

Introduction to Danish Land Records

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Background:

During the Middle Ages the majority of Danish peasants were freeholders, free residents of their own farms. Around 1500 it became common for farmers to place themselves under the jurisdiction of a noble, giving title to the farm to the noble. Thus, the farmer became a tenant, meaning he received the right to use a farm, either for life or a term of years, paying a yearly rent. The rent was paid in kind or by performing farm labor for the noble. In turn, the tenant received protection from the noble. Over the years, the number of freeholders decreased. The rural population was divided between the landowners, some private peasants, tenant farmers, smallholders and laborers. In 1688 90% of the Danish population lived in the country and 95% of them were tenant farmers.

The most common land records of genealogical value are discussed below.

Deed of Tenure (fæstebrev).

During the 17th Century it was a common practice for the noble to draw up a deed of tenure by which the tenant entered into a contract of tenancy of a copyhold farm belonging to an estate. In the deed the terms of conveyance of the lease were entered, mainly the payment of the rent. In 1719 it was determined that the deed of tenure would be drawn up in two copies, one to go to the tenant and the other one to the noble. It was also required that the deeds be entered in a book. In many cases a copyhold farm passed to the tenant's son when the tenant farmer could no longer work the farm. In some cases, a widow might be allowed to work the farm. The most important genealogical value of deeds of tenure involves information about relationships and often record prior residence.

In most cases the books are indexed, usually by first names. Where the original books were not indexed, the Danish regional archives compiled indexes. It has been estimated that around 80-90% of these books have survived. Where the books have not survived, there may be other records that can substitute for them.

Many of the deeds of tenure (*fæsteprotokoller*) are available for browsing at FamilySearch under: Denmark, Estate Records, 1436-1964 as well as on microfilm at the Family History Library.

Land Tenancy (jordebøger).

These records consist of registers of the landed property belonging to private persons or institutions, which contain information about the rent to be paid by each farmer. In those cases, where these records have survived for a long period, it is possible to follow the succession of farmers on a particular farm. In some cases, sons took over after their fathers, thus establishing relationships.

These records list the yearly dues to be paid to the landlord and were kept by the owner of the estate.

Many of these records are available on microfilm at the Family History Library and some are available for browsing on FamilySearch under: Denmark, Estate Records, 1436-1964.

Land Registration (matrikel).

In 1662 all lands in the kingdom of Denmark were recorded and their values converted to an exact rate. The purpose of the land registration was to devise a fair and uniform system of taxation.

The 1662 plan failed and in 1664 it was replaced with a revised listing of property owners.

In 1688 a new listing of properties was compiled and each farm was listed by number and by the names of each owner and lessee. This listing also made reference to the 1664 property owner or lessee.

The 1688 list is a register of the land belonging to a person or with the name of the lessee and the amount of yearly tax in money or kind due from a lessee or landowner.

Generally, the land registration lists covered the years 1662, 1680, and 1688, the latter being the most complete. However, in some parts of Denmark you may find lists for other years.

These records list the names of the owners as well as the leaseholders for each property.

Some of the records are available on microfilm at the Family History Library for various years.

Deeds and Mortgages (skøde og panteprotokoller).

These are records of land ownership, sales of property, and transfers of property. These records begin as early as 1551, but they were not kept on a regular basis until 1738. They were recorded in court records (*tingbøger*). The records list the individuals involved in the transactions, descriptions of the land, and dates of the transactions. These records are valuable in establishing relationships. Also contained in these records are entries regarding legal confirmations as to the receipt of an heir to money from a private inventory (probate record).

Many of these records are available on microfilm at the Family History Library. They are also online at FamilySearch under “Denmark Deeds and Mortgages, 1572-1928” (as of March 2016 only for Sønder Jylland).