

## *Charles Scott*



*"Hope College is small, but what may it  
become in a hundred years?"*

*-- Charles Scott*

As the second president of Hope College, Charles Scott moved to Holland and joined the faculty after Hope had already endured trials. Scott spent twenty-seven years of his life at Hope, both as a professor and as the President. He had many talents to bring to the task of guiding Hope on its progress, though his administration was not without conflict or hardship. In fact, he faced the difficult responsibility of leading a school, on the fringe of American civilization, through financial crisis. Because of economic problems and administrative arguments, not all of Scott's dreams for the school were realized during his time in Holland. However, Charles Scott has a unique place in Hope's history as a bold visionary.

Charles Scott was originally from rural New York, born in 1822 in Little Britain, a tiny village no longer in existence in the southern part of the state. The Scott family had been in the United States for nearly one hundred years and both of Charles's parents were of Scots-Irish descent, as was the entire town of Little Britain. Scott's experiences as a young boy in a homogeneous non-Dutch environment distinguished him from the other early founders of Hope College. Charles's father Alexander was a farmer and a veteran of the War of 1812.

Since farming provided only a moderate income, Alexander and his wife Miriam could not afford private academies for their children, so Charles and his siblings attended a public country school, which met throughout the entire year. Even in his youth, Scott was recognized as a scholar. He loved a wide variety of subjects, but especially linguistics, mathematics, and science. His teachers noticed early on that Scott had a "sturdy integrity" about him, respecting straightforwardness and truth in all situations, both in his study and in his individual interactions with other people. This disposition led to his lifelong passion for history and the sciences.

At age fifteen, Scott was sent away to school in Washingtonville, New York to study Latin. There, he had two encounters that would shape his entire life: his first opportunity for interaction with a mostly Dutch community and a new acquaintance with a studious ten-year-old boy named John Van Vleck. The two quickly became friends, a relationship that would extend twenty-five years, until the time of Van Vleck's death.



Scott's lifelong friend John Van Vleck

In 1840, at age eighteen, Scott was offered an appointment to the prestigious West Point Academy, but decided not to pursue a military career. Instead, he enrolled in Rutgers College in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Although he did not have the same formal preparation as many of his classmates, Scott graduated first in his class of twenty-five. Teaching was Scott's original profession, a calling that would remain with him even as his career shifted forms.

After he graduated from Rutgers, Scott moved from New Jersey to South Carolina, which was, in the pre-Civil War time, a southern slave state. Settling in Adams Run, a coastal town near Charleston, Scott began working as a private tutor and eventually started an Academy further inland at Aiken, South Carolina. Scott appears to have generally liked his tutoring position, though he did once write to his brother, complaining of the "spoiled children" he was forced to teach.

During his stay in South Carolina, the previously non-religious Scott experienced a conversion that would shape his entire life. Committing himself to Christ and demonstrating his faith through baptism at a Presbyterian church in Wilton, South Carolina, Scott almost immediately felt that he was called to change his life and enter a new kind of service. He had previously planned to move to Mexico, but discerning a call to enter the ministry, Scott moved back to New Brunswick and attended the Theological Seminary there, which was affiliated with the heavily Dutch Reformed Church in America.

Scott was nearly thirty when he graduated from seminary and was ready to pastor a church of his own. Before he finished school, he married Maria Steele, originally from New York. The couple moved to Shawangunk, in southern New York and Scott took over the ministry of the Third Reformed Church, where he would remain for fifteen years. Scott's period of service was a success, and three hundred new members joined while he was the pastor.

During his tenure, Scott founded the Ulster County Bible Society, as well as the Ulster County Historical Society, an organization that gave outlet to his love of accuracy and truth. He became an expert on local history and published many historical articles, as well as several others regarding subjects of interest. Scott and his wife were also occupied with their growing family—Henry, Gertrude, Charles, Alexander, and Edward were born during the Scotts' time in Shawangunk. A sixth child, Maria, would be born in Holland.

During his stay in Shawangunk, Scott began his association with Hope College. In 1855, Scott had been asked by the church council to recommend a Reformed Church minister to become the Principal of the Holland Academy, a local primary school newly established by Dutch immigrants in Michigan. Scott had named his friend John Van Vleck to assume the position of Principal, along with the responsibility to preach to the English-speaking people of Holland. Van Vleck labored tirelessly for four years, with much of his effort devoted to constructing the first Academy building, now named after him.

At the end of the four years, Van Vleck returned to the East, infected with tuberculosis and still owed back salary by the school. He must have talked to his friend Charles Scott about the problems he encountered, as Scott took it upon himself to hold the Academy and the General Synod of the RCA, which was in charge of financial matters, accountable for their actions.



Van Vleck's impressive Academy building

Scott wrote an angry, extensive letter to the *Christian Intelligencer*, a Reformed Church weekly newspaper, signing his name simply "W" in order to protect his identity. Scott knew that Rev. Albertus Van Raalte, Holland's Dutch minister and founder of the town, was in the East asking for more money to be used on behalf of the Academy. "Have we not been somewhat deceived in respect to the Holland Academy?" Scott asked in his letter, urging the donors to give their money to more deserving, local causes.

Although Scott was not against the school entirely, he did believe that Van Vleck received unfair treatment by planning and supervising the construction of a foundational building on his own. He did not think that additional donations should be necessary so quickly. Scott wanted to hold the Holland population responsible in part for their school. If they cared so much about its survival, he insisted, they should at least attempt to contribute to its operation.

In standing up for his friend and the cause of the Academy, Scott incited a controversy that grew to include himself and Van Vleck on one side of an argument against Van Raalte and Rev. Philip Phelps, who had come to replace Van Vleck as the principal of the Holland Academy. Most of this argument took place in letters written to the *Christian Intelligencer*, and the identity of “W,” until it was eventually revealed, was an intriguing mystery for readers.

The argument was ultimately resolved between Van Vleck and Van Raalte, and Van Vleck died soon afterward. Scott performed the burial service for his friend, whose life had been so short due in part to his extensive work with the Academy. Though Van Vleck’s time with the Academy was over, Scott’s was only beginning. The Holland Academy had expanded greatly under the direction of Philip Phelps, and in 1866, it was incorporated into Hope College, a recognized and established Western college that was about to graduate its first class. Surprisingly, despite the conflict Scott experienced with Phelps and Van Raalte, Scott was recruited by Van Raalte at a meeting of the General Synod.

He moved to Holland, Michigan as a member of the small faculty, recruited to teach in both of the separate theological and academic departments. His classes included Mathematics, History, and Constitutional Law, as well as the theological classes of “mental and moral Philosophy and evidences in Christianity,” though his true specialties were chemistry and natural science, with his favorite branch being geology.

Whether out of belief in the mission of the Academy or loyalty to his friend Van Vleck, Scott accepted the position, which meant leaving the church he had come to love. The congregation was not happy to be losing their pastor to the West, but Scott, during his farewell sermon, told his people the question he asked himself before making important decisions: “What will most advance the glory of God?”

Scott’s time at Hope was full of conflict and controversy. When Scott arrived at the newly-formed college, it was already on the way to accumulating a debt that would be its challenge for decades. The campus consisted of a total of six buildings, and aside from Van Vleck Hall, all were simple wooden structures constructed by staff and students. The area was still relatively unsettled and the Holland residents had their own ideas about how to run the school. Since most of the students were still native to the Holland area, the local opinions regarding the school were powerful.



Hope’s campus when Scott arrived

After several years of Scott's tenure as a professor, the Theology Department was suspended by the General Synod. The school was deeply in debt and more polished theological education was available in the East at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. The Holland community did not agree with this decision, and several professors wanted it restored immediately.

Tensions started to mount over whether Hope should become a university, a proposal that Scott, along with fellow professors Cornelius Crispell and T. Romeyn Beck, opposed. The Synod noticed that the faculty were in strong disagreement with each other and that distrust and conflict had spread among them. Therefore, in 1878, after Scott had already been with the school for twelve years, the Synod directed the entire faculty, along with President Phelps, to resign.

Scott handed in his resignation as desired, but it was not accepted. Though the Synod had originally called for a complete turnover in faculty, they ultimately took a less drastic course of action and removed only Phelps and the professor of theology. Scott, Crispell, and Beck were permitted to remain and Scott was even made vice president of the school. Scott, along with Crispell and Beck, both of whom had also previously worked in the theological and academic departments, did not believe that theology should be restored while Hope was facing so much debt. Even though such action may have been popular with the townspeople, it would not have been practical. Scott's position on this controversy may have contributed to his ability to keep his employment at Hope while others were forced to leave.

With Phelps gone, Scott took on many added responsibilities as the vice president. The provisional president was actually living in New York to raise money so Scott was essentially in charge of day-to-day operations. When it came time again to appoint a new president, Scott was passed over a second time, and another minister in New York was offered the job. Scott was not happy with the arrangement and felt the slight. As before, when he believed that the school had made the wrong decision, Scott spoke out about the problem.

He wrote to members of the council, informing them that although he had the option of leaving the school, he would choose instead "to protect the church, and the cause I have labored for these years." Scott stood beside Hope, knowing that he had an important voice to add to the cause. Another of Scott's letters went out to the newly appointed President in New York, warning him of the treatment he would receive in Holland.

Fortunately for Scott, the appointed President turned down the position and Scott was offered the title of provisional president. After spending so much time as the unrecognized leader of campus, in 1880, his hard work was partly acknowledged. It would take another five years before he would be officially inaugurated.

Scott's presidency, both before and after he was inaugurated, was not an easy venture. In the decades after the Civil War, the entire nation faced economic hardships. Money was not readily available anywhere and Scott and his family suffered as a result. "The last 12 months have been very unhappy ones to me," Scott wrote to a friend about his economic situation. Though he had been promoted by the school to provisional president, the position meant only "much more care and labor—no more income." Scott was forced to take out loans and continually owed interest on money he was borrowing. Supporting his family was hard, especially when relatives were becoming ill and his oldest son Henry required initial investments to begin his career in business, an attempt that ultimately failed.

Hope College itself was also greatly affected by the lack of funding and Scott was never able to satisfactorily follow through on his visions for the school. Scott's talents and interests were not directed toward administrative duties, but he did have plans for Hope and improvements he wished to make. Without the money, however, he watched the physical condition of the buildings deteriorate and the available courses lessen. The finances became so scarce that when Scott asked for fifty dollars for lightning rods for Van Vleck Hall, which had a continuous problem with fire, he was denied his request.

With even such necessities refused by the council, Scott's dream of improvement for Hope's academic program was hardly well-supported. Although the faculty and the Hollanders eventually managed to convince the Synod to reinstate the Theology Department and back it financially, it was separated from Hope, marking the beginning of Western Theological Seminary. Hope's other subjects, especially the sciences, Scott's specialty, suffered under Scott's administration. Scott wanted to bring his passion for science to the students, but without the proper equipment or a real laboratory, science at Hope did not match his ideal.

Although President Phelps had lived among the students in Van Vleck Hall, Scott stayed in his own house, which he lost in a fire in 1871, along with all of his collected historical work and original writing, the products of many years of labor. Such a loss would have been heartbreaking. Rendered homeless by the fire, Scott was given a place in the Zwemer house, a small home built by a former student.

Scott envisioned the school with its own house for the president, a project that he was able to begin but not see through to completion. The council donated enough money to complete the exterior of the building, but when funds ran out, the house sat vacant and boarded up on campus. By the time the house was completed, Scott was no longer the President and he never lived in it.

Even though Scott was frustrated with much of his work at Hope, he was nonetheless recognized as an able leader. Phelps had been an idealist, always planning something grand for the school, and Scott, with his need for orderliness, was a welcome change. He was careful and precise in his work and did not attempt any major changes in the administrative structure.



Charles Scott as President

During the financial hardships, Scott was able to maintain a "quiet, steady life" at Hope. He was also able to work for compromise between the Eastern and Western forces competing over the future of the school. For the governing body in the East, Scott was an Easterner who understood the interests of the church. Though a non-Dutch newcomer, Scott won the trust of the Holland community as a pious man who would protect the school from the feared liberal influence of the East. Thus, Scott spent much time as a mediator between the two groups, which always held the potential for conflict.

Scott saw the school through many of its major financial problems. Although Hope was far from wealthy at the end of his tenure as president, it was no longer in a state of crisis. He had managed to raise the money for most of the funding of the President's House and he had begun the plans and secured the funding to build a chapel and library building, which later was named Graves Hall. Scott continued to envision expansions for the school, even during its financial problems, planning a laboratory and another dormitory for the campus.



President Scott (seated, right) with faculty and students

Scott's administration also saw changes in student life at Hope. The school had already become rather diverse for its time, with women students beginning to enroll at the end of Phelps's administration and Japanese students coming to study at Hope only several years after Scott first arrived as a professor. Scott wanted to expand the student body further, so he began the tradition of recruiting young people to come to Hope, so that the still primarily local college began to have a wider influence.

He traveled to Muskegon and Grand Haven, and even to the Upper Peninsula to talk with students about Hope. The school was beginning to resemble more of a modern college, with students being of a younger age and becoming more involved in athletics and extracurricular activities. The *Anchor* was founded in 1887, and students were taking on more active roles on campus.

Scott sacrificed much during his time at Hope—a fulfilling career with timely pay in the East, a child to disease, a house to the Great Fire of 1871, and ultimately, his health. He was speaking almost literally when he said, "I have given my life to the college." The "West," as Michigan was, was not an easy place to live in the 1800s, and Scott had never been in the best physical condition. In 1892, he suffered from paralysis and was unable to attend Hope's commencement. He wanted to retire, but when the council was unable to find a replacement, Scott decided to stay for another year. Most of Scott's final year of service was spent facing illness and he was again prevented from witnessing commencement. Scott died only several months later.

"I am no enemy of that institution," Charles Scott wrote in his infamous "W" letter, "but, in my own way, its friend." Scott demonstrated this friendship to the college often throughout his career. When others may have been afraid to criticize the new Academy, Scott dared to hold the school accountable for its actions. He then followed a call to move West to work for an institution with which he often disagreed, relying solely on God, saying, "Be assured that I do it in faith, and in the confidence that He who has called, will also accompany with his blessing, and aid me in doing something for his kingdom and glory."

His own service in Holland brought a calm, rational presence much needed during a time of financial crisis. Though others often found reason to argue with his ideas, in the end, he is recognized as a sustaining influence on the life of Hope College. As a friend acknowledged after Scott's death: "Hope College today is a crown to him."

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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."

This project was made possible by the generous support of both the Crossroads Project and the Office of Residential Life and Housing. Special thanks must also be extended to the Joint Archives of Holland for providing access to research materials as well as assisting in the research process. The Van Raalte Institute also provided significant logistical support, particularly Dr. Jacob E. Nyenhuis, who kindly offered an editorial critique of each booklet.

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*