



From America to Norway: Finding a place of origin

Anka Schjerven Magee, B.S. AG®

Mageeanka@familysearch.org

The objective of this class is to help persons find their ancestors' place of origin in Norway using family and US sources, then verifying the information found with sources in Norway.

Emigration from Norway (as we know it) started in 1825 when a small group of Norwegian Quakers left Norway on the sloop "Restaurationen". Since then around 900 000 persons have left Norway to start a new life in America. Their reasons for leaving has been as varied as the persons themselves.

Tracing immigrant ancestry back to Norway can be challenging. Norway has no nationwide index to birth, marriage or death; these records were kept on the parish level. However, by combining family, home, and US sources the "journey back to Norway" can be exciting.

We need to start close to home.

Start by checking the following:

- ✓ The importance of your ancestor's last name. If the names does not end in –sen or –son (a non-patronymic name), the name could be a clue to a place in Norway. Many Norwegians took their farm name as their last name (often of sentimental reasons), and that could be a valuable clue as to where they came from in Norway. If this is the case, check a Norwegian gazetteer to determine if the name appear as a place (city, farm) and where it is located in Norway.

A great gazetteer to use is the 1972 Postal Guide for Norway or "Norsk Stedsfortegnelse" which can be accessed online at:

http://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Norway_Gazetteers

- ✓ Do you have any living relatives that might have information you do not have? This would be a great time to reconnect with grandparents, distant cousins, aunts, uncles etc. In today's technological world make sure you include social media in your searches.
- ✓ Are there family letters, documents, pictures, Bibles? Pictures can have stamps on the front or back which can give you a place to start looking for your ancestor. Letters, of course, can have names and addresses written on front or back of the envelope, and lots of great information can be imbedded in the text.

- ✓ Vital records. Look for any documents written in a foreign language. They could be birth, marriage or death records with information on a place of origin and or names of parents included. Obituaries can give clues to place of birth as well as possible siblings.

Having checked family and home sources we then go to US records. Let us start with the following:

- ✓ US Federal censuses. The 1900 census is the first US census that gives the year of immigration, which can be very helpful in your search for your ancestors. 1900 and later census records will also indicate if a person had been naturalized.
- ✓ Passenger lists. Immigration records can give information on age and last place of residence in a foreign country.
- ✓ Naturalization applications and petitions. May give clues to place of birth in Norway and when a person had lived there.
- ✓ SSDI. Can identify/verify a date of birth.
- ✓ Military records. Service and pension records, draft registration records will often give a person's complete birth date including a place of birth.
- ✓ LDS records. If your ancestor is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints there are membership records and ward histories that can give you valuable information.
- ✓ Norwegian-American Lutheran records. Most Norwegians were Lutheran and attended Lutheran churches when they came to America. They would often bring a "Flytnings attest" - moving document with them from their parish priest in Norway. This could have important information in it; dates and places of birth, confirmation, and marriage. The new priest in the US often transferred that information into his parish registers here.
- ✓ Newspapers from the area where an ancestor settled can be a source of information. These searches are very worthwhile your time. Even if you don't find a birth place you might find out interesting stories about your family or neighborhood which can make your family "come alive" to you!
- ✓ Local county histories. County histories can provide detailed information on a person's origin as well as stories about them and their families. Like newspapers the county histories can also have stories and pictures you might not find in other sources.
- ✓ Funeral home records and cemetery records can have information given by the person contacting the funeral home for their services.

When you have hopefully found clues to your ancestor's place of origin in Norway, you can start exploring the various Norwegian records, then identify and gather your Norwegian ancestors.

Helpful websites:

The "Digitalarkivet.no": The most wonderful site for Norwegian family history research! This is where you will find parish registers, census records, probate records, emigration records, land records, court records, and so much more!! <https://www.digitalarkivet.no/>

Norway-Heritage: Hands across The Sea: A great place to look for Norwegian emigrants 1825-1925. Passenger lists and emigrant ships; pictures of ships, documents, etc. This site has great articles showing what the crossing might have been like for your ancestor – daily life, children, health and sickness, ships and disasters, etc. <http://www.norwayheritage.com/>

Ancestry.com

Rowberg Files: 200.000 + clippings of biological articles on Norwegian Americans from Norwegian-American newspapers, church and lodge magazines, obituaries, etc. Main time period 1914-1980's. <https://naha.stolaf.edu/genealogy/index.htm>

Norwegian American Genealogical Center and Naeseth Library (NAGC). Formerly known as: Vesterheim Genealogical Center and Naeseth Library is located in Madison, Wisconsin, and is a great place to contact with questions regarding early Norwegian immigrants. This center has valuable family records and genealogical material dating back to the 1870's.- <http://www.nagcnl.org/>

Published Books:

There are published books that can have great value to you in your search. One in particular is a work on early emigration from Norway to America.

- Ulvestad, Martin: *"Nordmænderne i America deres historie og record"* (Norwegians in America Their History and record). Two volumes, published in 1907. This book describes many early Norwegian immigrants (often with a small bio) and usually includes a place of origin in Norway. Volume I give a short history of the early Norwegian settlers alphabetically by state, then by county within each state. Vol II is an index to many early immigrants, many not mentioned in Vol I. These volumes can be located at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah (FHL book 973 F2u pt.1 and 2; film 0896612, item 1).

Another great book discussing the early Norwegians in America is:

- Naeseth, Gerhard B. Norwegian Immigrants to the United States. A Biographical Directory, 1825-1850. Five Volumes. Published 1997. This book can be located at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah (FHL book 973 D3nn)

Universities and Historical Societies

Universities and Historical Societies in the Mid-West and North-West often have large Scandinavian collections. These collections can include Bygdebøker (farm books), letters, biographies, county histories, obituaries, and newspapers.