

TRACING YOUR DANISH ROOTS: ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR BEGINNING GENEALOGISTS

Jill Morelli, CG,[®] CGL

jkmorelli@gmail.com

<http://genealogycertification.wordpress.com>

<http://theCDGseries.wordpress.com>

<https://appliedgen.institute>

Are you an intermediate genealogist, but a beginner in your Danish research? The goal of this presentation is to alert you to some basic skills needed for Danish research; illustrate accessing the various online resources for Danish parish, and to arm you with strategies for challenges you will face. Hopefully, we will also relieve any angst you may have about using international records. Armed with the parish name and facts gathered in the United States of your Dane, you can usually access the original parish records and start your journey—even if the individual was named Christian Christensen!

Work begins in the United States -- by discovering as much information about the immigrant and his/her family using the documents, artifacts and stories.

The strategy is to assemble all known data points of the U.S. family, including siblings and other relatives (the immigrant's FAN Club¹), and compare and correlate with likely families in Denmark. If there is a reasonable correlation, then there is a high probability that you have identified the correct person. Because Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries had limited numbers of given names and used patronymic naming practices, the misidentification of someone with the "same name" must be guarded against, especially if the name is Christian!

The basic skills or information needed by the Danish researcher include:

- Knowing your ancestor's birth parish
- Knowing a few words of Danish
- Understanding Danish patronymic naming practices
- Studying the FamilySearch Wiki for Denmark/county/parish of interest
- Knowing the unique letters and how to type them
- Familiarizing yourself with the names and locations of the villages/farms in your parish
- Most importantly---a willingness to plunge in!!

We will focus on parish birth, marriage, and death (BMD) records, but other records are also available, e.g. census, military rolls, and probate records. These other records can span gaps in parish records, provide direct and indirect evidence or negative evidence, add background context to your interpretation of the documents, clarity to your ancestor's decision making and build your ancestor's story. Generally, Danish records are complete and with a little patience you can trace your Danish ancestors into the early 1700s!

¹ Elisabeth Shown Mills, "Quicksheet: The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (The FAN Principle)," (Baltimore : Genealogical Publishing, Co., 2012).



DENMARK

The Danish national archives or *Rigsarkivet* has the most complete set of records—online or not. Access to these records is free but the BMD records are not indexed.² The collections of records held by *Ancestry*, *FamilySearch* and *My Heritage* can be limited in their years and geographic areas covered and/or the type of record, but are indexed. Use the country-wide indexes of *Ancestry*, *FamilySearch* and *My Heritage* to find your individual's parish. The Rigsarkivet provides a (unforgiving) census index, which may be helpful to find the parish of birth if other options fail.

Tip: Search in all three indexes. The collection of records of *FamilySearch* is shared with *Ancestry* but their search engines (algorithm) are different. *MyHeritage* has a unique index and search engine. Each will give you a different results. One may be more accurate than another.

Read about the collection in *Ancestry* and *FamilySearch* before trying to find your ancestor. This will help determine if they even are indexed and/or imaged for your location.

Tip: Once the record date and parish are located, use the National Archives site for finding your ancestor in the original record. This is now preferred as the archivists are re-digitizing the records in color and they are more readable!

MAKING UNIQUE LETTERS

Each computer system has a symbol dictionary or a special character map, which includes the unique letters of the Danish alphabet. If using a Danish site, you must use the proper letter and remember that all of these special letters come at the end of the alphabet. You cannot expect to find the name “Søren” in a Danish site. In a list, Søren will be after Suhm in an alphabetical list, not before.

Tip: *FamilySearch*, *Ancestry* and *MyHeritage* ignore these special letters in their index.

Tip: For MAC users: to make the unique letters, hold down the “English” letter and your options will appear. For PC users, memorize the number combinations for the letters and/or prepare a “cheat sheet”.

NAMING PRACTICES

Naming practices have evolved over time in Denmark and are similar to all of Scandinavia with slight, but important, variations. In the earliest records and when populations were small, the pastor may have recorded the events of individuals only by their given names. By the 1700s, too many same named people populated the parish and it was impractical. The pastors began identifying the person by the given name of the father. Thus, Neils, the son of Jacob Christensen, would NOT be called Neils Christensen, but rather Neils Jacobsen. This method, called patronymic naming, allows us to identify the given name of the father, sometimes a very valuable clue. The wealthy, urban dwellers and tradespeople adopted true surnames earlier than the rural population.

² The DDD index that exists for census, probate and emigrants is not a “fuzzy” search, making it necessary to spell (and abbreviate) exactly like the enumerator. I have still included the URL at the end of this syllabus.

Women usually kept their birth names throughout their lives, until around 1900, when some women adopted their husband's name as a true surname.

Tip: If suddenly your ancestor is not on the farm you expect (census), check the Moving in/Moving out records. These are very helpful in tracing the movement of your person of interest from farm to farm and can fill in the gap when the censuses are widely spaced.

Tip: First, in the Wiki, copy/Paste the Place Names (farms) from your parish. This will help you with identification and spelling. Second, print/download the attachment of Gothic letters from "The Swedish Genealogy Guide" (under Learning Center). (See Resources)

VOCABULARY

You will find that recognizing approximately 100 words will enhance your understanding of the records. Your Danish vocabulary should include the ones listed on the next table, and also, numbers, locations, governmental jurisdictions, relationships, illnesses and occupations. The FamilySearch Wiki is very helpful and gives you a word list of genealogical terms. It can also help with translating a Feast Day into a Gregorian calendar date.

Tip: Be prepared for abbreviations and a variety of spellings of farm and individual names in the parish records. Each pastor had their own conventions.

Table 1
Common Danish Genealogical Terms

	Danish
Birth	<u>Fødsel</u>
Christening	<u>Døbt</u>
Marriage	<u>Copulerede</u>
Death	<u>Døde</u>
Illegitimate	<u>Uægte</u>
Witness	<u>Fadder</u>
Coming into the parish	<u>Tilgang</u>
Leaving the parish	<u>Afgang</u>



Danish Censuses (not covered in presentation)

Denmark has a large number of genealogically useful censuses. The most helpful early Danish censuses were taken in the summer of 1787, 1801, and 1834. Beginning in 1840, a census was taken every five years until 1860. After 1860, the census was taken every ten years until the end of the century. Some censuses were conducted on a district level. Check the FS Wiki for these out-

of-sequence censuses. Some will not be a recording of names and will be of limited use. Starting with the 1845 census, the birth location was recorded.

The path to the Archives is a little convoluted so I have included the path here, where YYYY indicates the year of the census you desire:

Rigsarkivet: (free, color images) <https://soeg.rigsarkivet.dk> > Census lists > tab at top *Folketællinger* > *Folketælling* > “*Folketælling* YYYY, ***Landdistriker*** YYYY-YYYY” > Insert your *Amt* [county of interest] and *Sogn* [parish of interest] > hyperlinked description below. Be prepared to scroll, but rural parishes are small record sets.

Tip: When the writing is particularly difficult to read (it will get easier with practice), instead of looking for the name, look for the year of birth of your ancestor. The numbers are sometimes easier to read.

CHALLENGES & STRATEGIES

The challenges of Danish records are not too different from that of other countries as well as the United States.

Record Context: Understanding the context of the record set and the ethnic group is important. If we understand the way it is “supposed to be,” we will be able to identify when it isn’t. If ignored, we will either miss something or include something that isn’t true. Broad context is best defined by example,

“When planning research, genealogists consider historical boundaries and their changes, migration patterns and routes, and sources available for potentially relevant times and places. They also consider economic, ethnic, genetic, governmental, historical, legal, linguistic, military, paleographic, religious, social and other factors that could affect the research plan and scope.”³

Strategy: Know and understand the broad context first before pursuing of your ancestor. Read the Wiki about your location; gather historical information, understand patronymic naming, etc. By understanding broad context you will be able to interpret the records more accurately and gain a better understanding of the motivations of your ancestor.

Multiple same-named individuals in parish: The patronymic naming practices relies on given names, which are historically few in number. This results with many same-named, but unrelated, individuals. It is very easy to “pick” the wrong ancestor.

Strategy: It is important to recognize this issue at the onset of decision-making. Do not dismiss likely candidates, but instead research all as if they were the correct person until you discover they aren’t. Only when the facts clearly do not align can you dismiss that person. Elimination of candidate is more accurate than just picking one.

FAN Club research is also an important tool for elimination of candidates. For Danes witnesses at weddings and baptisms are often close relatives, even fathers of the parents.

³ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, Second Edition, Revised (Nashville: Ancestry.com, 2021) 12.

Emigrated alone; no FAN Club: This is a common problem that can make it difficult to identify the parish of birth. Because of patronymic naming practices there are often last name changes upon arrival in the U.S. If they emigrated alone, we are often missing that first layer of the FAN Club—the family. We have to expand to the next layer of associates. Others from the same village on the passenger manifest, members of a common ethnic club, witnesses to births and marriages, people who owed him money or to whom he owed money are all identifiers that can make your person unique.

Strategy: If the emigration index does not help (remember, most Danes left from Copenhagen), you must make some inferences. Why did your emigrant settle where he did? He probably knew someone, joined the same club and even went to the same church. Read your records carefully. Sometimes those other boarders in the house are from the same parish.

Difficult to read original: This is a common issue with all older record sets. Look first for an index. Do an overview of the organization to understand how the pastor organized his entries.

Strategy: Ask for help, but not before you have tried! Check in with the Danish Genealogy Facebook page. They are very helpful. Read the postings of others asking for translation help to broaden your reading and translation skills.

Moved around: Yes, they did. Young men from the time they became confirmed until they married (c. 10 years) often moved as seasonal workers from parish to parish. Young single women usually stayed with their families, but poor women move to seasonal work regularly, leaving their children in foster care.

Strategy: Follow the moving in and out records carefully. Every move; every time. This is especially important to identify if the individual married or had children in another parish.

Gaps in the records: Gaps in records can occur for many reasons. If there is a gap in the records and the culture is following patronymic naming practices, you may not be able to bridge the gap. The issue: which of the many Christians in the parish is the father of your ancestor born in the gap?

Strategy: This is where the FAN Club can help...witnesses to births and marriage can provide clues, as these were often family members. You may have to rely on other record sets (military, probate) to provide indirect evidence of parents. Construct a timeline of your ancestor's life to see the gaps and conflicts.

Damaged record sets: Usually prevalent in older record sets.

Strategy: We need to identify if other record sets are available. Sometimes there are and sometimes we just run out of records.

It may appear confusing at first but you can do it!

RESOURCES (URLs checked in December 2024)

1. *My Heritage*: <http://myheritage.com> (\$, selected index & images) Research > Collection catalog > “Denmark” > select your record choice. Selected index; not all parishes.
2. *FamilySearch*: <https://familysearch.org> (free, selected index & images): Search > catalog > “Denmark” > Church Records-Indexes or censuses > browse or insert name if prompted
3. *Ancestry*: . <https://www.ancestry.com> (\$, World edition, selected indexes and images; free at affiliate and FHCs): Catalog > Denmark > select your record choice > browse or insert name etc.
4. *Rigsarkivet* (must have parish and county to enter records)
 - Parish records (free, many color images, recently filmed): <https://soeg.rigsarkivet.dk> > Kirkebøger > “*Kirkebøger fra hellet landet*” (3rd section, for rural parishes) > Insert your *Amt* [county of interest] and *Sogn* [parish of interest] > Click on data set desired > Click on years of interest and type of record.
 - Dansk Demografisk Database (DDD): <https://soeg.rigsarkivet.dk> > “Dansk Demografisk Database” (tab at top) > (click on English button) Censuses (Go to database) > multiple search engines. Select Advanced Search first. Good for censuses, probate and emigrants.

Tip: Be prepared to use * in your searches to replace multiple letters when you can. Use minimal information and then add back to narrow your search. Who knows if that person was indexed as Christen, Chr., Xtn, Christian or Kristen, etc.? An asterisk is not successful on the DDD site.

Tip: “Danish American Genealogy” has a Facebook page with volunteers who are willing to help with record translations. There are three other FB pages related to Denmark as well. (I usually pick the Facebook page with the most people who belong to the group.)

OTHER RESOURCES

FamilySearch Wiki: “Denmark Genealogy”

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Denmark_Genealogy

check out the links to other informative pages.

Juengling, Fritz. “Beginning Danish Genealogy.” *Legacy Family Tree Webinars*

<https://familytreewebinars.com/index.php> Excellent but a little dated.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. *Quicksheet: Guide to Cluster Research (The FAN Principle.)*

Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 2012.

Morris, Geoff, *The Swedish Genealogy Guide*, “Learning Center” (has the Gothic script cheat sheet and short videos of how to read the script—highly recommended).

<https://swedishgenealogyguide.com>

Sanders, Kirsten, “Introduction to Genealogical Research in Denmark,”

<https://slaegt.dk/media/5vjfcdut/genealogy-in-denmark2.pdf>