

# At the Bottom of the Atlantic

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May 15, 2022

## The Mid-Atlantic Ocean

One event in Bekker family history stands out as our watershed moment. If the outcome had been different, none of us would be the same, or perhaps, even exist.

On April 6, 1889, the SS *Danmark* sank in the mid-Atlantic. Our Great Grandfather Frederik Bekker was on board.

Frederik Bekker was born to Neils and Karen Bekker in Fohl, Denmark, in 1872. Fohl was in the disputed geographic region of *Schleswig-Holstein*, both the Germans and the Danes considered it *their* territory.

One day in 1888, German soldiers entered the Bekker home and interrogated Frederik's parents as to their ethnicity and allegiance. The Bekkers were proud Danes and told the soldiers so. The soldiers took objection. They used their rifle butts to smash Frederik's mother's china, which had Danish emblems on it. The soldiers informed the Bekkers that Frederick, who was 16 at the time, would be required to enlist in the German army when he turned 18.

Neils and Karen Bekker were having nothing to do with that! They arranged to send Frederick to America, to live with an uncle. On March 21, 1889, at the age of 16, Frederik boarded the SS *Danmark* alone, bound for New York.

The voyage was dammed from the start. The *Danmark* rode gale-force winds and heavy seas for two weeks, making slow progress on the frigid Atlantic. Most of the ship's passengers became ill (including Frederik, we assume). On April 4, 1889, one of the ship's propeller shafts broke and the vessel started taking on water.

The ship's engines could have driven the ship with one propeller but were needed to pump water from the bilge. The pumps could not keep up with sea water entering the breached hull, and the stern of the ship sank ever deeper.



And Every Soul Was Saved  
- Thomas M. M. Henry, 1889

The captain sent out S.O.S. signals, which in the days before radio involved hoisting flags, blaring steam horns, and billowing black smoke, but there were no ships within reach of the distress signals. The captain considered placing the passengers on lifeboats but was concerned that they would capsize in the heavy seas. Frederik and the other 737 passengers and crew on board, scanned the undulating horizon, and yearned for rescue.



Rescue of the SS Danmark - Lewis Mueller

On April 5<sup>th</sup> the SS *Missouri*, carrying a cargo of cattle and manufactured goods, came upon the disabled *Danmark*.

The *Missouri* was a small freighter with accommodation for no more than 50 people. Through the heroic efforts of the crew of both ships, all the *Danmark*'s passengers and crew were transferred to the *Missouri*, while fighting heavy seas. Cargo was tossed overboard to make room.

The overloaded *Missouri* put ashore at the Azores Islands, off-loaded half of its shipwrecked passengers, and set sail for Philadelphia with the other half, young Frederik Bekker among them.

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*The skill and bravery of the sailors rescuing Frederik and the other passengers of the Danmark is recorded in a Wikipedia article. It is well worth the time to read.*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rescue\\_of\\_the\\_SS\\_Danmark](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rescue_of_the_SS_Danmark)

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Frederik landed in America with nothing but the clothes on his back. He spoke no English and never found the uncle he was destined to meet in New York. Frederik forged his destiny alone, from a very early age.

These events: the sinking of the *Danmark*, the heroic rescue by the crew of the *Missouri*, and Frederik's struggle to survive in a new country, shaped the destiny of our family. Without such tenacity, Bekker family history may have ended in 1889, ...

**... at the bottom of the Atlantic.**