

Letter of Sjoerd Aukes Sipma

to the

Citizens of Bornwerd

in

Westdongevadeel

Dockum, Wed. B. Schaafsma 1848

Translator: Rev. C. Greenfield

SJOERD AUKES SIPMA

PELLA, IOWA

MARCH 16, 1848

To the combined Farmers and the Teachers of youth at Bornwerd.

Dear Friends!

Having agreed with you when we were with you in Bornwerd to report to you about our trip and about the country to which we went, so I now relate some things to you according to my ability.¹ You know that we left on Easter Monday April 3 (1847). The 7th of April we went into the sea at Lemmer and arrived at Amsterdam the same day. The sea was turbulent, so that we all were sea-sick. At Amsterdam we stayed three days, there we purchased our ship tickets. The 10th of the month we went on to the Helder with a cargo ship from Amsterdam, which brought us on the eleventh to the large ship Pieter Floris. At Helder we lay quietly for eight days, and then on the nineteenth we went into the sea with a total of 311 souls, including sailors and all. You can realize that it was fairly full. Of our departure I know very little. A day before our departure I became ill, and thus had a serious sickness on the sea. It was all a cold - the doctor said - that I had in me a long time, for on the sea nothing remains hidden. After the passing of four weeks fortunately I was again recovered. At sea we had much contrary wind. For fourteen days we lay in the English Channel, but danger

1. In order not to lose its uniqueness we have changed the style as little as possible.

we did not experience at sea, and most of the people were fully healthy. However the croup prevailed among the children, so that eight children died at sea, including the youngest of P.O. Viersen. Thus we tossed about, week in and week out on the great sea (Atlantic Ocean) without ever seeing land. Did we have favorable wind, then it was calm, but usually good weather. That lasted until the 10th of June, then we saw land. Since our captain had not before been in America he partially removed the sails because he was afraid of reefs. But it did not last long when a pilot came down the river and came on board by us. Then the sails were raised and we had a favorable wind so that the 11th of June we came close to the city of Baltimore. There we remained lying until a doctor came on board to determine whether there were any sick. Ships with sick people could not be at the dock. The doctor testified that he had never had contact with such healthy immigrants. Then supervisors came to count the people. The 12th of June we sailed to the dock and we went into the city. I can only scarcely tell you of the new things we saw there.² It is a wealthy commercial city, amazingly large, at the same time being extended on all sides. Most of the houses are of bricks, all of the new ones. The brick is almost the same as those in Friesland, but a little larger and much smoother and nicer. All of us

2. Baltimore is the largest city in the province (State) of Maryland, of which Annapolis, on the Chesapeake Bay, is the capital. It's a beautifully built city, on a bow which reaches landward from the mouth of the Patapsco, and has a harbor, factory, a high school, much business, 14,000 houses and has a population of almost 100,000. One finds here a monument of Washington standing in an obelish of 180 feet beneath the image.

testified that they had never seen such pretty bricks in Holland and Friesland. Most of the houses are four or five stories high, and many have silver door knobs. The dark Negroes do the work. One hardly sees any white workers. The blacks have no rights, and are treated as slaves. I was told that there are ninety thousand Negroes in Baltimore.³

The 14th of June our luggage was taken off our ship, the suit cases had to be opened and examined and after that weighted, with everything found to be in good order. Then our goods were taken to the warehouse of the railroad train. We had to stay in Baltimore five days before we could leave, so on the 17th we left by train for Columbe.⁴ We rode there through hard rocky mountains and also under and through a mountain. The same day we left from Columbe with a canal boat for Holliedesburg,⁵ where we arrived on the 22nd. On the 23rd we left there with the train for Johannstad, arriving

3. We don't at all doubt the truthfulness of the writer, but believe that he was mislead about the number of negroes in Baltimore. According to the small Aardvkkunde (Geography) printed by Canabish in 1843. Baltimore had a population of 95,000, therefore one would have to presuppose that in the city, say of 100,000 people, of each ten nine would be negroes or slaves, which is unlikely. Or could it be that in Canabish's little Aardrykkunde the negroes were not counted among the inhabitants? That would be more probable.

4. Not to be confused with the city Columbus, on the Scioto in the State of Ohio.

5. A small city in Pennsylvania.

the same day. From there we left again with a canal boat for Pittsburg,⁶ a city on the Ohio river a hundred hours from Baltimore, arriving the 25th. The 28th we left Pittsburg on a steamboat for Cincinnati⁷ where we arrived the first of July. The fifth we left the Ohio river to go into the Mississippi⁸ and the sixth we were at St. Louis, a city on the Mississippi, five hundred hours from Pittsburg. There the Holland group waited long enough until all the transients who belonged together had come.

Now I'll tell you a few noteworthy things I saw on our trip. I didn't do this when we went from city to city, because the treatment of the Americans was everywhere almost the same. From Baltimore to Pittsburg it is

6. Pittsburg, in Pennsylvania, on the Ohio, which arose at the converging of the Allegany and the Monongahila rivers. Large ships are built here and there is much commerce. Besides it is the most important manufacturing city in the State, with a University and 35,000 inhabitants.

In Pennsylvania there is also the city, Philadelphia, one of the most attractive cities of the United States at the confluences of the Schuylkil and Delaware rivers. This city has a University, many factories, a museum, an excellent harbor, the mint of the free state, and the bank of the United States completely built with marble. As something remarkable it deserves to have mentioned its renown water works that supplies the entire city with water.

7. Cincinnati is an important manufacturing city of the United States, and the largest city of the western States, with 34,000 inhabitants, who carry on a lively business. She lies on the Ohio river in the State of the same name.

8. The Mississippi is the largest stream of North America. It originates at 50 degrees northern latitude from various lakes and plunges itself after a run of 650 miles, in the gulf of Mexico. It takes in the following rivers in its run: the Missouri, an attractive river which takes its origin in deep mid-America, and again, in the Platte, a fellow-river; the Ohio, originating from the merging of the Alleghany with the Monongehela; the Arkansas, also a very attractive river and the Red river.

very hilly and mountainous and in that area I saw most of the wonders. American inventions (ingenuity) is tremendous. The canals are laid along rivers. Canals cannot be made of rivers because of the prevalence of stone. The canals get their water from the rivers, which always flow. Sometime the rivers flow under the canals. We have also gone with a canal boat under large mountains which were entirely of stone, so that one might say it was impossible with human hands to be made. At Columbus is a bridge over the river requiring twenty-five minutes to cross. From Columbe to Holliedesburg there were a hundred thirty locks in the canal, each one raising seven to eight feet of water. You can imagine then how we rode over the heights. Going from Holliedesburg to Johannstad with the train, first going up five high mountains, then down five mountains, thus declining, and also even with the train going under and through a mountain.⁹ From Johannstad to Pittsburg with the canal boat we had more than a hundred locks that again locked in much water but that always meant a decline. I did not see much farming in that area, because we were usually between mountains. In the valleys between mountains we sometimes saw luscious corn fields and grass-rich flat lands, and horses, cows, sheep and donkeys everywhere in large numbers. The horses are quite large and heavy, as heavy as in Friesland. The cows are mostly all a glaring red with large horns, otherwise also much as in

9. Doubtless they went over the chain of Blue mountains that cuts through from the southwest to the northeast of Pennsylvania. The canal mentioned in the Chesapeake - Ohio canal, forty-seven miles long, and the river, the Ohio, from Pittsburg at the Ohio, to join with Chesapeake Bay. That canal is carved through the chain of the Blue mountains.

Friesland. There are also some without horns. The sheep usually have large horns and long tails, some are without horns. Hogs run all over in large numbers on the street. Dogs are amazingly big and many. Before we came to St. Louis we saw very little farming, but we stayed there a month and a half so that many (of our group) did some work for the farmers. There was also much work at the river¹⁰ on the steam boats. Daily there lay some hundred steam boats at the dock, so that a large number of people had work there earning twelve and a half cents a hour. The Hollanders could not endure that because it was too warm in St. Louis¹¹ and mostly heavy work to do, so it was better at the farmers. They gave a daily wage of about fifty cents and board. You must figure with American cents of which a hundred are like one Holland ryksdaalder. I also worked at the farmers and was able even to save money. I had rented a room in the city for two dollars¹² a month. Farming here is not very neatly done mainly because of the scarcity of laborers. Everything here is a bit roughly done. The corn is always cut; weeds are handled with a horse and small plow. Farmed land is fenced in, the other is not. Most (land) is left in the wild, and anyone is permitted to use it for pasture. The soil is exceptionally good, mostly consisting of three or four feet of dirt. Fertilizer is not used and the products are

10. St. Louis, on the Mississippi is an important commercial center.

11. St. Louis lies at about 38 degrees northerly latitude.

12. One dollar is 2 gulden 50 cents in our money.

abundant, sometime too much so. As much as I've seen it is better here than in Friesland. It's a shame that so much lies wild.

Building in St. Louis is greatly extended by reason of the many imigrants who settle here. In 1848 seventeen hundred houses were built. There are also many factories, all steam driven. Pittsburg is almost black with smoke from the many steam factories.

When the entire group was in St. Louis, Scholte left with a few farmers seeking to find some place that would appeal to most of them. They were gone about four weeks and returned with the decision that we should settle in the State of Iowa. The fourteen of August the first ones left St. Louis, and the twenty-first we left to go to Keokerk, a city on the Mississippi in Iowa, which was laid out for three years, where we arrived the twenty-third. We still had to go by land with wagons fourteen hours west of the Mississippi. We left Keokerk the twenty-sixth and on the thirty-first of August we arrived in Pella. Pella is the name which Scholte gave to the layout for the Hollanders. We were there on the open lands and now our trip was finished. Never did I enjoy myself more than on that trip to North America. We enjoyed many privileges, at the same time we always were healthy. Now everyone had to provide for a dwelling. In our new town there was a loghouse, and Scholte wanted to live in it. The others had to build houses, each family for itself. We all had the same hand work-carpentry. There was enough wood, and also prairie grass which was very good for

roofs.¹³ Some bought claims.¹⁴ Scholte had bought the claims of some thirty Americans, so that there would be no Americans in our midst. In the area newly laid out Americans did not buy land, but with claims they always have the first right to purchase, and if they don't wish to buy, when it's being sold, they can get paid for the claim and the work done. In buying land in the States it costs a dollar and twenty-five cents an acre, that is three gulden twelve and a half cents in Holland money. Four acres make five Friesian "pondematen" (an acre thus is equal to one fourth of a "pondemaat"), but the States don't sell a smaller parcel than forty acres (fifty "pondemaat"). This is the same in all the United States. Land is divided into sections, one section is 640 acres, a half is 320, a fourth 160, an eighth 80 and a sixteenth 40 acres. Land is very reasonable, but costs much to bring under cultivation.

I must yet say something about the birds. There are many birds in Friesland that I don't see here, such as: the stork, the cuckoo, the green clover, the godwit and others that I haven't seen here. Ducks, geese, swans are here in large numbers, also chickens and prairie-chickens by the hundreds, which are a little smaller than the common hens and do not have tails. Also here: partridges, turkeys and peacocks, besides a multitude of

13. Prairie in America means that stretched out area of wild lying, high grass growing on the plains, at times the height of a Netherlands el. Prairie grass is therefore that grass which grows on the plains. Prairie really is the same as pasture land.

14. As I understand it, it's a kind of right, by which one always has the first choice on the land, so that the land may not be sold without the agreement of the owner of the claim.

other birds entirely unknown to me. There are a few wild animals in the forests, but savage animals, not at all. There are two kinds of wolves: the woods-wolves and the prairie-wolves. I've seen two prairie-wolves and also four deer. Snakes are also here, but not large ones. Poisonous snakes are mostly in warmer areas, and winter is here rather long and rather cold. Since the last of November until now we've almost always had frost. During the day it is not extremely cold, since the sun here in the winter is much warmer than in Friesland. The month of January was exceptionally good. We've had very little snow. At the shortest day the sun sets at 4:37 and rises at 7:23. The longest day here is so much shorter than in Friesland as the shortest day is longer.

The laborers' wages are good here, by the day it's 50 to 75 cents (one gulden twenty-five cents to one gulden eighty-seven and one half cents), by the month in the winter 8 dollars (20 gulden), and in the summer 10, 11 to 12 dollars (25, 27 1/2 to 30 gulden). Food is a good buy. Flour costs 2 cents (5 cents) a pound, white beans 50 cents a bushel (one gulden and twenty cents) - a bushel weighs 65 pounds -, bacon 2 to 3 cents (5 to 7 1/2 cents), meat about the same, butter 6 cents (15 cents), turnips 12 1/2 cents (a good 31 cents), potatoes from 20 to 30 cents (50 to 75 cents) a bushel. I don't say that's how it is in America, but that's how it is where we are, for it's not at all the same everywhere. We bake our own bread. There's no rye bread here, only wheat bread. The pound is a bit lighter here than in Friesland, and the el(yard) is longer.

The Americans in these areas and are mostly Methodists, ¹⁵ but what their feelings are I don't really know, but I believe there are many good people among them.

The church building in Pella is as good as ready, and the children already go every day to school. The state has given an attractive gift to the community of Pella. We're no longer strangers in America: we all have citizenship like the Americans. Immediately on our arrival we registered with the State, in order to live as good citizens in Iowa. Citizenship, which otherwise is given after the passing of five years, was immediately granted us by the State, so that we could have the right to vote.¹⁶

In regard to farming I can't say much, for we came here in the fall. It deals mainly in corn, wheat, oats, buck-wheat, beans, potatoes and rape. Of potato sickness we have no evidence here. One cow costs about 10 to 15 dollars (25 to 37 1/2 gulden) one sheep 2 dollars (5 gulden), fat hogs 2 cents (5 cents) a pound. Horses are quite expensive, but here many oxen are used. For prairie farming they always use oxen. The soil here is exceptionally excellent, one can't easily estimate it too highly.

15. In no country in the world are there more religious sects than in the United States of North America. One finds among the Methodists, of whom there are great many, honest people, but also excessive fanatics. In their religious gatherings each one speaks as the spirit moves him, so that in such gatherings not seldom do annoying scenes take place.

16. In the United States every citizen is entitled to vote, and has the right, through voting, to be named to the highest positions. Nobility is not acknowledged: not birth but actual ability alone determines the worth of a person.

This winter our home burned down, our furnishings we partially got out, but we won't be required to eat less, for I earn good wages here. At first I worked for Scholte for 25 cents (one gulden and twenty-five cents) a day until winter set in. When our home burned down, there was an American who had built a new house. When I happened to see him, he said that I should just get his oxen and wagon and go into his house, which then I also did. Now I'm also working for him during this winter for 8 dollars (20 gulden) in the month, besides free use of the house and free fuel, so that during this winter I have more than our means of support.¹⁷ I bought a grown hog, in addition we now have two piglets, and one I purchased which was born in late summer, so now in all we have four in number. If we remain healthy then in the spring we can buy a cow and two sheep. That way we'll have a complete farm. Pasture land is free everywhere except where it's fenced off. It's a shame there are not more people here: land and work is here. Oh! how often I think of the the poor people in Friesland when we are sitting to eat. Bacon and meat we eat three times a day, just like the American custom. A laborer with a fair size family who works here the entire year, three days a week has a good subsistence,¹⁸ and the farmer gets along very well, for he

17. That's different than in the Netherlands! How many workmen here would starve to death if they didn't get support? O, my Fatherland!

18. That's different here! A workmen whose marriage is blessed (?) with a large number of children, even if he has worked every day, becomes unavoidably poverty stricken. That's actual truth. A workman here earns, with everything, 50 cents a day. There are only a few who earn more - as, three gulden in the week. Just imagine to yourself a family of five or six small children, and you would have to admit that we have not expressed ourselves too strongly.

had no expenses except the labor-wages, and what more he pays out is insignificant. O, I'm so glad we're in America.¹⁹

We're located at 42 degrees northerly latitude, between two rivers, the Main and the Schonk rivers. They both flow into the Mississippi right next to the State of Illinois. They are beginning to make the Main river navigable. That would give the grains here a better price, and make cheaper what we don't raise. By wagon it takes forty hours now to get our grain to the Mississippi. We are seven hundred hours from Baltimore.

Of the Friesians who came together there have died Jacob Slot, Mrs. Van Wopke de Haan, two children of G.v.d. Wert, three children of Dirk Posthumus, one child of P. Viersen and one child of Tjebbe Beintema. All the others are still well. The Friesians who have land, have it next to eachother, about a half hour from Pella.

Now I'll end this. When I write again I'll report things better, since I now still know so little because we've been here such a short time. Now I want to assure you that we are in the best of health and that we like it here very much. Our heartfelt wish is that you may receive this also in

19. And we are glad with him, - if we may expres ourselves that way, - that he in time escaped poverty. Sjoord Aukes Sipma was a virtuous and industrious young man, who left his Fatherland not because of religious principles - as many claimed, but to achieve an honest living. He had taken the position, to marry a girl from his home place, and seeing no chance to break loose from poverty if his marriage would be blessed with children, he came to the decision to leave his Fatherland in time with his young wife, and migrate to America, where he now, as his letter indicates, with his hands can not only earn a subsistence, but even be able to save some money, while many laborers in the Netherlands sometimes with less nourishment than given to hogs must be satisfied.

good health. Especially greet our elderly Father and our sister Ietje - if they are still living and all other brothers and sisters. Now I have a request of you, Teacher of Youth at Bornwerd, that you write the content of this letter to our Uncle and our Mother at Engwierum, Jan Hendriks Loomstra and Frouwkje Ruurds de Vries, so that they may know we are all well.

Thereby you do us a big service. Greetings to you all, farmers of Bornwerd and Teachers of Youth! I would be so pleased to get a letter from you: who is living and who not, how it is with the potatoes, and other things. Also, I would like to have the address of Roelof Kroodsma. If the postage isn't too high, then we expect a reply very shortly; but when you do write prepay the postage for crossing the ocean, otherwise it won't get here. You can learn the costs from P.H. Viersen and also by Riermer Boersma of Birdaard who have written to this place. Then I'm eager to know if it is well with my elderly Father, Brother and Sisters. H. Vierzen has written a letter, but not a single word about our family in it. That was hard on me. I did understand from it that they are still living. Greetings to all!

Sjoerd Aukes Sipma

Jantje de Vries

My address is:

Sjoerd Aukes Sipma

Pella, Marion County, Iowa

U.S. of N. America