

From Winterswijk to Wisconsin: Emigration from the Achterhoek to the United States in the nineteenth century

Introduction

Winterswijk is a small village in the eastern part of the Netherlands, in the province of Gelderland. It is likely that nobody in Wisconsin would ever have heard about it, if not for a single historical phenomenon: in the nineteenth century, a significant part of the population emigrated to the United States and many of these emigrants ended up in Wisconsin. This article will explore the reasons why so many people left, how they traveled and where they ended up.

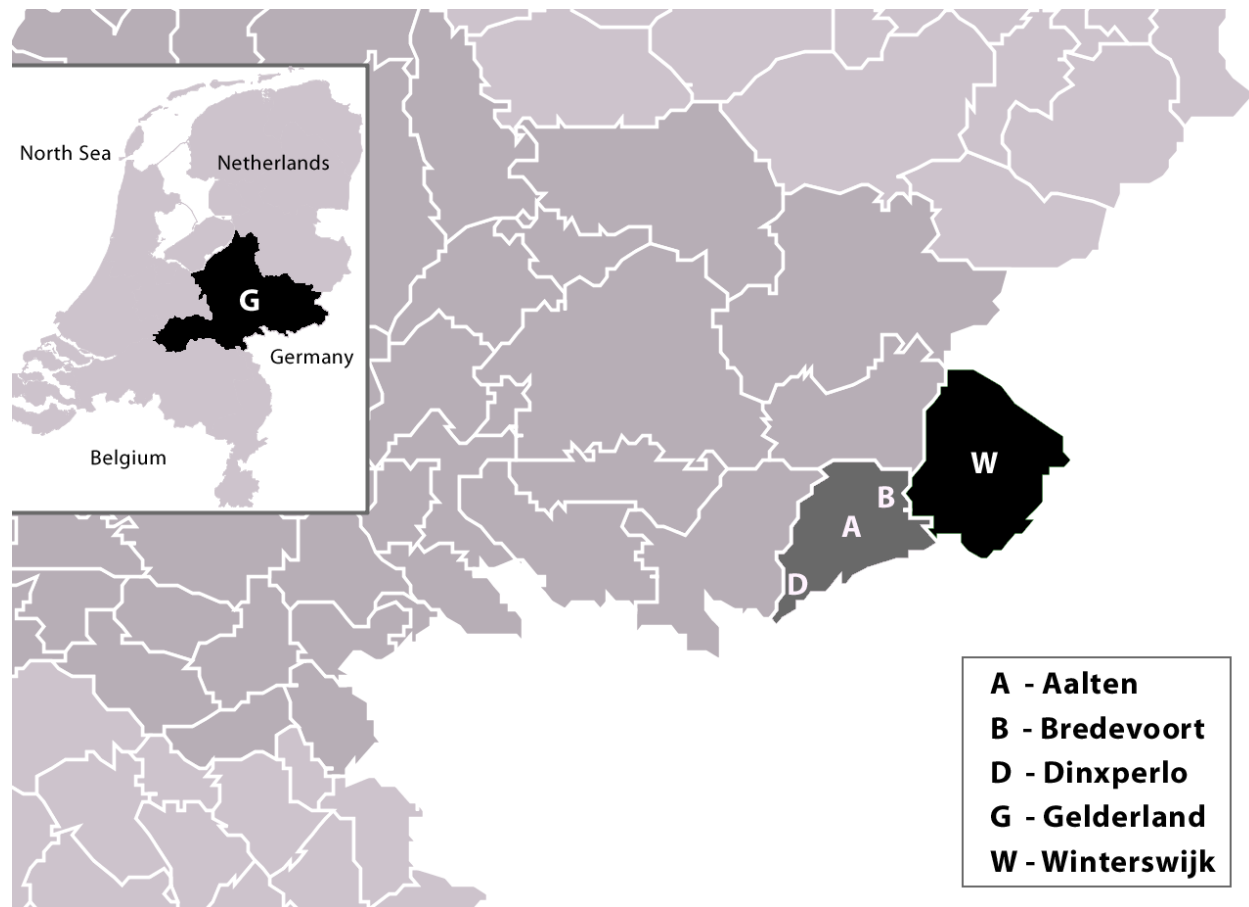


Figure 1: Location of Winterswijk and the neighboring towns of Aalten, Bredevoort and Dinxperlo¹

Agricultural history of Winterswijk

To understand why the emigration wave hit exactly in the Winterswijk area, we have to understand some of its history. Winterswijk has long been a rural community. Some of the farms that exist today, appear in historical records as early as the 11th century.²

Until the French occupation in 1795, many inhabitants were serfs. They were bound to the land and worked the farms of the landlords. They also had to perform services for the lord, including de-icing the castle moat, letting the lord's pigs roam the forests for acorns, providing food and

water for the lord's hunting party and cutting wood for the lord's kitchen. In return, they had the right to work the farm and the lord provided protection for them.

They also had to submit to strict serf laws. In general, serfs were only expected to marry other serfs that belonged to the same estate. Even then, the serfs needed to provide the landlord with gifts like wax, peppers and boots when they married. If they married a serf from a different landlord, another serf had to be found to swap with or a fine had to be paid. Money also had to be paid when a free person wanted to marry a serf, in which case the serf had to be bought free or the free person had to pay to be allowed to become a serf in order to take over the farm. These limitations on marriages meant the population stayed relatively stable; in most cases only people who had the opportunity to take over a farm got married.

When serfs died, the landlord was entitled to half of their 'four-legged beasts'. Furthermore, if the serfs had missed their annual appearance before the serf court before they died, the lord was entitled to half of all the serf's possessions, 'until the last spoon'. The eldest son (or if there were no sons, the eldest daughter) was entitled to take over the farm. This meant the serf farms were never divided among the children, as happened with free farms. While other properties diminished over time, serf farms remained large estates.

In the 17th and 18th century, the position of the serfs improved. Many of the annual obligations could be bought off for a yearly sum, instead of having to be performed in person or paid in kind. Because of inflation, these yearly sums became easier to pay over time. Combine that with the fact that a farm was not split up every generation and it is easy to understand why many serfs became well-to-do despite their legal status.

With the French occupation, servitude was abolished. The serfs were now granted the farms they lived on. Overnight, they became the wealthiest farmers in the area.

In the first half of the 19th century, the common grounds around Winterswijk were divided among the landowners. Until then, every landowner was allowed to use the common grounds for herding their sheep or getting sods of heath, a low growing bush, to put in the stables to hold the manure. These manure-drenched sods were then used to fertilize the land. As this practice went on over centuries, large parts of the early farm lands are tens of feet higher than they were originally. On average, the lands grew over 4 inches per century. The common grounds, on the other hand, got lower as the topsoil was removed time and time again and the land got more waterlogged. This meant the good grounds kept improving while the bad grounds got worse.

When the common grounds were divided, it was done based on the amount of land already owned. The serf farms were already the largest, never having been split up. With the added common grounds, the former serf farms got even larger, creating a new rural elite.

Chances for people outside these families were small. There were some job opportunities in the village of Winterswijk, mainly in the textile industry. There had been a weaver's guild since 1682.³ But the population grew faster than the local economy could support. Without limitations on marriage, the population grew from 6,000 in 1808⁴ to 7,860 in 1849, an increase of 31% in 40 years. That percentage would have been closer to 50% if we include the 1,016 emigrants who left

in the 1840s. When the crops failed in the middle of the 19th century, many people started looking for other options and emigration began.

Emigration from Winterswijk

The emigration from Winterswijk started around 1844 and continued well into the 20th century. The major peaks were from 1845 until 1847, from 1854 until 1856 and in the 1880s. The emigration wave wasn't limited to Winterswijk, people were emigrating from the entire region including towns like Aalten, Dinxperlo and Varsseveld and the neighboring German countryside.

My estimate is that from Winterswijk alone, between 4,000 and 6,000 people emigrated between 1840 and 1920. A significant number if you realize that the total population of Winterswijk numbered only 7,600 people in 1849!

Jan Derk te Winkel

A personal glimpse into the emigration wave is provided to us by Jan Derk te Winkel. He lived in Winterswijk from 1795 until 1856 where he worked as a farmer, catechism teacher and brick manufacturer.

What makes him important for our story is that he kept a diary from 1809 until his death in 1856⁵. In this diary he talks about everyday things. He tells us about getting drunk for the first time, falling in love for the first time, getting rejected for the first time - probably because the girl's parents didn't like the fact that he was drunk all the time! After a few years of despair, he finds a girl to marry and they start a family.

The next few years are described in a positive tone. But in the 1840s, the tone becomes more negative. He talks about hail storms, hurricanes, floods and late frosts that destroy the crops. Food prices sky rocket. People around him are becoming desperate, several of them even commit suicide. On May 25, 1844, he writes "Several households left from here to North-America." Over the next years, we read about more and more people leaving, encouraged by the positive letters that come back. Some people leave for religious reasons, others to avoid trouble back home.

His diary also shows some effects the emigration had for those who remained in Winterswijk. Never one to miss a business opportunity, Jan Derk was able to buy some real estate of families that left for a good price. Sometimes he had the wrong end of the bargain though, when people whom he had vouched for emigrated and left him to pay the debt.

In January 1848, he writes how he received a letter from his brother who had left the previous summer. The letter contains news regarding his brother's four children, as well as several of his fellow passengers, who died when the steamer on which they were traveling caught fire and was destroyed. This is a reference to the steamer Phoenix, that perished on Lake Michigan on November 21, 1847, killing over 200 Dutch emigrants. On board were many families from Winterswijk. The letter is ambiguous as to whether Jan Derk's nieces and nephews died during the Phoenix disaster or because of other reasons.

Reasons for emigration

Religion

One of the most frequently cited reasons for emigration in the mid-1800s is religious persecution. The Afscheiding (or Secession) of 1834 created a rift in the Dutch reformed church. The Seceders, as they were called, wanted to go back to a stricter form of worship. The Dutch government was opposed to this new way of thinking. In 1831, an uprising had caused a split of the country, creating the new country of Belgium. This meant the government became suspicious of people going against the establishment.

In the Winterswijk region, the Rev. Brummelkamp was instrumental in the spread of the Secession. In the 1840s, he founded several Afscheiden communities in the area. They worshipped in private homes. To oppress these practices, the government reinstated an old French law, forbidding public assemblies of over 20 people. When an 'illegal' meeting of Seceders was discovered, both the home owner and the preacher were fined.

By the middle of the 1840s, the oppression lessened. Requests for founding new churches were approved, leading, for example, to the establishment of the Winterswijk Christian Reformed church in 1845. However, the leaders of the Secession still felt they could never fully live according to their own beliefs whilst living in the same community as so many people of other faiths.

This led Rev. Brummelkamp and another Seceder pastor by the name of Rev. Van Raalte to stimulate emigration. They wrote a pamphlet 'Landverhuizing of waarom bevorderen wij de volksverhuizing wel naar Noord-Amerika en niet naar Java?' ('Emigration: why we promote moving to North America instead of Java').⁶ This pamphlet described their ideal of setting up their own Afscheiden community in the United States, free of government interference. Many of their followers took their advice. Van Raalte himself led a group of his own flock to Michigan in 1846, where he founded Holland, MI. Brummelkamp remained in the Netherlands to help guide people to emigration. He would never emigrate himself.

Many Winterswijk Seceders emigrated in 1847. They were headed for Wisconsin. Tragically, many of them ended up on the steamer Phoenix which perished off the shore of Sheboygan. Over 200 people died while less than 25 people survived. Among the casualties were over 60 Seceders from Winterswijk and another 40 Seceders from the nearby villages of Aalten and Varsseveld. After the Phoenix disaster, the zeal for emigration seemed to lessen in Winterswijk. This also coincided with an improvement of the crops. It would take until 1854 before the next big emigration wave hit.

Religion as a reason for Winterswijk emigration

Van Raalte was a charismatic leader, who received a lot of attention both during and after his lifetime. Perhaps that explains why religious reasons for emigration are often considered to be the most important. But this does not seem to be the case in Winterswijk.

The following table compares the religions known from the 1849 census⁷ to the religions mentioned in the emigration lists in the 1850s. The emigration ratio calculates the ratio between

the emigrants in the 1850s to the population in 1849. Some interesting patterns can be deduced from this table.

	Population in 1849		Emigrants in the 1850s		Emigration ratio
	Absolute #	% of total	Absolute #	% of total	
Dutch Reformed	6550	83%	490	91%	7%
Seceders	50	1%	24	4%	48%
Anabaptists	20	0%	0	0%	0%
Roman Catholic	1200	15%	25	5%	2%
Israelites	40	1%	1	0%	3%
Total population	7860	100%	540	100%	7%

Table 1: Religions of the Winterswijk population

If we look at the population in 1849, less than 1% are Seceders. In the 1850s, they represent 4% of emigrants from Winterswijk, though. We also see that 24 Seceders emigrate in the 1850s, while there were only 50 Seceders in Winterswijk in 1849, yielding an emigration ratio of 48%. This is significantly higher than the 7% emigration ratio for the general population of Winterswijk. Emigration ratios for Roman Catholics, Anabaptists and Israelites were below that of the general population.

These numbers show that Seceders are statistically about 7 times more likely to emigrate than the average population. Clearly, religion was an important reason for them. However, Seceders only make up a small number of the total emigrant population. However, we have to keep in mind that many Seceders or people who sympathized with the Secession were still registered as Dutch Reformed, so Seceders are probably underreported in the official statistics. Even taking this into consideration, the vast majority of emigrants from Winterswijk would have been Dutch Reformed.

Similar patterns can be observed in the emigrant lists from the nearby municipalities of Aalten and Dinxperlo. From this, we may conclude that most emigrants from this area must have had other reasons to emigrate besides religion.

Economy

Economical reasons also played an important part in emigrating. We saw glimpses of them in Jan Derk te Winkel's diary when he talks of crop failures and rising prices. This is confirmed by reviewing the emigrant lists from Aalten in the 1860s⁸. These lists mention the reasons why people emigrated. 'lotsverbetering' (improvement of destiny) was the reason given by almost all the emigrants. Occasionally, the reason is more personal: 'malicious desertion by her husband' or 'fear of an unjust punishment for theft'. But these are the exceptions.

Destinations

		Origin				Grand Total	Percentage
		Aalten	Bredevoort	Dinxperlo	Winterswijk		
Destination	Brazil	28		6		34	1%
	CO				1	1	0%
	IA	17		13	48	78	2%
	IL	1			7	8	0%
	IN				12	12	0%
	KS	1		7		8	0%
	KY			1		1	0%
	MA				5	5	0%
	MI	4		4	43	51	1%
	MN	7		23	18	48	1%
	MO				6	6	0%
	NE	3		1	6	10	0%
	NJ	3				3	0%
	NY	27		10	456	493	13%
	OH			8	2	10	0%
	PA				1	1	0%
	SD			2		2	0%
	WI	303	4	74	346	727	20%
	Unknown	701	53	309	1100	2163	59%
Grand Total	1095	57	458	2051	3661	100%	

Table 2 Destinations of emigrants

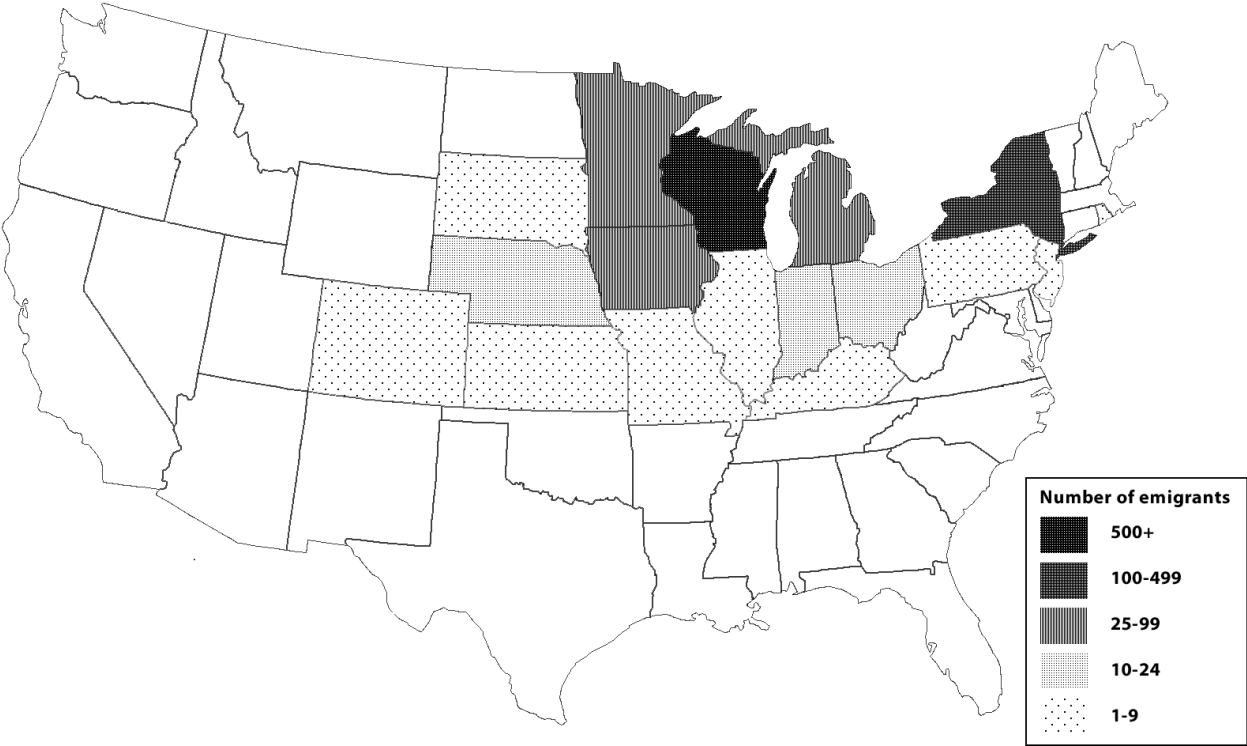


Figure 2: Settlement of emigrants in the US

Table 2 and figure 2 show data collected from my genealogical database⁹, which contains information about 3,661 emigrants from Aalten, Bredevoort, Dinxperlo and Winterswijk. I have been able to locate 1,498 of them in the US so far. A note of caution: my results are biased towards Wisconsin and New York. Because of the contacts I have in these states, I have been able to find a lot of emigrants who settled there. The numbers represented in the table therefore represent the low boundary of the real number of emigrants that settled in the state, and many numbers will likely rise if the destinations of the 59% emigrants with unknown destinations are determined. It is possible that they settled in a region of a state remote from the area I researched, or even in a state not included in this table.

The numbers show that at least 20% of the emigrants from Aalten, Bredevoort, Dinxperlo and Winterswijk ended up in Wisconsin. In Wisconsin, they settled in four main areas: Sheboygan county (villages of Oostburg and Cedar Grove), Fond du Lac county (villages of Alto and Waupun), Milwaukee county (city of Milwaukee) and Saint Croix county (village of Baldwin). Another 13% or more settled in New York, mostly in the Clymer area. The other well-known destinations for Dutch immigrants in the 19th century, Holland, Michigan and Pella, Iowa, only attract a relatively small number of settlers from the Winterswijk area.

If we limit ourselves to Winterswijk itself, New York is the most popular destination with 456 Winterswijkers settling there (22% of the total number of Winterswijk emigrants), Wisconsin is second with 346 Winterswijk settlers (17%) and in third place we find Iowa with just 48 Winterswijk emigrants settling there (2%).

The table also shows differences between the Dutch villages that the emigrants came from. Of the 493 Dutch immigrants found in Clymer, 456 (92%) came from Winterswijk and only 27 came from Aalten (5%). In Wisconsin, the numbers are much more even. Of the 727 people found in Wisconsin, 346 (48%) came from Winterswijk and 303 (42%) from Aalten.

Why Wisconsin?

An interesting question is why so many people from Aalten, Bredevoort, Dinxperlo and Winterswijk ended up in Wisconsin. Wisconsin was the first choice of Albertus Van Raalte. He only decided on settling in Michigan during his trip. At the same time, another group of Seceders from Winterswijk had left for Wisconsin and settled there. This may explain why they settled in Wisconsin initially, but does not explain why so many followed there instead of going to the other Dutch settlements like Pella, Iowa or Holland, Michigan. Another early group of Winterswijkers, mostly Dutch reformed, settled in Clymer, New York.

It is hard to pinpoint the motivation of individual emigrants. One explanation is suggested by the difference in emigration patterns we discovered when comparing the destinations for Winterswijk and Aalten emigrants.

Both towns are very close together (about 9 miles apart) and share the same history of agriculture, crop failures and Secession. This explains why so many people emigrated from both towns, but does not explain why their settlement patterns differ so much.

Despite their shared history, people from Aalten and Winterswijk did not mingle very much. They had separate churches and as a result, people from Aalten and Winterswijk rarely married each other. Rather, they married within their own town (or hamlet). This suggests an explanation: contact between emigrants and their relatives who stayed behind. Later emigrants often travel to the same location as earlier emigrants in their family or immediate neighborhood. The reason for this must have been contact between the emigrants and their relatives and neighbors in the Netherlands. Positive letters back home would have stimulated others to follow in their footsteps, settling in the same area.

Settlers in Wisconsin would have had much to be positive about. Having achieved statehood only in 1848, land in Wisconsin was cheap during the early emigration wave. The landscape was similar to the Achterhoek and the abundance of timber provided a source of income while trying to build a homestead. Once cleared, the land was suitable for different types of agriculture.

So after the initial emigrants settled in Wisconsin, their letters would have induced other people to follow. In the end, hundreds of emigrants from the Winterswijk area settled in Wisconsin. Today, their legacy can still be seen in the names of the people, the windmills in the front yards and in the street signs of Sheboygan County. There's even a Hoitink Road, named after a distant cousin of mine who was the first man to build a homestead in that part of Wisconsin, over 4,000 miles from the Hoitink farm in Winterswijk!

About the author

Yvette Hoitink (1975) is a project manager and ICT consultant at the Nationaal Archief, the National Archives of the Netherlands, where she is involved in projects that create online access to heritage collections.

Since 1990, she has been researching the population of the Winterswijk area as a personal project. Her special interest is emigration from this area and trying to reconstruct where all the emigrants ended up. More information about her research can be found at her website at <http://www.dutchgenealogy.nl>.

¹ Source: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek / Topografische Dienst Kadaster, via [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Map_-_NL_-_Municipality_code_0294_\(2009\).svg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Map_-_NL_-_Municipality_code_0294_(2009).svg)

² List of income of the St. Mauritsconvent in Münster, Germany of the 11th century, in: B. Stegeman: 'Het Oude Kerspel Winterswijk', 1927.

³ G.J.H. Krosenbrink: 'Winterswick is minen naem. Uit de historie van Winterswijk', 1968.

⁴ Vereniging Gelre: 'Statistieke beschrijving van Gelderland in 1808', 1986.

⁵ Jan Derk te Winkel: 'Voorname lotgevallen van J D te Winkel Categrmr. Geboren den 13 junij 1795 en den 21 gedoopt', adapted by Gerrit te Winkel, available at the Winterswijk public library.

⁶ A.C. van Raalte and A. Brummelkamp: 'Landverhuizing of waarom bevorderen wij de volksverhuizing wel naar Noord-Amerika en niet naar Java?', 1846, available at <http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/?en/items/KONB04:81>

⁷ Van der Aa: 'Aardrijkskundig woordenboek der Nederlanden', 1849.

⁸ W.J. Konink, 'Emigratie uit de gemeente Aalten naar Noord-Amerika anno 1830-1930', 1983.

⁹ My complete genealogical database, including reports containing lists of emigrants, can be found at <http://www.dutchgenealogy.nl/tng>.