FREEDOM ON THE HORIZON
Dutch Immigration
to America, 1840-1940

Hans Krabbendam
The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America

The series was inaugurated in 1968 by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America acting through the Commission on History to communicate the church’s heritage and collective memory and to reflect on our identity and mission, encouraging historical scholarship which informs both church and academy.

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If one goes searching today for recognizable Dutch manifestations in the Midwest of the United States, one will certainly find them in places with names such as Holland, Zeeland, Vriesland, Pella, and Orange City. Place names, historical buildings, societies, and festivals point to Dutch roots. At first glance most of these sites appear to be purely local—a historical monument, a windmill, a canal, or a tulip festival. However, these examples are related to each other, as a result of the waves of Dutch immigrants who came to America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and who formed a subculture. The Dutch in different locations keep in touch with each other in various ways. Thus there are a number of Holland Societies in many localities, bound together by cultural and historical relationships to the Netherlands, often harking back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; festivals of recent date that have a commercial and nostalgic flavor; and churches that want to continue a theological tradition.

Careful observation of these manifestations demonstrates that the current relationship with the Netherlands is actually rather thin, and that their main purpose is to strengthen the mutual connections
among Dutch Americans. The bond with the Netherlands, of whatever kind, offers these groups an identity. Their transatlantic contacts are usually informal, brief, and incidental. A few groups, however, are cohesive and intense, and they have always taken the bond with the Netherlands very seriously. They stand in a broad tradition of Protestant emigrants from Europe who moved to America since the middle of the nineteenth century. In the general American immigration pattern these groups were not exceptional—other ethnic groups have also reinforced their identity with religious bonds. This similarity to other groups could lead to the conclusion that there is no story to tell about the Dutch in America. Obviously there is. The Dutch had their distinctive characteristics. This book seeks to understand the settlement process of an unproblematic and relatively small immigrant group during the century when the door to America was wide open and Dutch emigration reached its apex. It takes a closer look at the transatlantic ties to explain the formation of a new Dutch-American identity.

My fascination with this topic began in the mid-1970s when as a young teenager I met an American family of Dutch descent that temporarily lived in my hometown. It was Robert P. Swierenga, who, together with his family, spent his first semester in the Netherlands to lay the foundation for his comprehensive statistical analysis of Dutch emigration. In the meantime he planted a seed of historical curiosity in my young mind. This seed germinated during my studies at Leiden University and Kent State University and continued to grow new branches. I harvested these fruits in a Dutch book, *Vrijheid in het verschiet. Nederlandse emigratie naar Amerika, 1840-1940*, of which this is the English translation, adapted for an American audience.

The main theme of this book originated during a term of study at the Van Raalte Institute in Holland, Michigan. The generosity, hospitality, and expertise of the staff in the heart of this Dutch colony gave this book a significant impetus, especially because by their interest they made clear that I should describe and elucidate the permanence of their subculture, which was self-evident to them. I never knocked in vain on the doors of Elton Bruins, Jack Nyenhuis, Bill and Nella Kennedy, Karen Schakel, and Robert P. Swierenga for facts, photographs, and files. The assistance of the archivists of the Joint Archives in Holland, Larry Wagenaar and his successor Geoffrey Reynolds, was indispensable as well. I found the staff of Heritage Hall of Calvin College in Grand

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Rapids equally helpful, and I was always welcomed as an old friend. Dick Harms, Wendy Blankenspoor, Hendrina Van Spronsen, and Boukje Leegwater offered assistance and coffee. It is thanks to this connection that Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres offered their services to translate the book into English. I am grateful for their excellent job. Thanks to the unparalleled editorial skills of Margriet Bruijn Lacy the manuscript was cleared of errors and glitches.

The connection between the Netherlands and the Midwestern Dutch immigrants fits naturally into the mission of the Roosevelt Study Center, a research institute for American history and European-American relations in Middelburg, the Netherlands. Housed in a twelfth-century abbey and surrounded by medieval monuments, the center offers a near-perfect residence for research. I am indebted for these stimulating circumstances to Kees van Minnen, Leontien Joosse, Giles Scott-Smith, and the doctoral students who came and went. The doctoral research project of Enne Koops on post-World War II Dutch immigration and the multifaceted connection between religion and immigration once again confirmed the importance of the immigration tradition that emerged in the nineteenth century. That is the theme of this book.
Overisel Reformed Church, Michigan.
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