Whitinsville, Massachusetts

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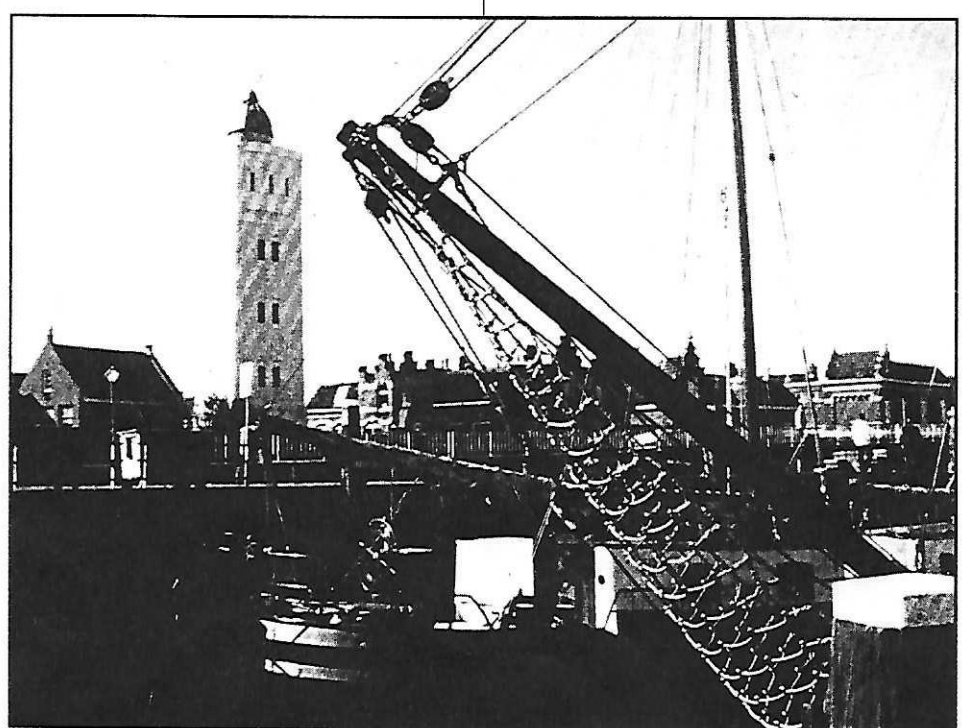
Worcester, Massachusetts, is a large and productive county with an undulating surface which rises, in general, from two hundred to two thousand feet above sea level. Within its borders, the township of Northbridge incorporates the company village called Whitinsville. Both Northbridge and Whitinsville industrialized rapidly during the nineteenth century, and by 1880 the Whitin family dominated the local economy. To them the company village of Whitinsville owes its origins, its name, and its one-time leading position as a producer of cotton and textile fabrication machinery. Consequently, the township's population more than doubled between 1815 and 1910, with the greatest portion clustering in Whitinsville.

As Rev. A. P. Marvin described the village in 1879, it was marked by the evidence of thrift in every direction. The buildings were nearly new and kept in "good repair." The architectural design of the shops and factories copied the most advanced models and were supplied with the best machinery available. Some of the homes were elegant and surrounded by capacious grounds and gardens. Rev. Marvin declared,

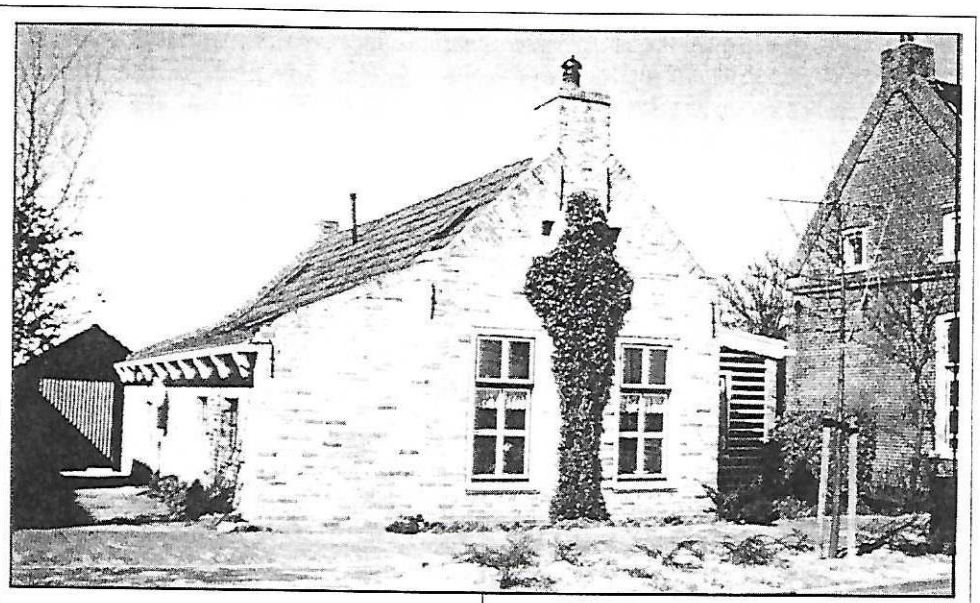
"It would seem that (the area's) growth must be mainly in the villages near the river and the railroad. . . . And as the property in these localities is very much under the control of the members of the above named (Whitin) family the gradual development of all the capabilities of the valley of the Blackstone, within the limits of the town, may be expected. As the villages increase, the natural effect will be to raise the value of the land in the Centre, by furnishing a market for all the products of the farms and gardens. The quarries are near for the convenience of builders, and thus many circumstances combine to prophesy a prosperous future to this ancient town."

Obviously the clergyman's opti-

Harlingen Harbor.



Drs. A. Galema has nearly completed her doctoral thesis which recounts the history of Frisian immigrants in North America. This article edited and condensed for *Origins* is a small fragment of her longer study. *Origins* will review that book when it is published and hope as well that Galema will provide us with popularized versions of the Frisian experience in Paterson and elsewhere. Those who wish to consult Galema's sources will need the footnotes which are available in the Calvin College Library Archives.



Laborer's house in Oude Leije.

mistic report could not have predicted that Whitinsville would soon contain a vibrant Frisian community. The first of many Frisians arrived in Whitinsville almost by chance in 1886. No one planned their coming, and one of the two newcomers returned to Friesland almost immediately. A widely credited tradition indicates that these first Frisian migrants arrived with a herd of Holstein-Frisian cattle purchased to populate John C. Whitin's Castle Hill Farm.

Verification for that account comes from a record book which Thomas Navin consulted while compiling the Whitin family history. The Castle Hill Farm, managed by John Whitin's widow after his death in 1882, suffered the loss of its registered Jersey cattle to tuberculosis in 1886. To restock the herd, Mrs. Whitin, like other American farmers in those days, sent agents to the province of Friesland to find and purchase a number of good Holsteins. In 1886, these cattle were shipped under the care of two men—Jan Bosma from the village of Nijland and Hendrik de Boer from Gaastmeer.

Recounting these events in 1950, J. Kooistra wrote that Jan took an immediate liking to the American environment and wanted to stay but Hendrik got homesick because, as the story goes, he had already promised marriage to a young lady in the fatherland.

Jan Bosma stayed to work on the Castle Hill Farm. In May 1887 his sister and her husband, Wytse B. Feddema, arrived from Tzummarum, and they were followed by Feddema's brother Pieter. In September 1888, Piet's wife, Klaske Hoogendijk, joined him with their five children. All came from Tzummarum. In 1892, Rintje Bosma, brother of the first emigrant, Jan, came over with his wife and children. A year later Albert Rienstra (a brother of Rintje Bosma's wife) moved his family to Whitinsville from the village of Abbega in southwestern Friesland. Oepke Plantinga with his wife and children departed from the same place.

These events indicate that the group expanded rapidly, but,more importantly, they illustrate the many connections which linked the families and individuals together *before* they crossed the ocean. Ties both of kinship and regional background are obvious. Thus the forces that bound the Frisian emigrants together before they left the Netherlands continued to influence the social patterns established in Whitinsville after settlement.

In 1880, the Dutch-born populace throughout all of Massachusetts numbered 993; by 1910 the figure was 1,589. A few of these were located in the city of Boston, mainly Jewish cigar makers who had come from Zwolle and Rotterdam. In 1900, Boston had 391 resident Hollanders and 486 in 1910. In other parts of Massachusetts a few Dutch were located in the industrial towns of Fall River, Lowell, and Worcester (3, 9, and 8, respectively, in 1910). It is obvious then that most of the Massachusetts Dutch lived in the area of Northbridge. This town, and primarily the village of Whitinsville, lodged the remarkable number of 987 Dutch immigrants. They were 11 percent of the 8,807 population. J. Jansen, a minister of the Whitinsville Christian Reformed Church, noted that most of the Dutch immigrants were Frisians from the southwestern part of Friesland's northern clay area.

From the whole group of Dutch migrants who settled in the township of Northbridge between 1880 and 1910, I was able to examine extensively 132 people who came from the six municipalities of Wonseradeel, Barradeel,

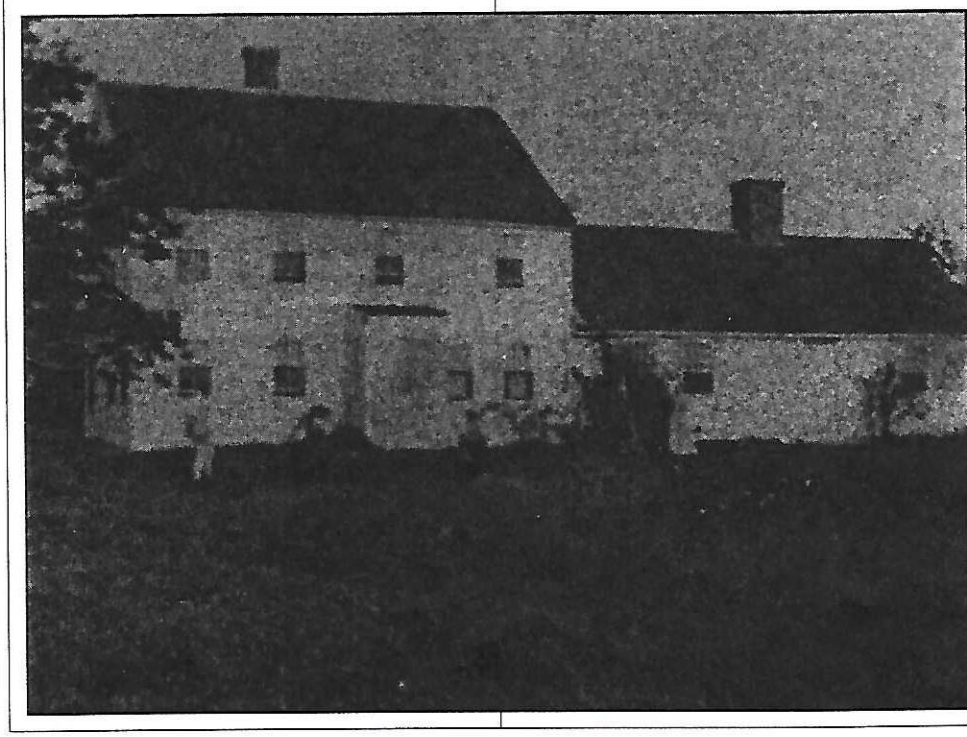
Ferwerderadeel, Het Bildt, Westdongeradeel, and Oostdongeradeel. Some 83 percent of these came from only two municipalities, Wonseradeel and Barradeel, and there were also areas of concentration within these two municipalities. In Barradeel the largest percentage of emigrants to Whitinsville came from the towns of Minnertsga (22 percent) and Tzummarum (39 percent).

It is a curious reality that the vast majority of Whitinsville's Frisians did not become farmers in Massachusetts, but industrial workers. Available evidence for sixty-four immigrants whose occupations are known both in Massachusetts and Friesland indicates that, although nearly all of them were agricultural workers in the Netherlands, in Whitinsville forty-six of the sixty-four immigrants gained livelihood as machine operators or in other tasks directly related to factory production.

This occupational pattern faithfully represents the entire Frisian subculture which, in 1900, worked mainly (43 percent) at the Whitin Machine Works or the Whitin Cotton Mill. Only 5 percent became farmers, and all but one of these were truck-garden farmers. Most unmarried women worked at home, though a few worked as maids or in the cotton mill. By 1910, when the Frisian community nearly tripled the occupational ratios remained nearly constant. Several new farms were added,and unmarried women were more frequently employed as maids and store clerks, but the major difference occurred in the categories of industrial occupations. In 1900, the census taker labeled most Frisians as "factory workers'" in 1910, they were identified as mechanics engineers, machine operators, and foundry men. Obviously, then, these rural Frisians adjusted to the industrialized workplace with few difficulties. Quite pragmatically, they simply accepted whatever the Whitin Company offered from its list of available tasks.

Even so, some immigrants did seek careers as independent farmers. Several acquired neglected Yankee farms and restored them for productive agriculture. That pattern was also evident elsewhere—in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, for example, where Finnish immigrants rejuvenated abandoned farmlands. In 1911, several Whitinsville Frisians also explored Edmonton, Alberta, as a site for agricultural livelihoods. Gaele Bakker, with his wife and seven children, filed land claims northwest of Edmonton, where other Dutch immigrants had already established a Christian Reformed congregation. But farm ownership, although always a potent symbol of achievement for immigrants with rural origins, did not lure a significant portion of Whitinsville's Frisians to Canada or elsewhere. Most of them, coming from the ranks of the unemployed or of low-wage laborers, gained sufficiently satisfying social status and economic security in Whitinsville to keep them in that industrial setting.

By most standards the industrial community which the Whitin family established in Northbridge Township was ideal. For example, Massachusetts passed its maximum ten-hour workday law in 1879, but the Whitin family had already adopted the ten-hour day in 1864. By 1907, the Whitin Company also instituted the five-and-a-half-workday week while most employers still demanded a full six-day week. And in Whitinsville, no night work was required. T. Navin, who wrote a history of the Whitin Company, concluded that the Whitin workforce enjoyed a wide range of



Bangma Farm — last remaining Dutch dairy farm in Whitinsville.

freedom, which reduced the need for supervisory discipline. These conditions contrast sharply with T. van der Wal's assessment of labor conditions in Friesland—conditions of poverty, labor unrest, and massive unemployment.

The Whitin Company also provided housing for its employees. Navin estimates that two-thirds of the people rented company housing in 1870. By 1901, the family had constructed seven hundred company homes, and many if not most of the Frisian immigrants began their New World lives under a company roof. Census records indicate that 81 percent of the Frisian immigrants rented homes in 1900, and the percentage declined only slightly to 72 percent in 1910.

Along with housing the company offered apprenticeships, which young men often preferred to advanced formal education. Arnold Banning, who became a company apprentice, recalls that he came to Whitinsville as a ten-year-old in 1913. He attended the Whitinsville school until he was fourteen and then began his factory apprenticeship. As the oldest son, Arnold worked to support his parents and younger siblings, a task which became an urgent necessity when his father died. Banning's brother and sister gained advanced degrees in sociology and theology, but he, like other firstborn sons, joined his parents to support a large family. Harold Wassenar confirms the impression that firstborn children were viewed as additional resources to provide large families with greater security and comfort. Apprenticeships were well suited to those objectives.

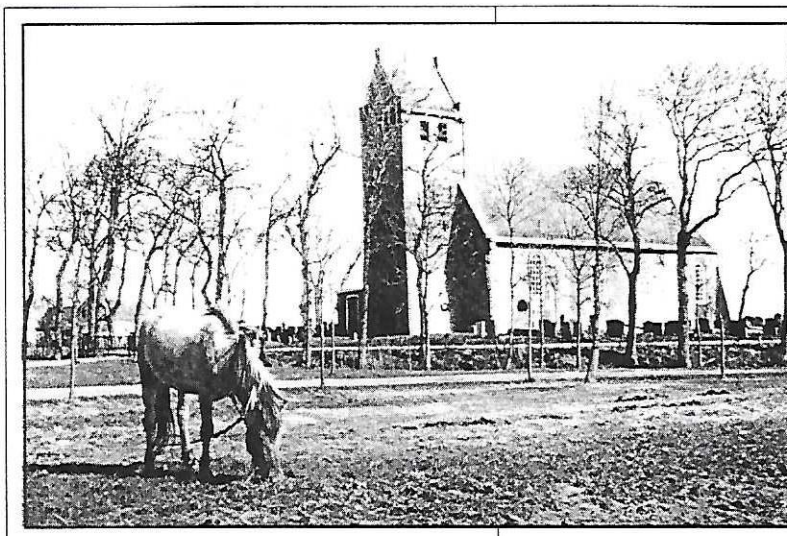
The Whitin Company knew well enough that recent immigrants made good and reliable employees—especially when they came from conditions of poverty and underemployment. Thus, along with the Frisians, a variety of other European immigrants gathered for work in Whitinsville. Before 1880, the local populace was predominantly New England Yankee. The Irish, who first joined them, worked in the foundry, but the next generation of Irish would not take on that heavy work, and during the 1880s they were replaced by French-Canadians and Armenians. The Frisians, who arrived during the same period, avoided the foundry, preferring work in the machine company.

Whitinsville, with a population of Yankees, Frisians, Irish, Armenians, and French-Canadians, provided the ingredients to test the theory of the American melting pot. The various national-origin groups (one writer mentions fourteen in 1905) worked cooperatively together in the mill and machine shops, but after hours each group retreated behind familiar social boundaries. The French-Canadians and Irish clustered together around their Catholic church, and the Armenians were similarly clannish. Yankees who expected Europeans to assimilate the social and cultural patterns of traditional New England were disappointed, because the restoration of a homogeneous Yankee past gained little or no support from Whitinsville's newcomers. Like the other groups, the Frisians did not abandon their national heritage, and they refused the option of melting with other ethnic groups.

According to the 1910 United States census, no person born in the Netherlands married outside of the ethnic group in Whitinsville. Frisian men preferred women from the Netherlands and were known to travel across the ocean to find suitable spouses. The story of Meindert Krull, who landed in Whitinsville with five marriageable daughters in 1896, became a local legend. According to Harold Wassenar, the news that five women were immigrating from Holland spread rapidly in Whitinsville. He reported, "When they arrived in front of the Whitin Machine Works, the Dutchmen ran out of the building to greet the wagon full of women. It was a day to remember. Ha! The first Dutch beauty queen parade. And my mother was the queen." The Dutch not only married exclusively within the ethnic boundaries; they also restricted room and board to single persons from the Netherlands. Thus even single newcomers were incorporated into familiar family structures which duplicated Old World village patterns.

In Whitinsville, as in many similar villages, the churches served as social centers. Choir rehearsals, church suppers, prayer meetings, and mission-society gatherings all helped to enrich the daily routines. Whitinsville supported a number of churches—Methodist, Presbyterian, and the two largest, the Congregational and Catholic congregations. Around the turn of the century, when secularism diminished the strength of Whitinsville's traditional churches, they lost a measure of their prominence and social significance. The Dutch Frisians, however, had just begun to consolidate their religious activities during the 1890s, and for them the church remained a vital institution.

In the October 1, 1926, *Banner*, Henry Beets penned a historical account of the Whitinsville CRC which reported that in the 1880s a number of Frisian immigrants were not satisfied with the English-language preaching and Sunday school classes which were available in



Marrum village green.

Whitinsville. Consequently, they organized their own worship services in the basement of the Presbyterian Church, where they read Dutch sermons and sang from the Dutch Psalter. In 1895, Rev. F. J. Drost accepted an invitation from the Whitinsville group and became their first pastor, with a $400.00 annual salary, free housing, and a podium in the town hall. In 1896, Drost officially organized the Whitinsville CRC by joining it to the Hudson classis, and in 1898, the congregation completed its first sanctuary, on Willow Street.

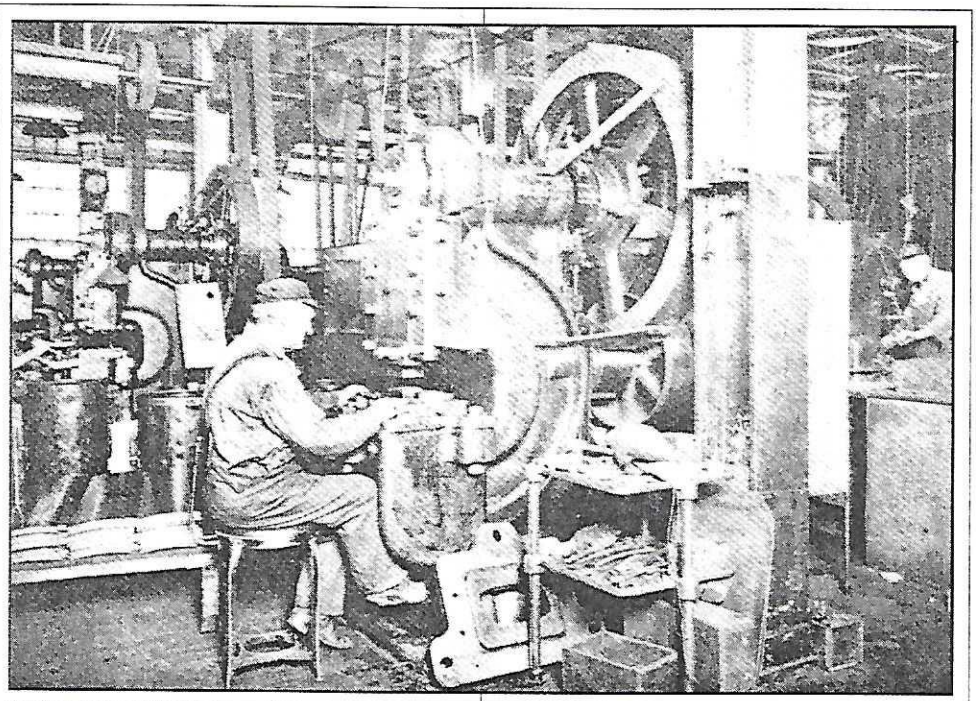
In 1904, Rev. J. Jansen followed Drost as Whitinsville's second pastor, but after two years he returned to the Netherlands. During the Twenties, writing about his American experience, he reported that the Whitinsville CRC, with about four hundred parishioners in 1905, incorporated about half of the eight-hundred-member Frisian community. Rev. Jansen described the congregation as cheerful, young, and well-established. Worship services were in Dutch, and the church also sponsored a Dutch-language grammar school to avoid public-school instruction which challenged the teaching of the church. But the parochial school also preserved the Dutch language to assure its continued viability as the primary language for worship and catechism instruction. The use of Dutch persisted until 1921, the last year of Rev. F. Fortuin's fifteen-year pastorate in Whitinsville.

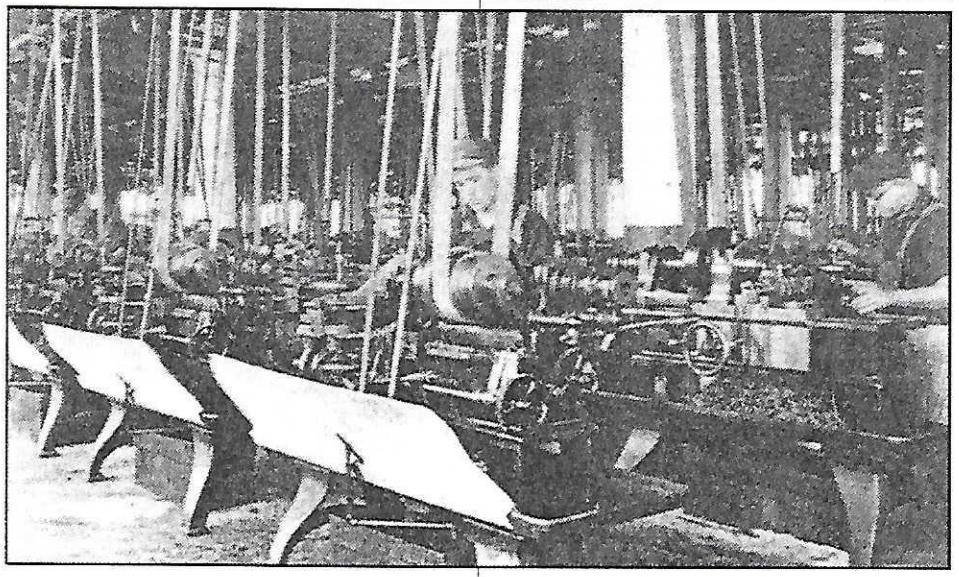
When the need to change from Dutch to English could not be avoided, the process was, as usual, prickly. The original immigrants did not want to abandon either Frisian or Dutch. Eventually, however, the children, who learned English in school and spoke Frisian at home, could not understand the formal Dutch used in sermons. Thus, the need to connect the upcoming generations with the church forced their parents and grandparents to adopt English. While troublesome, the language transition was not destructively disruptive to the Frisian subculture, and the church continued as a unifying influence within the ethnic community.

The Whitinsville experience clearly illustrates the validity of recent theories about the immigration process. For example, the effective units of migration were neither in-

Tzummarum village street.

dividuals nor households but sets of people linked by acquaintance, kinship, and work experience. The emigrants commonly drew on information from network members who had already gone to Whitinsville and often received help from them as well. The reports of people arriving in Whitinsville with tickets prepaid by their already-migrated family members, former neighbors, or friends in the USA, tell us as much. The fact that the Dutch group in Whitinsville was very homogeneous, consisting largely of emigrants from the same Frisian province of origin, shows that this migration was a transplanted network, a knitting together of networks that spanned place of origin and destination. An immigrant letter to the province of Friesland in the 1950s best captures the community spirit: *"De Friezen binne hjirre hast ien famylje meiinoar en allegearre hast meiinoar forgroeid."* ("The Frisians here in Whitinsville are one big family closely connected one by one.")





Work places