Nordlyset and the New York City Danish Community, 1891-1953

Catrine Kyster Giery

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The Danish community in New York City was never more than a speck on the Big Apple. At the same time, however, New York City and the surrounding area was for decades—and still is—home to a larger number of Danish-born people than most other places in the United States. Unfortunately, New York City’s popularity among Danes has not translated into a large amount of historical research about the city’s Danish community.

When I first moved from Denmark to New York City, about twenty years ago, I met other Danes at the Danish Seamen’s Church in Brooklyn and online. From the church, I got the impression that there had been a larger Danish community in New York in the past. My Brooklyn-born Irish American husband drove me through Bay Ridge and nearby neighborhoods in Brooklyn and told me that Scandinavians lived in these areas when he grew up. I began making trips to the New York Public Library to study microfilm copies of the Danish-language New York newspaper Nordlyset (The northern light) and scout out locations in the city with Danish history, but then life took me somewhere else. Twenty years later, living in South Carolina and studying for a history degree online, I was able to revisit some chapters of the Danish history of New York, through digitized versions of Nordlyset and secondary sources. This article is an attempt at beginning to home in on the characteristics of the Danish community in New York. Was there in fact such a thing as a Danish community at all, or did Danish-born people pretty much just melt into the multiethnic metropolis? How big was the community, and did it have a geographic location or anchor? What kept the community together and going? And what happened to it?

This article will tell a brief version of the parallel histories of Nordlyset and the Danish community in New York by looking at three editors who set the tone for the newspaper for an extended period of time, describing how the Danish community developed during those
eras, and illuminating the relationship between the two. As pointed out by then New York Danish Consul General Georg Bech in 1941, at the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the founding of *Nordlyset*, there was a very close relationship between the editor, the newspaper, and the community: “If the editor is *Nordlyset’s* mother, the colony is its father.”¹

The three “mothers” of *Nordlyset* were John Volk, famous for his elegant style and high-quality newspaper but not money savvy; the flamboyant Emil Opffer whose time at the newspaper was temporarily interrupted by being fired and launching a competitive newspaper; and Albert van Sand, a dancer-turned-newspaper man who worked tirelessly on a shoestring budget to make *Nordlyset* the non-political but active hub for Danish-born people on the east coast. All the editors appear to have been driven by a passion for Danishness and the community, and not for love of money. In fact, the paper appears to have never been very successful financially.

In terms of the newspaper’s “father,” statistics for the number of Danish-born inhabitants in New York State generate a pyramid-shaped form that peaks around 1930, when approximately ten thousand of New York City’s inhabitants were Danish born. *Nordlyset* existed through the peak of the pyramid: from 1891 to 1953. In this article, the term “New York Danish community” refers primarily to people born in Denmark and living in New York City. While second-generation Danish Americans likely also played important roles in the community, readers of the Danish-language *Nordlyset* were predominantly born in Denmark.² The Danish community in New Jersey also played an important role for the community in New York; in fact, the newspaper often refers to “Greater New York” as its area of interest. However, researching the Danish institutions and community in New Jersey in any detail was not possible due to time constraints. (In addition to reading *Nordlyset*, Danes in New Jersey had their own newspaper, the Perth Amboy *Dansk Amerikaner* (1886-1913),³ but little is known about that paper.)

This article will show that while Danes never created a “Little Denmark” in New York, they did utilize a network of Danish organizations and institutions. Geographically, these were, at the numeric peak of the Danish community, located primarily in Manhattan; in the
western, close-to-the-waterfront areas of Brooklyn; and to some extent in the Bronx (as well as in areas of New Jersey relatively close to New York City). While Danes lived in many areas of New York City, there appears to have been some form of physical center of Danishness in those areas although it would not have been very visible to passersby. The geographical pattern can be viewed on an interactive map created for this article based on ads and social notices in Nordlyset in 1920 and 1940, supplemented by a map layer which shows locations where people could buy Nordlyset in 1943. The map can be accessed at bit.ly/DanishNewYorkPeak.

In the larger picture of Danish-language newspapers in the United States, the history of Nordlyset is both unique and typical. Like many papers, Nordlyset was founded during the period that Marion Tuttle Marzolf describes as the emergence of the Danish American press, 1870-99, a time of newspaper growth and diversification which took place during years of mass immigration. Unlike rural newspapers such as Den Danske Pioneer, Nordlyset was an urban paper which supplemented the news that readers would get from easy-to-read dailies. Nordlyset never attempted to become its readers’ only source of news. Like many other newspapers, Nordlyset folded during the period from 1920-69, a period which in general presented many challenges to Danish-language newspapers in the US, including low immigration, increased Americanization and lack of interest among second-generation immigrants, rising production costs, and increased use of English in Danish American churches. By the 1960s, only Den Danske Pioneer and Bien remained of the once-thriving Danish American newspaper landscape.

Immigrant newspapers are often analyzed in terms of their role in either connecting people with their homeland and/or helping them acclimatize and find their way in their new environment. However, Nordlyset was very much a community newspaper, defined as a newspaper which “works to knit its audience together, build consensus, stress common feelings, play down negative events in the group, and reveal outside threats to the group.” Nordlyset helped create and sustain the sense of a Danish community and a Danish-rooted identity. It amplified the work of people who wished to include Danishness in their new lives and new identities and who made it possible for
other people to do to the same by organizing and maintaining Danish organizations, churches, businesses, events, and personal networks. The newspaper was thus both an independent agent and a vehicle for other agents. The newspaper supported the community, and the community supported *Nordlyset*.

Editor Albert van Sand, writing in 1941 to mark the fiftieth jubilee of the newspaper, argued that *Nordlyset*'s survival despite being published for one of the smallest linguistic groups on the east coast “is proof of how alive a thing that we call Danishness and unity is.”

Georg Strandvold, who edited *Nordlyset* around 1910 and who was later editor of the Norwegian *Decorah-Posten*, agreed:

It’s practically impossible to imagine the colony without *Nordlyset*. For the newspaper has always been that which gathers in the middle, which spurs on, which encourages. Likely even without *Nordlyset*, there would have been Dan-
ishness in Greater New York, there would have been organizations, lodges, churches and much more. But without the newspaper, their field of action would likely not have been as great as it was.9

Danish Immigration to New York

*Nordlyset* existed from 1891-1953, a period which spans most of the decades with the highest numbers of Danish-born residents in New York. The statistics in the following paragraphs and illustrations are all from Torben Grøngaard Jeppesen’s book *Danske i USA: 1850-2000*.10

Figure A illustrates the number of all Danish-born people in the United States from 1850-2000 and presents a bell-shaped curve with a soft peak in 1920 when 189,154 Danish-born individuals lived in the United States. Figure B illustrates the number of Danish-born people who resided in New York State, New Jersey, and Connecticut (where most potential readers of *Nordlyset* lived). It shows a slightly different, pyramid-shaped curve, peaking in 1930. That year, 17,401 Danish-born lived in New York state, with an additional 6,665 in New Jersey and 3,129 in Connecticut. Figure C shows the numbers for New York City, including Brooklyn. Although incomplete, it appears to show the same pattern as for New York State.
Prior to 1850, there was very little Danish immigration to the United States. Among the Danish-born people who did immigrate, most chose to live in New York City, the country’s largest city and home to many foreign-born people. During those early years, most Danes in New York had maritime occupations, such as ship’s captain, sailor, boatman, ship’s carpenter, and sailmaker. Most were male, and when they married, they often married a spouse who was not born in Denmark. In terms of a community, rather than being concentrated in one area, the city’s Danes were generally spread out over the city’s
wards and districts.\textsuperscript{11} This was a geographical pattern which to a large extent continued into the twentieth century.

New immigrants began to head west, however, and by 1870, New York City (including Brooklyn), surrendered its place to Chicago as the number one urban destination for Danish-born immigrants.\textsuperscript{12} In the 1880s and 1890s, the heyday of Danish rural mass immigration, New York dropped to ninth place among states with the highest number of Danish-born residents. Less than five percent of Danish-born immigrants lived in New York during those decades (see figures D and E). Towards the turn of the century, the occupations of Danish immigrants in New York City become more varied with inclusion of more non-maritime occupations, and the city’s Danish immigrants became more well-off financially. The city also began to attract more female Danish immigrants, many of them working as maids.\textsuperscript{13}

Danish immigration to the US between 1890-1920 was, according to Jeppesen, characterized by industrialization and urbanization, with streams of immigrants heading towards the cities.\textsuperscript{14} As Figure D shows, New York State began to slowly increase in popularity again, percentagewise, among Danish immigrants starting in 1900. It peaked a second time in 1960, although it never got back to the percentages of 1850-60. In 1960, a total of 18.5 percent of Danish-born Americans lived in the tristate area. From 1930-2000, as shown in Figure E, Jeppesen’s numbers show New York State among the top three destinations for Danish immigrants and expats to live.

![Figure D: Percent of Danish-born people living in the tri-state area versus other areas of the U.S.](image)
The Danish Community in New York Before Nordlyset

The earliest organizations among Danes in New York appear to have been pan-Scandinavian. In 1844, Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians created the Skandinavisk Forening af 1844 (Scandinavian Association of 1844). Like many other organizations that followed, this one offered a mix of social gatherings and insurance services. A few years later, in 1847, the semimonthly Scandinavian newspaper Skandinavia was founded, with a Danish editor, but only eight issues were published. Skandinavia was followed by other pan-Scandinavian newspapers, including Skandinaven and Skandinavisk Post.

It appears that almost another thirty years went by before a host of other, more successful Danish organizations sprung up:

- De Danske Våbenbrødre (Danish Brothers in Arms) was founded in 1875. By 1917, the organization was famous for its wonderful Christmas parties.
- The industrial areas of New Jersey attracted many Danish workers, and in 1878, the Danish missionary student Rasmus Andersen was called to serve a congregation in
Perth Amboy. Andersen preached across a wide geographic area including Brooklyn, New York State, New Jersey, and Connecticut, and he also visited Danish ships. In 1881, Andersen founded Our Savior’s Church, located on Ninth Street in Brooklyn in what is now known as the Gowanus neighborhood. The church moved to its current location in Brooklyn Heights in 1958, and it is now known as the Danish Seamen’s Church in New York.21

- In 1884, the association Odin was founded; a year later it became an Odd Fellow lodge named after the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. By 1917, the lodge had 220 members, and its annual spring masquerade was “the colony’s most elegant and largest party.”22
- In 1886, the first Danish organization in Brooklyn, Dania, was founded. It had a strong cultural profile, offering Danish plays and lectures in addition to the usual social gatherings and insurance benefits. The members initially met at a place called Paul Schou’s Tivoli. When it burned, Dania established itself in Prospect Hall with club rooms and a Danish library.23 Prospect Hall24 continued to be an important location in the Danish community for many years.
- The first Danish women’s association, Dagmar, was founded in 1889. By 1917, it had one hundred members.25

The last editor of Nordlyset, van Sand, who arrived in New York in 1900,26 wrote that the 1880s and 1890s belonged to a time when Danes in New York were generally living far apart from each other, and the journey from one end of the city to the other was long. Despite the number of Danes already in the city and the increasing number of new immigrants, the list of members of the four or five Danish organizations was, according to van Sand, not impressive. He concluded: “It was due to the fact that they were missing a link through which they could get in touch with each other.”27

John Volk, the founder of Nordlyset, would go on to provide that link.
John Volk and the Founding of *Nordlyset* (1891-1904)

The founder of *Nordlyset* was John Volk. Born in Copenhagen in 1842, he was the son of a silk merchant from Østergade. Legend has it that the night before his departure for America, Volk penned the ballad “Farvel mit fædreland, jeg byder” (I bid my fatherland goodbye) which went on to earn a lot of money, while Volk, not knowing of his good fortune, had to occasionally sleep rough in New York.\(^\text{28}\) That story seems to capture Volk’s personality and work at the newspaper as well as he appears to have been a gifted and popular writer, poet, author, and translator, but apparently without much interest in the commercial side of running a newspaper.
The Danish journalist and author Henrik Cavling, who visited the United States and wrote the two-volume *Fra Amerika* published in 1897, met Volk and described him as very bright and one of the most popular Danes in New York. According to Cavling, Volk had originally trained as a pharmacist, but his artistic personality and emotional, agile temperament was better suited for the “fast life of a journalist.”

Volk arrived in the United States for the first time in 1863 but returned very soon thereafter to Denmark to volunteer for the war of 1864. He was, however, turned down due to his slight size. Volk then worked for a while as a parliamentary clerk in Copenhagen but longed for more excitement. He returned to the United States in 1866 and found work as an editorial assistant at the magazine *Reform*. From 1881, he worked as clerk and later manager for transatlantic passenger lines.

Volk had been considering starting a Danish-language newspaper but lacked the financial resources to do so. Luckily, friends with funds, including Niels Poulsen, the owner of Hecla Iron Works, stepped in to help Volk and his partner Clemens Petersen. They began working on the newspaper in a basement room in the building where Volk was employed by the Hamburg-American Line. Coming up with the right name for the newspaper proved somewhat difficult. Van Sand wrote: “Either they soaked their brains too much or not enough, but there were no suggestions that suited Volk.” Finally, one night, sitting in a small bar close to 1 Broadway, three friends bounced some names around – Den nye Verden (The new world), Det danske Folk (The Danish people), Trællepråsen (The candlestick), Lommelygten (The flashlight) and Blinkfyret (The light house) – and finally came up with Nordlyset (The northern light). The first issue was published on October 3, 1891 and was handed out for free to Danes and Norwegians in New York and Brooklyn.

Van Sand described Volk as “immensely popular among the then-living Danes.” Volk’s activities were not limited to the newspaper. He was very active in community theater, which at the time was popular in Danish communities in the United States. Cavling mentions that a revue, written by Volk and performed in one of the largest music halls in New York, gathered an audience of two thousand Danes.
In her study of Danish American newspapers, Marzolf describes the approach of *Nordlyset* as “elitist.” News was not just covered but analyzed. There was an emphasis on style and culture. Drama, good music, books, intellectual discourse, and elegant formal occasions were considered important. “Even the fine quality white paper and delicately detailed engraved section headings and Roman type bespoke culture. *Nordlyset* had more elegance than its editor had business sense.”

Marzolf argues that the newspaper’s elitist approach narrowed its potential audience:

Volk’s elitist approach did not attract farmers or craftsmen who made up the greatest proportion of Danish immigrants. It was suitable for the numerous businessmen, lawyers, and professional men of New York, but the total colony of Danish-Americans in New York was never very large – 5,000 to 8,000 before the turn of the century and 10,000 to 12,000 thereafter. The audience was simply too small.

Whether because or despite the traits Marzolf characterizes as elitist, Cavling, visiting from Denmark, was certainly impressed, noting: *Nordlyset* in New York is that of the Danish-American papers which spiritually as well as geographically is closest to the press of the mother country. The analytical political articles and literary reviews cannot be found any better in
the Copenhagen press, and still everything which is written in the paper is noticeably Danish-American in its form and content. In Nordlyset love of the mother country is harmoniously integrated into reverence for the mighty America.\(^{36}\)

Despite its limited audience, it appears that the newspaper flourished. One contemporary Danish American wrote: “The magazine quickly acquired a not inconsiderable influence in spite of its limited audience, since both editorials as well as news articles were well edited, and Clemens Petersen’s literary and foreign review articles were read with great interest.”\(^{37}\)

Passion rather than salaries fueled the editors’ efforts. Viggo C. Eberlin, a Danish-born librarian and bookseller, wrote in 1914 of Volk, Petersen, and their colleague Adolf Riise: “These three gifted men put a lot of work into the newspaper—it was a labor of love for which the only salary was the knowledge of having worked for the good of Danishness.”\(^{38}\) Eckard V. Eskesen, a financial backer of the newspaper, wrote in 1941:

He [John Volk] lived for his paper. He wanted it to be a messenger of the best in Danish culture, be well-written and literary; read by everyone as well as set the tone over here. … He was a master of language, an exquisite writer who loved his poets and himself cultivated the beautiful art of poetry. … The other chair in the basement belonged to lecturer Clemmens [sic] Petersen. He wrote handsome weekly editorials about foreign policy, ruling as an absolute monarch down there and did not allow ideas which were different from his own point of view.\(^{39}\)

Together, Volk and Petersen ensured that Nordlyset helped Danes in New York retain a sense of their cultural identity.

The Danish community in New York was growing in terms of the number of both Danish-born city dwellers and Danish organizations. In a 1917 article, Eberlin lists Danish New York associations which came to life during the years that Volk was editor: The Danish Athletic Association (1892), Skandinavisk Læseforening (Scandinavian Reading Association) and Sangforeningen Dana (The Dana Singing Association) (both 1893, Brooklyn), Fremad (1898, Brooklyn), the women’s association
Stella (1900), Danish Brotherhood (DB) Lodge Modersmaalet (The mother tongue) (1903), Danish Sisterhood (DSS) Lodge Dannebrog (Danish flag) (1903, Manhattan), and two associations to support the Danish Old People’s Home in Brooklyn (1903 and 1904). The Trinitatis congregation was founded in 1901, although it did not build its church in the Bronx until 1910. According to Eberlin, each organization usually minded its own business, but the organizations came together when needed, such as to raise funds for a Central Park statue of the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen.40

Eksesen, who also wrote the occasional poem for the newspaper, was of the opinion that the newspaper helped the community become more vibrant:

In the beginning, there was not much going on in the colony. There was the church and many Danish organizations, but everyone had enough in their own [lives] and the organizations were mostly about entertainment and socializing. It was tiresome work for John Volk to reach his audience, to raise the paper up to be more than just a means of communication for organizations. Not until the beginning of the new century, the colony became more full of life.41

When John Volk died in 1904, however, it was not obvious who could take over his important work.

Salem Danish Lutheran Church in Brooklyn had to relocate due to the building of a highway. *Image courtesy of DANE: The Danish Archive North East.*
Emil Opffer and the Growing Danish Community (circa 1905-24)

After Volk’s passing, his son led the newspaper for a while, working with Jensen, the owner of the printing company on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, which had been printing *Nordlyset* for some years. Jensen then worked with editor Harald Neble, until the manufacturers Karl Mathiasen and E. V. Eskesen took over *Nordlyset.* Eskesen recalls:

> We were still seeking editors; seeking genies who could light up the sky of *Nordlyset.* … Then one day, crashing through the door like a puff of air from a different world, straight from Mexico, a man with a large goatee and a huge broadbrimmed hat (sombrero). That was Emil Opffer, well known as editor of the Copenhagen paper *Kl. 12* (twelve o’clock). Eskesen describes Opffer as “an intelligent journalist, full of wit and humor, known as one of the best and most modern writers of his time,” but Opffer initially ruffled many feathers:

Opffer was the son of a Danish newspaper editor, had attended the elite boy’s academy in Sorø, apprenticed in printing, and edited the family newspaper for a few years before joining the army and then returning to journalism. According to van Sand, Opffer fled from Copenhagen to Mexico after the Danish Minister of Justice fined him the equivalent of 120 years in jail for writing disrespectfully about the Russian czar and other prominent people.

At the time, our Danish-American paper had a habit of, when they needed more content to print, to try to start an argument among men. In addition to that, the various papers from east and west were often feuding with each other, and the polemics could become quite nasty. We didn’t consider that the task of a paper over here. We wanted to work together; build on the values that we had brought with us. That it could grow and multiply. Seek to create a future for our little Danish people over here in the large America.
According to Eskesen, Opffer continued to write nastily about the editor of Den Danske Pioneer, despite Nordlyset’s owners having promised to end the feud:

You can understand that we were furious. Nordlyset had to date not brought us much joy, rather pain, hassle, and enemies. We had achieved nothing but commotion. All our wishes to see Nordlyset skim the waters never seemed to come true. We said goodbye to Opffer and his hat and sent for Georg Strandvold, then co-editor of a Danish-American paper in Racine. Strandvold had attracted attention due to his beautiful language.47

Opffer did not leave quietly, however. He founded a competing paper, Dansk-Amerikaneren (the Danish-American) and for a year and a half, the two papers fought intensively.48 Nordlyset’s new editor, the twenty-one-year-old Strandvold, initially worked as co-editor with the academic Knud Hartnack but soon became sole editor.49 The paper’s office was initially located on Fulton Street in Manhattan and later 562 Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. Strandvold recalled the years as extremely busy – running from “Herod to Pilate” to do everything from sitting in on serious committee meeting and reviewing compatriots’ performances to serving as a masquerade judge. He saw the job as very rewarding, at least in non-financial ways: “The money was nothing to brag about, but being a bit idealistic, you didn’t pay much attention to it: you were doing work that you loved, you felt in all modesty that you were in the fight for the Danish cause in America. At that time, there was such a thing as that.” Both Strandvold and van Sand, who wrote poetry and essays for Nordlyset during Strandvold’s time, describe the era as festive:

We were all young people with a voracious appetite for life, and we filled the grey and dark rooms with the exuberant wit of our youthful overconfidence. We made it into a student’s room where the fates of the world were decided in eager debates and where we ‘by the glow of the lamp watch the dance of the muses.’50
In 1912, Nordlyset’s owner Karl Mathiasen was tired, and the paper had cost him a lot of money. He sold it to Emil Opffer who was back in town and who was able to get financial support from various well-off Danes in the area. Opffer established his office on the thirteenth floor of a building on Nassau Street. According to van Sand: “The years had taken a little of the unruliness out of him [Opffer], without his whimsy having suffered any harm. His readers were very amused by his pointy pen and his gracious and unique personality won him great popularity in wide circles.”51 Marzolf sums up Opffer in the following way: “Opffer’s flamboyance was as much admired as Volk’s elegance in New York, and his office in one of the towers on ‘Newspaper Row’ was usually filled with guests.”52 Opffer ran the newspaper until he passed away in 1924.

A number of Danish organizations were founded in New York during the Opffer era: DB Lodge Vort Land (Our country) (1905, Brooklyn), Trinitatis Danish youth association (1905, the Bronx), DB Lodge Dannevang (Danish meadow) (1905, Richmond Hill, Queens), Freemason Lodge Frederik (1906), DSS Lodge Enigheden (Unity) (1907, Brooklyn), DB Lodge Cimbria (1907, the Bronx), DB Lodge Fre-
densborg (1907, Brooklyn), Rebekah Lodge Valkyrien (The Valkyrie) (1908), “Den danske Hjælpe- og Understøttelsesforening” (The Danish Association for Help and Support) for any Dane in New York in acute need (1909), and DSS Lodge Bronx (1914). A number of brick-and-mortar institutions were also erected in New York during this time: Salem Church (1905, Brooklyn), the Danish Old People’s Home (1906, Brooklyn), and Trinitatis Danish Church (1910, the Bronx). There was also a waterfront social club associated with Trinitatis Church in the Bronx, named Askov Hall/Trinitatis Danish Young People’s Society. The club, which still exists today, began accepting non-Danes as members around 1920. Across the river in New Jersey, the Danish Children’s Home was founded in 1908 and the Danish Old People’s Home around 1914.

Of the Danish-born inhabitants of New York in 1912, Ivar Kirkegaard explains:

Danes can be found in all classes and positions in society, there are business people and manufacturers, craftspeople and artists, office workers and grocers, apothecaries and physicians – and then there are more down-at-the-heel characters among Danes in New York than in all of the rest of the country, which is not so surprising as only the very fewest of those who are already out on the slippery slope upon arrival in America manage to get away from the big city.

Not all these Danes were involved in maintaining a Danish ethnic community, however. According to Eberlin, ten thousand of the almost fifteen thousand Danish-born men and women in New York City were completely unknown in Danish circles:

The Danish colony in its widest interpretation—people who belong to Danish associations, read the Danish newspaper, visit the Danish church or Danish get-togethers—make a maximum of 5,000 people, including not a few Danes from the German side of the border and Danish-speaking children born over here. Because of the immense distances between the various parts of the city, it’s impossible to gather more than a few hundred about a particular cause or as-
sociation. There is therefore not a united Danish colony in New York as such—rather half a hundred Danish circles.58 However, Eberlin still believed in such a thing as a “United Danish life in New York,” which he credits to the roughly twenty-five Danish organizations and three churches “who have in each of their circles helped to keep the language, the memories and the spiritual life from Denmark alive.”59 Eberlin also points to the importance of the newspaper in regards to the feeling of community: “Without this Danish uniting paper there could not exist any real colony life in such a wide-spread city as New York. Sadly, the colony does not give the paper the financial support that it honestly deserves.”60

Albert van Sand – the Peak and the End (circa 1925-53)

After Emil Opffer’s death in 1924, there was, once again, no heir apparent to the editorial seat. Joachim Reinhard edited the newspaper for a while, but the newspaper was, according to van Sand, somewhat boring. Opffer’s son took over as publisher with Albert van Sand as editor, and around 1926, van Sand became both publisher and editor.61 Born in Copenhagen in 1881, Albert van Sand was the son of merchant Julius A. Michaelsen, while his moth-
er’s aristocratic maiden name was van Sand. While attending the secondary school Jensens Latin- og Realskole, van Sand was deemed more bright than hardworking. A desire to see the world outside of Denmark prompted his emigration and around the age of twenty, he arrived in the United States. Prior to becoming editor at *Nordlyset*, van Sand worked as a dancer, actor, gardener, in advertising, and owned a Greenwich Village nightclub called The Purple Pup during WWI. According to Georg Strandvold, van Sand entered the field of journalism without any professional prerequisites, but he managed to create a well-written and well-edited paper with a special atmosphere due to his many-faceted personality.

On the occasion of van Sand’s sixtieth birthday in 1941, Danish Consul General Georg Bech described van Sand’s passion for his work:

For years he lived in Bohemian circles; he enjoyed it and he belonged there for a time at least. He belonged always to what he himself called the “battalion of fire,” the battalion of those, who are in the forefront, whether it is a question of work or pleasure. He has given his enthusiasm to his work and to his pastimes. This made him a charming and entertaining companion. ... [His never changing fundamentals] are tolerance, born of understanding of men and conditions, honesty, discretion and generally sound judgment, loyalty to Denmark and what is Danish.

During van Sand’s editorship, *Nordlyset* aimed to be the neutral center of Danishness in the Northeast. Van Sand said: “In these many years, my passphrase has been to create a Danish paper that, if possible, would appeal to all in all areas of society in our Danish-born community in the east. I have wished to gather, not to spread.” One of the
community-wide initiatives that van Sand was involved with was creating the Danish Central Committee.70

Being neutral did not, however, mean being passive. Van Sand and the newspaper were involved in work to assist poor and needy local Danes during the Great Depression.71 During WWII, the newspaper took its role as one of the few free Danish-language newspapers very seriously. During the five years of Nazi occupation of Denmark, Nordlyset made it its mission to inform its readers of the situation in Denmark; speak the truth on behalf of a censored, silent Denmark; try to influence US public opinion for a more favorable view of Denmark; and support Denmark’s fight for freedom. After Pearl Harbor, the newspaper supported a dual goal of helping America win the war and liberate Denmark through publishing war bond ads, highlighting the accomplishments of Danish American soldiers, and more.72 After the war, van Sand received King Christian’s Order of Liberation in 1947 and the Order of the Dannebrog in 1948.73

According to van Sand, the number of Nordlyset subscribers peaked in 1928. People still had money to spend and the impact of stricter immigration laws, passed beginning in 1921, could not yet be felt among foreign-language newspapers. The Great Depression, however, resulted in fewer subscribers as well as less revenue from advertising.74 In 1933, Nordlyset reduced its page count to six,75 but van Sand refused to throw in the towel, as an article in Bien explained:

Although Mr. van Sand is probably the grand old man among the active Danish editors here in America and far from any youngster, he’s still ever young and full of enthusiasm for the task he has undertaken. According to his own statements, his paper has not given him any profits during the Depression years until the last months, but he will not give up and take down the flag. “If our Danish press in America disappears,” he says, “everything is lost for Danish interests and as long as I still have health and power, I will not give up.”76

The loss of advertising during WWII, especially from the transatlantic steamship companies, was another hurdle, but the number of subscribers went up during the war77 like it had during WWI when readers felt a strong need for Danish news.78
Nordlyset’s former editor John Volk had warned van Sand that becoming a Danish journalist was a “hunger diet.” According to the 1940 census, van Sand made $1,400 a year, while his wife Rose, an interior designer who was a daughter of Russian immigrants, made $5,000 a year. In his own writing, van Sand points to his love of Denmark and desire to provide something of value to other Danish Americans as the fuel for his work: “It has been, for the very most part, a labor of love – the best salary has been to keep our family heritage alive through the language and the other Danish values of life which gives part of our existence its justification. And last but not least that we through our often-laborious work gave joy to Danish hearts.”

Nordlyset closed its doors in December of 1953, having been under new leadership for the preceding year. Van Sand turned seventy years old in 1951; according to Marzolf, the last years of his tenure as editor appear to have been a struggle. Fewer pages and a lower frequency of publication could not offset increasing publishing expenses, even when the editor worked for free. During 1953, a new editorial board under the leadership of Peter Freuchen, now operating out of 59 Pearl Street, also worked for free. They attempted to relaunch the paper as more modern, using a better quality paper and more photos, and featuring a women’s column and an English summary of content. They also increased the number of pages and raised the subscription price. However, the financial backers did not approve of Freuchen, and towards the end of the year $2,000 dollars were urgently needed to pay a printer’s bill, although the newspaper ensured its readers that this was a temporary cash flow problem. Freuchen resigned, hoping the paper would achieve financial support under the leadership of the newly arrived Danish journalist Gunhild Gansing, who resided in Boston. The December 18, 1953, issue was the last to appear, but it didn’t contain any notice of closing.

A Snapshot of the Danish Community in New York at its Numerical Peak

In 1941, Pastor A. Th. Dorf of Our Savior’s Church in Brooklyn characterized the Danish-born community in Greater New York as probably the most heterogeneous and motley of any group of Danes abroad. And as previously mentioned, most Danish-born Americans...
did not live in ethnic enclaves. However, Brooklyn seems to have stood out as an important cultural center for Danes during the *Nordlyset* era. A *Brooklyn Eagle* article from 1932 states that there were approximately twelve thousand Danes living in Brooklyn, most of them in Bay Ridge and what was then known as South Brooklyn but that they had no distinct colony: “They have homes in all parts of the city and invariably receive a warm welcome from their neighbors on account of their pleasant manners and extremely neat housekeeping methods.”92 The article also mentions that almost all of the Danes read *Nordlyset*, which is described as a progressive, up-to-date paper that gives all the important news of the homeland, as well as of happenings in this country.

Even though the region’s Danish-born inhabitants were widely dispersed, the Danish community still had ethnic anchors, such as brick-and-mortar churches as well as regular meeting places that could be more mobile. The New York Peak map created for this article based on ads and the social calendar in two 1940 issues of *Nordlyset*93 from 1920 and 1940 shows that during the numerical peak of the Danish community, there is a recognizable geographical pattern to the community, not just dots scattered all over the city. Danish-born Americans may not have lived or worked in the streets surrounding the Danish church or the places that the fraternal, social, cultural, or benevolent organizations met, but it is likely that those places would...
still have been chosen at least partly due to their easy accessibility for
many of the people who attended them. To complement the ads and
notices, a 1943 list of places where people could buy Nordlyset94 was
added to the map. Most names of stores on the list of point-of-sale
locations are not obviously Danish or Scandinavian, which supports
the argument that a store’s decisions to carry Nordlyset was mostly
market-driven; it was a newspaper for which the store had customers.
The geographical distribution of point-of-sale locations confirms the
geographical pattern indicated by the ads and other notices.

Many variables could impact the ads and notices in the two is-

sues and how well they represent the parameters of the Danish com-

munity. For instance, it is unlikely than any Danish-owned business
(store, restaurant, lawyer, etc.) could make a living solely by appeal-
ing to Danish customers. The location of a Danish-owned business
therefore does not necessarily imply that many Danes lived or worked
nearby. Also, some Danish businesses may not have advertised in the
paper, while others without any Danish or Scandinavian connection
may have advertised indiscriminately in all newspapers, although the
most obvious of these have not been included on the map.

Churches and other brick-and-mortar institutions such as the
Danish Old People’s Home are likely good indicators of the location of
the Danish community although such institutions may have remained
in areas after the Danish community had moved. The locations of the
meeting places for the organizations are perhaps some of the best in-
dicators of place as the meetings appear to have taken place in rented
rooms, and such rooms would have been relatively easy to change if
most of the members found the location inconvenient.

The Norwegian settlement in Brooklyn is said to have been
greatly impacted by the building of the Fourth Avenue subway in
1915 which enabled many Scandinavians, who were becoming more
prosperous, to move from less desirable areas near their waterfront
jobs to the more desirable Sunset Park and Bay Ridge areas. A stretch
of Eighth Avenue even became known as “Lapskaus Boulevard,” af-
ter a Scandinavian stew, due to the number of Scandinavian stores it
housed.95 While the Danes’ employment was not solely connected to
the waterfront, it is likely that Danes also followed this pattern of mov-
ing to more desirable areas as they became better established. A case
in point: the Danish Athletic Club was founded in Red Hook in 1892, but by 1940, it had relocated to near the Bay Ridge/Sunset Park area. According to a *New York Times* article, the club’s membership reached its peak of eight hundred members in the 1950s. Also, when looking at the points of sale in 1943, the Bay Ridge/Sunset Park area appears more popular than the area closer to Red Hook. Another possible indicator of this move further south: when the Salem Church building in Gowanus had to be demolished in 1940 due to the building of a highway, the new Salem Church was built in Bay Ridge. However, more research would be needed to confirm these indications.

In 1920 and 1940, almost all Danish NYC locations are in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

*Nordlyset* contained a weekly list of church services, lodge meetings, etc. *Nordlyset*, March 7, 1940. Image courtesy of the van Sand family.
with a few in the Bronx but there were also some notable changes between 1920 and 1940:

- In Brooklyn, the Danish locations in 1920 as well as in 1940 stretch from just across the Brooklyn Bridge, along the waterfront south to Bay Ridge. The two Danish churches, Our Savior’s and Salem, can be found in the same locations in 1920 and 1940, just about eight blocks apart, between Third and Fourth Avenue in the Gowanus area. Many meetings of Danish organizations take place, in 1920 as well as 1940, in Prospect Hall, which is located close by in Park Slope. Acme Hall, also in Park Slope, was also a meeting point in both 1920 and 1940.

- The middle part of Manhattan, from 14th Street to 61st Street is sprinkled with Danish business and meeting points in 1920 as well as in 1940. In 1920, there is a strong concentration of businesses that advertised in *Nordlyset* located at the southern tip of Manhattan. Many of these businesses are maritime-related. In 1940, there are still some businesses and two newspaper points of sale in that area, but not nearly as many as in 1920. The area from north of the Brooklyn Bridge to 14th Street is, based solely on newspaper ads, almost devoid of Danish businesses or meeting points during these years.

- Northern Manhattan and the Bronx appear to change a bit between 1920 and 1940. In 1920, there are several Danish locations in Harlem, including two places where fraternal organizations meet and a Danish cake shop. Across the river in the Bronx, there is a Danish church and the meeting location for the Danish Brotherhood lodge Cimbria. By 1940, three of these organizations meet farther south on the East Side between 86th and 106th Streets. According to a *Nordlyset* newspaper article, Trinitatis Church in the Bronx was in 1945 considering moving farther south to a more central location. There are no points-of-sale for *Nordlyset* north of 80th Street in 1943.

While these maps only provide snapshots of the Danish community as seen through *Nordlyset*, the maps show a clear geographical area
of Danish interest in a band along west Brooklyn relatively close to the waterfront, the southern tip of Manhattan, mid-Manhattan with a tongue into the Upper East Side/Harlem/the Bronx.

Figure F: Danish New York City in 1920.
The online map of historical Danish New York City can be accessed at https://bit.ly/DanishNewYorkPeak.

Figure G: Danish New York City, 1940.
In the period from 1891 to 1953, New York’s Danish community was both small and large. Compared with other ethnic communities in New York, it was small in terms of numbers, the Danes did not live
close together, and a sizeable number of Danish-born people appear not to have been part of any Danish associations. In such a big city, a few church buildings, an athletic club, a social club, an old people’s home, and a few restaurants and bakeries, did not make a strong visible imprint. However, New York’s Danish community was, at the same time, large. In 1920, about nine thousand Danish-born individuals lived in New York City, and in 1930, New York State was home to about seventeen thousand Danish-born residents, most of them living in New York City. From 1930 onwards, New York State was among the three most popular choices for Danes to settle compared with other US states. In addition to churches and old people’s homes located in New York and in nearby New Jersey, Danes formed multiple organizations which met regularly, and there were Danish-owned stores, restaurants, and other businesses that one could patronize. If one were looking for a Danish community, one could find it. As shown on the online map with Danish locations, a good place to start looking for that community at its numerical zenith would have been the western areas of Brooklyn, the southern tip of Manhattan, mid-Manhattan, and into the Upper East Side and the Bronx.

Looking at the history of Nordlyset, it seems evident that the newspaper helped the community grow and create a sense of belonging. One could say that the editors watered and provided nourishment for a small Danish garden growing in the big city, inviting its Danish-language readers into this garden. Applying Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities, which regards nations as a cultural construct created in part by language and printing, one could argue that the Danish-language newspaper helped create, define, maintain, and grow the imagined Danish community in New York.

Nordlyset existed throughout the peak years of Danes living in New York. Nordlyset’s income from subscribers and casual buyers, advertising revenue, and supply of local relevant events to write about were connected to the number of Danish-born people in its geographical area of focus. The newspaper also relied on community correspondents to supply content. But why did the newspaper begin in 1891 and not 1881 or 1901? And why did it fold in 1953 and not ten years before or after, or continue to this day like The Danish Pioneer?
As mentioned earlier, Consul Bech described the newspaper as the child of the editor and the community. When Volk founded the paper, he had a team of dedicated editors, financial supporters, and a growing community. When the last issue of the newspaper was produced, several of these aspects appear to have been destabilized. The number of Danish-born people in the area was declining. Due to the newspaper’s financial situation, the editors had to work for free, only fueled by passion for the project. Potential financial backers would need to be willing to make what appears to be a non-profit investment. Considering that the newspaper required a lot of work and did not offer much of a profit, perhaps it is not as much a question of how come the newspaper closed when it did as how it was able to survive for as long as it did. The answer to that question can most likely be found in the drive of the individuals who led the paper. If one is to believe the reports of their contemporaries, the successful editors all appear to have been individuals who stood out in the community for their drive and personality as well as their skills in writing and creating a newspaper.

If, in 1953, *Nordlyset* had secured financial backing, found the right editor, and transformed itself into a paper relevant for a larger group of people, could it have survived like *Bien* and *The Danish Pioneer*? In the 1950s when the newspaper folded, the Danish community in New York was changing, although it did not disappear entirely. There was still a relatively large number of Danish-born people living in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Ads in the newspaper show that there were still Danish churches, Danish lodges, and businesses in existence. However, it is possible that Danes in the area were becoming more assimilated and did not feel the need for a Danish-language newspaper. Maybe a larger percentage of the Danish-born people listed in the censuses were expats rather than immigrants. A move to the suburbs could also have taken readers farther away from the city’s geographical Danish anchors. However, the ethnic community anchors could have moved with them—and appears to have done so in at least one instance: at some point after 1940, a Long Island Danish Brotherhood lodge was created.101

Another aspect to consider is whether *Nordlyset* was still competitive in the 1950s. Van Sand wrote in 1953 that some subscribers had
not renewed their subscriptions due to the smaller number of pages in the newspaper.\textsuperscript{102} Danes in New York also had the option of subscribing to other Danish-American papers such as \textit{The Danish Pioneer}, which also included New York news. Since 1909, \textit{Politiken} in Denmark also offered a weekly newspaper for Danes abroad.\textsuperscript{103}

Around 1970, the number of Danish-born people in New York State fell below the number of Danish-born in the same geographical area at the time when Volk founded his newspaper in 1891, and it has fallen even more since then. Is there a Danish community in New York City and the surrounding area today? Or Danish circles at least? Someone living in New York today would likely be able to answer that question better than I can, but it is my impression that the answer is yes, in the sense that if one wants to find other Danish-born people to socialize and network with, one can find them.

The Danish Seamen’s Church in Brooklyn, a direct descendant of Our Savior’s Church, appears to be the most important ethnic Danish anchor in New York City nowadays, attracting both expats and permanent immigrants for religious functions as well as the church’s playgroup, mothers’ group, network group, luncheon club, Christmas bazar, and more.\textsuperscript{104} In addition, there are a number of Danish community forums, including business and professional networks,\textsuperscript{105} a parents’ group,\textsuperscript{106} and Facebook groups.\textsuperscript{107} The American-Scandinavian Foundation’s Scandinavia House\textsuperscript{108} appears to host a variety of Danish and Scandinavian activities, and there’s also a Scandinavian-New York Facebook presence.\textsuperscript{109}

In 2020, however, two long-time Danish institutions closed: the Danish Old People’s Home in Croton-on-Hudson\textsuperscript{110} and the Danish Athletic Club in Brooklyn.\textsuperscript{111} The old people’s home in Edison, New Jersey doesn’t function as an old people’s home anymore but it continues as a center of Danish American culture and history, offering meeting rooms to Danish American lodges and housing DANE: the Danish Archive North East.\textsuperscript{112} There are also Danish Brotherhood lodges that meet in Long Island and New Jersey,\textsuperscript{113} and Danish Sisterhood lodges in New Jersey.\textsuperscript{114} In addition to the Danish Archive North East, the Scandinavian East Coast Museum group also works to document New York City’s Scandinavian history.\textsuperscript{115} Finally, an article about Danish New York would not be complete without mentioning that a
number of Danish food establishments have opened in New York in recent years, making it easier for Danes and those with Danish roots in New York to satisfy a craving for Danish food.

Then as now, the Danish community in New York is made up of a very mixed group of people, and like in former times, many Danish-born people may not specifically seek out any Danish community. But while there is no Danish-language New York newspaper today, with the advent of the internet and social media, Danish-born people and people with Danish roots have effective new ways of finding each other, communicating, and possibly building community.

Endnotes

1 “Generalkonsul Bechs Tale ved Nordlysets Jubilæumsfest” [Consul General Bech’s speech at Nordlyset’s jubilee party], Nordlyset, October 16, 1941. All translations are the author’s own unless otherwise noted.
2 Editorial, Nordlyset, March 30, 1944.
4 Marzolf, 95-97.
5 Ibid, 151-79.
6 Ibid, 175.
8 Albert van Sand, “En kortfattet Oversigt over de Mænd, der har ledet Bladet [A brief overview of the men who have led the paper],” Nordlyset, October 2, 1941.
9 Georg Strandvold, ”Minder og tanker ved den Sorte Flod” [Memories and thoughts by the Black River], Nordlyset, October 2, 1941.
14 Ibid, 48-49.
17 Marzolf, 29.
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19 Eberlin, 131.


22 Eberlin, 131.

23 Ibid, 131-32.

24 The Grand Prospect Hall is on the National Register of Historic Places but its file has not yet been digitized: https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/AssetDetail?assetID=9d8be261-a8b1-4f3f-a6c5-a1929b065324.

25 Eberlin, 132.


29 Cavling, 189.


31 Van Sand, *Nordlyset*, October 2, 1941.

32 Cavling, 149-50.

33 Marzolf, 95.

34 Ibid.


36 Cavling, 188.


38 Eberlin, 132-34.

39 Eskesen.

40 Eberlin, 131-34.

41 Eskesen.

42 Van Sand.

43 Eskesen.

44 Marzolf, 137-38.

45 Van Sand.

46 Eskesen.

47 Ibid.
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70 Van Sand, Nordlyset, October 2, 1941.
72 Catrine Kyster Giery, “Nordlyset and the Greater New York Danish-American Community at War 1940-1945: Fighting for Denmark’s Freedom, for Uncle Sam, and for a favorable public opinion” (research paper, American Public University, 2020).
74 “Nordlyset’s jubilæumsaar” [Nordlyset’s jubilee year], Nordlyset, January 9, 1941.
75 Marzolf, 171.
77 “Nordlyset’s jubilæumsaar.”
78 Marzolf, 143.
79 Tom, “Nordlyset’s 50th birthday,” Nordlyset, October 9, 1941.
81 Van Sand, Nordlyset, October 2, 1941.
82 Marzolf, 171-72.
83 Albert van Sand, “Jeg trækker mig tilbage som Udgiver af Nordlyset [I withdraw as publisher of Nordlyset], Nordlyset, March 26, 1953.
85 Marzolf, 172.
86 Ibid.
87 Peter Freuchen, “Til Nordlysets læsere fra Peter Freuchen” [To the readers of Nordlyset from Peter Freuchen], Nordlyset, November 27, 1953.
88 Gansing.
89 Freuchen.
90 “Redaktionen i Boston” [The editorial office in Boston], Nordlyset, April 17, 1953.
91 Marzolf, 172.
93 To provide a snapshot of the geography of the Danish community during the years of most Danish-born people living in the city, a virtual interactive map was created. It can be viewed at https://bit.ly/DanishNewYorkPeak. The map is based on ads and the “social calendar” in
the March 4, 1920 issue and the March 7, 1940 issue of Nordlyset. These two issues were chosen to represent two of the years with the highest number of Danish-born people living in New York. Unfortunately, the author’s digitized copies of Nordlyset do not currently include the peak year of 1930.

94 “Nordlyset kan købes hos følgende Forhandlere” [Nordlyset can be purchased at the following retailers], Nordlyset, June 17, 1943.


97 Ibid.


102 Albert van Sand, “Nordlyset begynder en ny era” [Nordlyset begins a new era], March 26, 1953.

103 Per Debelsteen, “PolitikenWeekly runder 100 år” [PolitikenWeekly turns 100 years old], Politiken, January 9, 2009, https://politiken.dk/kultur/art4780823/PolitikenWeekly-runder-100-%C3%A5r.


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