

## The Dutch Ghost Settlement of Grand Island, New York

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In 1851 and 1852 a group of about eighty Dutch emigrants settled on an island between Buffalo and the Niagara Falls. They did not stay long but there was for a couple of years a small Dutch community. Very little is known of the group and every trace is gone. What little is known comes from an autobiography by the Dutchman, Cornelis Steinigeweg, who was the leader of this group of Dutch settlers. His autobiography, *Amerikaansche Levens-ervaring*, [American Life Experience] was published anonymously in 1892 in Amsterdam. Jacob van Hinte, well-known as the writer of *Netherlanders in America*, mentions the book but misidentifies the author. He thinks it was written by J.H. Redelaar, but that is the name of the illustrator of the book.

Van Hinte apparently also did not find Grand Island that important because he did not read the whole autobiography. From what he read, Van Hinte concluded that the settlers were prosperous and that many moved away because they were wealthy enough to buy property for themselves. We will see that that is just part of the story. Also, if Van Hinte had read the autobiography thoroughly, he would have little difficulty identifying the author, because Steinigeweg proudly mentions that after returning to Amsterdam he bought some property and built the American Hotel on the Leidseplein, which became a famous establishment in the Netherlands.

Who was this author? Who was this man? What kind of settlement was there on Grand Island and what happened to the settlers? I hope to begin to answer some of these questions. Cornelis Steinigeweg was a self-made architect and businessman. The full title of the work is *Amerikaansche Levens-ervaring. Schetsen en Lotgevallen uit het Leven van een Oud-Hollandsch Emigrant met een Gids voor den Landverhuizer naar Amerika* [American Life Experience. Sketches and Adventures from the Life of an Old Dutch Emigrant with a Guide for the Emigrant to America]. In a short introduction to the book, he says that he wrote the book for the love of America and to help emigrants. Although he describes his whole life, he thinks his work has no literary value. Still, that does not really explain why he published the book anonymously. The last part of the book is a guide for emigrants with detailed information and some very handy and practical tips.

Cornelis Steinigeweg was 24 years old when he left Amsterdam for the United States to get acquainted with the country. He was born in 1825 in Rhenoy, a little village in the Betuwe that is part of the province of Gelderland. His father was a minister in the Hervormde Kerk [Reformed Church] and served several villages in the area. Steinigeweg is very negative about his father, whom he describes as a bully. Also, in hindsight, he finds that his parents did not care too much about his education. Steinigeweg is clearly a self-made man. In the years before he sailed for the U.S., he has worked as a carpenter and as an assistant engineer at public works projects in Amsterdam. He helped build a natural gas facility in Amsterdam and later one in Zwolle. Even though he was still only in his early twenties, he supervised hundreds of workers. Steinigeweg, who seems to have called himself Stoneway when he came to the U.S., went to Boston and arrived there in January of 1850. He traveled to Albany and talked about plans of Messchert van Vollenhove, who wanted to take a group of emigrants to the U.S. Van

Vollenhove lived in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and Steinigeweg wrote to him, offering to look for suitable land.

Steinigeweg traveled to New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh. He was an adventurer but he also tried to sort out his life. He had a fiancée in the Netherlands, Louise Engel, and she was waiting for him. Steinigeweg went on to Cincinnati, St Louis, and then Alton, Illinois, where he worked as a surveyor for the Union Pacific Railroad. After a few months he realized he would not get ahead doing this work so he returned to Cincinnati to help build the Burnet Hotel. There was cholera in Cincinnati that summer and Steinigeweg had lost his mother to the disease only one year earlier, so he decided to leave the city. He headed to Sandusky and Cleveland in Ohio and from there to Buffalo. While staying there he made a day trip to Niagara Falls and saw Grand Island. It made him curious, so he returned the next day. After gathering more information about the price of the land, he thought this was an ideal spot for a settlement. It seemed that Steinigeweg wanted to get going right away, but his bride's father did not permit his daughter to go over on her own. Steinigeweg returned to the Netherlands and met with Van Vollenhove in Amsterdam to tell him about Grand Island. Steinigeweg did not like the emigration plan of the Van Vollenhove group, so he decided to go at it alone, "albeit on a smaller scale," he wrote. One is curious what big emigration plans Van Vollenhove and his friends had at the time.

Steinigeweg went back to his hometown and recruited emigrants. Not much is known about the circumstances in the area. A poor group of farmers and craftsmen lived there, and hearing the minister's son talk about the prospects in America must have impressed them. A first group of locals decided to leave the Netherlands. Steinigeweg married Louise Engel and borrowed money from her aunt and from his father-in-law. He had to advance the passage for most of the people and also take care of the food they needed on the trip. After his wedding at the end of April in 1851, they left Amsterdam on the ship Nijenstein.

With help of the municipal records of Geldermalsen, Gelderland, the Dutch emigration records, and the passenger records, we get a good picture of the group. Steinigeweg says that the first group consisted of six families and several single persons, altogether thirty-four people. According to the information from Geldermalsen a number of people left the town with America as their destination on April 22, 1851. Rijkje de Smale, born January 1 from Tricht, left with three young children, named Van Ooijen. The civil servant has made a note somewhere that she married on April 20, 1850, but it is not clear to whom. We do not find her name anymore in any other record.

Other families who emigrated included Cornelis Steenis, a widower who traveled with seven children; Jan Meijdam with wife and two children; his son Jan junior and his wife and three children; Jan Janse van Ooijen with a wife and four children; and another widower, Martinus van Doorne, who joined the group with two children. Marinus van Maurik and his wife also departed on April 22 1851, but we do not find them in any other records thereafter. Did they decide not to go? Could they have found work in Amsterdam, just before departure? Finally, there is a single man, a baker's helper, Johannes Frederik Valkonet. That makes a total of thirty-one people, but in the 1860 U.S. Census we suddenly find two Dutch-born children that complete the count, a girl Steenis and a boy Van Doorne, who were at the time of the census 13 and 10 years old respectively. That makes thirty-three people.

Steinigeweg does not say much about the trip, but he tells us that his group was harassed in New York and later in Albany by so-called "runners," people who spoke the

mother tongue of immigrants and offered them goods and services, but their sole purpose was to rob them. Steinigeweg instructed his group to ignore them. In Albany, though, the runners ganged up on him and the conductor warned him that they planned to beat him up or eliminate him to be able to get to the rest of the group. It was so dangerous for him, according to the conductor, that he had to stay in the office and have his wife picked up from the hotel by someone else. Welcome to America!

In Buffalo Steinigeweg bought about five hundred acres for about \$17 per acre from the Holland Land Company, totalling \$8,500. In a map in his book, he outlined which part of the Island he bought. The group found shelter with a farmer in Schlosser on the other side of the river from their lands. They rowed back and forth but quickly bought some cabins. Steinigeweg was in charge, of course, and told everyone what to do. They started producing cordwood, which in the beginning was the main product. Steinigeweg also bought a cow for every family.

We do not read anything about individual immigrants. By the time Steinigeweg wrote his story it was forty years after the date, so he may not have remembered all the names. On the other hand, he did remember a lot of local names and workers of a later date. Sometimes he described his business transactions in such detail that he must have had some kind of ledger that also functioned as a diary. Of the Dutch colonists, only one is mentioned by name, Jan Willem Steenis, "the fifteen-year old help." He boarded with the Steinigeweg's for ten years as a help to Steinigeweg and his wife. Then Steenis relocated to Chicago, according to the autobiography, and worked as a truck farmer and suffered sunstroke one day, after which he walked into the river and drowned.

Almost exactly a year after Steinigeweg and his first group sailed, a second group followed. Two older brothers, Jan Hendrik and Frederik, were in charge and they brought a group of forty-five people over. One of the brothers, Jan Hendrik, was a teacher at the Gymnasium in Amsterdam. That was quite a good job at the time and he must have heard enthusiastic things from his baby brother to give up everything and go to the wilderness of Grand Island. Jan Hendrik was a roommate of Cornelis when they both lived on Nieuwmarkt.

In the second group there were many relatives of the people in the first group. Teunis Arie van Ooijen, married with three children, left Geldermalsen on April 16, 1852. Brother-in-law Willem Johannis Nijhoff departed with his wife, a Van Ooijen, and five children. Then there was Peter Verwey, who also joined them with a wife and five children. Cornelis Verwey, maybe a brother, also left with a wife, another Van Ooijen, and three children. So in the 1852 group there were two heads of households with the name Van Ooijen, two wives with that maiden name, and another widow Van Ooijen with three children. The family of Cornelis Verwey and his wife also included Willemke van Ooijen, 16 years old, possibly a maid. There is one single man who emigrated, the day laborer Gerrit van Westriene (Westreenen).

Johanes Boet, from Beesd, traveled with destination listed as Buffalo with his wife and five children. The Van Hal family from Deil consisted of a husband and a wife, named Steenis, and they had seven children. From Leerbroek there was the Van Genderen couple, consisting of Arie and Adriana and one child. Leerbroek is fairly close to Steinigeweg's hometown of Rhenoy, but in the province of Zuid [South] Holland. Willem Vogel from Leerdam came with a wife and three children. On the same ship with the second group, the *Witte de With*, they must have met the Grooters couple from Eibergen, which is also in Gelderland but in the east of the province. We find that family living on Grand Island later on,

as recorded in the 1855 New York census. I counted fifty in the second group, led by the brothers, not including the couple from Eibergen.

It must have been a tough life on Grand Island in 1851-1852. Steinigeweg reported that a woman died after delivery of a baby. The husband married his niece shortly thereafter and the baby died. The daughter of one of the emigrants, Steinigeweg wrote, married an American but soon after she died of cholera. There were also two other workers who died of cholera, as well as several married women. There must have been children dying also. He reported a woman dying in labor in 1855. In that same year Steinigeweg reported that two of his workmen drowned while they were trying to cross the river in a leaky row boat. It seems that when his workmen were not Dutch, he mentioned their nationality; otherwise there is no mention of this. It is hard to determine who died. Putting all the records together: emigration records, passenger lists, census records, and so on, one has about six hundred pieces of a thousand piece puzzle.

According to Steinigeweg, an important remedy for death and disease is hard work. Steinigeweg made an agreement with the New York Central Railroad in Buffalo to deliver oak railroad ties. He also wrote up contracts for trains to deliver cordwood and wood for a sawmill in Buffalo and hired Germans and Americans. His brothers brought some capital and they were working together for the time being. Steinigeweg bought a boat to be able to deliver in Buffalo. He also decided to buy more land to make more money and buy out his brothers. He discovered that because of his settlement and its success the price had gone up from \$17 to \$30 an acre.

In the summer of 1853 a schoolhouse was built and a teacher hired. Steinigeweg explained that in those days you needed twenty-one children to get federal funding for a school and it had to run for six months without funding to show that there was support in the community.

Steinigeweg reached the point in his autobiography where he complained about his Dutch workers. He said he had lost money on those that died and did not pay back the passage fare. He also said that some could not earn enough to pay him back, and others left without repaying him. "I find it more advantageous to give others who got into debt more and more their freedom," he says. He mentions that for one family who had a big debt outstanding he would cancel it if they left in three days. They did.

This is contrary to the belief that every Dutchman struck it rich and left for the west with his money. Of course, some made good money. "Many of the Dutch emigrants desired to go to the far west as soon as possible where they could buy land from their extra money," he writes. They were replaced by Germans, "which were actually better workers." Somewhere else he stated that Canadian lumberjacks are the best.

Steinigeweg was a hard-working man who grew up in the countryside. Later, in Amsterdam, there were days when he got up at 4:30 AM and worked till midnight. He demanded the same from his workers. Maybe he was not so pleased with his Dutch workers and that is the reason why all except one did not get much at all. Steinigeweg devoted a lot of space to his dogs and the hardships he went through with them, but the Dutch workers did not get much credit.

In 1854 Steinigewegs bought a second boat and obtained more contracts from the railroads and a sawmill. In 1855 he also got contracts with a Canadian company and the Great

Western Railway to deliver wood. He built a jetty for the steamboat from Buffalo that brought tourists over in the summer. His wood was also used more and more for bridges and ports.

The New York State Census of 1855 is the only way to track the immigrants during their first years. For the rest we have to rely on Steinigeweg's autobiography. According to this census there were two Dutch servants living with the Steinigewegs. Besides Jan Willem Steenis, there is a Cornelius Quintus, who is not found in any other records. There were four other Dutch families still living on the Island, plus Steinigeweg's brothers. Of the approximately eighty-five people that we have been tracking, only nineteen were left, excluding the Steinigewegs. The only one of the first group still living on the Island was Jan Willem Steenis. A note in the census says that the previous September, a 28-year old Dutchman had drowned. It is not clear who that might have been, although Gerrit van Westreenen, the single man from the second group was born in 1828. Was he one of the workmen that drowned while crossing in the leaking rowing boat?

Of the eighty-five people at least nine had died by 1855 and since there were only nineteen left, some fifty-seven must have moved elsewhere. Did people go back to the Netherlands? There is no mention of it in the autobiography and also not in the records of Geldermalsen. So, presumably some of those fifty-seven were in debt and had to leave, and others may have made some money and bought land in the Midwest.

The Van Genderen couple arrived in 1852 with a baby boy. In the 1855 census the couple had a one-year old daughter, Mary Cornelia. She shows up again in the 1860 and 1870 censuses. By then the Van Genderens were living in Iowa. And they still do; there are a number of them in this area.

The brothers Peter and Cornelis Verwey left the Netherlands in 1852. Interestingly, neither are registered as emigrants or located in the U.S. passenger records. That is odd, because they both had a family. Peter shows up in the 1855 census with all his children, but his brother is not on Grand Island anymore. Did he ever arrive? Cornelis remains lost, but by 1870 his brother Peter was living in Appleton, Wisconsin.

It is striking how many of the former Grand Island group ended up in Wisconsin, mostly around Appleton. By 1870 Teunis Van Ooijen and his family lived in Buchanan, Wisconsin, slightly west of Appleton. His brother Adrian (J.J.) lived there also. Their father, Jan Janse Van Ooijen, lived in the same town. John Steenis was living in Grand Chute, Wisconsin, somewhat east of Appleton. The Meidam family also moved to Appleton.

Martinus Van Doorn and his family ended up in Ottawa County, Michigan, at Grand Haven. Others moved to areas unknown, maybe further west or to areas where they escaped the roving eye of Robert Swierenga, who looked at census areas with at least fifty Dutch-born inhabitants. In many areas there simply were not many Dutch.

In 1855 Steinigeweg decided to appoint a German Lutheran minister named Kreitschmar. This seems appropriate since most of the workers were by then German. Steinigeweg's living room served as a church and people of all faiths visited the services. Steinigeweg remembered that the first couple married there was Roman Catholic.

After 1857 the economy worsened and Steinigeweg noticed. One of the railroad companies that Steinigeweg catered to went out of business and another was doing so badly that it tried to end the contract. Steinigeweg at the same time was also growing different crops, such as potatoes, hay, clover corn, wheat, rye, barley, oats, and fruits (apples and peaches), but prices were depressed. He also owned livestock, mainly pigs, but also cows.

Once the depression set in, he figured he had more land than he could use so he decided to sell below the price just to get the remaining payments off his books. He had 550 acres left.

His sister and brother-in-law came over in 1857 and purchased one of the properties that Steinigeweg had previously sold. According to passenger records, Willem Ryken sailed to America in the fall of 1856. His wife followed a year later. In 1859 Steinigeweg was elected Justice of the Peace, so he really had become an established inhabitant.

More and more, Steinigeweg relied on his harvest of crops and less on wood. He also divided his remaining property into two and sold one part. By the time the Civil War broke out, the economy was steady again but the country was at war. Steinigeweg escaped the draft but was forced to stay in the country.

There were still a couple of Dutchmen living on Grand Island, which was presumably only the Steinigeweg family. Basically it is the three brothers, two of whom were not married. The one sister was married to William Ryken. In local histories a Coasje Ryken Bagley shows up, belonging to the Congregational Church. Except for the mention of C.A.A. Stoneway on maps, this is the only Dutch trace to be found today.

Steinigeweg returned to the Netherlands in 1865 to visit his wife's father who was aged. He got involved in some business dealings and stayed about five years. When he came back to Grand Island, a devoted helper named Blacking had almost ruined his farm, but Steinigeweg forgave the man because of years of loyal service.

By 1875 Steinigeweg's wife, who had problems with her leg, had enough of the Island. Steinigeweg said that since they were childless, they desired a change of surroundings. It is not the end of the Dutch on Grand Island, but there was not much left.

Steinigeweg returned to the Netherlands again and after taking it easy for a few years he put his money into building the American Hotel on the Leidseplein. The first plans date from 1878 and by the end of 1881 it opened its doors. Steinigeweg's signature is visible in the lobby where he had a huge mural painted of Niagara Falls. Shortly afterwards, Steinigeweg decided that running a hotel and restaurant was not for him, so he sold out. "American", as the place is known in Amsterdam, became an enormously successful place and the building was later torn down and replaced by a bigger one. The American II, this time without any mural, opened in 1900, the year that Steinigeweg passed away.

Steinigeweg is not an average emigrant. He gave the impression of being a can-do guy. He was educated, handy, smart in business, and practical. He was very entrepreneurial and a hard worker. It is remarkable that the first group of six families put their trust in this 24 year-old minister's son. What did he tell them? How convincing was his story? Maybe they left him sooner than originally planned just to get away from him. Apart from being a successful entrepreneur, he also must have been a hard driving boss.

The emigration pattern at Grand Island confirms the general story of Dutch emigration in the nineteenth century. The emigrants were related and from the same rural area. They stayed closely together and even when they were forced to go their separate ways they sought each other out later on. It is interesting that the majority of these people all started out in the Lower Betuwe, spent time on Grand Island, and ended up going to Appleton. Even looking in the phone book of today's Appleton, one still finds the same names. Some of them, like Steenis and Van Ooyen, are living on the same street.

Despite the hardships, the emigration to Grand Island was a success. Most people who went there were better off, even though they had to go someplace else to really get a better

life. Steinigeweg certainly did well and "brought home the bacon." The city of Amsterdam and the Dutch owe him a thank you for one of the most prominent hotel-restaurants in the city. Next time you visit the Netherlands you should go to the Grand Hotel American and remember that the Niagara Falls are not that far away.

