

Tips to Help You Do Valid Research about Your Danish Ancestors Reprinted By Permission

Dennis, it will be nearly impossible for anyone (including us) to gather information about our Danish ancestors from various official Danish records unless we know and use their Danish names with Danish spellings. We must be willing to use Danish rules, think like a Dane, and view their culture through their eyes if we are to be successful in researching a Danish family tree. We cannot understand them or their ways using the reasoning that controls our thoughts, actions, and beliefs.

Until the 20th century there were no standard spellings in Denmark. The priests recorded the birth names either, as they desired, in the style familiar to them, or perhaps in a phonetic mode as they heard it being pronounced by the person who carried the baby to the christening font. They may even have spelled the same name differently from page to page or person to person. Today's Danes are really into both family history and computers in a big way. As various agencies transcribe and/or digitize the census and church records for availability on the Internet, they spell the people's names the way these appear in the original records. The only variance they use is for the names of their towns, cities, and geographical terms. They have standardized the spelling of these names according to the way they appear in an atlas or gazetteer of today. Also the records available on the Internet usually are "every-word searchable." Since the spelling of people's names has not been standardized for internet use, the way the name is spelled into the search window will result in a hit only if it is spelled as done in the Danish record for that event. You may have to try several variations of name spelling or use "wild cards" to find the information being sought

Possible problems that too many researchers of Danish ancestry have today is that they know very little about the history of Denmark, the social structure and culture of old Denmark, the immigration history of their ancestors, nor the LDS protocol of the early convert emigrant days. In case you want some background to help you understand my corrections and the COLDFACTS, I'll explain a little of the Danish situation below. This will be "the mallet on your head" as you mentioned, so listen up!!! I'm so glad you're such a teachable, likeable, interested person!

- As the foreign LDS converts began to arrive in Illinois and later in Utah, Joseph Smith and later, Brigham Young, knew all members of the day had to speak one language. This was necessary to survive, to live together in harmony, and to be taught the gospel concepts. Since the LDS people of the day spoke English, this language was the one to be spoken by all. The leaders also encouraged (emphatically) the emigrants become "Americans" in spirit as well. Most of the convert immigrants wanted to be American anyway. This is why they left their homeland and came to this country. The American language was English so all learned to speak it (sort of) and most of the Danes immediately anglicized the spelling of their names.

Informal research shows that very few of the ancestors of today's researchers told little of these happenings to their descendents. They learned English and forced their children to speak it also. Most never returned to the land of their birth. Our family is fortunate. My dad

(Leonard Andrew Nielson, Andrew's oldest grandchild) lived with Andrew and Karen for periods of time when he was quite young. By that time Andrew was already suffering from crippling arthritis. My dad would help Andrew with his farm work. Andrew talked to him about his family. My dad told the stories to his children. Aunt Bertha, daddy's oldest sister also knew a few of the happenings in Denmark and told these to her children, too. Had they not been told the story of Andrew's name change, and they not told it to us, it would have been most difficult to trace our family line beyond Andrew.

- Danish naming customs present problems for an unwary researcher today. Danish ancestry and the ancestral names that family members know today **CANNOT BE TAKEN AT FACE VALUE.** Anyone working with Danish family history needs a basic course in **Danish Naming Customs 101** even if they are just posting the names. This is especially true if they intend to do research or even understand someone else's research. The naming customs of the past days included the following:
- Until about 1850 Danish people did not have last names or surnames as we know them. They used patronymics, instead. In this naming system, a male child's patronymic or "efternavn" (English translation: "after name") was formed from his father's first name plus – sen (son). Since each of Niel Christensen's boys was a "son of Niel," each of their names was recorded as Niels' sen (English translation – "son") thus "NIELSEN." This is why Christen Nielsen has the NIELSEN "after name." He was Niel's son. A female child's patronymic was formed from her father's first name plus – datter (daughter) and so, since each of Niel's girls was "Niel's daughter," her name was recorded as NIELSDATTER. This also is why Andrew's mother, Ane Cathrine, has the patronymic, ANDERSDATTER on the Danish records. She was Anders' Poulsen's daughter.

The Danes dropped the possessive "s" in the patronymic (they don't use an apostrophe before adding the possessive – s like we do in English.). This is why NIELSEN and NIELSON have only one "s". The Swedes followed similar naming customs but they retained the possessive "s." Also, their word for "son" is "son" so Swedish patronymics nearly always have a double "s" and the -on. The Swedes didn't anglicize their names as the Danes did. Nielson would be Nilsson in Swedish.

- The first two male children received the paternal and maternal grandparents' names, respectively to imply ancestral honor. If both grandfathers or both grandmothers had the same name (many times this was true) and if at least two boys or two girls were born to the parents, the family would then have two sons or two daughters with the very same name.
- If one or all of these first two boys or girls died, the next child of that gender received the name of the dead child. I have seen some Danish family group sheets where there may be two, three, or more children of the same gender all having the same name. When this is the reason for the name duplication, either only the last one will have lived to maturity or another child of that gender was never born. If the name had significance or was especially well-liked, sometimes a later child would have been given the name and two or more siblings will have lived to maturity.

- By the onset of the 19th century and with the impending overpopulation of the country, the Danish government knew it had a “name” problem. Because of the naming customs prior to this, the names had become so hybridized that only about two dozen names were being used for first and for last names for both males and females. There could be perhaps 6 Ole Larsen’s or Karen Marie Jensen’s in the same parish and in each parish across Denmark.
- Because there were so many people of the same name in an area, the Danes would personalize their names. They either would add an identifier (occupation, personality trait, or physical characteristic, etc.) to their name, assume an unofficial descriptive name, or use an “official” name they simply liked better than their baptismal name. Their “church name – the first one listed on the record” may have never been used again. The descriptive name was used so that the correct person could be distinguished in a conversation or document. (Many peasants were illiterate before about 1750 or 1800.) Though an illiterate work force was one of the ways the nobility and Crown could keep the working class (peasants) controlled through serfdom (slavery.), the populace was an intelligent, quick-witted people

This is why Erik the Red was known as such. He had no surname because there was no such thing in that era of time. His given name was Erik and he had red hair so he became known as “Erik the Red”. And this is the reasoning behind the name, William the Conqueror, son of Robert the Devil. William’s given name was William (Guillaume in French) and he was the last conqueror of England, so his descriptive name became “William the Conqueror.” This custom was true of other countries in Europe at the time, too.

In 1812 the Danish government passed a law requiring families to choose a fixed surname that future generations should continue to use. City dwellers followed the law first. Country dwellers were slower to adopt the new system. As people adhered to the law most of them just kept the name listed on the church books of the time. I believe this may be why Anders (Andrew), his brother Niels, and their sister Mariane (Marie) all used the last name of NIELSEN by the time they immigrated in 1867. Upon arriving in Utah they then anglicized it to NIELSON, which is the name their descendants have used ever since.

Andrew and Mariane settled in Ephraim, Sanpete, Utah, USA, as did Niels when he immigrated seven years later. A huge proportion of the settlers there was of Danish ancestry. Mariane had used the name Marie long before she emigrated. Andrew’s brother, Niels, was referred to as Brickmason Nielson because he was a brick mason. In some records he is referred to as Niels Spendrup. Adding a parish name to a baptismal name was a very Danish thing to do. Since other men in Ephraim also were named Andrew Nielson, our Andrew added the identifier “Spendrup” as a middle name. Spendrup was the birth parish of their mother, it bordered the Gassum parish where Andrew was born, he worked in Spendrup parish as a young man, and he and Else were married there. Perhaps using Spendrup as an identifier was either a logical choice or a sentimental one. He continued using this name the rest of his life.

- Until late in the 20th Century, married women kept their maiden patronymic (later, their surname) after marriage. This is why Andrew’s mother, Ane Cathrine, always is referred to in the church records as Ane Andersdatter.

- Name extraction done by the LDS church to form the International Genealogical Index (IGI) began long before computers were in use and an even LONGER time before the Internet was conceived. Sometimes during this process and indiscriminately by family history researchers, female “last names” were changed from “-datter” to –“sen.” These should be recorded to match the official birth record.

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