

GEERT ADRIAANS BOOMGAARD, the first supercentenarian in history?

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Abstract

This contribution presents the validation of the age at death of Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD (GAB), a seaman who reached the age of 110. He was born in Groningen on 21 September 1788 and died in the same city on 3 February 1899. A remarkable number of documents have been found that cover the full span of GAB's life, and thus make it possible to validate his reported exceptional age. In the first step of the validation, a comparison of the baptism and death records shows that the information provided is consistent, even if the spelling of the surnames of his parents reported in the two records is not identical. The reconstitution of GAB's family and the dates of birth of his siblings also support the validity of GAB's reported age at death. The demographic information covers the period between 1818 (the year of his marriage) and 1837 (the year of birth of his last child). We found only a few documents that mention him during his early life before his first marriage, including a document from 1791 indicating that his father named his new boat De Jonge Geert, and a list of conscripts from 1811. However, we found numerous documents covering the period from 1837 to 1899 that are related to his career as a seaman; the marriages of children; his entry into a nursing home; and various interviews, photos, and articles on his life that appeared in the press. All of these documents support the validity of GAB's reported year of birth and age at death. Thus, GAB might be considered the first thoroughly validated supercentenarian in the history of humankind.

Introduction

Documented cases of people reaching age 110 have existed at least since 1950, and the number of validated supercentenarians has increased substantially since 1970. It has been estimated that globally, there have been more than 1000 supercentenarians (Maier et al.

2010¹). However, we still do not know when in history the first supercentenarian appeared, or even whether supercentenarians existed before 1950.

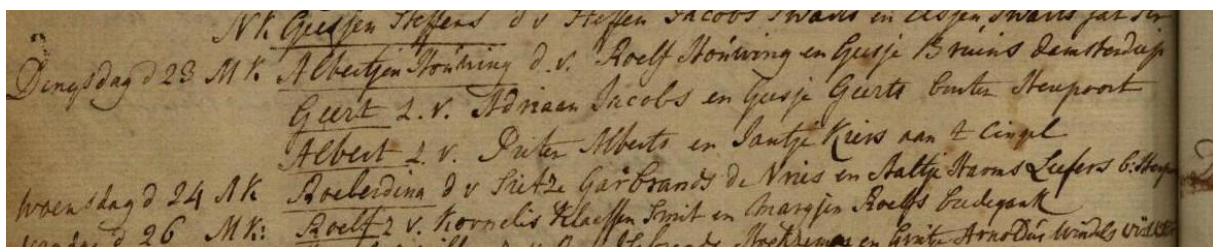
We would have expected the first supercentenarian to have been a woman. However, Margaret Ann NEVE, the first woman known to have reached 110 years of age, died on 4 April 1903; whereas Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD, a man, died a few years earlier on 3 February 1899. Here we present the validation of the age at death of Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD at the reported age of 110.

Birth, marriages, and death records

The first step in the age validation of a dead person is to check the consistency of the information included in the birth and death records. Photos 1 and 2 show the baptism and death records of Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD (GAB). The baptism record of GAB is dated Tuesday, 23 September 1788. He is identified as the son of Adriaan JACOBS and Geesje GEERTS. The death record indicates that Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD died on 3 March 1899 at age 110 years; was born and had been living in Groningen; was first widowed upon the death of Stjintje BUS and again upon the death of Grietje Abels JONKER; and was the son of Adriaan Jacobs BOOMGAARD and Geesje GEERTS.

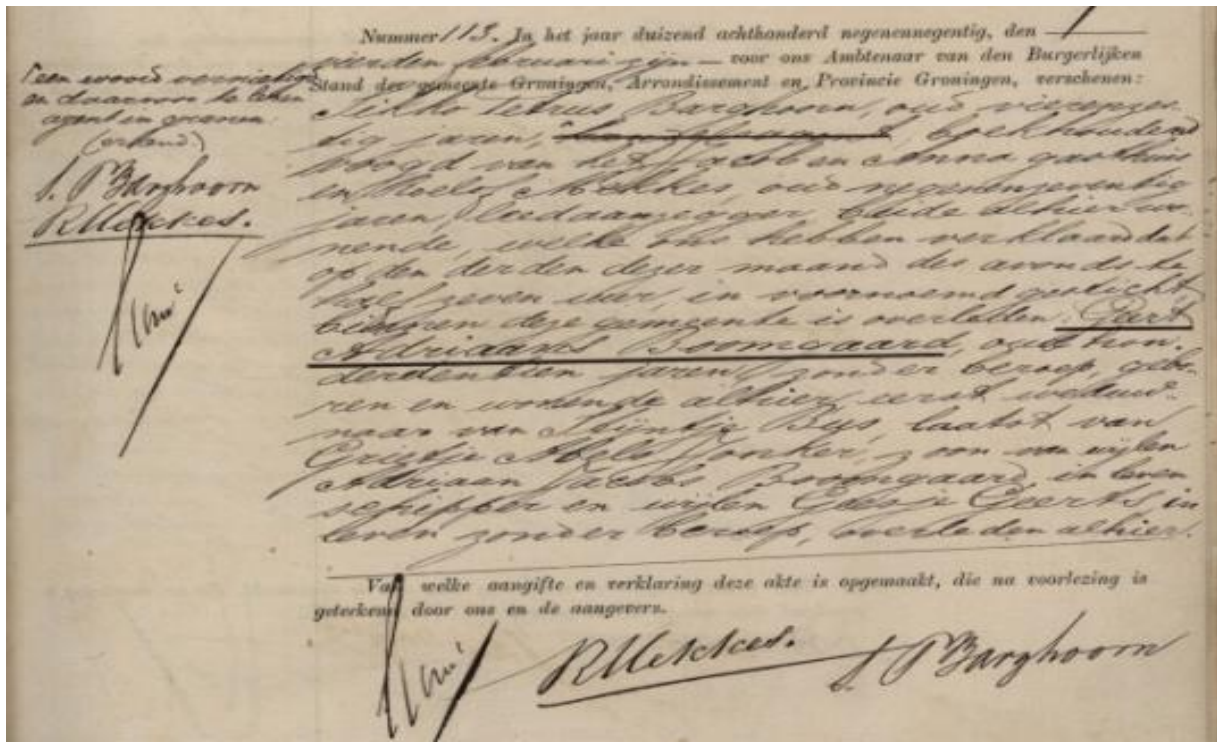
When comparing the two records, we see that the reported age at death is consistent with the reported dates of baptism and death, and that the names given for his mother are similar. However, the family name of the father differs in the two records: it is listed as Adriaan JACOBS in the baptism record and as Adriaan Jacobs BOOMGAARD in the death record. Therefore, these two documents are clearly not sufficient for the validation of the age at death of GAB, as they do not unequivocally confirm that the two individuals mentioned in these records are the same person. To validate GAB's age, additional information is needed, such as documents on the marriage of his parents (Photo 3) and on his own two marriages.

Photo 1. Baptism record of Geert, son of Adriaan JACOBS and Geesje GEERTS on Tuesday, 23 September 1788 in Groningen (Parish register, Groninger Archieven)



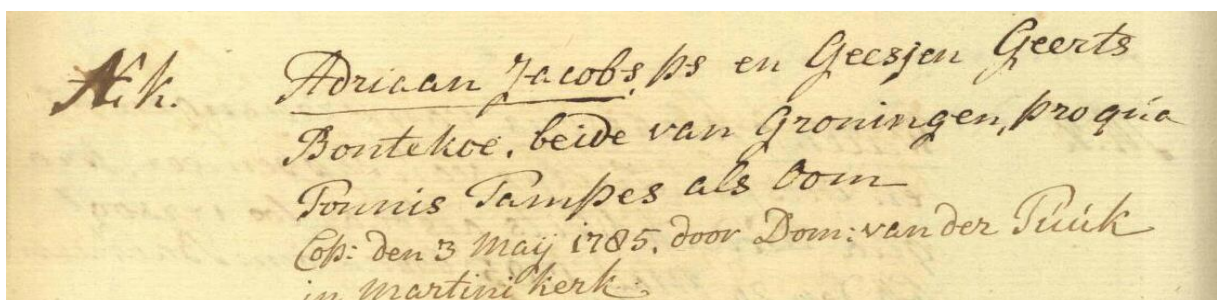
¹ Maier, H., J. Gampe, B. Jeune, JM Robine, and J.W.Vaupel (Eds.) (2010) Supercentenarians. Springer Verlag, Heidelberg, Germany

Photo 2. Death record of Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD, who died in Groningen on 3 March 1899 (Civil death register, Groninger Archieven)



The marriage of GAB's parents took place in Sint Martin church in Groningen on 3 May 1785, and the names of his parents were Adriaan JACOBS and Geesje Geerts BONTEKOE (Photo 3). Even if these names correspond with the names that appear in GAB's baptism and death records, the surname of his mother, BONTEKOE, is indicative of the large degree of variability of surname spellings at the end of the 18th century.

Photo 3. Marriage record of the parents of Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD in Groningen on 3 May 1785 (Parish register, Groninger Archieven)



The marriage record of GAB's first marriage to Stijntje BUS on 4 March 1818 gives the following information: Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD aged 29, son of Adriaan Jacobs BOOMGAARD and Geesje GEERTS (GAB's date of baptism is given as 23 September 1788). Stijntje BUS died on 24 March 1830 at age 33. GAB married his second wife, Grietje Abels JONKER, on 17 March 1831. In the marriage record, GAB is identified as follows: Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD, 42 years old, son of Adriaan Jacobs BOOMGAARD and Geesje GEERTS. At that time, variation in the spelling of given names and surnames was common,

as can be seen from the baptism records of all of the children of Adriaan Jacobs BOOMGAARD and Geesje Geerts BONTEKOE (see Table 1).

Table 1. The siblings of Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD and the names of their parents

Jacob (n°1)	1787 Sept 12 th	Ariaan Jacobs Boomgaard	Geesje Geerts	Infant ?	
Geert	1788 Sept 23 th	Adriaan Jacobs	Geesje Geerts	1899 Febr 3 th	110 y.
Grietje	1791 Febr 23 th	Adriaan Jacobs	Geesje Geerts	Infant ?	
Jacob (n°2)	1793 April 26 th	Ariaan Jacobs Boomgaard	Geesje Geerts Bontekoe	Infant ?	
Jacob (n°3)	1795 April 3 th	Arriaan Jacobs	Geesijn Geerts	1828 June 20 th	33 y.
Tonnis	1797 August 29 th	Aderjaan Jacobs	Geesje Geerts Bontekoe	Infant ?	
Christoffer (n°1)	1800 Febr 9 th	Adriaan Jacobs	Geezien Geerts	1806 Oct 27 th	6 y.
Annegien	1803 May 11 th	Aarjaan Jakops	Geesien Bontekoe	1892 March 29 th	88 y.
Nicolaas	1805 Dec 29 th	Adriaan Jacobs	Geessien Bontekoe	1806 Nov 20 th	10 m.
Christoffer (n°2)	1807 Oct 28 th	Adriaan Jacobs	Geesjen Geerts Bontekoe	1894 Jan 24 th	86 y.

Adriaan JACOBS, the father of GAB, was identified with the surname BOOMGAARD in the baptism record of a son named Jacob in 1787, and with the surname BOOMGAART in the baptism record of a second named Jacob in 1793. Between these two years, we found also two documents in which the surname BOOMGAARD was mentioned:

- BOOMGAARD in the marriage record of the father's sister-in-law Geertje Geerts BONTEKOE (married to Jacob Thomas DE WAARD on 19 November 1791);
- A.J. BOEMGARD in the document stating that the father Adriaan JACOBS received the 'Schippers Gildepenning' in 1792.

The use of surnames was not made mandatory until the beginning of the 19th century. Before this point in time, it was normal practice to use only the name of the father and to add an 's' at the end. Thus, since GAB's great-grandfather was named Nicolaas PETERS, his grandfather was named Jacob NICOLAAS, his father was named Adriaan JACOBS, and GAB himself was named Geert ADRIAANS. At that time, an additional surname was only occasionally given in a baptism or marriage record.

With the annexation of the Kingdom of Holland by the French Empire on 13 July 1810, a system of civil registration was introduced, and the requirement to provide a fixed surname on administrative documents was progressively imposed. In the register of surnames, *Register van naamsaanneming* (Groningen Archieven n°6429), the father of GAB, Adriaan

JACOBS, declared on 6 June 1826 that he had taken the surname of BOOMGAARD for himself, his three sons, and his daughter: Geert ADRIAANS, aged 33; Jacob ADRIAANS, aged 28; Christoffer ADRIAANS, aged 18; and Annechien ADRIAANS, aged 22². These were indeed the four children of Adriaan JACOBS, but the age of GAB was reported as 33 years, while it should have been 37 years. Such errors are often found in administrative documents when the age is declared by another person. Moreover, the transcription process could have introduced such an error. By itself, this error does not call into question the year of birth of GAB. From this point onwards, GAB was systematically referred to by the name Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD.

The examination of the sibship of GAB is an important part of the validation process. GAB was the second of 10 children. As can be seen in Table 1, the time intervals between the births of the 10 children were very short – the longest interval was three years and three months between the births of Christoffer and Annegien. In line with the usual practice at that time, the deaths of the younger children in GAB's family were not recorded in the parish register. However, the appearance in the register of two or three entries for the same name – as was the case for the names Jacob and Christoffer – indicates that the previous bearers of the name had died. It is possible that GAB's sibling Tonnis also had the given name of Geert, and died in 1899 at age 101. Tonnis is the only sibling in the family who could have plausibly been confused with GAB considering GAB's year of marriage in 1818. But since the name Tonnis Adriaans or Tonnis Adriaans BOOMGAARD did not appear after this point in time in any of the numerous documents we have examined, the chances that Tonnis was confused with Geert are very low.

The reconstitution of the family of GAB (Table 2) with his 12 children from two marriages supports the claim that GAB was born in 1788, as his age is mentioned systematically in each record of baptism of his children. These data on the births – and, in some cases, the deaths at young ages – of GAB's children have been extracted from the civil registers. As can be seen in Table 2, four of GAB's 12 children died before reaching one year of age, and a fifth child died before the age of two. Only Jansje Hinderika survived until the age of 50, and all of GAB's children had been dead for several years before he died in 1899. He was 96 years old when Jansje Hinderika died in 1885. However, GAB's father, Adriaan Jacobs Boomgaard, died in Groningen on 2 February 1844 at the age of 80 years and 10 months; and one of his uncles, Niklaas Jacobs Boomgaard, died in Groningen on 6 March 1845 at the age of 84 years and 11 months.

Based on the information we found in the relevant marriage and birth records, it appears that GAB's major life events were consistently recorded from 1818, the date of his first marriage, until 1837, the year of birth of his last child. However, these records do not contain information on two long periods of his life: from 1788 to 1818 and from 1837 to

² Den zesden January achttienhonderd zesentwintig (06/01/1826), Adriaan JACOBS verklaarde dat hij aanneemt tot zijn geslachtsnaam de naam van BOOMGAARD, dat hij heeft drie zonen en eene dochter, namelijk Geert ADRIAANS oud 33 jaren, Jacob ADRIAANS oud 28 jaren, Christoffer ADRIAANS oud 18 jaren en Annechien ADRIAANS oud 22 jaren. Registers van naamsaanneming, inventaris nummer 6429, Naamsaanneming in Groningen, 1811-1826, P.J.C. Elema, Index 286, Inventaris nummer S-3823.

1899. To cover these periods, we needed to find other types of documents. Of these documents, the most important came from the population register (*bevolkings register*).

Table 2. The children of Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD: the mother of the first eight was Stijntje BUS, and the mother of the last four was Grietje Abels JONKER. The age of GAB is mentioned in the third column.

Geesje	1818 November 24 th	30	1859 November 15 th	40 y.
Anna	1820 May 31 th	31	1844 June 13 th	24 y.
Adriana	1821 September 26 th	33	1838 January 1 st	16 y.
Hinderika Margareta	1823 November 28 th	35	1825 October 14 th	1 y.
Teunis	1825 September 30 th	37	1862 July 21 th	46 y.
Jansje	1827 March 15 th	38	1827 June 9 th	2 m.
Jansje Hinderika	1828 August 10 th	39	1885 May 24 th	56 y.
Jacoba	1830 February 19 th	41	1830 March 7 th	16 d.
Anna Henderika	1831 November 25 th	43	1832 March 9 th	3 m.
Abel Gerardus	1833 February 6 th	44	(*)	?
Jacob	1834 May 7 th	45	1879 February 22 th	44 y.
Geert	1837 March 12 th	48	1838 August 23 th	1 y.

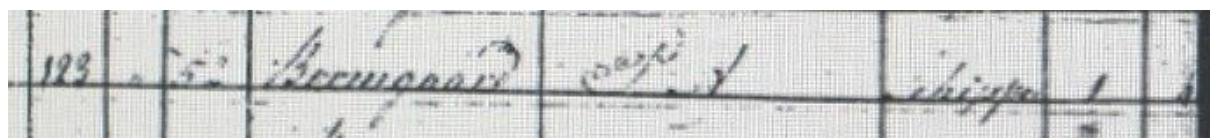
(*) Probably died in 1861 (his boat *Helena Jacoba* was on sale in Antwerp on 31 October 1861)

Lists of inhabitants, censuses, and population registers

The French regime introduced population registers by ordering municipalities to establish lists of inhabitants by household, and to keep these lists updated by registering births and deaths, as well as immigration and emigration events. Such lists can be found in the archives. It appears, however, that the updating process was not efficient, as only a few signs that the lists were updated can be found in the documents. When the Netherlands recovered its independence after the Vienna Congress in 1815, the requirement that municipalities maintain lists of inhabitants was extended, but the lists drawn up in 1819, 1822, and 1825 were not updated continuously. Thus, these lists cannot be considered population registers or population censuses. More detailed lists were produced for all of the municipalities of the Netherlands (including Belgium) on 1 January 1830, but the first census that collected detailed data was not carried out until 1846. Population registers were not maintained on a continuous basis in the Netherlands until the 1850s onwards, but

the first list of inhabitants for the city of Groningen that we found in the archives of the city in the *Bevolkingsregisters* (population registers) section is from 1822 (Groninger Archieven n°6537). In this list, the household of GAB was recorded as number 123, and consisted of five persons, including his wife and three daughters. The entry did not indicate the ages of the family members, and it was not updated to include the children who were born in the following years (Photo 4).

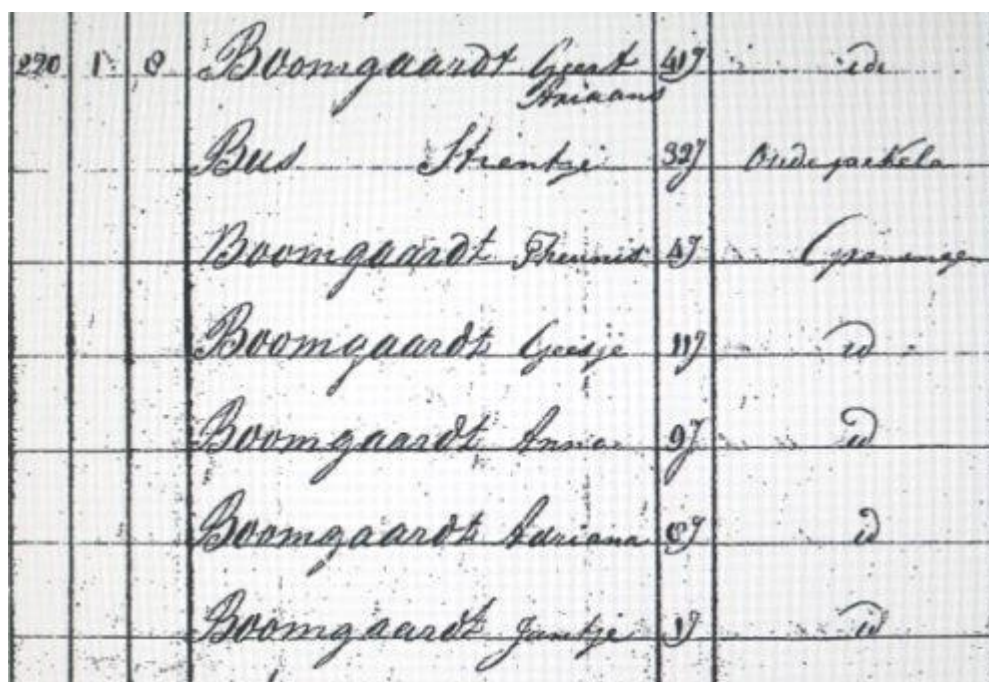
Photo 4. Extract from the list of inhabitants of Groningen compiled in 1822 (Groninger Archieven n°6537)



123	5	Boomgaardt	Geert	1
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The list of inhabitants of Groningen that was compiled in 1830 (Photo 5) was more complete, as all members of the household were mentioned along with their ages and places of birth. The list contains mentions of GAB, aged 41; his wife, Stijntje BUS, aged 32; and their five children. This list had not been updated.

Photo 5. Extract from the list of inhabitants of Groningen compiled in 1830



270	1	0	Boomgaardt Geert	41	Groningen
			Bus Stijntje	32	Oudegastela
			Boomgaardt Phruis	17	Groningen
			Boomgaardt Geesje	11	"
			Boomgaardt Anna	9	"
			Boomgaardt Mariana	8	"
			Boomgaardt Jantje	5	"

The information on the ages and the composition of the family in the following list dated 1840 is consistent with the information in previous lists (Photo 6).

Photo 6. Extract from the list of inhabitants of Groningen compiled in 1840

50	1	8	Boengaard Gert	51	Idem
			Jonker Gertje	46	Sappem
			Boengaard Teunis	14	Groninger
			Boengaard Huijgen	6	Idem
			Boengaard Jacob	3	Idem
			Boengaard Anna	21	Idem
			Boengaard Geerje	19	Idem
			Boengaard Janje	11	Idem

In 1850, the list of inhabitants became a population register. The composition of the household was updated in the register with the removal of mentions of Geesje (born in 1818) and of Teunis (born in 1825). These daughters left the household upon marriage; Geesje in 1850 and Teunis in 1855 (Photo 7). GAB is mentioned as a *scheepskapitein* (boat's captain) and his son Teunis as a *zeeman* (seaman). Both men were probably at sea at the time the list was first compiled, and were added to the register when they returned.

Photo 7. Extract from the first population register of Groningen compiled in 1850

1	Jonker	Gertje	1793	Groningen	H. Straatman	(16	
2	Boengaard	Wil. G. v. d. L.	1832	Groningen	C. v. d. L.	Zeeman		16	
3	Boengaard	Jacob	1834	Groningen	C. v. d. L.	Zeeman		16	
4	Boengaard	Geerje	1838	Groningen	C. v. d. L.	(16	Geertje G. v. d. L.
5	Boengaard	Janje	1838	Groningen	C. v. d. L.	(16	
6	Boengaard	Gertje v. d. L.	1793	Groningen	H. Straatman	Scheepskapitein		16	
7	Boengaard	Teunis	1825	Groningen	C. v. d. L.	Scheepskapitein		16	

In the population register of 1860, GAB, his wife, and two children are listed: Janske Hinderika (born in 1828) and Jacob (born in 1834). For the first time, the complete date of birth of GAB is mentioned. The date given, 21 September 1788, is consistent with GAB's date of baptism, 23 September 1788. This household was later deregistered, and GAB and his wife were transferred to the list of inhabitants of a convent (old people's home) in 1864. GAB's wife died on 18 May 1864 (Photo 8).

Photo 8. Extracts from the population register of Groningen established in 1860: GAB and his wife were first registered as residents of a private household; were then deregistered (above), and were finally registered as residents of a convent (below).

1.	Boomgaard	Geert Adriaans	m Hoof	21 Sept	Groning 76
				1780	
2.	Jonker	Grietje Abels	v Hoorn	7 mei	Sappemen 76
				1793	Gron.
3.	Boomgaard	Jansje Hindriks	v dochter	10 Aug	Gron 0
				1828	
4.	Boomgaard	Jacob	m Leen	7 mei	Gron 0
				1831	

15	Boomgaard	Geert Adriaans	m Hoof	21 Sept	Gron: 76
				1780	
16	Jonker	Grietje Abels	v Hoorn	7 mei	Sappemen 76
				1793	Gron:
				1793	

In the population registers of 1870, 1880, and 1890 we found that GAB was still listed as a resident of the convent. In the last register, his name was removed and was replaced with his date of death, 3 February 1899 (Photo 9).

Photo 9. Extracts from the population register of Groningen established in 1890. GAB's name was first listed, and was later removed and replaced with his date of death.

Boomgaard	Geert Adriaans	m Leen	Hoorn	21 Sept	Groning 76
				1780	

3	Feb	1899
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We found the archives from the old people's home, the Jacob and Anna Gasthuis, where GAB and his wife were mentioned when they entered in 1864, and where GAB lived for 35 years until he died in 1899. The population register did not give the date of the change of

residence, but an accounting book of the Jacob and Anna Gasthuis for the year 1864³ mentioned the names of GAB and his wife among the 13 *conventualen* who resided there.

Given this confirmation that GAB was living in this nursing home from 1864 until his death, it would appear that GAB's life from the birth of his last child, Geert, in 1837 to his death in 1899 is well-documented in the archives. In light of the wealth of information we have about GAB's life, it is highly unlikely that the GAB who died in 1899 was his last son, Geert Boomgaard; especially as the son's death at age one year was reported in the civil register in 1838. This kind of mistake was made in the case of the famous Canadian Pierre Joubert, who was believed to have been the first supercentenarian for more than a century.

But can we be certain that the GAB who married Stijntje Bus in 1818 was the same GAB who was born in 1788? Before the marriage, he was registered as a seaman, and had previously had a military career. The records indicate that GAB had been conscripted into Napoleon's army and had fought in the French leader's campaigns – apparently against his will, as he subsequently said he considered Napoleon a tyrant. In the following sections, we describe the information we have about GAB's military career, and about his subsequent careers as a seaman and a marine captain.

The military career

GAB's military career started with his conscription in 1811. An Imperial Decree dated 3 February 1811 ordered the recruitment of 3000 conscripts from the class of 1808, which was made up of boys born in 1788⁴. For the department of *Ems-Occidental*, 288 conscripts were registered in a unique list within a conscript register. The list of conscripts is presented in alphabetical order, and GAB's name appears in the first position (Photo 10). He is identified as ADRIAANS Geert, son of Adriaan JACOBS and Geesien GEERTS, born on 18 September 1788. GAB's profession is given as *pilote* (pilot), and his father's profession is given as *batelier* (boatman). GAB's place of residence is listed as uncertain, probably because he was at sea. The complete list of the 288 conscripts from the class of 1808 for the department of Ems-Occidental was also published in the local newspaper, the *Ommelander Courant*⁵.

³ This accounting book was published in 1865: W.Laman Trip, boekhouder, Groningen 1865, 31 p. folio, manuscript. It includes a list of 13 'conventualen' (elderly residents) who were between the ages of 61 and 88.

⁴ There was no conscription in the Kingdom of Holland in the years 1806-1810. As soon as the Kingdom of Holland was integrated into the French Empire in 1810, the classes of 1808, 1809, and 1810 were conscripted, starting with the 1808 class at the beginning of 1811. Thus, GAB was conscripted at age 23 (*Décret Impérial qui ordonne un appel de trois mille conscrits sur la classe de 1808, dans les sept départements de la Hollande*. Bulletin des Lois de l'Empire Français, Tome Quatorzième, juillet 1811, contenant les lois rendues pendant le premier semestre de l'année 1811, Bulletin des Lois N° 348, décret n. 6499 du 3 février 1811, pp.117-119).

⁵ « *Ommelander Courant van Dingsdag den 16 April 1811* »: « NAAMLYST van de 288 CONSCRITS, welke, uit de Klasse van het jaar 1808, door het Departement van de Wester-Eems geleverd zyn, met aanwys van de NOMMERS, NAMEN, ARRONDISSEMENTEN, CANTONS, WOONPLATZEN, REMPLACANTEN en CORPSEN, by welke zy geplaatst zyn, als mede de namen van de Officieren en Onderofficieren by de Garde van den Heer Prefect, wordt op HEDEN uitgegeven, te Groningen by den OMMELANDER COURANT – DRUKKER. De prys is 2 stuivers »

Photo 10. Conscript's register: alphabetical list of conscripts of Groningen for the class of 1808.

COMMUNE de *Groningue*
 CLASSE DE L'ANNÉE
 1808.
 LISTE ALPHABÉTIQUE
 DES CONSCRITS.

1.° <i>Adriaans</i>	1.° <i>18</i>	Fils de <i>Adriaan Jacobs</i>	} domiciliés	
		et de <i>Geerdt Geerts</i>		
		à <i>Groningue</i>	canton d' <i>Groningue</i>	1.°
		département d' <i>Mind Occid.</i>	né à <i>Groningue</i>	2.°
2.° <i>Geert</i>	2.° <i>Septem- bre</i>	canton d' <i>Groningue</i>	département d' <i>Mind Occidental</i>	
		cheveux	sourcils	yeux
3.°	3.° <i>1788</i>	front	nez	bouche
		menton	visage	teint
		marques particulières		

According to various documents that describe Napoleon's campaign⁶, we know that GAB served in the 33^e régiment d'infanterie légère (in short, 33^e léger), and that he left Groningen on 16 April 1811 for Givet in the French Ardennes, where this regiment was quartered. His role was that of a drummer. We do not know why he was assigned this job. Was he a drummer because he was deemed weak, short, or afraid to fight? We have found no answer to this question in the official documents or in the press articles about GAB. In

⁶ Archieven van het gemeentebestuur van Groningen, 1594-1815 (toegang 1605): inv. nr. 12.497 – liste alphabétique des conscrits, 1808 (staten bevattende gegevens over de dienstplichtigen van de gemeente Groningen. Met aantekeningen tot 1811). Op 11 April 1811 bij het 33^e regt. Lichte inf. (jagers), 4^e bat., 4e comp., 4e div. Van de Armée in Duitsland. F.H.A. SABRON, Geschiedenis van het 33^e Regiment Lichte Infanterie onder Keizer Napoleon I., Breda, 1910.

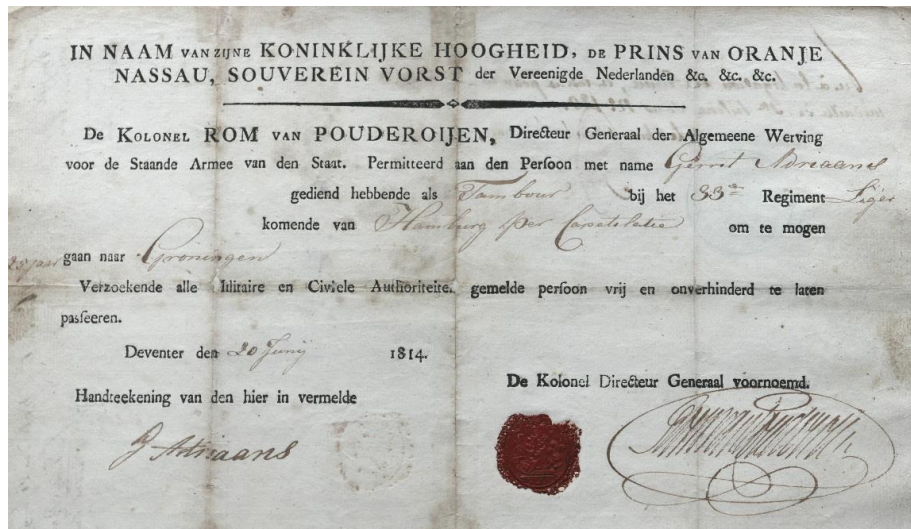
January 1812, the 33^e léger regiment became part of the *Corps d'Observation de l'Elbe*, which was under the command of *Maréchal Davout* (field marshal), and was headquartered in Stettin.

Several documents explain that some of the soldiers in this regiment were objectors. It is possible that GAB was among these objectors, and that this was the reason why he did not participate in the Russian campaign. According to a press article about GAB,⁷ “before the [regiment’s] departure for Russia in 1812, he was spared by a temporary indisposition, and thus avoided the battles at Moscow and Beresina and the horrible Russian attack.” (“voor het optrekken naar Rusland in 1812 werd hij bewaard door een tijdelijke ongesteldheid, zoodat de Moskou- en de Berezina-allende en de vreeselijke aanvallen der Russen voor hem gespaard zijn gebleven...”). It is important to note that at that time, the press was not allowed to mention soldiers who were objectors. It is possible that GAB was kept as an objector in a camp in Wesel until July 1813, when he was reintegrated into the 33^e léger, which was moving on to Hamburg.

On 16 July 1813, Davout set up his headquarters in Ratzebourg to prepare for the resumption of hostilities. Davout and his army won the battle of Lauenbourg on 18 August 1813, and then returned to Hamburg on 4 December 1813, where they continued to defend the city until May 1814. The soldiers of the 33^e léger were allowed to leave Hamburg on 31 May 1814. After participating in the battles of Lauenbourg and Ratzebourg, GAB was discharged and was given a *laissez-passer* to return to Groningen. The descendants of GAB have the original *laissez-passer*, which proves that GAB was demobilised in June 1814 and was allowed to return to Groningen through Deventer, Zwolle, Meppel, Dwingeloo, and Assen (Photo 11). The translation of this document is as follows: “The Colonel ROM van POUDEROIJEN, Director General for the general recruitment of the land Army of the State, allows the person with the name Gerrit Adriaans, 25 years, who served as drummer in the Regiment 33e Léger, coming from Hamburg after capitulation, to travel to Groningen. Request to all military and civil authorities to let that person pass freely and openly. Deventer 20 June 1814” (with the signature of the person as well as the Colonel Director General and his seal).

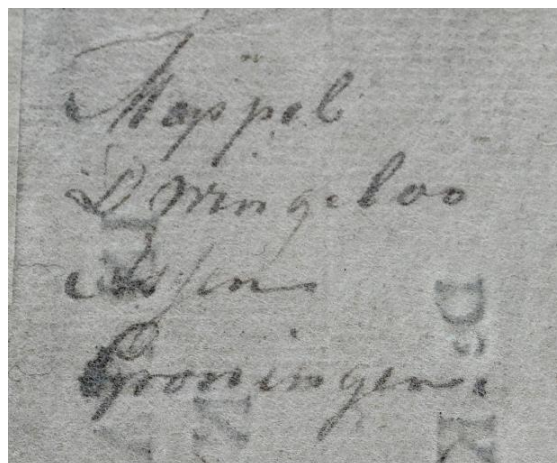
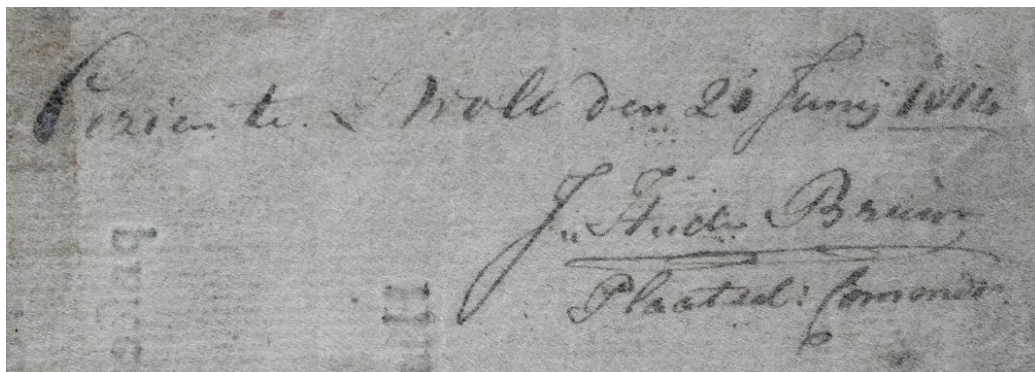
⁷ « Nieuwsblad van het Noorden », 8 November 1935 : « Geert Adriaan Boomgaerd 1788-1899 »

Photo 11. Laissez-passer given to Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD (aged 25) that granted him permission to return to Groningen after Hamburg's capitulation in May 1814.



The back page of this document includes some additional information on GAB's itinerary: he was in Zwolle on 21 June, and then travelled back to Groningen through Meppel, Dwingeloo, and Assen (Photo 12).

Photo 12. Back page of the laissez-passer given to Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD that granted him permission to return to Groningen.



The Saint Helena Medal

By a decree of 12 August 1857, Napoleon III created the Saint Helena Medal (Médaille de Sainte-Hélène) to commemorate Napoleon's campaigns from 1792 to 1815. For the purposes of awarding this medal, a list was compiled of all the men who took part in the military campaigns of the First Empire. All veterans of these campaigns were invited to be included in this list by providing documents proving that they had served in the French army, such as a certificate of honourable service or a proof of survival.

Using the *laissez-passer* mentioned above, GAB sent a request to be awarded the Saint Helena Medal to the Chancellery of the French Delegation in The Hague (Légation de France). This document confirms that he served in the French army. On the back of the document, there is a note stating that the request for the medal was registered under N°120. The text, which is accompanied by the stamp of the French Legation in The Hague, reads as follows: '*Vu à la Légation de France, et inscrit pour la médaille de Ste Hélène sous n° 120. Le chancelier de la Légation. Signé Desvernois*' (Checked at the Legation of France and registered for the St Helena Medal under the number 120. The chancellor of the Legation. Signed Desvernois).

The distribution of medals started in October 1857, and GAB was among the first to receive a medal: a total of 450,000 medals were awarded, and GAB's medal bore the number 3171. At an official ceremony that took place on 8 January 1858 in Groningen, three veterans were presented with their medals by the mayor⁸. GAB's medal was accompanied by a diploma (Photo 13). The two items were kept first by Mr Johan Christiaan Herman Winterwerp, a great-grandson of the supercentenarian who was living in Garmerwolde (Ten Boer). Currently, the items are kept by Mr Winterwerp's son, Fokko Winterwerp, who gave us permission to take this photo. The name that appears on the diploma is Gerrit Adriaans from Groningen. Adriaans is the surname that was used at conscription, and Gerrit is the French version of Geert.

⁸ *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* 11 Januarij 1858: "Groningen, 8 Januarij. De Burgemeester dezer gemeente heeft heden aan 3 personen de St. Helena-medaille plegtig uitgereikt."

Photo 13. Diploma of the Saint Helena Medal awarded in 1857 to Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD.



The career as a seaman and a marine captain

Adriaan JACOBS, GAB's father, was a seaman. In the edition of the *Rotterdamsche Courant* dated 27 May 1790, the following information appears: "After Bremen the tjalkschip *De Jonge Geerten* from Groningen with boatman Adriaan JACOBS left on 5 June." ("Na Bremen (binnen door) het tjalkschip *De Jonge Geerten* van Groningen, schipper Adriaan JACOBS, vertrekt den 5 Junij"). A new boat with the same name was registered on 22 February 1805, and was subsequently mentioned in 1812, 1814, and 1824. The fact that Adriaan JACOBS named his boat *De Jonge Geerten* (other spellings include *De Jonge Geert* and *De Jonge Gerrit*) is an additional indication of GAB's date of birth: it is likely that in 1791, Adriaan JACOBS wanted to show his pride in his three-year-old son, Geert.

GAB also became a seaman. After returning from serving in Napoleon's army, GAB started working on his father's boat in 1815. On 24 February 1818, GAB registered his own boat, a *bijlanderschip* named *De vrouw Christina* (*Middelburgsche Courant* of 30 June 1818). The name Christina is probably linked to Stijntje BUS, whom he married on 4 March 1818 (*Stijntje* = *Christina*). Between 1821 and 1836, this boat was registered as a *smakschip* named *Christina*. In 1836, he became captain of another boat, a *kofschip* named *Margreta* (*Groninger Courant* of 10 June 1836). That boat was also mentioned under the alternate spellings *Margrieta* (*Rotterdamsche Courant* of 30 June 1838) and *Margrietha* (*Groninger Courant* of 5 September 1853). The name of this second boat was probably linked to the name of his second wife, Grietje Abels JONKER (*Grietje* = *Margreta*).

The last trips of the *Margrietha* with GAB serving as the captain were as follows:

- 09/12/1852: departure from Ramsgate to Hamburg

- 22/04/1853: departure from Hamburg to Dublin
- 17/06/1853: departure from Liverpool to Nerva (i.e., Narva)
- 20/07/1853 : departure from Nerva to Petersburg (i.e., St Petersburg)

GAB returned from Petersburg in August 1853. According to a news report from Calmar, Sweden, that appeared in a Groningen newspaper on 5 September 1853, the boat *Margrietha* helmed by Captain G.A. Boomgaard was stranded on the island of Öland on 3 September 1853 while sailing from Petersburg to Groningen. The report noted that the local people helped to save the boat and to rescue the freight (*Groninger Courant* of 20/09/1853). This was probably GAB's last trip (he was 65 years old). At this point, GAB's son Jacob took over as captain of the boat. The *Groninger Courant* of 6 January 1854 published a "List of Dutch boats which during the year 1853 had crashed, burned, been scrapped, demolished or lost: *Margrietha*, captain Boomgaard" ("*Lijst van Nederlandsche schepen, welke in het jaar 1853 verongelukt, verbrand, afgekeurd, gesloopt of vermist zijn: Margrietha, kapit. Boomgaard*"). In the January 1856 edition of the *Staat der Nederlandsche Zeemagt en Koopvaardij-vloot*, GAB is mentioned for the last time as a captain in reference to his activities in 1855.

As a seaman, GAB was involved in several professional associations. He was registered on 4 August 1825 in the *Zeemans-Collegie Tot Nut der Zeevaart* in Rotterdam as member number 103. In the *Zeemans-Collegie Groninger Eendracht* of 1830, he was registered as member number 3. He was also mentioned as a *Directeur*⁹ of the directorial college of this institution in 1850. In addition, he was listed in December 1852 as a *Directeur* of a new association called "the Society for mutual insurance of seamen against loss and stranding" ("*Maatschappij tot onderlinge verwaarboring van zeeschepen tegen verlies en stranding*")¹⁰.

Press articles and the end of his life

Articles published in local or national newspapers may be of some help for the validation of the age of oldest olds. Obviously, the number of press reports about a long-lived individual increases as the person grows older. While most centenarians are mentioned in local newspapers, only extreme cases are mentioned in national and international newspapers or in scientific journals. The content of press articles may be helpful for discovering other types of documents beyond the traditional civil registration records. They also tend to provide a lot of qualitative information about the character, the lifestyle, and the life course of the centenarian. But because such articles tend to be based on subjective reports, the information they contain may be erroneous or misinterpreted, and should therefore be viewed with caution.

Some of the press articles on GAB focused on his participation in Napoleon's campaigns. In interviews, GAB explained that he served in Napoleon's army grudgingly (*met grooten tegenzin*)¹¹, and that he went by foot to Givet to join the 33e léger. Nevertheless, he spoke

⁹ *Berichten betreffende het Zeewezen en de Zeevaartkunde verzameld en uitgegeven door Jhr.G.A. Tindal en Jacob Swart, Nieuwe Volgorde, Jaargang 1850, Amsterdam, De Wed.G.Hulst van Keulen, 1850, p. 23.*

¹⁰ *Bijdragen tot de kennis van den tegenwoordigen staat der provincie Groningen, uitgegeven door de commissie voor de statistieke beschrijving van der provincie Groningen, Eerste deel, Groningen, De Erven C.M. van Bolhuis Hoitsema, 1860, p. 103.*

¹¹ « *Het Nieuws van de dag: Kleine Courant* », dated 26 September 1894

passionately (*"met gloed"* or *"met voorliefde"*¹³) about his adventures in the army – despite having described Napoleon as a tyrant¹³. He said he was very happy when the Oranje Prins returned to the Netherlands in 1813, and was pleased that had been able to return to his fatherland soon after the campaigns and continue his cherished work.

Other articles in the press, especially those about his marine career, provide some information about GAB's character and lifestyle: "He lives a very quiet life." (*"He leefde steeds kalm voor zich zelf heen"*¹⁴). "The old man, who can easily take care of himself, lives in a very simple way. He goes to bed at 9 p.m. and gets up at 7 a.m." (*"De grijsaard, die ruim uit eigen middelen bestaan kan, leeft zeer zuinig. Hij begeeft zich des avonds om 9 uur te bed en staat om 7 uur op..."*¹⁵). "The venerable man enjoys smoking several pipes of tobacco every day, yet he also likes to smoke a cigar from time to time, as he considers it a purgative" (*"De eerbiedwaardige man rookt met smaak heel veel pijpen tabak per dag, doch hij behoeft wel eens een sigaar, die het gebruikt als purgeermiddel"*¹⁶). "His voice is free of trembling ... he recently stopped drinking strong alcohol, and now drinks only a glass of wine now and then" (*"Hij spreekt zonder trilling van stem... In den laatsten tijd gebruikt hij geen sterken dranken: alleen neemt hij af en toe een glaasje wijn"*¹⁷). "While the Methuselah of Groningen can no longer see, hear, or move, his wits and his stomach have not yet abandoned him" (*"Het verstand en de maag hebben den nestor nog niet in de steek gelaten, maar zien, hooren en gaan kan de Groningensche Methusalem niet meer"*¹⁸).

A newspaper article with quotes from his last interview, which was given on 21 September 1898, the day he became supercentenarian, gave some information about his health decline: "As far as we can tell, his ability to walk, hear, see, and think has been declining in recent years, but he is still very cheerful. Nevertheless, during the last four weeks has he spent most of his time in his armchair or in his bed. And when he was not sleeping..." (*"Zooals men weet, waren zijn vermogens om te gaan, te hooren, te zien en ook om te denken in de laatste jaren zeer afgenomen. Toch was hij tot voor korten tijd wel opgewekt. Maar in de laatste vier weken slaapt hij verreweg het grootste gedeelte van den dag, in zijn armstoel of op bed. En als hij niet slaapt in zijn liefste bezigheid eten, wat hem dan ook nog den been houdt"*¹⁹).

The images we have of GAB's final years are also worth examining (photos 14 to 17). In Photo 14, GAB is pictured at age 100 together with his two surviving siblings, Annegien (aged 85) and Christoffer (aged 80). At this point, the last of GAB's children had passed away several years before. Photos 16 and 17 show GAB in the same position in his armchair at ages 100, 107, and 110. The decline in his health is evident, especially during the last three years of his life. We can see that at age 107, he was using a cane, whereas at age 110, he was in a wheelchair. In the last photo (photo 18), he is wearing a stick, probably because he was not longer wearing his traditional wig.

¹³ « Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad », dated 21 September 1893: « Een 105-jarige »

¹⁴ « De Gooi- en Eemlander », dated 14 September 1895: « Een kras oudje »

¹⁵ « Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad », dated 21 September 1893: « Een 105-jarige »

¹⁶ « Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad », dated 21 September 1893: « Een 105-jarige »

¹⁷ « Het Nieuws van de dag: Kleine Courant », dated 26 September 1894

¹⁸ « De Telegraaf » dated 21 September 1897: « De oudste Nederlander »

¹⁹ « De Grondwet » dated 11 October 1898

Photos 14 and 15. G.A. Boomgaard at 100 years old, taken by J.G. Kramer. In the photo on the left, he is sitting in his flowered armchair with his two surviving siblings: his younger brother Christoffer (aged 80) and his younger sister Annegien (aged 85).



Photos 16 and 17. The photo on the left was taken at GAB's 107th birthday by P. Dyserinck. The photo of G.A. Boomgaard at 110 years was taken by W.B. Bekkering. Both photos are preserved at the Groninger Archieven.



Discussion

Fortunately, we were able to find a long list of documents covering almost all periods of GAB's life that allowed us to validate reports that GAB reached the exceptional age of 110 years. In the first step of the validation process, the baptism and death records of GAB were compared, and were found to provide consistent information. However, the surnames of GAB and of his parents listed in the two records differed somewhat. GAB was baptised as Geert ADRIAANS, and died as Geert Adriaans BOOMGAARD. GAB's parents were listed as Adriaan JACOBS and Geesje GEERTS in the baptism record, and as Adriaan Jacobs BOOMGAARD and Geesje GEERTS in the death record.

We found that these surname changes occurred because new rules for civil registration were introduced during the French regime. In line with these rules, another surname had to be added to the traditional surname, which was the name of the father with an additional 's'. We found the document from 1829 for the registration of surnames, *Register van naamsaanneming* (Groninger Archieven n°6429) in which GAB's father, Adriaan JACOBS, declared that he was taking the surname of BOOMGAARD for himself, his three sons, and his daughter. The surname BOOMGAARD had already appeared in the baptism records of several of GAB's siblings at the end of the 18th century.

The reconstitution of GAB's family and the dates of birth of all of his siblings also support the validity of GAB's reported age. He was the second-born in a family of 10 children. Only six of these children lived longer than one year, and the dates of death of the four other children are unknown. This is not considered problematic as infant deaths were not recorded in parish registers before the new civil registration was introduced. However, the name Jacob was given to a child in the family three times, and the name Christoffer was given to a child in the family two times. This pattern indicates the death of the preceding child. The name Geert was not given to any other sibling. The birth intervals in the family were narrow and regular, which suggests that there are no missing children. It therefore seems impossible that it a younger brother of GAB who had been given the name Geert was the person who died in 1899.

The kinship records of GAB's eight children with his first wife Stijntje BUS and four additional children with his second wife Grietje Abels JONKER contain no signs that call the validation of his age into question. He married at age 29, remarried at 41, and had children between ages 30 and 47. Amazingly, none of GAB's children reached age 60, and his 12 children died long before he did. His youngest child was given his father's name of Geert. This child was reported to have died at the age of one. However, even the child's date of death was not accurately reported, a father-son mistake seems absolutely impossible given the wealth of information we have found on GAB's life course.

The above-mentioned demographic information covered the period between 1818 (the year of GAB's first marriage) and 1837 (the year of birth of his last child). To complete the age validation process, information about GAB's life during the period before 1818 and

during the period from 1837 until his death in 1899 was needed. The lists of inhabitants and the population registers stored in the *Groninger Archieven* played an essential role in this part of the process, as they allowed us to follow the successive places of residence and the demographic events of GAB and his family from 1822 to 1899. We found that all of this information supported the claim that GAB's year of birth was 1788. A birth date of 18 September was given at GAB's conscription in 1811. However, a birth date of 21 September 1788 was mentioned for the first time in the 1860 population register. This date of birth is more plausible given that GAB was baptised on 23 September. In fact, *Groningen Zuiderbegraafplaats* reported that the birth date of 21 September appeared on GAB's gravestone (Photo 18).

We found numerous documents covering the period from 1837 to 1899 that referred to GAB's career as a seaman, the marriages of his children, and his entry into a nursing home. When GAB reached age 100, numerous articles about his life, which included interviews and photos, appeared in the press. All of these press mentions support the validity of GAB's reported year of birth and age at death.

For the period before GAB's first marriage, we found only one document that mentioned him. In 1791, GAB's father named his new boat *De Jonge Geert* – a name that appears to have been chosen to honour his three-year-old son Geert (the next child, Grietje, was born on 23 February 1791). However, we have no information about GAB's school education or his apprenticeship as a seaman. Thus, there is no documentation on GAB's life course prior to age 20.

Photo 18. Grave of GAB in the Groningen Zuiderbegraafplaats



Later, on 22 February 1810, Geert ADRIAANS and his father Adriaan JACOBS were registered as members of the Reformed Church²⁰. They were listed as living together at *Harderinge Brug*. It is important to note that in order to be registered as a member of the Reformed Church, the individual must have reached the age of majority. As the civil majority age was fixed at 21 years by the *Code Civil des Français*, the registration provides further confirmation that GAB had reached age 21 year at that point in time.

In 1811, GAB was among the 288 conscripts of the class 1808, which was made up of boys who had been born in 1788 and were living in the French department of Ems-Occidental. He participated in Napoleon's campaigns as a *tambour* (drummer) up to the end of May 1814. He became a seaman like his father in 1815. In 1818, around the time of his marriage to Stijntje BUS, he got his own boat.

An article published on 9 August 1927 in the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* looked in detail at the age validation of GAB. The author of the article pointed out two problems with the process: that GAB's surname changed (from Adriaans to Boomgaard), and that his father reported his age as 33 when he registered the surname of BOOMGAARD in 1826. This may have been an error in the oral declaration or in the transcription. The article concluded that despite these problems, "no more doubt is possible" ("*geen twijfel meer mogelijk*") about GAB's age.

Nevertheless, two outstanding questions remain: Is the conscript GA registered in 1811 the same person as the soldier who came back from Hamburg in June 1814? Is the soldier who came back from Hamburg in June 1814 the same person as the GAB who died in Groningen on 3 February 1899?

Regarding the first question, we believe that the conscription list and most of the other information collected by the Ministry of the Army during the Napoleonic occupation are valid. We also think that it is highly improbable that the soldier GAB who returned from Napoleon's campaigns in June 1814 was not the GAB who left Groningen three years before to join Napoleon's army. This person could not have been a younger brother, as we have shown above; and another soldier who took GAB's identity in the army would have been recognised as an imposter when, for example, he joined GAB's father to work as a seaman, or when he witnessed the signing of the marriage certificate of a younger brother a few years after he returned.

Regarding the second question, we found positive evidence by comparing the signatures of Geert Adriaans on the *laissez-passer* of 1814 and several signatures of GAB found in the documents between 1818 and 1863 (Photos 19, 20, and 21). Given how the capital letters G and A are formed, we think the same person wrote these signatures. We therefore believe that the soldier who came back from Hamburg in 1814 and the man who died on 3 February 1899 was the same person. We can thus state that Geert Adriaans Boomgaard was born on 21 September 1788 and died on 3 February 1899 at the exceptional age of 110 years, 4 months, and 13 days. He may have been the first supercentenarian in history – although it

²⁰ W.G. Doornbos, P.C.J. Elema en D.F. Kuiken, *Lidmaten van de Hervormde Gemeente Groningen, 1800-1840*, Indexnummer 135, Studiezaal, Groninger Archieven.

is also possible that some as yet unknown man or woman was actually the first person to reach the age of 110.

Photo 19. Signature of Geert Adriaans on his marriage record on 4 March 1818

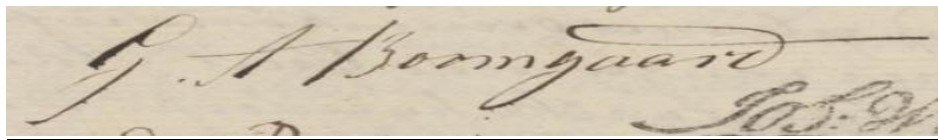
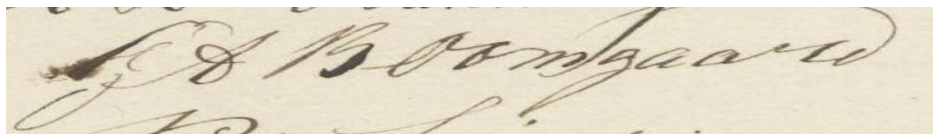
A close-up photograph of a handwritten signature in dark ink on aged, slightly yellowed paper. The signature is written in a fluid, cursive script and appears to read 'G. A. Boongaard'. The ink is somewhat faded, and the paper shows some texture and minor discolorations.

Photo 20. Signature of Geert Adriaans on his second marriage record on 17 March 1831

A close-up photograph of a handwritten signature in dark ink on aged, slightly yellowed paper. The signature is written in a fluid, cursive script and appears to read 'G. A. Boongaard'. The ink is somewhat faded, and the paper shows some texture and minor discolorations.

Photo 21. Signature of Geert Adriaans on the marriage record of his daughter Jansje Henderika on 2 May 1860

A close-up photograph of a handwritten signature in dark ink on aged, slightly yellowed paper. The signature is written in a fluid, cursive script and appears to read 'G. A. Boongaard'. The ink is somewhat faded, and the paper shows some texture and minor discolorations.

Acknowledgements

Albert Beuse at the Groningen Archief for helping us to find and to take copies of several documents
Fokko Winterwerp for copies of some important documents and for allowing us to take a photo of his
médaille de Saint Hélène"
