A.C. Van Raalte: Holland’s Founding Father
October 14, 2011-December 29, 2011

Born on October 17, 1811, Albertus Christiaan (A.C.) Van Raalte and his young family moved from the Netherlands to the United States to escape the hardships that had fallen on many in Europe. They wished to find a community where they could worship freely without government interference and the opportunity to earn a decent livelihood. In the winter of 1846/1847 they found a fairly vacant wilderness by a lake and began to build their new home. We now refer to that community by the lake as the City of Holland, Michigan.

As the leader of the mid-19th century Dutch immigration to West Michigan, Van Raalte was a true pioneer in many ways. His legacy will last for generations and his impact can be felt each and every day.

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Vision of a New Life

Albertus C. Van Raalte, son of a Reformed Church pastor, was born on 17 October 1811. The recent centralization of the Dutch government led to the Ordinance of 1816, making the Reformed Church an administrative arm of the kingdom, with a bureaucracy unsympathetic to traditional doctrinal standards.

Van Raalte aspired to be a pastor in the Reformed Church, but was rejected because of his refusal to promise unconditional adherence to the new church order. In 1835, wishing to return to Reformed orthodoxy, he joined the Afgescheidenen, who had separated from the Reformed Church in 1834.

The separatists underwent severe persecution by authorities and the populace. Albertus and his wife Christina were often subject to taunts and vandalism; Albertus was frequently fined and was once incarcerated. Heavy taxation on the poor, a sluggish economy, unemployment, and crop failure led to plans to emigrate. Van Raalte felt compelled to accompany the separatists, to provide religious, economic, and educational leadership.

On 2 October 1846, Van Raalte, his young family, and many of his congregation boarded the Southerner and left Rotterdam bound for America.
Van Raalte and his family would have packed their belongings into a similar trunk for their voyage to America. This trunk belonged to a 25-year-old bachelor who came to America in 1848.

2010.16.6 – Gift of Barbara Archer
1941.68.1 – Gift of Mrs. James DrPree

Reverend Albertus C. Van Raalte

The Southerner Image

Albertus C. Van Raalte’s Citizenship Paper, 6 April 1847

Hope College Collection at the Joint Archives of Holland
Photo Index 3218.6 – Holland Historical Trust Collection
1937.176.6 – Gift of Ottawa County Courthouse

De Kolonie

Van Raalte, his family, and other passengers arrived in New York on 17 November 1846. Initially bound for Wisconsin, Van Raalte was persuaded in Detroit to make Western Michigan the home for the new colony.

Mostly wilderness, this land around Black Lake was already home to the Odawas and a few missionaries. The Dutch immigrants purchased land and began to clear the area for their homes.

Survival was of the utmost importance. Money and food soon ran out, disease became rampant throughout the Colony and some of the early settlers moved out of the area to Grand Rapids or Kalamazoo. Van Raalte urged the remaining settlers to stay and thus ensured the survival of the Colony:

“…There were about 200 houses of all descriptions [in Holland], from the rude hut covered with bark, to the well finished and...
painted frame house, every lot occupied having a fine garden and yard, in front of the house a gate, and at every window on the street the neat white curtain.”

--Henry Griffin, county clerk of Ottawa County, 10 July 1848

The land around Black Lake continued to be cleared for farms, businesses, and developing industry.

**Dutch coins, 1840, 1845, and 1847**

**Reverend Van Raalte’s slotted sermon rack**

1940.15.41 – Gift of John Van Nieuwland
1986.23.1 – Gift of Jelle Wildschut Wilson
1956.13.1 – Gift of William O. Rottschafer

**Reverend Albertus C. Van Raalte’s top hat, watch, and letter seal/pipe tools**

Van Raalte carried this watch when he was imprisoned in The Netherlands. He purchased this letter seal/pipe tools at the time of his immigration to the United States.

1937.68.36 – Gift of Hope College Library
1937.76.4 and 1937.76.7—Gift of D.B.K. Van Raalte

**Old Wing Mission**

**Photograph**

Old Wing Mission was a mission station located on the Allegan-Ottawa County border and was the home of Reverend George and Arvella Smith. Before settling on the area around Black Lake to be the future site of the new colony, Van Raalte and his party stayed at the Mission in early 1847.

Photo Index 1161 – Holland Historical Trust Collection
Van Raalte decided the wilderness around Black Lake (now Lake Macatawa) would be the perfect place to build a new colony. A few settlers, missionaries, and Ottawa Indians already called the area home. The Ottawas had established an area north of the lake and had cleared and cultivated a few acres. The rest of the land was filled with great trees.

Community Leader

Van Raalte’s primary task as a leader was to meet the settlers’ present and pressing needs without losing the larger vision of a Christian community. He provided the necessary encouragement and took on many roles in the community:

Pastor – Van Raalte established a Christian community and organized the First Reformed Church, where he remained pastor until his retirement in 1867.

Public Official – He established local government, with many members of his congregation running for office. People soon began to take responsibility and ownership for the community’s welfare.

Landowner – He helped settlers obtain land for their farms and businesses. When land did not sell, he assumed this debt to become the primary real estate owner. He donated land for parks, churches, schools, and the market square.

Educator – Van Raalte wanted to establish an institution of higher learning; he saw the need to educate the future of the ministry. After raising funds from congregations in the East, Hope College was incorporated in 1866. Western Theological Seminary was formed in 1884, six years after theological education ceased at Hope College.
Albertus Van Raalte’s Leather Valise

Johanna Maria Wilhelmina
Van Raalte Oggel’s Bible, 1847

Photograph of “Van Raalte B [Benjamin] Implements and Vehicles”

1937.68.33 – Gift of Hope College Library
1938.93.15 – Gift of Mrs. William Winter
1941.63.3, Photo Index 1473.13 – Gift of C.H. Yates

Certificates of Marriage signed by A.C. Van Raalte, 1856-1857

Arithmetic Book, 1861

Benjamin Van Raalte’s Parkers Third Reader, 1851

Dutch/English Dictionary, 1871

1937.18.1 – Gift of HH Boeve
2007.17.1 – Gift of Dorothy Chamness
1968.21a.55 – Gift of Orlando S. Reimold II
1962.1.1 – Gift of Ten Cate, Townsend and Cunningham Law Firm

Hope College, early years

Elementary education was taken care of by the public schools, but the community’s educational needs soon progressed from elementary to higher. Classes began at Hope College in 1862. In the mid-1880s, students from other Middle West Dutch settlements began to attend Hope to further their education.

Courtesy of Hope College Collection at the Joint Archives of Holland

First Reformed Church (Pillar Church)

Before any churches were built in the new colony,
Van Raalte preached in the open or in homes until the first log church was built in 1848. He became the pastor of the First Reformed Church (dedicated 29 June 1856), which he served until 1867 when he retired.

Warranty Deed, 29 May 1852

Van Raalte’s primary task as leader was to obtain property so the settlers could purchase lots to build their homes and businesses. The Van Raalte’s own home was built just outside the city boundaries.

Family Tree

Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte and Christina Johanna de Moen were married in 1836 in the Netherlands. Their first child, Albertus, was born ten months later in January 1837 and their last child, Anna Sophia, was born in 1856.

They had a total of eleven children, but only seven survived past childhood. The first six children were born in the Netherlands and the last five were born in Ottawa County, Michigan.

Most of their children stayed in Holland to attend Hope College, raise their families and establish businesses. Two of their sons, Benjamin and Dirk Blikman Kikkert, even fought for their new country during the Civil War.

They left a long lineage in West Michigan with many descendants still in the Holland area.

(More of Van Raalte and his family’s possessions can be viewed in the Permanent Gallery of the Holland Museum.)

Christina Johanna de Moen Van Raalte
Christina supported her husband and family in any way she could. She gave birth to eleven children, and managed the home and family affairs while Albertus was away on business. She died 30 June 1871.

Reverend Pieter Oggel and Albertus C. Van Raalte

Pieter J. Oggel was born in Axel, Province of Zeeland, the Netherlands, and married Van Raalte’s eldest daughter, Johanna Maria Wilhelmina in 1860. Pieter studied with Van Raalte at Ommen in the Netherlands and became the pastor of the church in Utrecht when he was just twenty years old. He immigrated to America in the spring of 1856. He married Johanna and moved to Pella, Iowa to serve as a minister of the Reformed Dutch Church. They moved back to Holland, Michigan in 1863. Pieter taught at Holland Academy (before it was incorporated as Hope College) before he passed away in 1869.

Courtesy of Hope College Collection at the Joint Archives of Holland

Benjamin Van Raalte
Pastel, based on a tin type from 1863

Benjamin was born in Ommen, Province of Overijssel, the Netherlands in 1840. He died 14 August 1917 in Holland Township, Ottawa County, Michigan. Ben enlisted for service in the Civil War in 1862, at the age of twenty-two, and served with distinction, escaping injury. He had two children and made his living as a farmer and farm implement store owner.

1968.21a.586 – Gift of Orlando S. Reimold II

Dirk Blikman Kikkert (D.B.K.) Van Raalte
Oil on canvas, painted in 1919 by Holland artist Joseph Warner

D.B.K. was born in Ommen, Province of Overijssel, the Netherlands in 1844. Dirk enlisted in the Civil War, eight days after his brother Ben enlisted. In 1864, Dirk was severely wounded, which resulted in the full amputation of his right arm. After the war, he attended Hope College,
bought his parents homestead, and owned a local business. He also represented Ottawa County in the House of Representatives and had two children.

1994.69.1 – Gift of Roy Klomparens

Christine Catharina Van Raalte Gilmore  
*Cartes de visite*

Christine was born 30 March 1846 in Arnhem, Province of Gelderland, the Netherlands. She emigrated with her family when she was only six months old; it was said that she spoke flawless English. She married in Amelia, Virginia and figured prominently in the formation of a Reformed Church school in the area. After the attempt to form a new colony in Amelia failed, Christine and her family moved back to Holland, Michigan. She was appointed as Lady Principal and dean of women at Hope College. She organized the Federation of Women’s Societies in Holland and served as President. She had four children (one child made it to adulthood) and passed away in August 1933.

*Courtesy of Hope College Collection at the Joint Archives of Holland*

Maria Wilhelmina Van Raalte Kollen  
*Cartes de visite*

Born 14 September 1850 in Holland Township, Michigan, Maria lived for a brief time with her older sister, Christine, in Amelia, Virginia. Maria’s husband, Gerrit Kollen, was a mathematics professor at Hope College and was elected the third president of the school in 1893. Maria became involved with campus functions and was highly regarded by the students. She had one child and died in March 1905.

*Courtesy of Hope College Collection at the Joint Archives of Holland*

Anna Sophia Van Raalte Kleinheksel  
*Photograph*
Anna Sophia was born 27 August 1856 in Holland Township, Michigan. She was the last child born to Van Raalte and his wife Christine. She spent time with her sister, Christine, in Amelia, Virginia. Her husband, John H. Kleinheksel, graduated from Hope College and was head of their mathematics department. Anna went on to have four children and passed away in February 1914.

Photo Index 3410.19 – Holland Historical Trust Collection

From the Ashes

After his retirement from the First Reformed Church, Van Raalte wanted to devote his time and energy to missionary work. He traveled to Virginia in the hopes of organizing a new Dutch American colony. In April 1869, the Van Raaltes moved from Holland to Virginia. They established three congregations and a school, but faced difficult challenges. This new colony ultimately failed.

Back in Holland, Van Raalte soon faced an even bigger challenge. In October 1871, a great fire swept through the city and destroyed the entire business district and two-thirds of the homes. Holland’s first mayor, Isaac Cappon, lost his own home and his tannery business. Van Raalte did everything he could to encourage the community to rebuild.

Albertus C. Van Raalte spent his final years managing his land properties and helping his children. He died on 7 November 1876.

Although he may not have been fully appreciated during his lifetime, Van Raalte’s legacy will endure. His mark on this community will last and his important role as a pastor, leader, and colonizer will never diminish.

Albertus C. Van Raalte
Pastel

1941.53.1 – Gift of Dr. ACVR Gilmore

Program for the City of Holland’s 25th Anniversary, 17 September 1872

“Programma of the Celebration of the Quarter Centennial of the Colony…” marked a momentous occasion in Holland, Michigan’s history.
The program was written in both Dutch and English. Van Raalte gave the ceremonial speech.

Proclamation of Albertus C. Van Raalte’s Death, 9 November 1876

All business activity and public schools were suspended on the day of Van Raalte’s funeral.

T88-0230 – Albertus C. Van Raalte Collection

T92.1296 – Gift of City of Holland City Clerk