A downtown area in Grand Rapids known since the 1960s as Heartside has housed the city’s poorest citizens for over 150 years. Its first residents were rambunctious riverboat hands and wharf workers, who spent short periods of time and most of their wages in the taverns and rooming houses which crowded the river’s east bank. Already in the 1850s, Dutch immigrants, many escaping welfare in concentrated on Ionia, Commerce, and Division streets, bounded by Fulton on the north and Wealthy on the south. By 1876 this sector became the nerve center of the fledgling Christian Reformed Church. Its landmark edifice, Spring Street Christian Reformed Church, stood at what is now 57 Commerce Street.* The denomination’s first group of theological students (1870) gathered in the upper rooms of the Dutch-language school at 43 Williams Street, and the CRC weekly Dutch-language periodical De Wacht  
*er was headquartered at 42 Commerce Street. These institutions were sur-
rounded and supported by a large enclave of Dutch immigrants.

Netherlands settlers in the area because it offered unskilled jobs, low-cost housing, and ready access to both workplaces and retail stores. By 1857, when the first congregation organized and built a $3,000 structure on Ionia Street, it attracted about fifty charter-member families. The 1860 census counted seventy-four households in or near the current boundaries of Heartside. During their first decade (1857-1867) Dutch Christian Reformed immigrants worshiped in a plain, rectangular wood structure on the northwest corner of Ionia and Weston streets, a

* Commerce Street was Spring Street until 1912.
site in the shadow of the newly constructed Van Andel Arena today.

The congregation erected a new sanctuary on 57 Commerce Street in 1867, where the first pastor, Rev. Wilhelmius Van Leeuwen, laid the cornerstone. This ample structure with a seating capacity of 1,300, was ornamented with a clock tower and a raised pulpit modeled after Reformed church architecture in the Netherlands. In 1887 membership peaked at 1,800, but in 1910, with only 500 members, the congregation decided to relocate. Its parishioners had moved elsewhere, and Polk's Grand Rapids City Directory in 1910 records only fourteen Dutch householders on Commerce and Williams streets—once the vital core of the ethnic enclave.

During its vigorous heyday Heartside's Dutch enclave supported an array of ethnically linked businesses—Steketee and Kim; Brink's Grocery; Van Driele's Flour, Feed, and Grain; and a wooden-shoe outlet. These and other aspects of the community are evident in the correspondence of Martin Schoonbeek, who arrived there in 1873. Martin's seven-member household, together with four other families, could find no housing on their Saturday-morning arrival and spent their first two nights in a barn.

family relocated in one of Piet Otte's apartments, just two doors away from Geert Stel's home. Martin wrote, "Piet Otte and his wife are Hollanders. In fact most people around here are Hollanders... Geert Stel has been in Grand Rapids for about three years. He was in debt when he came, but he now has his own house and another which has two rental flats. He told me that he receives rental of $4.50 per month for them."

For his own flat Martin paid Piet Otte $2.00 monthly but within ninety days Schoonbeek was building a new home at 36 Logan Street SE. The lot, purchased from Jacobus De Jong, stood two doors east of Division Street, on the fringe of the city. Martin wrote, "We have a fine house built entirely of wood, but wood is cheap here—$14.00 for one thousand linear board feet. One side of the house is decorated with eight windows that have eight panes. Each window costs $1.80, and they are well made." Two months later Martin added, "We have come to the point here where our lot must be fenced to enclose the garden... cows roam wherever there are no fences."

Schoonbeek's one-time neighbor on Spring, W.H. De Lange, also arrived in 1873 and provided a description of the area and his apartment: "There are many factories, large stores, and other expensive buildings here. The many wooden houses are well planned. Currently I live on the second floor of such a house and pay rent of $2.00 per..."
First sanctuary of the CRC in Grand Rapids. Northwest corner of Ionia and Weston Island. Courtesy of Local History Department, Grand Rapids Public Library.

Mrs. Spierstra, nee Benjamin, recalled her early years, the 1860s, in the Ionia Street neighborhood and wrote in 1934.

I was only five years old [1862] at that time . . . but I do remember going to that church and school—the very first church and school.

When I was about six or seven years old [1863], main street Grand Rapids had only a few stores, some sawmills, flour mills, and some small factories, etc. A fifteen-minute walk took you out into the country.

Not long after the first church was built, in perhaps six or seven years, it became too small. Then we built a new brick church not far from the old one and called it Spring Street Church—which is now Commerce Street . . .

Then the old building on south Ionia was used for immigrants who had no place to go at first.

1869 sanctuary - Spring Street CRC, later Bates Street CRC or First CRC of Grand Rapids.

Current use—site of remodeled furniture warehouse used now for loft apartments and a restaurant.

Dutch History, Geog. Lit. were taught in Dutch at William's School.

children well enough so they can read and write Dutch. They learn other subjects in the English [public] schools. * I teach from Monday through Friday, 9:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. The prospects are good because people can live well here on $10.00 per week. So I opened the school with about one hundred students on August 11, 1873—one day after my forty-eighth birthday . . . . It was rather lively here at first and I doubted that I could hold out, but now, after eight weeks, I am getting used to it. Still, these Yankees are uncivilized rascals and not easy to control.*

De Lange was accidentally killed in 1874, two years before the CRC's first group of theological students began to meet in the Williams Street school's second floor, quarters which served the seminary until 1892, when a

* In 1884 the South Division Street School of the corner of Bartlett and Division stood where the Guiding Light Mission stands now. The school, with a seven-hundred-student capacity, was the largest in Grand Rapids.
monumental new structure was completed on the corner of Franklin and Madison streets. Grade-school education persisted in the old structure until 1905, when enrollment dropped to about sixty students. The Salvation Army purchased the building in 1907 to establish an industrial school and home.

The Spring Street congregation did not relocate to its new Bates Street sanctuary until 1912, but by then little remained of the old Dutch enclave's shops, homes, and apartments. Warehouses, factories, and cartage firms dominated the area. The Union Railway Station, completed in 1870, conveniently transported newly arriving immigrants to the doorstep of their enclave, but the station also transformed the local economy by facilitating the distribution of goods from both farms and factories. Ultimately all of the region's houses were razed to make room for commercial buildings, and by 1900 a new and larger Union Station together with a train shed indicated the rapid growth of railroad-related businesses in Heartside.

The various uses put to the once-hallowed Spring Street sanctuary reflect the area's transformation. The Ryskamps, Division Street butchers, removed the pews and scrapped the high pulpit and clock tower to make space for horses, delivery wagons, and eventually trucks. In 1931, during the Great Depression, the city acquired the building for use as the City Social Center. Reflecting on the congregation's history that year, Banner editor Henry J. Kuiper wrote,

The pictures herewith represent the old Spring Street church building, for many years the home of the mother church of Grand Rapids. When, in the days of Rev. P. Ekster, the First Church, as it is now called, moved to a better neighborhood, the Spring Street property was sold. Being in the very heart of the city it should have been kept for church purposes, but the Grand Rapids churches did not realize how convenient it would be to have a building downtown for public religious gatherings. So the erstwhile dignified church edifice was torn down, and converted into a garage. The present owners are the Ryskamp brothers, meat dealers, who in the present unemployment...
emergency have donated the use of the building to the city for charitable purposes. It is now a municipal clubhouse for homeless and jobless men. During the winter months about six hundred men were fed every day and sleeping accommodations were provided for one hundred and forty-five men.

Similarly nostalgic ruminations were published in 1956 when the venerable structure was razed. Noting that event, the Grand Rapids Press wrote,

OLD CHURCH COMES DOWN

Demolition of the former Spring Street Christian Reformed Church at 57 Commerce Avenue, SW, removed a historic landmark which was once the place of worship of the first Christian Reformed church on this continent and the mother church of all the Christian Reformed churches in this area. The picture at right, showing the almost classic beauty of the old structure, was made from an enlarged reproduction of an old photograph, prepared by Benjamin Herzel, whose father was an elder in the church, and who was baptized and catechized by one of its pastors. The congregation is now known as First Christian Reformed Church and its church is at Bates Street and Henry Avenue SE.

Today no remnant of the Dutch enclave can be detected.