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The Founding of Danish America

by J. R. Christianson

If I were to address an audience of Norwegian Americans and ask them when Norwegian emigration to America began, many would answer without hesitation, "in 1825." Some would even say, "the fourth of July 1825," which was the date when the sloop, *Restaurationen*, sailed out of Stavanger harbor with fifty-three emigrants bound for the New World. I know this is true because I have frequently addressed Norwegian-American audiences and have always received this same answer. The voyage of the *Restaurationen* is well established as the beginning of Norwegian mass emigration to America.

If I were to address an audience of Swedish Americans and ask them when their emigration began, they would also have a ready answer. It would be, "in the year 1638." Some would be able to name the two ships that sailed into Delaware Bay under Governor Peter Minuit and laid claim to lands that became the crown colony of New Sweden. Swedes in America, like Norwegian Americans, have a well-established concept of their group's American origins.

Danish Americans, however, do not. If there was a crucial event that triggered the movement of hundreds of thousands of Danes to new homes across the North Atlantic, people do not seem to have a clear sense of what it was. If there was a specific ship and voyage that led the way in the great trans-oceanic migration from Denmark to the new world, Danish Americans do not seem to be aware of it.

Over the course of a century, many historians have delved into the origins of Danish-American migration. One of the first was Peter Sørensen Vig, who wrestled with the question of what touched it off in the first volume of an immense, two-volume work, *Danske i Amerika* (Danes in America), published in 1908. Vig concluded that the decade of the 1840's was the key, because that was when Danish *rural* emigration began, and rural emigration had the potential to swell into a mass movement. He probed the cause and decided that rural emigration was stimulated by the activities of lay preachers: Lutherans in the 1830's and 1840's, Baptists as well from around
1840, and Mormons from around 1850. The most influential of these lay preachers, according to Vig, was Rasmus Sørensen, a farmer's son who rose to national prominence as a spokesman for farmers' rights, began writing about emigration in the mid-1840's, later sat in the Danish parliament, founded the first folk school in Denmark proper (Uldum 1848), and finally, in 1852, emigrated to America himself and urged others to do so.7 "[T]here is no doubt," wrote Vig, "that he was really the one who woke the Danish crofter class and the rural working class to an awareness of America and the possibilities that it held out to those who were not afraid to seize them."8 A second hero of Vig's was Claus Lauritz Clausen, a lay preacher who emigrated to America with his bride in 1843 and became a prominent Scandinavian-American leader.9 Vig also tried to locate the first Danish settlements in America and found that they were established in Wisconsin during the 1840's at Hartland (Pine Lake) in Waukesha County, New Denmark in Brown County, around Neenah, and in the Lake Michigan ports of Milwaukee and Kenosha.

Later historians presented an alternative view. Twenty years after Vig, Thomas P. Christensen published his Dansk Amerikansk Historie (Danish American History, 1927). He did not mention lay preachers, nor did he emphasize the 1840's. Instead, Christensen described the Mormon exodus, beginning in 1852, and the flight of Germans from Schleswig-Holstein after the war of 1848-51 as the first waves of Danish emigration, though he did not show how either related to the surge of emigration that followed.10 Christensen also got into a bit of trouble when he divided the settlement era into two phases, Kongstiden (The Time of Kings) 1845-85, when strong individuals or "kings" took the lead in founding settlements, and Kirketiden (The Church Time), 1885-1925, when Lutheran church organizations founded new settlements: This categorization failed to include the Baptist and Mormon "church times" of the 1850's.11 On the other hand, Christensen was on firm ground when he claimed that Danish-American colonies were established to "hinder a rapid Americanization of the immigrant" and also when he described how daughter colonies were established on the moving frontier by immigrants who went out from the older settlements.12 He pointed out, however, that only a quarter of all Danish immigrants joined
identifiable Danish-American churches, and even fewer settled in colonies. Danish immigrants scattered far and wide across the country and frequently intermarried with other groups, which served to speed up their acculturation and assimilation, in his opinion.13

Half a century later, George R. Nielsen wrote what remains the most complete survey of the Danish-American experience in English.14 Nielsen followed Christensen in beginning his account of migration and settlement with the Mormons of the 1850’s, returning in a subsequent chapter to the earlier Danish settlements in Wisconsin.15 He said that the Danes who settled in Wisconsin were “the first of the non-Mormon Danes who started a chain of migration.”16 Actually, however, his own evidence indicated that they were the very first, since he dated the Hartland, Wisconsin, settlement to 1846 and Mormon emigration to 1852.17

The lines were now drawn among historians: the 1840’s versus the 1850’s. Did Danish emigration begin in the 1840’s, set in motion by the rural agitation of Lutheran lay preachers, or did it begin the 1850’s with the emigration of Mormons? Both choices seemed to be based on the premise that religious discontent played a key role in starting Danish emigration, and there was general agreement that emigration was self-accelerating, through the process of chain migration, once it got going.

Vig, Christensen, and Nielsen all wrote from the American side of the Atlantic, but in 1971, a powerful voice joined the debate from the Danish side. This was the voice of Kristian Hvidt.18 He was a pioneer in the application of computerized data analysis to historical studies, and his 500-page book on Danish emigration had a tremendous impact on the field. Hvidt’s database covered the period 1868-1914, so he had relatively little to say about the beginnings of Danish emigration in the 1840’s and 1850’s. He did agree, however, that religion was extremely important in Danish emigration, and he thought that Denmark may have had the highest percentage of religiously motivated emigration in Europe.19 He emphasized in particular the role of two lay preachers, Vig’s old hero, Rasmus Sørensen, and a later leader, Mogens Abraham Sommer, both of whom promoted emigration and escorted many emigrant groups to America.20 Hvidt noted that most Danish
emigration prior to 1865 was in large escorted groups, and he thought that Sommer in particular must have influenced thousands to emigrate.\footnote{21} Baptists and Mormons also emigrated in organized, guided groups, and Hvidt considered the Mormons to be especially well-organized in this respect.\footnote{22}

Migration studies have flourished in Denmark ever since the time of Hvidt's book. Erik Helmer Pedersen trained many emigration scholars at the University of Copenhagen, and in 1985, he published a handsomely illustrated book entitled Drømmen om Amerika (The Dream of America).\footnote{23} Helmer Pedersen gave particular emphasis to two factors in the early emigration from Denmark. He said that letters from America, both private and published, were what finally made ordinary Danes aware of America as a goal for emigrants, and that they found letters to be especially persuasive if they knew the letter-writer personally. He added that the pull of these letters was augmented by an awareness of earlier Norwegian mass emigration.\footnote{24}

Helmer Pedersen followed the pull of letters into specific regions of Denmark. He claimed that letters from C. L. Clausen explained the early emigration from Langeland, where Clausen had many friends. Moreover, letters from L. J. Fribert, the first Dane in Hartland, Wisconsin, attracted a man named Christian Ludvig Christensen to Hartland in 1846, and Christensen's letters attracted many later emigrants from his native part of Lolland.

In 1847, Fribert published the first guidebook to America written by a Dane. The book touched off a flurry of discussion in the form of pamphlets and newspaper articles written by Christensen, Clausen, and Rasmus Sørensen and published in Denmark. "[T]he resulting polemics in the press," wrote Helmer Pedersen, "put the question of emigration on the [Danish] public agenda."\footnote{25} In 1852, Rasmus Sørensen emigrated himself, and he soon came back to Denmark to lead large groups of emigrants to America. These early immigrants to the rural Midwest were especially fortunate, said Helmer Pedersen, because they came to the right place at the right time. "Land was incredibly cheap by European standards, and wages were simply princely."\footnote{26}

The next major study of Danish immigration was by Torben Grøngaard Jeppesen, who shifted from the big picture of Hvidt and Helmer Pedersen to examine in depth how a single settlement was
established. His book threw much new light on the beginnings of important Danish-American settlements. Grønngaard Jeppesen began his study in the vicinity of Hartland in Waukesha County, Wisconsin. He showed how this settlement had its origins in a small group of educated, middle-class Swedes who settled around Pine Lake in 1841 and were joined in 1843-46 by Danes and Norwegians with similar backgrounds. Among them were many who became well-known publicists of emigration, including Gustav Unonius, L. J. Friibert, C. L. Christensen, and Rasmus Sørensen, whose son, Martin, came there in 1844. Consequently, the pull of this community upon later immigrants was very strong.

Lars and Marie Hannibal from Nysted, Lolland, were among those who arrived a decade later. They came to Hartland in 1856. As immigrants continued to arrive, Hannibal got the idea of establishing a new colony on the frontier, where poor immigrant crofters (husmænd) from Denmark could acquire land and live together in a community of their countrymen. M. C. Pedersen established the West Denmark colony in Polk County, Wisconsin, around the same time for similar reasons. Hannibal and his collaborators scouted out Howard County, Nebraska, in 1870, then led a movement of Danes to found the town of Dannebrog and claim over 20,000 acres of land within the next four years.

Grønngaard Jeppesen’s detailed background description of the Hartland settlement presented strong evidence that Waukesha County, Wisconsin, was the first Danish settlement in America and that the Dannebrog colony was its daughter. Similar ties created a web of connections between Danish settlements throughout the land, but they were especially dense in the upper Midwest and adjacent plains states. By sending out parties to establish new daughter colonies, early settlements like Hartland came to exert an influence upon Danish immigrant communities over a wide geographical area. Grønngaard Jeppesen showed one important example of how that web of connections was constructed, how the world of Danish America came into existence, and how it functioned as time passed.

Now we need to return to our original set of questions. When was the beginning of Danish-American history? What was the
crucial event that triggered the movement of hundreds of thousands of Danes to new homes across the North Atlantic?

Some, like Thomas P. Christensen and George R. Nielsen, identified the decade of the 1850's as the time when Danish emigration took a sharp upswing, and they identified the emigration of Mormon converts as the factor that set mass migration in motion. Most other historians, however, from P. S. Vig to Torben Grønegaard Jeppesen, have gone back to the 1840's and identified key events in that decade, which triggered mass migration of decades to come. Their spotlights shone most sharply on individuals like Rasmus Sørensen and C. L. Clausen, who shaped and led the movement. These popular Lutheran agitators helped to focus the discontent that later also gave rise to the Baptist and Mormon revival movements in Denmark.

Time and again, the area of Wisconsin around Hartland in Waukesha County and adjacent Racine County has been identified as the first Danish settlement in America. Several things were important about this area. For one, early Danish settlers in the area found support from other Scandinavians. For another, the early settlers wrote letters and books about America that exerted a
tremendous pull upon the flow of emigration. Still another was the fact that these settlements continued to grow by means of chain migration, and that they eventually sent out groups of people to establish important daughter colonies farther north and west. The beginning of Danish-American history was in these southeastern Wisconsin settlements of the 1840’s.

One question remains: What key event touched off the mass migration? What was the event that Danes and Danish-Americans can celebrate as Norwegians celebrate anniversaries of 1825, or as Swedes celebrate the founding of New Sweden in 1638? Any attempt to identify one such defining moment in a complex, ongoing process is bound to be arbitrary and debatable. One could argue, for example, that it was the arrival of Friibert at Pine Lake in 1843, or the arrival of Rasmus Sørensen’s letter-writing son, Martin, in 1844. It could have been the arrival of Christian Ludvig Christensen in 1846, or of his family in 1847, or the voyage of the schooner, Perseverance, in 1848, bringing settlers to Racine, Neenah, and New Denmark. An argument could be made for any of those events. None of them, however, would be my first choice.

My choice would be an event that could meet several key criteria. First, it would be one that grew out of the religious protest movements of the 1840’s, because those movements served to focus discontent and motivate relatively large numbers of people to leave Denmark. Second, it would be an event that related to the spread of information about America among ordinary people in Denmark. Third, it would be an event that initiated chain migration from Denmark to America. Fourth, it would relate to the founding of Danish-American settlements. Finally, it would be an event that reflected the remarkable ability of Danes to interact with Scandinavians, Germans, Yankees, and all manner of other Americans who were not Danish. The founding of settlements was an important part of Danish-American life, but in the long run, learning to live as Americans among other Americans was even more important.

All of these factors came together, it seems to me, in the decision of one young, newly wed couple from Langeland to emigrate in the year 1843. She was Martha Rasmussen from Rifbjerg in Simmerbølle, where religious revivals had been active since 1837.
He was Claus Lauritz Clausen, the lay preacher. They are well-known to Danish-American history, and their lives illustrate both the cultural richness of the Danish-American experience and the remarkable ability of Danes to interact with others without losing their own identity.

Martha and C. L. Clausen left Copenhagen on 18 April 1843 and arrived in Racine County, Wisconsin, on 8 August 1843. Their Atlantic crossing on the bark, Johanna, took exactly two months, from 22 May to 22 July 1843. In the new land, their rapid upward mobility must have seemed astonishing to folks who read about it back home, giving powerful testimony of the opportunities offered by America.

Source: http://www.norwayheritage.com/ships/nice.htm#bark

Typical Bark of the 1840's

The Clausens settled in a predominantly Norwegian rural community. Claus began his American career as a school teacher, was ordained within two months of arrival by a German Lutheran pastor (making him the first Danish pastor in nineteenth-century America), and within eight years of his arrival, he was a Lutheran bishop. His letters home were published in Danish newspapers, encouraging others to emigrate. He started the first American newspaper and the first religious periodical in what was then the common Danish-Norwegian language. In 1853, he led a large party of immigrants from Wisconsin to found the settlement of Saint
Ansgar on the Cedar River in north-central Iowa, and this settlement became the nucleus of numerous Danish and Norwegian settlements on both sides of the Minnesota-Iowa border. Clausen served in the Iowa legislature and on the state immigration commission. During the Civil War, he was chaplain of the famous Scandinavian regiment, the Fifteenth Wisconsin. In 1867, he visited Denmark and laid the foundation for the commission that would soon send a stream of Danish pastoral candidates to America. In 1870, he helped to establish a church body called the Norwegian-Danish Conference—the first Lutheran church body in America with "Danish" in its name—and became its president. The following year, he ordained the first pastor of what would come to be called the Danish Church in America.\textsuperscript{33} Martha Clausen’s memory is associated in particular with a beautiful hymn that was often sung at the conclusion of Danish-American gatherings.\textsuperscript{34} Theirs was a Danish immigrant story of mythic proportions, one that played a key role in launching and sustaining the Danish-American migration that affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

So here we have it: a defining moment that marks the beginning of Danish-American history, perhaps better than any other—the emigration of Martha and C. L. Clausen to America in 1843, aboard the bark, \textit{Johanna}. Please join me in celebrating the dates of their journey, from the eighteenth of April to the eighth of August 1843, as the symbolic beginning of Danish mass migration to America.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Voyage of Martha and C. L. Clausen</th>
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<tr>
<td>18 April 1843—Departed Copenhagen, Denmark</td>
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<td>22 May 1843—Departed Drammen, Norway aboard S/S \textit{Johanna}</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 July 1843—S/S \textit{Johanna} arrived in New York City</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 August 1843—Arrived Muskego, Racine County, Wisconsin</td>
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\textsuperscript{1} © 2004 by J. R. Christianson, Luther College, Decorah, IA 52101. All rights reserved. This paper was prepared for presentation to the international conference, “Danish-North American Relations Since World War II,” in Omaha, Nebraska, on 10-13 October 2002.
For a detailed study of the voyage of the *Restaurationen*, see Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America 1825-1860* (Northfield, Minnesota: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1931), 24-56.

The ships were the *Key of Kalmar* (Calmare Nyckel) and the *Griffin* (Fogel Grip). See Rune Ruhnbro, ed., *New Sweden in the New World* (Stockholm: Wiken, 1988).

Although celebrations of Swedish-American ethnicity have generally focused on the year 1638, scholars tend to date the beginning of Swedish mass immigration to the year 1845, when a group led by Peter Cassel of Kisa departed to establish the settlement of New Sweden in Iowa. See, for example, H. Arnold Barton, “Introduction,” *Scandinavian Roots, American Lives: Scandinavian Emigration to North America*, ed. Krister Björklund, Marianne Möller & Birgitta Schreiber (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2000), 10-11.

*Danske i Amerika* (Minneapolis & Chicago: C. Rasmussen, 1908), 36-37. This first volume ran 800 pages, of which Vig wrote the first 358 pages and in collaboration with I. M. Hansen wrote another 50 pages. The second volume was published as *Danske i Amerika, II. Bind* (Minneapolis: C. Rasmussen, 1916), but the last fascicles appeared as late as 1927. On Vig, see Peter L. Petersen and John Mark Nielsen, “Peter Sørensen Vig—Danish-American Historian,” *Danish Emigration to the U.S.A.*, ed. Birgit Flemming Larsen and Henning Bender (Aalborg: Danes Worldwide Archives & the Danish Society for Emigration History, 1992), 124-41.


*Danske i Amerika* 1908, 1: 349. On Rasmus Sørensen, see 1: 337-49. Vig’s own background was in the crofter class.

Thomas P. Christensen, *Dansk Amerikansk Historie* (Cedar Falls IA: Holst, 1927), 44-49, 51-52. Christensen mentioned Clausen and Sørensen among authors whose books, pamphlets, and published letters influenced Danish emigration, adding that Sørensen escorted several parties of Danish immigrants to Wisconsin, beginning in 1852. Denmark fought two wars in 1848-51 and 1864 over the attempt of pro-German elements in the Danish duchies of Schleswig-Holstein to bring the duchies into a united Germany.
The common speech of the duchies varied regionally between Low German, Frisian, and Danish, with Danes concentrated in northern Schleswig, while High German served as the \textit{lingua franca} until at least the middle of the century. After Denmark won the first war, German nationalist leaders and others emigrated from the duchies to America, where many of them settled in and around Davenport, Iowa. These were the immigrants of the 1850’s to whom Christensen referred. Following the Danish defeat in the second war, many Danes emigrated from Schleswig to America to escape the Prussian rule that followed 1864.

11 Christensen 1927, 71.
12 Christensen 1927, 79.
13 Christensen 1927, 56.

17 Nielsen 1981, 103, see also 63, 101.

19 Hvidt 1971, 280.
21 Hvidt 1971, 271, 273, 275-6. He noted that Sørensen was said to have escorted 500 emigrants to America and that Sommer led or influenced many more, possibly many thousands of emigrants. Hvidt considered Sørensen’s influence more political than religious, and there was a political dimension to Sommer’s work as well in 1871-72, when he was affiliated with the Danish socialist party.

22 Hvidt 1971, 280-300.
26 Helmer Pedersen 1985, 84.


32 The religious periodical, Maanedstidende for den norsk-evangelisk-lutherske Kirke i Amerikal (Monthly for the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, later called Kirkelig Maanedstidende), first appeared in March of 1851. It was published by Clausen, A. C. Preus, and H. A. Stub and was initially printed in Inmansville, Rock County, Wisconsin. In January of 1852, the newspaper, Emigranten (The Emigrant) appeared from the same press, initially edited by Clausen. Although earlier Dano-Norwegian newspapers had appeared briefly in the years 1847-51, they all soon vanished, whereas Maanedstidende and Emigranten (later Fædrelandet og Emigranten) both continued to appear for many years and were the first enduring American periodicals in the Dano-Norwegian language. See


34 The hymn, “And Now We Must Bid One Another Farewell” (Så vil vi nu sige hverandre farvel), was ascribed to Martha Clausen, 1840, and set to an anonymous melody in the Danish-American Hymnal For Church and Home, 4th edition (Blair, Nebraska: Lutheran Publishing House, 1953), number 35. The same 1908 English translation by George Taylor Rygh appeared as number 51 in the Norwegian-American The Lutheran Hymnary (Minneapolis: Augsburg [1913] 1935), where the hymn was ascribed to Martha Clausen, ca. 1830, and set to a melody by Ludvig M. Lindeman. For the Danish text, see Den danske salmebog (Copenhagen: Det kgl. Vajsenhus’ forlag, 1973), number 393. Neither the English nor the Danish version were included in the bilingual Sangbog for det danske Folk i Amerika, 6th edition (Cedar Falls, Iowa: Holst, 1931). Enok Mortensen, The Danish Lutheran Church in America (Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1967), 29, 36, noted that this became the traditional farewell hymn at annual conventions of the Danish Lutheran Church in America, and that it was sung at the farewell party for the Clausens in Martha’s home community of Rifbjerg in 1843, when they left for America, but he also pointed out that a Norwegian scholar has challenged Martha Clausen’s authorship of the hymn and ascribed it instead to F. Fenger.