

Finding Aid

Reformed Church in America Record Group

IOWA CLASSIS ARCHIVES

1884 - 1918

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Introduction

The Iowa Classis Archives document the corporate institutional life of a regional classis of the Reformed Church in America based in Iowa in decades surrounding the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. The records include the minutes of the classis, church statistics, financial materials, and correspondence. Collectively, these archives provide evidence for the historical growth of a first- and second-generation Dutch-immigrant Protestant denomination in the trans-Mississippi prairies and northern plains over the span of thirty-four years.

Size: 58.5 cm

Provenance: Presumably, these records were deposited by one or more classis official.

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Processing Notes: This arrangement and finding aid were completed in 2014 by Doug Anderson.

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Historical Notes

The [Reformed Church in America](#) traces its beginnings to the celebration of communion in the colony of New Amsterdam in 1628 (the local church begun then exists today as the [Collegiate Reformed Church, New York City](#)). Although the Dutch colony became the British colony of New York later in the 17th century, services in the English language did not begin until the mid-18th century. After the American War of Independence, the Reformed denomination also established its independence from the Netherlands. The denomination was incorporated in 1819 as the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church; it became the Reformed Church in America in 1867.

Confessions: Historic statements of belief formally affirmed by the Reformed Church in America include the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Belhar Confession.

Polity: Each local Reformed church has a consistory, consisting of lay elders and deacons (elected by the congregation), and ordained minister(s). The clerk of consistory is responsible for the minutes; the consistory itself is responsible for the oversight of the life and order of the local church.

Multiple congregations in a geographic area form a classis. The classis consists of elected lay delegates (elders) and all the ministers enrolled in the classis. It has charge of the process of the training, examination, ordination, and oversight of clergy. It also has charge of overseeing local churches within its geographic bounds, including authorizing new ones and disbanding ones deemed no longer viable.

Multiple classes (plural of classis) form regional synods. (An older terminology is “particular synod.”) Regional synods consist of clergy and lay delegates from classes.

The denomination’s highest body is the General Synod. Minister and lay delegates from classes and regional synods, along with other authorized delegates, together have general superintendence of the whole church.

The Classis of Iowa: In 1847 colonists from the Netherlands founded Pella, Iowa, not far southeast of Des Moines. The Pella colony was initially led by the Reverend Hendrik Pieter Scholte, but his independent and patrician ways (ecclesiastically and socially) opened up pathways for other leaders to emerge, such as Henry Hospers. Hospers was a layman of the Reformed Church in America. He emigrated from the Netherlands as a teenager. As a young man in Pella, he worked as a land agent, teacher, and notary; eventually, he also edited a newspaper and served as Pella’s mayor. After the Civil War, land hunger fueled the gathering of prospective colonists, with Hospers as their leader. The new colonists looked to lands north of Sioux City, the last sector of Iowa opened up for settlement (and the only part of Iowa to come under the Homestead Act of 1862). The Pella colonists founded Orange City, Iowa in 1870. In 1871, the colonists organized First Reformed Church. Various delays, including locusts, made the growth of the new colony tenuous at first, but by 1882 there was enough stability for Hospers and the Reverend Seine Bolks to lead in founding Northwestern Classical Academy (eventually

Northwestern College). Also by then, a general settlement boom in the southern half of Dakota Territory attracted smaller Dutch colonies there.

Iowa Classis was organized June 18, 1884 at First Reformed Church, Orange City. The Classis of Illinois (the judicatory of the Pella and northwest Iowa congregations) petitioned the Particular Synod of Chicago for the new classis. With the Synod's authorization, six churches in Iowa (Orange City, Alton, West Branch, North Orange, Parkersburg, and Washington) and six in Dakota Territory (Sioux Falls, Lennox, Harrison, Turner, Centreville [*sic*], and Marion Junction) constituted the founding twelve congregations. By the following summer, there were 1207 communicant members plus 1794 baptized non-communicants.

The Classis of Iowa at first not only grew west, but also east. By 1886, it had accepted five additional churches in Dakota Territory, but nine more churches came in Iowa, including the two Pella churches from Illinois Classis (1885). In 1888, the Dakota congregations were released to the new Dakota Classis. German and East Frisian congregations were released to the Classis of Pleasant Prairie in 1892. In 1904, other congregations were released to form Pella Classis.

Iowa Classis's base in 1918 included 5349 communicant members plus 7269 baptized non-communicants. That year the classis formally came to an end when it was divided into the classes of East Sioux and West Sioux. These two classes continue to this day.

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Related Materials

This collection is closely related to that of the Dakota Classis Archives and the Dakota Classis Disbanded Churches Record Group. Since B.D. Dykstra was the classis missionary, his collection also has potential connections to this collection.

For a history of the Iowa Classis, see:

- Kennedy, William. "A Missionary Classis: The Classis of Iowa, 1884-1907." *Historical Highlights* 3:2 (Spring 1982): 3-10.

For Iowa Classis statistics in published form, see:

- Reformed Church in America. General Synod. [*Acts and Proceedings of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America*](#). New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Church in America, 1868-.

For background on the Pella Colony, see:

- Stellingwerff, Johan. [*Iowa Letters: Dutch Immigrants on the Iowa Frontier*](#). Ed. Robert P. Swierenga. Trans. Walter Lagerwey. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004.

For background on Orange City, see:

- Anderson, Doug, Tim Schlak, Greta Grond, and Sarah Kaltenbach. [Orange City](#). Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014.

Also, see Henry Hospers' Orange City Dutch-language weekly,

- [De Volksvriend](#), 1874-1951

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Arrangement

The Iowa Classis Archives are in seven ledgers and two boxes. For the most part, it is arranged chronologically. The detailed arrangement is as follows:

IOWA CLASSIS, 1884-1918			
BOX	FOLDER	CONTENTS	DATES
1 (ledger)		Minutes of the Classis of Iowa	1884-1896
2 (ledger)		Minutes of the Classis of Iowa	1896-1903
3 (ledger)		Minutes of the Classis of Iowa	1903-1908
4 (ledger)		Minutes of the Classis of Iowa.	1908-1917
5 (ledger)		Minutes of the Classis of Iowa	1917-1918
6 (ledger)		Classical Membership Record	1917
7 (ledger)		Cash Book	1884-1918
8	loose	Receipt books (11)	1913-1917
	Paper clipped	List of correspondents in folders (typed)	
	1	Communications and Reports	May 22, 1917-Sept. 12, 1917
	2a	Communications	Sept. 14, 1916-Spring 1917
	2b	[Communications]	Sept. 14, 1916-Spring 1917
	3	Communications and Reports	April 16, 1916-Sept. 14, 1916
	4	Reports and Papers of Spring Classis	April 1916
	5	Special Session	February 1916
	6	Documents, Receipts, Fall Classis	Sept. 1915
	7	Special Session Reports	June 29-Aug.

			9, 1915
	8	Reports, Spring Classis	1915
	9	Communications and Receipts	1914
	10	Reports of Committees, Fall Classis	1914
	11	Communications for Classis	April 1914
9	loose	The Constitution of the Reformed Church in America. New Edition Revised.	1911
	ledger	[Classis notes in Dutch language]	Spring 1912-1918
	ledger	Classical Membership Record	1912-1916
	composition book	[Classis notes, mostly in English]	Sept. 12, 1912-April 1914
	composition book	[Classis notes]	May 1914-Fall 1915
	composition book	[Classis notes]	Spring 1916-1917
	composition book	[Classis notes]	Oct. 1916 [?]-May 1918 [?]
	composition book	[Classis notes]	April 1917-Sept. 1917
	composition book	[Classis notes]	Fall 1918
	1	Papers	1913-1914
	2	[Papers]	1917-1918
	3	Communications	Oct. 22, 1917-Spring 1918
	4	Communications and Reports	Sept. 10, 11, 1918
	5	[Communications]	Spring 1919
	6	Communications	April-Sept. 1918
	7	[Communications]	Spring 1919
	8	Financial Records (kept by Thomas Welmers)	1918-1919