

Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees



"[We] feel profoundly thankful for these large gifts without which Hope College would not be the prosperous institution which it is."

-Council of Hope College, 1907

Though Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees never set eyes upon the Hope College campus, her presence still endures. As the donor for the building that bears her name, Voorhees gave Hope a lasting reminder of her generosity. The influence of this woman who led a quiet, simple life reached throughout the country and the world. She was not content to think only of herself, but followed her calling to be a steward of the gifts she had in order to create opportunities for people for generations.

Born into a wealthy Eastern family of Dutch descent in 1841, Elizabeth Rodman enjoyed the benefits of a privileged childhood. Her mother died when Elizabeth was only nine weeks old and her father John Rodman provided for her in their home in Brooklyn, New York. John Rodman had made his fortune as a ship owner, a lucrative business in their coastal town. Brooklyn was a wealthy residential area during the pre-Civil War era, when ships operated by sail and the town was clean and quiet. Along with his Brooklyn house, Rodman bought an estate in Bedminster, New Jersey in 1860, where Elizabeth spent most of her adolescence and young adulthood until the time of her marriage.



Elizabeth's father, John Rodman.

Because the family enjoyed a high social status, the young Elizabeth did not attend school but received her education through private tutors. She did not attend college and spent most of her time at home. She did, however, enjoy reading and was known, both as a child and as an adult, to have a large stack of books on her table, most often including volumes of religious devotion or instruction. Elizabeth would often withdraw from the company of others in order to read by herself. Her love of the solitary act of reading lasted for her entire life.

Since her father was a society man, Voorhees also had opportunity to meet with various educated and experienced people, who kept her informed about the world. Social life was very important to the Rodman family, and Elizabeth, as the woman of the house, took part in its events. Although some remembered that she was shy, many remembered Elizabeth as a good listener, and she took the occasion to hear the stories of men and women in leadership positions.

Throughout her childhood and young adulthood, Elizabeth Rodman was very active in the life of her church. A deeply spiritual person, she brought her gifts to the church, especially through the ministry of the choir. Singing weekly with the choir, Elizabeth made an acquaintance with Ralph Voorhees.

Their nephew, Oscar Voorhees, speculated that they came to know each other when Elizabeth was the alto soloist and Ralph the assistant musician who operated the reed organ, an arrangement which would have placed the two close together during rehearsals and performances. Oscar speculated that "proximity was inevitable and evidently not deemed a thing to be deplored."

The two became friends and rumors of a romance began to circulate. Ralph was the son of a wealthy farmer, from the old and established Dutch-American Van Voorhees family, the largest Dutch family in America. He did not have a childhood as privileged as Elizabeth's. The youngest of eleven children, he attended a small public schoolhouse rather than receiving private tutoring. Both Ralph and Elizabeth were recognized public figures in Bedminster, active in church and community life. Fellow church members and townspeople were curious about their relationship, but Ralph and Elizabeth refused to comment.



Elizabeth husband, Ralph Voorhees.

Ralph and Elizabeth continued to see each other secretly. They wanted to be married, but a further complication arose in 1864. Ralph woke up one morning to find himself blind in one eye. After visiting with specialists and attempting to cure his condition through the use of leeches and painful operations, Ralph learned that he would soon be completely blind. And as predicted, he gradually began to lose the sight in his other eye soon afterward. He was almost thirty years old, but the marriage was not to happen soon. John Rodman objected, not wanting his daughter to be tied to a blind man who would not be able to take over the family business or become involved in local politics.

Ralph and Elizabeth waited until 1887 to marry. The objection of John Rodman was stringent enough to induce the couple to wait to marry until after his death. In the meantime, Ralph had moved in with his brother Samuel and helped to take care of his house and children, while Elizabeth had spent the time taking care of her father and his home. Elizabeth Rodman was forty-five years old when she was finally married, much older than the average woman of the time. Ralph Voorhees, being blind, would normally have depended on family members for the rest of his life, without hope for love or marriage.

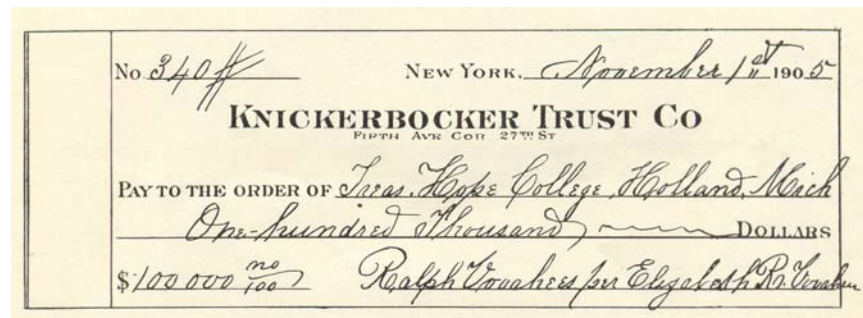
The couple admitted to being engaged for seventeen years, meaning that they entered into the understanding in 1870 when Elizabeth was nearly thirty. They had kept their engagement secret from the entire town, never making an announcement or purchasing an engagement ring. With none of their parents surviving, they had a wedding with family and friends. Then Elizabeth sold John Rodman's estate, and the couple moved away from their familiar home to Clinton, New Jersey.

Ralph and Elizabeth moved into a modest farmhouse and proceeded to live out a quiet life together. Ralph was unable to work because of his blindness, but he was able to find his way around town and do the couple's errands. Throughout his life, he continued to amaze people with his adaptation to disability. Elizabeth was the sole inheritor and manager of her father's money. Both were involved with teaching Sunday school and participating in the ministries of the local church.

Elizabeth's lifestyle had changed dramatically from her childhood as the daughter of John Rodman in Bedminster, surrounded by comforts. Clinton had only one thousand inhabitants, a small country town without any electricity, telephones, or sewers. However, Elizabeth greatly enjoyed her new surroundings in Clinton.

The two were happy to live together after such a long romance. Observers noted how well they complemented and took care of each other. Noticing Elizabeth's concern for her husband, the council of Hope College later recalled: "her Christ-like ministering spirit was a great compensation to him in his sad affliction."

Seven years later, the couple had the opportunity to completely change their simple life when Elizabeth again became the sole heir of an estate—this time, at the death of her uncle, Robert Woodruff Rodman, a man who was even wealthier than her father had been. Elizabeth was not expecting to inherit anything from her uncle, and the sum she received was substantial, though it has never been precisely recorded. The news that Mr. and Mrs. Voorhees were suddenly extremely rich circulated throughout the town. Everyone watched to see if they would start acquiring new conveniences or modernizing their home. Despite their acquisition of wealth, however, nothing about their life visibly changed, and the Voorhees continued to live exactly as before.



The Voorhees' donation to Hope College

The one transformation the inheritance did prompt was the beginning of Elizabeth and Ralph Voorhees's lifelong career in philanthropy. With all of the wealth Elizabeth acquired, she used it to help others and to serve God. No account has been kept of the total of the Voorhees's gifts to various schools, churches, and other institutions, but the list of those aided is extensive.

With her contributions, Voorhees carefully considered the specific causes and institutions to which she would pledge her support. Her particular interests were of "intellectual interest and religious faith," which led her to give substantial support to schools and churches or religious causes.

Yet Elizabeth placed her generosity within specific bounds. Although Elizabeth was in possession of a great fortune, due to the time in which she lived, she was not allowed to become directly involved in business. Even though she could not exercise her full financial rights, she made the decisions regarding where her money went. She asked: "Will this gift serve the advancement of Christ? Is the institution or person asking the gift presenting a real need? Are the recipients doing their share toward the cause for which they are soliciting? Is the financial policy of the institution such as will give a guarantee of safety permanency for the investment?" In this sense, though constrained by her time, she was a business woman.

With these standards in place, Elizabeth began to make donations. She gave money to all of her nieces and nephews when she first inherited the estate, along with a substantial annual gift to the Voorhees's home church and other causes of the Reformed Church in America, including foreign and domestic missionary efforts. However, the largest number of donations were given to colleges. Though neither Ralph nor Elizabeth was a college graduate, one of their primary causes was supporting institutions of higher learning throughout the country.

Most of the beneficiaries of their endowments were small, struggling colleges in the southern and western United States. They usually did not become involved with east coast schools that already had wealthy benefactors. Throughout her life, Elizabeth donated to colleges all over the country, and multiple schools

still bear the mark of Elizabeth or Ralph Voorhees's name. Rutgers University in New Jersey has a Voorhees Library and Huron College in North Dakota was given a new administrative building.

Voorhees even provided the initial support for entire colleges and several institutions still exist thanks to her generosity. Elizabeth Evelyn Wright, president of a South Carolina school and a former student of Booker T. Washington, approached Elizabeth Voorhees about her struggles to educate African-American students in the south. Voorhees was moved by her story and donated enough to save the college, which was renamed the "Voorhees Normal and Industrial School" in her honor.

The college served as an agricultural, industrial, and teaching school. The school has gone through many evolutions and is now called Voorhees College. No longer a trade school, the college is still in existence as a liberal arts school that combines "general education" and "pragmatic studies."

While the Voorhees were financially supporting colleges and universities in the states, their generosity extended overseas as well. Upon a visit from the Chamberlains, missionary friends who served in India, the Voorhees learned that they wanted to begin a school for the blind children they met while working in the hospital in Bombay. This project held special resonance for Elizabeth and Ralph, who knew first-hand the hardships of blindness, having experienced Ralph's blindness. The Ralph Voorhees School for the Blind in Bombay was established with Elizabeth Voorhees's patronage and provided opportunities for blind children to have a place to study.

Although this school is no longer in existence, another school still bears their names, Voorhees College in Vellore, India. This school, established by the same missionaries, was originally a high school, but as the numbers of students rapidly increased, college-level courses were added. With the Voorhees's donation, the school became the largest junior college in the area and still exists as a four-year institution.

Closer to her home on the East Coast, Voorhees endowed the Women's College of New Jersey. Though she had not been educated herself, Voorhees believed strongly in education for women. She donated to several colleges that wanted to provide women with extended opportunities to attend college. The Women's College was located in New Brunswick, New Jersey, near several Reformed Church institutions that served mostly men. The most substantial financial contribution to the campus was built after Elizabeth Voorhees's death in 1924. The Elizabeth R. Voorhees Memorial Chapel is a Georgian Colonial structure still in use today as a site for weddings, concerts, and religious services. The Women's College also endures, in the form of the all-female Douglass College, a smaller division of the larger Rutgers University.



Hope College in the early 1900s

Her reputation for generosity led many people to seek out Elizabeth Voorhees's assistance in their own scholastic endeavors. The third President of the college, Gerrit Kollen, had long believed that Hope was not equipped to serve its female students. Although women had been a part of the student body since 1878, their numbers still did not match those of men. Kollen knew that the shortage of women on Hope's campus was

not due to a lack of interest in education, but rather, an issue of housing. There was only one dormitory on campus, Van Vleck Hall, which housed only men.

In 1905, there were under twenty women enrolled at Hope, the majority of whom were native to the Holland area. Kollen wanted to build a dormitory for women, in order to draw them from other parts of Michigan and even out of state. He knew that “we must make suitable arrangements to give these girls as nearly as possible the advantages of refined, Christian homes or see them leave for other institutions.” He recognized that Hope needed to develop accommodations for women, or lose a competitive edge to other schools.



Voorhees Hall when it was completed in 1907

Kollen approached Elizabeth Voorhees, knowing of her history of funding both denominational schools and causes in women’s education. Elizabeth Voorhees was moved by Kollen’s appeal, delivered during a personal visit to her home, and donated \$100,000 to Hope on an annuity basis, meaning that Hope paid her interest on money she invested. However, over her lifetime, she consistently returned these interest payments to Hope. With \$35,000 of Elizabeth’s donation, Voorhees Hall was constructed in 1907.



The Voorhees Hall parlor and dining room, ca. 1907

Voorhees Hall revolutionized the Hope campus. With the newest conveniences, such as electricity and steam heating, along with a dining room and a parlor, Voorhees was an attraction for female students. Although the hall was designed for one hundred, only thirteen women lived there during its first year of operation. It soon grew to house many more, filling to capacity by the 1920s. With a place for them to live,

women began to arrive from outside the immediate Holland area. Their position on campus also became more prominent. Whereas Hope had previously been a mostly men's school, women now occupied the impressive new building on campus.

Even as the women of Hope were afforded a new opportunity for education, their patron Elizabeth Voorhees retreated further from community life. Ralph Voorhees died in 1907, the same year Voorhees Hall was completed at Hope. Elizabeth Voorhees still received visitors and maintained her hobby of reading, but she was less active in the community and could not often be seen outside of her home. In this quiet manner she continued until the time of her death in 1924.



Hope women enjoying Voorhees Hall, ca. 1940

Voorhees Hall moved Hope forward in terms of women's education. Such a project would not have been possible without the help of Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees. Voorhees's impact on Hope lasts through her building, as well as through the generosity and character of the woman who made it possible. Not only an excellent businesswoman, she also was an admirably charitable Christian.

Voorhees was always thinking of the needs of others, despite the fact that her circumstances made it easy for her to be concerned with only herself. Although she was a quiet and reserved person, she continually listened to appeals for her financial assistance. Her devotion to charity, and especially her selection of causes to support, demonstrated that she had a definite vision for the future of institutions like Hope. Her nephew remembered that "she led the life of a recluse that millions whom she had never seen might have the joy of a larger life."

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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