

A LOOK AT DUTCH CATHOLIC IMMIGRATION TO WISCONSIN

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Although the Dutch people did not show much interest in migration to America before the 19th century, by the mid-19th century the Dutch began to leave the Netherlands. During the 1840 to 1861, almost 20,000 Dutch immigrated to the United States, compared to only 2,500 the previous twenty years. This great migration resulted from the combination of economic and religious hardships in the Netherlands at the time.

Most of the Dutch immigrants during the great migration were Protestant, who mainly settled in Michigan and Iowa. During this period only small groups of Dutch Catholics came to the United States. These Dutch Catholics, who were mostly farmer, were thinly scattered throughout the Middle West. The earliest and most noteworthy Dutch Catholic settlement was established in Wisconsin, then called the Michigan Territory, by Reverend Theodore Johannes Van den Broek in 1848.

Theodore Johannes Van den Broek, born in Amsterdam in 1783 and educated in the Netherlands went to America around 1830-1832 as a missionary. Van den Broek studied at the Dominican Saint Rose convent in Springfield, Kentucky and the Saint Joseph convent in Somerset, Ohio. He then worked among the native Indians and settlers in the Fox River area of Wisconsin.

Returning to the Netherlands during the summer of 1847, Van den Broek conceived a plan to establish a Dutch Catholic settlement in Little Chute, Wisconsin and published his Trip to North America to promote this idea. The response was great enough to charter three ships to America. Three ships, called "Liberia", "Maria Magdalena" and "Amerika", left the Netherlands on March 19, 1848 with 350 immigrants. The first immigrants arrived in Wisconsin on June 10 -- an 83-day journey -- and settled in the Little Chute area of the Fox River valley. Despite lack of funds, poor accommodation and living conditions and Van den Broek's death in 1851, this early Dutch Catholic community managed to survive.

Early in 1850 another Dutch priest, Reverend Gerald J. B. Van den Heuvel brought 200 Dutch Catholics from Brabant province to the Fox River valley. In June 1850 a new settlement 15 miles to the east of Little Chute was founded called Hollandtown. Unlike the existing mixture of French Canadians, Germans and Irish, Hollandtown was the only entirely Dutch Catholic settlement in Fox River valley. These settlements were the beginning of what became one of the largest Dutch Catholic settlements in the United States and, ultimately, brought 40,000 Dutch Catholics to the region.