Introduction

Graafschap, Overisel, and Vriesland are small villages on the edge of a cohesive Dutch immigrant community in the western part of the state of Michigan, with Graafschap to the west, Overisel to the southeast, and Vriesland to the northeast of the city of Holland. Each of these three villages at one time had a monumental, white-washed Protestant church. The congregation of Vriesland sold the old building, built in 1869, to a Spanish-speaking Pentecostal congregation and built a new multipurpose building a few hundred yards up the road. The Overisel congregation moved into a still more attractive church, right behind the old one, complete with kitchen, library, and sports hall. The original building of 1866 became superfluous, and, after some discussion, it was torn down. In spite of the fact that the Graafschap Christian Reformed Church was the cradle of the denomination and the site of its first ministerial training school, this historic building was also replaced by a new one. Only the steeple was retained. The requirements of contemporary American church life make ownership of historic churches a liability rather than an asset. An appeal to historical consciousness is insufficient to save the original buildings.
This leaves the Pillar Church, the church of the founder of the Dutch colony, Albertus Van Raalte, built in 1856, the main monument of the sturdy ecclesiastical past of the Reformed immigrant colony.¹

However, at the same time that monuments have disappeared, new construction in western Michigan has expanded. In the past several decades thousands of new residents, among whom are many Latin Americans, have come because of labor opportunities. It is expected that within twenty years the rural area with independent villages will be changed into a conglomerate of mutually exchangeable suburbs. The memorial year of 1997, packed with festivals, parades, lectures, publications, exhibits, memorials, concerts, and church services, was perhaps the final marking point of a homogeneous past. Although that thought can lead to some melancholy, it is truly astounding that a small group of Dutch pioneers was able to maintain its own subculture for a century and a half. This book describes how it was possible.

In the Netherlands, emigration to America continues to fascinate a wide public. The success of hotel “New York” in Rotterdam is a striking example of this. Historians are interested in the phenomenon of emigration, because it means much more than simply a demographic movement of people who build a new life in another country. The phenomenon demonstrates moments of crisis in the country of origin, possibilities in the country of settlement, but most especially the human capacity for imagination. Would a move bring about improvement? Everyone who thought about emigration formed an image of the new country, of the journey, of the future, of the loss of home. People projected ideals and expectations on the screen called “America,” which promised freedom and prosperity. Once they had arrived and settled, the immigrants reshaped their new environment and compared their American lives to their earlier lives in the Netherlands. Had it been a good decision to emigrate? How are family and friends doing? In turn, the relatives left behind tried to form a picture of life in America. Established Americans also pondered the effects of the massive immigration. Some saw the immigrants as an asset for the country, a welcome strengthening of the nation, as an indispensable labor force or as potential customers. More often Americans feared that the arrival of hordes of paupers who maintained their non-American lifestyle and imported ideas that undermined democracy threatened the unity and prosperity of their country.

To this day the debate about immigration continues to affect the core of the American nation, just as it does in the Netherlands and the rest of Europe. This often grim discussion is usually conducted in terms of “us” against “them.” The history of Dutch immigration to the United States reminds us that “we” once were “they.” A long-term

perspective teaches that immigrants come in waves of different composition. Immigration policy therefore returns regularly to the political agenda. In the eighteenth century immigrants mostly from the British Isles crossed the Atlantic, followed by Europeans from the north and west in the first half of the nineteenth century, and by Europeans from the south and east at the end of the century. Between 1921 and 1965 the influx of immigrants was limited to a maximum of several hundred thousand, but in 1965 the American Congress passed new legislation that increased immigration greatly in the remainder of the twentieth century. After the Second World War the center of gravity moved from European to Asian refugees, and Latin-American immigration became the most numerous. Even though the number of immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s reached new absolute heights with five to six million newcomers per decade—considered in relative terms there never were as many newcomers as in the 1890s, when nearly 15 percent of U.S. citizens were born abroad.³

The apex of Dutch emigration to the United States was in this very period. Between 1846 and 1914 at least two hundred thousand Dutch citizens crossed the Atlantic, while approximately one hundred thousand Dutch followed them between 1948 and 1960. The early immigrants settled in western Michigan, Wisconsin, and southeast Iowa. The next waves moved further north to northern Michigan and westward to Minnesota and the Dakotas. Immigrant communities also developed in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Paterson (New Jersey), and Rochester and Buffalo in New York State.⁴

Even after migration from the Netherlands had dwindled in 1930s, the phenomenon continued to appeal to the imagination. This was true for those involved, as well as for scholars and writers who were curious about people’s motives, their circumstances, and the human capacity for adaptation. Those studying immigration each highlighted a different aspect—for example, by emphasizing the “special character” of the Dutch immigrant, defending the role of church and faith, correcting the neglect of forgotten groups, or tracing either the communal mentality or its alternatives. In the historiography of nineteenth-century Dutch emigration to the United States this

variation in viewpoints is especially noticeable. The interest in the religious aspect has always occupied a prominent place, not only in historical writing of American descendants of these immigrants, but also among Dutch writers.

The memory of nineteenth-century migration played a remarkable role in the twentieth century among self-conscious Calvinists in the Netherlands (first called Seceders, later Gereformeerden), who commemorated their centennial in the midst of the depression of the 1930s. In 1834 the first Protestants had seceded from the privileged Reformed Church (Hervormde Kerk). On October 12-14, 1934, hundreds of kindred spirits came together in Utrecht in an atmosphere of great thankfulness, mixed with some pride. After all, who could have imagined in 1834 that one hundred years later a descendant of the Seceders would be prime minister of the Netherlands (Hendrikus Colijn), and that a few years earlier a grandson of a Separatist emigrant (Gerrit Jan Diekema) would be appointed as the American ambassador to the Netherlands?

On the first day of the event Professor A. Goslinga, historian at the Gereformeerde Free University in Amsterdam, opened an impressive exhibit about this history. One of the visitors was bank employee
and writer Piet Risseeuw from The Hague, who was deeply impressed by the material on display and especially by the forty brochures and four illustrations about migration to America. Risseeuw became so captivated by the brochures of the ministers Anthony Brummelkamp and Albertus C. Van Raalte, who had defended the early emigration, that he decided to write a novel about the relationship between the Secession and the migration of 1846 to the United States. During the Second World War he found time to turn his collection of historical sources into a historical fiction series; the first two volumes appeared in 1946—*Vrijheid en brood* (*Freedom and Bread*) and *De huilende wildernis* (*The Howling Wilderness*). The third and last volume, *Ik worstel en ontkom* (*I Struggle and Escape*) appeared in 1951. Together they were published in 1959 as the trilogy *Landverhuizers* (*The Emigrants*).

This topic scored a bull’s eye. Immediately after publication in 1947, the Dutch Christian radio station NCRV produced the book as a radio drama, and new editions were printed until 1982. *The Emigrants* formed the image of emigration for the postwar generation. The Netherlands slowly recovered from the deprivations of economic crisis and World War II. Parallels with the setbacks and difficulties of the pioneers in the land of freedom were readily at hand. Moreover, after two generations, emigration had once again gained momentum, with one-third of Dutch families considering departure in 1948. Risseeuw based his sturdy main characters on actual people and quoted regularly from their correspondence. As a novelist he was especially interested in family relations and in various survival strategies. As a committed Calvinist, he wanted to give a new impetus to Christian literature. In his trilogy he allowed the Christian faith to play a central role, even though he also gave notable secondary roles to those who were not Christians.

Risseeuw stood in a historical tradition that paid much attention to the religious aspect of migration. However, this emphasis ran the risk of pushing aside other aspects. In response, later publications underrated the religious dimension. If one looks at the statistical data that one-third of Protestant Dutchmen had joined a Dutch-American denomination, one could conclude that the influence of church and faith was limited. This is, however, a premature conclusion that does

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not take into consideration the many Roman Catholic immigrants who did not found their own denomination, but were absorbed in the American Catholic Church, and the many immigrants who joined other American churches. Religion played a role in the immigrant experience in various ways, but it needs to be matched with the other aspects that shaped a Dutch-American subculture.\(^6\)

This book has sprung from my wonder about the fact that a relatively small group of Dutch immigrants was able to maintain its own identity for such a long time. In the explanation of this phenomenon religion plays a significant but not exclusive role. Earlier studies about Netherlanders in America have described a number of aspects of the Dutch emigration movement: Jacob van Hinte and Henry Lucas published massive works that described local settlements in detail. The American historian (and third-generation Dutch-American) Robert P. Swierenga provided a solid statistical basis for research on the composition of the waves of emigrants till 1880, and he described the Dutch community in Chicago in minute detail. He inspired a generation of immigration historians who dealt with subjects such as regional concentrations, Roman Catholic emigrants, Frisians, women, and the development of Dutch communities in the Midwest. In the Netherlands, Pieter Stokvis marked the beginning of this emigration movement in 1846 with his dissertation about *De Nederlandse trek naar Amerika*.\(^7\) These recent research results, augmented with original sources, make it possible to reconstruct the Dutch-American emigrant culture in the nineteenth century. This book does not offer an exhaustive overview of all Dutch communities—for that purpose one can consult the works of Van Hinte and Lucas and the many articles in the periodical *Origins*—but will expose the patterns that have guaranteed

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\(^7\) See Appendix 2.
the continuity of these communities. More than the American studies, this investigation is focused on the bonds with the Old World.\footnote{David A. Gerber, “Forming a Transnational Narrative: New Perspectives on European Migrations to the United States,” \textit{The History Teacher} 35.1 (2001): 61-78.}

Dutch immigrants received the same welcome in America as did many English immigrants. As a group they were not discriminated against, as were many others who came to America from more exotic areas. In 1847 the Presbyterian minister George Duffield already called the Dutch immigrants “a very interesting and valuable foreign population.”\footnote{See P.R.D. Stokvis, \textit{De Nederlandse trek naar Amerika, 1846-1847} (Leiden: Universitaire Pers Leiden, 1977), 135.} The congressional commission which, under the leadership of Senator William P. Dillingham, examined the situation of immigrants between 1907 and 1910, made an extremely positive judgment about the Dutch: “In social customs the Dutch show greater affinity to the English than to the Germans. They have been called the Englishmen of the mainland. Like the English, the Dutch have been great colonizers.”\footnote{\textit{Reports of the Immigration Commission}, Vol. I. \textit{Summary} (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), 232.} Even after the Second World War an American Republican senator from Wisconsin said that he gladly saw Dutch immigrants come, because they would improve the quality of the American people: “They are a good breed; we can use them.”\footnote{Senator Alexander Wiley (Republican from Wisconsin) in \textit{Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, Eighty-Second Congress, First Session on United States Economic and Military Assistance to Free Europe} (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951), 249.} Whatever the political motives for these statements, they illustrate the fact that the Dutch Americans did not have to overcome political obstacles or fight for their acceptance. Nevertheless, as individuals they faced alienation similar to many British immigrants and yet they did not disappear in the melting pot without a trace.\footnote{William E. Van Vugt, \textit{Britain to America: Mid-Nineteenth Century Immigrants to the United States} (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1999).}

That the Dutch communities with a Reformed character did not seek integration head over heels was a result of the communal ideals that they wanted to realize. The Seceders were a despised minority in the Netherlands and became a leading group in America. This transition stimulated a strong self-consciousness that differentiated itself from both a Dutch and an American awareness. The Dutch immigrants
were not unique in this respect; other ethnic subcultures formed new identities as well. The ethnic groups did not form natural, permanent units from the beginning, but brought them about themselves.\footnote{Werner Sollors coined the term the “discovery of ethnicity,” in \textit{The Invention of Ethnicity} (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), ix-xx.} It is not accidental that this history mainly took place in the Midwest. This region, including the states of Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North and South Dakota, promised space for group settlements and farming and offered freedom to remain true to oneself. This freedom also had a reverse side. Immigrants could easily decide to leave or to split the community. An ethnic enclave that was able to keep the old authority structures in place because of American freedom saw with dismay the unraveling result of that same freedom. These circumstances hindered the immigrants from copying their society from the Old World. Even the virtue of freedom could produce internal tensions in communities that wanted to continue their own lifestyles as much as possible.\footnote{See my article, “The Return of Regionalism: The Importance of Immigration to the Plains for the History of the Dutch in America,” in Paul Fessler, Hubert R. Krygsman, and Robert P. Swierenga, eds., \textit{Dutch Immigrants on the Plains} (Holland, Mich.: Joint Archives of Holland, 2006), 1-21.}

If a group was successful in satisfying the needs of its members within the boundaries of its own community with the help of economic and social institutions, then it strengthened its continuity considerably. Through the establishment and maintenance of the boundaries between its own group and outsiders, through formal membership and informal rules regarding language, clothing, behavior, and custom (whether or not formulated by authorities), the group remained distinct from other groups. This permanence was further strengthened by successive generations identifying with this tradition in various cultural expressions, such as literature, festivals, and commemorations.\footnote{Rudolph J. Vecoli, “An Inter-Ethnic Perspective on American Immigration History,” \textit{Mid-America} 75 (1993), 223-35.}

The establishment of a Dutch-American subculture in the nineteenth century in the American Midwest is sketched out in this book according to ten building blocks that overall follow a chronological sequence. The first three chapters describe the prelude of the emigration movement, which led to the actual departure in the period 1846-1850. This segment of the history is known best because of its adventuresome nature, but it becomes more structurally significant by viewing it as a
condition for community formation in America. The organization of the departure and the building of immigrant communities in America demonstrate how the immigrants had developed ideals and plans at home, and thus laid a basis for a firm network.

The next three chapters (4-6) describe the three building blocks for internal cohesion—church, family, and work. This series is followed by the means of communication that are described in chapters 7-9. The cement between the building blocks constituted the internal communication by maintaining and adapting the language and the media, and the external communication with the Netherlands, which was preserved through extensive correspondence and visits, and with American society, especially through politics. These factors eventually led to a Dutch-American identity, which is described in chapter 10. In the conclusion, these ten interwoven developments are placed in a wider perspective that begins with New Amsterdam and continues through the postwar emigration. It then becomes clear that the Dutch-American group culture was a temporary phenomenon that reached its climax in the first half of the twentieth century. Around 1920 all the elements were fully developed. After that time, the pattern would not change essentially until the last emigration wave of 1948-1960 had ebbed away and all kinds of modernizing developments replaced the local autonomy with regional and national bonds.  

Dutch Protestant immigrants are more prominently represented in this book than other religious groups because they best satisfied the requirements for continued existence as a group: a strong identity, shared experiences, geographic concentration, internal and external communication channels, a discussion among themselves about their own identity, and the urge to pass on the identity to succeeding generations. The Netherlanders who chose to build their lives outside the Protestant or Catholic enclaves were, of course, no less “Dutch American”—except that they did not contribute (or very little) to the new phenomenon of the Dutch American.

16 James D. Bratt, Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 220: “The slowness of accommodation also deserves note. Having all the marks of the WASP profile, the Dutch did not melt into American society on schedule; in fact, they vociferously resisted the same. Socio-economic dysfunction cannot explain the anomaly, for in these areas the Dutch have adjusted well enough. The reason must lie in considerable part in the realm of ‘outlook,’ religion and ‘mind.’”
Map 3: The Netherlands in the nineteenth century.