

Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte  
1811 - 1876

Brief Biography

The Reverend Albertus C. Van Raalte was born October 17, 1811 at Wanneperveen, a little village near Zwartsluis (Overijssel). His father, Albertus Van Raalte, was a minister there of the Hervormde Staatskerk. His mother, Christina Caterina Harking, was of wealthy Frisian offspring.

There is no record of Van Raalte's childhood. He was one of 17 children, of whom only 5 reached maturity.

In 1832 Van Raalte, a junior at Leyden University, changed his course in medicine to a major in theology, a decision of tremendous importance to his life, possibly due to the fact that, in his own words, "aim and seriousness were only found until after the first cholera period" (1832).

He subsequently became involved with five young theology students who had formed their own group in opposition to the teachings of some of their professors, whose teachings they considered "rationalistic and supernaturalistic." These five included A. Brummelkamp, H. P. Scholte and S. Van Velzen who played prominent roles in Van Raalte's life and in the life of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk, as the seceded ministers later named their organization.

Refusal on Van Raalte's part to go along with the established Reformed Church on matters of doctrine and practice led to his joining the group of seceding ministers and the eventual decision to go to America. Severe economic conditions in the Netherlands abetted by the devastating disease to

the potato crop also influenced the decision to seek better days in the United States.

After weeks of investigation upon arriving in New York in November 1846 with 53 followers, Van Raalte decided to establish his settlement at the mouth of the Black River in Western Michigan with the assurance that the broad expanse of land between the Grand and Kalamazoo River valleys afforded enough room for homes for as many Hollanders who cared to come.

The activity of Van Raalte in the years following is incredible. Trained as a preacher, but now in a foreign land with a meager knowledge of language, customs, and laws, he developed into a business man, educator, preacher, and leader of his community.

Notwithstanding his great success along these lines, it was as a pastor that Van Raalte was best loved, revered, and remembered in the hearts of his people.

While still in the Netherlands, Van Raalte married Christina De Moen, a daughter of a pious family, whose sisters married Brummelkamp and Van Velzen, fellow ministers in the seceding group. Of 10 children born to them, 7 reached maturity. Two of the boys served in the Civil War. One of these lost an arm in combat.

At the 25th anniversary of the founding of the settlement, Van Raalte reminded his listeners, "Beloved, who follow us in this inheritance, we are ready to give it over to you with you. But do not forget, we received it from God."

Aleida J. Pieters, in her book, A Dutch Settlement in Michigan concludes

by saying that "every son and daughter of the Dutch emigration to Michigan owes to Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte an everlasting debt of gratitude for the broad vision, able effort, and grim determination which he manifested in the establishment of a settlement in Ottawa County."

He died November 7, 1876, in Holland, Michigan.