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Van Raalte Papers: 1850-1859

Van Raalte Papers

8-19-1851

A Draft of a Letter from A. C. Van Raalte to Mr. Silsbee

A. C. Van Raalte

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August 19, 1851

A draft of a letter by ACVR to a Mr. Silsbee who is the executor of the estate of Mr. Nathaniel Silsbee. Some parts of the letter were scratched out and rewritten. ACVR is concerned about paying off the debt he owed Silsbee for land purchased in 1848. Hyma makes reference to this letter on pp. 164-65. ACVR concludes by saying "excuse my broken English."

Calvin College Archives: Van Raalte Collection, Box 8, folder 142.

Van. 1, 1850

Mich.: February 1, 1848, 40 acres; February 1, 1848, 40 acres; February 1, 1848, 40 acres; February 1, 1848, 160 acres; February 1, 1848, 63½ acres; April 5, 1849, 80 acres; April 5, 1849, 45 acres; April 5, 1849, 40 acres; and April 10, 1851, 160 acres.

That Van Raalte took no chances in his purchases of land may be gathered from the following letter from a law firm in Detroit dated January 1, 1850: "Dear Sir, We have received by Mr. Post the large package of deeds and certificates — and have copied the descriptions of same and the years, etc. We presume that what you wish us to do is to find out what we can about the titles, and ascertain if possible who owns the other undivided interests, etc. This we will endeavor to do as well as we can and as soon as we can get time — and report to you." This was the firm of J. L. Whiting and Adams.

In one respect Van Raalte was not so sagacious, namely, in the purchase of land he had not yet fully explored. For that reason we find him writing a pathetic letter one day to the son of Mr. Nathaniel Silsbee. To be exact, it was August 19, 1851, and Van Raalte remarked: "In September 1847 I did get a contract on a part of your land in Ottawa, Michigan, for the Holland Colony by your father's agent Mr. Ch. Noble of Monroe. . . . I did pay him down \$100. . . . On 1 Sept., 1851, there is to paj \$140.74, and I am glad that I can saij it is at hand. . . . At last on 1 Sept. 1853, I have to paj \$408.74. This is a large amount and I am much in fear that I can not paj it at that time at once unless I maij

Hyona

be so fortunate that I can dispose of a part of my property. This is a singular country. We have enough to eat and still to get moneij back is next to impossible. . . . Sir, when it is impossible to paj that time I wish you would be so kind to have patience with me."

What worried him the most was that there were several families living on the land he had bought from Mr. Silsbee, and he did not want to see them evicted. Moreover, there was on his tract about one hundred acres of swamp, and every time the river rose a bit all that land was flooded. In short, until that land was drained it was worthless. At the end of the letter Van Raalte wrote: "One thing I assure you, I will not abuse your patience; I will surely pay you just as fast as possible. I hate debts."

We would be most unkind to Van Raalte if we refused to take his word for this remark of conclusion. He had undertaken a tremendous task in the year 1847. His ignorance of geography had caused him some painful losses, and before long he was unable to meet all of his obligations. Those who would feel inclined to entertain thoughts unfavorable to the founder of the "Colony" should bear in mind what he wrote in his well-known letter of January 30, 1847, addressed to Brummelkamp. During the past five or six weeks, so he admitted, he had spent a large sum of money. But he had won the friendship of progressive Americans. If the latter could supply him with about \$3,000, he could go ahead and buy land

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Aug 19, 1851
Jan 30, 1847

Hegma

for cash. But perhaps it was better the way God had arranged everything.

Then followed a brilliant analysis of his grand scheme, the founding of the Colony on the following basis: He had almost no money left, and so he had to buy land on contracts. He would make a small down payment, buying everything in his own name as trustee for the people as a whole. If he should get into trouble, the Americans would be glad to help him. The poor would get from him their own contracts, and thus he would save them much worry and expense. In January 1847 the whole of Ottawa County had only 1,200 inhabitants. The Hollanders would form a community of their own; they would combine four to six sections of land into one colony with a government of their choosing. At least \$250 was going to be spent for a road from Allegan to Holland. Soon the harbor would be improved, in order that ships could enter Black Lake from the west under more favorable conditions. Holland would become a paradise for hunters and farmers, while city folks would enjoy the comforts which he had experienced himself in such a place at Kalamazoo. The latter was only some fifteen years old, and yet one could find there the latest thing in comfortable living.¹

It is not surprising that those who read the pamphlet by Brummelkamp in which Van Raalte's enthusiastic account of Michigan and its people was published, became eager to see that land of wonders. The inhabitants of the United States, unlike those of the Netherlands,

1. A. Brummelkamp, *Holland in Amerika*, pp. 28-34.

were aggressive and ambitious. It was fun to live among such fine people. Let the Separatists leave the land of oppression and take very little baggage with them. America had everything people could want. The emigrants after arriving in New York should not act as if they had a lot of money, nor must they buy provisions on their way. Let them go to the Colony. There they would find the land of milk and honey. And so they came, thousands upon thousands. ✓

Aug 19, 1851

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Letter to Mr Silsbee
Salem Essex Mass.

19 Aug 1851.

W.

Mr. Silsbee Esq,
executor of the estate of
Mr. Nathaniel Silsbee.

Calum C. Arch
Acve coee
Box 8, Sept 142
Holland Ottawa Mich.
Holland P.O.
19 Aug. 1851. -

Dear Sir!

In Sept. 1847 I did get a Contract on a part
of your lands in Ottawa Michigan for the Holland Colony, by
your Father's agent Mr Ch Noble of Monroe. t.w. on NW 1/4 Sec
and NE 1/4 of 129 T5 N. R 15 W. - I did pay down \$100. "
^{the remainder was to be paid as follows}
1 Sept 1848 there was to pay \$17, 7/4. and I did pay \$80, " - 1 Sept 1849
the payment was \$97, 7/4. and I did pay \$80, " - 1 Sept 1850 there
was to pay \$94, 2/4. and I did pay \$94, " - 1 Sept 1851 there is to pay
\$120, 7/4 and I am glad that I can say it is at hand: now I wrote
Mr Noble about the manner the place of ^{this} payment not knowing
or ^{agent} where after your Father's death agent; but I fear the letter did
not reach him, and the time being so near at hand I thought
it to be my duty to write you that the money is ready and that
I am looking out for instructions where to place it.

1 Sept 1852 I have to pay \$133, 7/4. - I hope to be able to fulfill the
contract and at last 1 Sept 1853 I have to pay \$408, 7/4. this
is a large amount and I am much in fear that I can not pay ^{it all that} ^{time} ^{at once}
unless I may be so fortunate that I can dispose of a part of my
property, I am willing to do this ^{only} when it is only possible; but without
such ^{here} chance I can not see how to get the money: this is a singular
country we have enough to eat and still ^{to get the money back is next to impossible} I have never been so
I have a great wish to

(has crossing
out) 6/8

I have a great wish to
in trouble for money and so in great
danger of not fulfilling.

but I see I am in danger
my engagements! Sir! When it is impossible to pay that time
I wish you would be so kind to have patience with me, and ^{please} give
me the assurance thereof, that my mind may have relief; by
losing this contract I would come in an immense trouble
these several families are living on the land and this burden is pressing
heavily upon me. - of course I pay the interest on the money. -

and now yet another matter: there is on the land bought by contract
more than hundred acres of Swamp land, this is ^{very} bad for our health,
When we have two ^{or} days rain then it is all covered with water because
it is nearly level with the river when the river is not low: We would
^{this can not be changed they say} like to drain it by ditches and dikes that is however impossible
but therefore we want a small strip of land SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of S 20 and
the SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of S 21 in the same town lying south of the river containing
about 20 acres: then we can make a solid wall against the river water: -

I hope Sir you will by fixing the price take in consideration that
^{we did buy} ~~we~~ by ignorance so much land that ^{we see now mostly all the time unemployed} ~~is~~ ^{is} ~~mostly~~ ^{is} ~~always~~ ^{is} covered with
water and that this ^{season} till now is one sea that in stead of being pro-
fitable is giving trouble ^{and} expense and bad health but Sir When you
will sell this land ^{to me} ~~it is impossible~~, I must confess to
^{circumstances} ~~however~~ I hope the country is growing ^{and} ~~decreasing~~ ^{mainly} ~~by~~ ^{by} ~~developing~~ ^{by} ~~the~~ ^{the} ~~resources~~
^{time will change} ~~when the~~ ^{has} ~~new~~ ^{open} ~~comers~~ ^{by} ~~developing~~ ^{the} ~~resources~~
^{change on} ~~and~~ ^{and} ~~also~~ ^{also} ~~when~~ ^{the} ~~navigation~~ ^{is} ~~open~~ ^{by} ~~an~~ ^{an} ~~Act~~ ^{Act} ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~appropriation~~ ^{of} ~~appropriation~~

One thing I assure you, I will not abuse your patience, I will
surely pay just as fast as possible. That's debts. -

Gentleman praying from above over you God's temporal and spiri-
tual blessings: I remain in expectation of your favorable answer
your obedient servant

your Obedient servant
S. C. van Rosta

NB excuse my broken English
& hope it may be intelligible