

HIGHLIGHTS OF GREENLAND PHILATELY

By Eric v. Wowern

(Illustrations courtesy of Stuart Silverberg)



Hans Egede
(Facit 42)



Egede's Arrival
(Facit 77)



Settlers and Soldiers
(Facit 110)

(Editor's Note: This article is adapted from the author's presentation to the SCC Annual Meeting, September 4, 1999, in Baltimore, MD.)

Greenland is the world's largest island with most of its 840,000 square miles located within the Arctic Circle. The first Europeans on Greenland came from Iceland about a millennium ago. However, the early settlements did not survive. A second settlement occurred in 1721 when Hans Egede, a Norwegian at a time when Norway was a part of Denmark, was sent to Greenland as a Christian missionary and teacher to the Eskimos and Inuits.

A number of settlements were established, schools and churches built, and a number of Danes employed to help with the education and to serve in the health division. The Danes always referred to these settlements as colonies. In Denmark, the Royal Greenland Trade Company (Kongelige Grønlandske Handel—KGH), which handled all administrative work in Greenland, was established in 1774.

Greenland's population today is approximately 50,000, of which 10,000 are Danes.

The philatelic picture of Greenland can be divided into three segments: (1) before 1905; (2) 1905-1938; (3) after 1938.

Before 1905

Contact from Denmark to Greenland was limited to one or two ships per year per colony. On the east coast, it was only once a year, in August. Actually, everything required to care for the entire population had to come from Denmark.

All ships carried passengers, as well as mail. Letters, parcels, and newspapers were carried free of charge both ways. For mail from Greenland, this free-of-charge was limited to the arrival at the Greenland Trade office in Copenhagen. Danish postage rates then applied for onward transportation. ►►



*Mail Boat
(Facit 82)*

Therefore, Danish stamps and parcel cards were available in all towns and settlements in Greenland. As parcel cards were not handed out to the addressee in Denmark, none is known to have survived. Very few letters have survived and they are scarce. One in particular is worth mentioning – a cover from 1854 franked with 4 RBS.

1905 – 1938 Period

This was the Pakke-Porto period, i.e., the period when the KGH wanted a fee for carrying mail to and from Greenland. As a fee for letters would conflict with the monopoly of the Danish Postal Service, only a parcel fee was permitted. The fee, really a handling fee, started with only one øre (1/7 cent) per pound with a minimum charge of 10 øre. In order to give a receipt for this charge, the KGH issued Pakke-Porto stamps. In most catalogues, there are 18 different Pakke-Porto stamps, but if you count all the different printings, there are 43 different. Letters remained free of charge between Copenhagen and Greenland.



Typical Pakke-Porto

On the way to Greenland, special parcel cards were used. There are 14 different cards, of which the first one is very scarce. Parcel cards from Denmark proper were accepted without Pakke-Porto stamps, but after 1930, when rates went up dramatically, Pakke-Porto stamps had to be added to the already affixed Danish stamps.

The cancellations used in this period are a chapter of their own. About 25 different cancellers were used, most of them in black or purple, but sometimes in red.

On the way from Greenland to Copenhagen, the Pakke-Porto stamps were affixed on the parcel and cancelled with the local colony handstamp. On arrival in Copenhagen, the parcel was provided with a transit handstamp. Therefore, Pakke-Porto stamps cancelled with both a Greenland and a Copenhagen handstamp have surely been used on a parcel from Greenland. Such pieces naturally demand a premium price.

It should be mentioned that from 1927 until 1938 the Pakke-Porto stamps in Greenland also served as saving stamps. They were mounted in small booklets, cancelled with the special Avane number handstamp or with the handstamp of the settlement or its sub-offices. The booklet could be redeemed at the KGH office.

At the end of the Pakke-Porto period there were, at most, 300 persons in Greenland who could write Danish. Since 80 percent of all Pakke-Porto stamps were used as saving stamps and a large portion of the Pakke-Porto stamps were sold to collectors, the total number of Pakke-Porto stamps used genuinely for transportation of parcels is small. For that reason, the price of Pakke-Porto stamps is fairly high.

In this period, letter mail also became more frequent. In particular, domestic letters which were free of postage are scarce, still around \$75 each. Letter mail to Denmark with Danish stamps to pay postage from Copenhagen to the addressee is more plentiful.

In the 1970s, reprints of the Pakke-Porto stamps were produced, using the original printing blocks that were found in the Ministry for Greenland, the new supervising office of KGH. The reprints are made in such a way that the collector can distinguish between the different printings, the special perforations of sheets with imperf sheet margins, and identify some of the major varieties. The ministry, to collect funds for cultural activities in Greenland, sold them.

Of special note during this period is the set of Thule stamps issued in 1935 and 1936. They were issued by the private Thule Company in northwestern Greenland, founded by the arctic explorer Knud Rasmussen, with the purpose to assist the Eskimos in this part of Greenland that was beyond the reach of the KGH. These stamps are plentiful, both mint and used, but covers franked with the local Thule stamps and sent by the Thule company on its own ship to Copenhagen, where they were re-franked with Danish stamps, and carried by the Danish Postal Service, are quite scarce. The Thule stamps were discontinued in 1937 when the Royal Greenland Trade Company took over.

In the 1930s, we also see a number of arctic expeditions and arctic flights, from which exciting covers have survived.

After 1938

In 1937, Greenland applied to the UPU for a separate membership and began planning for special Greenland postage stamps. Greenland became a stamp issuing "country," though under Danish supervision, rather than a Danish colony.

The Royal Greenland Trade Company maintained the production and sale of Greenland postage stamps, and the Danish Stamp Printing Bureau did the printing of the stamps, as it does today.

The first Greenland stamps were issued December 1, 1938 in Copenhagen. It was a different story in Greenland. The stamps were shipped to Greenland by the last ship in 1938 on the east coast and to Thule with the only ships in 1939. They were valid for postage in Greenland after the last ship had left for Denmark. So, the start of Greenland stamps varied from November 1938 until



September 1939 and for Thule as late as January 1940. Remember that domestic mail remained free of charge until 1956.

In 1940 due to World War II, the connection between Greenland and Denmark was broken off for five years. The 1938 postage set did not last that long, and in 1945, a new set of nine stamps, printed in the USA, was issued in Greenland – the so-called American Issue. With the end of World War II in Europe, a part of this set was overprinted “Denmark Liberated” and distributed, mainly from the USA, with overprints in different colors and even inverted overprint. Due to wrongdoing by people from the Greenland administration and by the philatelic adviser in the United States, this was a sad incident in the history of Greenland stamps. (Editor’s note: See “The American Issue of Greenland, Parts One and Two,” by Dr. Dan Laursen, in the November 1999 and February 2000 issues of *The Posthorn*.)



Greenland Home Rule
(Facit 115)

After the war, things returned to normal and the Royal Greenland Trade Company again produced stamps in Denmark. Stamps always have a subject with close relation to Greenland, and from 1967, Greenlandic designers are dominant. From 1969, the stamps do not bear the name Greenland, but rather, Kalaallit Nunaat, which means “Our Country” (literally: “The Greenlanders’ land/country”). In 1979, the first stage of the two stages of home rule was initiated; however, it was not until 1990 that the handling and production of Greenland stamps was transferred from the KGH to the now fully established Greenland Postal Administration.

The stamp issuing policy in general has been modest. In the 1970s there were about 40 stamps, in the 1980s increasing to 80 stamps, and in the 1990s about 130 stamps were issued. Due to the fact that rates in Greenland have increased considerably, the annual face value has gone up.

Other Philatelic Fields of Interest

Plate number blocks used to be of great interest. They were available from the beginning, but interest has decreased in the past five to ten years.

Special first day covers have been available since the mid-1950s, but average quantity produced is now down to 20-25 percent from their peak in the 1980s. Year sets have been issued since 1977, but here too, the annual sale has dropped considerably. Maximum cards have been available since 1981, stamp booklets since 1989, and miniature sheets from 1991.

So, the annual cost for a collector has certainly gone up more than inflation would justify.

From 1960 to 1985, 40 percent of the annual income came from postal activities, while 60 percent of the profit originated from sale to dealers and collectors. Now the ratio is reversed: 60/40. There are two reasons for this: the declining sale to the philatelic market and the expensive internal air mail rates.

Due to the extremely large sale to philatelists in the 1960s to the 1980s, mint Greenland from that period can only be sold at approximately 50 percent of face. But stamps from the 1990s are not discounted at all.

Beyond Stamps

There are many other aspects of Greenland's philately. For instance, the postmarks. Since 1938, there are over 1,000 different postmarks, all well catalogued.

There are no covers or postcards with pre-printed stamps on them. There are, however, quite a few picture postcards, and colorful aerograms. They were mainly issued by the KGH, but are also issued by private companies. A collection of 300 to 400 different could be put together easily.

Also private charity seals, which start with the annual Christmas seal issued since 1974, but including other charitable organizations.

Finally, meter marks. There is a large number of different operators and there are well over 100 different of those marks existing.



photo by Bonnie Smith

Eric v. Wowern resides in Virum, Denmark, but he is a native of the United States. He was born in New Jersey but at the age of four his Danish parents decided to go back to Denmark "and I decided to go with them." He developed tuberculosis at the age of seven, and his doctor said that too much exercise and sports activity would be unhealthy for the recuperating boy. "So he suggested – and recommended – stamp collecting." Wowern has been a keen stamp collector since then, later giving up a career in advertising to become a full-time stamp dealer. Now retired, he is the author of a number of catalogues on Greenland and the Faroes and is a former columnist on Scandinavia for *Linn's Stamp News*.

