

10-1-2004

The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 14.03: Fall 2004

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Douma, Michael and Reynolds, Geoffrey D., "The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 14.03: Fall 2004" (2004). *The Joint Archives Quarterly*. Paper 46.

<http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/jaquarterly/46>

Published in: *Joint Archives Quarterly*, Volume 14, Issue 3, Fall October 1, 2004. Copyright © 2004 Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

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The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

Volume 14 Number 3

Fall 2004

Veneklasen Brick: A Family, a Company, and a Unique 19th Century Dutch Architectural Movement in Michigan

by Michael Douma

On a clear sunny day, drive south from Holland on 40th Street and then east on 142nd Avenue. With a little bit of imagination, you are transported to the 19th century; the asphalt streets turn to dirt, the ranch-style homes disappear, and squat wooden barns take the place of corn silo sentinels. And here in the farmlands of Overisel Township, a place which has changed remarkably little in over a century, you can see what it must have meant to have been a successful Dutch immigrant in America: to own your own land, work it with your own hands, and upon it build a solid home for your family. Brick houses dating to the late 19th century still dot the landscape, but like an endangered species, they are dwindling in number. A street that once hosted five of these attractive but modest dwellings might now have but two or three.

These houses still inspire awe like they did when they were first built. Passers-by might wonder about decorative features of the houses, the interplay of white and red brick. Contemporaries with the construction of these houses were also amazed at the quality of workmanship in the brickwork, but they were perhaps even more impressed with the size of the houses and the comfort they offered. Like the moral of a fairy tale, some had come to West Michigan and first built houses of wood and later built more enduring houses of brick. By and large, the houses were built by Dutch immigrants for Dutch immigrants. Even the brick, which was supplied from

the local Veneklasen family brickyards (hence the name Veneklasen brick house), was extracted, shaped and shipped by Dutch immigrants.

Initially, my goals for the annual summer research project were fairly straightforward. I would document each of these

houses by taking photographs and filling out a survey for each house. I then hoped to assess the general threat level that these historic houses face. Based on the figures of past researchers, I believed the total number of remaining Veneklasen houses to border on one hundred. This naive belief was shattered again and again as I found the movement to be much more extensive than had been previously thought. By driving around the countryside, I soon



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Supply stack of red bricks at the Cloverdale Brickyard

realized that many brick houses had not been documented. Through separate articles which appeared in the *Holland Sentinel*, the *Zeeland Record*, the *Lakeshore Press*, and KnowHope (the website of Hope College), interested persons came forward to offer their services in finding more houses. Their leads were followed up by my thorough searches of practically every road in the selected area. By the project's third week, I was aware of 150 houses suitable for documentation; at four weeks, that number had risen to 180 and continued to rise from there. Meanwhile, old photographs

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From the Director

Ahhhhhhhhhhhh. That says it all as the staff of the Joint Archives of Holland has completed its first major move since its founding in October 1988. Through the efforts of our student staff and our secretary Lori Trethewey, we were able to move approximately 3,000 linear feet of archival collections to our new location, the Theil Research Center, located at 9 East 10th Street. While just across the street from our former location, we took great care in the moving of the materials to ensure the quality of archival resources you have come to expect as researchers. So now that we are settled, I invite you all back for a tour and to do some research, should the need arise. We always appreciate your questions and comments.

This past summer we also changed our focus of the annual oral history project to a formal research project. Once that decision had been made, we let loose our ever-eager archival assistant, Michael Douma, to research the history of the Veneklasen brick homes that dot Ottawa and surrounding counties. Little did he know that he would eventually be writing a book-length manuscript about the Veneklasen Brick Company of Zeeland, the producers of the brick that make up those uniquely styled homes. To illustrate the wealth of knowledge Michael learned, he agreed to write about his experience in this issue of the newsletter. The formal history of the brick company will follow in book form later.

Now, settle back and enjoy the upcoming holidays and the joy that they bring us all each year.

Geoffrey Reynolds



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The Theil Research Center at 9 E. 10th Street

Veneklasen Brick (continued from page 1)

confirmed the existence of more brick houses that have been destroyed. Archival sources, which made mention of other brickyards owned by the Veneklasen family, directed my search elsewhere. These leads were investigated and, in the end, I confirmed Veneklasen brickyards once existed at many local communities like Hamilton, Cloverdale (Barry County), Grand Rapids, and Kalamazoo. And yet, perhaps the most difficult task waited. How could I prove that all these houses, in all these areas, were made with Veneklasen bricks and not bricks from some other company? I would have to research the company as well.

Since the scope of the project had been altered, I began to realize that I was no longer researching one particular issue, but multiple interwoven stories. These stories included 1) a history of brick architecture in Holland, MI; 2) the hard work that built an industry and the family commitment which sustained it; 3) Dutch brick making and the patterned brickwork tradition; and 4) the houses themselves and the issue of their conservation.

In many ways it is difficult to research this sort of unorthodox history. First of all, it requires a substantial amount of time. Besides professional historians (who are few and far between), who has four months of one's life to dedicate to a research and writing project? Secondly, in regards to research obstacles, there is a great void of information. The office papers and files of the Zeeland Brick Company (the name of the Veneklasen brickyard company from 1892 forward) are nowhere to be found. Newspaper indices and collection catalogs of archives are helpful, but they have limits. Photographs of the company are also hard to come by. While cameras were in common use in Holland by the brickyards' heyday in the late 19th century, few people ventured to the brickyard to take photographs, and understandably so. Local photographers, amateurs and professionals, wanted grand beach scenes at Macatawa Park, dignified family or individual portraits, or snapshots of the merriment of friends. Nobody wanted to photograph working class men in overalls, each covered with his own combination of dirty clay and sweat. On the other hand, old photographs of the Veneklasen houses are relatively common. These not only help the historical researcher, but provide an important basis for those who are interested into restoring a home to its original status.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle in this research is not time or lack of obvious sources, but distance. When I speak of distance, I am primarily addressing the fieldwork of visiting and photographing hundreds of houses spread across (as I eventually learned) at least four different counties. In many communities, a local historian came to my aid with his/her



Courtesy Larry Ocobock

*Ocobock Home at 2994 Byron Road
in Jamestown Township, c. 1890*

own photographs. In determining the extent of the use of Veneklasen brick, I owe a debt to the many people who, while vacationing or visiting some out-of-the-way part of Michigan, were able to confirm or deny the existence of brick houses. Midway through the summer, I realized that it would be logistically impossible for me to personally visit and survey every Veneklasen brick house. The visits that I did conduct were helpful, although I had to weed through some misinformation. In addition to legends of Indians and ghosts, I also heard many touching stories of the families who had previously dwelt in the houses. There was the Veneklasen brothers, who each lived in a separate house all together in a row; the Nykerk house, which would send a young man off to a fruitful career at Hope College; and the house of Dr. Yntema, whose circa 1930 hand-made wooden mailbox with a painted-on address could still be seen in an storage shed in the backyard.

In Zeeland, the consciousness of the brickyard and the legacy of Veneklasen Brick Company have faded, but may now be involved in a sort of “revival.” Zeeland seems to have recognized the “Veneklasen brick style” as the official architecture of the city, promoting it now in a school, hospital, and a bank. What is forgotten is that Zeeland was only home to one of the many Veneklasen-run brickyards. The memory of a Veneklasen brickyard is perhaps most apparent in Cloverdale, Michigan. In this village in Barry County, numerous brick houses are still visible as well as some remnants of the brickyard itself. Many citizens can recall a father or uncle who worked in the brick industry. Veneklasen brickyards near Kalamazoo seem to have been largely forgotten as such, and the brickyard which the Zeeland company once owned in Grand Rapids has since been built over with factories and residences. In Hamilton, only a

handful of people are aware that their own town once had a brickyard.

At the same time, my research demanded that I become acquainted with other local archives and historical societies. Here was an interesting world of disparities. On the top end of the user-friendly scale are Heritage Hall at Calvin College and the Grand Rapids Public Library, which both keep up to date with standards in the care of collections, have knowledgeable full-time employees along with dedicated volunteer corps. One local “historical society,” whose name I will respectfully omit, had an archives consisting of nothing more than a single rusty file cabinet crammed with unlabeled folders bursting with decaying newspaper clippings. Another archives stored its collections in an old gymnasium, a type of room which seems to only amplify extremes temperature and humidity, rather than guard against them.

While I was met with these sorts of frustrations, I encountered more positive feedback than negative. Many residents, in addition to helping me fill out an architectural survey, were interested in learning about their houses and discussing historical status. I could only agree with the son of one family who told me that I had a “pretty cool job.”

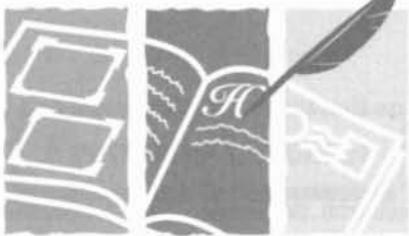
The value of well-run archives can be seen in the historical conscious of a community. Those with no past to research bulldoze historic houses on a whim and soon have no physical record of the past. Holland and Zeeland, on the other hand, have fairly strong historic-minded communities, in no small part due to the Joint Archives of Holland, the Holland Museum, and Zeeland’s Dekker Huis Museum. I hope that this area will learn about and appreciate the legacy of Veneklasen brick houses.



Courtesy Leslie Lampen

Family of Berend J. Veneklasen, c. 1890

The Joint Archives of Holland



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*Geoffrey Reynolds, Jacob Nyenhuis, Eleonore Theil, and James Bultman
at the October 25 dedication of the Theil Research Center*