

# *Philip Phelps*



*“Yes, Hope in God, when it is dark,  
And hope when it is light.  
For hope shall never cease to be  
Til lost in perfect sight.”  
--Philip Phelps, Jr.*

Hope College is still in existence today due in no small part to the efforts of its first President, Philip Phelps, Jr. He left his home to travel to an unknown struggling school in the West, transforming the Holland Academy into the fully functional and independent Hope College. Phelps, with his constant vision and idealism, saw a future for a school that was not yet established. As the founder of Hope College, Phelps set Hope on the course to becoming the school it is today.

Philip Phelps, Jr. was born in 1826 in Albany, New York, where his parents, Philip Sr. and Hannah Mascroft Phelps, were already well settled. The Phelps family had been in the United States for several generations and was of a rather mixed European heritage, as opposed to the predominantly Dutch background of most of the founders of Holland and Hope. Phelps's father was the Comptroller of Albany, a highly public and respected financial government position, which he held for fifty years while also working at the family's Reformed Church. Philip was the sixth of seven children. He was closest to his younger sister Eliza and brother Will, and remained in contact with them even after he had moved west.

From a young age, Phelps received an excellent education. The family was moderately well-off and "no time nor money was spared in his education." His parents enrolled young Philip in the Albany Academy, the most prestigious boys' school in the area. He always excelled at academics and quickly distinguished himself among the other students, especially in the classical languages and mathematics.

With his love and ability to learn, Phelps easily passed through his nine years at the Academy, studying under well-known teachers and earning honors before graduating and beginning a lifelong career as a scholar. He was then ready to attend college, entering directly into the junior class at the age of sixteen. Union College, a Reformed Protestant Dutch Church school in Schenectady, New York, was his choice for undergraduate schooling.

After two years of college, Phelps spent two years teaching before moving to New Brunswick, New Jersey in order to pursue a degree at the Theological Seminary. Phelps again proved his worth as a student while attending seminary. He also gave much thought to what he would do with his life after he was done with school. It was clear that if he stayed in the eastern United States, he could become a highly respected minister. However, Phelps often thought about mission work. During a letter written home to ask for money and complain about a problematic professor, Phelps also informed his father that he wanted to go to Borneo or Amoy, China as a missionary. His father discouraged the idea, and Phelps later decided against it, as he wanted to get married and stay in touch with his family, but the attraction of missions stayed with him throughout his career.

After graduating from seminary, Phelps took a position in the small village of Hastings-on-the-Hudson, New York, with the title of "missionary preacher," since the town had no established church. The type of mission work was not the same as it would have been abroad, but Phelps still had plenty to do. His first church service was held in a congregation member's house and Phelps preached the sermon and led the singing. After two months, the church constructed a building and Phelps was officially made the pastor. The congregation grew during Phelps's time and became better organized. After nine years in the position, at the age of thirty-three, Phelps received the call that would lead him to begin his relationship with Hope College.

In 1859, the Holland Academy was a struggling small school in the West. Van Vleck Hall had been built the year before, giving the Academy a home for the first time. Students studied at the Academy to prepare to move east and train for the ministry in New Brunswick at the Theological Seminary. They were studying at many different levels in an unorganized course under one or two teachers. Due to the harsh conditions in the wilderness and the demands of the position, three Academy Principals had already left the job to return home in the East.

The school was constantly in need of money, and Holland founder and Dutch minister Albertus Van Raalte traveled east several times in order to collect donations from supporting churches. During one of these fundraising trips, Van Raalte came to the First Reformed Church in Hastings-on-the-Hudson, where he met Rev. Philip Phelps for the first time and was invited to stay at the Phelps home as a rest from travel. The two pastors began corresponding and when the Academy needed a new principal, Van Raalte asked the church to appoint Phelps for the job. Along with his Academy title, he also received the position of “Missionary Preacher” to the English-speaking population of Holland. In a sense, Phelps had found the call to missions he had expected since his college days.

Phelps knew that he could have a successful and well-recognized career if he remained in New York to preach. He was a good speaker and was respected at meetings of church councils for having a “kindness of temper and good humor of keeping on good terms with those who differed from him.” Raised in New York upper-class society, he was a gentleman accustomed to well-mannered and highly educated company. The Holland population was comprised of recent immigrants living as pioneers and the rustic living conditions did not match Phelps’s well-dressed style.

He later remembered, however, “I felt in my heart that I was called of God to the work; and under that conviction I went, whether to failure or success I did not know,” so he moved away from his well-to-do background and traveled to the West, a new mission field. During his time in Hastings, Phelps had married Margaret Ann Jordan. Margaret had attended the Albany Academy for girls, so they had probably met during their time in Albany. Since she spoke Dutch, the couple was relatively comfortable moving into a community where Dutch was still the primary language of the inhabitants. The move west was adventurous, especially since they now had a young daughter, Frances. Travel at the time was difficult and the couple had to hold their baby throughout the journey taken mostly by train, with the rough final twenty-mile trek by stagecoach.

When the Phelps family arrived in Holland, they moved into Van Vleck Hall, where the Academy Principal lived among the boarding students. The entire life of the college was carried out in the one building, and Phelps worked where he lived, teaching classes and conducting chapel in the confines of Van Vleck. Almost immediately upon seeing the school for the first time, Phelps was already determined to advance the mission of the Academy.



Van Vleck Hall in the 1860s

He immediately started to work, but quickly realized that he did not know how to adequately teach the varying levels of students. Previous staff had taught all of the students without recording their abilities or attempting to break the boys into groups or classes. Phelps's first major task was to classify everyone according to his abilities, which proved to be rather difficult, since the condition of the school was described as "chaotic." Using his "exact, orderly, systematic" personality, Phelps was able to sort the thirty-two students into their proper classes. After observing the students' skill levels, Phelps was ready to turn the Academy into a successful college.

When Phelps arrived, the Academy was a primary and mostly local enterprise that concentrated on preparing students to move east, usually to pursue studies for the ministry in New Brunswick at Rutgers College and New Brunswick Theological Seminary. In Phelps's vision for the school's future, the school would be self-sufficient, eliminating the need for students to leave the area in order to obtain a college education.

Another dream was for the school to support students in their desires to pursue careers other than that of ordained ministry, since to Phelps, "all occupations [were] regarded as sacred." Within three years of his arrival, in 1862, one of Phelps's organized classes was able to proceed to college-level work. These ten men were the first Hope College graduates, the class of 1866. The faculty also began to expand, raising the number of teachers to six including Phelps, meaning that the Academy could offer a wider variety of subjects.



Phelps's study in Van Vleck Hall

Whereas the new faculty all held specific positions, Phelps "taught as occasion required, which means that he was in charge of every thing not otherwise provided for." His academic talents helped Phelps to be a 'liberal arts' professor, not limited to only one academic subject. Although the work load was substantial, Phelps loved his students and was known to form individual relationships with each of them, not letting his heavy responsibilities take away from their experiences.

Phelps also helped the school add new buildings. Building materials were not easy to come by and Van Vleck Hall had been a major undertaking. Phelps and his students collected the lumber and built the first new structure, which was quickly followed by four others. A small wooden building put up by the students and faculty during the summer of 1862 became the Academy's new chapel as well as a gymnasium and a hall suitable for major campus events. The campus itself increased from a mere five acres when Phelps arrived to sixteen acres. Other than Van Vleck Hall, none of the buildings from Phelps's time is still standing. The buildings were not ornate or impressive, but they were functional—just what the school required at a time when the Academy needed to grow but the community was economically struggling.

The Academy was operating on its own, complete with distinct college classes and a suitable campus, meaning that the school was ready to take a historical step and become an incorporated college. Phelps obtained approval from the state of Michigan for the Holland Academy to officially become Hope College and the first class graduated in 1866. Phelps, for all of his hard work as principal of the Academy, was made Hope's first President.

The first commencement ceremony and Phelps's inauguration fell at the same time, and were cause for much celebration on Hope's campus and in the community. Phelps, who loved to write songs and poetry in his spare time, helped to commemorate the occasion by writing an Ode: "Oh, ne'er cut loose the anchor, boys! The anchor sure, of hope! But in its strength outride the storm, And with the billows cope."



President Phelps at the time of his inauguration

Phelps enjoyed his time in Holland, making friends with the residents and establishing his family. Four of his children were born in Van Vleck Hall—Philip Tertius, Lizzy, Edward, and Theo. Edward died at a very young age, but the other three, along with Frances, survived, and all four graduated from Hope. Philip Tertius became a minister like his father, whereas Lizzie and Frances became teachers. Frances eventually married Hope classmate John Otte, and the two became missionaries in Amoy, China, one of the mission fields Phelps originally considered. Lizzie became a governess in New York.



Phelps (seated, right of picture) and his family

Phelps identified well with the Holland natives, though he did not speak their language and continually encouraged them to learn English and implement it in their daily lives. Both he and the Dutch population knew that they had the same motive—to honor God and promote the work of the church and college, so Phelps was able to relate sincerely to a new class of people, with whom he had never really worked before.

Phelps was happy with his accomplishments while at Hope, choosing to stay and continue his work even when presented with job offers back in New Jersey. Phelps was idealistic in his view of the school and had a penchant for making extravagant plans, some of which turned out to be successful while others were dismissed for being unrealistic. Friends and coworkers later remembered that “he was never more in his element than when he was planning great things.”

One such plan was to introduce women’s education to Hope at the college level. Starting with his daughter Frances Phelps, women became an important part of the student body, an uncommon practice for schools in the late 1800s. Japanese students also arrived early in Hope’s history, with five young men making the long journey to study and live in Van Vleck Hall near the President’s quarters, where Phelps made them feel welcome. All five of the men returned to Japan after their education, taking on a variety of careers and never forgetting their time in Holland, Michigan. Phelps clearly had an impact on them. Upon hearing of Phelps’s death, the former students held a private memorial service for him in Japan.



Hope’s first Japanese students remembering Dr. Phelps

Phelps also aided student social life by bringing the Fraternal Society to Hope from his Alma Mater, Union College, where it had originally been a student-run secret society. As a new school, Hope did not have very many extracurricular opportunities, so the Fraternal Society was a welcome change from class. This literary group provided an outlet where young men would engage in the same activities that Phelps enjoyed—writing, speaking, and rhetoric.

Despite his success, Phelps also suffered some setbacks, when the rest of the faculty or the Holland community in general did not share his dreams for Hope. One of Phelps’s plans was his intention to turn Hope into a university with a graduate school. Phelps was extremely passionate about this plan and stubbornly held to his vision of “Hope Haven University,” though financially untenable and not supported by the faculty. In Phelps’s vision, this university would include graduate schools of theology and science.

Theology was extremely important to Phelps, as well as most of the faculty and Hollanders, who still thought the school's main focus should be preparing young men for ordination. Several arguments broke out between the faculty and the General Synod of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, who governed the school. Theology was suspended due to financial concerns, then reinstated as a department and eventually, Western Theological Seminary was founded as a graduate school for students desiring to pursue ministry. Future pastors and missionaries would no longer have to move east, either for their undergraduate or seminary training, so Phelps's vision was realized, though in a modified version.

Phelps did not see an ideal end of his career at Hope, although the beginning was successful. He had not been successful at elevating the status of Hope College to that of a university and the school was facing more financial problems each year. The faculty was angry about the General Synod's suspension of theology. Professors disagreed with each other about the future direction of Hope, causing enough discord that the Synod noticed the distrust between the faculty members. Thus, the Synod decided to take drastic measures. They spoke respectfully of Phelps, saying, "We admire him, and reverence him, and love him," but at the same time, they also issued a resolution: "the resignation of all the members of the faculty should be secured."

The Synod stated as its reasoning, "It sometimes becomes necessary to sacrifice men to save institutions," and Phelps, the man who had founded Hope, became the required sacrifice to keep it alive. However, Phelps did not approve of the Synod's decision. He did not want to leave the school, having invested too much into it. Two of his children were still attending college and the Synod owed him back salary and repayment of loans. Phelps believed that the "dismissal was absolutely and forever incapable of defense from any legal, moral or ecclesiastical point of view," so he protested the Synod's action by refusing to leave Van Vleck Hall. From 1878, when he was forced to resign, until 1884, when his children Lizzie and Theo had graduated, Phelps continued to live in the quarters belonging to the Hope College President. Eventually, the Synod had to pass another resolution, this one ordering him from the hall. Phelps then complied and he and his family left the campus, having lost the support and respect of the school he had helped to found.



Van Vleck Hall at the end of Phelps's stay, with the new Chapel/Gymnasium to the right.

After Phelps had moved his possessions and his family out of Van Vleck Hall, he returned to New York, discouraged by the treatment he received in Holland. The setback did not prevent him from service, however, and Phelps became the pastor of the churches in North Blenheim and Breakabeen, two small adjacent villages. After nine years, he finally retired completely from his ministerial work, and he and his wife moved in with their oldest son and remained with him until Phelps's death a year later.

The end of Phelps's life did not fit that of a former man of great promise or a college founder. Phelps never regained the respect of the Synod after the conflict in Holland. However, he did not have to end his life completely un-recognized. At the twenty-fifth anniversary of Hope, Phelps was brought back to the school, where he was finally able to witness the appreciation of the faculty and students. Everyone present knew that Hope as an institution owed him "perhaps more than it has ever recognized; but it owes what, as time rolls on, will be recognized more, and appreciated more and more."

Phelps is remembered as a man who “had given the best nineteen years of his life to an impossible task.” When Phelps arrived in Michigan, his future, along with that of Hope College, was uncertain. As an idealist, however, Phelps had the vision to make something incredible of the young school and he was determined to follow through on his plans. Phelps was faithful during his stay in Holland and trusted that God had a plan for the school. Although he was from a privileged background and had many personal talents and gifts, he did not give into the temptation to view himself more highly than others.

Instead of clinging to all of the credit for the advancement of Hope College, Phelps regarded himself as God’s instrument. The “keynote of his life” was “we are not our own; we are bought with a price, and therefore would glorify Thee in our body and in our spirit, which are Thine.” This faith and dedication led to lasting results, beginning Hope’s journey into becoming the school it is today. As one of Hope’s original Japanese students, welcomed by Philip Phelps, remembered, “Hope College stands today and will stand for the future as a memorial to his faithfulness.”

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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](http://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 10<sup>th</sup> St.

*Laura Shears, August 2008*