

## **Consuls and Citizens: Dutch Diplomatic Representation in American Cities**

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In 1816, the year the Kingdom of the Netherlands was reconstituted after the Napoleonic conquest, Frederick Gebhard, the Dutch consul in New York, reported to the Dutch mission then residing in Philadelphia: “Nothing whatever of moment has occurred in the Station, which I have the honor to hold, save numerous applications of distressed people from Holland, which I have endeavored to aid and assist.”<sup>1</sup> Gebhard resigned a few months later, because his position cost him much more in supporting Hollanders in America than he earned in consular fees. This could be a short paper if this letter had set the course of Dutch-American diplomatic relations. Fortunately for our two countries, history ran its course. I will briefly outline the consular relation in its four stages.

From the beginning of the Dutch-American consular exchange in 1784 till almost a century later, the consuls were located in ports along the East Coast and in the South. Though the care for stranded Netherlanders was part of a consul’s responsibility, his main task was to protect and promote Dutch trade. His uniform was modeled after that of naval

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<sup>1</sup>National Archives, Den Haag, 2.05.13 Plaatsingslijst van het archief van het Nederlands gezantschap in de VS 1814-1940, inv. 48 ingekomen brieven met Nederlandse consuls in de VS 1815-1818, letter 6 April 1816, by New York consul Fred. Gebhard to J.W. Ten Cate, secretary of the Dutch legation in Philadelphia.

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officers, since their primary business was with the merchant marine.<sup>2</sup> New York became the official center, when it hosted the first Dutch consul-general in 1852. The next stage was reached in 1871, when a new Dutch law allowed for the founding of more consuls-general and Dutch parliament created a training course for future consuls. This opened the opportunity to create new offices in other parts of the United States. A third phase began in 1911, when New York received its first professional consul-general and other places followed. A final phase began after World War II when the consuls-general became part of the regular career pattern of the Dutch diplomatic service, rotating on a three-year schedule.

The most interesting part is the developmental phase in the first century and a half, when consuls served lengthier terms and immigration was a significant factor in Dutch-American relations. Since I described the history of the New York consuls in a separate article, I will concentrate on the cities of Chicago and Grand Rapids as important destinations in the Midwest, with a coda on San Francisco as the most prominent West Coast location and a bridge to the Dutch colonial possessions in the East Indies.<sup>3</sup> My purpose is to explore the activities of Dutch consuls in the cities and assess in particular what Dutch citizens could expect from them.

### *Consular Developments*

The nineteenth-century consuls might be busy, but they were not active. Consuls responded to demands from Dutch and American authorities and occasionally from citizens. They registered Dutch ships, collected consular fees, claimed lost properties, tracked down offenders of Dutch laws, reported economic developments, and legalized marriages. Most of them were commercial bankers, whose priority was to protect Dutch-American business interests. They benefited from stable business and legal relations and received their reward more in status and reputation

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<sup>2</sup>A brief general overview of Dutch consular history is H.J. de Muy-Fleurke and S. Plantinga, "Hulp in het buitenland. De consulaire dienst," in R.E. van Ditzhuyzen a.o., eds., *Tweehonderd jaar Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken* (Den Haag: Sdu, 1998), 124-42.

<sup>3</sup>Hans Krabbendam, "Capital Diplomacy: Consular Agents in Amsterdam and New York, 1800-1940," in *Parallel Cities: Amsterdam and New York, 1653-2003*, eds., George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam (VU University Press, 2003).

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than in financial compensation. Since all consuls were honorary, Dutch Americans initially held many of the posts, with Dutch citizens occupying the most prominent consulates. Pressure from some Dutch chambers of commerce led to the appointment of more Dutch citizens, and the Amsterdam business circle even succeeded in naming their candidate for the New York office when a vacancy arose in 1855.<sup>4</sup>

Laboriously negotiated commercial treaties in 1839 and 1852 and a consular convention a few years later paved the way for increase in trade between the two countries. After 1850 consuls had to collect information about economic developments, because Dutch-American trade relations improved gradually in the second half of the century. Between 1851 and 1891 exports from the United States to the Netherlands increased eleven-fold, while the American import from the Netherlands grew six times over.<sup>5</sup> After the American Civil War, the Dutch consular service was slowly modernized, occasional reports were published and later annual overviews, while the office incidentally stimulating new business ventures.<sup>6</sup>

After 1870, a more liberal economic climate in the Netherlands and an increase in colonial commodities stimulated international trade. Gin,

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<sup>4</sup>The same commercial interest in a consular post is visible in New Orleans. In 1831 the new consul Hugo C. Gildemeester informed envoy Bangeman Huygens, that he had launched a commercial firm which would be confined exclusively to Commission Business. His references were gentlemen such as J.J. van der Kemp of the Holland Land Company, Fred. Gebhard, former Dutch consul in New York, Thomas W. Ludlow of New York, and Thomas Dixon of Boston, which were part of the Dutch-American, or better – Amsterdam-American - commercial network. Nationaal Archief Den Haag, 2.05.13 Plaatsingslijst van het archief van het Nederlands gezantschap in de VS 1814-1940 inv. 52 incoming correspondence, 1831; Hugo C. Gildemeester to envoy Bangeman Huygens, 25 November 1831.

<sup>5</sup>G.J. Kloos, *De handelspolitieke betrekkingen tusschen Nederland en de Vereenigde Staten van Amerika 1814-1914* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1923) 97.

<sup>6</sup>*Verzameling van consulaire en andere verslagen en berichten over nijverheid, handel en scheepvaart, 1865-1893*; Uitgegeven door het Ministerie van Landbouw, Handel en Nijverheid; *Consulaire verslagen en berichten, 1894-1906*; Uitgegeven door het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken; *Economische verslagen van Nederlandsche diplomatieke en consulaire ambtenaren, 1907-1936*; Uitgegeven door het Ministerie van Landbouw, Nijverheid en Handel, met medewerking van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken.

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coffee, rubber, tobacco, and sugar were imported by the United States from the Netherlands and its colonies, but four times as much petrol, animal fats, talcom, cotton seed oil, and grain were shipped from the United States to the Netherlands. The balance of trade remained lopsided for decades to come. The few Dutch ships that sailed to New York made their trip in ballast, which greatly reduced their profitability.<sup>7</sup> The lack of a return load from the Netherlands was a major obstacle for a stable reciprocal trade relation. This problem was partly “solved” by the transport of emigrants from Europe.

### *Chicago, Grand Rapids, and the Midwest*

The first Midwestern consul to be active in the immigrant scene was Gijsbert Van Steenwijk, a lawyer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin since 1851. As state commissioner for immigration between May 1852 and May 1853, he recruited immigrants in New York for Wisconsin.<sup>8</sup> Van Steenwijk offered a new model of an active consulship, but he was sixty-five years before his time. He outlined his plan for a professional job in his 1855 application for the New York consulate-general vacancy, proposing a salary of \$1,500 per quarter, and annual compensation of \$250 for offices space, \$100 for furniture, \$700 for secretarial assistant, and \$1,250 for printing costs. He ruled himself out of the market when he emphasized to the Netherlands Secretary of State that he could not do it for less, taking into account that American consuls in Europe had a much better salary than did his Dutch colleagues. The American consul in Amsterdam received \$1,000 and in Rotterdam \$2,000, but the Dutch consul in New

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<sup>7</sup>*Verzameling van consulaire en andere berigten en verslagen over nijverheid, handel en scheepvaart*. 1878: 524-530, and berigten till 1883. See also the failure of the largest Dutch international commercial firm to create a foothold in New York by W.J. Wensink, “Te billijk en te nauwgezet. De mislukte poging van de Nederlandse Handelmaatschappij om een Agentschap te vestigen in New York 1879-1882,” *Aanzet* 11 (April 1993): 21-30.

<sup>8</sup>G. Van Steenwijk, “Milwaukee,” *De Recensent. Algemeen Letterkundig Maandschrift* (1851). Evidence for his standing among Dutch-Americans is in Herbert J. Brinks, ed., *Dutch American Voices: Letters from the United States, 1850-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 343, 348. Henry S. Lucas, *Netherlanders in America: Dutch Immigration to the United States and Canada, 1789-1950* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955, 1989), 199-200.

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York only received \$400.<sup>9</sup> This was clearly not the model for The Hague, which appointed a candidate with excellent colonial business connections, a high social standing, and modest financial expectations. Van Steenwijk moved to New Port, Minnesota, in 1854 and resigned five years later when he was elected in the state assembly of Wisconsin, which office was incompatible with a consulship. He recommended his cousin Johan Voswinkel Dorselen as his successor, and Dorselen moved the consulate to Winona, Minnesota.<sup>10</sup>

In the meantime, Dutch merchants active in the Windy City had taken the initiative to push one of their own into the consulship, but the proposed candidate had a shady history of embezzlement and sexual affairs with a junior. Voswinkel's desire to move his consulate to Chicago solved the problem of finding a suitable candidate.<sup>11</sup> This transfer and the boom after the great fire of 1871 prepared the scene for Chicago to be the leading Dutch consular center in the Midwest.

Once a consular post had been established, its continuity was commonly a matter of recommending as successors his assistants, business partners, or relatives. In 1875, when Voswinkel returned to the Netherlands for business reasons, Lobertus Jacobus Johannes Nieuwenkamp, importer of clothing materials, was appointed to his post. He had assisted Voswinkel in the previous years and soon found that his tasks multiplied. In 1884 he got a vice-consul John Steketee appointed for Grand Rapids, and a year later, in 1885, he received the assistance of George Birkhoff, Jr. Birkhoff succeeded Nieuwenkamp as the consular agent in 1886 and stayed on till his death in 1914. Under Birkhoff the

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<sup>9</sup>NA, 2.05.01 Ministerie van buitenlandse zaken, 1813-1896, inv. 3025 aanstelling consulaire ambtenaren, Map "Consulaat-generaal te New York," 1855-1870; Letter, Van Steenwijk to Gevers, New Port, Sauk City, 31 March 1855.

<sup>10</sup>NA, 2.05.01 Ministerie van buitenlandse zaken, 1813-1896, inv. 3025 aanstelling consulaire ambtenaren, Map "Consulaat te Portage City," 1854-1870. Letter, Gevers to foreign minister Van Hall, 19 September 1854, Letter, Van Steenwijk to R.C. Burlage, 10 January 1859. Van Steenwijk served as state senator in 1879-80, Henry S. Lucas, ed., *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs and Related Writings* (rev. ed.: Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997) 2: 132.

<sup>11</sup>A.C. van der Zwan, "Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Consulaire vertegenwoordiging te Chicago" (unpublished paper), Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, Dienst Documentaire informatievoorzieningen, August 1993).

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Chicago district grew to include the prairie and plains states with the exception of Iowa. That state was serviced from St. Louis, until Orange City got its own vice-consulate in 1919 till 1975, when it folded due to lack of business.

Birkhoff, a real estate agent and member of the First Reformed Church, was highly respected in the Dutch community. He undertook the promotion of the Dutch heritage at the 1893 Chicago World Fair. He also placated the Dutch-Americans by joining them at the functions of the Holland Society, awarding cash prizes for Dutch and English essays to their brightest students.<sup>12</sup> Close to the end of his career, he discovered that the swell in immigration and the growth of the city had made his task heavy. Moreover, he found the attitude of the Dutch not very deferential. "Some of our Dutch people have an idea that officials are their servants, who must always be at their command, even in affairs where they themselves failed to get results."<sup>13</sup> His efforts were rewarded by his promotion to consul-general in 1908. While Birkhoff and many other Chicago Dutch hoped that C. van Ryn van Alkemade, a manager of the Holland-America Line, would succeed him, The Hague chose John Vennema, who had met the director general of the Foreign Ministry personally and got his endorsement.<sup>14</sup>

This new consul-general was a lawyer and served till 1941, when Chicago became a professional post. A rare report gives an impression of the scope of Vennema's business activities in 1929. In this final year of the prosperous twenties he and his secretary, who did most of the routine

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<sup>12</sup>George Birkhoff, Sr., *A Short History of The Family Birkhoff* (Chicago, n.d.), 23-25; *De Grondwet*, 3 July 1888; \$25 for the best English essay was won in 1888 by student Keppel from Zeeland and \$25 for the best Dutch essay on Jacob Cats by Gilbert Haan of Vriesland.

<sup>13</sup>2.05.13 Gezantschap VS, 339 cg Chicago; Letter, George Birkhoff to J. Loudon, 24 February 1910.

<sup>14</sup>Birkhoff had been personally promoted to the rank of consul general in 1906, *Ibid.* 340; Letter of 21 October 1914, signed by 16 leading Dutch-Chicagoans complaining that Van Ryn had been superseded in the consular service in Chicago. He had performed well in the past 15 years, everyone liked him, he worked hard, and was highly appreciated by Birkhoff. Vennema had no consular experience. Neither man was rich. Van Rijn was married to Sybilla De Bey, daughter of the late Rev. Bernardus De Bey, minister of the First Reformed Church of Chicago.

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work, had to answer 1800 letters and collected \$1,227 in consular fees. Principal exports to the Netherlands were meat products, flour, cereals, automobiles, and dental preparations and imports from the Netherlands consisted of salted fish, seeds, bulbs, diamonds, cheese, chocolates, cocoa, rags, and a limited number of tiles. This office saw little chances to increase imports from the Netherlands.<sup>15</sup> Business relations with the “Queen of the West” were not overwhelming. Even after the Dutch foreign office made efforts to formulate an international trade policy, its common frugality and domination by laissez-faire civil servants precluded a commercial success.<sup>16</sup>

In 1914, Grand Rapids became a separate consulate and kept this independent status until the end of World War II, when it returned under the supervision of Chicago. These three decades of Grand Rapids independence from the Chicago office were under the aegis of the most enduring consular family in Dutch-American history, the Steketees of Grand Rapids, who served for more than half a century. John S. Steketee, a 1847 emigrant from Zeeland, had worked his way up as a farmer, sheriff, and real-estate agent in Grand Rapids. He entered the service as a vice consul in 1885, and was extremely committed to his task, counseling hundreds of compatriots who came to see him after working hours at his home. When he died in 1900, his son Jacob was the logical candidate to succeed him. A rearrangement of consular resorts in 1912, after Chicago consul-general Birkhoff had died, put the states of Michigan and Minnesota under consul Steketee’s supervision. His workload increased and he could appoint a vice consul, another relative.

Occasionally, consuls became involved in politics. In 1918, Steketee almost caused a diplomatic row when he granted an off-the-record interview with the Grand Rapids *Herald*, which subsequently published the remarks on March 22. Steketee had condemned the appropriation of Dutch ships by the American government to transport American troops to Europe, emphasizing the neutrality of the Netherlands

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., report of J. Vennema to Gezant J. H. van Royen, 5 November 1930.

<sup>16</sup>For the slow change in trade promotion see Walter Salzmann, *Bedrijfsleven, overheid en Handelsbevordering. The Netherlands Chamber of Commerce in the United States, Inc. 1903-1987* (Leiden, 1994).

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and the difficult situation of a neutral country surrounded by belligerents. He defended the rights of Dutch citizens in the United States who claimed an exemption from military service, which was understood as being pro-German.<sup>17</sup> This problem was solved when the editor apologized, but two years later, in 1920, Steketee was fired because he had not properly executed some bureaucratic measures in preparing passports. Only because his successor tarried to assume office and the Washington mission grew impatient, was he able to repair his reputation by clarifying that the Great War had significantly increased his duties. His supervisor in Chicago confirmed that Steketee had an excellent reputation and that he would be difficult to replace. He was satisfied that “the consular position would remain in a generally respected family.”<sup>18</sup> The Ministry revoked its decision, so that Steketee could keep his stipend of \$125 a month to pay for his secretary.

A full-page interview in the Grand Rapids *Herald* of January 31, 1926 revealed a realistic view of his consulate. Its heading read: “A Consulate Without Gold Lace and Frills. Jacob Steketee, 25 Years in Service of Netherlands Here, Admits His Office Means Mostly Prosaic, Every Day Legal Business, few Thrills.” Reporter Alta Lawson Littell recorded Steketee’s explanation of this characterization: “Being a consul to Mr. Steketee is just a matter of granting passports, settling estates, helping the old folks back in Holland find the boys and girls in America who forget to write back home, and acting as a sort of general counselor for citizens of the Netherlands who find themselves in Grand Rapids and in need of help. If there is anything romantic or thrilling in any of that, Mr. Steketee insists he has yet to dig it up.” Jacob Steketee had a realistic view of his job, but sounded too modest. As his father before him, he was a reliable liaison between the Dutch and both countries and properly

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.. 351 Grand Rapids 1912-1924; Letter, Jacob Steketee to August Philips, Minister of the Netherlands, 27 March 1918.

<sup>18</sup>National Archives, Den Haag, 2.05.13 Gezantschap VS, 351 Grand Rapids 1912-1924. Henry Beets had advised the minister to appoint Gelmer Kuiper, a railroad lawyer and son of the respected Christian Reformed Church minister R.T. Kuiper (28 August 1919), 1117, dienstreizen Michigan, 28 June 1920: Zaakgelastigde ad interim aan Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken.

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received the rank of an Officer in the Order of Oranje Nassau as recognition for his twenty-five years of service in 1925.<sup>19</sup>

The further history of the Midwestern consulates proves that commercial activities were more important for becoming consul than were an upsurge in immigration and the interests of the newcomers. In 1937 F.C. Goodheart applied to be made consul for Kalamazoo. Jacob Steketee missed the logic of such an appointment, since Kalamazoo had little business activities and few citizens called on the Grand Rapids office. If they wished, they could reach his office easily. "Of course, if it were Holland's policy to have Consuls or Vice Consuls in every community where there are people of Dutch blood, Kalamazoo would be one of those places."<sup>20</sup> Clearly, this was not the policy. The fact that a Dutch consulate opened in St. Louis in 1909 was due to the troubles of the Culman Coke Company, which filed for bankruptcy in 1915. Many prominent Dutch citizens, such as the Dutch minister of foreign affairs De Marees van Swinderen, and the Queen herself, had invested their money. Also the presence of an active Dutch citizens group, founded by the consul Dr. J.J. Houwink testified to the interests and aspirations of the Dutch.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly the consuls had to be close to the Dutch citizenry growing into Americans, but how important was this connection in diplomatic eyes? The chiefs of the Dutch mission in Washington were slow in discovering the needs of the Dutch immigrants in the Midwest. Career diplomat Jhr. Dr. Reneke de Marees van Swinderen (1860-1955) was the first Dutch envoy to visit the colonies there. He had been appointed in 1904 and would serve successfully till the end of 1907 to take up the position of minister of foreign affairs in The Hague in 1908, which was a common career move. Within a year after his arrival in Washington in February 1904, Van Swinderen married Elizabeth Lindsey Glover.<sup>22</sup> Though he clearly belonged to the upper class, he saw himself as belonging to the middle classes. He felt quickly at ease with people and

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<sup>19</sup>National Archives, Den Haag, 2.05.13 Gezantschap VS, 1118, dienstreizen Michigan.

<sup>20</sup>NA 2.05.13 Gezantschap VS, file 327, letter Jacob Steketee to H.W. Haersma de With, 35 March 1937.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., file 420-423.

<sup>22</sup>*New York Times*, 22 December 1904.

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acted more informally than the usual stiff Dutch diplomats, which was a promising combination for opening doors to meet the Dutch in the Midwest.<sup>23</sup>

The Dutch-Americans in the west liked Van Swinderen, and respectfully honored him at a well-attended reception. The sympathy was mutual; nevertheless, Van Swinderen advised his successor John Loudon in 1911 to minimize its importance. When Loudon asked him whether he should accept invitations for official visits, Van Swinderen advised: “these are all occasions that seem important in the country, but in fact have no more than local significance; here in Europe people laugh about those American exaggerations and they lack any prestige. In my opinion also a visit to Michigan is not pressing, when the [Dutch] Minister visits it once a decade, I personally think it suffices.... However, act according to your own wishes.”<sup>24</sup> Loudon went to Michigan in February 1912 and met a more than excited audience.

However, when the Dutch reputation was seriously jeopardized during the First World War, at a time when many Americans believed the Dutch were profiting by trading with the enemy, the Washington minister was quick to recruit the support of authoritative Dutch Americans in the Midwest. He enlisted the leading Christian Reformed cleric and church historian, the Reverend Henry Beets, and the publisher William Eerdmans, who could write opinion articles for the newspapers.<sup>25</sup> Such leaders were more than willing to render their services. They were thrilled with attention from Washington and diligently editorialized in their periodicals, as Beets did in *The Banner* on July 29, 1920. Here he commented on the visit a few weeks earlier of Dutch Chargé d’Affairs, Dr. W.H. de Beaufort,

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<sup>23</sup>Michiel Riemens, “Een frisse wind door een stoffig departement. Reneke de Marees van Swinderen (1908-1913) in Duco Hellema, Bert Zeeman en Bert van der Zwan, *De Nederlandse ministers van Buitenlandse Zaken in de twintigste eeuw* (Den Haag: Sdu Uitgevers, 1999), 55-67.

<sup>24</sup>National Archives, Den Haag, inv. 2.21.205.37. Collectie John Loudon, file 3: correspondentie met de Marees van Swinderen, letter 23 February 1911 to Dr. John Loudon.

<sup>25</sup>National Archives, Den Haag, inv. 2.05.13 Gezantschap VS, 1117 dienstreis Michigan, “Losse aantekeningen over Nederlanders en oud-Nederlanders in Michigan,” April 1919.

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and he remembered the equally agreeable visits of Van Swinderen and Dr. Loudon. “There are several reasons why we Americans of Dutch extraction in the New World should keep up direct personal contact with the folk in the Old World Home,” Beets noted. He mentioned blood ties, physical and psychological closeness, intelligent understanding, spiritual bonds, the American respect for Dutch forbears, and the grand Dutch heritage.<sup>26</sup> This advocacy of Dutch America came to an apex when Beets and émigré political scientist Henry Vlekke published *Hollanders Who Helped Build America* (1942) to inform an American audience about the strong historical, cultural, and political ties between the two countries.<sup>27</sup>

In the final quarter of the nineteenth century, consuls were occupied with a myriad of administrative acts: settling debts, establishing death certificates, and assisting in filing patents. After 1910 new commercial activities shifted the burden of their daily duties to providing information on industrial products, import duties, health requirements for immigrants, and questions of military service.<sup>28</sup> The consuls enjoyed privileges aboard ships of Holland-America Line, which was much appreciated.<sup>29</sup>

While special consul-generals reviewed the American consular service biennially and recommended promotions, the Dutch counterpart made only small moves towards professionalization and continued to depend on personal relations. In the fall of 1920, De Beaufort, the acting minister of the Dutch government, organized a conference in Chicago for

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<sup>26</sup>Idem, see Herbert J. Brinks, “Henry Beets (1869-1947): Historian of the Christian Reformed Church,” in George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam, eds., *Breaches and Bridges: Reformed Subcultures in the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2000), 125-140.

<sup>27</sup>Bernard H. M. Vlekke and Henry Beets, *Hollanders Who Helped Build America* (New York: American Biographical Company, 1942); P. Blaas, *Betrokkenheid en distantie. Bernard Vlekke (1899-1970) en de studie van de internationale betrekkingen* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991).

<sup>28</sup>National Archives, Den Haag, 2.05.48.23 Inventaris van het archief van het Consulaat-Generaal te New York, (1818) 1855-1954. inv. 1-24 correspondentie 1874-1911.

<sup>29</sup>National Archives, Den Haag, 2.05.13 Gezantschap VS, 352, Grand Rapids, 1925-1933, letter exchange between Steketee and HAL in 1930. Also relatives could count on preferential treatment, see Birkhoff, *Short History*, 54.

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the consuls and consuls-general to discuss a commercial strategy for export to the United States. They decided to exchange publications of American banks, to list Dutch exporters, to issue commercial bulletins, distribute brochures about the Dutch economy, and highlight the facilities of the Rotterdam port.<sup>30</sup>

The Dutch consular activity in the Midwest can be characterized by a passive role of the Dutch authorities. They made no systematic effort to find markets for Dutch products until 1920, they did not formulate a strategy for advancing emigration, and they left all initiatives to establish or move consulates to Dutch-American citizens. The consuls were committed and competent men, but could not fill the gap left by the lack of policies from the motherland, since their honorary status made them part-time volunteers.

### *San Francisco and the West Coast: Rising Importance of the Dutch Colonies*

Consulates follow shifts in trade and movements of citizens. So it is not surprising that the first consul on the West Coast was commissioned in 1849 at the time of the Gold Rush. J.P.H. Gildemeester served during the Civil War in his post in San Francisco till 1862, when he was succeeded by James de Fremery (1862-1892). His successors were Belgian consuls, who also represented the Netherlands, till in 1913 the place became a consulate-general under its first office holder, the flamboyant Henri Albert van Coenen Torchiana, who served till his death in 1940.

The opening of the Panama Canal in 1915, which was highly significant in political, military and commercial terms, caused De Fremery's promotion to consulate general. Apart from the state of California, the consular territory included Arizona, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington. In 1908 Los Angeles received its first consular representative due to the recent immigration wave into California. F.J. Zehandelaar was

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<sup>30</sup>National Archives, Den Haag, 2.05.13 Gezantschap VS, 1121 "Dienstreis Chicago," Report by Commerical attaché, Mr. Andeae [20 November 1920]. American trade periodicals carried reports about this meeting.

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the first honorary consul. In 1929 this post became a consulate and in 1961 a consulate-general, taking over this function from San Francisco.

Van Coenen Torchiana, not of noble birth but an entrepreneurial character who had added his mother's surname to his own, was born in the Dutch East Indies, had attended a commercial school in Amsterdam and tried his luck in the land boom in California in 1892. After he had lost his investment, he read and practiced law and grew affluent. He became the chair of the Dutch American Chamber of Commerce in San Francisco in 1910 and volunteered a long report to the Dutch minister singing the praises of California, indicating the opportunities in the future and mapping out the role of the Dutch.<sup>31</sup> Van Coenen was well educated and moved easily in circles of power, be it commercial, educational, or political. He informed the Dutch authorities that he unofficially acted as a liaison and counselor for the Dutch in the state. This paved the way to his appointment as the first consul-general on the West Coast in 1913. An initial distrust towards him only gradually subsided. Since he worked on the basis of reimbursements, and had delegated the bureaucratic formalities to a consul, ship owners feared that he advanced his own interests by charging sailors fees for passports, while some in the Dutch community blamed him for their losses in the Merced land deal in 1892.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 427, San Francisco, 1910-15. Letter included in a dispatch from the Dutch Envoy to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 28 March 1911.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 428, San Francisco, 1916-19, Letter in name of the Envoy to the Dutch minister of foreign affairs, 16 December 1919. His main opponent was Carel Vornholt, who was the chairperson of the Holland Society of California. See the complaints file 432: letter by Carel Vornholt to Envoy Jhr. van Rappard, 19 August 1915, and memo 12 September 1915, by Carel Vornholt "Ever since the Merced land deal in 1892, where he [Van Coenen] was connected with the Crocker Estate, who sold the Hollanders the worthless land, a swindle involving hundreds of thousands of dollars and bringing ruination to most of the unfortunate investors, he had lost the confidence of his countrymen, who blamed him not so much for what he did as for what he failed to do, viz. warn them of the nature of the land put up for sale." Part of this dissatisfaction was caused by the failure of Van Coenen to grant his fellow Dutchmen contracts for building parts of the San Francisco Panama-Pacific International Exposition, which he managed as Commissioner General. Others responded that Van Coenen had himself suffered financially.

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Van Coenen was saved from an official rebuke because he charged only \$175 per month, which was much less than a professional consul would cost, and he maintained excellent contacts with the American authorities. He masterfully sent a 37-page report to Queen Wilhelmina explaining the main differences in Dutch and American mentalities, underscoring his superior relations.<sup>33</sup>

This colorful man took an important initiative: he gave an overview of the state of trade between the United States and the Netherlands in 1918 to redress the poor reputation of the neutral Dutch as having benefited from trading with the enemy. He embarked on a course of cultural diplomacy, since he was aware of the fact that “public opinion will act very largely as a jury of future trade relations”.<sup>34</sup> For his own regional audience he added that California ports were the logical and promising destination for the resurging colonial trade and he encouraged American business men to set up banks and transportation lines and invest in the Dutch East and West Indies.

After a successful tour in the West in the summer of 1937, minister Haersma de With advised the Dutch Foreign Office to let the Dutch minister travel to California every other year, in order to generate attention for the importance of the Dutch East Indies, to create connections, and to drive home the importance of the Netherlands in the world. He praised the consul-general Van Coenen Torchiana, who did his utmost to advance Dutch interests and who had access to all the circles of power and

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 431, 1935-40, Report “Historische uiteenzetting eerbiedig aangeboden aan hare Majesteit Koningin Wilhelmina, Naar aanleiding van een gesprek met Hare Majesteit op 31 May 1938 op Huize ‘Ruigenhoek’” 12 July 1938. He explained that the United States was a capricious society that could change quickly. “the American firmly believes that it is the spiritual power of his people that condones no casts or limiting traditions and that every citizen has the same chances in life” (33). An official investigation confirmed the efficacy of the money spent on the Dutch pavilion at the International Exhibition.

<sup>34</sup>Walrave Boissevain, *Mijn Leven, 1876-1944* (Bussum: Van Dishoeck, 1950), 149-150, takes credit for drawing the attention of the Dutch envoy to Van Coenen Torchiana. H.A. van Coenen Torchiana, *The Future of Trade Between the United States of America and the Netherlands and Its Colonies: A Short Study* (San Francisco: Holland-American Chamber of Commerce, 1918), 9.

influence.<sup>35</sup> Due to his performance and recognition of the strategic position of the West Coast, San Francisco became an important center for Dutch commercial interests.

*Conclusions*

Dutch consuls took office in the United States when commercial activities between the countries demanded an official representation. The presence of Dutch immigrants in an area was never sufficient reason to open a consulate, especially since many of them became American citizens soon. Only a substantial trade with Holland, and a growth in Dutch travelers to the United States in the twentieth century could induce the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to open a new consulate. Clearly, the priority of the consul was to be an efficient civil servant who accurately administered his legal tasks. His extra energy was invested in stimulating Dutch trade and helping Dutch citizens in need. The development of the Dutch consulates in the Midwest showed that consulates started in budding settlements, but moved to the major urban centers promising more trade.

The staff of the Dutch consulates in the United States became increasingly Dutch. In the course of the nineteenth century the Ministry appointed candidates with a Dutch heritage to posts vacated by non-Dutch consuls. Consular candidates who were acquainted with the minister of foreign affairs or could boast of aristocratic connections had the best chances to get appointed to the top positions. The consuls in the Midwest were either involved in the transport business or were lawyers. They all needed a good standing in the Dutch-American community to work effectively, whether in the establishment circles of the colonial Dutch of New York City or in the more recent communities of the Midwest. The history of the Steketees proved that “standing” helped to acquire an independent office, and to hold on to a position. Raised and rooted in the Dutch Reformed denominations, most consuls joined upper class churches

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<sup>35</sup>National Archives, Den Haag, 2.05.13 Gezantschap VS, inv. 1127, dienstreizen Californië. Haersma de With to the Dutch Foreign Office, 1 June 1937. Similar praise at his 25-year anniversary dinner attended by 124 grateful Hollanders. File 433, 1938, ambtsjubileum.

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and secular service clubs and belonged to the American networks of power and influence.

Dutch diplomats had no structural contacts with Dutch immigrants. Trade and settlement were separate entities, and little policy directives were made for either. Dutch consuls were not active in the immigration arena, because the Dutch government had no emigration policy until after World War II. A fruitful comparison can be made with the neighboring Belgian liberal governments, which actively tried to push the poor, destitute, and convicts to emigrate to the United States.<sup>36</sup> Consuls were expected to help stranded citizens and they did much good, but it was not a structural action.

For all consuls-general, and a selected number of consuls, their ceremonial position became more important in the twentieth century. Consuls became the symbols of an emerging Dutch-American ethnicity, displayed at world's fairs.

The nineteenth century saw little change in the Dutch consular service in America; the consuls served long and secured continuity in their office. At the end of the century, more impersonal relationships demanded better information centers, but the consulates were not equipped to provide these. The Dutch ministers did not need the Dutch-American network for their information. At least three Dutch ministers to the United States in the first half of the twentieth century had created personal connections to America: Van Swinderen, Loudon, and Van Roijen had all met and married American wives. Many Dutch ministers seated in Washington D.C. later became Ministers of Foreign Affairs. The official Dutch interest in the Dutch-American presence was strong only when the reputation of the Netherlands was harmed in World War I.

The Dutch consuls exemplified the transition from international relationships based on personal contacts to formalized connections. This was a factor in the process of modernization, which took off hesitantly in the Netherlands in the 1890s and consolidated after 1920. A few key consuls-general and foreign ministers with broad American experiences helped made this transition. Though at crucial moments the diplomats

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<sup>36</sup>Dirk Musschoot, *Wij gaan naar Amerika. Vlaamse landverhuizers naar de Nieuwe Wereld 1850-1880* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2002).

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acknowledged the importance of the Dutch immigrants, they never involved them in building up a stronger economic relation that was more balanced.