

# Danish Estate Records - Not Just Accounts and Ledgers

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When most people in the United States of America think of an estate their mind conjures up images of *Downton Abbey*, *Monarch of the Glen*, *To the Manor Born* and maybe Southfork Ranch from *Dallas*. While these images may reflect some of the estates, it's not true for all of them. Though estates are correctly associated with nobility and wealthy landowners, this presentation will focus on the records created by the operation of the property rather than the people.

To begin, it's necessary to provide some historical and cultural background. The nobility constituted a larger portion of the population in Denmark than in Norway. Many of the estate owners in Norway actually lived in Denmark. The geography and socio-economic conditions in Norway were not conducive to the development of large estates, except in very small areas. Prior to 1648 it is estimated there were nearly 1,000 estates in Denmark. By comparison, in Norway there were fewer than 100 in 1639, with about half of them in the area of Oslo fjord.<sup>1</sup> By 1821 the number had dropped to about 25.

## Definition

Estates have existed in Denmark and Norway since the 1200s. Historically several terms have been applied to estates, such as *gods*, *hovedgård* and *setegård*. Over time these terms became more defined. The *setegård* came to be associated with the estate where the nobleman and his family lived, while *hovedgård* indicated the most significant, if not the largest, property. In Denmark the term *gods* is used to generically refer to either a *hovedgård* or *setegård*, which is how it will be used in this class.

Some estates owned properties in a single parish. Others had property in several parishes, and some estates had holdings in several counties. Some families owned several estates. From their inception estates were associated with families that had obtained noble status.

In return for their loyalty and support of the monarch, the nobility enjoyed special privileges such as freedom from taxation, tithes, and military service, as well as income derived from their properties and rent charged to their tenants. Beginning in the 1500s this began to change. Among these changes were in 1582 noble women who married outside the

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<sup>1</sup> *Norsk historisk leksikon*, 2nd ed., "Setegard." Other estates were found on the west coast near Bergen and in the north near Trondheim.

nobility saw their share of any inheritance go to their nearest noble heirs. The children of a man who was married to a non-noble were ineligible for noble rank.

In the 1660s laws changed in connection with the establishment of the absolute monarchy.<sup>2</sup> Previously all noble properties enjoyed a tax-free status, but now it was limited to only the estate where the family had their primary residence.

## Property Valuations

In Denmark the valuation of a property is tied to its annual production of grain (barley or rye). This measure is called *hartkorn* (literally, hard corn). The 1688 land survey set the area that a single barrel (*tønder*) of seed could sow as 14,000 square alen (5,500 m<sup>2</sup> or 1.35 acres) as one *hartkorn*<sup>3</sup>. Any property that planted over 24 *tønder* was assessed as an estate.

Estate type (Denmark)	Size (Tønder)
Gods or herregård	>24 (32 acres)
Proprietærgård	12-23
Helgård	6-11
Halvgård	3-5
Boelsmandssteder	1-3
Husmandssteder	<1

In 1661 a commission was formed in Norway to register all the properties and implement a more evenly applied valuation. In 1665 the assessments were reviewed, and again in 1723. Unlike Denmark, the property classifications were simpler and were based on a system from the 1300s called *vissøren*. This divided farms into three taxable groups: *fullgård*, *halvgård*, and *kvartgård* (or *fjerdingsgård*) the smallest farms, designated *ødegård*<sup>4</sup> were exempted at this time.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Enevoldsarveregeringsakten* or *Suverænitetssakten*, of 10 January 1661.

<sup>3</sup> This was then divided further into 8 *skæpper* containing 4 *fjerding land*, which included 3 *album*, separated into 4 *penning*.

<sup>4</sup> This term possibly traces back to the Black Death, when farms were abandoned and left desolate (*øde*). Making them profitable, or even sufficient to sustain a family was a considerable undertaking.

Farm type (Norway)	Tax Rate
Fullgård or helgård	1
Halvgård	½
Kvartgård or fjerdingsgård	¼
Ødegård	Exempt

## Ranks of Nobility

In 1671 Christian V introduced *Grevernes og Friherrernes Privilegier* to create more feudal properties and further strengthen the ties between the nobility and himself.<sup>5</sup> Men owning estates valued at 2,500 tønner hartkorn were created *Grever* and their properties became a *grevskab*. Men owning properties valued between 1,000 and 2,499 tønner were created *Friherre* or *Baroner* and their properties became a *baroni*.

### Titles of Nobility (Masculine)

Danish / Norwegian	English
Fyrste	Prince
Hertug	Duke
Markgreve / Markis	Marquess / Marquis
Greve (Lensgrev)	Count (Earl in the UK)
Baron / Friherre	Baron

## The End of the Nobility

In Norway in 1821 the nobility lost their privileges as result of the *Adelsloven* (*Lov, angaaende Modificationer og nærmere Bestemmelser af den Norske Adels Rettigheder*). In 1849 the new constitution in Denmark (*Junigrundloven*) transformed the absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy with Frederik VII as head of state, and abolished the privileges of the nobility, essentially leaving them with only their titles.

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<sup>5</sup> This is one of three articles enacted simultaneously. The other two, *Gemaksordinansen* and *Rangforordningen* regulated access to the king and created a new hierarchy placing the king's official above those of noble birth respectively.

# The Records

The three most important records for the genealogist who is studying persons employed on an estate are *fæstebreve* and *fæsteprotokoller* (copyhold records) for farmers, *tyendeprotokoller* (registers of servants) and *hoveriprotokoller* (registers of serfs, until 1702 when villeinage was abolished, after that date a register of service required of the tenants). *Fæstebreve* (copyhold letters) recorded the terms by which a farmer leased property from an estate. Generally, the contract contained the names of the parties, the name of the leased property, the term of the lease and the duties and obligations of the copyholder to the owner. The lease could also include the name of the previous copyholder, identify any relationship between the new copyholder and the previous one, as well as any dependents or survivors the copyholder is responsible for. Following an ordinance in 1719, a copy of the contract was given to the leaseholder and the original recorded in a *fæsteprotokoll* (copyhold journal) kept by the estate.

*Tyendeprotokoller* and *tyendekontrakter* recorded the names of persons employed by an estate. They identify the name of the servant, their birthdate and place, their household responsibilities, the term of service, and their wages. In contrast to the *fæstebønder*, the servants had far fewer rights. Until the *Tyendelov* (Servant's Law) of 1854, they were easily the lowest class in society. This law limited the reasons for which a servant could be discharged, and it became illegal to physically punish female servants over the age of 16, and male servants over 18. It was not until 1915 when servants received the right to vote, and 1921 when it was corporal punishment of any servant was prohibited.

*Hoveriprotokoller* post-1702 record day labor performed by tenants on the estate. Different types of work days were required by the landowner. The number of days required to provide labor was related to the size of the estate. These records generally include the laborer's name and residence.

Another record of great interest to genealogists are *skifteprotokoller* (probates). Their arrangement and use is well covered in other materials so they will not be covered in this presentation.

Despite the nobility losing their privileges in 1821, estates continued to function. Many estates had already been purchased by wealthy merchants who were looking to expand their enterprises. Many estates are still in operation today, some as private residences, and others as hotels, restaurants, executive conference centers, or living history museums.

The Dansk Center for Herregårdsforskning has several articles online that explore the role of estates in Denmark's history.<sup>6</sup>

## Digital Publication

In 1946 the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU) began microfilming at Rigsarkivet. During the time the GSU was working in Denmark, not all estates had deposited their records with the archive. Therefore, not all of them are represented in the FamilySearch catalog. In December 2012 FamilySearch published the records they had microfilmed with the title *Denmark, Estate Records, 1436-1964*. This Historical Record Collection allows users to access the records by selecting the county where the estate is located, the name of the estate, then the record type and volume. Additionally, images can be accessed through the FamilySearch Catalog. A corresponding article in the FamilySearch Research Wiki, *Denmark Estate Records (FamilySearch Historical Records)*, provides additional information on the collection and links to other helpful resources.

The National Archives of Denmark (*Rigsarkivet*) has also made many of these films available on their site through their database *Daisy*, at [https://www.sa.dk/daisy/daisy\\_forside](https://www.sa.dk/daisy/daisy_forside). The search is available only in Danish, but is very easy to use. Enter the name of the estate in the **Arkivskaber** (archive creator) field and press the button **Søg i Daisy**. Materials that have been scanned can be viewed online, and those which have not can be ordered for use at any of the Archives' reading rooms

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.danskeherregaarde.dk/historisk-kontekst.aspx>

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