

- The Arctic Region of Disko -

The History of Qasigiannnguit

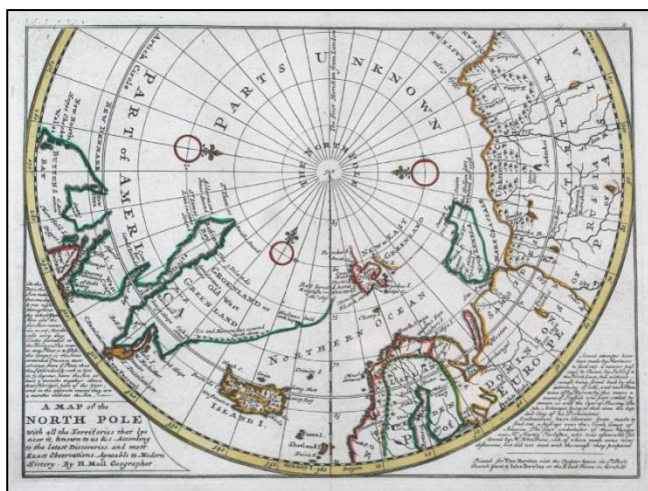


by

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The history of Qasigiannugit probably begins around the time that the first ever settlers arrived in Disko Bay. Saqqaq settlements have been found close to Qasigiannugit that date from 2400 BC and it is known that the later Greenlandic Dorset and Thule cultures also populated the Disko region. These peoples must have trodden the shores where Qasigiannugit is located, thus seeing the locations' potential as later colonisers did. The Greenlandic or Inuit people of today are direct descendants of the Thule people who arrived in the region around 1100 AD. It was also around this time that Norse travellers from their settlements on the southwest coast travelled northwards and traded with the Thule people of Disko. The Norse settlers however, soon disappeared from Greenland and it was not until after the 15th century (when cartographers began thinking of the earth as a globe and were trying to draw in an unknown arctic region) that new interest in the Arctic was gained among Europeans. In search of the Northwest Passage, the English explorer John Davis commanded three expeditions to the Davis Strait and Baffin Bay areas. On these journeys he interacted notably with the local Inuit population, particularly at a settlement later to become Godthaab (today the capital Nuuk). In 1587, Davis sailed up along the west coast of Greenland to Sanderson's Hope near Upernavik at 72°46'N, having passed Disko Island. Davis was a

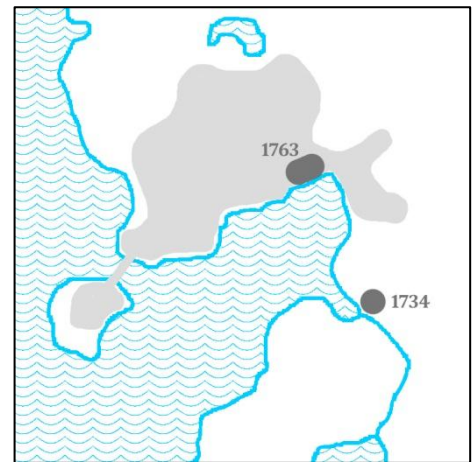


sterling mariner and provided unprecedented data from his voyages - charts of over 1000km of previously uncharted coastline, notes on ice and sea conditions, flora and fauna, of Greenland's interior near Godthaab and ethnographic descriptions of the Inuit he met. William Baffin was the next to make notable progress up into Baffin Bay, in 1616 reaching 78°N, where Baffin Bay enters Smith Sound between Greenland and Ellesmere Island. No one would sail farther north for another 200 years. Left is a map of the North Pole drawn by Herman Moll around the year 1720. It displays the limited extent of our geographical knowledge of the arctic at the time.

During the 1700's the Canadian subarctic was exploited by enterprises such as the Hudson's Bay Company who brought incredible numbers of furs and skins to auction in London. Also in this period, Dutch whaling ships made their presence felt off the west coast of Greenland and especially in Disko Bay. They caught huge numbers of whales through the years and had certain inlets where they regularly set anchor. One of these was *Virebay* as it was known to the Dutch - the inlet where Qasigiannugit lies today. It was anticipated among the local people that the Dutch would make a permanent base in Disko but this was prevented by the Danish who had by this time already colonised Greenland at Godthaab in 1728. Hans Egede, the Danish-Norwegian Lutheran missionary who established Godthaab had also heard of the qualities of the Disko region. Hans Egede originally travelled to Greenland from Norway in 1721 in search of lost Norse settlements in the fear that they may have fallen to the Christian faith. This interest in the Disko region led to an expedition by Captain Ebbe Mitzel and assistant Mathias Fersleff who were sent from Godthaab to reconnoitre Disko Bay or "*Hual fiske bugt*" (whale fishing bay) and find a suitable location for a new Danish colony. They visited and found that the head of *Virebay* (Qingunnguit) was an ideal location, noting that there was anchor space for at least 50 vessels, a sandy beach allowing ships to easily be drawn onto land, fresh water, materials for building and not least a fertile landscape with lush vegetation and ptarmigan, hare and reindeer. Mitzel's report inspired Hans Egede but the new colony would not be a reality until Jacob Severin convinced the Danish king of the idea in 1733. Severin was a Danish wholesaler who became claimant of a trade monopoly granted by the king. Severin acted on the information provided by Mitzel and arrived in *Virebay* with 3 ships packed with supplies on the evening of the 14th of June 1734. By the 25th of July, the new timber-built house "*Bryghuset*" was complete and it was consecrated by Hans Egede's son Poul Egede who later was the missionary in the colony from 1736-40. Poul Egede followed in his father's footsteps in the work of the church among the local people. The colony was christened "*Christians Haab*" (anglicised Christian's Hope) in recognition of Kong Christian VI and is Greenland's second oldest town after the capital Nuuk.

During the following years it became clear that the Dutch did not respect the Danish trade monopoly in the area and this culminated in a 75 minute exchange of fire on the 2nd of June 1739 when four Dutch ships were defeated by three of Severin's vessels, thus cementing the Danish monopoly.

The following decades proved that the site Severin had selected in 1734 and where the first houses were built, was in-fact quite unsuitable as a site for the colony. Interestingly, Severin, quite by accident, established the colony by the small inlet Igdlukut (known to the Danish as "*Bryghusbugten*") located only a few hundred metres to the south of the head of the bay - Qingunnguit - that was suggested by Mitzel. *Bryghusbugten* was plagued by springtime flooding and frequent gale force katabatic winds, called Saqqarsarnek, that were channelled through the site by the surrounding topography. Despite these storms and their often destructive force Christians Haab became the centre for trade and missionary work in northern Greenland during the 1940's. In 1763 the then colony manager Jonas Lillienchiold de Svanenheil suggested they move the colony. His wish was granted and a new main building was erected above a stone wall built to provide a level foundation - the site today is thus 250 years old! The building *Bryghuset* from 1734 was also later moved to be alongside the new colony headquarters. Indeed these buildings now house the current museum above the harbour on the northern shore of the bay directly opposite the first site. Poul Egede's original wooden house from *Bryghusbugten* is reputedly the oldest surviving wooden building on Greenland.



Front page: Igdlukut - the site of the first colony as seen from the town today. Above: Locations of the early colonies and the extent of Qasigiannnguit today (shown in light grey).



Poul Egede ended his missionary work in Christians Haab in 1940 prior to returning to Denmark due to eye problems. However, he continued his work right up until the moment he left, promising to baptise all who wished. Following his return to Denmark, he acted as consultant for the missionaries on Greenland. In 1779 he became a bishop. Poul Egede is particularly remembered for his translations to Greenlandic - especially of the New Testament. His original translation from 1766 is kept in the church in Qasigiannnguit.



Above: The façade of the main colony building from 1763 as it looks today and the museum buildings dating from 1763 (left) and 1734.

In 1740, Poul Egede's younger brother Niels Egede became colony manager in Christians Haab. Niels Egede was well liked among the Greenlandic people and having grown up in Godthaab, he could speak the language. He was the colony manager for three years before travelling to Denmark a few years later. In 1759 though, he returned to Greenland and established a further colony of Egedesminde (Aasiaat) in Disko Bay - named "Egede's memory" after his father. The wooden carving of a soldier that hangs over the door of the main house and now museum in Qasigiannugit is believed to depict Niels Egede.



Above: The entrance to the museum with a replica of the original wooden carving of Niels Egede. Photographs dated as early as 1892 also show the carving above the door.

Throughout the 1740's, there continued to be trouble with Dutch ships and this drove the further establishment of Danish colonies along the west coast, including Jakobshavn (Ilulissat) which was established as a trade station by Jacob Severin in 1741. It was recorded in 1746 that at one time there were 40 Dutch ships on the waters of Disko Bay. Their hunting and trade in the area was driven by demand from Europe and good prices for, amongst other goods, narwhal tusks - that were used for medicine but were also interestingly something that kept the mystery of the mythological unicorn alive in the Mediterranean countries. It became apparent in the mid 1940's that the blood of the Europeans was being mixed with that of the local Inuit people. The increased number of interactions with Europeans also had a grave consequence for the Greenlandic Inuit population. By 1752 Smallpox had reached Disko Bay and the disease continued to be a recurring problem well into the 1800's. It was transmitted up along the coast, particularly after summer camps, where Inuit from many places gathered during the short summer. Many small settlements were completely wiped out by the disease. By 1793 there were less than 450 people living in Christians Haab and only 31 in 1805. The colony became so small that there was talk of moving it to Ilimanaq some 30km to the north, as there were more people living there at the time and their hunting and fishing was more successful. The move never happened though, as Ilimanaq has a very poor harbour. The population of Christians Haab slowly recovered and in 1850 there were 63 people and by 1921 a total of 510 living in the colony.

Up until the Second World War many of the local people still lived in peat and stone houses and used blubber lamps for heat



Above: An Inuit peat and stone house with fish hanging to dry outside in Qasigiannugit in 1936 (Arktisk Institut).

and light. However, the start of the 1950's changed the colony dramatically. Indeed, the last skin boat in the town blew away in 1953 thus by coincidence marking the end of an era. The biologist Dr. Poul Hansen discovered large quantities of shrimp in Disko Bay and this prompted the beginning of a new and prosperous industry in the town. A modern shrimp processing factory was built on the harbour and the small fishing boats were replaced with modern trawlers. At the same time, a new law ended the government retail monopoly allowing private shops to open thus also driving the sudden development and expansion of the town. New housing was built, people began wearing modern clothing, and the import of other modern goods exploded. In 1977-78 the harbour was expanded to allow the increasing number of trawlers to land their catch more



The shrimp factory pictured in 1956 (Arktisk Institut).

easily. At this time, there were approximately 1900 inhabitants living in the town - the largest population that there has been. Forty years later the local shrimp business was to come to an end with the closing of the factory in 1999 with activities moved to the more economical and larger production centre in Ilulissat. The derelict building and stainless steel machinery still occupy the site in a decaying state, testimony to the times past. The shrimp industry has been somewhat replaced by halibut fishing and processing after the construction of the new *Atlantkaj* on the small island of Quilik which was joined to the

mainland with a causeway. This is now reputedly one of Greenland's best harbours due to its sheltered location. The town is serviced regularly by Royal Arctic Line for goods transport and by Diskoline for passenger transport to towns in Disko Bay. In 1984 Qasigiannuit celebrated its 250 year anniversary and this was marked by the release of a book in Greenlandic and Danish written by Villads Villadsen describing the colony's history - *Christianshåb i 250 år*. At the same time the museum also opened after local people bought the buildings and donated them to the council with the clause that the buildings become a museum and facilitate the local history to visitors. During the 1980's the museum had a central role in the discovery and excavations at Qeqertasussuk.

The colony was known to the local Inuit as K'asigiánguit prior to about 1973 when the spelling changed to Qasigiannuit - the name that has now replaced the Danish colony name in tact with increasing self-governance of the country - a trend seen all over Greenland. Originally the colony was given the Danish name Christians Haab which changed to the spelling Christianshaab and later Christianshåb with changes in accepted use of the Danish vowels. For English speakers, one can get close to the pronunciation of Qasigiannuit with "kra-si-ji-anng-uit" remembering that double letters (the nn in Qasigiannuit) indicate an elongation of the letter's sound. The name comes from the Greenlandic Qasigiaq - the characteristically and colourfully marked Harbor seal (also Harbour or Common seal - *Phoca vitulina*) which filled the waters here in more than average numbers when the town was named by the first Inuit inhabitants. Today the town has a population of approximately 1250 and is quite modern by Greenlandic standards with two schools, a sports hall, supermarket, small kiosks and a hotel. The pace of development has however been challenged by the lack of an airport. Hence the towns of Aasiaat and Ilulissat have seen greater expansion and modernisation. Qasigiannuit has withheld a lot of charm and is considerably quieter than these larger more accessible towns. Qasigiannuit is also known for its friendly welcoming atmosphere, rows of multi-coloured wooden houses, sled dogs and an active fishing and hunting culture - many people are still subsistence hunters, regularly feeding their family and sled dogs with their catch. The type of prey is seasonal but mostly cod, trout and salmon, ringed seal, ptarmigan, arctic hare and occasionally reindeer. There are approximately 800 sled dogs by the town. The Greenland Dog is one of the oldest breeds of dog in the world and these dogs work in the winter and spring when there is sufficient snow and ice for them to pull sledges over the tundra and sea ice for hunting or recreation and tourism. It is important to note that sled dogs are not domesticated animals and are kept chained outside year round. They have a hierarchy and display pack behaviour similar to wolves but are loyal animals to their owners.



The statue of Villads Villadsen in Qasigiannuit.