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**“UNCOVERING THE ODYSSEY OF 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY JESUIT IMMIGRANT  
ARNOLD DAMEN S.J.--FROM THE LOW COUNTRIES TO CHICAGO (1815-  
1837)”**

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**Introduction**

*“I have no doubt that you will be eagerly awaiting the story of my travels, so I hurry to get them to you quickly.”*

These are not my words, I'm sure you didn't come all the way here to hear about my eight-hour flight from Amsterdam to O'Hare International Airport – even though the onboard entertainment wasn't too bad. No, these words belonged to Arnold Damen, the founding father of the Church of the Holy Family and Saint Ignatius College and my fellow Dutchman. Not long after he first came to the United States in the fall of 1837 and he was settled – for the moment – at the Saint Stanislaus Seminary near Florissant, Missouri, he wrote a letter with an extended account of his travels to his parents, brothers and sisters in Leur, Noord-Brabant. This is a province in the Netherlands where I myself am from too.

Now, you probably know Father Damen was a Jesuit missionary who built this school and the Holy Family church and had an avenue in Chicago named after him. But his Dutch roots and forming years in the Low Countries are perhaps less familiar to you. Today, I will tell you more about that, but before I dive into Damen's youth, the topic I was invited to talk about here today, I would like to start at the end of his adolescence, when he was 22- years- old and embarked on the three- month journey. Naturally the trip included a lot of with first times and new impressions. So, unlike me, Father Damen actually, did encounter some adventures on his way, which he could boast about to his audience. I would like to talk you through some highlights of his travel report. Not only because, in a way, I am currently retracing them, but also because they are quite colorful and are extracted from a rare ego document. This is one

of the few sources in which the actual voice of father Damen himself echoes. It is therefore one of the best ways to get to know our protagonist a bit better right at the start of this evening that revolves around him.

### **1837 travels**

After he had said his goodbyes to his family in the township of Leur at the end of August 1837, Arnold Damen first traveled to the residence of the Society of Jesus in Belgium. In Antwerp, he was able to mentally prepare for the long journey that was ahead of him and his five companions. *“We meditated for an hour every day, and remained silent all day long. We even weren’t allowed to go out without leave. That was a great fortune for us, one that the missionaries in the years before did not have. We were able to prepare for receiving the strike of death calmly and with confidence, in the case it would please the Divine Providence to order the sea to swallow us.”*

His time in Paris, his next destination, he appreciated much less. To Damen the City of Light was nothing short of the City of Sin. *“This city of which I have so often been told about, was portrayed to me as the seat of wickedness and as a purgatory. Unfortunately, I had to feel the pain when I saw it was true what I was told. One does not see the slightest sign of religion here. I was always overwhelmed by a sensitive sadness when I saw such a multitude of mortals who, either by lack of knowledge of religion or by their own ungodliness, [...] walk with eagerness to their eternal destruction.”*

Spending seven days in Paris must have felt as hitting rock bottom. *“Nothing was able to pick me up, nowhere, if ever, have I been as pained as in this city.”* But, fortunately this feeling of anguish was relieved when his party visited the palace of Versailles. *“I should send you a special letter to give you an idea of the enchanting beauties, beautiful paintings, delicious statues that are so numerous that I cannot name you. It is impossible for me to tell you in detail everything I saw in the old beautiful palace of Louis XIV.”*

After Paris, they were off to harbor Havre-de-Grâce in Le Havre, a city in the north of France. When Damen saw the boat that would bring him oversees, he was filled with joy because he

was very eager to leave. Finally, on the 26th of September 1837 his party of five departed, together with a great number of ‘fortune-seekers’, as he called the other European migrants. On having to leave Europe, he wrote to his parents: *“Do not believe that a tear rolled out of my eyes at the eternal farewell to my homeland, of all that is sweet and dear to me. No, but we did sing a hymn to greet Europe for the last time.”* A few sea miles later, his delight must have weakened a bit as he had to *“fly upstairs to the deck to greet the sea with a restitution of my stomach.”* The weather out on the ocean remained stormy for most of the sea journey, which at the time took a month to six weeks, depending on the wind. At one time the ship was covered completely with waves. This forced the company to stay belowdecks, and made Damen feel like a prisoner, who *“desires nothing more than to be released from his Detention.”* This, and the curses of the sailors that could be heard all day, led him to conclude: *“Beloved parents, I do not believe that I was born to be a sailor.”*

The letter with the story of his voyage also contains first impressions of the US. New York, he said, *“has nothing extraordinary, and I was affected by the poverty of the churches of this city.”* He did, however, like what he saw in Philadelphia, which he deemed *“one of the richest, neatest and cleanest cities in the United States that far surpasses New York. Religion is practiced here with more splendor and dedication than in the latter.”* After Philadelphia, he travelled to Pittsburgh, and went on the river Ohio to Cincinnati. After two more weeks, on November 20th, Damen and his company arrived at their final destination: the house of the Order of the Society of Jesus in Florissant, where he later would be ordained. There, *“Father Krijnen and father De Leeuw were no less in ecstasy as I was to be able to embrace another fellow Dutchman.”* Both fathers actually, were not only fellow Dutchmen, they were from the South of the Netherlands, just like he was. To be precise, from the province of Noord-Brabant. It is not unthinkable this made their embrace just a bit warmer. With the greeting of two other men from Noord-Brabant, we return to Damen’s origins.

### **Aim for this talk**

There exists a biography of Father Damen, written by his fellow Jesuit Reverend Joseph Conroy in 1930. It is called, *Arnold Damen. A chapter in the making of Chicago*, and carefully lists

Arnold Damen's accomplishments on this side on the Atlantic. However, it falls short of a detailed description of Damen's youth. This is where I, a Dutch historian, step in. Ellen Skerrett, the local Chicagoan historian who is working on the history of Saint Ignatius College Prep and wrote *Born in Chicago. A history of Chicago's Jesuit University*, has asked to me to help fill in some of the blanks. I previously worked on a research project about missionaries who went to US from Noord-Brabant in the 19th century. As I will demonstrate tonight, in the past few years, together, Ellen and I have been able to reconstruct quite some details by tying together several Dutch archival records. But retracing the early life of a, to some extent, legendary man would not be possible without encountering some unsolvable mysteries. Tonight, I will present to you my guesses for filling the empty pages in Damen's biography and I will reconstruct his youth, education and migration. Towards the end of tonight, I will also reflect on the question why someone his age would consider travelling 7,000 miles over water and land for almost three months, to never return home.

### **On Noord-Brabant**

But first, you have heard me mention 'Noord-Brabant' a couple of times so far. Before I continue my story, I will first, in a nutshell, talk you through the history of this Dutch province. Not only because of its significance for understanding Damen's boyhood and adolescence; also, because it helps to understand the position of Catholicism in the society into which he was born. For the title of my talk, I have used the term 'Low Countries' to refer to the greater geographical area where Damen once lived. By 'Low Countries', I mean to indicate the area that consists of both modern- day Belgium and the Netherlands. Saying Damen was 'Dutch' wouldn't do complete justice to how he would have experienced his own nationality. The northern part of modern- day Netherlands would not have meant much to him nor appealed to him. It is, however, safe to say that he identified more with the north of modern- day Belgium. How so? The two countries have a long, shared history during which they often were ruled by the same king, government or oppressor. Up until today, the inhabitants of the north of modern- day Belgium speak Dutch. The modern dividing borders were only finalized in 1839, so that's two years after Damen's departure to the US. Noord-Brabant was placed north

of that constructed border; a border that cut right through an area that is culturally and religiously homogenous. This is something to keep in mind about the Netherlands. Even though it is a small country, it has a history of big regional differences along the lines of culture and religion.

Now, Noord-Brabant and Belgium traditionally are Catholic and have struggled to remain so ever since the Reformation reached the Low Countries in the 16th century. As you might know, from famous 17th century portraits of Dutch Calvinist elitists by Rembrandt, in the aftermath of the Reformation, Calvinism became the dominant religion in the northern parts of the Netherlands. Almost overnight Catholicism turned into one of the country's minority religions. As a result, it became illegal to be openly Catholic, celebrating the Holy Mass in public was banned, and the episcopal hierarchy was abolished. Churches were closed, destroyed or taken in by Protestants. During the 17th and 18th century, in several provinces of the Netherlands apostolic vicariates were established in absence of bishops. For those of you who aren't familiar with this term, an apostolic vicariate is the organizational term for missionary regions. From the point of view of Rome and the pope, Noord-Brabant, regardless of its century long Catholic history, had to be re-converted.

That didn't mean, of course, that the Catholics or Catholicism disappeared from the Low Countries. But they did go somewhere: underground. As masses and liturgy couldn't be celebrated in a church, they were held in secret places. 'Clandestine churches' were established in places that were out of sight. Mass was held in a hidden room or saloon, and the parish members would have to enter through secret and/or guarded doors in backway alleys. A striking example of a so called 'clandestine church' or 'hiding church' can still be visited today in Amsterdam, and is called Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder. This hiding church gets his name from the fact that a two-story church, complete with altar and choir, is built within the attic – 'solder' – of a regular residential home. From the outside, one would not have guessed every Sunday, Catholic Amsterdammers gathered here to conduct a secret activity: celebrating mass.

Maintaining its Catholic identity in a secret societal infrastructure has not always been evident for the inhabitants of Noord-Brabant. Located in the south, the province also had a great strategic geographical value. Therefore, it has been subject to political suppression – either from the northern provinces or foreign invaders such as Napoleon and the French king Louis XIV, whose statues at Versailles were so admired by father Damen. From the 17th century until the beginning of the 19th century, Noord-Brabant would literally be a battle field from time to time. This meant for cities to be ransacked, harvests to be burnt and villagers to be harassed. This was not a stable situation or time for Catholicism to bloom again, as can also be seen from the many examples of former Catholic churches that served as barracks or stables for horses.

### **Birth, baptism, communion**

Now, I have presented some long political and religious developments, covering three centuries in just a couple of minutes. You might wonder, did any of these events, taking place over a long time in a small country, affect young Arnold Damen, the city builder of Chicago? Even though we don't know of any documents written by him that literally comment on politics, I would certainly argue it did.

In doing so it is important to emphasize Father Damen was born into a province that was recovering from a deeply impoverishing past, not only in economic terms but in terms of cultural life as well. It would take until 1853 for the episcopal structure to be restored, igniting a Catholic revival and an emancipation process in the Low Countries. So, Father Damen never got to experience this. The Catholic revival was foreshadowed though at the beginning of the 19th century, when times slowly were starting to change. Catholics were no longer oppressed and persecuted, as they had been before. Catholicism still was prohibited by the law and regulation of the Protestant political elite, but Catholics were tolerated. As a result of this, there was a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards the parishes – more on that in a minute.

Damen was born on March 20th 1815, a child to then 42-year- old Johannes Damen and 41-year- old Johanna Oomen. We know this because both a baptismal record from the Saint Francis de Sales parish and a record of the municipality have survived. Putting these together, it was possible to reconstruct the composition of the Damen family. His parents would have had nine or ten children in total. It seems there were ten, but we are not entirely sure about this because the municipal records and the records of the parish do not align. Damen certainly had two elder brothers and three elder sisters who lived until adulthood. His elder brother Theo died at the age of 13, when Damen was six. One or two brothers with the name ‘Arnoldus’ died as infants. This is where the confusion on the total amount of children originates: the parish archive mentions one Arnoldus Damen who was baptized in 1809, but there is no record for his birth or death in the archive of the municipality. One can imagine this child only lived a couple of hours. Undoubtedly, another Arnold was born in 1813 and died in 1814. ‘Our’ Arnold, or Arnold the third, was born in 1815, and two other children would follow: one younger sister and a baby brother who only lived a couple of months.

From the municipality record we know Damen came into the world at nine o’clock in the evening. Johannes Damen brought two neighbors to Leur’s townhall to bear witness to him registering his son: one Abraham van Essevelt who was a manual laborer, and Cornelis Dekkers, a blacksmith. Two witnesses were called in for Arnold’s baptism as well, that probably took place the same day: Cornelia Oomen, aunt on his mother’s side, and Arnoldus van Arendonk, indeed very likely to have been the person our Arnold was named after. This elder Arnoldus van Arendonk was his great-uncle on his father’s side. Van Arendonk was probably a well-respected member of the family, as he was pastor in Princenhage, a neighboring village to Leur and the place of birth to Arnold Damen’s mother. Van Arendonk presumably was on good terms with the Damen family. Not only because of the fact he witnessed the baptism of his great-cousin Arnold, but also because Johannes Damen was the first one to be mentioned in Van Arendonk’s will after his death in 1831.

Arnold was one of the 55 children to be baptized in Leur in the year 1815. In 1826, he received

his first communion, together with 37 other children. Now, given the context on forbidden liturgy and hidden masses, this might seem like a big amount to you. Thirty-seven children lining up to celebrate their first Holy Mass must have caught the eye of any official – or Protestant, for that matter. And how come there is such elaborate documentation available from the Saint Francis de Sales parish? This is possible because of something I mentioned before: the ambivalent position Catholics had within society at the beginning of the 19th century, not being recognized but tolerated. You might justly call them ‘second-class citizens.’ This is very adequately illustrated by the building in which Arnold Damen’s baptism and first communion had taken place: the barn church of Leur. This church perfectly fits in the tradition of the clandestine churches like the one in Amsterdam. The word ‘barn church’ in itself almost tells the complete story: this was a church that was not recognizable as such but from the outside looked as if it had another functionality. The difference between a regular clandestine church and a barn-church is that the former actually was illegal and secret. Barn-churches, in which the Catholic minority could meet for liturgy, were out in the open and tolerated, as long as they did not look like churches and the Catholics of the barn-church’ parish paid some good quiet money to the local government.

The barn church was built in 1787, and because a final financial statement has been kept, we have an impression of what the interior looked like. For the liturgy there was an altar made of white marble, an oil painting depicting the sacrifice of Isaac, son of Abraham, two side altars, a pipe organ, a silver chalice, silver cutlery and an altar cross. A pulpit and an altar railing completed the inside of the barn church. There were no benches, but visitors could sit down on chairs. Building and decorating the church cost around 13.000 guilders, 75% of this amount was collected amongst the citizens of Leur. The barn church doesn’t exist anymore today, it was substituted in 1888 by a neo-Gothic church that still stands: the Saint Peter Church. This new church would also replace the name of the parish.

## **Leur**

Historical Leur was well positioned within its landscape, with a small harbor at an inland

waterway that had an important logistic function in the region. By 1838, the village had a little over 1500 inhabitants. A sand path led to Etten, a bigger village half an hour to the south by foot. Etten's modern day claim to fame are the seven years during which Vincent van Gogh lived in the rectory as a boy with his family, his father being a Protestant minister. Leur was also located relatively close to the city of Breda, a brisk walk of 2.5 hours. Breda would have been the biggest city in the of the Damen family, although we don't know whether they visited often.

Of Damen's youngest childhood we not only know the exact location he attended church and had his first experiences with Catholic ritual. Thanks to local historian Cor Kerstens we also know where he lived. Comparing old street numbers from municipal records to the modern housing numbering system, Cor was able to determine Damen was born on de Korte Brugstraat, Short Bridge Street, number 44/46. This is the same street as where the barn church stood. When Damen was born, Leur only consisted of this very street– which then was logically simply called 'Leur.' We know the Damen family lived in Leur when their oldest son Johannes was born in 1803. Population registers from 1822, 1830 and 1840 have Damen's parents at this address throughout the years, until they both died in 1848, eleven years after their son migrated to the US. Today, the address still exists and a farm stands on the same spot. Presumably, this is not the exact same house anymore as the building has been renovated very thoroughly by another family throughout the second half of the 19th century. It was declared a national heritage site in 1967 because of its striking and rather unique position towards the street: instead of its longest wall, this farm has the end side facing the street.

The ground on which the farm is built is spacious, and there are no reasons to assume Damen's birth house was much smaller than this modern building. First of all, we know Johannes Damen was not a poor man. In the eldest population register, he is a mere carpenter, but from 1830 he was listed as a merchant too – indicating he was expanding his business. Secondly, we know he inherited a substantial amount of money from his uncle Arnold van Arendonk. Most convincingly however, is the mention of servants living on their address too. The family has

employed, at different times, at least two housemaids. Even more telling is the presence of one Hendrik Crooijmans. This unmarried, Catholic man was of the exact same age as Johannes Damen, his profession was ‘carpenter servant’ and he moved in with the family after 1822 and before 1830, never to moved out again. The record of 1840 shows that when all Johannes and Johanna’s other children had moved out, only the youngest daughter and Hendrik lived with the elderly couple. Their daughter probably took care of the elderly couple. Hendrik Crooijmans presumably either rented a room or worked in return for room and board after 1822. It goes to show the family had some room to spare and was financially able to hire help. Perhaps Hendrik Crooijmans worked until his death, but both he and Johannes reached the age of well over seventy. Therefore, I deem it not unthinkable that the couple let him stay out of charity after he was too old to work – indicating they had some money to spare.

### **Bois-le-Duc**

From the same population register arises one of the first mysteries in Arnold Damen’s youth. Between the years 1830 and 1834, at the age of 14 or 15 to 18 or 19, he is not registered in Leur. The record does mention he departed to ‘s-Hertogenbosch, the capital of Noord-Brabant on a day walk’s distance from Leur. As far as I have been able to check he never actually lived there or went to school in this city. But even though we don’t know if Damen actually spent time here, it is interesting to consider the significance of this city for a couple more minutes. Mainly, because it corelates with something Joseph Conroy, the author of the 1930 Damen biography, mentions in his few paragraphs on Damen’s youth. He clearly states Father Damen undertook pilgrimages to the shrine and chapel of the Blessed Mother in Saint John’s Cathedral in Bois-le-Duc, the old name for ‘s-Hertogenbosch. This basilica was built in the 14th and 15th centuries in a style that is sometimes called ‘Brabantian gothic.’ It is a unique building, one of its kind in the Netherlands, because of the stained windows, flying buttresses and 96 decorative figures on the buttresses. In the 17th century, the church was claimed by Protestants and wasn’t returned until 1816. Like many other churches, it also briefly functioned as stable for military horses – one can imagine the damage this did. In 1830, there was a fire, which burnt down the West tower. Restorations only started in 1853, that important

year I already mentioned, after Damen left for America.

Saint John's is a well-known destination for pilgrimages. At the end of the 14 century an old and, as contemporary sources emphasize, very ugly statue of the Virgin Mary was found, and soon became the center of worship. The statue started to attract pilgrims after it was said to have cured a crippled woman. Donations of pilgrims actually helped to pay for the construction of the cathedral. A yearly procession is dedicated to the statue; until today it is carried through the streets of 's-Hertogenbosch in May. It is striking that the actual statue of Mary was not in the chapel at the time of Damen's supposed pilgrimages at the time. During the Reformation of 's-Hertogenbosch it was smuggled to Brussels and not given back until 1853. As you see, the information on Damen's pilgrimages is somewhat contradictory and it is not entirely sure how Conroy came to his conclusion. By all means though, visiting this impressive cathedral must have made an impression on young Damen. Even though the interior and exterior were in a bad shape, the architecture must have stood for itself. Especially compared to the simple barn church of Leur, Saint John's presumably was one of the most impressive encounters with outward Catholic expression Damen had in Noord-Brabant.

## **Education**

Now, we know Damen did not study in 's-Hertogenbosch. We do know, however, he received some education because he was admitted at the novitiate at the home of the Society of Jesus in Florissant. We are positive on where Damen's education in Europe ended – more on that in a minute – but less sure on where it started. Now, it will not come as a surprise to you that the Catholic schooling system in Noord-Brabant was highly influenced by the political context of the time, and therefore chaotic. At the end of the 18 th century, the Vicariates of Breda and 's-Hertogenbosch did not have enough organizational strength to open seminaries in Noord-Brabant for the education of priests. For their education, aspiring priests from the province were reliant on seminaries in modern day Belgium. Damen's great-uncle, Arnoldus van Arendonk, probably was trained in Turnhout. There was a Jesuit school there until 1773, when the Society of Jesus was banned by Pope Clement XIV. At the start of the 19th century, many

educational developments shortly followed one another. The loss of the Turnhout school was compensated by the foundation of several Latin schools throughout Noord-Brabant. Also, the first steps towards founding seminaries within the Vicariates were made.

The Latin School of Oosterhout is one of the two potential schools where Damen might have received his early education, after he finished the local primary school in Leur. It was located a day's walk from Leur, in the direction of 's-Hertogenbosch. Education at a Latin school lasted five years. Pupils were taught humanities, grammar, rhetoric, Latin and French. The Latin schools were not boarding schools, the practice of the time was for either villagers or teachers to take in pupils who came from other places. During the more or less 50 years this Oosterhout school was opened, the peak of its total number of students was shortly over a 100. The school's regulation handbook has been kept and it was quite strict. Outside schooling hours, which started at seven in the morning with a clandestine Mass, students were forbidden to enter the local pub, carry knives – not even for carving their pens – and swim, hunt or, in the winter, ice skate. We know one of the fellow Noord-Brabantians Damen greeted when he arrived in Florissant, Father Theodorus de Leeuw, went to the Latin school of Oosterhout before he started his training as a priest. He was only five years older than Damen and came from Breda.

Also from Breda, and seven years older than Damen, was Father Bartolomeus Krijnen, the other Brabantian in Florissant. He visited the Latin School in Turnhout, that had replaced the Jesuit school over there. This school was a private institution, founded by merchant and local politician Pieter-Jan De Nef. The latter made sure the spirit of the Society of Jesus was never far away, as he had a big social network amongst the displaced Jesuits and played a pivotal role in recruiting new missionaries for overseas Jesuit houses. The Institute of De Nef was aimed at preparing missionaries for emigration to the US, and De Nef was well acquainted with Belgian Jesuit missionary Pieter-Jan De Smet – who during his lifetime was already famous for his missions amongst the indigenous communities and undertook several journeys between the US and Belgium to recruit even more missionaries. We'll see him again in a bit.

This private Latin school started out small, with only a couple of students who lived with De Nef, but grew steadily because of a lack of competition in its neighborhood. Daily life must have been similar to that in Oosterhout. Now, we know for a fact that Arnold Damen spent two years at the institute of De Nef, just before he left to the US: in 1836 and 1837. His name pops up in lists of alumni of several of the courses that were taught at the institute: poetry, rhetoric and geometry. These three subjects would not have been enough to finish a complete classical training though, and Damen had already reached the age of 20 by this time – usually the age one would already have finished Latin School. Three different explanations seem plausible. Damen could have transferred from another school, Oosterhout perhaps, and finalized his training in Turnhout with three more courses. It is also possible that Damen had finished the Latin School in Oosterhout and his time at De Nef's institute was not spent with the objective to finalize his secondary education but to either apply to become a missionary to the US or to prepare for it. The third option is that he spent previous years at the institute of De Nef too, but the records to support this theory either are missing or lost. According to Conroy, Damen's decision to go to the US was inspired by a visit by Pieter-Jan De Smet to De Nef's institute, which would rule out the option he came to Turnhout in order to prepare for life as a missionary.

### **Opting for America**

Even though we don't know why, and exactly when, Damen ended up under the protection of De Nef, it is safe to say his destiny presented itself to him when he first entered the institute in Turnhout. And that destination was not the life of a sailor. As I mentioned, the institute was organized to prepare young men for the life of missionaries and for migration to the US. By 1837, the year Damen left, new flocks of Catholic European immigrants were also starting to arrive in the US, and the young American Catholic church was desperately understaffed. One of the life objectives of Father De Smet was to recruit young men to join the Catholic church of America. De Nef, the director of the school in Turnhout, was in close contact with De Smet, but also, with the Vicariates of Breda and 's-Hertogenbosch, which also contributed

to sending pupils to the US. Therefore, Damen was definitely not the first Noord-Brabantian to set sail to Florissant. We already met Fathers Krijnen and De Leeuw who arrived prior to Damen, and there had been other expeditions as well – eight in total. Most of these young men had attended either the Latin School in Oosterhout or De Nef's Latin School. What I am trying to say is there was a closely linked network of prominent Catholics in Noord-Brabant in the first half of the 19th century. They closely worked together to recruit as many new missionaries to the US as possible. Damen must have heard about this program even before he entered De Nef's institute. Therefore, I doubt De Smet's visit to the Latin School of Turnhout was the first time he ever heard about the possibility of migration. However, De Smet undoubtedly pushed him towards his decision.

Now, we know from letters by De Smet, the missionary who Damen would eventually follow to Florissant, the aspect of adventure and discovery of the mission was often romanticized in his recruiting propaganda. By this, I mean the US was presented to the Brabantian youngsters in the same way it was to the European migrants who came here in the 19th century: a wide, undiscovered land behind the Frontier, with an abundance of opportunities and a need for strong, determined people of faith to help build the church. A special place in De Smet's propaganda was reserved for the image of the 'Noble Savage,' the indigenous Americans who were in spiritual need and had to be converted. It goes to show that Damen doesn't forget to describe the so-called 'savages' he encountered in New York in his 1837 letter to his family. *"I couldn't stop looking at them and marvel at their strange clothes, their dress was painted, here and there a red patch, they had some sort of fringes in the ears, a blanket with a belt around their body, but I noticed that they had no blankets before they arrived in New-York, only skins of wild animals. Some had trousers, others did not, but then they had a small skirt from the hip to the knees. The two chiefs were recognizable by a hat with one or two feathers."*

### **Final remarks**

I think this quote, even though very outdated, testifies to the appeal of becoming a missionary in the USA for Damen, certainly given his young age at the time; the promises of adventure

and the urge to assist others. These aspects are foregrounded by Joseph Conroy, in his 1930 biography. However, as I hope to have shown you today, there were pressing circumstances at play in his home country that might have contributed to migrating to the US as well. In my opinion, regardless of whether you call it ‘vocation’ or ‘decision,’ the uncertainty of growing up in a landscape that was constantly changing politically, culturally, and religiously and being acquainted with a social network that was pre-occupied with sending young, abled men overseas contributed just as much. It made perfect sense for Conroy to write from the American perspective and list all Damen’s great accomplishments here in Chicago. But, by contributing new biographical information, I hope to have shown that local Dutch circumstances should not be overlooked when trying to understand the entire life of Damen. Next time you drive around Damen Avenue or enter the beautiful church next door, you’ll hopefully not remember all the complex details of 19th century Noord-Brabant I have presented tonight. But perhaps I have convinced you it would not suffice to say Damen arrived in the US out of zeal or sense of adventure alone.

As our presence in this building here tonight shows, Damen’s true capabilities and strength lay not in, as he himself once probably thought, living with and converting the indigenous communities, but in building a Chicago home for travelers who followed in his footsteps. That includes me. Thank you.

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