

19th-Century Danish Cover Helps Locate Immigrant's Birthplace

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All American genealogists with immigrant ancestors face the question of where exactly their immigrant ancestors lived before coming to America. Place of origin information handed down within families and recorded in American census, church and vital records is often just the name of a country. Because most religious, census and other records in the home country involve a single community, a genealogist needs a specific location to search for an ancestor before his or her departure for America, as well as to continue searching for earlier generations, descendants and a possible visit. Family heirlooms may include old letters that provide a specific location, but many families do not have such letters. This paper describes how an envelope from a postal history collection helped locate an immigrant's home in Denmark.

Lewis Johnson emigrated from Denmark to the United States in 1857 with his parents and his brother

Christian.⁽¹⁾

In a Goodhue County, Minn., pioneer history, Lewis describes digging his house's foundation in the snow with his father and brother.⁽²⁾ As we trace Lewis back in time from the United States to Denmark, his family name changes from Johnson to Larsson to Jørgensen, reflecting both patronymic naming practices



Mid-19th-century cover, sent unpaid from Nakskov, Denmark, to Goodhue Centre, Goodhue County, Minn. (Photo courtesy of Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries)

of Denmark and immigrant family name changes made after arrival in the United States. Lewis appears in the 1860 U.S. census as Lewis Larsson, a farmer, living next door to his parents, John and Catherine Larsson, and his brother Christian.⁽³⁾ Lewis marries Martha Anderson (born in Wisconsin to Norwegian immigrants) in Goodhue County in 1866.⁽⁴⁾ Lewis (now Lewis Johnson), Martha, their first child, Lewis's parents and Christian appear together in the 1870 census.⁽⁵⁾

Mrs. Lewis Johnson of Goodhue Centre, Goodhue County, Minn., received a letter postmarked in Nakskov, Denmark, about 1870 (illustrated). That letter was sent unpaid and stamped "US Currency 12 [cents]," reflecting a 7-cent postage rate, plus a fine of 4 cents for lack of postage (payable as 11 cents in gold, or 12 cents in depreciated coins or notes).⁽⁶⁾ Nakskov is a town on the island of Lolland in the Baltic Sea in southeastern Denmark.⁽⁷⁾

We expected that Nakskov or a nearby village could be Lewis Johnson's birthplace. American sources state that he was born April 15, 1838.⁽⁸⁾ As Lewis and Johnson are not Danish names, a search was made in online digital images of Danish parish and census records in Lollands Nørre, the district which includes Nakskov, for a male child born April 15, 1838, with a name that could later appear in English as Lewis

Johnson.⁽⁹⁾ After searching 10 parish registers, a Hans Laurits Jørgensen, son of Jørgen Larsen Buk and Cathrine Hansdatter, born April 15, 1838, baptized April 18, 1838, was found in the Parish of Utterslev, six miles north of Nakskov.⁽¹⁰⁾ A brother, Rasmus Christian Jørgensen, was born Dec. 19, 1842, and baptized Jan. 8, 1843, at the same church to the same parents.⁽¹¹⁾ Laurits appears, as Lauritz, with his parents in the 1840 and 1850 Danish censuses, and worked on a nearby farm in the 1855 census.⁽¹²⁾ The family was not found in the 1860 census of Denmark. Laurits and Rasmus Christian Jørgensen would become Lewis and Christian R. Johnson after their arrival in the United States. Subsequent to our search, a descendant of Christian reported that she has a copy of Christian's passport showing Utterslev as his birthplace.

In conclusion, Lewis Johnson's birthplace was found near the postmark's location. While the envelope's postmark was not identical to Lewis' birthplace, it enabled us to focus our search in a particular area. The postmark was used in combination with census, birth and family information from Denmark and the United States to identify Lewis Johnson's birthplace. While this envelope came from the immediate area of an immigrant's birth place, one can not assume that all letters sent to the United States from another country were sent from an immigrant's birthplace. This paper illustrates the potential benefits of collaboration between postal historians and genealogists. Postal historians with similar covers in their collections from the 19th and early 20th centuries are encouraged to submit photos to the Philatelic Genealogy website (www.philgen.org). ■

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Endnotes

1. Lewis' year of arrival, shown in 1900 U.S. Census, Goodhue, Goodhue County, Minn., Enumeration District (ED) 42, p. 6B, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) series T623, roll 764. Christian's arrival shown as 1856 on p. 8A of the same census. Parents' arrival inferred from Lewis' account of digging a house foundation with his father (see footnote 2) and presence of both parents in the 1860 U.S. Census (see footnote 3). Viewed on www.ancestry.com.
2. *Goodhue County, Minnesota, Past and Present* (Red Wing, Minnesota: Red Wing Printing Company), 1895, pp. 71-72. Viewed on www.ancestry.com and <http://books.google.com/>.
3. 1860 U.S. Census, population schedule, Township 111, Range 15, Goodhue County, Minn., p. 103, NARA series M653, roll 570. Viewed on www.ancestry.com.
4. Martha's birth place, her parents' country of origin and year of marriage calculated from number of years married shown in 1900 U.S. Census (see footnote 1). Maiden name was found in Diane Woodward, Angell, Phillips, Etherton, Money dataset, updated Dec. 14, 2001. Viewed on www.rootsweb.ancestry.com.
5. 1870 U.S. Census, population schedule, Goodhue, Goodhue County, Minn., p.9, NARA series T132, roll 4. Viewed on www.ancestry.com.
6. Robert A Siegel Auction Galleries, The Charles J. Starnes Collection, Sale 945, Lot 3656. Viewed on www.siegelauctions.com/.
7. Viewed on <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nakskov>.
8. Diane Woodward, op. cit.
9. Danish State Archives. Danish churchbook and census images are online at: <http://www.arkivalieronline.dk/>. Transcribed censuses (if available) are at http://www.ddd.dda.dk/ddd_en.htm.
10. Utterslev churchbook, 1823-1853, pp. 70-71. Viewed on <http://www.arkivalieronline.dk/>. Parishes in Maribo County: <http://www.dis-danmark.dk/kort/kortmari.htm>.
11. Utterslev churchbook, 1823-1853, pp. 90-91. Viewed on <http://www.arkivalieronline.dk/>.
12. 1840 census of Denmark, Maribo, Lollands Nørre, Utterslev, Utterslev, et Huus, 66, FT-1840, B2477. 1850 Census of Denmark, Maribo, Lollands Nørre, Utterslev, et Huus, 62, FT-1850, B0049. 1850 Census of Denmark, Maribo, Lollands Nørre, Utterslev, Tjørneby, and Utterslev sogn, Maribo amt, 90 en gård, FT-1855, C6347. Viewed on the Danish State Archives website (see footnote 9).