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*“Odyssey of Woe”: The Journey of
the Immigrant Ship April from
Amsterdam to New Castle,
1817-1818*

BEFORE THE AGE OF STEAM, crossing the Atlantic Ocean to America was a risky venture. Commonly, one in twenty immigrants died en route and in periods of stress up to one in five succumbed, mostly infants and children. Mortality was compounded because outgoing freight vessels were cheaply modified to carry immigrants below deck as a form of “paying ballast.” Passengers with prior infections, coupled with overcrowding, lack of sanitation and ventilation, and inadequate food caused epidemics of typhus or “ship fever,” cholera, and smallpox that carried off thousands.¹

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¹ Farley Grubb, “Morbidity and Mortality on the North Atlantic Passage Eighteenth-Century German Immigration,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (hereafter, *JIH*) 17 (1987), 565-85, reported overall mortality rates of 38 percent on a small sample of German ships bound for Philadelphia, 1727-1805, but children’s rates were 92 percent (570-71). In the nineteenth century passage mortality dropped to half that of the late eighteenth century, but the Irish famine migration of 1847 to Canada averaged 20 percent mortality of 98,000 migrants. See Friedrich Kapp, *Immigration and the Commissioners of Emigration of the State of New York* (1870, reprint, Salem, N H, 1969), 23, Raymond L. Cohn, “Mortality on Immigrant Voyages to New York,

Deaths at sea were also predictable, given the troubled economic and social circumstances of the immigrants. Tens of thousands of German and Swiss peasants desperately fled their homeland in the post-Napoleonic years in the face of burdensome taxes, conscription, unemployment, inflation, and periodic crop failures. The presence of these temporary visitors, many destitute and victimized by sharpers, posed major problems for the Amsterdam police and civil authorities.² The Dutch government tried to check the unexpected influx by prohibiting German immigrants from entering the Netherlands unless they had sufficient funds or sponsorship for passage out of the country. But the regulations had little impact. Community leaders in the German and Swiss towns reported that people simply could not be held back.³

The consequences of this poorly planned migration were disastrous. Upon arriving in the seaports of Rotterdam and Amsterdam, these hapless people did not want to waste one day. But the excess demand for transatlantic shipping drove up passage fares and delayed departures, making the migrants the prey of so-called "soul merchants." Most of them lacked passage money and were forced to become redemptioners, contracting

1836-1853," *Journal of Economic History* (hereafter, *JEH*) 44 (1984), 289-300, Robert P Swierenga, "Dutch Immigration Patterns in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in Swierenga, ed., *The Dutch in America Immigration, Settlement, and Cultural Change* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1985), 21-25, especially Table 1 4, and Maldwyn Allen Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago, 1960), 104-7

² *Amsterdamsche Courant*, May 28, 1817, courtesy of Wilhelmina Chr Pieterse, chief archivist, Gemeentelyke Archiefdienst (Municipal Archives of Amsterdam) (hereafter, GA) According to this press item, the Swiss consul in Amsterdam frequently had to advance loans to destitute citizens to pay for their return home The Swiss government also paid f200 (f100 for children) to agents in Amsterdam who facilitated processing passports Gunther Moltmann provides German immigrant letters and government reports of the Amsterdam transit in his edited collection, *Aufbruch nach Amerika Die Auswanderungswelle von 1816/17* (Stuttgart, 1989), 188-214

³ Mack Walker, *Germany and the Emigration, 1816-1885* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), chaps 1-3, Gunther Moltmann, ed., *Germans to America 300 Years of Immigration, 1683 to 1983* (Stuttgart, 1982), esp Moltmann's essay, 26-35, Moltmann, *Aufbruch nach Amerika*, 44-303, Moltmann, "The Migration of German Redemptioners to North America, 1720-1820," in P C Emmer, ed., *Colonialism and Migration Indentured Labour before and after Slavery* (Dordrecht, 1986), 105-22, Paul Futterer, "Die Auswanderung nach Nordamerika aus dem Gebiet des heutigen Landkreises Rastatt im 19. Jahrhundert," *Landkreis Rastatt Heimatbuch* 5 (1978), 80-85, Farley Grubb, "German Immigration to Pennsylvania, 1709-1820," *JIH* 20 (1990), 417-36, Hans-Jürgen Grabbe, "Besonderheiten der europäischen Einwanderung in die USA während der frühen nationalen Periode, 1783-1820," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 33 (1988), 271-90, Grabbe, "Das Ende des Redemptioner-Systems in den Vereinigten Staaten," *ibid* 29 (1984), 277-96

with the ship agent or supercargo to pay their fare, plus a surcharge, within two weeks after arrival in America. Transatlantic fares from Amsterdam in 1817 were *f*170 (\$68) for adults and *f*65 (\$26) for children ages four to eighteen.⁴

Dutch shipowners from Amsterdam were particularly guilty of exploiting the immigrant traffic, according to the American press. *Niles' Weekly Register* of Baltimore in 1818 declared: "We have very distressing accounts of the state of the German emigrants attempting to reach the United States through the ports of the Netherlands." And again: "The heart is sickened with accounts of the suffering of emigrants from Germany, making their way to the United States, through the cold-blooded cruelty and infernal avarice of the masters and owners of passenger-ships. We are glad that very few of those guilty of such deeds are our countrymen—the actors are chiefly Dutch." One ship with 500 on board was forced back after weeks at sea and 60 burials in the deep. Another Dutch brig, out for ninety-one days, lost 40 passengers. A Dutch ship from Amsterdam, bound for Philadelphia with 500 Germans, landed at Bergen, Norway, after a series of disasters, having lost 100 passengers. Other captains landed their passengers at Lisbon, the Azores, or Caribbean Islands and left them to perish.⁵

None of these cases rivaled the ship *April* of Amsterdam, which sailed for Philadelphia in June 1817 with about 1,100 immigrants, mostly south German and north Swiss farmers. The *April* suffered a "shocking mortality" of 50 percent.⁶ Only 550 survived to reach Philadelphia after

⁴ The best study of the redemptioner system is the ongoing work of Farley Grubb "Redemptioner Immigration to Philadelphia Evidence on Contract Choice and Profitability," *JEH* 46 (1986), 407-18, "The Auction of Redemptioner Servants, Philadelphia, 1774-1804 An Economic Analysis," *JEH* 48 (1988), 583-603, "The Market Structure of Shipping German Immigrants to Colonial America," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter, *PMHB*) 111 (1987), 27-48, "The Disappearance of European Immigrant Servitude in the United States An Economic Analysis of Market Collapse, 1785-1835," Working Paper No. 89-3, University of Delaware, Sept. 1988, "The Disappearance of Organized Markets for European Immigrant Servants in the United States," *Social Science History* 18 (1994), 1-30 For an overall study of immigrant contract labor schemes that focuses on English indentures, see David W. Galenson, *White Servitude in Colonial America An Economic Analysis* (New York, 1981)

⁵ *Niles' Weekly Register*, Nov. 1, April 11, June 11, 1818 *Niles'* was the "newspaper of record" of its time, strong on government business, national news, and statistics. Described as nonpartisan and "precise in everything," other editors clipped from it heavily.

⁶ The passenger manifest of the *April* cannot be found in Dutch archives, nor is it among the Philadelphia "baggage lists," series M425, in the National Archives. A partial list is cited in note 17.

a typhus epidemic struck while the ship was still in Dutch waters near the North Sea.⁷ This article recounts the voyage of this notorious vessel, whose tragic transit helped spark the U.S. Congress to pass the first passenger ship regulations “to restrain a cupidity so infamous and disgraceful to humanity.”⁸

The *April* had been built in Danzig (now Gdansk), Poland, and was on its maiden voyage under new Dutch owners, after being sold for f10,000 (\$4,000) to Seemann and Co. of Amsterdam, owned by Jan Frederik Seemann. A three-masted vessel of 800 tons and a length of 135 feet, it was a so-called “pink,” that is, a ship with a fairly rounded hull and a deeply recessed upper deck that created a small third (orlop) deck.⁹ The tonnage of the *April* made it one of the larger ships carrying immigrants into Delaware Bay in this period.

The fateful trip of the *April* began with the ship getting stranded on a sandbar at the tiny island of Pampus, which is situated at the mouth of the IJssel River at the eastern gateway to the port of Amsterdam. For ships totally dependent on wind power, it was a navigator’s nightmare to sail past this bar, because the wind could suddenly change direction. “To lie before Pampus” (Dutch: *voor Pampus liggen*) became synonymous in Dutch parlance with being dazed, in a stupor or even drunk, and it

⁷ The primary source documents of the *April* voyage of 1817-18, were compiled by Jan Alberts of Krommene, The Netherlands. Photocopies of all the pertinent documents collected by Jan Alberts have been deposited in the Calvin College Archives, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

⁸ *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser*, Jan 7, 1818, reprinted in *Delaware Gazette and Peninsula Advertiser*, Jan 31, 1818, Kapp, *Immigration*, 41-42. The congressional act of March 2, 1819 (3 Stat 489) “regulating ships and vessels,” among other provisions, set the legal maximum number of passengers at two per five tons burthen. Ships exceeding that number were subject to forfeiture and the captain could be fined \$150 per person. The law also levied a fine of \$3 per day per passenger for short allowances of food and provisions. The act is included in William Bromwell, *History of Immigration to the United States* (1856, reprint, New York, 1969), 206-9.

⁹ At 800 tons, the *April* would have been limited under the law of 1819 to 320 passengers, or less than one-third of its actual manifest. The bark’s dimensions were length 135’, width 33’2”, depth 16’7”, forecassle 7’2”. The mizzenmast was mounted horizontally rather than perpendicular to the deck. The description of the *April* is the courtesy of C F L Paul, head, department of investigations, Nederlands Scheepvaart (Shipping) Museum, Amsterdam (hereafter, NSM), to Jan Alberts, Oct 4, 1978. Documents relating to the sale of the *April* include a letter to Captain Johan Ernst Holtz dated Dec 13, 1816, an advertisement of sale by Amsterdam ship brokers in the *Amsterdamsche Courant* on March 3, 1817, and the deed of sale dated June 16, 1817. The letter and sale deed are in the Notarieel Archief nr 19645, notary J Abraham Molester, bylage acte nr 154, GA.

is an uncomplimentary description indeed of anyone.¹⁰ From the Pampus outlet of the IJssel, the passage to the ocean lay through the Zuiderzee, a large saltwater inland branch of the North Sea, and then past the barrier island of Texel.

The key players in the *April* disaster can aptly be said to “lie before Pampus.” Bureaucratic inertia, greed, incompetence, and even inhumanity are some of the unsavory aspects of this story. The German Johan Ernst Holtz had been the veteran captain of the *April* under its Danzig owners. But when Seemann and Co. leased the vessel in May 1817 to the ship-brokerage firm of Kress and Rodenbroek of Amsterdam to carry emigrants and freight to Philadelphia, Seemann appointed his employee Captain Dirk Cornelis de Groot as second in command. Since the Barbary pirates of the Mediterranean Sea were known to raid as far afield as the North Sea, the new owners decided to put the ship under the Dutch flag and thereby obtain a “Turkish Pass” to gain immunity from the raiders. The old Prussian captain, who refused to sail under a Dutch flag, then resigned and De Groot took sole command.¹¹

Captain De Groot has left behind his version of the journey in a diary and a sworn affidavit filed in court in Amsterdam following his return.¹² The captain was at the center of events, and he had good reason

¹⁰ *Grote Winkler Prins* (20 vols., Amsterdam, Brussels, 1966), 15 44

¹¹ Seemann and Co's application of June 24, 1817, requesting a certificate of registry is in Documentation van Zeebrieven, inventory nr 3, 1817 (dossier nr 53), GA For a Turkish Pass, consult inventory nr A 4898 (14), cat nr Gr 78-7 KIII, NSM The Amsterdam agency of Widow Pieter Poolman Jzn and Son arranged for the “Zeebrief” and Turkish Pass Captain De Groot was from the village of Hollum on the Frisian island of Ameland

¹² This article relies heavily on these two documents, and all quotes are taken from English translations by Henry Lammers and Adriaan de Wit The June 4, 1819, affidavit, courtesy of Jan Alberts, is in the Nieuwe Rechterlijke Archieven, inventory nr 1434, Scheepsverklaring, GA Captain De Groot's original diary of the voyage (now lost) is quoted and paraphrased in an article in an as yet unidentified Frisian newspaper in 1913 Jan Alberts provided an exact typescript of the 3,500-word article, titled “Hoe een eeuw geleden landverhuizers naar Amerika werden vervoerd Een reisverhaal van een oud zee kaptein” (The Story of How Emigrants were Transported to America As told by an Old Sea Captain) The Frisian editor may have been a relative of De Groot, because he stated that he discovered the “reliable travel log among old family documents” and decided to publish it as an item of historical interest “Here and there I will allow the captain himself to carry on the conversation in his own simple and truthful style,” the editor explained See Robert P Swerenga, ed., “Captain De Groot's Account of the Tragical Voyage of the *April*, Amsterdam to New Castle, Delaware, 1817-1818,” *The Palatine Immigrant* 18 (1993), 82-91, for a complete transcript

to document the affair so as to refute future attempts to lay the blame on him rather than on the ship brokers.

According to De Groot, the *April* was fully outfitted with a crew of 24 men and ready on June 20, 1817, to take on 400 passengers and sail from Amsterdam to Philadelphia. The value of the freight totaled *f*36,000 (\$14,400).¹³ The departure was delayed several days while waiting for favorable sailing conditions to cross the sandbars off the island of Pampus at the entrance to the port of Amsterdam. The passengers later averred, however, that the owners ordered the ship to drop anchor a few miles below Amsterdam "to wait for more passengers, but no more entered."¹⁴ On June 22 a harbor pilot came aboard and four days later the wind shifted to the north and the *April* sailed out of Amsterdam. To lighten the ship in order to clear the sandbars at Pampus, a number of water barrels were dumped overboard. With the help of six trawlers the *April* managed to get past Pampus on July 8 and head northeastward on the Zuiderzee to the islands of Wieringen and Texel at the entrance to the North Sea.¹⁵

The "human ballast" rejoiced to be underway at last. "At that moment we resembled more closely a warship than a merchant vessel because of the musical renditions of playing and singing by the passengers," De Groot recalled. But the sound of music would soon be replaced by the sound of mourning. Within days the first cases of ship fever were reported to the captain, who showed little alarm at the not unusual news. Three days later, on July 11, the ship dropped anchor off the island of Texel.¹⁶

The journey was again delayed when Mr. Rodenbroek, the supercargo

¹³ The crew members of the *April* are listed by name and function in the Muster Roll for Seafarers, June 12, 1817, Particulier Archief nr 38 (Waterschout) inventory nr 104, GA. The figure of 400 passengers is in De Groot's sworn affidavit. Henry T. Virchaux, secretary of the German Society of Philadelphia, reported that 233 "full freights" boarded at Amsterdam, see Virchaux Report, Jan 22, 1818, German Society of Pennsylvania Archives, kindly provided by librarian Amy Johnson, and partially published in Kapp, *Immigration*, 22-23. A German-language synopsis of Virchaux's report is also in Moltmann, *Aufbruch nach Amerika*, 291-93. It adds no significant details but does contain an emotional gloss on the report by an anonymous editor: "Freight" designates adult male passengers who paid full fare. Women (sometimes) and children under thirteen (always) went for half fare, children under five were free. Hence, 233 full fares could well number 400 passengers. See Marianne Wokeck, "The Flow and the Composition of German Immigration to Philadelphia, 1727-1775," *PMHB* 105 (1981), 255-57, 263-64.

¹⁴ Virchaux Report.

¹⁵ Virchaux Report, De Groot Affidavit.

¹⁶ De Groot Diary and Affidavit.

(the ship's officer in charge of the cargo, passengers, and the commercial concerns of the voyage), foresaw a big financial loss from having too few passengers. Rodenbroek, a young man and likely a son of the Amsterdam ship broker, over Captain De Groot's strong objections brought aboard more than 700 hapless redemptioners from three other vessels "lying in the Roads" whose owners had the same problem. Most of the new passengers were from the Swiss canton of Aargau, south of the Rhine River; the rest were Germans from Württemberg.¹⁷ There were two doctors among them. The additional passengers boarded between July 12 and July 29. "These vessels had lain there for a considerable time, and, owing to bad food and poor attendance, those on board were, more or less, sick and full of vermin." Food and other necessities for the trip were also stowed away, but not in sufficient quantities for the passengers, although De Groot had ensured that the crew was abundantly provisioned. The number of passengers was now about 1,100, yet there was only enough food for 600.¹⁸

The supercargo's decision to add so many passengers was a major blunder. "In truth these people are packed together like herring in a barrel," declared a Dutch military official later. "The density of human beings is so great that there is standing room only."¹⁹ Given the one to two week incubation period for communicable diseases, the healthy passengers who lacked immunity were virtually guaranteed to be infected in the cramped quarters by the diseased and vermin-infested redemptioners from the others vessels. Indeed, a mass outbreak of sickness on the

¹⁷ Jan Alberts acquired from Werner Fasolin of Wolfinswil, Switzerland, six lists totaling 730 Swiss and German passengers. The lists from the Staatsarchiv of Aargau (StAAG IA Nr 5, *Auswanderung America*, 1817), originally had been compiled by the Swiss commercial consul P I Von Planta at Amsterdam and forwarded to the Swiss government. A preliminary version of the lists was published in Robert P Swierenga, ed., "A Partial Passenger List of the Dutch Ship *April* to New Castle, Delaware, June, 1817," *The Palatine Immigrant* 18 (1993), 76-81. None of the three vessels is identified in the sources.

¹⁸ The quote is in the Virchaux Report, Jan 22, 1818, as is the charge by the passengers upon arrival in Delaware that the owners took on the hundreds of additional passengers at Texel for financial reasons. De Groot's affidavit states that the "nearest count" of passengers in late July was between 1,000 and 1,100, but his diary puts the number at 1,200. Virchaux also stated that "1,200 souls" were aboard. De Groot's diary and affidavit both include the charge of grossly inadequate provisions, responsibility for which rested with the broker.

¹⁹ Capt Lt J F C Wardenburg, Roads of Texel, to Police Director Holtrop, Amsterdam, Aug 28, 1817, Ministry of Binnenlandse Zaken (Internal Affairs) in the Algemeen Rijksarchief (National Archives), The Hague (hereafter, AR).

second and third decks was reported to Captain De Groot within days.²⁰ The captain immediately sent a letter to his employers in Amsterdam describing the possible epidemic and food shortage. They invited him to come in person directly to discuss matters and to bring an accurate passenger count. In Amsterdam De Groot secured the promise of sufficient food and then agreed to take his chances and put out to sea "in God's name" as soon as the provisions arrived.

De Groot returned to Texel on July 29 to find that the situation had gone from bad to worse. More than 100 passengers and several crew members, including the first mate, were found to be ill with typhus.²¹ Sailing out to sea was now out of the question, although Rodenbroek insisted that the ship must depart. On July 27 he came on board with new passengers to replace those who were ill. Despite Rodenbroek's insistent demands, De Groot refused to set sail. Very soon, in his words, "it was misery without end," with immigrants dying daily.²²

When local government officials first learned of the outbreak they moved to quarantine the sick, a decision that set in motion a series of events involving the provincial governor, sheriff's police, a royal naval commander, and, ultimately, the king and his ministers. Officialdom intervened on August 4 when a quarantine doctor and a naval doctor boarded the *April* and ordered the most seriously ill passengers to be taken off and quarantined at a navy station on the nearby island of Wieringen (in the Zuiderzee) until they could recuperate. The sick crew members were taken to Texel and billeted separately in an old unused fort and given the best medical care. By August 14 the transfer of the sick passengers, about 500 in all, was completed, leaving at least 600 still on board. Local officials refused Captain De Groot's request to disembark all of the remaining passengers, fearing the spread of the disease throughout the community. "Upon hearing my request the com-

²⁰ In the Virchaux Report the outside source of the typhus outbreak is attested by the "original" passengers, who very much resented the suffering and death caused by the supercargo's decision

²¹ *Webster's New International Dictionary* defines typhus as "Any of several infectious diseases conveyed by the bite of lice, fleas, and other biting arthropods. The louse-born variety occurs in explosive epidemics, often as a result of wars, earthquakes, and other diseases which cause large numbers of people to be herded together in unsanitary conditions. Symptoms include a rash, high fever lasting about a fortnight with vomiting, prostration, delirium and some pneumonia"

²² De Groot Diary

mander started to curse uncontrollably and dismissed me," De Groot recalled. Meanwhile, a second immigrant ship lying in the Roads of Texel, the Russian vessel *Nadesta*, was also stricken with typhus.²³

As the *April* lay at anchor before Texel, the pestilence raged among the already weakened transmigrants still on board. Several times a day the captain threw carbon (*kruiit*) on a fire in a vain attempt to disinfect the ship with smoke. "I became so hardened to the terrible sights I witnessed," De Groot recalled, "that my emotions were left unmoved even when a boatload of corpses was brought to shore for burial. I realized starkly the brevity of man's earthly existence. Indeed I was unmoved when my own people died; in fact I was not even afraid of becoming sick and it seemed that death could not touch me. My conscience was seared shut; I lived without fear."²⁴ According to the doctor's initial report, more than 100 passengers were seriously ill, almost 40 had already died, and the whole crew was also infected and bedridden. Later on 10, 20, and even 30 people died daily, including the supercargo Rodenbroek, the ship's pilot, and two crew members. In one 2½ hour stretch 7 men died. The horrendous stench from the *April* permeated the harbor for miles around. In desperation several passengers jumped overboard and committed suicide.²⁵

During this time, the king's representative at Den Helder (the Schout or sheriff), who had jurisdiction over the region, took the unusual step of forbidding anyone except Captain De Groot to communicate with land or other vessels. At night the warship *Zeeland* was stationed at anchor alongside the *April* to enforce the communications blackout. Only the captain could go ashore.²⁶ The king's officials had now taken charge of the situation, specifically the provincial governor of Noord-Holland, the Schout at Den Helder, and the secretary of state in The Hague.²⁷

Death became so commonplace on the filthy, cramped vessel that the immigrants as well as the captain were numbed by it. Husbands watched their wives die, wives their husbands, parents their children, and children

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ De Groot Affidavit and Diary

²⁶ De Groot Affidavit The Schout was the chief executive and judicial officer of the regional elected council of *Schepenen* (aldermen)

²⁷ Governor of Noord-Holland, Haarlem, to Secretary of State, The Hague, Aug 17, 1817, Archief Binnenlandse Zaken afd G, inventory nr 711 G83, nr 314/3452, AR

their parents, without showing any emotion whatever. Finding burial places became a problem. The captain was not allowed to cast any bodies overboard in coastal waters, and the Texel cemetery finally ran short of space and had to forbid further interments. When De Groot threatened to cut his mooring ropes and beach his vessel, officials ordered the commander of the *Zeeland* to shoot if the *April* made any attempt to land. The provincial governor finally relented and pointed out a deserted place near the harbor called "Het Horntje" (literally the little horn) to bury the victims.²⁸

The naval commander at Texel, Capt. Lt. J.F.C. Wardenburg of the warship *Zeeland* was angry at the supercargo and ship brokers. But he came to sympathize with the plight of the sick passengers and sent daily reports to higher authorities urging them to have the ship completely emptied, cleaned, and disinfected. The main concern of provincial officials and the central government, however, was to maintain law and order and to rid themselves of the problem with the least expense to the public treasury. The shipowners and consignors likewise tried to weasel out of their obligation to provide food for the quarantined passengers.²⁹ An owner of the ship even came in person from Amsterdam to see what he could do to salvage his venture, but he threw up his hands in despair and in the end left matters in the hands of the captain. The two ship's doctors also confessed that they were "besides themselves."³⁰

Meanwhile, on August 16 central government authorities in The Hague sent a confidential memo to the Schout at Den Helder ordering him to protect the local inhabitants and to dispatch the infected ships as soon as possible.³¹ The governor of the Province of Noord-Holland told the secretary of state that it would be better to spend f20,000-f25,000 (\$8,000-\$10,000) to enable the *April* and the *Nadesta* to sail, rather than risk having "this desperate horde" of several thousand Swiss and Germans

²⁸ De Groot Diary

²⁹ De Groot Diary, Wardenburg, Roads of Texel, to Rear Admiral N Lemmers, Amsterdam, Aug 12, 1817, Ryksarchief, Dept of the Marine (Navy), Schaarsbergen, Wardenburg to Lemmers, Aug 31, 1817, AR, Lemmers, Amsterdam, to Minister of the Navy, The Hague, Sept 3, 1817, nr 1226, AR, Wardenburg to Schout, Den Helder, Sept 19, 1817, Oud Archief, Den Helder

³⁰ De Groot Affidavit and Diary

³¹ Procurer General, The Hague, to Minister of Home Affairs, The Hague, Aug 16, 1817, Archief Binnenlandse Zaken afd G, inventory nr 711 G83, nr 4378, AR

come ashore and cause a clash with the 1,600 workers stationed at the Roads of Texel.³²

The secretary of state authorized *f*10,000 to hasten the departure of both vessels, but this was insufficient to feed the passengers. Commander Wardenburg complained that 1,100 pounds of hard ship biscuits were needed but only 800 pounds were provided. The obfuscation and mistreatment was “nothing short of murder,” Wardenburg charged. Starvation is imminent and “if no immediate assistance is forthcoming I can foresee in two or three days a terrifying and inevitable explosion.” Rear Admiral N. Lemmers took the letter seriously and urged the central government bureaucracy to delay no longer or he might have to order military intervention to maintain order.³³

Finally, on August 15, the governor of Noord-Holland, after Commander Wardenburg’s many urgent requests, reluctantly granted permission to evacuate the entire ship and quarantine all passengers on the island of Wieringen for a few days, because of the “distress of humanity.” On August 20 government officials ordered Captain De Groot, under threat of being fired upon by the warship, to anchor the *April* downwind from the other ships because of the foul odor. He obeyed but had only two healthy crew members to complete the maneuver. The evacuation of the remaining passengers was completed eight days later and the ship was thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. The captain even hired a number of laborers to empty the entire third-class deck in order to clean it thoroughly.³⁴

In the meantime the government allocated another *f*20,000 and

³² Governor of Noord-Holland to Secretary of State, Aug 17, 1817, AR

³³ Wardenburg to Lemmers, Aug 31, 1817, Lemmers, Amsterdam, to Minister of the Navy, Sept 2, 1817, AR

³⁴ Holtrop, Den Helder, Aug 14, 1817, to Director of Police, Amsterdam, Archief Binnenlandse Zaken afd G, inventory 7, dossier G83, AR, Governor of Noord-Holland, to Schout at Den Helder, Aug 14, 15, 16, 1817, Provinciaal Archief 1817, nrs 302/3306, 314/3452, 304/3447, Rijksarchief (National Archives) of Noord-Holland at Haarlem (hereafter, RNH), Procurer General, The Hague, Aug 16, 1817, to Minister of Home Affairs, Archief Binnenlandse Zaken afd G, inventory nr 711 G83, nr 4378, AR, Governor of Noord-Holland, to Secretary of State, Aug 17, 1817, Archief Binnenlandse Zaken afd G, inventory nr 711 G83, nr 314/3452, AR, Governor of Noord-Holland to Minister of Home Affairs, Aug 18, 1817, The Hague, *ibid*, nr 404/3458, Minister of Home Affairs, The Hague, to King Willem I, Aug 18, 1817, Kabinet van de Koning, portfolio 3598 nr 21/372, inventory nr 471 nr 60, AR, Holtrop, Amsterdam, to Captain Bart, Aug 23, 1817, AR

ordered provisions to be dispatched to Wieringen for the quarantined passengers, including those from the *Nadesta*, but with the caveat to be very sparing in spending public monies.³⁵ The consignors of the *April* were in all likelihood nearly insolvent at this point, before the transatlantic voyage had even begun. More than half of the passengers were redemptioners who had made only a small down payment. "I sensed that my employer as well as the freight brokers, were unsure what to do with the mess," Captain De Groot noted in his diary.³⁶

By September 2, some 406 passengers had died including 84 in quarantine. The quarantine center actually proved little better than the ship, and the director was incompetent.³⁷ Some 150-200 persons out of 900 were seriously ill and 6 to 14 died daily. Children made up one-third of the sick but two-thirds of the dead. The surgeon found dead children hidden under the bedding straw, and he sometimes had to use force to remove bodies from distraught parents. He reported 50 orphans with no one to care for them and adults too weak to come for the food handouts, which consisted of hard biscuits, old grey peas, spoiled salted bacon and fish, and rotten fresh fish. The sick were in the barracks and the sound lived outside, subject to the cold rains sweeping in off the North Sea.³⁸

On September 8 the director of the quarantine center, as well as the physician from the warship *Zeeland* and two customs officers, boarded the *April* to make the required inspection of the sealed provisions—salt, wine, gin, and other goods—that were aboard. They found one seal broken and seized the entire ship, ordering Captain De Groot to appear in court at Haarlem. The judge levied a fine of *f*6000, but the captain successfully pleaded his case and got the fine reduced to only *f*600, which the owners paid to secure the release of the vessel.³⁹ The ship was again fumigated with smoke for two days under the supervision of the quarantine doctor, after which the captain supervised the preparations for the recovered passengers to continue the journey.

On September 15 a new first mate and sixteen sailors arrived on a

³⁵ Governor of Noord-Holland to Secretary of State, Aug. 17, 1817, AR.

³⁶ De Groot Diary.

³⁷ De Groot Diary.

³⁸ Lemmers, Amsterdam, to Minister of the Navy, The Hague, Sept. 2, 1817, AR.

³⁹ De Groot Diary.

relief ship sent by the owners to replace those who had died or quit. The crew was now back to full strength.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Commander Wardenburg continued to appeal urgently for food and reported that a woman went mad and attempted to murder several children.⁴¹ A few days later Texel authorities provided the much-needed food. Nearly two and one-half months had passed during the typhus epidemic, and at least 415 immigrants (more than one-third of the whole) had perished. By mid-September, only 100 passengers were sick and the death rate had dropped to one per day. "I can't wait for this sad business to reach its conclusion," declared the provincial governor.⁴² The ship's doctor purified the air in the hold with smoke several times a day and still the stench was unbearable.

On October 1 the commissioner of police came aboard the *April*, accompanied by a corporal and four soldiers. He ordered Captain De Groot to send some of the food supplies to those quarantined at Wieringen. The captain had to comply, despite the objection of the supercargo who believed that this group was the government's responsibility. Between October 5 and 10 the passengers reboarded with their baggage. Additional supplies for the journey were purchased amidst charges that unscrupulous merchants were exploiting the situation.⁴³

⁴⁰ The new muster roll of the *April*, Sept 12, 1817, is in the Muster Roll for Seafarers, Particulier Archief nr 38 (Waterschout) inventory nr 105, GA. It named twenty-five men, but only the chief helmsman, Jacob G Adnaans of Den Helder, was part of the original crew. The first crew of twenty-four men was half Dutch and half German. The second crew was only one-quarter Dutch, and the rest were German and Scandinavian.

⁴¹ Wardenburg to Director of Police, Amsterdam, Aug 28, 1817, AR, Minister of the Navy, The Hague, to King Willem I, Sept 3, 4, 1817, Kabinet van de Koning, nr 358, nr 25/370 nr 14, AR, Archief van de Staatssecretaris van Koning Willem I, nr 21/372, AR, Governor of Noord-Holland, Haarlem, to Schout, Den Helder, Sept 11, 1817, Provinciaal Archief 1817, nr 304/3914, RNH, Royal Army Medical Corps, Alkmaar, to Schout, Den Helder, Sept 12, 1817, Archief van de Commissie voor het Geneeskundige Staattoezicht in Noord-Holland, inventory nrs 131, 146, RNH, King Willem I, Brussels, to Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of the Navy, The Hague, Sept 11, 1817, Archief van de Staatssecretaris van Koning Willem I, inventory nr 486 nr 57, AR, Holtrop, Den Helder, to Corporation of Den Helder, Sept 21, 1817, Oud Archief, Haarlem, Governor of Noord-Holland, Amsterdam, to Schout, Den Helder, Sept 20, 1817, and Governor of Noord-Holland to Minister of Home Affairs, Sept 22, 1817, Archief Binnenlandse Zaken afd A, inventory nr 610 dossiers A692 nr 314/4100 nr 26, AR.

⁴² Governor of Noord-Holland to Minister of Home Affairs, Sept 22, 1817, AR.

⁴³ Wardenburg to Holtrop, Aug 28, 1817, AR, Governor of Noord-Holland to Minister of Home Affairs, The Hague, Sept 22, 1817, Archief Binnenlandse Zaken afd A, inventory nr 610, dossier A692 nr 314/4100 nr 26, AR.

The new supercargo, J.E. Schmidt, and a new ship's pilot came on board to replace their counterparts who had died in August. Before allowing the surviving passengers to reboard, Schmidt required them to sign a new contract giving him the option to proceed to any port in the United States, not just Philadelphia. One passenger reported later that he "would have signed anything in order to be extricated from the situation and get to America."⁴⁴ About 620 passengers reboarded the *April*.⁴⁵ This was a passengers per ton ratio of .77 (620/800 tons), which was not atypical, although it allowed barely one cubic yard of space per person. This was twice the limit of 320 passengers, had the congressional law of 1819 been in effect.⁴⁶

On October 11 the ship lifted anchor and, with a harbor pilot on board, set sail, driven by a northeast wind. As it approached the narrows known as the Schalpegat, however, the ship could not be controlled because of the strong undertow. The captain was forced to anchor in nine rods (149 feet) of water. The next day the ship finally sailed out to sea on a northeasterly wind.⁴⁷

The passengers became accustomed to the gentle swaying of the ship, and the fresh air was like a tonic that made everyone feel better. The passengers cooked three times daily on a brick stove behind the mainmast in two huge copper kettles that could hold up to seventy pails of water. Water was rationed and each morning the crew distributed the allotted portion of meat, bacon, bread, gin, peas, and porridge. Life was a ceaseless flurry of activity simply to take care of primary needs. The monotony was broken twice when the captain performed marriages.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Virchaux Report

⁴⁵ The 620 figure is based on the facts reported below that 550 passengers disembarked at New Castle and 70 died on the ocean (550+70=620)

⁴⁶ Captain De Groot's diary states that originally the 1,000 passengers with families shared only 62 berths in a space 72 ft long, 33 ft wide, and 7 ft high (616 cubic yds) . An additional 200 single men were housed in a third orlop deck in the hold of 30 ft long, 33 ft wide, and only 15 ft high (183 cubic yds) . This was a total of 800 cubic yds or 7 cubic yds for each of 1,100 original passengers and 13 cubic yds for the ultimate number of 620 passengers

⁴⁷ De Groot Affidavit

⁴⁸ One of the marriages was probably that of Daniel Rottengatter (Anglicized to Rutten cutter) and Mary Pacracy Rottengatter came from Gernsbach, a village in the Black Forest near Baden. They were married aboard the *April* by Captain De Groot, they repeated their vows in a church in New Castle immediately after their arrival. They settled in St Marys (Tyler County), West Virginia, along the Ohio River fifty miles south of Wheeling. Their eight children all lived past eighty years of age in St Marys, according to a report in the *Wheeling News Register*, Sept 7,

After several weeks of smooth sailing, high seas and strong winds buffeted the ship. But it pressed on until November 28, when a crack was discovered in the mainmast. The captain ordered the ship's carpenter to make a replacement, which took five days. Two days after installing the new mainmast, another tremendous storm staggered the donkey's-head mast, and it completely broke the other two masts. The masts were repaired in a makeshift manner and the journey continued.

Shortly after this episode the captain fell gravely ill with typhus and nearly died of fevers, intestinal bleeding, and vomiting. He later recalled: "Nothing is more frightening than death, because I had neglected my eternal salvation." But he recovered and gradually resumed his responsibilities. Altogether some seventy passengers died on the ocean, but the loss was partially offset by a number of births.⁴⁹

After ten weeks at sea, on December 20, 1817, the lookout sighted the American coast, and on December 25 a pilot came aboard at the mouth of the Delaware River. The weather then turned extremely cold as the *April* sailed up the Delaware, dropping anchor off Reedy Island.⁵⁰ Several days of calm stalled the ship there. On January 3, 1818, it caught a fresh breeze and continued to New Castle, where it tied up between the "heads." The next day, while anchored there, a large ice floe crashed into the ship with such force that the heavy tie rope and pulleys were ripped loose, taking two planks out of the ship's hull behind the mainmast. Although badly damaged, the rope did not break and the ship remained firmly moored.

The supercargo's immediate task was to arrange for the poor passengers to redeem themselves and pay their passage fare. His advertisement in the January 7 issue of the New Castle *American Watchman* announced the arrival of a shipload of immigrants to be signed to labor contracts.

GERMAN REDEMPTIONERS. On board the ship *April*, now lying at New Castle, about three hundred German Redemptioners, of families, single men and women, of different trades, but principally farmers. For

1908 (item reprinted in *West Virginia Hillbilly*, March 31, 1988, p. 7) The information on the Ruttencutter family was kindly provided by a great grandson, Lynden E. Reynolds

⁴⁹ The mortality at sea of 11 percent (70/620) was probably twice the "normal" rate, but not unexpected given the rampant disease outbreak prior to sailing. See the sources cited in note 1

⁵⁰ *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 7, 1818

terms enquire on board, or of JOSEPH ROBINSON, in Wilmington, January 5, 1818.⁵¹

As soon as the *April* docked, some angry passengers filed complaints for mistreatment against Schmidt with Captain Sawyer, the U.S. Revenue officer at New Castle. As the agent of Kress and Rodenbroek, the supercargo bore the responsibility for overloading the vessel with sick passengers. Sawyer notified C.L. Mannhardt, president of the German Society of Philadelphia, and the board of the Society immediately dispatched secretary Henry T. Virchaux to investigate in person. Virchaux boarded the *April* on January 15, amidst a "number of gentlemen from the country to purchase passengers," and was told that the captain and supercargo were too busy to speak with him. He then interviewed a family who had already disembarked and learned "of the sufferings which they endured during their stay on board the Ship April which were indeed distressing."⁵²

Virchaux reported on various legal actions for redress started in New Castle by passengers. One sued Schmidt for not landing him in Philadelphia as his original contract specified, but then settled for \$10. Another, Ambrosius Blusik, sued Schmidt for the "unreasonable detention of himself and his family on board of the Ship." Meanwhile, the many passengers who had not yet sold their services, and thus had to remain on the ship, threatened mass action because they had received no fresh provisions or their allotted gin ration. Virchaux intervened and pacified the passengers after Schmidt agreed to provide food. Within a day Virchaux returned and found plenty of fresh pork, beef, and potatoes. "The passengers were then at breakfast, very much pleased and thankful to me for my interference." Schmidt pacified others by refunding a portion of their fare "when humanity required it."

Virchaux noted that the passengers directed their ire only against Schmidt. "I did not hear any of the passengers make any complaint

⁵¹ The clipping was kindly provided to Jan Alberts by Constance J Cooper, manuscript librarian, Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington. The implied percentage of redemptioners among the passengers was 55 percent (300/550), slightly above the average for German immigrants to Philadelphia at this time (Grubb, "The Disappearance of European Immigrant Servitude in the U S," Table 1). Given the costs the immigrants incurred in the Netherlands before sailing, we would expect to find a higher percentage who had to redeem themselves.

⁵² Virchaux Report

against Captain De Groot." In the end, Virchaux returned to Philadelphia satisfied that conditions had improved to the point of being tolerable. But he noted that the process of "binding out" the redemptioners did not go as well as in Philadelphia, especially of the many orphans, several of whom ended up in "tipling houses, etc."

While the agent of the German Society worked as an ombudsman, the poor passengers bound themselves out. "Very soon," De Groot noted in his dairy,

farmers came from far and wide to look over and meet the newcomers. All morning the deck was crowded with farmers and tradesmen who picked out young men and women. The scene resembled a circus as deals were struck. This is how it went with the trading of people. I had 42 orphans on board who lost their parents at Wieringen, of which the oldest was no more than 12 to 14 years. In this way the children were traded. In general the girls had to serve their masters until age 22 and the boys until age 20. They all received the proper document or contract stating how long they had to serve and the terms of employment. I found it most heart-rending when a sister and brother were separated and said farewell to one another; they would sometimes cry uncontrollably. I also noted that some parents were unmoved when they let their children go. I could have written a book about the passengers reaction.⁵³

The process of disembarking and vending the passengers was completed on February 7. About 100 of the oldest and least productive redemptioners, who were not able to sell their services immediately, were put up in a public building, probably the New Castle County almshouse, until the supercargo could find employers for them. Whether he succeeded is unknown, but the high demand for contract labor makes it probable.

The redemption system passed into merciful oblivion soon after the passage of the *April*. The last passenger "sales" were reported in Philadelphia in 1818 and 1819. According to Friedrich Kapp, one of the commissioners of emigration of the state of New York, "We do not hear of indentured servants after 1819, when immigration began to consist of a much better and well-to-do class of people, and the United States first intervened in behalf of this important economic interest."⁵⁴ Poor immi-

⁵³ De Groot Diary

⁵⁴ Kapp, *Immigration*, 12, Grubb, "The Disappearance of European Immigrant Servitude in the US," Table 1, gives the total number of redemptioners to Pennsylvania after 1819 as follows 1820, 18, 1821, 5, 1822, 0, 1823-1831, 15, after 1832, 0

grants turned instead to the new remittance system, in which relatives and friends in the growing German community of Pennsylvania sent money to purchase tickets in advance of embarkation. German immigrants after 1819 were also increasingly able to pay for their own passage, and transatlantic rates declined as shipping companies competed for the rising tide of immigrants.⁵⁵

Because of the storm damage, Captain De Groot decided to have his ship towed to Wilmington, where the splintered masts were replaced with new ones. This task was completed on May 1 and two days later, after taking on supplies and additional ballast, the *April* prepared to embark on the return voyage. Meanwhile, four seaman had deserted, so the ship returned to New Castle while the captain traveled to Philadelphia to hire replacement deckhands.

On May 13 the new crew members came on board and the money paid by the redemptioners was accounted for. After all expenses had been paid, 5,300 Spanish ducats (about \$12,000) remained and this was handed over to E.W. Hoskins, a Wilmington businessman, who remitted the funds to the owners in Amsterdam.⁵⁶ On May 20 the ship sailed for Surinam, to take on a return cargo.⁵⁷

After two months at sea, the captain miscalculated the tides and the *April* ran aground at Braampunt, a promontory on the coast of Surinam near the entrance to the harbor of Paramaribo. The ship *Een Swaan* pulled it free the next day with the aid of a winch and heavy throw line. Five days later, on July 25, 1818, the *April* arrived at Paramaribo, the capital of Surinam. Captain De Groot had intended to pick up 600 barrels of sugar for the return trip to Amsterdam, but the March deadline to load had long passed. After six months of great difficulty Captain De Groot managed to obtain only 211 barrels of sugar, which took six weeks to load.⁵⁸

The return trip to Amsterdam began on March 17, 1819, at the first favorable winds. A violent storm near St. Lucia again severely damaged the sails, masts, and rigging. After retrieving the large pieces from the water, the *April* managed to limp into War's Bay on the island for repairs.

⁵⁵ Grubb, "The Disappearance of European Immigrant Servitude in the U S," 46-55

⁵⁶ De Groot Affidavit

⁵⁷ The owner is here identified as a Mr Boekhouder

⁵⁸ De Groot Affidavit

The homeward trip resumed on March 27, and without further incidents the vessel crossed the ocean in seven weeks, reaching Texel on May 13. After traversing the Zuiderzee in two days, the *April* again ran aground at the Pampus. In order to lighten ship, some of the barrels of sugar and ballast bricks were offloaded to a smaller ship, and with the help of a trawler the *April* was pulled past the Pampus bar and tied up in Amsterdam harbor, where the remaining cargo was unloaded.⁵⁹

All 211 barrels of sugar were delivered in good shape. Not one had been stolen, thrown overboard, or damaged, Captain De Groot testified. The captain also declared under oath that no harm to the ship was caused by poor loading or lack of care on his part or that of the crew, who displayed good seamanship at all times.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the very expensive interruption in the voyage at Texel in the summer of 1817 led to the bankruptcy of the freight consignors, the firm of Kress and Rodenbroek. The *Rechtbank van Koophandel* (Judicial Bank of Commerce) closed legal proceedings on October 12, 1819, but the settlement of outstanding debts between the shipowners and consignors was not concluded until 1821. It is noteworthy that in these court litigations the faceless passengers received no recognition or financial restitution. They were victims of an “act of God” in an age ignorant of hygiene and epidemiology.

The experience of the *April* is an example of Murphy’s Law—whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. The situation was ripe for disaster. Thousands of poor people wanted to escape to the land of their dreams by any means possible, and they were willing to undergo any hardships to reach the promised land. With little government regulation of ocean vessels that were not designed for passengers, and with tens of thousands of unfortunates desperate to sail to America, disastrous epidemics could be expected, if they were not inevitable.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid Eight of the crew members affirmed De Groot’s testimony under oath, “except for particulars concerning the captain” They were Jacob G Adriaans of Den Helder, the second in command, Christen Fieuren and Symen Pieterse of Norway, Thues Clemens of the German island of Fohr, Claus van Seggeren of Amsterdam, Hans Jacob Warnd (boatman), Andries Jurmaans (ship’s carpenter) of Ahrendal, and T A Franken The residence of Warnd and Franken is not specified, but they are probably Netherlanders Since the affidavit was for insurance purposes, De Groot makes few references to the loss of human life because contracts between shipowners and captains typically precluded captains from making any independent decisions about the loading and provisioning of immigrants

Because of the owners' malfeasance, but through no fault of Captain De Groot, the *April* suffered a scourge that left hundreds dead. Indeed, the real disaster stemmed from the supercargo's decision to overload the vessel at Texel. But the death rate was higher than necessary because of the indecisive action of Netherlands government officials in accepting responsibility for and bearing the costs of foreign nationals in distress. Their only goal was to rid themselves of the problem at minimal expense. The Dutch monarch was finally shamed into sending funds for food, but demanded an accounting for every cent. As soon as the ship departed, he also ordered a formal investigation into the *April* and *Nadesta* cases "to guard against further abuses and dishonoring of the name of the Netherlands."⁶¹ No wonder that bureaucrats in the lower echelons were preoccupied with money matters, had a fear of blundering, and showed a meanness of spirit toward the defenseless immigrants who were bent on passage to America. The German and Swiss governments also bore responsibility for allowing their poorest citizens to flock to Dutch ports in such numbers that they overwhelmed the facilities and transport system. That shipowners and their agents exploited the victims is a given. The "paying ballast" was too lucrative a cargo to refuse.

The *April* disaster spurred the United States government into action. The tale of its passengers, according to Friedrich Kapp, was "shocking in the extreme and created a painful sensation all over the country," as did the public realization that no U.S. law limited the number of passengers or ensured their "health or comfort." The unspoken concern, of course, was the arrival of poor, diseased foreigners. On March 10, 1818, Representative Louis McLane of Delaware introduced a bill "to regulate passenger ships and vessels."⁶²

In floor debate on December 16, 1818, Congressman Thomas Newton, Jr., of Norfolk, Virginia, a member of the Committee on Commerce and Manufactures that marked up the bill, cited the case of the *April* as proof that the law was needed to give immigrant passengers a "security of sufficient food and convenience." Newton embellished the facts a bit: he claimed that the ship carried exactly 1,267 passengers and that 400 died at Texel and another 300 at sea. Moreover, "the remainder, when the

⁶¹ Privy Council, Brussels, to Minister of the Navy and Minister of Home Affairs, The Hague, Nov 26, 1817, Archief Staatssecretaris Koning Willem I, inventory nr 520 nr 76, AR.

⁶² Kapp, *Immigration*, 41-42, *Annals of Congress*, 15th Cong, 1st Sess, March 10, 1819, p 1,222

vessel reached Newcastle, were in a very emaciated state from want of water and food, from which many of them afterwards died." This tragedy showed the "absolute necessity of provisions such as those of this bill," Newton concluded. The House passed the bill that day and the Senate concurred with only minor amendments. The final version became law on March 2, 1819.⁶³ The *April* victims were vindicated; they had not suffered in vain. The U.S. government had begun the regulation of immigrant ships. Although the first law did not significantly improve shipboard conditions, stiffer legislation followed. Ultimately, by the 1850s, market forces compelled owners to cater to their customers with the new steam technologies.

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⁶³ *Annals of Congress*, 15th Cong., 2nd Sess., House of Representatives, Dec. 16, 1818, pp. 414-15; Senate, Dec. 22 1818, p. 80; Jan. 11, 1819, p. 112; Feb. 2, 1819, pp. 205-6; Feb. 27, 1819, p. 285; House of Representatives, Feb. 6, 1819, p. 1,037; March 2, 1819, p. 1,393, 2,496-98.

