Danish Cedar Falls

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In 1855, Frederick Petersen’s family became the first Danish immigrants on record to settle in Cedar Falls, Iowa. The Petersens came from the Schleswig area on the Danish/German border, and in 1860, Christian Petersen came to Cedar Falls, also from Schleswig. More Danish families moved to Cedar Falls from Pine River, Wisconsin in 1866, and the next year Danes began arriving directly from their homeland after enduring a long journey by ship and train. By the early 1870s, Danes were settling in Cedar Falls in large numbers. By 1871, three hundred Danes called the city home, making up about ten percent of the city’s population.

Danish immigration to Cedar Falls did not taper off again until the late 1890s.

Many immigrants found that the landscape of the Cedar Valley reminded them of Denmark, which helped draw some to Cedar Falls and others to the nearby rural village of Fredsville, about eight miles to the southwest. Carlo Christensen, a cultural attaché at the Danish embassy, visited Cedar Falls in 1959 for a Danish Days celebration and commented on the landscape, saying, “I can understand why the Danes settled here because around Cedar Falls the country is very much like we have it in Denmark.”

Fredsville, which means “peaceful village” in Danish, was located near Cedar Falls on the highest ground in Grundy County. Jens Andersen, one of the first to settle in Fredsville in 1866, returned to Denmark the following year to bring more settlers back to both Fredsville and Cedar Falls, providing an example of chain migration. As the number of immigrants in the area grew, more Danes heard about the area from family and friends and made Cedar Falls their new home, too.

The Danish immigrant population in Cedar Falls reflected US immigration trends in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The community Danish immigrants built was characterized by its businesses, institutions, language and traditions. Cedar Falls quickly became the state’s second largest Danish community, after Elk Horn.
Danish Cedar Falls | Carrie Eilderts

Danes comprised the largest immigrant group in Cedar Falls, and they left their mark on the city.

Rich soil and the availability of jobs were major factors drawing immigrants to Cedar Falls. Whether they were working on the farm, on the railroad or in one of the many businesses in town, there were plenty of opportunities for Danes who were willing to work hard. Danes were involved in all manner of work in Cedar Falls and Fredsville. Many found jobs in Cedar Falls businesses. At one time, every store along Main Street needed to employ at least one person who spoke Danish in order to communicate with the many immigrants in the city.8

Jens Nielsen was one of the most successful Danish businessmen in Cedar Falls. Nielsen made a large impact on commerce in the community. He owned a stone quarry which supplied the stone used to build many early Cedar Falls homes.9 He experienced many problems with flooding in his quarry, however. It was because of this flooding that in 1904, Nielsen developed a pump to remove seepage water from the quarry. He had the pump patented, and in 1911, he founded the Viking Pump Company, along with George Wyth and Christian Petersen. Petersen brought with him the skills he had learned as a machinist in Denmark.10 Viking Pump is still one of the largest employers in Cedar Falls.

Many Danes became farmers in the area surrounding Cedar Falls, especially in the rural community of Fredsville. Some of these farmers found greater opportunities for land ownership in the United States than they would have had in Denmark. Dairy farming was especially popular; Truels Slifsgaard ran a creamery in Fredsville. He often wrote to his father Jeppe, who was still in Denmark, and complained about the cream separation methods that were available to him. Jeppe decided to come to the United States and bring a cream separator with him. This sped up the process of cream separation considerably.11 The cream separator had been invented by Gustaff De Lavalla, a Swede, and L. C. Nielsen, a Dane. It used centrifugal force for separation.12 The cream separator became an essential part of Fredsville, as many considered dairying to be the lifeblood of the community.13

The many businesses and opportunities in Cedar Falls and Fredsville helped draw Danes to the city. They also helped Danes
establish their place within the Danish immigrant community and the city as a whole. The Danes in Cedar Falls organized their own churches and organizations, including Nazareth Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. Nazareth Lutheran Church quickly became a very important part of the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which held its national conventions in Cedar Falls in 1880 and 1886.¹⁴

The church continued to be a place for Danes to worship exclusively in their own language for many years, until in 1923, the congregation decided that one High Mass service each month would be conducted in English. In 1925, Reverend Otto Nielsen began holding half of the services in English, while Danish language use was gradually phased out.¹⁵ The Danish services remained fairly popular, though. The average attendance at the twelve Danish services held in 1936 was 134, while English services had an average attendance of 200.¹⁶ By 1934, there was only one Danish service held each month, and by 1938, all regular services were in English, although Danish services were still occasionally provided. By June of 1943, the word “Danish” had been dropped from the church’s name.¹⁷

The switch to English occurred more quickly in Nazareth’s Sunday school. Sunday school was used as a time not only for religious study, but also to learn Danish patriotic and folk songs. All Sunday school lessons were conducted in Danish until 1917, when the nativism inspired by World War I encouraged the switch to English. This seemed to be a good time to switch Sunday school classes to English since that had become the language of the children. Attendance at Sunday school actually increased due to the use of the English language.¹⁸

There was not complete harmony within the Danish Lutheran Church in Cedar Falls, however. On July 1, 1897, approximately fifty members of Nazareth Lutheran left the church to found their own congregation, Bethlehem Lutheran Church. This was due to a split in the Danish Lutheran Church between the Grundtvigian and Inner Mission factions. Until 1892, all the pastors of Nazareth Lutheran had been Grundtvigian. In 1892, Pastor P. L. C. Hansen of the Inner Mission movement became the pastor of Nazareth. In 1893, the national synod met in Wisconsin and adopted a new constitution. Nazareth Lutheran wished to remain a part of the synod but rejected the new
constitution. They did not like that the new constitution made the church property liable to the synod and liable to be taxed. Nazareth and other churches that refused to sign the constitution joined together as the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church of North America, which held its convention in Cedar Falls in 1895. This convention brought more attention to the split and resulted in a division of Nazareth’s congregation. In June 1897, the members of Nazareth who identified as Grundtvigian met together and decided to resign from the congregation on July 1, 1897. That declaration was signed by fifty-three members.¹⁹ The group decided to ask Reverend Adam Dan, who was the pastor at Fredsville Lutheran Church, to preach for them as well.²⁰ Although that was a tumultuous time for Nazareth and the new congregation of Bethlehem, the two churches are now on good terms.

Like Nazareth, Bethlehem also started out conducting all services in Danish, but eventually made the gradual transition to using English. At a congregational meeting in July 1922, there was a request for a meeting to discuss the possibility of using English in some church services and Sunday school classes. They decided at that meeting that they would hold two evening services each month in English. The use of English at Bethlehem gradually increased after that date. According to Julia Madsen, a boys’ Sunday school class taught in 1932 was the last class to be taught in Danish. When the church had first started, Sunday school classes had been exclusively in Danish.²¹

Besides Bethlehem Lutheran, Nazareth Lutheran also had close ties to Fredsville Lutheran. Reverend A. S. Nielsen, who was the first pastor of Nazareth, also served at Fredsville. Nielsen lived in Cedar Falls, and children from Fredsville travelled to Cedar Falls for catechism. The congregation in Fredsville was formed in 1871, the same year as Nazareth. By 1873, the church minutes recorded “a general need for the erection of a little Danish church for the Danish people living outside of Cedar Falls has for a longer time been considered;“ a church was accordingly built for the congregation.²² Another pastor, Reverend Jens Jensen, also served both the congregation in Cedar Falls and the congregation in Fredsville. The Fredsville church was sometimes referred to as the “congregation outside Cedar Falls,” which underscored the connection between the two communities.” The church officially became known as Fredsville in 1888.
Like Nazareth and Bethlehem, Fredsville gradually made the switch to English during the first half of the twentieth century, although it took a little longer than it had in Cedar Falls. During World War I, Iowa Governor William L. Harding banned the use of foreign languages in public services, but the proclamation was not effective. The congregation at Fredsville sent a letter of protest to the governor, and this letter, along with other protests across the state, caused the governor to withdraw his proclamation. It was not until 1936 that Fredsville’s minutes for their annual meeting were written in English, but English became the official language of their meetings in 1941. In 1944, they decided to hold one Danish service and three English services each month. In 1950, Pastor C. A. Stub sent out a newsletter, in which he noted that one Danish service was held at 9:30 a.m. one Sunday each month, with English services being held at 10:30 a.m. every week. In 1951, only nine Danish services were held during the entire year. There was no record of any Danish services held in 1953, and the word “Danish” was dropped from the name of the church that same year. While most of the Danish immigrants in Cedar Falls were Lutheran, some of them were Seventh Day Adventists, and some were Baptist. The Seventh Day Adventists never established a church in Cedar Falls, but the First Danish Baptist Church in Cedar Falls was established in 1878.

The Lutheran churches continued to remember their Danish heritage long past the change to the English language. A model ship hangs from the ceiling of Bethlehem Lutheran, following Danish tradition, to represent the Christian’s journey, sailing on rough seas toward salvation. Fredsville also has a ship hanging from its ceiling, and Nazareth has a ship which used to hang from the ceiling and is now displayed in a case of items representing the church’s history. A copy of the statue “Christus” by Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen can also be seen in many Danish churches in the United States. A copy of that statue stood over the altar at Bethlehem Lutheran for over seventy-five years; it now stands just outside the sanctuary. Interestingly, Fredsville added a copy of the statue to the church in the 1950s, after the use of the Danish language had already declined. Perhaps this was their way of keeping their Danish heritage alive.
Several other organizations gave Danish immigrants in Cedar Falls a place to socialize in their own language and provide assistance when needed. The Danish Brotherhood, an organization founded in 1882 with lodges across the country, was formed to unify Danes in the United States, perpetuate memories of Denmark, and provide insurance for death, sickness, and disability. The Danish Lyren Association, formed in 1890, was a benevolent and fraternal organization that offered insurance as well as a place to socialize. The national convention of the Danish Lyren Association was held in Cedar Falls in June of 1902, with H. Rasmussen serving as the delegate for the city. These organizations, as well as the churches, brought together the Danish community in Cedar Falls throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century.

The use of the Danish language was an essential characteristic of the immigrant community in Cedar Falls, as the ubiquity of Danish in Cedar Falls businesses and churches demonstrates. While many immigrants learned English fairly quickly, they continued to speak Danish well into the twentieth century. This can be seen through the existence of a library of Danish books at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, the continued popularity of publications in the Danish language, and Danish inscriptions on tombstones in both Cedar Falls and Fredsville.

The most popular Danish newspaper published in Cedar Falls was *Dannevirke*. The name *Dannevirke* means “Dane’s work” in Danish. It was also the name of a wall built in the early Viking Age between Denmark and Germany that played a central role in the Second Schleswig War of 1864, which demonstrates the significance of that conflict between Denmark and Germany to the Danes who immigrated to the United States. The newspaper *Dannevirke* provided a “spirit of unity” to expatriate Danes. At its peak, *Dannevirke* had a circulation of around twenty-four hundred, reaching subscribers in thirty-seven states, Canada, South America, and Denmark.

The assimilation of Danish immigrants into American culture in Cedar Falls happened gradually. By the middle of the twentieth century, the churches, businesses, and organizations that had characterized the Danish community in Cedar Falls, as elsewhere in America, were no longer distinctly Danish. The immigrants’ children
had grown up there, spoke English, and identified as American. The desire to maintain a separate Danish identity and community had faded. Even so, local Danish Americans continued to remember their heritage through Danish traditions.

After most Danes had been assimilated into American culture, some people in Cedar Falls began looking for ways to celebrate the city’s Danish heritage. The first such celebration was planned for a day during the city’s centennial celebration in 1952. The day featured Henrik Kauffman, the Danish ambassador to the United States, who gave a speech in which he declared that he was impressed with the “stronghold of Danish Americans” in Cedar Falls. The day’s activities also included Danish folk dancing, a concert by Leo Olson’s chorus, a skit, community singing, a Danish display at the Odd Fellows Hall, and costumed folk dancers. Æbleskiver and coffee were served.

The Danish Day in 1952 went over well enough that a Danish Days celebration was planned for July 2-4, 1959. Governor Herschel Loveless spoke, and television star Carmel Quinn was featured in the variety show at the college gymnasium. The crowd for Danish Days was estimated to be between twenty and twenty-five thousand attendees for Saturday morning alone. One of the most significant events of the Danish Days was the historical pageant. The pageant was opened by cultural attaché Carlo Christensen of the Danish Embassy in Washington, DC. He spoke about the role Iowa has played in becoming home to more Danish immigrants than any other state. It was the historical pageant that gave the Danish Days celebration its meaning. It was important to those of Danish descent that people attending the celebration understood the role of the Danes in Cedar Falls and the United States. As the pageant itself declared, “Here are the Danish-Americans. They are one ingredient in the vast melting pot of nationalities that is America. This is their story and these are their contributions.”

Endnotes

1 This article is adapted from the author’s MA thesis, which is available for download here: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/etd/157/.
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4 “The Why of Cedar Falls.”

5 “Danes Come to Cedar Falls.”


10 Thorvald Holst.


13 “First Cream Separator in U.S.”


15 “Nazareth Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cedar Falls, Iowa, 1871-1931,” 21-22.

16 “Annual Report, 1936, Nazareth Church, Cedar Falls, Iowa,” Nazareth Lutheran Church, 3-4.

17 “Nazareth Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cedar Falls, Iowa: Fragments from the First Sixty Years of Its History,” Nazareth Lutheran Church, 15-17.

18 “Nazareth Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cedar Falls, Iowa, 1871-1931,” 26-28.

19 “Nazareth Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cedar Falls, Iowa, 1871-1931,” 15-17.

20 “Bethlehem Lutheran Church – 14th and Main Streets, Cedar Falls, Iowa,” 1971, Cedar Falls Historical Society Series Via, Cedar Falls Churches, Box 4, Lutheran Churches.


22 Fredsville Lutheran Church.

23 Fredsville Lutheran Church.

24 “Bethlehem Lutheran Church – 14th and Main.”

25 Fredsville Lutheran Church.
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