

## About Denmark - updated by RAC 12 Apr '16

### About Denmark, Part 1 - Basic Vocabulary - Some Danish Words Used in Robert Christiansen's Family and Local Histories

Danish (plural)	English	meaning
Danmark	Denmark	the country
København	Copenhagen	the capital
Dansk	Danish	the language
Sjælland	Zealand	the big island
Jylland	Jutland	the big peninsula
sogn (sogne)	parish	area served by one church (there are over 2000)
kirk	church	
amt	county	no longer used
herred	district	area between sogn and amt - no longer used
kommune	municipality	local administrative area (98 in number)
region	region	since 2007 one of five large administrative areas
by	town or city	
landsby	village	
bebyggelse	settlement or subdivision	
købstad	market town	no longer used
slot	palace or castle	
gaard	farm or yard	
kirkegaard	churchyard or cemetery	

## **About Denmark, Part 2 - Denmark's Political Organization - Then and Now**

The 19th century Denmark of my great-grandparents was divided into *amter*, with each *amt* (county) divided into *herred* and each *herred* (district) divided into *sogne*. Each *sogn* (parish) had a Lutheran *kirk* (church). A rural *sogn* might include a *by* (town) and a number of *bebyggelsen* (settlements).

Early Denmark had a number of officially-chartered market towns. Most rural *sogne* did not contain a market town.

In my great-grandparents' time a rural *sogn* might also include several school districts in which students of both genders received primary instruction.

For example, my great-grandfather, Christian Christiansen, was born in Store Linde Bebyggelse, Karise Sogn, Præstø Amt, Denmark. Karise Sogn surrounds Karise By, and includes Store Linde Bebyggelse as well as other *bebyggelsen*.

In 1970, Denmark was reorganized into a smaller number of *amter*, thirteen in number. *Amter* were divided into *kommuner*, totaling 270 in number.

In 2007 the *amt/kommune* system of 1970 was abolished in favor of five regions which today contain 98 *kommuner*.

## **About Denmark, Part 3 - The Danish Alphabet**

In addition to the twenty-six letters A through Z, the Danish alphabet contains three extra letters, namely Æ, Ø and Å (in lower-case, æ, ø and å). In alphabetical lists the extra letters occur after Z.

In my writing I replace å with aa, as in *gaard* rather than *gård* and *Aalborg* rather than *Ålborg*.

On a conventional typewriter, one often replaced æ by ae and ø by oe.

On a Mac computer, hold down the Option key and tap comma or o respectively to produce æ and ø.

I have found that Danish spellings are not always standardized. Two examples:

“k” vs “ch” A 19th century Danish family might shift back and forth between the spellings “Kristen” and “Christen”.

“ks” vs “x” For instance, the name of a small industrial town and the surrounding area on the Stevns Peninsula south of Copenhagen is generally spelled “Faxe” but often spelled “Fakse”.

## About Denmark, Part 4 - Denmark's Geography - An Overview



(map courtesy of lib.utexas.edu)

Geographically Denmark consists of the Jylland (Jutland) peninsula and numerous islands. The largest island is Sjælland (Zealand), on which the capital København (Copenhagen) is located.

## About Denmark, Part 5, Common Danish Surnames

The most common surnames in Denmark all end in “sen” as shown in the following table of the top 21 Danish surnames found at a defunct rootsweb webpage in 2004.

Over the years many Danish-Americans replaced the “sen” with “son”. In the right column, I include other common spelling changes made by Danish-Americans.

PLACE	DENMARK SURNAME	TOTAL	COMMON U.S. SURNAME VARIANT
1	Jensen	303,089	Johnson, Jenson
2	Nielsen	296,850	Nelson, Nielson, Nelsen
3	Hansen	248,968	Hanson
4	Pedersen	186,913	Petersen, Peterson
5	Andersen	172,894	Anderson
6	Christensen	133,033	Christenson
7	Larsen	129,662	Larson
8	Sørensen	124,175	Sorensen, Sorenson
9	Rasmussen	104,130	Rasmusson
10	Jørgensen	98,354	Jorgensen, Jorgenson
11	Petersen	92,189	Peterson
12	Madsen	70,176	Madson, Madison
13	Kristensen	65,074	Christensen, Christenson
14	Olsen	54,044	Olson
15	Thomsen	40,514	Thomson
16	Christiansen	40,224	Christianson
17	Poulsen	34,204	Paulsen, Paulson
18	Johansen	33,120	Johanson, Johnson
19	Knudsen	31,977	Knudson
20	Mortensen	31,252	Mortenson
21	Møller	30,870	Miller

I have found from experience that Americans sometimes confuse the surnames “Christensen” and “Christiansen”. In Denmark these are different names, with different pronunciations, as are the given names “Christen” and “Christian”.

## **About Denmark, Part 6 - 19th Century Danish Surnames**

Two hundred years ago the Danish system of assigning surnames differed in three respects from that used in the United States.

### **The Patronymic System**

19th century Denmark generally used patronymic surnames. For example, in 1836 my great-great-grandfather Hans Jensen named his son "Peter Hansen" (Peter the son of Hans). From around 1830 to 1870, the patronymic system gradually faded. Thus, in 1883, Peter Hansen named his son "Laurits Christian Hansen" instead of "Laurits Christian Petersen".

Patronymic names died slowly in rural Denmark. For example, if a Danish man named Jens Andersen had a son named Peter born in 1860, the son might sometimes call himself Peter Jensen (his patronymic name), and at other times use Peter Andersen (his modern name).

### **Naming of Women**

At the beginning of the 19th century, most Danish women ended their surnames with the suffix "datter" (the Danish word for daughter) instead of "sen". During the 19th century, this usage faded away.

### **Maiden Names**

In the past, married Danish women generally kept their maiden names. This is still the norm in Denmark. However, in Danish census transcriptions from around 1900 the wife is sometimes enumerated using the husband's surname.