Dutch-American Calvinist immigrants came to Minnesota in the 1880s intent on doing two things: farming new land and transmitting old values to their children. Houses and barns expressed the first and churches symbolized the second objective. Physically their farms and churches closely resembled the structures their non-Dutch neighbors built. The doctrine taught in the churches and practiced in the homes distinguished the Dutch from the Swedish, Norwegian, and German immigrants who arrived in the state during the same period. The signboards on the Dutch churches carried the adjective “Gereformeerde” (Reformed), a word the settlers regarded as a synonym for “Dutch.”

This fierce religious loyalty had driven the Dutch Calvinist immigrants from the Netherlands to the United States starting in 1847, and inspired a schism among them within ten years. Ministers had led them first to the shores of Lake Michigan and the Iowa prairies. Later, clergymen played a major part creating a chain of colonies that by the 1890s stretched from Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Michigan to Minnesota, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, and Montana.¹ The vigor of each colony could be measured by two characteristics: the number and size of the congregations settlers organized and denominational affiliations. Vibrant settlements usually included churches linked to both the venerable Reformed Church in America and the upstart Christian Reformed Church. From this rivalry came division, and strength.

When the Dutch colony of Prinsburg, Minnesota began in 1886, and the Friesland, Minnesota colony formed in 1896, denominational competition arrived with the first settlers. Prinsburg’s endurance and Friesland’s demise were tied to the stories of their churches. Each settlement hosted rival congregations. In Friesland they actually met, albeit separately, in the same building. In Prinsburg, isolation on the prairie allowed the groups to see, and express, their commonality. These examples raise the basic question of why two similar groups of people, motivated by similar hopes, settling in similar circumstances came to such different ends. The short answer seems to be that religion, like gravity simultaneously repelling and attracting, fragmented and solidified communities. The Reformed and the Christian Reformed factions needed each other more than either realized, or admitted. In looking at each other they found their reason for existence. Left to themselves, they had difficulty maintaining a strong sense of identity.

Prinsburg and Friesland owed their existence to the religious tensions in the Netherlands that produced a schism in the 1830s. Economic and social conditions, especially in the borderland areas of the country, inspired a revival which, in turn, led to a secession for the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk in 1834. In rural areas of Groningen and Friesland the Seceders (Afgescheidenen) were often of peasant stock, people who saw the traditions of the farming village under assault. Beginning in 1846, they formed the vanguard of immigration to the United States, following ministers to Holland, Michigan Pella, Iowa, and Sheboygan, Wisconsin. They arrived with an eye for good land, a heart for extended families, and an ear for sound doctrine. With few exceptions they spent their first years in the United States unlearning their greenhorn notions about farming and accumulating modest grubstakes. Prepared for the rigors of pioneer life on the prairies, they headed west to transplant old Dutch village values in American soil.2

As they learned American farming skills, the newcomers also grappled with what it meant to be Dutch Calvinists in the United States. They

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