THE MAKING OF AN ETHNIC ISLAND:
INITIAL SETTLEMENT PATTERNS OF
NETHERLANDERS IN WEST MICHIGAN

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This article focuses on the historical geography of the Netherlandic settlement area of West Michigan. The research identifies all those Netherlanders who patented land in twelve townships of Allegan and Ottawa counties in West Michigan beginning in 1847. Information about these land patents is linked to published sources that provide additional data both about those who bought the land from the government and about the land they purchased. A chronological mapping of the land patented by Netherlanders reveals that the expansion of this ethnic island is governed by the initial settlement centers, by the Macatawa River system, by soil quality, and by the availability of land. The Dutch patent holders sometimes cluster by Netherlandic provincial origins around centers named for their Dutch provinces. At other times the patent holders from a particular province are highly scattered without a clear orientation to any center.

INTRODUCTION

An historical geography of the Netherlandic culture area in West Michigan has yet to be written; the same is true for other principal Netherlandic settlement areas in Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, and New York established during the nineteenth century. The most significant source for the historical geography of Netherlandic settlement in the USA continues to be Netherlanders in America by the Dutch geographer Jacob Van Hinte (Van Hinte 1928). The publication of an English translation in 1985 made this wide-ranging and provocative work available for the first time to historical and cultural geographers in North America (Van Hinte 1985). Although geographic themes and analysis are present in Van Hinte’s work, by present day standards Netherlanders in America is more a historical than a geographical study. Moreover, Van Hinte painted on a country-wide canvass: all Netherlandic settlement regions were portrayed and compared. Within such a compass, no single Dutch immigration area could be thoroughly examined.

During the more than sixty years since the appearance of Van Hinte’s work, geographic research related to North America’s Netherlandic subculture has shown only a few signs of life. Of the nearly eight hundred items identified in Linda Doezeema’s Dutch Americans: A Guide to Information Sources published in 1979, only eight are geographic writings and only two of these examine the Netherlandic subculture in West Michigan (Doezema 1979; Bjorkland 1964; Jakle and Wheeler 1969). In the years following the publication of this annotated bibliography, several new geographic analyses have appeared, but the century-long trend of geographic inattention to Netherlanders in North America remains unbroken (Saueressig-Schreuder 1985; Wyckoff 1986; Quandt, Houdek, and Rosen 1987). For North American cultural and historical geography in general, however, the geographic interpretation of land occupation, adaptation, environmental perception, settlement patterns, the built environment and regional life styles of immigrant cultures developed into enduring research themes and produced a large
the Peel in the northeast of the province of Noord Brabant (Figure 1). These were agricultural regions that experienced economic depression and over-crowding. In the USA, the principal initial nineteenth century settlement region is found along the southern shoreline of Lake Michigan from Muskegon, Michigan to Green Bay, Wisconsin. Secondary settlement regions developed in central Iowa, western New York and the greater New York City region (Swierenga 1985a, pp. 32-35).

Within the Lake Michigan shoreline settlement region, the Lake Macatawa and Macatawa River area of southern Ottawa and northern Allegan Counties in West Michigan became the principal focus of Netherlandic immigration (Figure 2). As in other Netherlandic rural landscapes settled by group migration in the Midwest, religious convictions decisively shaped the establishment of what became known as the Holland Colony in West Michigan in 1847. Its leader, Albertus Van Raalte and many of the influential initial settlers and organizers were Seceders, those who had left the National Church in the Netherlands because of its doctrines, liturgy and state control. They wanted to found a religious ethnic island where, unencumbered, their followers could practice their religion. While the West Michigan site satisfied this broad criterion, it was chosen over other possible areas for more practical reasons that had little to do with religious belief. Van Raalte chose the as yet ‘unsettled' Macatawa River area for his colony over other possible settlement
zones in Wisconsin and Iowa because of its woodland vegetation (lumber and fertile soils) and because the area was considerably closer to the commercial heartland of the United States: the Holland center had potential to become a thriving commercial harbor on Lake Michigan (Lucas 1955, pp. 80-82; Van Hinte 1928, pp. 132-137).

Netherlandic settlement in this area began in 1847 and the focal points were established very quickly and at the same time: Holland (1847), Zeeland (1847), Groningen (1847), Drenthe (1847), Vriesland (1847), Graafschap (1847), Overisel (1848), North (New) Holland (1848), and Noordeloos (1848), (Figure 3), (Van Hinte 1928, 1985; Lucas 1955). With the exception of Graafschap a community of Netherlandic speakers in Germany close to the Dutch border, these are all toponyms borrowed from the Netherlands and even Graafschap is a Dutch language toponym. Zeeland, Groningen, Vriesland (Friesland), Drenthe, Overisel (Overijssel) are the names of Dutch provinces; Holland, sometimes associated with the low-lying western provinces of Noord and Zuid Holland is also a synonym for the entire Netherlands; Noordeloos is a municipality in the province of Zuid Holland. The name North (Noord) Holland is related by direction to Holland, the principal center of Netherlanders in West Michigan.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

The principal documentary source for this research are the Tract Books available by county for the State of Michigan (Michigan Department of Treasury). These record details of the original sale of government land to individuals and organizations (land patents). They are organized geographically by section, township and range and a legal description of the location of the land parcel within the section is provided. Other pertinent information recorded in the tract books includes the acreage purchased, the name and residence of the purchaser, and the date of the patent. The first task was to identify and extract the Netherlandic purchasers by Dutch last names (and first names when necessary) from the Tract Books for twelve townships in Ottawa and Allegan counties and enter all the information for each purchase into a computer data base. Macintosh Hypercard software was chosen to store the data because of its versatility, its graphics capability (for mapping), and because information could easily be exported to other data base systems and statistics software.
The final product of this initial research stage is a computer data base for 848 land patents of Netherlanders as well as a computer map of each section of land within the twelve townships showing the distribution of land patented by Netherlanders (400 maps in all). Figure 4 is one card from the Hypercard stack of land patents; it records the aforementioned information from the Tract Books and links it (with the Map button) to a Hypercard stack of section maps which show the location of each land patent and the distribution of land patented by Netherlanders in each section. Figure 5 is an example of such a map. These records also contain summary information about the map's location and the properties patented; the maps show the location, size, and date of each land patent; the shaded properties were patented by Netherlanders. Each Dutch land patent property shown on the section maps is linked by means of a Hypercard button to the stack of land patents; by clicking on one of these properties the information about the original patent holder is revealed. In this way the Hypercard stack of section maps is closely linked to the corresponding stack of land patents taken from the tract books. The next phase of the research added data from published records to the land patents data base. Published lists of Netherlanders based on Dutch government emigration records, on United States ship passenger manifests and on the US Population Censuses are available. (Swierenga 1983a, 1984a, 1985a).
### TRACT BOOKS

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**Figure 4:** Example of a Hypercard Record of a Land Patent Taken from the Tract Books

1983b, 1987) These lists record information not available in the tract books. The names of purchasers from the land patent record were linked with those from these published sources. In many cases no match could be found. When a match was found, the information relating to that name was transferred to the land patents data base. In this way the information about each land purchaser was broadened to include provincial and municipal origins in the Netherlands as well as household size and denominational affiliation (Figure 4). Data from published soil surveys represent a second source of information added to the land patents data base. For each of the land patents the first and second most common soil types (by area) were recorded; these two soils classes constituted all or the larger portion of the land patent (Figure 3). Soil surveys of Allegan and Ottawa counties prepared by the United States Department of Agriculture and Soil Conservation Service were used for this purpose (United States Department of Agriculture 1972, 1987).

There are important limitations in the use of land office (land patent) records to study the settlement geography of any region (McIntosh 1976; Rice 1978). These records list only the original purchasers of the land from the government and not the subsequent purchasers of the same land. As speculators and entrepreneurs, first purchasers sometimes quickly sold the land to others making either no or only marginal improvements to the land. The subsequent purchasers would be the true pioneer farmers. From the distribution of land already patented by 1847 (Figure 6), it is clear that Netherlandic immigrants were subsequent purchasers of significant amounts of such land (for example, around the centers of Holland, Groningen and Overisel). Tracing the expansion of the Netherlandic culture area in West Michigan through land transfer records repre-
sents another important research task for the study of the settlement geography of this region; however, this study relies only on land patent, not land transfer records.

Among the Netherlandic settlers themselves, the first purchasers were also not necessarily the first farmers. Community leaders and well-to-do immigrants, for example, A. C. Van Raalte, the founder of the colony of Holland, and J. G. Van Hees, patented large and diverse holdings; some of these patents were granted as farms to others unable to purchase their own land. Only much later did such farmers become the registered owners through land transfers. The land patents may, therefore, represent the pioneer farming stage but not by the patent holders but by others using the land.

Another limitation of the land office records is that households and single persons who did not purchase land are excluded, for example, residents of towns, agricultural labourers and those in other occupations. In other words, those who patented land do not reflect the immigrant population as a whole. However, the Netherlandic island in West Michigan was primarily an agricultural region of owner-occupied farmsteads during the 1850s and 1860s. Even so, a small segment of the immigrant population is not included in the data.

This data set may be used to study various aspects, both geographic and non-geographic, of Netherlandic settlement in West Michigan.

Figure 5: Example of a Hypercard Section Map
This article will focus on two aspects of the settlement geography of this region: the expansion of initial settlement by Netherlanders as revealed by the land patent record, and the geographical distribution of provincial origins of those who patented the land. These phenomena were mapped for geographic analysis using the forty acre divisions of the survey system as recording units.

**GEOGRAPHIC EXPANSION OF INITIAL SETTLEMENT**

An analysis of the land patents reveals that the geographic expansion of Netherlandic settlement was governed by a variety of factors: the number of land patents per year, the distribution of settlement nodes founded by initial groups of settlers affiliated with provinces and municipalities in the Netherlands, the distribution of suitable soils, the distribution of land already patented by others, and, finally, distance along and from the Macatawa River, the southwest to northeast axis of the entire
Figure 7: Land Patents Issued to Netherlanders in the Study Area, 1847-1875

colony. Figure 7 depicts the yearly number of land patents issued to Netherlanders from 1847 to 1875 in the study area. Overall, the number of land patents issued per year declined as the amount of available land steadily shrank. Two peaks, 1847-1849 and 1854-1856, coincided reasonably well with the overall pattern of immigration from the Netherlands to the United States (Swierenga 1985a, p. 31). Figure 3 shows the distribution of all land patented by Netherlanders. The largest block of contiguous land patents surrounded the centers of Zeeland, Vriesland and Drenthe, with a secondary area around Graafschap. As measured by land patents, the Holland Colony was a distinctive geographic unit with clearly marked boundaries to the south, east, and northeast; to the west and northwest the boundary was more indistinct.

The 1847 land patents (Figure 8) reveal the beginning of the Macatawa axis. In this first year there was a lot of land acquisition by patent in the western sector and center of the ethnic island, around Holland, Graafschap and Zeeland. Much of the land around Holland and Lake Macatawa was not available for patent (Figure 6). Given the importance of Holland as a receiving center and hub for the entire ethnic region, it is likely that a lot of land was purchased from non-Netherlandic owners quite quickly. Holland’s immediate tributary area, however, had severe limitations for farming because of the sandy, relatively infertile soils of dunes, lake plains and outwash plains. This may also explain the paucity of land patents in the immediate vicinity of Holland.

Graafschap, on the other hand, settled by Netherlandic-speaking people living across the frontier in Graafschap Benteheim, Germany, enjoyed a more open agricultural frontier, one not already patented by others (Figure 6). The pattern of the spread of land patents reveals that early growth was channelled in a southerly
and southeasterly direction. Here, the soils consist of brown loams, loamy sands and sandy loams, well suited to field agriculture as well as forestry. To the north and west, infertile sandy outwash and lake plains and beach ridges blocked the spread of agriculture. During the 1850s this land, unsuitable for arable farming, was nevertheless patented by Netherlanders and drawn into the sphere of influence of Graafschap, most likely for forestry (Figure 9). As revealed by the land patents maps, the settlement frontier steadily pushed further out around Graafschap, mainly in a southerly direction; by 1860 all the land in this area had been patented (Figures 8 to 10).

Already in 1847 significant areas of land had been patented by Netherlanders in the eastern part of the Colony along the upper reaches of the Macatawa River (Figure 8). Three nodes channelled the settlement: Zeeland, Vriesland, and Drenthe. Indeed, by 1848 the center of initial land alienation had shifted to the eastern frontier of the Holland Colony and remained there until 1850 (Figure 8). Again, geographical expansion around each of these nodes was governed by the physical geography of the area and by the distribution of and already patented by others. Vriesland and Drenthe are located on gently-sloping, upland loam soils which required draining for farming. In just four years the entire area was patented by Dutch farmers (Figures 8 and 9). The only barrier, the flood plain of the Macatawa River, a former glacial spillway, lay on the west side of this settlement zone. These bottom lands are flat and their soils very poorly drained.
organic materials. From 1847 to 1850 these lands remained a corridor of unpurchased land (Figure 8). Only when all the other land in this area had been patented were these organic soils slowly added to the stock of properties owned by Dutchmen (Figures 9 and 10).

The growth of settlement around the center of Zeeland was likewise directed by the agricultural potential of soils. Examination of the maps shows a strong northeastern and northern component to its expansion (Figure 8). In this area the soils have few limitations for farming, provided they are properly drained. To the south of Zeeland, however, are found infertile, sandy soils with much greater restrictions for agriculture.

By 1850 the Macatawa River axis from east central Laketown Township to northeastern Zeeland Township had become a continuous zone of land ownership and settlement served by the centers. During the next ten years the pattern of land patents shifted away from both sides of this axis strengthening existing centers and incorporating new ones (Noordeloos and North/New Holland) (Figure 9). A secondary pattern of land purchases closer to the Lake Michigan shoreline becomes evident during the latter half of the 1850s (Figure 9).

North of the original axis of settlement, much potential farm land remained, especially in southern and central Olive township. During the 1850s, land patented in this area around the settlements of Noordeloos and North

Figure 9: Land Patents Issued to Dutchmen, 1849-1855 and 1856-1860
(New) Holland conforms quite closely to a region of poorly drained, loamy soils. Other than drainage, these lands offered few restrictions to agriculture (Figure 9).

South of and parallel to the axis a line of new land purchases appears during the 1850s; by the end of the decade this expansion is halted by the barrier of land already patented before the Dutch arrived. Nearly all the land available for patent in this zone is sold by 1860. The expansion is on to somewhat poorly drained but quite fertile loamy sands and sandy loams. The agricultural zone around the centers of Graafschap and Overisel continues to move outward (Figure 9).

Another significant pattern appears on the land patents map of the 1850s. Dutchmen bought much of the remaining sand dune and sand plain land from the government in the lakeside townships of the colony, especially in Laketown township (Figure 9). These lands were not suitable for agriculture. They were most likely bought for the commercial forestry potential of the lake-shore setting: woodlands accessible to Lake Michigan became part of a regional and national forestry products market for steam power and residential fuel. Those who had come to this area earlier saw the potential of this lake shore; much of the land was already patented by the time the Dutchmen arrived (Figure 6).
With the exception of the blocks of land patents in eastern Olive township, purchases of land from the government by Netherlanders largely came to a halt by the end of the 1850s. The land patent maps from 1861 on reveal a mop up pattern (Figure 10). Measured by land patents, the agricultural frontier within the Holland Colony disappeared and a widely scattered pattern of land purchases becomes evident. If bottom lands along the upper reaches of the Macatawa River are any indication (Figure 9 and 10), many of these leftovers were much less desirable parcels. The same is true for the only large contiguous area of land patented during this period: the very poorly drained, sandy, lake plain soils of southeastern Olive township located northeast of North Holland (Figure 10). It took considerable time for these newly-acquired lands to become operational farms; Borculo, the center of this area, was not established until the 1880s. The land patent pattern for the last thirty years of the nineteenth century shows only scattered parcels considerably north of the Macatawa River. South of the river, all the available land had been patented. The supply of land for patents was exhausted (Figure 10).

PROVINCIAL ORIGINS OF LAND PATENTS

The social characteristics of the Netherlanders who patented the land may also be geographically analysed using these data. The provincial origins of the Netherlanders who purchased land from the government is one such characteristic. It was noted earlier that at least five settlement centers took the names of Dutch provinces; in addition, the townships of Overisel and Zeeland also took the names of Dutch provinces (Figure 11). These two townships are particularly closely linked to their Dutch namesakes because both the township and a center in that township have the same name. The township names are likely derived from the names of their principal centers. One would expect the geographic origins of the founders of these named settlements and townships to be related to the corresponding provinces in the Netherlands. Such provincial (as well as regional and local) loyalties and congregation have been noted elsewhere for other national immigrant populations as well as for Dutch immigrants (Swierenga 1985b; VanderStel 1985, Oster gren 1979). In order to make the transition to the new country, immigrants from the rural Netherlands chose to settle together with those from the same Dutch communities and provinces.

The land patent tract books do not list the provincial and municipal origins of those who bought land from the government. Only about 40% of the land patents could be linked to published sources that included such information. It is important to note that a number of households patented several parcels.

In general, the distribution of the provincial origins of Netherlandic immigrants who patented land in West Michigan conforms to the main emigration regions in the Netherlands, with the exception of the largely Catholic province of Noord Brabant. Even though the Peel, an area in the Northeastern part of that province was one of the principal emigration regions, there was virtually no land patented by persons from Noord Brabant in West Michigan (only 1% of patents). This underscores the exclusive Protestant and Reformed character of the Holland Colony. The predominance of immigrants from the provinces of Overisel (23% of patents), Drenthe (19%), Friesland (12%), Groningen (12%), Gelderland (11%) and Zeeland (11%) fits into the larger Netherlandic emigration pattern; the other provinces combined contribute less than 12% of the patents.

Within West Michigan's Netherlandic culture area, the greatest clustering of settlers by provincial origin took place among those from Graafschap Bentheim in Germany, and those from the provinces of Drenthe and Friesland. It is understandable that the settlers from a region in Germany would wish to stay together;
while they had much in common with people living in the nearby Dutch provinces of Drenthe and Overijssel across the border, they had a separate identity. There is virtually no land patented outside the center of Graafschap sphere of influence by these Dutch speaking German settlers (Figure 11).

Emigrants from the Province of Drenthe also patented land close together in three principal concentrations: as expected, around the center of Drenthe but also around Graafschap and in a zone between Zeeland, Groningen, and Noordeloos (Figure 11). Such clustering is reinforced by the municipal origins of the settlers from this province; family, social and religious ties would be even stronger among those settlers who came from the same community. More than half of the emigrants from the province of Drenthe came from only two municipalities. A significant cluster of land patents from Drenthe were affiliated with the Graafschap center; the people of these two adjoining regions spoke the same Netherlandic dialect and shared other common cultural traits (Figure 11). The land patents of those who immigrated from the Province of Friesland only show clustering around the center of Vriesland and not around other centers or in other independent groupings (Figure 11). The Frisian land patents not associated with the
center are widely scattered throughout the culture area. Frisian is a unique language incomprehensible to other Netherlanders. The congregation of Frisians around a center is therefore expected even more than for those from other provinces who, in spite of dialects, spoke the same basic language.

Contrary to expectations, land patents from the provinces of Gelderland, Groningen, Overijssel, and Zeeland showed little clustering. With some expected grouping around the center of Overisel in Overisel Township, the settlers from that province were, nevertheless, widely distributed throughout the entire settlement zone even with only two municipalities making up nearly half of the settlers (Figure 12).

Land patents from the province of Zeeland were also widely scattered, though largely north of the Macatawa River and in a broad circular band some distance from the center of Zeeland (Figure 12). While the greatest number of land patents issued to those from this province are found in Zeeland and Holland Townships, there were no significant contiguous zones of settlement, not even around the center of Zeeland in Zeeland Township. Here the lack of strong municipal ties may be a contributing factor; no fewer than seventeen municipalities made up the

Figure 12: Provincial Origins of Dutch Land Patents: Groningen, Overijssel and Zeeland
immigration stream with the largest municipal cluster of seven households and thirteen municipalities contributing only one household each. Likewise, land patents of those from Groningen showed little evidence of clustering although this province had a strong regional identity and dialect (Figure 12).

The intuitive and theoretic expectation of clustering around centers associated with Netherlandic home regions is only partially confirmed. If the provincial origins of all the land patents were known, more clustering by provincial origins might surface, but the dispersed properties would still remain evident. In conclusion, while the settlement centers’ names imply province-derived communities, the social geography of this Netherlandic island was far more complex. We should not assume, for example, that those from the province of Drenthe all settled in close proximity to the center of Drenthe; many persons from this province settled elsewhere. We need to recognize that in many cases there is both a settlement focus for those from a particular area in the Netherlands, but also a broader settlement zone of those who were not able to or chose not to live close to their old country regional neighbours. The affiliation of the centers may have been established by the founding group or community leaders but they appear not to have channelled the immigration stream into particular receiving zones as much as expected. Whether the provincial character of the centers would strengthen through time, with population growth and property sales, remains to be seen, although assimilation would also gradually weaken such ties.

Conclusions

A geographical analysis of land patented by Netherlanders in West Michigan’s Allegan and Ottawa Counties reveals a differentiating pattern of areal growth governed by the location of settlement centers, soil types, and land availability. The provincial origins of these land purchases show an assortment of forms: some groups are highly clustered by provincial origin; other groups are far more scattered, although minor nodes do exist. When land office records are linked to other published sources of information, the earliest and formative phase of settlement geography may be identified.

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