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The First Dutch Catholics In Brown County

by Willem Keeris, The Netherlands

[Mr. Keeris was born in 1952 in the village of Zeeland in North Brabant, Holland. He works as an RN in an Amsterdam hospital. He became interested in Dutch Catholic emigration to the U.S. after seeing a picture of an emigrated family. Dutch/American emigration became a hobby, which Mr. Keeris enjoys with his good friend Willem Rovers. This summer will mark his tenth visit to Brown and Outagamie counties.]

We sincerely thank Larry De Groot for locating and contacting Mr. Keeris, who has generously taken the time to write this article about the history of Dutch Catholic emigration into Brown County.]

More than 155 years ago the first Dutch Catholic emigrants arrived in the Fox River Valley area in Wisconsin. Those first emigrants traveled under the leadership of Father Theodorus Joannes Baptista Van den Broek, who brought nearly 320 men, women and children, mostly from the south of Holland, to the United States of America.

The majority went to 'La Petite Chute' (as Little Chute was called then) where Father Van den Broek had built the first church in 1836. Some of them were not happy with the accommodations in Little Chute, and they went some ten miles east until they stopped in the middle of the forest to found a settlement in the woods, now known as Hollandtown. In those days it was called "Franciscus Bosch." Others moved to existing villages in Brown County (Outagamie County was not formed at that time) and later to other places in Wisconsin.



Father Theodorus Van den Broek, (1784-1851) helped establish a migration route from Holland to Wisconsin in 1848. Catholic Diocese of Green Bay Archives

Father Van den Broek was baptized in Amsterdam, Holland on June 24, 1784 as the second child of Abraham van den Broek and Elisabeth de Meijne. His paternal grandparents were Abraham van den Broek and Alida Verhaar, who both died in Uden, North Brabant Holland when Father Van den Broek was 7 and 9 years old respectively.

He joined the Franciscan Order, was ordained in 1808, and on June 16, 1817 he joined the Dominican Order in Amsterdam. For 10 years he was pastor in Alkmaar, Holland where he restored the church. He also published a few books about the Catholic Faith.

In 1832 he left his native country with some other Dominicans and went to Cincinnati, Ohio in the United States. In 1834 he came to Green Bay, Wisconsin where Father Samuel Mazzuchelli (also a Dominican) already had formed a mission. In Green Bay he became friends with the Grignon family, one

of the first French-Canadian families in the area. Probably through this contact he went to 'La Petite Chute' two years later, where he built the first church for the Menominee Indians. He also had several missions to attend to in the surrounding area, even as far as Wisconsin Rapids.

In the summer of 1847 he went back to Holland to collect the inheritance of his mother who had died in 1844. Unfortunately the money had been wasted by the solicitor. Probably he already had the idea to inform and help Dutch Catholics to emigrate and establish a Catholic settlement in the United States, as the Protestants already had done in Holland, Michigan and Pella, Iowa.

Father Van den Broek found emigrants through an advertising campaign, a brochure promoting his colony, and an open letter to the Dutch Roman Catholics. He published an ad several times in a national newspaper "De Tijd" (The Time) to make people aware of the possibility of finding a better life in the States. The result of all this was that in the spring of 1848 three wooden sailing vessels (owned by Hudig & Blokhuisen, a ship broker company) left Rotterdam, Holland bound for the United States of America.

Probable reasons for Father Van den Broek leading a group of Dutch Catholics to America include the following:

- to help his fellow citizens find a better living
- to increase the number of his parishioners after the Menominees had left
- to have the chance to sell the land he had bought in order to get rid of his debts
- to provide jobs for the new arrivals through his contact with Morgan L. Martin, who was making the Fox River navigable

The Dutch nationals had mainly one reason for leaving their homeland - economic improvement.

Most of the emigrants were "less well-to-do" and looking for a chance to improve their life and the lives of their children. Although there are still stories about religious reasons for the Catholic emigration, this is NOT true. During the second half of the 1840s in the Netherlands there was a general economic decline, and that, coupled with the belief in the possibilities of a better life in the United States, were the main reasons for the beginning of the Dutch mass emigration.

The three ships that left Holland in 1848 were the *Libra*, the *Maria Magdalena* and the *America*.

The *Libra* was the first ship to set sail. It left Hellevoetsluis (near Rotterdam) on Tuesday, March 14, 1848 with 83 passengers, including their leader, Father Adrianus Dominicus Godthardt. Under the leadership of this priest the only Dutch Catholic colony was founded in Hollandtown in Brown County, Wisconsin.



St. Francis Catholic Church in Hollandtown. Hollandtown was first settled by Dutch Catholic immigrants led by Franciscan' priest Father Adrianus Godthardt in 1848. Photo by Jim Emmel

Father Godthardt was baptized in Haarlem, Holland on July 12, 1811 as the fourth child of Ferdinand Dominicus Godthardt and Catharina La Tour. In 1829 he joined the Franciscan Order and

adopted the name Pacificus Maria. He worked as a priest in Amsterdam for a while. From 1842 until 1844 he was in the Dutch East Indies. After his return he worked in The Hague, Holland until 1848, when he traveled to the United States on the *Libra*. Because Father Godthardt was a Franciscan, the settlement was called 'Franciscus Bosch', later renamed Hollandtown. He stayed there for approximately two years. It is uncertain what happened to him after that. He probably went east, to New York State and from there to Texas and later to Illinois, where he was staying in 1866. It is not known when and where he died.

Hollandtown is the only colony in the United States founded by Dutch Roman Catholics. It is the only place in the United States where members of the Schut society ("shoot the bird"), carry on a heritage from their native country.

Among the first settlers in Franciscus Bosch were the families of Van de Hei, Gerrits, Van den Berg, Verkuylen, Kempen, Hoevenaars and Verkampen. The 1848 emigration is the beginning of what is called a "chain migration": people in Holland followed their family members, former neighbors, friends and acquaintances to the places in the United States where they had made their homestead.



Father William Verboort, (1836 - 1876) became the first pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church in De Pere, Wisconsin in 1869. [From *Wooden Shoes West* by Scott Vandehey, 1979]

The *Libra* landed after a voyage of 53 days on Friday May 5, 1848 in Boston, Massachusetts. One of the families on board was the Verboort family. Their son William Verboort (who was 12 years old at the time of the crossing) became, in 1869, the first pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church in East De Pere. In 1875 he followed his parents (who had left earlier that year) to Oregon. In 1876 all three died and since then the place where they settled is called "Verboort".

On Sunday March 26, 1848 the two other ships left Hellevoetsluis. The *Maria Magdalena* landed after a voyage of 44 days in New York City, New York on Monday May 8, 1848. There were 147 passengers on board under the leadership of Father Van den Broek. Father Van den Broek died in Little Chute on November 5, 1851.

The *America* reached Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on Thursday May 11, 1848 after a voyage of 47 days. On board were 94 passengers, among them many members of the Van de Hei family. Although each ship arrived in a different port, the route to Wisconsin was the same: by tow barge, via Albany, New York, through the Erie Canal, to Buffalo, New York and then by lake steamer over the Great Lakes to Green Bay, and from there on the Fox River to 'KaukaUna, near Little Chute. Immigrants had to change boats several times.

According to the diary of Father Godthardt, the group that traveled on board the *Libra* was the first one to arrive in Little Chute, Wisconsin on May 22, 1848 (one week before Wisconsin was granted statehood). The people on board the *America* and the *Maria Magdalena* reached Little Chute on June 7 and 8, 1848 respectively. The voyages of the three ships mark the beginning of the Dutch Catholic emigration to Brown County. The majority went either to Little Chute (in Brown County at that time) or to the area in and around De Pere.

Chain migration was the main factor in the arrival of new groups of emigrants and is an important phenomenon in the development of villages in Brown County. During many decades one wave of Dutch emigrants followed the other. In 1850, for example, a group of more than 200 people came from the province of North Brabant, Holland, on the ship *Tuskina* under the leadership of the secular priest Father Gerardus van den Heuvel, who was a chaplain in Boekel, North Brabant. The ship set sail from Rotterdam and arrived in New York City on May 25, 1850. (An interesting fact here is that two of Gerardus' nephews (both priests) played a role in the early 20th century emigration to Minnesota, Montana and North Dakota.)

One of the most well known participants in the 1850 group was Arnoldus Verstegen, who built the 'Zeeland-Mill' in Little Chute. Henricus de Groot and his newlywed wife Huiberdina van Rooy were also among the passengers. Their descendants can still be found in Green Bay, where Father Van den Heuvel died on April 1, 1851 of typhoid fever.

This continuous Dutch emigration has contributed to Brown County's rich cultural heritage and its contemporary appearance.

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Sources:

About Father Godthardt:

Wisconsin Magazine of History, vol. 75, No.2, page 117-140.

About the early Dutch Catholic emigration: *Landverhuizing als regionaal verschijnsel*, by H. van Stekelenburg, 1991. (This book is in Dutch but it has an English summary and is available at the Brown County Library, Genealogy and Local History Department.)