



Looking for your Norwegian ancestors?

Tracing your lineage is a fun and rewarding challenge that requires some basic knowledge of past centuries. This brochure from the National Library of Norway, the National Archives of Norway and DIS-Norge, the largest genealogy association in Norway, will walk you through the available resources and how to get the most out of them.

Norwegian immigration to North America

The very first Scandinavians in America were Leif Eriksson and his crew of 35 men and women, who wintered in Newfoundland around the year 1000 AD. Although accounts of the expedition were well-known for centuries, they weren't archaeologically proven until the 1960s.

Norwegians were also present during the early colonization of New England in the 17th and 18th centuries, along with Dutch, French and Swedish settlers.

Large-scale, organized Norwegian immigration began with the arrival of 53 Quakers from Stavanger in 1825, who settled by Lake Ontario. In their wake, nearly 900,000 Norwegians relocated to the United States. Per capita, this number of emigrants is second only to Ireland.

How do I track down my ancestors?

Norwegians have always loved keeping records, and chances are good that you'll find the exact name, age and occupation of your Norwegian ancestors going back centuries. What happened to a person after he or she arrived in America, however, will not be recorded in our archives.

To trace your lineage, you will need the name and birthplace of a relative born in Norway. Typically, this will be the person in your family who originally came over. In other words, in order to fully utilize our Norwegian resources, you'll need to do a little research at home first.

Once you have a name, there are several sources available through which you can track his or her lineage. An understanding of old Norwegian naming customs will make your search easier.

Old Norwegian naming customs

Norwegian names today are composed of a first and last name, as in other western countries, but in the 19th century, a name acted as an important clue to someone's place on the family tree.

The typical 19th century Norwegian name would be composed of three parts: The given name, the patronymic and the farm name. Let's take an example and break it down: Peder Johnsen Berg, a typical Norwegian farmer of the 1800s.

Given names were normally of Northern European origin, often adjusted to suit local dialects. Also, spelling was not standardized, meaning that Peter, Petter, Peder or Per may very well be the same person recorded by different clerks.

The second name, the patronymic (Greek for "father's name"), is what most people associate with Nordic names today. These are the names that end in "-sen" or "-son", meaning "son of", thereby communicating who your father was.

Consequently, Peder Johnsen is the son of John. His sister will be called Johnsdatter (John's daughter), and his son will be called Pedersen. Upon arrival in the States, this would commonly have been altered to Peterson. Two Petersons are therefore not necessarily related, they both just happened to have a father named Peter.

People would also include a farm name. As with the patronymics, these were not names in the modern sense. They were more or less an address. If you moved, the name changed. If Peder moved from the Berg farm to the Vik farm, he would be known as Peder Johnsen Vik, or some variant spelling, from then on.

Practically all farm names were derived from a defining geographical feature. The most widespread names in Norway even today are Berg (mountain or outcropping), Haug (hillock), Hagen (outfield) and Dal (valley). Compound names, like Øvreberg (Upper Berg) or Djupdal (Deep Valley), continue to be common.

An encyclopedia of Norwegian farm names, developed in the early 20th century, can be digitally accessed here: tinyurl.com/farm-names

By the early 1900s, the old naming system was fading away due to industrial development and urbanization. Its fate was sealed in 1925, when hereditary family names were made mandatory. To this day, most Norwegian last names are patronymics or farm names from that period.

Which records are available?

When you have the name of a Norwegian-born ancestor to go on, quite a few sources can assist in your search for him or her – and your lineage stretching further back in time.

Parish registers

Beginning in the mid-1600s, Norwegian priests kept records of baptisms, marriages and funerals. Today, these records (called *kirkebøker*: parish registers) are valuable first-hand genealogy sources. Surviving parish registers are kept by the National Archives' regional repositories (state archives). Most of these can be digitally accessed online: media.digitalarkivet.no/en/

A record covers a parish, its content ordered chronologically. In order to find a specific entry, you need to know *where* and approximately *when* the baptism, marriage or funeral took place.

What might the parish registers reveal? As many uneducated farmers did not know their own birthday, dates (and years!) of birth may vary widely in different sources. Therefore, by virtue of a priest's presence at important life events, parish registers are considered the most reliable sources of dates. They may also contain the names of people's parents and their homestead, and even godparents or witnesses, revealing other branches of the family.

Censuses

Norway has held nationwide censuses on a regular basis. Censuses of 1801, 1865, 1875, 1891, 1900 and 1910 are available online along with older lists of males back to 1664: www.arkivverket.no/digitalarkivet

What might the censuses reveal? A person's address at a given time, as well as the names of other people in the household and their family relation. They often offer some clues on a person's birthplace or -date, which may help you to locate them in the church records.

Bygdebøker

The *bygdebøker* (literally "village books") are invaluable sources of Norwegian family history. Most were commissioned by the municipality and written by people with great local history knowledge. They may include a general history of the area or a compilation of extracts from church records and censuses, listing the owners and histories of farms in the area. Not all parts of Norway are covered by *bygdebøker*, and there are no exact equivalents for Norwegian cities. The National Library has a complete collection of *bygdebøker*.

What might the village books reveal? If your ancestral farm is listed in a bygdebok, chances are you'll find the portion of your family tree that ran the farm – sometimes as far back as the first written records.

Resources in the USA

Ancestry.com (subscription site). Scanned and indexed ECLA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) church records – a large number of the Norwegian immigrants were Lutheran. These records include both births/baptisms, marriages, confirmations and often lists of the congregation.

Findagrave.com. A resource for burial places in the USA, sometimes accompanied by obituaries or memorials of the deceased that provide a birthplace or -date.

Familysearch.org (free). Indexed church records from Norway. These should be compared with the original scanned church records at arkivverket.no/digitalarkivet, as errors can occur in indexed material.

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