

# *Celebrating 175 Years*

1847 ~ 2022



APRIL, 2021

Who among us is not with great anticipation looking to the future when our lives will begin to return to some degree of normalcy? This Covid19 pandemic has brought not only disruption to our work, school, church and family interactions but it has also brought unimaginable pain, heartbreak and loss to so many. We have all uttered the prayer, “How long Lord. How long”?

Today’s current situation that we have all been facing for a full year has profound similarities with the experiences of the very first members of our congregation who exactly 175 years ago this month in The Netherlands were reeling from the effect of unemployment, food shortage and troubles within the church. Matters were so extreme that in March of 1846 our first pastor the Reverend Albertus C. Van Raalte was concluding plans to lead his flock of 53 souls to a hoped for better life in America. This decision to undertake such a journey would require much pray-er, much preparation and surely God’s protective hand. It would require selling or giving away most of their possessions, their land and their homes. It would require saying farewell to most family and friends. It would mean seeing for the last time their homeland in the low country slip below the horizon and going to “God knows where” in a strange land. It would mean “Trusting in Him, alone”.

Brothers, Sisters and Friends of First Church, it is true that many of us have had a hard year, but our experiences are nothing compared to the trials that were endured by those who were the first to worship under the banner of First Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan.

Plans are currently underway for today’s First Reformed Church to walk alongside our forbear-ers and celebrate our 175 years of ministry and mission. On September 24, 1846 the ship “Southerner” sailed from the Dutch port of Rotterdam and headed west toward the setting sun. Over the next several months here in The Chimes we will travel with them. Come early next year we will enjoy a year long 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our congregation.



Holland Historical Trust Collection of the Joint Archives



MAY, 2021

After many months of prayer and contemplation it was 175 years ago this very month of May, 1846 that the Reverend (Dominie) Albertus Christian Van Raalte realized that for the preservation of his small flock the only option was that of immigration. The Dutch economy was in ruin. People could not find work. For those fortunate enough to have an income, government taxes were skyrocketing to support a growing underclass. Pestilence and blight devastated the food supply. The same potato famine that had devastated Ireland had arrived in The Netherlands. In both 1845 and 1846 the crop was destroyed long before the harvest. The conservative yet long established Hervormde Kerk (Reformed Church) was rift with dissenting clergy. The Reverend Van Raalte was among this young dissenting group. Children of church members were not allowed to be baptized unless and until parents swore allegiance to the official state church. The economy and the government had failed them by imposing strict regulations concerning public gatherings. Across the provinces the Dutch society was in great turmoil. Anger was causing protests and rioting in the streets.

Amid these swirling events some bold, adventurous and courageous community leaders began to see hope by the possible immigration to one of the far flung Dutch owned colonies including Java, South Africa or The Caribbean. Also, and an even brighter option could be to find new lives among the long established Dutch who two centuries earlier had colonized America, now the United States. For those who were seriously considering leaving the troubles of The Netherlands behind, American democracy and its guaranteed freedom of religion coupled with less expensive and more reliable trans-Atlantic passage soon became option number one.

In this month of May in 1846 the first pastor of our First Reformed Church had made his decision to leave his homeland and look to an uninhabited region of the United States. Dominie Van Raalte made public his decision and soon others were hearing and following the call to "go with Van Raalte". Yes, their destination would be a freedom God-fearing nation whose flag of red, white and blue was of the same familiar tri-color combination as the flag of The Netherlands. While the national colors may be the same, the ultimate final destination within the United States was still completely unknown.

But, for now, plans would have to be made for the great journey.  
Will we stay? Will we go? What to take? What to leave behind?  
Surely, let's pack our Bible!





JUNE, 2021

It was June 1846. Our first pastor, Albertus C. Van Raalte was not only leading his own congregation but he was also actively leading an effort to plant new break-a-way congregations all of which were in strong support of Biblical scripture but openly opposed to the Dutch government supported Hervormde Kerk. Van Raalte and other passionate young “Afgescheidenen” pastors had grown evermore bold in their opposition to the established clergy and theology. The established Dutch church had even gone so far as to successfully elicit government support to have Dutch military personnel forcibly break up worship services and to better keep watch over these radical pastors quarter soldiers within their homes.

By the summer of '46 ten years of harsh governmental decrees had made personal and religious life unbearable for many. Among these oppressive rules which were punishable by arrest, fines and even imprisonment is found the following language:

*“No association of more than twenty people whose object is for the observance of religious, literary, or political purposes shall be allowed without the consent of the government”.*

*“Every group who openly defies and violates these conditions shall be dissolved by force”.*

*“Any person who allows the use of his home for unapproved meetings including worship shall be fined”.*

Even though the existing Dutch Constitution had specifically guaranteed freedom of religion this assurance was now denied especially to the “Seceders”. As one would expect these unconstitutional laws did not achieve their intended and restrictive goal to keep the lid on dissent. In fact these edicts only fueled greater interest, attendance and participation in these young congregations. Van Raalte among other young pastors were being called to lead gatherings throughout the region. This greater opportunity for organizing and preaching was joyful to them but it also made Van Raalte and others like him targets for intimidation. At one point protesting rioters attacked and stoned his home.

This loss of what we Americans recognize as our foundational and guaranteed First Amendment rights of freedom of speech, assembly and worship was language that was well known in 19th century Netherlands. Why, oh why remain in a country where national and local government leaders openly call you, your family and your fellow Christians as “fanatics”? Why remain faithful to a country that violates one’s freedoms? In addition to all of this the potato blight had reduced the food supply. Hunger was not only to be found in the stomach but also in the heart, mind and soul.



Home of Reverend Albertus C. Van Raalte, Ommen, Netherlands

There in the low country quite possibly along the very shoreline of “Zwartewater” (Black River) and “Zwarte Meer” (Black Lake), (to our senior members do these place names sound familiar?) Domine Van Raalte prayed to God and looked west for deliverance. From a distance of almost 4,000 miles pastors of the American Dutch Reformed Church were hearing the cries of their Dutch Brothers and Sisters and they were now offering guidance and assistance to those willing to leave their troubles (and property) behind and with God’s Grace make a new life in America. Would it all be worth such a great undertaking? Such an enormous risk? God help us.

## Celebrating 175 Years

1847 ~ 2022



In July, 1846 the summer brought worsening news for Dominie Van Raalte and his fellow Christian countrymen. Already facing famine, rising unemployment and exorbitant taxation the dreaded disease of typhus struck the region. Van Raalte himself was stricken. To make matters even worse the Church Council in Arnhem gave Van Raalte his “walking papers” and informed him that he had the “freedom to look elsewhere”. We should expect that in July, 1846 our first pastor spent a significant amount of time reading from the Book of Job.

By this month of July the conversation about the possibility to emigrate went from speculation to actual planning and recruitment. Van Raalte and his sister-in-law’s husband, Dominie Antonie Brummelkamp formed a society to actually encourage emigration. At this moment in world history the Dutch were major international traders and had established colonial territories in widely scattered areas of the world. Not only was there a significant Old Dutch presence in America, but newer colonies were to be found in the Caribbean, in Africa and especially in Indonesia. Van Raalte and Brummelkamp first made a significant study of the Indonesian island of Java as their intended destination. However the central Dutch government heard of this plan and immediately informed the “Seceders” that all applicable religious laws found in The Netherlands would be enforced in Dutch controlled territories. Heading around the world to Java offered no relief to their dream of freedom to gather and worship without government interference.

Meanwhile, we should recall our own American history and highlight that for more than 200 years Dutch clergy in New York and New Jersey had been freely and openly preaching the Gospel. These pastors began to enthusiastically encourage Van Raalte and Brummelkamp to give consideration to come to America where at this very moment in history vast newly opened territory was being settled on and around the Great Lakes. They strongly suggested that Michigan, Wisconsin and possibly even Iowa would offer ideal opportunity for new settlement. One committed Dutch-American pastor from New York, the Reverend Thomas DeWitt went so far as to travel to The Netherlands to meet with Van Raalte. When he returned to the United States he reported to Synod that he found a growing interest in immigration among their old Dutch brethren and assisted in the formation of The Protestant Evangelical Society for the expressed purpose of gathering here in the United States the necessary assistance which would then be extended to their Dutch Brothers and Sisters who would decide to tackle the arduous journey.

Now the clock was ticking. In less than two months’ time from now the first members of First Reformed Church would take to the sea. This would surely not be a “cruise” as we would define it today, but rather it would be a most harrowing and frightful journey of storm and death.



JULY, 2021



AUGUST, 2021

With every new sunrise in the month of August 1846, Reverend Albertus C. Van Raalte, his family and the small group of fifty-three determined followers attended to the mountain of needed tasks that needed to be accomplished in order to uproot themselves, climb aboard a ship and set sail into the setting western sun. Even though the original ship Mayflower had sailed more than two hundred years earlier with its passenger manifest comprised of English Christians who had tried yet failed to find a religious haven in The Netherlands, Van Raalte's vessel would be a new "Mayflower" serving as the vanguard of a new Dutch migration to the still young nation of America.

From a contemporary Dutch newspaper we read, "...with sadness we see these people preparing to leave. They leave their birthland thoughtlessly, without reckoning whether they can better their lot in a strange country". However, these words are found in the secular press of the day. This decision to emigrate was not "thoughtless" by any stretch of the imagination. This resolve, this decision to head into the unknown was girded by a deep sense of purpose and a sincere belief that their God, our God, was in control and that through Him all things, including this harrowing journey were possible. God would protect.

By the end of August it was time to pack. The time was growing short before embarking on a trans-Atlantic voyage. This however would not be a "cruise" with amazing dining room and buffet meals the memories of which would linger for years to come. The captain and crew would handle the complexities of navigating the ship but the passengers would be required to stock, prepare and consume all of their meals. This they would do while crowded below deck in dark and dank surroundings. In an original letter penned by Hendrik Berendregt we find the much needed recommended travel "check list" that limited each passenger to 160 pounds of provisions. This food supply would have to last seven long weeks without any refrigeration. In order to survive with the most minimal amount of daily food consumption each passenger should gather "ten pounds of pork fat for the baking of pancakes, ten pounds of ham for sandwiches, ten pounds of beef, twenty pounds of rice, twenty pounds of flour or other grain, fifteen pounds of potatoes, twenty pounds of blue peas, twenty pounds of grey peas (think Dutch pea soup!) thirty pounds of bread (sliced and dried) and five pounds of rusk" (remember the old Dutch Rusk building on Eighth Street?). Also recommended were items such as "headcheese, butter, sugar, lump sugar and prunes. For liquid one should consider wine, brandy gin, vinegar coffee and tea". It was also considered essential to pack "various medicines since American ships have no doctors". Finally, one should remember "to require necessary utensils which include a copper or iron tea kettle, tin plates and tin water cans".

There were now only days until departure.



SEPTEMBER, 2021

As the morning sun rose over the port city of Rotterdam on September 24, 1846, our first pastor, his family and his courageous congregation of determined Dutch Christian pilgrims gathered on the dock. The three tall masts with horizontal spars of the good ship “Southernner” most surely must have brought to mind an image of the three crosses on Golgatha Hill in Jerusalem. Huddled together each watched their very few yet most needed and valued possessions carried up the gangway. Just before departure a letter from Pastor Brummelkamp was thrust into Van Raalte’s hand. That letter of encouragement contained the words, “Thousands of God’s children in the Netherlands with their prayers accompany you on the ocean”. Many years later Van Raalte recalled that the parting words created “a mighty emotion in the hearts of our people”.

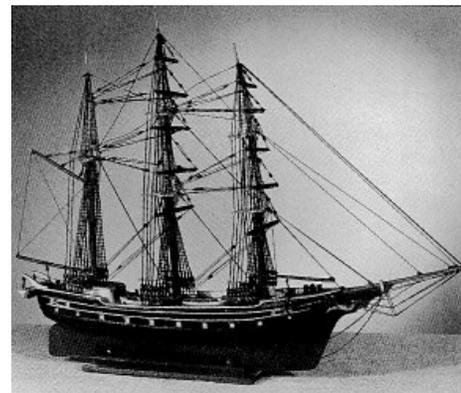
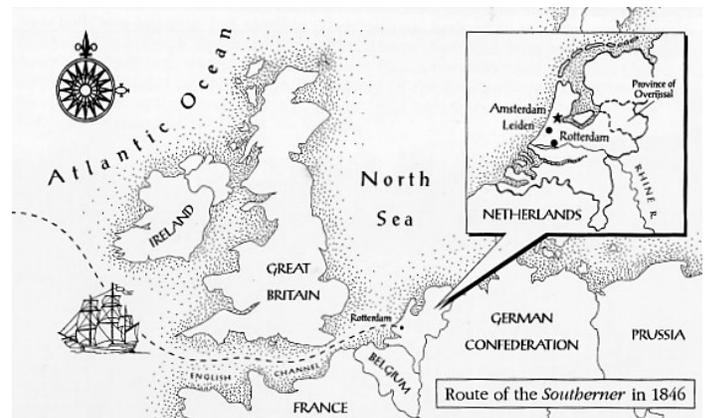
With all things squared away Captain Tuttle Crosby motioned for the group to take their final steps on the Old Country, ascend the gangway and prepare for departure. When shown to their “quarters” the passengers were deeply saddened to realize that the space allotted to them was dismal, dark and dank. There was barely enough room to stand upright. Soon the mooring lines were loosened and dropped from the dock. They were coiled and stored on deck. Sails were unfurled and into the setting western sun sailed the very first of First Church. With hope in their hearts prayers were lifted up before their first on board meal.

Fire! Meals for crew and passenger alike were cooked on open flame. The first full day on the sea a stove generated fire badly injured the ship’s cook and burned through to the open deck above. Captain Crosby turned the ship back to shore and docked at Hellevoetsluis for needed repairs. With the ship laid up for almost a full week Domine Van Raalte made the very best use of the time to go ashore and... preach!

With repairs completed the ship sailed on through the North Sea, English Channel and into the Atlantic Ocean. The season was autumn and with that comes storms, hurricanes and waves as high as “mountains”. The ship was sealed tight. The air was foul. There was little light. Sea sickness and what comes with it made the living conditions almost intolerable. The ship was battered for almost a full week. Van Raalte himself was injured and bore the bruises of the results of his being tossed about. “How long, Oh, Lord? How long was the cry. But, the storm did subside. The clouds did part and the sun did shine through. Our first music loving pastor greeted the clearing skies with joyous hymns of praise.

There was still a very long way to go and as the days stretched into weeks there was much homesickness among the congregation and for time for grieving lost loved ones. There were three deaths. One was a young wife of Evert Zagers as well as two young children. These bodies were wrapped in weighted sail-cloth and delivered to the depths of the sea. Our pastor provided the needed prayer, reassurance and encouragement.

Finally after more than seven long weeks from the mast high above came the cry, “Land, Land Ho”! On the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, 1846 the storm tossed ship and weary passengers sailed into New York Harbor. As they entered the harbor songs of praise were lifted and grateful prayers were offered. The next day the pilgrims set foot on American soil and were promptly greeted by descendants of the first Dutch who had colonized New Amsterdam (New York) two hundred years earlier. Welkom.





OCTOBER, 2021

For those who followed Van Raalte, their pastor and shepherd, the entire month of October was spent aboard the good ship "Southerner". Then, finally as the sun set on Wednesday, November 17, 1847 the small band stepped foot on the land of their hopes and dreams. Immediate and surely most needed assistance in the form of shelter and food was provided through the efforts of the Reformed Dutch Church in America. With the harshness of winter fast approaching the pilgrim party soon departed New York City and traveled north by steamship up the wide Hudson River which flowed between the highest mountains that these "lowlanders" had ever seen. It was at the steamship's final stop, Albany where even more welcoming hands of a Dutch speaking "Domine", Rev. Isaac Wykhoff greeted them.

With America's far west still far over the horizon and their final destination yet undecided and remaining an undefined dream, from Albany their journey continued toward sundown. This next phase of travel would be far more familiar to our Dutch forbearers. This leg of the journey was by canal boat on the 363 mile long hand dug ditch which since its completion in 1825 and its locks having been opened to the waters of the Great Lakes was known to all as the "Erie Canal". Americans of the day dared to consider this engineering marvel as one of the "great man made wonders of the modern world". This far less nerve-wracking mode of transportation provided for some time for res-pite and prayerful contemplation with the knowledge that day-by-day their jour-ney was nearing its end. They still had no pre-planned specific destination in mind but somewhere in America's West God would reveal a place in the wilder-ness that these pioneers would tame, settle, and surely someday call, "home".

Buffalo, on the shores of Lake Erie was the next "rest stop". That was soon fol-lowed by moving to and through Cleveland and then quickly on to Detroit. Here today's "Motor City" still showed vestiges of its earlier French and British coloni-al past. It was here in Detroit that Van Raalte found help from a Presbyterian congregation and its pastor the Reverend George Duffield. With the good rever-end's help lodging was found for all and for the men good work in a local ship-yard.

Here in Detroit Van Raalte connected with prominent business and political leaders and from their counsel recorded and personally investigated several possible Michigan locations for his settlement. Surely among these proponents were land speculators who had personal reasons behind their recommendations. But, from them all he heard of the opportunities that could be found in West Michigan. Here were sites ripe for new settlers and the business and commerce that would hopefully follow. On a map before him Van Raalte examined loca-tions that stretched from the Kalamazoo River in the south to the Grand and Muskegon Rivers further north. Even the much smaller Black River (now called Macatawa) garnered some attention. With map in hand our first pastor embarked on personal excursions of discovery one of which lasted a full month. Day by day West Michigan was win-ning Van Raalte's favor. As the winter snows fell he decided to leave the settling of Iowa to those other Dutch Calvinists who would soon like our band follow the setting sun and embark for America.

As the branches of the trees now were bare of their leaves and that which we would someday call "lake effect" began to fall, it was the land watered by the Black River and its Black Lake that could possibly provide a future water trans- portation route to the cities of the east that came into sharp focus in Van Raalte's mind. He would have to go there and see it and measure its potential for himself. But, that is another story.





NOVEMBER, 2021

This month of November we pick up our story directly from the pages of “The Pillar Church in the Van Raalte Era” by Reverend Michael De Vries and Harry Boonstra as well as the novel “Grand Traverse in the Era of the Civil War” by John C. Mitchell. “During the month of November, 1846 Van Raalte continued to interview people knowledgeable about suitable locations for his ‘kolonie’. Various Michigan boosters and promoters were of immeasurable help as they tried to influence Van Raalte by pressing him to select Michigan for his final destination. Each in their way went to great length to point out that Michigan would be the ideal location for new settlement. As Van Raalte studied his maps and heard first person reports a group of state leaders met to hear a report from the Reverend Ova P. Hoyt of Kalamazoo, the Reverend A. B. Taylor of Grand Rapids and Theodore Romeyn, a lawyer and church leader from Detroit concerning the probability of a large pending migration of Dutch settlers from The Netherlands. Romeyn arranged numerous contacts with prominent government officials who provided Van Raalte with much valuable advice, encouragement and financial incentives. These men all won his confidence. ‘They were God-fearing men’, Van Raalte wrote his wife, Christina and he viewed their motives as ‘pure and without any self-ish impulse’.”

As Van Raalte pondered his options for a settlement, here in Detroit the small flock huddled together as another tough Michigan winter began to turn the skies gray and the ground very white. The men found familiar and much needed work that provided for the necessary food and shelter to carry them safely through the winter season. Van Raalte was able to find a small apartment for his wife and children, Albertus, Mina, Ben, Dirk and the infant, Christina. Joining the Van Raalte family in this humble abode was fellow Dutch pilgrim, Bernardus Grootenhuis, his wife and two children. Bernardus was becoming a most trusted advisor and confidant and soon was recognized by all to be Van Raalte’s trusted number two in command.

As Van Raalte sharpened the focus of his ultimate destination, a place we now all call “home” within the boundaries of the region of the greater Macatawa watershed, we should take the opportunity to record, honor and remember what our Holland looked like just prior to the moment our first pastor and his initial scouting party emerged from an old Native Indian track and arrived at a solitary home, now known as the Old Wing Mission” which still is standing out on the eastern extremity of the City of Holland on today’s East 40<sup>th</sup> Street. This rough cabin was the home of the Reverend George Smith, his wife Arvilla and their children. Smith was in the employ of the American Home Missionary Society and his calling was to mission and evangelize to the Native American Indian population who lived in the dense white pine darkness of the lands touching the south shore of the region’s Black Lake (Macatawa).



In an 1836 US federal document of understanding entitled the “Treaty of Washington” agreed upon between the local Odawa (Ottawa) tribe led by Chief Joseph Waukazoo and the United States government the original inhabitants relinquished their claim to all tribal lands north of the Grand River Valley. The Native population was beginning to migrate north but the Reverend Smith who had begun a friendship with Joseph Waukazoo was committed to assisting his new found friend and Waukazoo’s band of some 100 Native Americans whose village was on the spot of today’s Heinz pickle factory to recognize their rights as guaranteed under the terms of the treaty as well as to assist them to better assimilate into the new culture that was about to overtake them like a fast moving tidal wave.



Monumental challenges of survival overwhelmed the Smith family through the 1840’s. Necessary and promised funds from both the denomination and the federal government were rarely received and the Reverend Smith was forced to survive on limited donations. “In the space of one year the Smith’s lost three children to disease. This was quickly followed by the death of Chief Joseph Waukazoo. The leader who had kept band members within the Old Wing Mission’s circle was gone and unity of the Odawa at Old Wing began to unravel”. It was at this crucial time of uncertainty that the first of a weary band of Dutch immigrants emerged from the forest to the south and entered the land today known as Macatawa.



DECEMBER, 2021

Our story now continues into the bitterly cold Michigan winter months that we all know only too well. The historical record for the month of December, 1846, grows quite thin. Van Raalte and his small pilgrim congregation were all sheltered in De-troit. Here they awaited some moderating of the weather since during these wintery months there was no transportation nor open roads heading west to their final destination. This city already could boast a history that had seen the flags of the Em-pires of France and England and now for almost a decade since Michigan was granted statehood in 1837 the “Stars and Stripes” flag of the young United States flew along the shore of the Detroit River.

There was no desire on the part of Van Raalte nor any of his band to attempt to put down roots here in Detroit. While there was available work and they did avail themselves of the opportunity in order to gain the financial resources necessary to sur-vive the winter, their expressed goal was to find open land upon which to establish a settlement far from others. We need to remember the original cause of their departure from the “Old Country” where government laws and other Dutch neighbors were hostile to their religious beliefs and practices. They simply wanted to be allowed to live separately and peacefully and follow the desire of their own hearts and minds and to follow scripture as preached by their pastor. These dreams were no different than those of the original Pilgrims who more than two hundred years earlier had fled England and attempted to find a religious haven in The Netherlands only to run afoul of Dutch government sponsored religious intolerance and then decid-ing to ultimately board the “Good Ship” Mayflower and established their colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

In December our first pastor met with numerous Michigan political and religious leaders to glean from them their best rec-ommendations for his ultimate destination. Moreover Van Raalte became a one man scouting party. Years later as Holland was celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Van Raalte eloquently spoke of his search and decision to plant his colony where he did. Hear the words of our first pastor:

*“The kind of life that I saw in American homes, the credit which poor folk acquired by husbanding their earnings, their joyful la-bor to improve their condition in life and not merely to gain their daily bread, their civilized manner of life, their obvious educa-tional development and their love for school and Sabbath influenced me strongly. On the other hand the decay of pioneer settle-ments which, I heard, frequently happened, impressed upon me the necessity of securing good market prices, good means of transportation and employment for our poor. Our workmen were my first care and also a source of strength. Some acquaint-ances with the Grand and Kalamazoo Rivers and the splendid future they offered as well as an inexhaustible opportunity for working men **led me to choose a spot for settlement on Lake Michigan between these two rivers**, provided a personal inves-tigation should show that we had not been misled by maps or by land office representations.”*

The Holland, Michigan of both then and now fulfilled Van Raalte’s requirements that this location needed to provide its peo-ple. Holland was then adjacent to Lake Michigan and a water route to markets both regionally and nationally. An old Native Indian trail which could and would be developed provided land transport to the south through Allegan, Kalamazoo and be-yond. Believe it or not the Black River now called Macatawa River could work to open lands to the east of Holland and to move goods from the eastern interior to Black (Macatawa) Lake, the big lake and beyond. Van Raalte would live long enough to see the coming of the railroad but never in his wildest hopes nor dreams could he foresee the final pieces of our city’s cur-rent transportation network; the interstate highway and West Michigan Regional Airport. The deep and dark first growth pine forest could provide ample raw material for log homes and good clay soil just to the east could provide the stuff from which familiar Dutch bricks could be made. The virgin rich black soil was ripe for planting and harvesting high yield crops that could sustain life and the surplus sold at market for needed additional supplies.

Now, only if the snow would stop falling and new life could begin to spring from the earth they could be on their way west. Van Raalte’s next sermon would be on the scriptural message of “Patience”.



JANUARY, 2022

This month we turn the calendar to the month of January in the Year of Our Lord 1847. After so many months of life changing decisions including departing the country of their birth, saying farewell to friends, neighbors and even some family; and after enduring weeks of a hazardous ocean crossing and temporary housing in a new and strange land, and as the winter snows blanketed Detroit, Van Raalte and his congregation were finally preparing for the final push into the West Michigan wilderness. All of their hopes and dreams were soon to be realized for their trusted leader accompanied by Allegan County Judge John R. Kellogg and a trusted Native Indian guide was conducting his final scouting expedition into northern Allegan and southern Ottawa County.

**“January 1, 1847”.** As the sun rose on this New Year’s morning, Van Raalte and his two companions found themselves safe and warm inside the “Old Wing Mission” home of the Congregational Minister George Smith. This structure still stands today with later improvements at its original location on East 40th Street in the far southeast corner of the City of Holland. They had endured a long walk along a narrow native trail that wound its way through the virgin forest from Allegan to the outskirts of modern day Holland. The very next day accompanied by the Rev-erend Smith Van Raalte and his group began the task of exploring and selecting the best possible site for their “new beginning”. For three weeks Van Raalte trudged through deep snow along and around Black Lake and up the then named Black River. From today’s Holland State Park, to today’s area of the mall, to Holland Heights, to the south side industrial park through what is now downtown Holland and out today’s South Shore Drive, Van Raalte mapped, studied and recorded topographical elevations, soil conditions and forest cover. (It should be noted here that we have all wondered why our Holland, unlike most all other Lake Michigan shoreline communities was not sited right along the water’s edge. We are not a St. Joseph, a Grand Haven, and Manistee or even a Traverse City. We must remember that these Dutch immigrants all had left the constant flooding from ever present turbulent seas along the coast of the Low Country of The Netherlands. For generations they had fought the sea and often times had lost. Above all else they yearned for higher ground.)

Van Raalte’s choice of location for his settlement was both scientific and realistic. He desired a place of seclusion where his flock could be isolated from the past stream of criticism, religious persecution and unjust government intrusion that they had experienced in The Netherlands. He also knew that while separate his colony needed to be connected to the outside world. The Dutch were there at the time that was long before major business and trade merchants were there. His people needed a harbor and water transportation routes to access outside markets.

The region around today’s Lake Macatawa provided the remote setting, water trade and communication potential, fertile soil and an immediate source of lumber income from the original growth. The trees were so dense that they created ground level darkness even at the noon of the day. He was overjoyed with the results of his investigation and now firm recommendation. Now it was time to make the long journey back to his flock in Detroit and share with them his “good news”. By early February he would return to the shores of Black Lake with the first of his much loved congregation, but as before, that is another chapter’s tale for next month’s Chimes.

# Celebrating 175 Years

# 1847 ~ 2022



FEBRUARY, 2022

Our story continues... In the frigid month of February, 1847 Van Raalte who was now familiar with the means of travel west from Detroit led his family and a small group of determined followers to the village of Allegan. This location was the last settled "outpost" before undertaking the northern trek into the wilderness that covered the final thirty miles of their journey that had started so many months and so very many miles ago. Here in Allegan many of the husbands and fathers of this pioneer group left their wives and children in the care of local Christian families and the first group of hardy souls who had already endured so much sacrifice and suffering followed Van Raalte's deep footprints in the snow. These footprints were all heading north to the place that Van Raalte had chosen to be their final destination and their new home. Our community and First Church history records these first to arrive as Egbert Frederiks, Bernardus and Janna Grootenhuis, Hermanus Lankheet, William Notting and his wife and finally Evert Zagers.

Finally, Van Raalte with a prayer of thanksgiving raised his voice and extended his arms to the heavens and exclaimed, "Thanks be to God. We're here"! As his shivering band each did a rapid 360 degree look around, they must have wondered exactly Van Raalte's meaning for there was save for a single cabin nothing else to be seen. This cabin was owned by the US government land agent, Isaac Fairbanks who shared the small frame wood structure with Reverend and Mrs. George Smith who was a missionary to the local Native Ottawa Indian population. While the men built several crude wood structures the women began feeding more and more wood to the single cabin interior fireplace.

In order to best understand the reality that greeted these first arrivals we need to hear the first person account recorded by Egbert Frederiks in his Reminiscences.

*Beyond Fairbanks' small clearing we beheld surrounding us on all sides a virgin forest teeming with wild life as yet wholly undisturbed. We viewed with astonishment the mighty giant trees which were perhaps two centuries old. Some of them were one hundred feet tall and six feet in diameter; all growing on a rolling terrain of various kinds of soil and the dense underbrush cut up by streams and creeks fed by springs and bubbling waters, a desert wild, fit only as a home for the timid creatures of the forest. Nevertheless this was the place declared by Domine Van Raalte where a city and a number of villages should rise, where an extensive Dutch Kolonie should be planted. Where we and our children would enjoy an untrammelled existence serve our God freely and without restraint and thank Him for His gracious kindness".*

Here Van Raalte served not only as pastor, but as chief financial officer of his flock. He was able to purchase vast tracks of now federally owned land from Fairbanks at \$1.25 an acre. Other adjacent properties that had already been bought by private individual land speculators was acquired for \$2.32 an acre. History records that Van Raalte's wife had travelled all the way from The Netherlands with the necessary gold coins sewn into the hem of her skirts!



Oxen clearing the land

As the first rudimentary shelters were constructed so to was work begun on hacking a "road" back south to better connect Holland with Allegan. Large oxen would provide the "horsepower" to haul the felled trees. Others settlers who would follow in the spring and for the next several years would need that road as would those already here need a "highway" to send their goods to market and transport purchased necessities back to Holland. Today's easily traveled state route M-40 follows that same path.

By the end of February, 1847 the settlers who were aided by local Native Americans widened the original native trail to Allegan and had built the first substantial log hut.

Those who originally had remained in Detroit arrived in Allegan and by the month of May six communal-living families called that first cabin "home". The only loss had been the death of Mrs. Notting the first member of the congregation to be buried in the sandy soil of their new home. These hardy Dutch had endured the journey, found their

way to the new Holland and survived a bitterly cold winter, but all of this suffering would pale with the arrival of warmer weather and its spring rains, little sanitation, poor food and the dreaded mosquito.