

*John Van Alcock*



*"My heart lies—more in the school than out of it—  
I may as well be honest."  
—John Van Alcock*

The first permanent building constructed at Hope College is named after one of the school's earliest founders. John Van Vleck became part of Hope's story before the college even had its name. When Van Vleck arrived, it was still the Holland Academy, a preparatory school in the wilderness of the western United States. For a brief chapter in his short life, Van Vleck helped this institution to survive and thus laid a solid foundation for its growth into an outstanding college.

The second of eight children, Van Vleck was born in 1828 and raised in New York. He spent most of his life near his birthplace of Shawangunk, a small farming town in the southeastern part of the state. His father James was a small-scale farmer, as well as a deacon at the family's Reformed Church. Young John spent time working on his father's farm, but his real passion was for serious study.

When he was in grammar school, he met a boy who would become his lifelong friend and who would eventually have a major influence on his life: the man who would become Hope's second president, Charles Scott. Scott observed Van Vleck's childhood love of learning: "He was studious in habit beyond his classmates, and not given to the ruder sports of the boys." Van Vleck suffered from an undefined condition that led to weakness, fatigue, and generally poor health for most of his life. As such, the "ruder sports" were difficult for him. Instead he was "unusually fond of books" and focused intently on his education.



Van Vleck's lifelong friend Charles Scott

When it came time for him to attend college, Van Vleck chose Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He had originally planned on a career in medicine, but instead felt called to pursue the ministry; he completed his graduate degree in the same town at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary, a school of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, which is now the Reformed Church in America.

Van Vleck graduated from seminary in 1855. In May of that same year, he married Elizabeth Falconer. Elizabeth, whom John called "Lissie," was the daughter of a large-scale farmer near his hometown, and the two had presumably known each other for quite some time.

After he had graduated, his childhood friend Charles Scott appointed him as principal of the Academy and missionary preacher to Holland, Michigan before he was even ordained. As principal, Van Vleck initially taught approximately eighteen boys in the higher classes, mostly to prepare them to move to the East in order to study at the same institutions as Van Vleck in their pursuit of careers in ministry. As missionary preacher, Van Vleck was the minister to the English-speaking people in the community, who were the minority in the mostly Dutch settlement.



Early Dutch settlers in Michigan

Van Vleck moved with his wife and her sister to Holland in August of 1855. The move proved arduous for everyone and brought various challenges. At the time, Michigan was part of the newly-settled West and was a wilderness compared to the East Coast. Moreover, Van Vleck was not in the best physical condition. His new job of Principal had taken its toll on two previous educators, who had abandoned the position in order to recover their health.

Dutch was still the main language spoken by Holland residents, which Van Vleck did not speak or understand at all. Although Van Vleck had graduated from seminary, he could not be ordained, since the church council could not communicate with him to ask the questions necessary for his examination.

Like most students at Hope today, Van Vleck stayed in Holland for only four years. According to Charles Scott, this time was the “most important in Mr. Van Vleck’s short life.” His time at the Academy had an impact on Van Vleck, but it was also crucial for the institution itself. When Van Vleck arrived, the Academy had no building of its own.

Both the Holland Academy and the District School, where his wife and sister-in-law taught, were in the same building, creating a crowded, chaotic atmosphere in the run-down building. Van Vleck worked with the older Academy students on the second floor, while the two women educated the younger District School students on the first.

The Academy eventually moved into the Orphan House, a small building constructed as an orphanage but never used for that purpose, since all of the orphans had been adopted by local families. This building proved to be adequate for classroom space and provided the Academy with a location of its own, but Van Vleck and the church council wanted to be able to house students as well. Academy students were currently living at home and commuting to school, which was a sufficient arrangement as long as the school remained local.

The school enrollment numbers, however, were quickly starting to increase. Van Vleck taught twenty-two students by the end of his first year and forty-two the next. He and the other educators and Holland officials envisioned that the Academy would continue to grow and attract students from further regions but recognized that it would not be possible to house them all in the few small private homes in Holland.

In 1853, the General Synod of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, the governing body in control of the church and the Academy, approved of the Academy for a five-year trial period. During that time, the Synod wished to see the adequate construction of a campus with a permanent building to provide the Academy with a sustainable home. Thus began Van Vleck’s major contribution to Hope College—the building now bearing his name.

Van Vleck Hall is now a small dormitory on campus, but when it was built, it was a large, imposing structure in contrast to its surroundings. A building of its size had never been constructed in West Michigan and brick structures were uncommon, so the new hall was extremely innovative. Instead of devoting all his energy to teaching, Van Vleck suddenly found himself also in control of the planning and construction of the building, acting as the architect and the building supervisor for a project that would require all of his strength.



Van Vleck Hall in 1884

A project of that magnitude was expensive, especially for a small, newly-established immigrant town. Therefore, the respected founder of the city of Holland, Albertus C. Van Raalte, traveled to the East Coast to ask for money from the various Reformed Church congregations in New York and New Jersey. The hall would eventually cost \$7,000, a considerable sum for the time.

With Van Raalte fundraising in the East, Van Vleck became the only official in control of the building process, a responsibility he often found burdensome. According to Van Vleck, in one of his many letters written during construction, “the whole business connected with the erection of our new building devolved upon me. I have prepared the plans, drawn all the drafts, bought much of the materials, procured the workmen, received and paid all the monies, made all the calculations, and day by day superintended the work.”

Given that the location for the new hall, atop a hill, was covered with trees, the forest had to be cleared away and a road constructed so materials could be brought to the site. The weather proved to be problematic, as frequent rains delayed the brick-work. Van Vleck’s perpetually weak health made the entire situation more difficult as he tried to oversee the construction while maintaining a teaching and examination schedule for his students.

Ill and discouraged, Van Vleck reported the same thing in several of his letters: “The building progresses slowly.” Eventually however, in 1858, almost a year after construction was begun, the Academy Building was complete. Van Raalte had managed to raise \$6,000 through his tireless campaigning, and Van Vleck donated the final one thousand dollars.



Construction in Holland

When the Academy Building was finished, it contained the activities of the entire institution. Van Vleck moved into the hall, along with his wife and two young daughters. Twenty-three of Van Vleck's forty-two students also lived in the building, and Van Vleck carried out all of his duties there, referring to the Academy as his "family of forty." He taught the students and held morning chapels, beginning the tradition of religious services at Hope.

Van Vleck loved teaching and cared deeply for all of his students. He was continually impressed by their desire to learn, a quality with which he could easily identify. His education as a pastor set him apart from the previous teachers and he was determined to increase the levels of education offered by the Academy. He offered classes in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, English, Mathematics, Chemistry, and Philosophy, along with Theology courses, initially instructing the students by himself and in time employing a teaching assistant.

Van Vleck also founded the Meliphone Literary Society for students who, like himself, valued education and self-improvement. According to the Meliphone Society's publications, the goal of the group was to "assemble to debate, and to speak, knowing that this training [would] help them in future activity." The society continued to be active on the Hope campus until the 1930s.

Van Vleck's time in Holland was full of setbacks and controversies. Only a few months after his arrival, he wrote to a friend that his health had worsened since the move from New York. He missed his home and family, especially his sisters, who were teaching in New York. He was also discouraged with his missionary preacher duties. While his teaching at the Academy was successful, the preaching in English did not go as well. Barely any Holland residents attended his services, since most still wanted to hear their sermons in Dutch.

Sometimes, Van Vleck could see nothing but missed chances to do God's work. He wrote to a friend, "I have let pass unimproved many, many opportunities to do good . . . I have been but an insufficient laborer in the Master's vineyard." Teaching and preaching together was a heavy load, and at times Van Vleck did not see how he could continue. Van Vleck was worried that he was neglecting his role as his students' pastor and not reaching enough of them for God. He was always concerned for his students and worried that some of the most academically promising were "still out of Christ."

Along with the professional problems, both John and Lissie Van Vleck contracted tuberculosis during their sojourn in Holland. Van Vleck's already weakened state was further threatened and his wife's health became even worse. A failed harvest brought a town full of discouraged people and although the Academy was in a new building, it was unable to financially support itself. "I fear and tremble," Van Vleck wrote about the school's economic hardships, "[the money] will go from hand to mouth."

Although he had taken on the major challenge of moving to Holland, Van Vleck started to become worried and discouraged. At one point, Van Vleck wrote to Rev. Van Raalte, who was away on one of his fundraising excursions in the East, “I have been immersed in deep, repeated, and continuous trouble.”

Van Vleck and Van Raalte also faced an ongoing conflict with each other, lasting even after Van Vleck had left the community. With the amount of work facing Van Vleck during the building process and a job offer closer to home in New Jersey, Van Vleck wanted a raise from the \$800 that he was making annually. In the economically hard times that Holland faced, such a request was not possible. The two then argued over who should be completing which tasks for the new Academy building and whose job was more difficult.

Van Vleck, in Michigan, wrote to Van Raalte in New York saying that he could not take over the job of begging for money. The two men behaved admirably within the conflict, and Van Vleck was upfront about his reasons for remaining in Holland instead of travelling. “I am sorry to tell you this,” Van Vleck wrote in one of many letters to Van Raalte expressing his concerns, “for it adds to your burdens, and implies weakness on my part—but it is better to speak plain truth.” This commitment to honesty maintained Van Vleck through the most painful part of the conflict, which was to come to the surface after Van Vleck had left Holland.

Following a long argument—partly published as letters to the editor of a weekly Reformed Church newspaper—over funds owed to Van Vleck and the accusation that the Principal may have falsified his account books and held grudges against the Dutch-speaking settlers, Van Vleck wrote a nine-page letter to Van Raalte explaining his side of the story. He expressed his desire to “bury the hatchet” and clearly stated the truth of his hurt feelings.

While Van Vleck believed that he had poured out all of his “body and soul for the good of every student” and then been treated unfairly through these accusations, he also admitted to his own weaknesses and mistakes. “You know very well that I am hasty and imprudent. Very, very often I say things I am sorry for afterwards,” he observed, turning the analysis in on himself.

In the end, Van Vleck was willing to forgive the grievances and closed the letter with: “May the past make us both wiser; and may the Lord make us both better.” Their conflict ended and, eventually, Van Raalte himself named the Academy building after John Van Vleck, recognizing the former principal’s honesty and hard work.

Despite the problems, Van Vleck was able to enjoy some success in Holland. Both of his daughters managed to survive despite their parents’ history of health problems and the pioneer lifestyle. Van Vleck made friends with some of the inhabitants, despite his language barrier. One report from a biographer claims: “the ladies thought much of Rev. Van Vleck and so they met in the afternoon to darn his socks and mend his pantaloons.”

Another minister, sent to Holland as part of a missionary board, became a close friend of Van Vleck, in whom he would confide his troubles. This man, Rev. John Garretson, also accompanied Van Vleck to enjoy some of Holland’s attractions. Van Vleck wrote to his friend, “I should be happy to have another row on Black Lake [Lake Macatawa] in your company, and a little struggle with the surf of Lake Michigan would not be amiss.”



Citizens of Holland

Van Vleck also employed his studious nature and learned Dutch quickly—just over a year after he moved to Holland, he knew enough to be examined by the council for his ordination. Proficiency in Dutch allowed him to preach in the native language of the townspeople, and he was even allowed to substitute for the main preacher, Rev. Van Raalte, when the minister was away in the East. His audience increased from under ten parishioners to between sixty and one hundred thirty for every sermon, which greatly encouraged Van Vleck to grow more confident of his abilities.

Van Vleck stayed in Holland for only a year after the Academy building was completed. In 1859, he resigned because of his health, and the Van Vleck family moved back to New York. Van Vleck continued to teach, this time at the Kingston Academy, until he became too ill, then preached at a church in Wawarsing, New York, near his hometown. When he lost his wife in 1861, he remarried quickly, to her sister, Julia Falconer. This sort of remarriage would have been controversial at the time, but was probably motivated by John Van Vleck's rapidly failing health and his desire to look after his two young daughters. The couple had two sons, Frank and John. Van Vleck retired in 1864 and died only a year later, at age thirty-six.

John Van Vleck only had four years to influence the Hope community, but his legacy still continues. He left a tangible reminder of his presence on campus—Van Vleck Hall. In fact, an observer remarked that Van Vleck “handled every brick that went into the building,” so Hope is left with the literal work of his hands. However, Van Vleck left not only a physical but also a spiritual legacy. He was known by friends for having “a feeble body, yet an indomitable will.” Taking a journey away from home into a wilderness where he did not speak the language of the inhabitants, Van Vleck displayed both courage and remarkable faith.



Male students enjoying Van Vleck Hall, ca. 1900

He believed God would provide for him, but at the same time, he knew of his responsibility for others. “May a kind Providence care for us!” Van Vleck wrote, “this I know will not obviate our caring for ourselves.” Van Vleck used all of his energy and talents for the benefit of others, working to build a hall and a school that he would not have the opportunity to see develop. Even in the most difficult times during the Academy’s construction and early days of poverty, Van Vleck said, “I dare not leave it. I feel that I am doing more good here than I could elsewhere.” At the end of his four years, he humbly reflected, “the Lord has permitted me to be useful here.”

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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*