

# ISAAC NEWTON WYCKOFF



"I SEE A LONG LINE OF FAITHFUL DISCIPLES OF CHRIST,  
THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT FRUITS OF THIS NEW COLLEGE, MARCHING TOWARD THE GATE OF THE  
HEAVENLY JERUSALEM; AND I HEAR MANY A SOUL EXCLAIMING WITH JOYFUL GRATITUDE,  
'FATHER, I THANK THEE FOR  
THE SUCCESS OF HOPE COLLEGE.'"  
--ISAAC N. WYCKOFF

Without Isaac Wyckoff, there would not even have been the dream of Hope College. Holland was founded with the help of this pastor and immigrant aid worker from New York, who reached out to people who were afraid and far from home. This sort of benevolence characterized Wyckoff's entire life and he was known less for his concrete contributions to any particular institution or organization than for the thousands of individuals whom he loved without restraint.

Isaac Newton Wyckoff was born in the small, rural town of Hillsborough, New Jersey on August 29, 1792. His father, Peter Wyckoff, was a farmer. Isaac was the youngest of the large family—his mother, Jemima Veghte, gave birth to eleven children, and there may have been as many as three children from Peter's previous marriage. The Wyckoffs were descendants of early Dutch immigrants who had lived in the United States since the 1600s. The family may have still been in touch with their Dutch heritage, since Wyckoff could speak the language in his later life.

The details of Wyckoff's early life are unclear, since records were not carefully kept, but it is clear that the Wyckoff family was not wealthy and had many children. Friends of Isaac Wyckoff noted that his father could not afford formal education for his children. As a result, Wyckoff did not have the opportunity for much experience with academics before the age of fourteen, when he began studying classical literature with the family's pastor. After that time, as childhood acquaintances remembered, "the winter was devoted to books, the summer to the farm."

At sixteen, Wyckoff was permitted to enter the local Somerville Academy, where he studied while trying to decide which career course to pursue. After considering medicine and law, he discerned a call to enter the ministry, like three of his older brothers before him, and moved to New Brunswick, New Jersey, where the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church schools of Rutgers University and New Brunswick Theological Seminary were located.

Wyckoff's father died the same year that Wyckoff left home for New Brunswick, leaving his son with even less money than had originally been allotted for his schooling. Consequently, Wyckoff had to put himself through college by teaching throughout his college career and working as the principal of the Young Ladies' Academy in New Brunswick while attending seminary.

After graduating from seminary in 1817 and before beginning a ministerial career that would last forty-eight years, Wyckoff spent some time traveling to different churches in New England, substituting for pastors who were absent.

He took his first pastoral position in Catskill, New York, where he preached for eighteen years. The area saw four new churches during this time, partly because Wyckoff would teach families in the surrounding rural areas, so there were soon enough people who wanted churches near their homes.

Wyckoff also had a profound impact on his own congregation and in 1831, after he had been a pastor at the Reformed Church in Catskill for several years, the town saw a major "revival" or renewal of faith. Many congregants became interested in attending prayer meetings daily and Wyckoff started a popular Bible class that often drew fifty people, an impressive number.

At the end of Wyckoff's successful pastorate in Catskill, he became the pastor of the Second Reformed Church of Albany, where he would remain for the next thirty years, longer than most ministers' entire active careers in Wyckoff's day. During his long service to this church, he was remembered for serving tirelessly and faithfully. A church publication remembered Wyckoff as "active, energetic, and devoted."

One of the major feats for which Wyckoff is remembered was his astonishing ability to never miss a church service. After twenty-five years on the job, Wyckoff had been present every Sunday in order to worship with his congregation, which speaks not only to his dedication, but also to his remarkable health and stamina for an era with greater instances of disease and more unpleasant living conditions than today. Wyckoff welcomed one thousand new members to his church during his time as pastor and performed nine hundred and eight marriages and six hundred seventy-six baptisms.

Wyckoff helped to modernize the church, both through his love of beauty, which resulted in numerous physical modifications to the building, and through the adoption of new ideas, some of which were labeled “progressive.” Wyckoff was noted for having his own ways of going about his work, considered eccentric by some congregants and fellow ministers. One pastor described him as demonstrating “peculiar and strongly individualized characteristics.”

Wyckoff himself appreciated that his church stood by him, noting after twenty-five years of service: “As I am conscious of being somewhat radical, and the church has been always noted for its conservatism, it was not to be supposed that all my plans would be at once and perfectly approved.” Preaching and public speaking were outstanding gifts of Wyckoff’s ministry and he even published seventeen of his sermons. During his sermons, Wyckoff loved to incorporate examples by way of extensive stories and elevated language. A contemporary noted that Wyckoff sometimes “liked to exaggerate” and always added style to his lessons.

Even considering all of the accomplishments of Wyckoff’s career in ministry, he contributed much more by personally supporting the members of his church. He also served those who were not affiliated with the Second Reformed Church or even the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church.

Though Wyckoff’s sermons were memorable and instructive, his gift of speaking extended into everyday conversation. Wyckoff knew everyone in his church personally and through church sacraments and individual relationships, his life became nearly synonymous with that of his congregation.

Even though Wyckoff enjoyed discussion and was known to spend much time talking, “he seldom or never made harsh and uncharitable remarks concerning others” and was known to “practice what he preached.” His mission was carried out not only in preaching, but “he gladly left his study and his books to do any favor possible, even for the humblest,” making his home a haven for everyone. By showing love to the entire community through his service, he became known as an “unordained bishop” of Albany.

Much less is known about Wyckoff’s personal life during this time than his professional engagements. Wyckoff married three times. In an era of disease and difficult living conditions, many people faced death at young ages. Wyckoff himself, in living to be seventy-six, proved to be unusually immune to the threat of disease, which condemned him to endure the tragedy of outliving the people he loved and witnessing the deaths of his family, friends, and church-goers.

His wives’ names and years of their marriages are not completely certain, but he was probably married the longest to Cornelia, a woman whom a friend described as “beloved” by Wyckoff. With them lived five children from theirs or Wyckoff’s previous marriages: Isaac, Mary, William, Josephine, and Anna, with eighteen years between the oldest and youngest. The family must have been fairly well-off, because three servants and a mother-in-law also lived with them, making for a busy household.

While living and working in Albany, Wyckoff utilized his ever-present energy and became involved with numerous aid organizations and causes while serving on church committees and boards.

All of these commitments must have demanded his attention, but the one for which he was most passionate was the Emigrant Aid Society, a charitable organization that he founded to help the primarily Dutch immigrants who were arriving in New York.



Dutch immigrants traveling to Michigan

Wyckoff became instrumental in assisting immigrants from the Netherlands to settle in the United States and finding permanent homes for them to begin new lives in the “West”—mostly Wisconsin and Michigan. Wyckoff acted as a needed friend to many immigrant groups who had left their homes because of religious persecution. Because he could speak Dutch, he also acted as a translator, relaying the immigrants’ cause to churches that could provide them with help.

Wyckoff’s calling to provide aid to immigrants began his relationship with the group who would eventually found Holland, and later, Hope College. Albertus Van Raalte was a minister leading a group of former Netherlands residents to the United States, and he needed financial and moral support in order to settle permanently. He wrote a letter in Dutch to Christians in New York, which circulated through the Reformed community before being passed on to Wyckoff, who translated it into English and published it in a Reformed Church weekly newspaper.

Van Raalte and his followers eventually traveled from New York City, where they first disembarked, to Albany, where they met Wyckoff in person. When they moved west and began establishing Holland as a permanent settlement, Wyckoff remained in touch with the settlers and reported their activities to the Aid Society.

In 1849, after the Holland colony had been in operation for two years, Wyckoff was commissioned by the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church and the Aid Society to make a trip west in order to report back on the success of the Holland community and other settlements in the Midwest. Wyckoff wrote a long report, detailing every aspect of colony life to the city-dwellers in the East. Wyckoff himself, accustomed to living in New York and New Jersey, greatly enjoyed his adventure in the wilderness. Describing his “novel ride, and not without peril,” Wyckoff recounted his journey to Holland via stagecoach, steamboat, train, mail wagon, and horse.



Holland citizens greeting visitors

The colonists were happy for a visitor and greeted Wyckoff “almost literally with a shout of joy.” The official observations that Wyckoff reported back were that Holland contained about two hundred thirty-five houses, and that the entire Holland-Zeeland area included only about three thousand people, most of whom were working as farmers. A few local businesses were beginning to open and people were adjusting to life in the West. Though the main purpose of the expedition was to survey the population and observe the newly developing churches in the Midwest, Wyckoff could not help but be impressed by the local landscape. “The face of the country, which I had supposed was very flat, is pleasantly diversified with hill and valley, lake and stream,” he observed, writing also that “the Colony has common natural advantages.” Wyckoff was fascinated with pioneer life and the ability of the colonists to remain healthy and content in an unpopulated area of the country.

Wyckoff’s true inspiration, however, came from the faith of the settlers. To him, the residents of Holland “seemed like the primitive Christians, and most beautiful.” This observation may have been romanticized, but it painted a picture for Wyckoff of the successful work of the colony, and by extension, of his successful work with the newcomers. The same people who had once faced religious persecution in their native country were now flourishing in the West and Wyckoff shared in their happiness.



A building project in Holland

Sixteen years passed before Wyckoff saw the Holland community again and his second visit to Holland occurred after the settlement had expanded in size and become more established. Hope College had just been incorporated after several years of existence as the Holland Academy, a small local school without a clear institutional structure or even a permanent building. In 1866, Wyckoff returned to Holland for the inauguration of the first President, Philip Phelps, who had been a member of his congregation in Albany.

When Wyckoff arrived in Holland, the city he had helped to create had undergone many changes. The Academy had built Van Vleck Hall eight years earlier and students were arriving from increasingly distant places. Phelps invited Wyckoff to give the “Inaugural Charge,” which was intended to be Phelps’s instruction on how to be the

best possible President of the newly established school. During a typically eloquent speech, Wyckoff outlined his prophetic vision for Hope College.



Hope's campus at the time of Wyckoff's visit in 1866

“A College is chartered, full of hope,” Wyckoff proclaimed during his address. His own hopes for the school continue to endure over a century later. Wyckoff recognized that newly graduating students, who were preparing to enter and affect the world through a variety of vocations, needed preparation academically in order to fit themselves to the task. “We must visit foreign nations, and learn ancient and modern language,” he encouraged. Wyckoff knew, even in this time of limited technology, that communications would become increasingly global, and that students would need to feel at home all over the world.

Also in the forefront of Wyckoff's envisioned future for Hope was the study of the sciences. Wyckoff himself was probably not very experienced with scientific education, but he realized that it was a subject of growing importance to the modern world. “We must plunge into the bowels of the earth . . . we must wing up to the ethereal realms...we may descend to the surface of the earth,” he asserted, advocating the study of geology, astronomy, botany, and zoology, among others.



Science at Hope in the early 1900s

Wyckoff knew that through the study of sciences and other academic subjects, students would grow to appreciate God's creation and the world around them. He ordered Phelps to “open to them this vast cosmorama, and let them see something of what God has placed before them, that the feeling of admiration and reverence may mingle with their acquisitions.” Students would do more than just study the world, they would incorporate what they learned into their lives and become passionate about their learning.

Wyckoff's vision for Hope included a fully Christian focus, complete with the "word of God" as a "constant text-book." He recognized that Hope, a new school built in the wilderness by a recently settled people, was a gift from God, and that it would continue to bless the lives of its students for generations. "Learning and religion are essential to the honor and happiness of society," Wyckoff claimed, linking study and faith together in a tradition that Hope still upholds.

For Wyckoff, Christian faith was more than doctrine and his desire for a Christian institution shows in his request that students learn to care for each other: "No man is born to live to himself . . . no man can be independent of his fellow creatures."

Wyckoff's vision of faith at Hope College was much like his own incorporation of faith through his ministry—practical and loving. He wished that in Hope's future, "the young may readily and effectually learn that mental strength and acquisition are far less effectual in commending any one to the love, esteem and confidence of his fellow men, or to invest him with eminent influence for usefulness, than an unblemished moral character, than the reputation for suavity, gentleness, justice and benevolence."

Wyckoff's legacy for Hope still remains in the form of his challenge to Philip Phelps at the very beginning of the school's incorporation. However, Wyckoff's impact also lasts through the character of the man himself. He channeled his energy and devotion into service, not for recognition, but because he cared so much about the people for whom he worked. Wyckoff spoke through his practical faith, while maintaining this wish toward all others throughout his entire life: "My powers of utterance and of action may and must fail but my love for the cause, and you, dear brethren, will never fail. The progress of time may make my step slower, but it will only fill my heart with warmer desires for the glory of God, and your present and eternal happiness."

#### Sources Consulted:

- Alexander, Robert S. *Albany's First Church and Its Role in the Growth of the City: 1642-1942*. Albany: First Church in Albany, 1988.
- Beers, J. B. "Town of Catskill Churches," 1884. <[www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nygreen2/beers\\_churches\\_catskill.htm](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nygreen2/beers_churches_catskill.htm)>.
- Corwin, Edward T. *Manual of the Reformed Church in America: 1628-1902*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: 1902.
- Demarest, W. H. S. "The Men Who Built Hope." *Intelligencer-Leader*, June 20, 1941.
- Hyma, Albert. *Albertus C. Van Raalte and His Dutch*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947.
- Janssen, Allan J. *Gathered at Albany: A History of a Classis*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Kennedy, Alice P. *Stubborn for Liberty: the Dutch in New York*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1975.
- Madison Avenue Reformed Church, Albany, New York Memorial: 1879-1881*. Albany, 1881.
- Minutes of the Classis of Holland*, 30 October 1850.
- Nineteenth Annual Report of the Board of Domestic Missions of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church*, 4 June 1851.
- "Notes from the Newspapers," March 1889. *Collections on the History of Albany from its Discovery to the Present Time*, vol. 4. Albany: 1871.
- Porter, Elbert S. "A Commemorative Discourse on the Life, Character and Services of the Late Rev. Isaac N. Wyckoff, D. D." *Christian Intelligencer*, 22 April 1869.
- The Quarter Century Anniversary Celebration of the Ministry of the Rev. Dr. Wyckoff in the Second Reformed Dutch Church, Albany, November 3, 1861*. Albany, 1862.
- Swierenga, Robert P., ed. *The Dutch in America: Immigration, Settlement, and Cultural Change*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985.
- Tenzythoff, Gerrit J. *The Dutch in America*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publication Company, 1969.
- Van Hinte, Jacob. *Netherlanders in America*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985.
- US Census*, 1850. <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)>.
- Wichers, Wynand. *A Century of Hope: 1866-1966*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968.
- Wyckoff, Isaac N. "Inaugural Charge," *Remembrancer* [1866?].
- Wyckoff, Isaac N. "Report of a Visit to the Holland Colonies in Michigan and Wisconsin," 1849. Reprint *Dutch International Society Magazine*, vol. 25, no. 2 (September 1993).
- Wyckoff, Isaac N. "Stability: An Indispensable Element of Usefulness and Greatness." Address at Rutgers College, 14 July 1840. Albany: 1840.

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*