Western Migrations and the LeCocq Family

Liesbeth ten Hoeve Almendarez

The LeCocq family, led by its patriarch, Jean Francois (J. F.), emigrated from the Netherlands to the United States in 1847 as part of the Pella colony in Iowa. In 1872, J. F.'s son Frank Sr. moved his family to Orange City, a new colony in Sioux County in northwestern Iowa. In turn, Frank Jr. led his family to Douglas County, South Dakota, in 1882, helping to start a new colony. Finally, Frank Jr.'s son Ralph LeCocq, a lawyer, moved to Lynden, Washington, in 1914, his parents and brothers following him in 1917.

The LeCocq story is a reminder that migration and community building have been central to American regional and religious histories. Frontier families picked up and moved regularly, often because their farm had failed. They also moved for opportunity, drawn by visions of cheaper or better land on a new frontier. Some people simply had wanderlust. This is not just a story about individuals and families, however, even if it often is told that way in American lore. The desire to start new colonies and build communities also inspired immigrants like the Dutch Reformed.

All these factors can be seen in the first four generations of the LeCocq family in America. By the 1910s, some of the great grandchildren of the first pioneers had left colonizing behind, gone to high school and university, and found work in a variety of professions.

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Immigration to "Amerika"

The LeCocq family story starts not in Iowa or even the Netherlands, but in France. J. F.'s ancestors migrated from France to Belgium and then the Netherlands. Johannes LeCocq (also spelled LeCox, Lecoc, or Le Coq) was born in 1756 in Attenhoven, Belgium. He married Johanna Huysman in 1798. Their son, Jean Francois (J. F.) LeCocq, was born in 1805. The family moved to Amsterdam in 1806, where it joined the French Reformed Church. J. F. became a modestly successful merchant. In 1824, he married Cornelia "Neeltje" Heere, and they soon started a family. [1]

Financial and religious struggles arose in the Netherlands in the 1830s and 1840s. High taxes, high rents, flooding, diseases among livestock and people, severe winters, and crop failure led to poverty and food shortages. King Willem I placed more state control over the national church, clergy, and training. He also renamed the church from the *Gereformeerde Kerk* to the *Hervormde Kerk* (both mean "Reformed"). The religious changes led to the *Afscheiding* (separation) in 1834, when traditionalist Reformed clergy and congregations seceded from the national church.[2] The state persecuted them, fining and jailing their leaders, until Willem II granted them toleration in 1841.

The desire for religious freedom and economic opportunity inspired some seceders to leave for "Amerika" in the 1840s. Rev. Hendrik Pieter Scholte led a group that organized a "Society for Emigration to North America." Among the 800 people who had signed up by March 1847 were J. F. LeCocq, Neeltje, and their six children.[3] J. F. was the Society's treasurer.

In April, most of the colonists boarded the *Pieter Floris* in Amsterdam. J. F. was a leader among them. Scholte, who had left for the U.S. earlier, put him in charge of the *Pieter Floris* group. Some 20 emigrants died on the difficult Atlantic journey. The ship arrived in Baltimore in June, where the colonists met Scholte and the rest of the group and then started their journey westward.

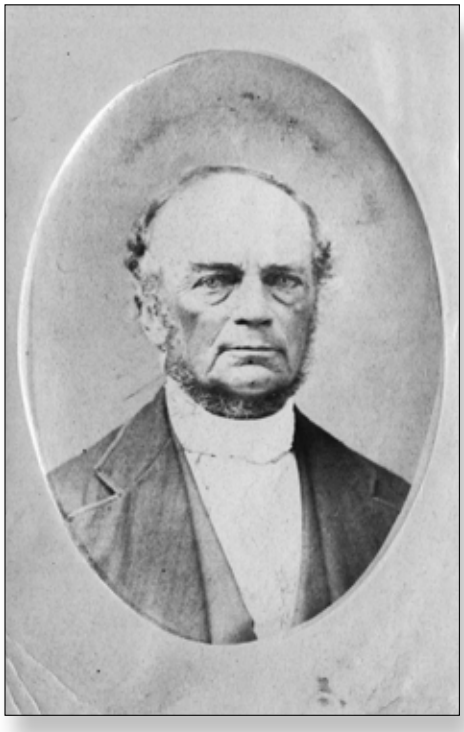


Photo of Jean Francois LeCocq (1805-1888) in 1880. Courtesy of tthe Northwestern College Archives.

The colonists took trains and canal boats to Pittsburgh. They preferred the familiar canal boats to the bumpy railroad cars. From Pittsburgh they took a steamboat on the Ohio River, arriving in St. Louis in July. A small party of men left with Scholte to look for a place to settle, while most of the group suffered in the heat and unsanitary living conditions in St. Louis.[4] The colonists received word about their new home after several weeks. They went by steamboat up the Mississippi River to Keokuk and then traveled 120 miles by horse and wagon to Pella, Iowa. They arrived in their new home in August.[5] Scholte had chosen the name, meaning "city of refuge."

The LeCocq Family in Iowa

The LeCocqs built a log cabin and began farming just outside of Pella. J. F. hoped that in America he would have more time for leisure than in his old life in the business world of Amsterdam. Frontier life was anything but leisurely, however![6]

The first winter was terribly cold, and the spring of 1848 brought a tornado that ruined many of Pella's temporary houses. LeCocq claimed 160 more acres in 1848. He owned two horses, a wagon, and some cows, geese, and doves.[7] He offered a man, his wife, and their children room and board in exchange for working for him. In 1849, J. F. LeCocq started adding on to their small cabin to create a double cabin.[8] That same year, he faced serious setbacks. He lost eight cows. The children and calves shared the milk from the remaining cows. If any was left over, the family used it to make butter to sell. They sold the eggs from their chickens to buy staple foods like bacon and wheat.[9]

The LeCocqs' pride made them reluctant to admit to family and friends in the Netherlands that they were struggling. At first, Neeltje hated living in America, with all the hardships it brought. She told a friend that it had been easier for her to buy expensive meat in Amsterdam than the scraps of bacon, meat, and even bread available in Iowa.[10] In 1850, J. F. LeCocq's estate was worth only $540 (about $19,000 today).[11]

As though living in a new land were not difficult enough, the Pella colonists discovered that Scholte had overcharged many of them (including J. F.) for their land. This news led to unrest, and Scholte resigned from his position as the settlement's leader.[12]

Like many farmers, J. F. and Neeltje depended on their children for labor. Jan and Frank, the two oldest boys, started a store in Pella to support the family.[13] They also helped

Painting of early Pella from an unknown itinerant artist. Courtesy of the Pella Historical Society.

The store opened by Jan and Frank LeCocq. Frank is standing in the background of the image. Courtesy of the Pella Historical Society.

their arthritic father do much of the farm work, especially when he became ill in 1853.[14] The younger children began making and selling cigars. Jan and Frank soon took over their idea and added it to their business.[15]

By 1855 the family's hard work started showing results, leading to an improving financial situation.[16] In 1860, J. F. was worth $3,600 (approximately $125,000 today). [17] J. F. passed away at home in 1888. Some of his descendants stayed in Pella; others took up his community building impulse on new frontiers.

J. F.'s son Jan LeCocq (1826–1911), for example, married Rinske vander Kolk (1837–1894) in 1869. They had four children. He stayed in Pella the rest of his life, selling cigars. He wrote long letters to his brother Frank, who migrated to Orange City in 1872.

Jan's letters reflected how his faith helped him endure both the tribulations of frontier life in the 1840s and 1850s and adapting to American culture as Pella became prosperous in the decades that followed. "O how fortunate it is for those who love God and feel that they do not belong here," he wrote in 1896. We but "are guests and strangers" on "a journey to the Heavenly fatherland."[18] These were common religious sentiments in this era. For Jan, they also likely reflected the challenges of the immigrant experience. In 1899, when his Pella church got a new pastor, he observed that "young pastors" in America were different from "old Dutchmen" like himself. America perhaps never truly became his home, but his faith left him sanguine. "Although the American ways still haven't gotten into me," he explained, "as long as they [clergy] are in the vineyard of the Lord fruitfully working to win souls for Jesus then causes or habits make little difference."[19] Jan died in 1911.[20]

Frank LeCocq (1828–1907), Jan's brother and business partner, married Maria van Gorkum in 1856.[21] Maria's family had immigrated to Pella in 1849. Maria's older sister, Sophia, married a man from Pella, and they and their children later moved to Oregon and California. Her twin sister, Theodora, married Theodorus, another of the LeCocq boys, and stayed in Pella. Frank and Maria had six daughters and one son (Frank Jr.).

Unlike Jan, Frank chose to start over again. As Pella's population grew

Frank LeCocq Sr. (1828-1907). Courtesy of Northwest College Archives.

land prices increased and some farmers had to rent. It would have been difficult for Frank's son and grandsons to buy farms. This was a common pattern. When frontiers became settled communities, free land disappeared or grew expensive, replicating economic conditions in Europe and eastern parts of the United States.

Opportunity came for Frank in 1870. A group from Pella decided to form a new settlement in Sioux County in northwest Iowa. (Other Hollanders were settling in Kansas and Nebraska.) Henry Hospers, one of the original Pella colonists, led the Sioux County colonization association. He had worked as a

Henry Hospers. Courtesy of the Pella Historical Society.

schoolteacher and land surveyor and become an attorney. He recruited Dutch Americans like Frank, getting them to commit money to the project, and traveled to the Netherlands to recruit more settlers. Hospers also served as the group's advisor, real estate agent, and lawyer, and he was the Iowa State Board of Immigration's commissioner to the Netherlands.[22]

Frank was attracted to the idea and joined the group. In 1872, he moved his family to the new town of Orange City.[23] The new settlement lay beyond the railroad lines and even wagon tracks, as had Pella. News of Sioux County's fertile soil spread—a testimony to Hospers's efforts. More families from Pella and other established Iowa towns soon settled in Sioux County, filling Orange City and forming other Dutch towns in Sioux County. The early years were difficult. Grasshoppers plagued farmers in the 1870s. For those who endured the grasshoppers, sometimes with loans from Hospers, the reward eventually came.

Frank prospered in Orange City and became a community leader. He served four years as county treasurer and four as county recorder, and the new Reformed Church there chose him as a deacon. It was not only opportunity that drew Frank, but the impulse to build.

The LeCocq Family in Harrison, South Dakota

Although Sioux County was flourishing in 1881, some Dutch settlers in Sioux County began looking further West again, this time to South Dakota. Land agents for the railroads played a role, promoting South Dakota with pamphlets, as did Dutch immigrant newspapers. A few men from Sioux County had been to South Dakota, trading with the Lakota for horses. Rising land prices in Iowa and a new generation of young farmers also "stirred the hunger for 'free land.'" So too did recent federal laws designed to get more public lands into settlers' hands, particularly on the arid parts of the Plains where a dry climate meant fewer bushels of grain per acre and farmers needed more land to get an adequate crop. The Timber Culture Act (1873), for example, addressed this challenge by adding 160 acres to the 160 allowed by the Homestead Act (1862), if homesteaders planted trees on their land.[24]

Another motivation was the desire to start a new colony. Some of the men looking to relocate again "were 'community engineers,'" historian Brian Beltman has argued, "persons who needed to be participating in the establishment of new settlements in part to re-experience the satisfaction of that building process and in part to perfect that which had already been done once or twice."[25] It makes sense to include the LeCocq family in this group of "community engineers." J. F. had been such an engineer for Pella, as had Frank for Orange City, and now one of Frank's children in South Dakota.

Frank's only son, Frank Jr. (1858–1930), was part of the South Dakota exploration party, alongside D. Vanden Bos and L. Vander Meer. The men first set out in 1881, but after little success they returned home and shared what little they had learned. The small group headed out again in January and February of 1882.

The second trip was more eventful. "[With] prayer and thanks to God they had their first meal on that vast open prairie," Frank Jr. recalled. "Just as the men were about to resume their journey, one of them, looking into the distance, exclaimed: 'See what's coming yonder!' A starving pack of wolves, attracted by the smell of frying ham, was approaching." The wolves kept their distance

Frank LeCocq, Jr. and family in their car, a Maxwell, in the early 1900s. The text on the photo says, "Father, Mother, sons Eddie, Frank & Irwin. RBLeCocq." Courtesy of the Northwestern College Archives.

and the men stayed calm, not shooting at them.[26] Later in the trip, the men got lost in a fog that turned into a snowstorm. Luckily, they found shelter in an abandoned Indian dwelling. On a different day, the men thoughtlessly emptied their pipes in dried grass, which started a fire. The fire sent a group of angry Native Americans in pursuit of them for burning their horses' food.

Despite these dramatic events, the men found a location with grassland perfect for farming. Dutch farmers from northwest Iowa quickly settled in Douglas County, South Dakota, starting a new colony and forming the town of New Orange in 1882, renamed Harrison in 1885. Other Dutch colonies, such as New Holland and Grand View, started in the same era. One of the latter's founders was Peter Hospers, son of Henry. The colonizing institutions that had brought the Dutch from Pella to Sioux County now brought them to Douglas County. Peter Hospers, like his father, was a real estate agent, selling land to settlers. By 1910 he had moved to a booming Los Angeles, where he again worked as a real estate agent. When he died in 1929, however, his family laid his body to rest in Armour, Douglas County, South Dakota.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Frank Jr. thus was part of a network of entrepreneurs and institutions, as well as an entrepreneur in his own right. Taking advantage of being in the group that chose Douglas County, Frank Jr. claimed land and built a house for his family before other Dutch settlers got there. His farm was just east of Harrison. He married Rhoda Brinks in 1883, shortly after her family moved to Harrison. Rhoda was born into a Dutch immigrant family in Zeeland, Michigan, and her family had moved from there to Iowa and then to South Dakota.

Frank Jr., his parents (Frank Sr. and Maria), his siblings, and his aunt Christina (1842–1933) were instrumental to the success of Harrison. Until the construction of a house of worship, Harrison's Reformed Church held services in the LeCocq home. Once built, the church also served as the public school. Frank Jr.'s youngest sister, Sophia, was the first instructor of the school.[27] Cornelia, Frank Jr.'s oldest sister, owned a millinery store in the town.[28] Frank Sr. was a charter member of the church as well as an elder, a deacon, and the clerk. Together, father and son started one of the first businesses in Harrison, *LeCocq Banking, Loans, and Real Estate*, selling land. By the end of 1883, settlers had claimed all the land around Harrison.

Not all the LeCocq family members from Orange City who joined Frank Jr. shared his enthusiasm. His mother, Maria, feared Native Americans.[29] The Indian Wars were over on the northern Plains by 1883, as Native Americans such as the Lakota had been forced onto reservations. They sometimes hunted or grazed their horses off reservations, as treaty-mandated provisions from the federal government often were late or inadequate. Despite her fears, however, Maria gave bread, meat, or milk to anyone who came to her door in need.

The early years were difficult in South Dakota. The Dutch settlers discovered that Douglas County had been organized fraudulently. A man named Walter H. Brown had petitioned to the state for the organization of the county, showing over 50 signatures of supposedly legal voters. Most of the signatures were forged or fake. Unaware of the fraud, the state approved the petition, and Brown appointed himself and his friends as county commissioners. They wrote and sold fake warrants to earn money for themselves.[30] Douglas County residents took Brown and his gang to court when they discovered the fraud. Defeating them took years of litigation. Immigrants from the Netherlands with no experience on the Plains struggled more than families like the LeCocqs, who came from Iowa.[31] Climate also played havoc in

Women at Harrison Home. "Grandmother LeCocq, Aunt Cornelia and ?. Harrison, [South Dakota] home." Courtesy of the Northwestern College Archives.

South Dakota, with years of drought from the late 1880s to the mid-1890s. Some Dutch settlers left for places like Prinsburg, Minnesota, and Manhattan, Montana. Churches took up benevolent offerings for suffering farm families in South Dakota.

Frank Sr. passed away in Harrison in 1907, survived by his adult children and wife. His funeral was one of the largest the town had ever held.[32] His pioneering legacy lived on through Frank Jr., also a beloved community leader in the region.

Frank Jr.'s influence can be seen in the many roles he played. Not just a farmer, he was also a banker and a county commissioner (1882–1889). He served as a Railroad Commissioner for six years and was the first representative of Douglas County in the state legislature (1889). He was cut from the same cloth as his father and grandfather.

During his time in the state legislature, Frank Jr. met Sitting Bull, the Lakota leader best known for his role at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.[33] Sitting Bull and some of his followers had escaped to Canada after Little Big Horn but returned and surrendered to the U.S. Army in 1881. His story is a reminder of the role played by Dutch settlers in the region's larger history. Occasional encounters and fears like Maria's aside, opportunity for settlers like the LeCocqs meant loss for Sitting Bull and his people. Frank Jr.'s children grew up as the frontier became a settled region. This history quickly became myth and memory for them.

Frank Jr.'s boys enjoyed fishing, hunting, adventure, and mischief, like other frontier children. They occasionally visited their cousins in Pella, two generations past the frontier era, where extended family still lived. Around 1903, the LeCocq brothers and other schoolboys got the idea to start a band. Frank III played the alto horn and Ralph played their father's old cornet. Since there was no music teacher, the boys bought instruction books and taught themselves to play. They eventually became good enough to hold a concert for the whole town.

LeCocq Family's Second Home in Harrison, S.D. Courtesy of the Northwestern College Archives.

The settlers transplanted cultural institutions to their new home. Chief among them were churches: Harrison's Reformed congregation in 1883 and a Christian Reformed rival in 1884. By 1900, there were over 200 families, two Reformed congregations and three Christian Reformed ones in the area. Though there was no music teacher for Frank and Ralph, there eventually was a Christian school, the Harrison Classical Academy. It was modeled on the academy in Orange City (which eventually became Northwestern College), started by Henry Hospers. The Harrison Academy opened in 1902 and seems to have been sponsored by members of the area's Reformed churches.[34]

Frank Jr. made sure that his sons got an education. The oldest six boys graduated from the Harrison academy under B. D. Dykstra, its principal from 1902 to 1906. In a letter to Nelson Nieuwenhuis, an archivist at Northwestern College, Dykstra later wrote that "the two oldest sons, Frank and Ralph, were in that historic first group at the Academy. They were young men with magnificent capacities. You will probably never find such a family with such high average ability."[35]

Frank Jr. emphasized the importance of education in a letter he wrote to his two oldest sons in 1906 during

Hunting Prairie Chickens. Ralph, Frank, and "Old Ben." Courtesy of the Northwestern College Archives.

their first year at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. "I would give all I have to see you happy and successful in your lives," he told them, "and would lay down my life to save that of my boys." In turn, the boys' minds had to be focused on their work. "Girls on the brain and study will not go together," their father declared.[36]

The boys' hard work and their father's dedication paid off in the 1910s. All of the LeCocq boys had successful careers. Frank III and Irwin became city engineers; Charles went into civil engineering; and Marion, John, and Edward became doctors. Gideon and Ralph became lawyers.[37]

By 1910, the frontier era in Harrison had passed. The railroad had come to nearby Corsica, six miles to the east. Some people and businesses moved from Harrison to Corsica as a result. Today, the once rival Reformed and Christian Reformed congregations are Harrison Community Church, part of both denominations, using their two buildings on a three-month rotation cycle.

Class photo of the Harrison Academy students. Courtesy of the Northwestern College Archives. Among the members of the class were a future dentist, engineer, and merchant and two future teachers and lawyers. Courtesy of the Northwestern College Archives.

The LeCocqs in Lynden, Washington

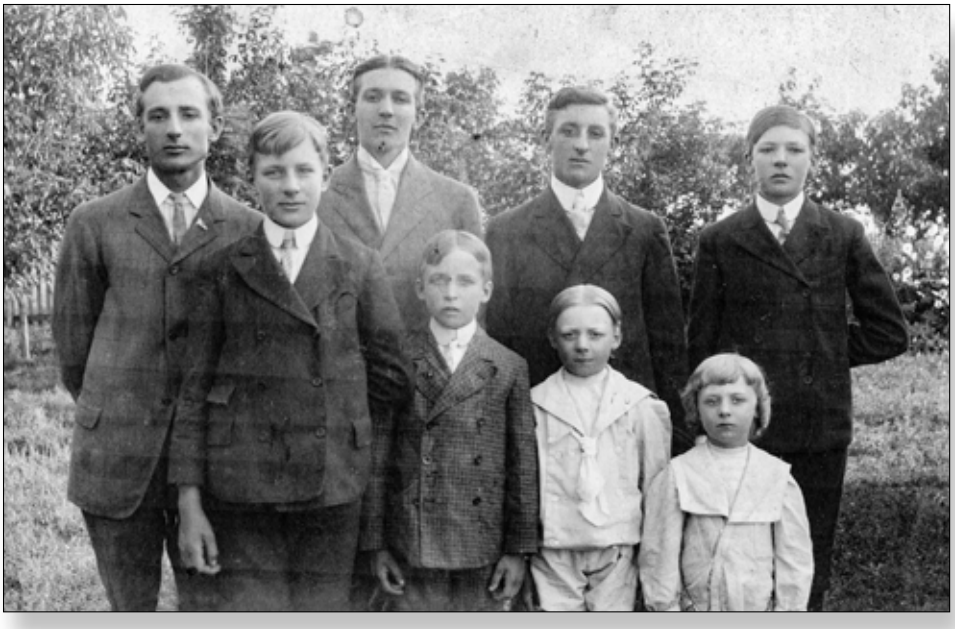
The story of the fourth generation of the LeCocq family in America was different, as suggested by the careers of Frank Jr.'s sons. Their "frontiers" were not founding new towns and farming on the Great Plains but being first-generation university students and white collar professionals.

Ralph Brinks LeCocq (1887–1984), Frank Jr.'s second son, is a good example. He went to Macalester College and Hope College and graduated from the University of Iowa. He then studied law at the University of Michigan, graduating in 1912. After working for two years in Armour, South Dakota, Ralph took a job as the only lawyer in Lynden, Washington. His father, mother, and brothers joined him there in 1917, the two youngest boys graduating from Lynden High School.[38]

Lynden was home to another Dutch colony. It had been a fading lumber town in the mid-1890s due to an economic depression and the lack of a railroad line. Dutch Americans and Dutch immigrants helped revitalize Lynden, migrating there from the late 1890s to the start of World War I. Railroad company land agents recruited settlers, published brochures, and marketed land. The Dutch settlers saw economic potential in the soil, manufacturing shingles, and accessible markets. They spread the word to Dutch communities on the Plains and in the Midwest. Dutch farmers migrated there from all over North America and the Netherlands to grow fruits and vegetables and start dairy farms.[39] Ralph thus move to an existing Dutch community in Lynden, not as part of its founding, as his forebears had in Iowa and South Dakota.

The story of the Dutch in Lynden, as in Pella, Orange City, and Harrison, was one of chain migration (familial, ethnic, and religious) and community building, not just the movement of individuals. Lynden was different, however. In the early 1900s it was in

Harrison Reformed Church and Harrison Academy in the background. "Harry Markus and I painting the church. We were 18 yrs old then." Courtesy of the Northwestern College Archives.



The eight LeCocq brothers in 1906. Courtesy of the Northwestern College Archives.

its second stage of evolution from a new frontier to a settled region. Ralph helped Lynden grow through his work as a lawyer. His father, Frank Jr., served as a justice of the peace and police judge in Lynden until his death in 1930. His brother Irwin became the first Dutch American mayor of Lynden in 1948.

Ralph was a well-respected lawyer, providing over 50 years of service to Lynden, including 25 as city attorney.[40] He owned a farm that he named *Buitenzorg* ("place of no worry" or "peaceful place"). The name suggests a nostalgic retreat from the busyness of his legal practice. Ralph raised beef and dairy cattle. In the 1930s, he promoted vaccination of cattle for brucellosis and experimented by cross-breeding Angus cows with an imported Brahmin bull. Farming was a post-frontier avocation for him, perhaps a way of remaining connected to his frontier roots. He also hunted, hiked, traveled, and mountain climbed. This was quite different from the risks, struggles, and stresses faced by the first three generations of the LeCocq family on frontier farms in Iowa and South Dakota.

Ralph outlived his seven brothers, passing away in 1984. He donated records from his family and the frontier era on the Plains to the Northwestern College archives in Orange City, a sign of the strong ties that remained for him in South Dakota and Iowa. The immigrant frontier was memory for him, rooted in a mix of boyhood experience and stories told by his parents and grandparents. By 1984, for most people, even his own children and grandchildren, it had become history.

Conclusions

The first four generations of the LeCocqs in America had migrated from the Netherlands to Dutch immigrant colonies in Pella, Iowa (1847); Orange City, Iowa (1872); Harrison, South Dakota (1882); and Lynden, Washington (1914). In each place, they proved to be reliable community leaders.

The LeCocq story illustrates the frontier cycle that historians of the United States have described: frontiers became settled regions and subsequent generations sought new frontiers. The family story also suggests how the process of building immigrant communities evolved over three generations, relying less on religious visionaries like Scholte and more on networks, businesses, and state offices—even if fathers often passed the a pioneering impulse to their sons.

Finally, the LeCocq story is one of Americanization and becoming middle class and educated. J. F., a businessman in Amsterdam, had become a frontier farmer in Pella, Iowa, in the 1840s. A century later, his great grandson Ralph, who grew up in frontier South Dakota, was a lawyer in Lynden, Washington, who operated a hobby farm as an avocation.

Ralph LeCocq at his home in Lynden, Washington. Courtesy of the Northwestern College Archives.

Endnotes

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5. Stellingwerff, 84.
6. Stellingwerff, 279.
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8. Stellingwerff, 279.
9. Stellingwerff, 315.
10. Stellingwerff, 363–364.
11. Entry for LeCocq in the United States Federal Census of 1850 (accessed on Ancestry.com).
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33. "LeCocqs as Founders."
34. The history of the Harrison Academy is hazy. It existed for four years (1902–1906) under Dykstra; he seems to have reopened it for several more years two decades later (1923–1928). Then another teacher ran it until the early 1930s. See an essay by his son, D. Ivan Dykstra, given at the AADAS conference in 1985: "The Harrison Academy," https://dutch-americans.org/past-conferences-proceedings/dutch-westward-migration-northwestern-college-orange-city-iowa-1985/ (accessed 12 August 2021).
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