

Greenland: Inuit, Norse, Danish and U.S. Heritage

by Geir Sør-Reime

The first Paleo-Inuit settlers, BC 2500-AD 1350

Humans seem to have reached the northern part of Greenland approximately 2500 BC. These people immigrated from Canada via Ellesmere Island, and they are labeled the Independent 1 culture and existed till around 1800 BC.

Another culture called the Saqqaq culture reached Greenland via the Nares Strait and settled on the west, south and east coasts. This culture seems to have disappeared around 700 BC. This culture was featured in a 1981 stamp.



Left, 1981 Saqqaq culture Sc. 146; right, 1981 Late Dorset culture Sc. 147

Around 800 BC another group, the Greenlandic Dorset culture appeared entering Greenland via Baffin Island. This group seems to disappear around AD 1, and it seems that Greenland was uninhabited from then until AD 700, when the group called Late Dorset reached Greenland from Canada and settled in the north-western part of Greenland. The Late Dorset settlements disappeared around AD 1350. It was also featured in a 1981 stamp.

Norse settlements, AD 986-ca.1450

Settlers from Iceland established settlements in Greenland from AD 986 onwards. The settling was led by Erik the Red who had been outlawed by the Icelandic Althing, and in AD 982 he sailed with some other outlaws to try to find a land discovered around 900 by the seafarer Gunnbjörn Ulfsson, who had sighted land west of Iceland when his ship drifted westwards on a voyage from Norway to Iceland.

Erik and his party found this land and started exploring it to find possible settlement sites. The party wintered in Greenland and returned to Iceland and persuaded around 700 people to join him in settling Greenland. They eventually founded three settlements: the largest Eastern Settlement (with around 500 farms), a smaller Western Settlement (approximately 95 farms) and the small Middle Settlement (20 farms).

Erik the Red settled at Brattahlid and when his son Leiv Eriksson returned to Greenland from Norway AD 1000, he introduced Christianity,



Greenland 1999 Arctic Vikings Sc. 354a (includes the stamp showing the reconstructed Brattahlid church)

and the first church was built at Brattahlid (which was reconstructed there in 2000). The reconstruction was shown in one of the Arctic Vikings stamps of 1999.

Brattahlid is now part of the UNESCO Heritage Site Kujataa, which includes both Norse and Inuit farms.



Greenland 1982 episcopate at Gardar Sc. 149



Greenland 2018 Kujataa World Heritage Site

Eventually, in 1126 Greenland got its own Bishop and the ruins of the impressive Bishop residence are still visible at Gardar. The last resident Bishop died in 1378.

The Norse settlements accepted Norwegian overlordship, and Greenland was considered Norwegian territory until 1814.

The Greenlanders soon started exploring the islands west of Greenland like Baffin Island, and eventually also reached Newfoundland, which they named Vinland. Leiv Eriksson tried to establish a settlement there and constructed a station at L'Anse-aux-Meadows. He rented it out for expeditions that used it to harvest attractive resources like hickory logs that, via Greenland and Iceland, were offered at the markets in Bergen, Norway.

The last written evidence of the Norse settlements is a report by Icelanders who had attended a wedding in the Hvalsey church in 1408; probably the settlements had been abandoned around the middle of the 15th century.



Greenland 2000 Arctic Vikings Sc. 361a



Greenland 2001 Arctic Vikings Sc. 383a

Between 1999 and 2001, Greenland issued annual stamps featuring the 'Arctic Vikings', the Norse settlements in



Greenland 1993 Hvalsey church Sc. 260



Greenland 2023 Hvalsey church



Canada 2000 L'Anse aux Meadows Sc. 1827a (Norse settlement on Newfoundland)

The second Inuit settlements, from AD 1150 onwards

Around AD 1150, the Thule Inuit migrate from Arctic Canada to Greenland, and today's Inuit in Greenland and Labrador are descendants of these.

A 1982 stamp featured Thule Inuit whalers.

1982 Thule whalers Sc. 148



During the 17th and 18th centuries, European whale hunting in Greenland waters, as well as various expeditions, led to interaction between the Inuit and Europeans, including inter-marriages. A 1983 stamp as well as a 1984 stamp illustrate the interaction of Inuit and Norse people around 1200-1300, and Inuit and European whalers 1600-1700.



Left, 1983 Norse-Inuit interaction Sc. 150; right, 1984 Whalers-Inuit interaction Sc. 154



1721 missionary Hans Egede arrives in Greenland and establishes settlements

Egede was born in 1686 in Harstad, Norway. His main objective was to find the Vikings of Greenland and convert them from their Catholic faith to Protestantism, but as he failed to find any Viking survivors, he instead started missionary work among the Inuit population and gradually converted them to Christianity. In 1728 he founded the Godthåb settlement, today's Nuuk, the administrative center of Greenland.

Egede became Bishop of Greenland in 1740, and died in 1758.

Egede was honored with a 1958 stamp on the 200th anniversary of his death and in



1958 Hans Egede Sc. 46



1971 Hans Egede Sc. 77 and B4

1971 the 250th anniversary of his arrival in Greenland and the start of his missionary work were honored with two stamps. In 1978 the 250th anni-



1978 Nuuk 250 years Sc. 109



2024 Hans Egede statue in Nuuk

versary of Egede's founding of Godthåb (Nuuk) was celebrated with a single stamp. The 300th anniversary of his arrival in Greenland was celebrated in 2021, and in 2024, the now a bit controversial statue of him in Nuuk appeared on a stamp.

In addition to Egede and his helpers, the Danish king in 1733 invited the Moravian Brothers to strengthen the missionary work. They left Greenland in 1900. In 1983 they were honored with a stamp.

Greenland becomes a Danish colony

The Danish state (which until 1814 included Norway) gradually strengthened its control over the southern part of Greenland and from 1776, the Danish state monopolized trade for its own Royal Greenland Trading Company. Its 200th anniversary was marked with two 1974 stamps.



1974 Royal Greenland Trade 200 years Sc. 98-99



1983 Moravian Brothers 250 years Sc. 158

After the Napoleon wars, Denmark, which had been on Napoleon's side, had to cede Norway to Sweden but was allowed to retain the Arctic parts of Norway (Faroes, Iceland and Greenland). This led to a conflict



2024 sovereignty all Greenland 100 years

between Norway and Denmark over the ownership of northern Greenland where Norwegian whalers, sealers and fishermen were active, and Norway occupied a part of Northern Greenland and called it Eric the Red Land with Helge Ingstad as governor. The case was eventually referred to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, and Norway lost and handed the area back to Denmark in 1933. In 2024, the centenary of Danish sovereignty over the entire Greenland was celebrated with two stamps.

Knud Rasmussen and Thule

The Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen was born in Greenland in 1879 and went to boarding schools in Copenhagen. From 1902 onwards he started exploring Northwestern Greenland where the Thule Inuit lived and in 1909-10, he established the Thule Station at Cape York which became a missionary and trading center, as well as a base for exploring expeditions. He organized seven Thule expeditions and the fifth was a journey from Greenland via Canada and Alaska to the Bering Strait. He died in 1933.

In 1935-36, the Cape York office in Copenhagen was also responsible for



1935-36 Thule locals, unlisted in Scott, imperf variety, and standard perf set used on cover.

mail and supplies to the Thule Station and issued a set of stamps celebrating the 25th anniversary of the station, including one with a portrait of Knud Rasmussen. The stamps were used on both mail to and from Thule. When the Greenlandic authorities took over the station these stamps were invalidated from August 1, 1937.

The 50th anniversary of the Thule Station was commemorated with a Greenlandic stamp in 1960, and in 1979 the centenary of his birth was commemorated with a semi-postal stamp.

Left, 1960 Thule station 50 years, Sc. 47; right, 1979 Rasmussen 100 birth anniversary, Sc. B8



2003 Rasmussen expedition Sc. 408a

In 2003 two stamps highlighted Rasmussen's expeditions and the centenary of the Thule Station was celebrated with 2009 and 2010 single stamps (next column). Rasmussen's portrait appeared on a 100 kroner banknote, and this banknote was reproduced on a 2021 souvenir sheet. In 2020, the poster for a film about Rasmussen was included in a series of

stamps celebrating Greenlandic feature films.

2009 and 2010 Thule Station centenary

2021 Rasmussen on banknote



2020 Rasmussen, from feature film poster

WWII and US involvement in Greenland

Greenland was not unknown in the U.S. before WWII. U.S. explorers like Robert E. Peary and Matthew A. Henson were active in Greenland, and although they started their quest for the North Pole in 1909 from Ellesmere Island in Canada, they visited the small north-western settlement of Annoatok in Greenland on their return from the Pole. Both have been honored on Greenlandic stamps, Peary in 2005 and Henson in 2009.



Top, 2005 Robert E Peary Sc. 462; above left, 2009 Matthew Henson; above right, 1981 Peary Land Sc. B9

The northernmost part of Greenland is named Peary Land in honor of Peary's exploration of Northern Greenland. In 1981 a semi-postal stamp issued to support a series of Danish expeditions to Peary Land features a Peary Land landscape.

When Nazi Germany invaded and occupied Denmark, her Arctic possessions became exposed to possible German invasions of the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland. The Faroes and Iceland were therefore occupied by Britain and plans were made for a British-Canadian occupation of parts of Greenland. The U.S., still not part of the war, rejected this, decided to make Greenland a de facto U.S. protectorate, and opened a consulate in 1940. In 1941, the Danish minister in Washington without the consent of the Danish government signed a treaty with the U.S. authorizing to protect Greenland and construct military installations there. Simultaneously, U.S. troops replaced the British and Canadian troops in Iceland.

The United States started constructing several airbases, the largest being Narsarsuaq and Kangerlussuaq, still important airports, and other military installations, including a large hospital at Narsarsuaq for treating U.S. servicemen wounded in Europe.

In fact, the U.S. government had considered a U.S. take-over of

Greenland in 1867 and 1910. After WWII the U.S. government offered to buy Greenland from Denmark for 100 million dollars in gold, but the offer was rejected. The reasons were the same as President Trump is using, namely vital security issues for the U.S.

In 1951 Denmark and the U.S. signed the Greenland Treaty, which give both countries mutual responsibility for the defense of Greenland. About 1953, construction began on Thule military base, now known as Pituffik Space Base, recently visited by U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance. Since 2004 this has been the only U.S. base in Greenland.



1945 American Series Sc. 10-18



1970 liberation of Denmark 25 years Sc. 76



2020 American Series 75 years

During WWII, new Greenlandic stamps were printed in the U.S. and issued February 1, 1945. The issue is normally referred to as the American Series. On June 18, 1945, it was re-issued with a "Denmark liberated May 5, 1945" overprint.

The 25th anniversary of the liberation of Denmark was celebrated with a 1970 stamp and in 1995, the 50th anniversary was marked with stamps in the same designs as the 1945 American Series. In 2020 the 75th anniversary of the American Series was marked with stamps reproducing the original issue.



Top to bottom: 2016 oranges and 2017 cryolite; 2018 US planes and dancing; 2020 celebrating liberation of Denmark; 2019 weather observation;

During the years 2016-20, Greenland issued annual sets of stamps on the theme of Greenland during WWII.

Among the various subjects illustrated on these stamps we find Greenlanders with oranges from America (2016), cryolite mining for export to the U.S. (2017), U.S. planes and airfield and Greenlanders dancing to U.S. music (2018), weather observation (2019), and 1945 celebrations of the liberation of Denmark (2020).

Greenland's road to independence

Greenland changed status from external territory to an integrated part of Denmark as a county in 1953, and Greenland started electing full members to the Danish Parliament.

In 1978 Greenland was granted internal self-government in 1979 and became an autonomous partner of the Danish Realm.

Stamps were issued for the inauguration of autonomy in 1979 and for the 10th anniversary in 1989, and the 25th anniversary in 2004.



Left, 1979 Home Rule, Sc. 110, right. 1989 home rule 10 years Sc. 200-01

One result of this was that Greenland left the European Union in 1985 after a referendum.

A revised self-government law was passed in the Danish Parliament in 2009 expanding the powers of the Greenland parliament and government, including the right to declare independence.

The recent elections to the Greenland parliament confirmed that many Greenlanders think that independence should be the ultimate goal of the Danish-Greenlandic relations.

The 10th anniversary of the 2009 extended autonomy was commemorated with a 2019 stamp.



2019 extended home rule