

Researching Scandinavian Ancestors

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Researching Scandinavian ancestors can be rewarding and challenging. We start in U.S. records to identify our ancestor's birthplace. We persevere when our ancestor hides in passenger lists. We use the multiple research aides available to locate the records and understand what they say.

Now is an exciting time to research Scandinavian Ancestors. While success is probable, it may be difficult to locate an immigrant in foreign records. Several obstacles may impact our success:

- Our ancestor's name is not so unique
- We have to adapt to their surname pattern
- Major cities were claimed as birth places
- Scandinavian countries kept their records differently than the U.S.
- Foreign records may be in multiple languages
- Borders change
- Place names change

Now is also the easiest time to research our Scandinavian ancestor:

- New indexes to these records continue to be released
- Record images are available online
- Genealogy education is more accessible
- Special interest groups are prevalent

Understanding Names

Given Names: A small set of given names were used. A naming pattern is prevalent, especially before 1850. The pattern varies slightly for each country. Children are named after their grandparents, aunts and uncles. After remarriage, the first child of the same sex as the deceased spouse might be named after the previous spouse. Two children with the same first name *could* indicate that the first child died. Look in confirmation records or death and burial records to confirm whether this is the case.

Surnames: Surnames fall into 5 general types: patronymic, occupational, characteristic, geographical or soldier. Patronymic surnames are the most prevalent. A Scandinavian takes the father's name and adds son or daughter as a suffix. Because your ancestor used his or her father's name as their surname, it changes with each generation.

Patronymic surnames may be combined with a geographical surname. Geographic surnames may change if the individual changes residence. Occupational and characteristic surnames may have been changed to the English equivalent after immigration. The soldier surname may have been used the rest of his life or he may have reverted to the patronymic.

In the early 1900s laws went into effect requiring a fixed surname such as is prevalent in the United States. Before the law, this change began to take place in the cities around 1850 and in the rural areas around the 1870s. Some families still used the patronymic surname pattern up until the law went into effect.

Women typically used their maiden surname throughout their life. This pattern may have continued in the church records created in the United States.

Understanding Places

Each Scandinavian country is divided into counties. Counties are divided into civil districts. These districts are then divided into parishes. In Norway, the district can be called home parishes with the smaller parishes called annex parishes. It is important to identify the parish because most of the records of genealogical value were created at the parish level. Sweden is also divided into provinces based on cultural differences. No records were kept at the provincial level.

Just as we might tell someone we are from the Kansas City area, our ancestors might have indicated they were from Oslo, Stockholm, or Copenhagen. If your ancestor's records list a major city, be prepared to branch out to the surrounding area.

U.S. Records

Before jumping into Scandinavian records, create a clear picture of your immigrant in the U.S. While most of these records will only list the country of origin, the clue to unlocking their foreign identity is hiding somewhere in their U.S. records.

Start by analyzing what you have and interviewing relatives. Then, collect as much information about the individual's immigration and birth place in the following records, if they exist:

Death records	Obituaries	Census records – federal
Marriage records	Homestead applications	Census records – state
Church records	Naturalization petition	Passport applications
Social Security application	Draft registrations	Alien registrations
Online family trees	First land purchase	County histories

Analyze the information found, note conflicts, and write it up. Create tables of names, birthdates, birth places, and occupations discovered. Knowing what information came from which record is important. Cite the sources.

Develop a list of family members and others who appear in these U.S. records. It will help differentiate your ancestor from others with the same name. Sometimes researching U.S. records for the immigrant's people may be necessary to uncover enough information to be able to search the foreign records.

DNA testing may help locate foreign cousins still living in the ancestral area.

Passenger Lists

Unless you have already discovered a record that specifies your immigrant's arrival in exact details, do not start with passenger lists. Build a foundation for success with other U.S. records first. Departure records may contain a more exact location.

Passenger lists may have been created for the port of arrival and the port of departure. Both record sets should be checked. The arrival record in the U.S. usually lists a country of origin.

An immigrant did not change their name on the boat. The same ship employee prepared the two lists. Immigrants were given the opportunity to change their name at naturalization. Over time in the U.S., the immigrants may have changed to the English variations of their name or dropped foreign endings.

If an ancestor is difficult to find in the indexes:

- Do not narrow search to a specific port, day, and ship
- Add or narrow search fields depending on the number of hits
- Try alternate spellings for both the first and last names
- Try translating each name
- Add a wild card to the end of the name
- Try the farm name, their patronymic surname or their father's patronymic
- Because collection content varies, search a different websites
- Because handwriting can be hard to read, look at results where one fact is "wrong"
- Your Scandinavian may have arrived through Canada, check border crossing records

Most immigrants prior to the U.S. Civil War traveled in large groups from specific communities and settled as a group within the U.S. or what became the U. S. Researching the history of the area they settled will be critical to identifying an overseas location. There may be published passenger lists with ship information inside these histories.

Overcoming the Language Barrier

Foreign records are written in the language of that country or the country that ruled it. Know the overall history of your ancestor's county. Earlier records may be in Latin. Use genealogical word lists and foreign language dictionaries. Finish records may be in Swedish. Old Norwegian may be more similar to Danish than modern Norwegian.

In the Scandinavian languages, V and W are interchangeable and alphabetized as the same letter. J and I are also interchangeable. These languages have additional letters in their alphabets. The Danish and Norwegian alphabets add 3 vowels: Æ æ, Ø ø, and Å å. The Finnish and Swedish alphabets add Ä ä, and Ö ö as vowels. These additional letters are alphabetized at the end of the alphabet. Østfold follows Vestfold.

Printed forms make interpreting these records easier. Even in journal format, a pattern is discernable for the information included and the order in which it was recorded. Once you have interpreted a baptismal record for your parish, other baptismal records become easier to interpret. Look for record heading translations online or in how-to book to make this task easier.

Wikis, How-to Books, and Education

Search the [Family Search Research Wiki](#) for your country and “genealogy.” There will be links to record types, country background, and getting started. Country pages include maps of counties. The counties and parishes have their own wiki pages. Maps of parishes are on the county pages. The FamilySearch wiki also has genealogical word lists and record collection information. [Wikipedia](#) will suggest alternatives when trying to find a foreign place name that has been Americanized. So will Google.

A good how-to book for your ancestor’s country of origin is a must. The older ones have been digitized under FamilySearch Books. The How-to will have information on the record types for your country, how the records are organized, and other helpful information.

YouTube videos, Family Tree Webinars, podcasts, and RootsTech recorded session are available to augment your genealogical education. Facebook pages allow for crowd sourcing of specific questions. A genealogy society in the United States may have a virtual special interest group that specializes in your ancestor’s homeland.

Dictionaries, translators, & genealogical word lists are useful tools for using foreign records. Do not expect these resources to be perfect. When a translated word makes no sense, try translating a few words as a phrase. Online language apps are helpful for getting a feel for the language but will not teach you the genealogical words.

Foreign Resources

Foreign countries have national archives, national libraries, national genealogical societies and national historical societies. Regional, county-wide, and local repositories also exist. These entities may have online finding aids, indexes, digital images, and/or house the original records. Access to their websites may be free or by subscription. English translations may be available. Google will prompt to translate foreign language pages.

Foreign Records

Foreign genealogical records are somewhat similar to U.S. records. There are census records, court records, land records, newspapers, probate records and tax lists. Court, land, and probate records are available. Because of the legal language included in these documents, they are harder to use. Before attempting to use these record sets in Scandinavia become experience with them in the U.S. Relationship identifiers were more flexible prior to the 20th century. A brother and a brother-in-law were the same under the law. They both may be listed as brother

The major difference is the importance of church records. With a state church, the church was responsible for keeping the vital records. In these countries you were born a Lutheran. Scandinavian church records started being kept in the 1600s. Most of the

records still exist from the 1700s. The earlier records were typically kept in journal format. Combined registers with handwritten columns came next. Then preprinted record specific registers were used.

Depending on the time and country, other religions may have been legally recognized. These are called nonconformists. Nonconformists births, marriages, and deaths may be recorded in the Lutheran church records.

Record Types

Births & Baptisms: Also known as christenings. Within the first 6 months of life and sometimes on the day of birth, a Scandinavian was baptized. Parents and witnesses are usually listed. When only one date is listed assume it was the baptismal not the birth date. A lack of witnesses usually indicates a non-Lutheran record of birth.

Confirmations: A course of religious study that qualified one to take communion usually occurred between the ages of 14 and 20. Typically all siblings were confirmed at the same age. This could be a family pattern or a pattern in that parish.

Banns & Marriages: Posting of the banns before marriage was an expected tradition and will be listed in the marriage records or as a separate record.

Deaths & Burials: Assume only one date is the burial date. Early records may not list the individual's name only the head of house and their relationship.

Moving Records: When a Scandinavian moved from one parish to another, he received a certificate from his local minister showing the individual's or families' vital information, their standing in the church and other information. This certificate would then be presented to the local minister in the new parish. Each minister would record this event in their church registers.

Civil Registration: Civil registration began when a governmental entity took responsibility for maintaining the vital records or collecting the information from the local churches. Sweden began civil registration in 1860, Norway began in 1906, and Denmark in 1924. Copenhagen, Denmark began much earlier.

Census records: Scandinavian countries took populations census. Years taken, information asked, and current availability varies. Search the Family Search Wiki or a how-to book for the details.

Military records: They vary by country. This is the record group where online records and indexes are expanding the most.

The Danish military rolls are of note. They were taken at the parish level and list all eligible males to age 44. Some start at birth, others at 14, and yet others at 17. Each male was assigned a serial number that stayed with him throughout the rolls for that parish. When a man changed parishes, the military roll should list the parish he moved into. The new parish roll should also list the parish he moved from. The serial number did not follow the soldier nor was he added at the end of the list. He was placed into an open number anywhere on the list.

Bygdebøker: These farm histories are available for many locations in Norway and some of them are rich with genealogical information. Most of these are available as digital images from FamilySearch.

Household Examination Records: Aka Clerical Surveys. They are specific to Sweden and Finland and similar to a yearly census. At least once a year, the pastor was required to make a listing of everyone living in the parish and include such information as birth date, residence, and if they had taken communion. Births, deaths, marriages and moves during that year were to be recorded. Most of these records cover 5 to 10 years.

Vaccinations: These were for small pox vaccinations. These lists are prevalent in Denmark.

Accessing the Records

What indexes and records are available is constantly changing. To keep up to date, check the [FamilySearch Wiki](#) for listing of online records. Search the country and “Online Genealogy Records.” It has links to indexes and images on FamilySearch, Ancestry, MyHeritage, and FindMyPast. Links are also included to archives, libraries, and subscription websites with records of interest.

FamilySearch Catalog: It is still a viable option to access the records. Use the place search to determine what is available for your parish of interest. The notes section will include links to indexes and online records outside the catalog for this location.

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