



Wisconsin Historical Society
P R E S S

Rasmus Sørensen and the Beginnings of Danish Settlement in Wisconsin

Author(s): William J. Orr

Source: *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Spring, 1982, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Spring, 1982), pp. 195-210

Published by: Wisconsin Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4635632>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Wisconsin Historical Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*

Rasmus Sørensen and the Beginnings of Danish Settlement in Wisconsin

By William J. Orr

IN the annals of American immigration history, Rasmus Sørensen is generally acknowledged to be the first and perhaps most influential promoter of Danish settlement in the United States. A religious revivalist, educational reformer, and democratic agitator whose career in Denmark repeatedly foundered in the face of public apathy, entrenched tradition, and, most of all, his own personal shortcomings, he came to view Wisconsin especially as the very embodiment of that broadly diffused prosperity, social equality, religious freedom, and democratic liberty that his own country so sorely lacked. First as a publicist, then as a settler, and finally as an emigration agent, he contributed, as few individuals have done, to the Danish influx to this state. His own life well reflects the economic distress, social tensions, and political frustrations that compelled so many other Danes to depart for foreign lands. And his endeavors demonstrate that, however important were the impersonal forces that impelled mass migrations, persuasive and forceful personalities could also play a decisive part.¹

¹The principal English-language studies of Danish immigration include: John H. Bille, "A History of the Danes in America," in the *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters*, XI: 1–41 (1896); and Kristian Hvidt, *Danes Go West* (Skørping, Denmark, 1976), as well as Hvidt's more scholarly *Flight to America: The Social Background of 300,000 Danish Emigrants* (New York, 1975). On Danish migration to Wisconsin, see especially Thomas P. Christensen, "Danish Settlement in Wisconsin," in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 12:19–40 (September, 1982); and Frederick Hale, *Danes in Wisconsin* (Madison, 1981).

Rasmus Møller Sørensen was born on March 8, 1799, of a well-to-do peasant family in Jelling, near Vejle in southeastern Jutland. Despite his humble origins he was blessed with alertness, intelligence, and the opportunity to become a schoolteacher, one of the few routes of social advancement open to the lower classes in Denmark during this era. Between 1816 and 1818 he attended the Vesterborg Seminary, which had been founded by enlightened aristocrats who aspired to transform rude peasant youths into loyal, dedicated teachers who would in turn elevate their less fortunate compatriots. Already, in the confines of this somewhat paternalistic institution, the young man showed something of that defiance which would be the hallmark of his entire subsequent career as his teachers chided him for "lack of modesty." After graduation, he accepted his first appointment in Aarhus, in his native Jutland, where he soon collided with the local clergy over the use of textbooks, a potentially damaging dispute from which he extricated himself in 1821 by taking a position at Brandstrup School in Loland. In 1827, at the invitation of Count F. A.

Despite his role in promoting emigration to America and Wisconsin, the literature on Rasmus Sørensen in English is very scanty, being limited to a few references in Hale, *Danes in Wisconsin*, and short sections in Hvidt, *Danes Go West*, 75–78, and Enok Mortensen, *The Danish Lutheran Church in America* (Philadelphia, 1967), 23–24. There are more extensive Danish-language accounts in *Danske i Amerika* (2 vols., Minneapolis and Chicago, 1907–1908), I: 337–346; P. S. Vig, *Danske i Amerika* (Blair, Nebraska, 1900), 24–29; Rasmus Andersen, *Banebrydere for Kirken i Amerika* (Brooklyn, 1923), 114–139.



WHi (X3) 37626

Caroline Christine Sørensen.

WHi (X3) 37619

Rasmus Sørensen.

Holstein, one of Denmark's most renowned aristocratic reformers and Christian philanthropists, he accepted an appointment at Venslev School in Zealand, the principal Danish isle. Here he was to remain until 1844 and gain general recognition as a tireless and dedicated, if not wholly innovative teacher.

In 1821 Sørensen became engaged to the fifteen-year-old Caroline Christine Johnsen, whom he married a year later. Despite the disapproval of those who felt that this earnest young man was being unfaithful to his own philosophy by wedding a mere "child," this proved a stable and apparently happy union from which ensued twelve children, eight of whom survived.² In the nineteenth century, as today, teachers did not draw princely salaries; financial hardship often dogged the Sørensen family and contributed, at least in part, to Rasmus' later decision to emigrate to America. In

spite of hardships, theirs was apparently a close family, as nothing better attests than the fact that, with exception of a single daughter, the entire family emigrated in close succession, for the most part settled nearby one another, and often even married into the same families.

RASMUS SØRENSEN was himself the volatile and contradictory embodiment of both appealing and repellent traits. Despite his own good fortune in rising to higher social standing, no easy feat in the highly stratified European society of his day, he never forgot his own lower-class origins. His tireless, unceasing, and often selfless efforts to elevate the condition of Denmark's masses—whether as preacher, pedagogue, politician, or promoter of immigration—remained the dominant commitment of his entire life. A devout Christian, he was unwavering in his dedication to principle.

But grave personal flaws weighed upon his whole career and repeatedly deprived his incessant labors of any success they might otherwise have attained. As the least of his

²For Sørensen's early life and career, see especially his autobiography, *Mit Levnetsløb og dets levende Berørelse med Almueskolens Historie i Danmark indevaerende Aarhundredets første Halvdeel* (Copenhagen, 1847); also Kund Banning, *En Landsbylaerer: Skolelaerer Rasmus Sørensens ungdom og laerergerning* (Copenhagen, 1958), and Marius Sørensen, *Skolelaerer Rasmus Sørensen* (Vegle, 1908).

deficiencies, he was a conceited bore who blithely assumed that others naturally shared his own fascination with the most mundane of his activities. Even worse, he was rash, quarrelsome, fanatically self-righteous, and unremittingly vitriolic in his denunciation of all who dared to differ with him. He especially nurtured an abiding resentment of Denmark's privileged orders—the aristocracy, clergy, and educated classes—whose arrogance he hated and whom he suspected, often rightly, of pursuing aims at variance with the welfare of the common people.

In view of his abrasiveness, it seems paradoxical that, while Sørensen often alienated the more educated or independent-minded of his collaborators, he always retained considerable influence with Denmark's masses, outlasting other ever-recurrent rebuffs and setbacks. In the absence of any substantial description of the man by his contemporaries, one can only conjecture as to the reasons for his appeal to this element of Danish society. Certainly, no one who has read his many long-winded, rambling, and monotonous tracts would credit the man with eloquence or charisma. On the other hand, this tall, gaunt figure did cut an imposing physical presence. Doubtless, too, he was gifted with the "common touch," the ability to relate issues—be they complex political reforms or the bounties of the remote New World—in terms the average man could readily comprehend. Possibly, his unquestioned sincerity and sheer indomitability elicited trust from the more impressionable of his followers.

It was as a religious revivalist that Rasmus Sørensen first staked out for himself a reputation as one of Denmark's most relentless and strident agitators. During the eighteenth century, "rationalism," which dismissed the mysterious, miraculous, and dogmatic features of traditional belief and sought to emphasize the "reasonable" essence of Christianity, had dominated Danish Lutheranism. Inevitably this diluted doctrine provoked a counterreaction during the early nineteenth century, the age of religious awakening throughout Europe and America. Beginning in the 1820's such theologians as N. F. S. Grundtvig and Jacob Christian Lindberg launched the assault on rationalism in the name of a revitalized and fundamental Christianity. No less significantly, pious Danish lay and clergy, especially

in the countryside, began, in defiance of the Conventicle Act of 1741, to meet in their own private "godly assemblies" where they could nurture their own unadulterated faith, untainted by the alleged impiety of the official state church.³

Although Sørensen as a youth had been relatively indifferent to religion, during his stay at Aarhus he fell under the influence of Grundtvig's writings and experienced a religious conversion.⁴ Later he joined the "godly assembly" movement and wrote various tracts in which he extolled these meetings as a reflection of disenchantment with the established churches, those stone houses with their dead congregations. Exuding boundless faith in the depth and sincerity of popular piety, he even held open the prospect of separation from the state church should it refuse to abjure its ungodly ways. He was soon to demonstrate that bent for unfettered polemics which would prove the most salient (but ultimately self-defeating) accompaniment of his entire career. To the dismay of contemporaries, he even dared in 1833 to denounce Pastor Hans Bastholm, a leading rationalist, as the perpetrator of "unchristian, ungodly, and mendacious" doctrines and went so far as to impugn his adversary as a tool of Satan!

Underlying Sørensen's diatribes was a deep-seated enmity toward the educated classes and the clergy. The simple lay folk must no longer permit such false prophets to lead them astray, but should rather assume direct control over their own spiritual life and affairs. Clearly this impudent young teacher had overstepped the bounds acceptable even to the relatively lenient Danish government of his day. For his outburst against Bastholm he was fined the equivalent of fifty dollars and required to submit future writings to the censor.⁵

Such penalties only succeeded in forcing

³Hal Koch, Bjørn Kornerup, *Den danske Kirkes Historie*, vol. 6 (Copenhagen, 1954), 268ff.; P. G. Lindhardt, *Vaekelse og kirkelige Retninger* (Copenhagen, 1959), 18ff.

⁴Banning, *En Landsbylaerer*, 49ff.

⁵Rasmus Sørensen, *Et Ord om gudelige Forsamlinger som holdes uden for den offentlige Gudstjeneste* (Copenhagen, 1832); Rasmus Sørensen, *Vor Christne Troes Forsvar imod Pastor Bastholms Angreb med Bevis for, at hans Ytringer, i hans Betragtning om Hindringer for Christendommens Udbredelse, ere uchristelige, ugudelige og lognagtige* (Copenhagen, 1833), 9, 11, 13–14, 19, 23–24; Sørensen, *Mit Levnetsløb*, 234.

him to moderate his tone, but they failed to halt his writing, speech-making, and travels to other congregations through Denmark. Over the course of the 1830's, due to the involvement of Sørensen and Rasmus Ottesen, another Zealand revivalist, the conventicles, which once had been primarily devotional, assumed ever more radical overtones. For Sørensen, religious orthodoxy and purging the church of unbelievers were no longer sufficient. Rather he was pursuing the more drastic and ambitious goal of complete congregational autonomy and the separation of church and state. By the middle of the decade he broke with his former allies, Grundtvig and Lindberg, indignantly charging that their real aim was to subjugate the laity to a new form of clerical domination. Evidently he hoped to exploit religious issues to galvanize popular discontent and thus enhance his own leadership of a separationist movement with a more openly democratic character. In the end, he overestimated the extent of popular support. Not only had his abrasiveness and intolerance antagonized many, but other revivalists clearly preferred to follow pastoral leadership and remain within a doctrinally revitalized state church. Sørensen, who had once played so central a role in the revival movement, now found himself increasingly isolated and ineffectual.⁶

Frustrated in his drive for leadership in the religious arena, Rasmus Sørensen began during the 1840's to involve himself in more strictly secular affairs. Thus he supported the temperance movement through publication and dissemination of a tract entitled *What Is the Cause of the Growing Weakness of Man's Soul and Body?* Ardently committed to the education of Denmark's peasant masses, he had frequently held evening classes for adults and now tirelessly espoused the need for adult schools. Although he was not directly responsible for the creation in 1844 of Denmark's first "folk high school" at Rødding in Schleswig, he would found a similar institution a few years later. Not without reason have the Danes, who have achieved some renown in this domain, honored him as a pioneer of adult education.⁷

In time Rasmus Sørensen discovered a new cause, one particularly suited to his background, talents, and aspirations, to which he would devote himself with a fervor equal to his earlier involvement in the revival movement,

and which for a time would bring him even greater influence and notoriety.

LATE in the eighteenth century the Danish government had abolished serfdom and introduced sweeping agrarian reforms. On the whole, these measures were salutary in diminishing, if by no means eliminating entirely, the once oppressive control of the landed aristocracy and in improving the living standards of independent peasant proprietors. Unfortunately, some groups like the small holders and tenant farmers did not benefit as greatly. They remained under humiliating personal dependency to their landlords, whose jurisdiction included even the prerogative of whipping the recalcitrant. Deprived of the limited safeguards to the land which even serfdom provided, they were still obligated to till the lord's estates, and now, moreover, must contend with uncertain leases and the ominous prospect of ever-escalating rents.⁸ Their condition was a precarious one indeed, and out of their simmering resentment would soon arise a movement of immense import for the subsequent course of Danish history.

Living as he did in daily contact with the impoverished rural masses, few in Denmark sympathized more fervently with their plight than Rasmus Sørensen. And as the scion of a more vigorous and independent-minded strain in the Danish peasantry, he was in many ways ideally suited to be an agrarian leader. His growing involvement with this cause coincided with what appears to have been a crisis in his personal and professional life. After the death of his benevolent and supportive patron, Count Holstein, he discovered that his benefactor's son lacked the father's commitment to education. Feeling himself "called to go forth without knowing where," he impetuously resigned his position at Venslev School in January, 1844, and sent his now sizeable fam-

⁶Sørensen, *Mit Levenetsløb*, 231-251; Knud Banning, *Degnekristne: En Almuerejsning. En Studie over den gudelige Vaekkelser paa Sydvestsjaelland med saerligt Henblik paa Skolelaerer Rasmus Sørensens Virke* (Copenhagen, 1958), 76ff., 212ff., 253-261.

⁷Sørensen, *Mit Levenetsløb*, 245, 250-251.

⁸Carl Theodor Zahle, *Den danske Husmand* (Copenhagen, 1910), 31-50.

ily to Copenhagen. Bolstered by severance pay and the support of an unnamed “friend from outside the peasant class,” he was now free to devote himself full-time to political activity.⁹

Earlier, in 1842, he and Jens Andersen Hansen, a shoemaker, had founded *Almuevennen* (The Common People’s Friend), one of Denmark’s first radical-democratic newspapers, which soon became the vociferous principal organ of the burgeoning agrarian movement. Soon after, he joined with the even more radical Peder Hansen and sallied forth to the Danish countryside to rouse the peasantry. Initially their agitation went unrewarded. Illiterate, deferential toward authority, and generally demoralized by their low social station and poverty, the peasants responded very reticently. But in time both men gained their confidence, and soon they were faithfully attending political harangues, defying noblemen and officials, and adding their signatures by the thousands to petitions presented them. In 1844, in an address to King Christian VIII, Sørensen provided the movement a four-point program: universal military service; an end to special tax privileges for the aristocracy; the provision of opportunities for lease holders to buy their own land, at a price set by a special commission; and the abolition of tithes. In addition, he advocated the creation of a joint stock company, which would buy up large estates and distribute them among the peasantry, and the widening of representation in Denmark’s consultative estates so as to include peasant deputies. He also encouraged the peasants to found their own fire insurance societies.

By 1845, in the view of the Danish government, the agrarian movement had assumed very alarming dimensions. Meetings sponsored by Sørensen and Hansen were attracting as many as eight thousand participants. The peasants themselves were growing ever more insubordinate, halting work, and occasionally even resorting to violence. So, on November 8, the King issued a circular prohibiting further assemblies. The results of this decree were disastrous. In the opinion of some historians, it destroyed much of the still-lingering faith the common people reposed in their ruler. No less ominous, the regime’s heavy-handedness antagonized middle-class

liberals who had hitherto kept their distance from agrarian agitation but now lent it open sympathy and support. Faced with a universal storm of protest, Christian VIII was forced to withdraw the circular only half a year later.

Great indeed had been Rasmus Sørensen’s contribution to a cause which, over the long run, was a powerful spur to the development of Danish democracy. Yet he was to enjoy little reward for his endeavors. Once more his abrasiveness and intractability made it nearly impossible for others to work with him. Hardly, for example, had *Almuevennen* been established than Sørensen and J. A. Hansen were at odds, with the former charging fiscal improprieties and the latter, probably with good reason, rejecting his colleague’s rambling and long-winded articles as unsuitable for publication. Increasingly too, Sørensen accused rivals of sabotaging cherished projects like the fire insurance association. Furthermore, his alleged “absolutism,” an old-fashioned conviction that the peasants should cultivate royal support for their program, clashed with the other leaders’ determination that the movement should maintain a more independent democratic character. In 1846 *Almuevennen* formally repudiated its one-time founder and collaborator. Nevertheless, it did so with a heavy heart and a sad tribute to Sørensen’s impressive contribution: “It was his call to bring the dead to life.”¹⁰

IT is difficult not to see a connection between Sørensen’s setbacks and his growing fascination with America. Twice now, positions of influence and leadership had slipped from his grasp. Despairing that the oppressed masses would ever free themselves from the clutches of aristocratic and clerical domination, and their own grinding poverty, he fixed his gaze ever more intently on that vast, distant land which seemed to

⁹Sørensen, *Mit Levnetsløb*, 278–279, 296.

¹⁰Sørensen, *Mit Levnetsløb*, 252–282; Zahle, *Den danske Husmand*, 64–100; J. A. Hansen, *Et lidet Tillaeg til Skolelærer Rasmus Sørensens Levnetsløb* (Copenhagen, 1848); Aage Friis, Axel Linvald, M. Mackeprang, *Det danske Folks Historie* (8 vols., Copenhagen, 1927–1929), VI: 466–477; Niels Neergaard, *Under Junigrundloven: En Fremstilling af det danske Folks politiske Historie fra 1848 til 1866* (2 vols., Copenhagen, 1896–1912), I: 31–52; Hans Jensen, “Bondecirculareret af 8. November 1845,” in *Historisk Tidsskrift*, ser. 9, vol. 2: 171–232 (1921–1924).

promise the liberty and abundance that wretched and tiny Denmark had so signally failed to provide.

During the mid-1840's the still largely unsettled Wisconsin Territory was a major destination for scores of settlers—mostly Yankees but including sizeable numbers of German, Irish, and Norwegian immigrants as well. This period also witnessed the first substantial Danish influx, so that by the end of the decade there were already small but established settlements in New Denmark in Brown County and in Hartland in Waukesha County. Numerous Danes were also dispersed among larger colonies of Germans and especially Norwegians, with whom they shared a common religion and linguistic affinity.¹¹

Of the earlier Danish pioneers in Wisconsin, Laurits Jakob Friert (1808–1862) was especially important in shaping Rasmus Sørensen's decision to emigrate.¹² Between 1840 and 1843 this shadowy figure had edited *Dagen*, a respected Copenhagen daily which the Danish government had heavily subsidized in hopes of fostering loyal and conservative opinion. Despite this backing Friert proved unable to finance the paper. In 1843, harassed by creditors, he fled the country, under considerable scandal, to evade impending bankruptcy.¹³ After a brief sojourn in New York he settled in southeastern Wisconsin, where he established close contacts with Gustaf Unonius, himself an early pioneer of Swedish immigration, and with the Nashotah Seminary, later attaining some prominence as an Episcopal layman. He also practiced law in Juneau and ran a business in Watertown where, his past unknown, he died a respected member of the community.¹⁴

In 1847, still under indictment in his homeland, Friert published in Christiania (now Oslo) a *Handbook for Emigrants to the American West*.¹⁵ Warning against both hot, fever-ridden, snake-infested Texas with its slave



L. J. Friert.

WHI (X3) 37621

economy as well as densely settled Illinois with its expensive land, he counseled prospective immigrants to move to Wisconsin instead. In his view the then prevalent fears of poisonous reptiles, severe winters, and fevers were overdrawn. Amidst a detailed description of Wisconsin topography, Friert presented a generally favorable—and, in the opinion of many, an overly sanguine—view of a state but partially settled where immigrants would find reasonably priced land, fertile soil, abundant harvests, and a moderate climate. Friert's *Handbook*, it would appear, became one of the standard guides for emigrants from Norway and had, as we shall see, considerable impact in Denmark as well.¹⁶

The steady trickle of Danish migration took on personal significance for Rasmus Sørensen in 1844, when his own son Martin Frederik (1823–1889), distressed by the poverty that awaited him in his homeland, departed for the

¹¹Hale, *Danes in Wisconsin*, 3; *Danske i Amerika*, I: 252ff.; see also *A Pioneer in Northwest America 1841–1858; The Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius* (2 vols., Minneapolis, 1950–1960), I: 286, 289.

¹²For a short sketch of his life, see Andersen, *Banebrydere*, 89–94.

¹³Poul Jensen, *Presse, Penge og Politik 1839–48* (Copenhagen, 1970), 52–82.

¹⁴See the obituary in the *Watertown Democrat*, January 1, 1863.

¹⁵L. J. Friert, *Haandbog for Emigranter til Amerikas Vest med Anvisning for Overreisen samt Beskrivelsen af Livet og Agerdykningsmaaden naermest i Viskonsin* (Christiania, 1847).

¹⁶Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America, 1825–1860* (Northfield, Minnesota, 1931), 256–257.

New World.¹⁷ A talented and well-educated young man, conversant with Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, Martin first settled in New York. There the Danish consul, who was also a close friend of Bishop Jackson Kemper, the great Episcopal organizer and missionary to the Northwest, befriended him; as a result, young Sørensen left two years later for Wisconsin where he enrolled in Nashotah Seminary.¹⁸ In 1849 he was ordained and later received his first parish, a largely Norwegian congregation near Ashippun, and after 1852 a mostly American one at nearby Mayville, both in Dodge County. In 1856, on the personal urging of Kemper himself, he transferred to St. Mark's Church in Waupaca, then a principal locus of Scandinavian settlement, where he conducted for many years a flourishing and well-regarded ministry among both Danes and Americans.

IN 1847 Rasmus Sørensen read Fribert's *Handbook*, and its account, corroborated by Martin's letters, converted him into an ardent advocate of emigration. That same year he published a short tract, heavily based on the Fribert guide, wherein he extolled Wisconsin as a refuge from all the afflictions of his own country. Where in Denmark the shortage of land and general eco-

nomic distress made it virtually impossible for landless peasants to build up a sizeable patrimony, Wisconsin's land was cheap and plentiful, and a mere three days' labor sufficed to support an entire family for a week. Poverty was all but nonexistent; theft and violence very rare. Wisconsin's government was democratic and her congregations free to select their own pastors. Taxes were light; there were no tithes. Such was the friendly and egalitarian ambience that hired labor was referred to as "help" rather than "servants."

"More I need not say," wrote Sørensen, "to show the advantage of emigration by some Danish peasants to Wisconsin in North America, where they will find Norwegian and Swedish brothers who have not only paved the way but will gladly welcome us with open arms as neighbors; for there one will find great helpfulness, good will, and service to all newcomers." With conditions in this state so appealing, Sørensen announced that he himself intended to emigrate and invited others to join him.¹⁹

So much of his effusive description was sheer hyperbole. None other than Pastor Claus Lauritsen Clausen, one of the very first and most renowned of Danish settlers in Wisconsin, who had learned of Sørensen's tract from a countryman, denounced it as "misleading twaddle." He was appalled that Sørensen and Fribert had underestimated travel expenses, exaggerated harvest yields, and discounted the very real prevalence of debilitating fevers, even while falsely holding out the prospect of short, mild winters. Prudently, he admonished that emigration was a decision to be taken only after careful deliberation and without unrealistic expectations about what America really had to offer.²⁰

These warnings, however, failed to deter Sørensen, who in a rejoinder continued to depict Wisconsin in the most favorable light.²¹ Jobless and faced with growing financial bur-

¹⁷For the most part, the following section is based on Andersen, *Banebrydere*, 95–113, an especially valuable account since the author later lived in the area of Sørensen's ministry and also corresponded with him as well as others who knew him.

¹⁸At first, the attraction of Episcopalianism for so many Scandinavians such as Unonius, Fribert, and then Sørensen, who all came from a predominantly Lutheran milieu, may seem surprising. Yet both the Lutheran and Episcopal churches do share a similar hierarchical structure; in comparison with both the Reformed and Baptist churches, they are alike conservative in doctrine and liturgy. Many early Norwegian settlers, especially, neglected by their own church, were often persuaded by their fellow countrymen that the differences between the two denominations were insignificant. In turn, American Episcopalians, with Bishop Kemper at their head, proved eager to extend the church's mission among Scandinavians. See State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Archives and Manuscripts Division [hereinafter SHSW], Jackson Kemper Papers, vol. 36, folder 109, Erick Helgeson, et al. to Jackson Kemper, January 16, 1855; also Charles Breck, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck, D.D.* (New York, 1883), 4, and Axel Friman, "Gustav Unonius and Pine Lake: Joining the Episcopal Church," in the *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, XXXIX: 21–33 (1978).

¹⁹Rasmus Sørensen, *Om de udvandrede Nordmaends Tilstand i Nordamerika, og hvorfor det vilde vaere gavnligt, om en-deel danske Bnder og Haandvaerkere udvandrede ligeledes, og bosatte sig sammesteds* (Copenhagen, 1847), 15.

²⁰C. L. Clausen to P. Rasmussen, September 6, 1847, in *Fyens Stiftstidende*, nos. 26 and 27, November 26, 1847.

²¹Rasmus Sørensen, "Om den gode Overenstemmelse mellem de Uddrag, Skolelaerer R. Sørensen har meddeelt af Friberts Bog om Amerika, navnlig om de norske Mybgyggers Tilstand i Wisconsin, og den Beretning Hr Claus

dens, his own resolve remained unshaken. Not without a touch of self-pity he lamented that although "there lives in Denmark hardly any man who knows so many or is so well known by his countrymen than Rasmus Sørensen," the path of service had been a "breadless" one all the same, and that the need to support his family left him no choice but to emigrate, an intention he would carry out in March of the following year.²² Once more this tireless organizer began to tour the countryside, this time preaching salvation through emigration. Eventually he convinced some fifty of his countrymen to accompany him. The most important of his recruits was the young Frederik Rasmussen Hjorth, who became a pioneer settler in Wisconsin and in later decades would play his own formidable part in promoting Danish settlement to the state.²³ All seemed in readiness when sudden events intruded to interrupt these plans.

IN the spring of 1848, in the wake of a deep depression and long-standing social and political discontent, Europe erupted in revolution. In the upheaval that convulsed the continent, not even tiny Denmark was spared. In March, mass demonstrations in Copenhagen forced King Frederick VII to appoint a liberal ministry and promise sweeping constitutional changes. To compound disorder and confusion, the efforts of Copenhagen nationalists to incorporate the hitherto semi-autonomous Duchy of Schleswig, an area of mixed Danish and German nationality, into the monarchy provoked a revolt, followed by an invasion of the German Confederation headed by militarily powerful Prussia. There ensued an intermittent and often bloody conflict which lasted well into 1850.

As these events, so crucial to Denmark's destiny, were unfolding, Sørensen, Hjorth, and fifty other Danes were in Hamburg waiting to embark for America. Upon learning

what was happening at home, Hjorth and the others decided to proceed with their voyage.²⁴ As for Sørensen, he had originally planned to depart alone, earn a living as a teacher among the Norwegians in America, and then return to Denmark to bring back his family. But now he worried that the war with Germany might sever all communications with his homeland and family. So he promptly returned to Copenhagen, postponing emigration for another four years but initiating a new interlude of political activism. Indeed, one would suspect that this indomitable agitator readily sensed the fresh opportunities presented by the freer atmosphere now prevailing in Denmark and was only too eager to pursue anew the educational and political aims that had eluded him in the years before the Revolution.

Convinced of the need for a new order which would bring king and people closer together without the meddling of selfish aristocratic intermediaries, Sørensen ran in the summer of 1848 for the constituent assembly but lost, so he claimed, in a rigged election. Undaunted, he founded in 1849 a "Society of Friends of the People" and edited intermittently a short-lived society *Organ*. An incessant spokesman for mass education, he at last gained both royal funding and peasant support to establish in Uldum, in his native Jutland, the first adult high school in the region. Unfortunately, the war in Schleswig and the Prussian invasion of the peninsula in the summer of 1849 interrupted both his journalistic and pedagogic endeavors. Ever the tireless traveler, he was on the continual move between the islands and Jutland, preaching, politicizing, and soliciting support for his school project.²⁵

In December he won a seat in the National Parliament established by the Constitution of June, 1849. He proved an energetic deputy who delivered well over a hundred speeches on all manner of subjects during the assembly's two-year session.²⁶ Above all, he became perhaps the most outspoken opponent of Denmark's Schleswig policy. As a Christian

Clausen, Praest for nogle af de norske Setlementer samstedts, for nylig har meddeelt i *Fyens Stiftstidende*," in *Kjøbenhavnsposten*, 1847, no. 293, 1170-1172.

²²Sørensen, *Mit Levnetsløb*, 299-300.

²³SHSW, Fritz William Rasmussen Papers, copy of F. R. Hjorth to H. P. Andersen, November 25, 1899. See also *Danske i Amerika*, I: 258, 259.

²⁴*Danske i Amerika*, I: 259.

²⁵Rasmus Sørensen, *Enden paa Rasmus Sorensens "Organ for hans Skildring af Rigsdagsforhandlinger," der udgjør Slutning paa Beskrivelsen af hans Levnetsløb i Danmark* (Copenhagen, 1852), 1-22.

²⁶Thomas Larsen, *En Gennembrudstid* (4 vols., Copenhagen, 1917-1934), II: 56-57.

pacifist, Rasmus Sørensen hated war, just as he abhorred that spirit of national hatred which was beginning to poison the politics of Europe. At the "Casino Meeting," a well-attended assembly of March, 1848, he had deplored, amidst hissing and heckling, the prospect of "dragging people into antiquated nationality struggles," and berated those who would forget fundamental human rights, for whenever it was a question of these "it is irrelevant whether we speak Danish or German."²⁷ Courageously, but perhaps foolhardily, he continued to condemn the war, laying the responsibility on the German and Danish aristocracies as well as on liberal officialdom, which were oblivious to the sufferings inflicted on the common people, both Danish and German, who shared none of the nationalistic foibles of the intellectual elite and longed only for peace.²⁸ Sympathetic as his pacifism may seem from a twentieth-century perspective, it nevertheless isolated him at a time when his countrymen were singlehandedly contending with vastly superior invading forces ensconced on native soil.

Increasingly estranged from the mainstream of Danish politics, hampered by the war from fulfilling his educational projects, Rasmus Sørensen was becoming ever more disenchanted with his predicament in Denmark. Above all, he was discouraged by a popular following which, for all its adulation, still failed to match his own level of commitment. As he explained: "He was not tired of traveling, or tired of speaking and writing for the people; but he was tired of the fact that the people, who were really always happy to hear or read him and felt uplifted, enlightened, and strengthened all to the good thereby, was itself too tired to raise its own hand and feet merely a step or two in the same direction where his hand and feet had made self-sacrificing steps a hundredfold—and this was the outward cause for his emigration to America."

Meanwhile, still other sons and daughters from his sizeable family were leaving for America, and a steady stream of letters from Wisconsin urged him to abandon his fruitless endeavors and join his children abroad. In 1852 he declined to run again for his parlia-

mentary seat.²⁹ Taking up anew his old resolution, he departed at last for the New World.

IN April Rasmus Sørensen, his wife, four daughters, and a few friends—seventeen Danes in all—sailed from Hamburg. Notwithstanding his lavishly over-detailed and tedious account, the voyage was, apart from a few complaints over the quality of the ship's fare and minor tensions between German and Danish passengers, a largely uneventful one. Supported by a royal subsidy and contributions from friends in parliament, he and his family could afford to travel in first cabin and were thus spared the typical immigrant travails of passage in steerage. In June the *Washington* docked in New York whence he and his followers proceeded by rail and boat to Detroit, Chicago, and Milwaukee. At journey's end he settled in Ashippun Township near his son Martin.³⁰

At last Rasmus Sørensen dwelled in the land whose benefits, sight unseen, he had touted so enthusiastically; and after his arrival his ardor remained undimmed. In various letters and tracts—in minute, dispassionate, and hence persuasive detail—he portrayed Wisconsin as a state of bounteous fertility with cheap and abundant farmland. He visited several Danish communities as far north as Brown County, meeting fellow countrymen whom his writings had encouraged to emigrate, and related how many who in Denmark had toiled in the ranks of the propertyless classes now owned flourishing farmsteads and ample livestock or held well-paying jobs in sawmills or as railway workers. Artisans too—and particularly smiths, wheelwrights, tailors, and cobblers—could be assured of higher wages. In Wisconsin opportunities even abounded for servants: maids could readily find husbands, and farm hands hardly needed to labor more than four summers before they would have saved enough to buy their own land.³¹

²⁹*Ibid.*, 22–24.

³⁰Rasmus Sørensen, *Første Brev til mine Venner og Landsmaend i Danmark indeholdende en Beskrivelse af min Udvandringsreise til Amerika og af mine der gjorde første Erfaringer* (Copenhagen, 1853).

³¹*Ibid.* 69; Rasmus Sørensen, *Andet Brev til mine Venner og Bekjendte i Danmark, indeholdende en Beskrivelse af Forfatningen, Tilstanden og Leveveiene i Wisconsin i Nordamerika* (Faaborg, 1855).

²⁷Neergaard, *Under Junigrundloven*, I: 123.

²⁸Sørensen, *Enden*, 5–12.

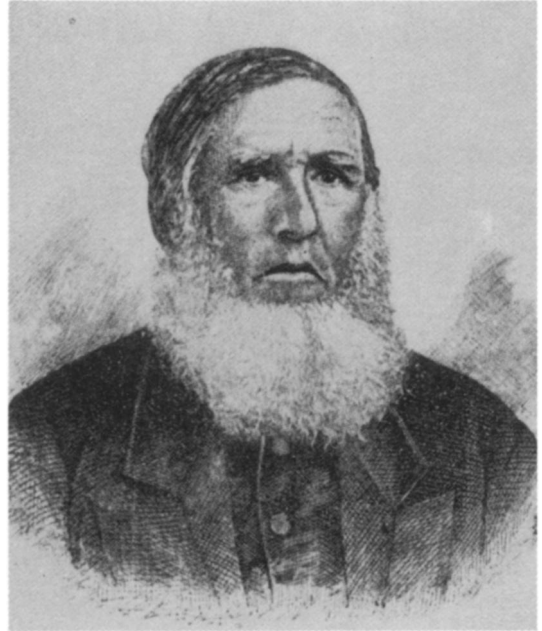
By all evidence, Wisconsin did indeed prove a real boon to the Sørensen family. Rasmus, especially, who had once experienced no little anxiety in supporting his family, could be gratified by the good fortune his numerous children enjoyed in America. Even as Martin was achieving distinction in the ministry, his next eldest son Carl Jakob was on his way to becoming a prosperous lumberman and farmer first in Wisconsin and later in the St. Paul area, just as the youngest, Adolph, was beginning to show his ability in business. The eldest daughter Hanne married, as did Martin, into the prominent Norwegian-American Gasmann family, while two sisters, Trine and Agathe, both wed American professional men, as did another daughter, Sørine, who also found a position as a teacher in a women's normal school. Only one daughter, Mine, eventually chose to return to Denmark after her impoverished but devoted fiancé came over to marry her and—over no little protest from her father—bring her back to Copenhagen. Long accustomed to earning his livelihood by pen and book, Rasmus Sørensen now plunged eagerly into farming, clearing and cultivating forested acres on Martin's farm.³²

In 1856 he followed Martin north to Waupaca County, settling in the township of Scandinavia, then a major center of Norwegian settlement. The first few years of his sojourn in America seem prosaic compared to his restless career in Denmark. For the time being he was content to farm, travel, teach, and serve as an Episcopal lay reader in Martin's congregation. Initially he made no impact on the Scandinavian community. Accounts of early settlers, while they refer to Adolph's success in establishing a thriving general store in the area, make no mention of his far more famous father.³³ Yet it was probably inevitable that this energetic and contentious spirit should eventually force his way into public attention—once more in a fashion that alienated rather than won him new adherents.

Sørensen's involvement stemmed from

³²Sørensen, *Andet Brev*, 19–21; *Danske i Amerika*, I:347–349.

³³Malcolm Rosholt, "Two Men of Old Waupaca," in *Norwegian-American Studies*, XXII: 75–103 (1965), esp. 103; Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *Frontier Parsonage: The Letters of Olaus Frederik Duus Norwegian Pastor in Wisconsin, 1855–1858* (New York, 1979), 81.



WHi (X3) 37618

Elling Eielsen.

longstanding controversies first arising in the church of Norway and subsequently transplanted to the Middle West along with the first wave of Norse migration. Early in the century, following the inspiration of the great preacher, Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771–1824), this land underwent a profound religious revival which in its orthodoxy and adversion to eighteenth-century rationalism, its stress on human sinfulness and conversion, its democratic character, and its suspicion of established church authority much resembled the "godly assemblies" of Denmark where Rasmus Sørensen had first gained renown. After Hauge's death, the more fiery and intransigent Elling Eielsen (1804–1883) traveled the length of Norway and throughout Scandinavia preaching repentance and rebuking the state clergy, colliding repeatedly with civil and religious authorities. In 1839 he emigrated to America, where he became one of the first and a highly popular itinerant preacher among the newly arrived Norwegian settlers of Wisconsin and Illinois.

In turn, the Lutheran Church of Norway, alarmed by lax conditions in America, attempted to restore its lapsed and shaken authority, culminating in 1853 with the foundation of the conservative Norwegian Synod.

Inevitably, this group with its high church ritual, sacramentalism, exaltation of pastoral authority, attachment to the language and traditions of the Norwegian homeland, and political conservatism clashed with Eielsen's rival "Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" which, by contrast, emphasized internal piety and good works, encouraged lay preaching, espoused reforms such as temperance and abolition, and promoted the greater use of English in religious services and literature. There ensued a most unedifying dispute in which each side impugned not only the orthodoxy of its adversaries but their motives and personal integrity as well.³⁴

Eielsen and Sørensen had been close friends ever since 1837 when the two men had preached together and the Dane and his patron, the Countess Holstein, had interceded on the Norwegian's behalf after his arrest by Danish authorities for illegal evangelizing.³⁵

IT was hardly surprising, then, that this one-time revivalist should see in the Norwegian Synod the same brand of hypocrisy, smugness, arrogance, elitism, and authoritarianism he had once decried in the clergy of his homeland. In 1858, ending long years of relative obscurity, Rasmus Sørensen entered the fray with a tract ponderously entitled: "The Following Important Question: Is It God's Word and the Bible, in Accordance with Which We Ought to Judge the Other Christian Congregations Here in America, or Is It the Norwegian Clergy's Judgment on the Same in Their *Kirkelige Maanedstidende* (Church Monthly) Here in the Land on Which We Norwegian and Danish-Americans Should Base Our Judgment?"³⁶

In view of the religious freedom enjoyed in America, he expressed outrage at the claim of the Norwegian clergy and "a few Germans in

St. Louis in Missouri" to hold a monopoly on the truth and at their presumption in condemning other Christians as wild sectarians and heretics. Defending Eielsen's right and competency to preach, Sørensen concluded with the reminder that in America there was no state church which might dare to infringe on congregational and pastoral autonomy.

In the fall he broadened the scope of his attack, raising the very sensitive issues of education and language. A staunch assimilationist, he extolled the English-language "common schools" for their efforts to bring immigrant children into the mainstream of American life. The Norwegian-language parish schools, on the other hand, would reduce their pupils to "Norwegian Indians in America" whom other Americans would inevitably treat as "outcasts and trash."³⁷ He railed against the Norwegian clergy's determination to maintain these parochial institutions as proof of a clerical power mania which aimed at establishing a "priestly kingdom in America where all others are erract sects and dangerous heretics who must not taint their Norwegian sanctity."³⁸

Inevitably such vituperation elicited a reaction in kind. The Norwegian ministry, with A. C. Preus at its head, ominously warned of Sørensen's dubious association with Eielsen, questioned his theological solidity, and reminded readers that this firebrand was not a Lutheran at all but an Episcopalian. Preus, in particular, defended the right and need of the Norwegian-American community for linguistic and cultural cohesion and deplored the disorganized, undisciplined, and irreligious public schools.³⁹

Norwegian-Americans, it would appear, mostly shared the outlook of their pastors. *Emigranten*, the journal in which Sørensen had initiated the school and language debate,

³⁶The Danish original, while evidently lost, is extensively reprinted in Mørstad, "Elling Eielsen," 166–170.

³⁷See Arthur C. Paulson and Kenneth Bjørk, "A School and Language Controversy in 1858," in *Norwegian-American Studies and Records*, X: 76–106 (1938), esp. 84. This article includes translations of a few of the many articles that ensued as a result of Sørensen's polemic.

³⁸*Nordstjernen*, February 22 and April 14, 1859.

³⁹A. C. Preus, "Nogle Ord i Anledning af Rasmus Sørensens Forsvar for Ellingianerne og Angreb paa den lutheriske Kirke," in *Kirkelig Maanedstidende*, IV: 42–46 (March–April, 1859); Paulson and Bjørk, "School and Language Controversy," 93–99; *Emigranten*, November 29, 1858; *Nordstjernen*, February 1, March 22, 1859.

³⁴J. Magnus Rohne, *Norwegian American Lutheranism up to 1872* (New York, 1926), 9–157; E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian Americans*, vol. 1: 1825–1890 (Minneapolis, 1960), 13–160; Clarence J. Carlsen, "Elling Eielsen, Pioneer Lay Preacher and First Norwegian Lutheran Pastor in America" (Master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1932).

³⁵Sørensen, *Mit Levnetsløb*, 243–246; E. O. Mørstad, *Elling Eielsen og den "Evangelisk-lutherske Kirke i Amerika"* (Minneapolis, 1917), 54–65.

refused to publish some of his later, more vitriolic diatribes. As the paper reported, his articles had prompted a "deluge" of letters, largely hostile, from those who resented the prospect of deculturalization. Then, too, as the comments of one reader would suggest, his very nationality made him suspect to many Norwegians whose own homeland had for centuries suffered under the yoke of Denmark.⁴⁰ For Rasmus Sørensen, long accustomed to the support and even adulation of the common people, this repudiation must have been disheartening indeed. By the spring of 1859 he abandoned the struggle with reassurances that he had never meant to suggest that Scandinavian peoples should totally jettison their language and culture.⁴¹

In the meantime the indefatigable Dane struggled to recoup and extend his influence by founding an independent journal. Already in the spring and summer of 1859 he was soliciting support for an *Organ for Religion, Agriculture, and Politics* which would spread enlightenment among the Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes, yet also complaining of disappointing advance subscriptions.⁴² Late that year he began to publish one of the first Danish-language journals in the United States, which quickly expired in the first half of 1860 after only five issues.⁴³ A perusal of the *Organ* readily reveals why it was so short-lived. Turgid, rambling, prolix, and given to excessive recounting of his personal activities, it was the very embodiment of the worst traits of its sole contributor. Yet amidst the verbose and soporific religious homilies, tired polemics against the Norwegian clergy, outdated appeals for fire insurance societies, and tedious descriptions of farming practices in Waupaca County, one can spy occasional sections which do nonetheless reveal Rasmus Sørensen's acculturation and perception of his new homeland. He admitted that though he read "American" well, he seldom spoke it.

Hitherto his political involvement had consisted exclusively of voting in local elections. Contemptuous of the opportunistic Democratic party, he backed the Republicans, though, in general, he regretted that politics in the United States was too dependent on parties and a professional political caste. On one issue, though, he waxed with special fervor. Adducing mostly scriptural arguments, he denounced slavery as an abomination.⁴⁴

IT was not Rasmus Sørensen's destiny to figure as a major political or community leader among the Scandinavians of Wisconsin. The political and social discontent which had propelled him, in spite of all his personal shortcomings, to a position of prominence in Denmark was largely absent in the United States. His sallies into religious-educational controversies and journalism all proved abortive. For a time he retained some influence with the Norwegian-language weekly, *Nordstjernen*, but with its absorption in 1860 by its rival, *Emigranten*, which was hostile to him, he lost yet another forum for his opinions.⁴⁵ In view of his inordinate egotism, it is to his credit that these setbacks did not blind him to the undeniable merits of his adoptive homeland. Once he returned to his native land, he would indeed become the most effective spokesman and promoter of Danish emigration to the United States.

On March 20, 1861, after long suffering, his wife Caroline died of a stomach inflammation. The following August, Rasmus Sørensen sailed for Copenhagen to visit friends and the one daughter who had chosen to go back to Denmark. Upon his return he discovered, perhaps to his surprise, that his experiences in the New World excited very lively interest among the common people. Countless Danes sought him out, eager to learn about America, and he was swamped with letters of inquiry. Once again he took up the lecture circuit and began writing still more tracts on the marvels of the Middle West. His

⁴⁰*Nordstjernen*, March 29, May 10, 17, 31, 1859; *Emigranten*, December 13 and 27, 1858; February 1 and March 14, 1859.

⁴¹*Emigranten*, April 18, 1859.

⁴²*Nordstjernen*, March 15 and June 21, 1859.

⁴³The only known original copy of this journal is in the Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. It lacks, however, the first and last issues. A microfilm copy is also available in the library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

⁴⁴*Organ for Religion, Landøkonomi og Politik*, 28–30, 34, 36, 47.

⁴⁵Carl Hansen, "Pressen til Borgerkrigens Slutning," in B. Wist, ed., *Norsk-Amerikanernes Festskrift 1914* (Decorah, Iowa, 1914), 26–28; Thomas P. Christensen, *Dansk Amerikansk Historie* (Cedar Falls, Iowa, 1927), 39.

text remained the same: that America offered dazzling economic opportunities closed to the average peasant or worker in Denmark. To bolster his claims he cited many personal success stories: of sons and daughters who achieved professional prestige, established flourishing businesses, and entered good marriages; of his own luck in buying a farm in Dodge County for two hundred dollars and selling the improved property for a thousand just five years later. The good fortune that blessed his own family equally touched countless other Danes in Wisconsin, not one in ten of whom would have been able to feed their families in Denmark but who were now prospering. In addition, those who left for Wisconsin could be assured that taxes were light and those actually collected put to constructive use like building schools. Charity was superfluous, since friends and neighbors were only too eager to help those in straitened circumstances. Churches remained independent of the state, but piety flourished and the Sabbath was scrupulously observed. Even national hatreds were absent in Wisconsin, where Danes and Germans lived in peace.⁴⁶

Enthralled by these accounts, scores of Danes flocked to Sørensen eager to emigrate. In April, 1862, he himself led a party of about 150 of his countrymen from Copenhagen to Hamburg and thence to the United States. Moving westward a few, mostly unmarried Danes settled in Michigan and Illinois, but a very considerable number followed him to Wisconsin, dispersing in Racine, Brown, and Waupaca counties. Thanks to the federal Homestead Law of 1862 which encouraged many farmers to move farther West, as well as the desire of many families with sons and husbands in the Union army to sell their untended farmsteads, many of the newcomers could purchase developed land at very advantageous prices.⁴⁷

EMBOLDENED by this accomplishment, the intrepid Dane, through the intermediation of a

Waupaca citizen, L. B. Brainard, solicited state backing for an even more ambitious colonization scheme. During his visit in Denmark one of the ministers had ostensibly approached him and intimated that the government might subsidize those of limited means who wished to emigrate to Wisconsin and also hire an agent to buy up lands which could then be distributed in eighty-acre lots to immigrants who, after four or five years, could reimburse their benefactors. Presumably Sørensen expressed interest in the plan but wished to discuss it further with a more astute businessman, his son Adolph.⁴⁸ Now in America, with his success as an emigration agent so evident, he proposed that the state of Wisconsin should engage his services.

"Mr. Sorensen [Brainard wrote] is a man of quite limited means, somewhat advanced in years, but possesses the energy and fire of youth. He wishes to return to Denmark, to prosecute further the work he has commenced, and could he from any source receive *material* aid in this country, to the amount of Five hundred dollars, he will in consideration thereof make the circuit of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, and do what he can to direct to us a portion of their population which from their crowded state they can [or] will spare."⁴⁹

Considering the state's longstanding interest in promoting immigration and the Dane's own undeniable talents in this area, one would at first think that such an offer ought to have been a very attractive one indeed. Unfortunately, with the Civil War raging, other concerns were the most pressing priority of state officials, and Governor Edward P. Salomon apparently was not forthcoming.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in 1863 Sørensen returned to Denmark anyway and brought back an even larger com-

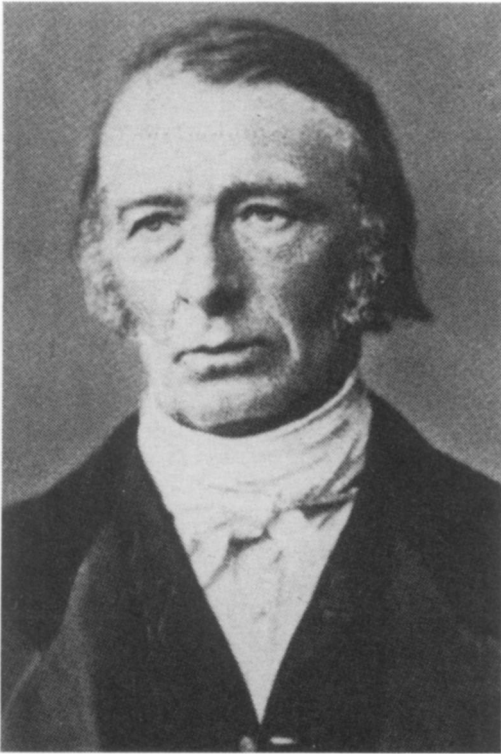
⁴⁷Rasmus Sørensen, *Er det Klogskab eller Galskab af Folk i Danmark at udvandre til Amerika?* (Copenhagen, 1862), 11–16.

⁴⁸There is no record of such an interview in the published Danish Cabinet minutes, and the author's inquiries with the *Rigsarkiv* in Copenhagen have also failed to turn up any such information—which does not necessarily rule out the possibility that such plans might have been discussed, albeit in an offhand way.

⁴⁹SHSW, Executive Department, Immigration 1852–1905, new series 126, L. B. Brainard to Governor E. Salomon, June 15, 1862.

⁵⁰There is evidently no reply of Salomon to Brainard either in the Immigration Department or gubernatorial correspondence files, SHSW.

⁴⁶Rasmus Sørensen, *Hvad siger Rasmus Sørensen nu, efter hans tiaarige Ophold i de nordamerikanske Forenede Stater, om Forfatningen og Tilstanden sammesteds, navnlig om den nuvaerende Krig derovre, m.m.?* (Copenhagen, 1861).



WHi (X3) 37617

Rasmus Sørensen.

pany of Danes, and then departed that same year for his homeland where he remained for good.⁵¹

Doubtless weary of these long transatlantic voyages, the now aging organizer was also growing more disenchanted with the United States, largely because of the Civil War. A vehement pacifist who condemned war as the work of the devil, he was astounded that the

⁵¹Such was the 1876 recollections of Martin Sørensen. See Andersen, *Banebrydere*, 108. Rasmus himself in 1863 only very briefly referred to a trip "last spring" when he visited Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin via Altona (near Hamburg), England, and Quebec. Rasmus Sørensen, *Er det for Tiden nu bedre for danske Udvandrere at søge Arbejdsfortjeneste og Jordkjob i Canada, end i Wisconsin eller i nogen anden af de vestlige Fristater i Nord-Amerika?* (Copenhagen, 1863), 15. Unfortunately, there appear to be no details about such a journey either in the Wisconsin press and public records or in Danish archives. Similarly, the reports of the American ambassador to Denmark, Bradford R. Wood, while often alluding to the desire of Danes to emigrate, are disappointingly sketchy and mention neither Sørensen, Hjorth, nor other figures so active at the time in promoting Danish settlement in America. National Archives, Department of State, Diplomatic Correspondence, Denmark 1861–1865, M 41, reels 9 and 10.

northern states should not rejoice in having let "the whole profligate vermin of all these slave states go and thanked God for being done with them." That the Lincoln regime chose instead to pursue the war with vigor was proof enough for him that avaricious elements, bent on accumulating wealth at the price of blood and suffering, now dominated American policy.⁵² For this reason, as well as the deterioration of America's currency and its lack of a stable government, he now promoted Canada as a more ideal destination for Danish settlers. This northerly land had all the attractions of the American Middle West; and, in any case, so many Scandinavians had flooded Wisconsin and neighboring states that Danes who settled there would be prey to all manner of pettiness and bickering and would never learn the American language nor adapt to American ways.⁵³

His change of heart did not pass unnoticed in Wisconsin. C. F. J. Møller, the Danish vice-consul in the state, who was eager to garner the post of Commissioner of Immigration, hastened to ply the Danish press with more positive information in hopes of counteracting the "evil work" of Sørensen; subsequently he prepared a short promotional pamphlet for prospective immigrants depicting Wisconsin in a favorable light,⁵⁴ of which the state printed ten thousand copies.⁵⁵

Details of Rasmus Sørensen's last years are sparse, but clearly he remained very much the tireless and unwavering polemicist who never shrank from expressing his views, however unpopular, and without regard to the consequences. In 1863, for example, he denounced the venerable Grundtvig, his former mentor and now possibly the most revered figure in all Denmark, whose espousal of living traditions as one source of Christian revelation made him, in Sørensen's view, little more than a tool of Papism, and whose romantic nationalism was a pernicious fount of strife.⁵⁶

⁵²Rasmus Sørensen, *Krigspolitik og Fredspolitik. Et Alvorsord til Folket i Danmark* (Aalborg, 1863), 5, 15–16.

⁵³Sørensen, *Er det for Tiden nu bedre*, 3ff., 15–16.

⁵⁴C. F. J. Møller, *Staten Wisconsin beskrevet med særligt Hensyn til denne Stats fortrinlige Stilling som et fremtidigt Hjem for Emigranter fra Danmark, Norge og Sverig* (Madison, 1865).

⁵⁵SHSW, Executive Department, Immigration 1852–1905, new series 126, C. F. J. Møller to Governor James T. Lewis, April 1, 1864, May 10, 1865.

⁵⁶Andersen, *Banebrydere*, 133–134.

In the fall of 1863, Denmark and the German Confederation went to war again over Schleswig. While this conflict marked for Bismarck and militarist Prussia the first triumph in a phenomenally successful march that led to the eventual unification of Germany, for Denmark defeat and the loss of Schleswig in 1864 was a humiliation surpassed only by the more shameful debacle of 1814 when the island kingdom forfeited its centuries-old domination over Norway. At the height of this struggle Sørensen drafted a petition to King Christian IX in which he damned Danish involvement as the folly of selfish “professors, students, officials, and municipal counselors in Copenhagen” and a few major cities. It had been undertaken without regard for the “working, trading, and burden-bearing Danish people” who abhorred bloodshed and destruction and desired only peace with their “German neighbors” who were also of the same class as themselves. Brazenly he exhorted the Danish King to abrogate the constitution of November, 1863, which, by annexing Schleswig, had provoked the war, and urged him to pursue peace negotiations in London.⁵⁷ When Sørensen subsequently attempted to disseminate this petition—particularly in Jutland, a major battleground of the war—it was confiscated and he himself summoned to a police hearing, though evidently no punitive action was taken.⁵⁸

Up until his death Sørensen continued to espouse in circuits of Jutland’s schools his brand of religious revivalism, educational reform, and political democracy.⁵⁹ By now, however, he was suffering an incurable stomach cancer which eventually became so painful that he checked into Frederick’s Hospital in Copenhagen, where he died not long afterwards.⁶⁰

As for Rasmus’s children, one author’s observation⁶¹ that “melancholy and mental illness have been a family malady” seems apt. Adolph committed suicide in 1867. Martin

continued to serve his mixed Danish and American congregation at St. Mark’s in Waupaca until the allegations of Norwegian Lutheran zealots, that his church propounded “false” and “soul-corrupting” doctrines, led to a split and his departure in 1869. The following years were largely miserable ones, as Martin preached in Illinois and Colorado and suffered the death of two wives. He finally settled in Council Bluffs, Iowa, where he married a saloonkeeper’s widow whose shrewishness, together with the dissatisfaction of his parishioners, possibly contributed to an onslaught of melancholia. In November, 1889, he took his life by slitting his veins. The other children, however, enjoyed a happier fate and later dispersed throughout the United States.⁶²

IN a condescending obituary one prominent Copenhagen daily well summarized the opinion of many contemporaries: “Rasmus Sørensen was not without a certain talent, but he was vapid, unclear, and confused in his thinking, so that his gifts were employed only exceptionally in the service of sensible goals.”⁶³ Posterity has been much kinder. Today his countrymen have accorded him deserved recognition as a pathbreaking educational reformer and instigator of the agrarian movement that was subsequently so vital to the development of Danish democracy. While hardly a pivotal figure in the history of nineteenth-century Denmark, he played a memorable role all the same. Although for many years afterwards he was also well remembered by his co-nationals in Wisconsin,⁶⁴ he never attained in America that celebrity he enjoyed in his own homeland.

Nevertheless, his contribution to Danish emigration is undeniable. In terms of the sheer numbers of Danes he personally accompanied across the Atlantic, he compares favorably with more well-known Norwegian immigrant leaders such as Cleng Peerson. His indirect influence was considerable too. It was largely due to Sørensen’s prompting, for ex-

⁵⁷Copy of this 1864 petition in Royal Library, Copenhagen.

⁵⁸Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen, Justitsministeriet, 1. kontor, journalsag nr. 1341/1864, copy of Copenhagen police report, May 29, 1864.

⁵⁹*Emigranten*, January 2, 1865.

⁶⁰Andersen, *Banebrydere*, 134.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 111.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 105, 109–111; Rasmus Andersen, *Den danske og Episkopal-kirken* (Brooklyn, 1920), 123, 227; *Danske i Amerika*, I: 347–349.

⁶³*Dagbladet* as quoted in *Emigranten*, June 26, 1865.

⁶⁴V. C. S. Topsøe, *Fra Amerika* (Copenhagen, 1872), 290–291.

ample, that the young Frederik Rasmussen Hjorth decided to emigrate to Wisconsin, and, in turn, this less flamboyant but equally indefatigable organizer brought some three hundred Danes over to America in 1863.⁶⁵

Their endeavors, to be sure, were not the major force that impelled mass migration from Denmark. With unaccustomed modesty, Sørensen himself conceded that it was not so much “handsomely printed” tracts or guide-books but rather the more humble and obscure letters from friends and relations abroad that persuaded most of the common people to embark for the New World. Once

they realized that immigrants “did not drown in the ocean, were not plundered, shot, or hanged, and were neither burned nor froze to death in America,” and that the land offered fabulous advantages to its impoverished newcomers—then the flood of emigration became irresistible.⁶⁶ Yet neither can one discount entirely the importance of those singular individuals whose journeys, writings, and personal efforts did so much to popularize and promote the exodus. And in this light Rasmus Sørensen must be granted his own honored place as a pioneer of Danish immigration in the United States.

⁶⁵*Danske i Amerika*, I: 363.

⁶⁶Sørensen, *Er det for Tiden nu bedre*, 1–2.

