susan Barr. 2014. “Oppegård kirke, Oppegård, Norway: fixing the location where Roald Amundsen revealed his ‘minor diversion.’” *Polar Record* 50(2): 222-224.