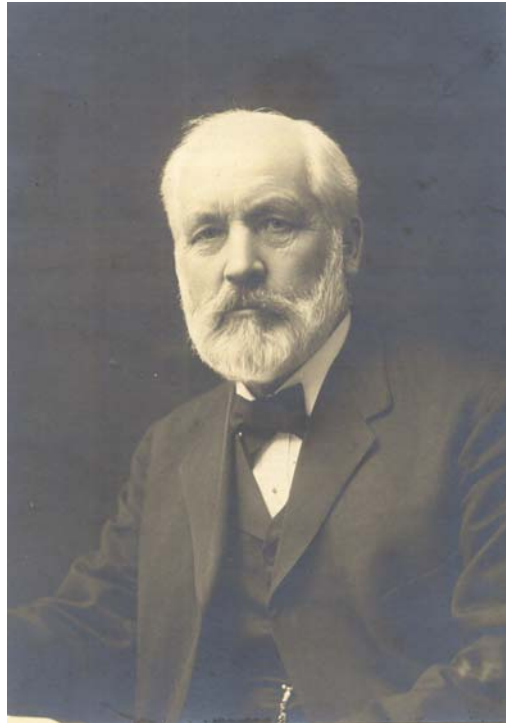


GERRIT JOHN KOLLEN



**“TO-DAY WE SEE WHAT GOD HAS WROUGHT
BY MEANS OF THIS COLLEGE...AND HOW ENCOURAGING AND BRIGHT IS OUR PRESENT OUTLOOK, IS
IT TOO MUCH TO SAY THAT IT IS A CHILD OF PROVIDENCE?”
--GERRIT JOHN KOLLEN**

Gerrit Kollen's life is a true success story. His transformation from immigrant farm boy to "debonair" businessman and finally to third Hope College president is remarkable. Kollen started out at Hope as a student, then became a professor, a financial agent, and finally the President. Bringing his unique talents to all of his positions, Kollen greatly influenced Hope for future generations. He possessed a knowledge of the educational system and a solid comprehension of business and financial matters, understanding that "a college is quite a complicated machine." With the ability to envision new ideas for the college as well as the determination and organizational skills to follow through with them, Kollen proved to be one of the most influential driving forces in Hope College's history.

Gerrit John Kollen was born in 1843 in the Netherlands. He was the youngest child in the family, with two older brothers and two older sisters. Gerrit's father died when he was very young, leaving his mother to raise five children on her own. When he was eight years old, Mrs. Kollen decided to relocate the family to the United States. The overseas journey lasted for a rough six weeks, and they endured difficult overland travel until the family was finally settled in Overisel, Michigan, a small farming town where her brother had already been established for five years. Mrs. Kollen acquired a farm, where she would remain for the rest of her life.



Gerrit Kollen with his mother and siblings

Kollen spent his early life working on the farm and attending the district school, a small, log schoolhouse in the wilderness colony. In the diary he kept throughout most of his life, Kollen described his childhood: "I lived a quiet life on the farm, tilling the soil; and doing what my hands found to do."

Although Kollen was not afforded the opportunity to attend prestigious schools, Kollen showed promise in his schooling. He enjoyed learning and credited excellent teachers with the opportunities he was afforded for the rest of his life. According to his biographers, Kollen was "never mean, yet enjoy[ed] fun and a trick," and was popular both with teachers and the other students.

During Kollen's early schooldays and his home life on the farm, Albertus Van Raalte, the founder of Holland who lived several miles away, came to visit the Kollen family as he made his traveling rounds as a minister. Observing promise in the young boy, Rev. Van Raalte informed Mrs. Kollen that her youngest son showed academic talent and should be allowed to pursue a higher education.

Mrs. Kollen allowed her son to pursue his education in both the Academy and, when it was created, Hope College. Through the work of her farm, she became wealthy enough for her son to attend the institutions without the aid of the church, whereas most of the other students required this assistance.

For amusement while he was attending the Academy, Kollen became a member of the Meliphone Society, a speaking and communication group, where he participated in debates that covered subjects such as whether the

Union North should surrender to the Confederate South during the Civil War. Kollen eventually became the librarian of the Meliphones, and was later elected president.



Hope's campus during Kollen's time as a student

After completing his time in the preparatory school of the Holland Academy, Kollen looked toward a college education. Previously, students desiring higher education had to travel to New Jersey, but by this time the Academy had expanded to include college courses. Kollen entered into the third class to ever graduate from Hope in 1868. The school was much different than it is today, though it was beginning its transformation into a modern college. There were only six teachers and class choices were very limited, with almost no electives. The "Course of Instruction" for students was completely determined for four years and included subjects like Mathematics, Latin, Greek, Rhetoric, History, Modern Languages, and Hygiene. Kollen was in a graduating class of only five men, so the class sizes were extremely small and student-teacher interaction was intense, with oral rather than written exams. Most of the school activities were carried out within the main building, Van Vleck Hall, where Kollen lived as a boarding student.

Kollen enjoyed student life during his time at Hope. He was even able to travel to Europe between his freshman and sophomore years, a privilege not afforded to many college students of the time. The Meliphone Society was only for Academy students, so Kollen joined the Fraternal Society, an organization which still exists as a fraternity on campus. Options for student involvement were limited, for extracurricular activities and athletics were only just beginning to organize.

Though he had originally been listed as a candidate for the ministry, like the other four men in his graduating class, Kollen decided instead to pursue a career in education. After graduating, Kollen became a teacher at the same district school in Overisel where he attended as a child, living with his mother at the farm and becoming very involved in the town life. He was apparently very successful as a teacher and, being one of the few educators in the small town, he automatically became a public figure. Many of his students followed his example by proceeding to Hope directly after their graduation.

Kollen was active in town, involved in his church in a young men's society and was always away from home, visiting friends and taking part in society events. While many young men of his time would have been married and starting a family by his age, Kollen was content with the single life. In his diary, he recorded his daily activities as those of a 'man about town,' recounting memories of amusing himself with his friends, "feast[ing] on beer and ice cream."



Kollen as a young man

Kollen taught three years at the district school before returning to Hope as a professor. He was hired initially to teach in the grammar school and became a professor of Pure and Applied Mathematics a year later, but his gifts for finance were soon recognized and he was made financial agent of the school.

Hope College was still a relatively young institution, and as a Western school in the unsettled wilderness of Michigan, the institution was always in desperate need of money. Most of the teachers' salaries were not paid on time, if at all, and the campus consisted of just six buildings: Van Vleck Hall and five small wooden structures surrounding it. An endowment to support the school was a distant dream, but Kollen knew it was a necessity if Hope was to survive.

Since Hope was located in the West, away from the established wealthy society of the East, any attempts to raise money would have to take place in the East, so Kollen set off in search of patrons for Hope. His ventures East proved extremely successful and he was able to make connections with the right people. Through all of his campaigning, Kollen managed to add \$100,000 to the school's endowment fund.



Kollen (seated, fourth from left) with the faculty and students in 1884

Kollen also saw changes in his personal life during his time at Hope. In 1879, Kollen married Mary Van Raalte, the daughter of the Holland founder who had encouraged his schooling, in a ceremony on Christmas Eve. Mary had been a teacher in Illinois but had returned to Holland to take most of the responsibility for her home and family after her mother died.

The couple had only one daughter, Estelle Marie. Estelle eventually attended Hope College and later enrolled in Columbia University in order to study music. Along with her husband, minister J. Carlton Pelgrim, Estelle moved to New Jersey, where she remained for the rest of her father's life, and where he often came to visit her.



Kollen's wife, Mary Van Raalte

After his years of dedicated work at Hope, Kollen was made president in 1893. Kollen was perfectly suited for this new role. As the third president of the college, he was also the first to be raised in the Holland area and the first who was not an ordained minister of the Reformed Church in America. Instead, he had been both a teacher and a financial agent, skills that were in high demand when he was hired. His business sense was crucial in order to bring the school out of its financial crisis.

Kollen was well-known, both in the East and the West, and was able to use the friendships he had built during his travels in order to further the purposes of the college. He was known as the “grand old man” of Holland, as he even looked the part of a college president: “dignified in appearance, cultured in manner, fittingly attired with top hat, frock coat, and cane.” He balanced an optimistic vision for the future of Hope with the practical sense to bring this dream to fruition.



President Kollen and the Hope faculty in 1904

Kollen had well-defined plans for the school and he quickly started making improvements. One of Hope's needs was suitable buildings. The old wooden structures on campus were no longer sufficient or modern enough for the students. During Kollen's eighteen years as president, he managed to raise funds and oversee planning and construction of four buildings. He also completed and opened the President's House, which had previously been boarded up due to lack of funds.

One of the new buildings was the Carnegie Gymnasium, which was funded by steel magnate Andrew Carnegie. Securing funds for the gymnasium was unusual, as Carnegie was not known to give money to denominational schools and normally built only libraries. Kollen had made Carnegie's acquaintance while he was president and Carnegie proved to be a loyal patron to Hope. Carnegie spent time with Kollen and came to know him personally. Throughout Kollen's life, he was welcomed several times in the Carnegie home and even visited

Carnegie and his family while they were abroad. Kollen experienced Carnegie's luxurious lifestyle, which was much different than his childhood upbringing in Overisel, Michigan.

Kollen found another East Coast patron to fund a new women's dormitory. Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees was the heir to a shipping business in New York and was known to support causes in women's education, so Kollen approached Voorhees at her home to ask for help. Before Voorhees Hall, women did not have a place to live on campus, so women's enrollment was not as high as Kollen envisioned. Kollen's dream for Hope's future was evident through the design of Voorhees, since a building suited for one hundred residents was constructed at a time when there were under twenty women in the entire school.

Another major building project was Van Raalte Hall, a classroom and laboratory building that remained on campus until it burned to the ground in 1980. When Van Raalte Hall, named after Kollen's father-in-law Albertus Van Raalte, was completed, it served as the main academic building for the campus. The biggest accomplishment in terms of construction during Kollen's time was definitely Graves Library and Winants Chapel, also funded by private donors. This building eliminated the need to keep the school's growing library in Van Vleck, which was notoriously fire-prone. With the library, chapel, classrooms, and dormitories in separate locations, Hope began to resemble a college more than a preparatory school, acquiring the appearance it has today. By the time Kollen was done with his presidency, he had completely transformed the look of Hope's campus, turning it into a modern and attractive home for students. Together with the increased endowment, Kollen added a total of \$500,000 to the value of the college.



A physics laboratory in Van Raalte Hall.

Along with changes to the physical facade of the campus, Kollen also helped to change the student body of the school. When Kollen was made president, there were only forty-seven students and nine professors. By the time his presidency ended, the population of the school had increased to 232 students and twenty-two faculty members.

The academic structure was more organized, divided into twelve distinct departments with departmental chairs. The number of classes increased, and the quality of instruction improved. Previously, Hope College had relied upon its religious and theological roots in order to attract students, as Hope's Christian character was one of the most important aspects of the school. "The Christian college owes the world no apology for its existence," Kollen said during his inaugural address.

At the same time, Kollen also realized that the academic credentials of Hope College had to be competitive in the academic realm. "Religion may sanctify scholarship," he said, "but it will not pass as a substitute for it." Kollen also continually demonstrated his love for the students and his desire for them to be scholars, spiritual devotees, and well-rounded individuals.



Students in Van Vleck Hall during Kollen's term as president

After his death, the students remembered Kollen in the *Anchor* as “the students’ friend.” Kollen believed that “Young people today are inclined to take themselves too seriously.” Although he knew that studies were important, he also observed that “scholarship alone is not going to make a student, in after life, a blessing to the world.” Extracurricular activities, athletics, and residential life developed during Kollen’s time, continuing the work that had begun during his term as a student and turning Hope into a college that is recognizable today.

The work as president proved to be strenuous and challenging. Kollen was successful at his fund-raising in the East, but he found it much more difficult to elicit the same financial cooperation from the populations of Holland and other Dutch cities and settlements in the West. The apathy of the people who lived so close to Hope and who benefited most directly from its existence frustrated Kollen. By 1902, along with the duties of the Presidency and the need to continually travel East, Kollen was facing health problems. His wife was also chronically ill with tuberculosis, from which she died only several years later. Contemporaries remembered that Kollen, “never took a vacation from Hope College.” The tendency to overwork tired Kollen as he assumed more and more responsibilities. Exhausted, Kollen resigned his office in 1902, but his resignation was not accepted by the council because they did not feel they could replace him, so he reconsidered the decision and determined to keep the position.

Kollen gained much recognition, even at the national level, for his work at Hope College. He was not only a successful denominational college president, but one of the most prominent people of Dutch descent in America. For his influence and his ancestry, Kollen became a member of the Holland Society of New York and the Knickerbocker Society of Chicago, both noteworthy groups of Dutch descendents. One of Kollen’s major honors came with the arrival of the Netherlands Ambassador Van Swinderen to Hope College. While visiting the school, the ambassador knighted Kollen on behalf of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands. Kollen was awarded the Order of Orange-Nassau, the highest honor the Dutch Queen could bestow.

After his second and accepted resignation in 1911, Kollen continued to be active in the life of Hope College, and he also became involved with United States foreign relations until his death in 1915. It was after his term as President that Kollen received some of the most unusual and high-profile opportunities of his life. Kollen was appointed by President Woodrow Wilson to become a delegate to the International Opium Conference, which was held in the Hague, the Netherlands. The goal of the conference was for delegates from all over the world to meet and discuss the international effects of traffic in opium.

Kollen was a qualified candidate since he spoke Dutch and he could represent the interests of both middle America and higher education. There was already a U.S. expert on opium in attendance, so Kollen did not have to be the one presenting on the scientific aspects of the issue. However, he did assert during a speech to the other delegates that he was concerned about opium trafficking, since he had been the president of a school

whose alumni had become missionaries all over the world. Delegates for the conference were treated to stays in expensive hotels and the ability to meet and spend time with people from all over the globe.

Following his Conference experience, Kollen was invited to the dedication of the Peace Palace, also in the Hague. The castle was paid for in part by Kollen's friend Andrew Carnegie, and was intended for use in peace talks and conferences. The dedication occurred, ironically, just a year before World War I. Kollen worked tirelessly to receive an invitation to the Peace Palace as a delegate. Only 140 people were to be invited, and Kollen desperately wanted to be a part of this important day, both for Carnegie and for the world. When his invitation arrived on his 70th birthday, Kollen wrote to his daughter, "I suppose this will mean a new silk hat! I would be willing to get twenty new silk hats for this opportunity."

After having resigned his presidency, and thus, his thirty-year tie with Hope College, Kollen told his successor, "A man who assumes the presidency of a college can not know what duties are awaiting him." Whether Kollen anticipated the hard work he would have to offer to Hope to keep the young school alive, he did it with enthusiasm and joy. "In no office can there be opportunity for the exercise of greater originality and initiative," he said. Kollen used his gifts to leave his mark on the campus.



Kollen (head of the table) with the faculty, 1901

Today, Hope still has the physical reminder of his presence, with Graves and Voorhees Halls standing as a testament to Kollen's devotion to the school. His financial work to increase the endowment helped Hope to continue and to become a fully established school and his dedication to providing a high quality education can still be seen in Hope's academics. Through all of his successes and the recognition granted him by others, Kollen remained modest. "It was faithfulness, not greatness," he maintained, that gained favor with God and people. He considered it his duty to continue the work begun by others through God's guidance: "it is incumbent upon us, entrusted with this charge, to build faithfully upon the foundations laid in faith and prayer."

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Photographs courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College

This project grew out of my own recognition that the Hope community could be enriched by an examination of the lives of notable persons in Hope's history. Words like "Phelps," "Dykstra," and "Kollen" are in constant use around campus but often with little understanding of the people behind the names. A knowledge of the people whose names we use in everyday conversation can serve to reconnect us with our heritage, as well as acquainting us with past and present visions for Hope College. At the suggestion and encouragement of several members of the Hope community, my idea evolved into a study of the eleven residence hall "ancestors."

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If you would like to learn more about all the individuals for whom the other ten residence halls have been named, visit www.hope.edu/student/residential/halls and click on each building. For more information about the history of Hope College, visit the Joint Archives of Holland at 9 East 10th St.

Laura Shears, August 2008