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Foundation of Hope: “Dear Old Van Vleck” Turns 150

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As the oldest building on Hope College’s campus, Van Vleck Hall has witnessed the history of Hope unfold. Finished in 1858, Van Vleck even predates the incorporation of the college in 1866. Van Vleck has served many different functions: dormitory, library, president’s house, chapel, and classroom building, all while experiencing fire and renovation and housing thousands of students. However, despite its long years of usefulness, after one hundred fifty years, Van Vleck still stands strong in the center of Hope’s campus.

When John Van Vleck arrived in Holland in 1855 as principal of Holland Academy, which later evolved into Hope College, it did not have a single building of its own. It

was through Van Raalte’s vision that Hope College received a donation of acreage for a campus.

Born in 1828 in Shawangunk, New York, the Reverend John Van Vleck was from a well-established family, the son of James and Maria Van Vleck.¹ Although he suffered from ill health for most of his life, Van Vleck, from a young age, was known for his studious disposition, having a reputation for “being very faithful and thorough in his work, and unusually fond of books.”² Future Hope College president Charles Scott attended school with Van Vleck, and Scott later remembered the ten-year-old Van Vleck as “studious in habit

beyond his class-mates, and not given to the ruder sports of the boys.”³

Although Van Vleck initially considered pursuing medicine as a career, he decided instead to prepare for ordination. After attending Rutgers College and graduating in 1852, he

attended New Brunswick Theological Seminary, graduating in 1855.⁴ When Van Vleck finished seminary, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) Board of Education recommended him as missionary preacher, as well as principal of the Holland Academy, Holland’s only school. With this appointment, Van Vleck moved from New Jersey to Michigan to take the

position. When Van Vleck came to Holland, he brought with him his wife, Cornelia Falconer, and her sister, Christina. The two women taught at the district school while Van Vleck taught at the Academy, though both institutions were housed in the same building.⁵ As missionary preacher, Van Vleck also preached to the local English-speaking residents, since he knew no Dutch.

Van Vleck remained in Holland for only four years, until 1859, when his health forced him to relocate to New York, where he worked first as the head of the Kingston Academy, then

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The Campus at the Time of the Quarter-Centennial



From the Director



The story in this issue celebrates the long history of Hope College's oldest building, Van Vleck Hall, and its importance in the college's historical footprint in the Holland community. It was written by Laura Shears, a Hope College junior majoring in math and English. The idea for this article came from her findings while working as a research assistant for Dr. Jacob Nyenhuis, Director of the A.C. Van

Raalte Institute, on his forthcoming book on the architectural history of Hope College. I hope you enjoy reading it and learning more about the college's rich architectural history.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Foundation of Hope (continued from page 1)

as the pastor of the church of Wawarsing. He retired in 1864 and died on March 15, 1865.⁶

According to Charles Scott, Van Vleck's four years in Holland "were the most important in [his] short life."⁷ Although Van Vleck's time spent in Holland was important to him, it was also extremely valuable for the Academy. When the General Synod approved the Academy for a five-year trial period, the Synod expected to see the construction of a suitable campus and building during that time to demonstrate the Academy's long-term potential. In 1857, the Academy separated from the district school and held classes in the Orphan House, since the Academy still had no building of its own. The need for a building was becoming increasingly apparent, especially to Holland founder Albertus C. Van Raalte. Without a suitable place for students to live, the Academy had no hope of attracting students from outside of the Holland area, as accommodations available in local homes were too small and too few to host the Academy's students.⁸ In 1857, the plans for a building "fifty four feet long and thirty two feet wide; [that] will accommodate thirty boarding scholars, and fifty village boarders" were arranged, and the building of the Academy was begun.⁹

While Van Raalte traveled east to raise funding for the building by appealing to various congregations, Van Vleck remained in Holland, overseeing the planning and construction and acting as the project's architect and supervisor. According to Van Vleck, in a letter written during the 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."¹⁰ The *Christian Intelligencer*, a publication of the Reformed Church in America, recognized that Van Vleck "handled every brick that went into the building."¹¹

The construction of the Academy building began in May 1857, with the laying of the cornerstone. Van Vleck Hall was created in the Italianate style, which was, according to the *Holland Sentinel*, the "very latest architectural style" of the time.¹² It was constructed from

bricks procured from the Zeeland Brick Company. As brick was not readily available in the 1850s, brick buildings were rare in the Holland area. However, when the brick company started in Zeeland, the brickyard made this material more easily accessible, and brick homes grew in popularity in the 1860s. When Van Vleck Hall was completed, it was "the largest brick building in the area."¹³ Construction of the building was not simple, and builders faced many challenges. The area was still covered with trees, which had to be cleared in order to construct the foundation, and a road also had to be created in order to deliver the materials.¹⁴ The raising of funds was not uncomplicated either, and despite Van Raalte's three tours of tireless campaigning in the East, more fundraising was still needed. In the end, John Van Vleck came through and donated the final thousand dollars to complete the seven thousand dollar project.¹⁵

In 1858, the hall was complete. An article in the newspaper *De Hollander* on February 17, 1858, noted that "religious exercises in English took place for the first time" in Van Vleck Hall.¹⁶ In addition to classroom and chapel space, the hall served many other purposes, including functioning as the principal's residence, dormitory, and dining room. All daily activities of the Academy were carried out in the new building. An early resident described life in Van Vleck Hall as a form of "primitive simplicity," while still noting that all aspects of life were incorporated into its purpose. Van Vleck Hall nurtured the physical, intellectual, social, musical, and spiritual lives of its residents.¹⁷



John Van Vleck

Van Vleck Hall's early history is characterized by a series of fires. It has been noted that by 1891 the building had been on fire at least eight times. Most of these fires were due to the wood-burning stoves located in every student's room. An early Hope College publication, the *Excelsiora*, carried reports of these incidents. One account from 1882 stated: "Last Wednesday night the people were suddenly aroused from their slumbers by the ringing of the fire bell. Hope College was on fire and thither they flocked in large numbers. The students however have the credit of extinguishing the fire."¹⁸ All of the fires were extinguished without major damage to Van Vleck Hall. In fact, it is one of only two public buildings in Holland to survive the fire of 1871; it is the second oldest public building in Holland. The 1871 fire occurred at the same time as the Great Chicago fire, and according to one account, "five churches, three hotels, sixty-eight stores, and more than three hundred dwelling-houses" were destroyed. Most of the city's structures were lost. This account was written by the Reverend E. J. Goodspeed, a Chicago minister connected with the Relief and Aid Society. As he appealed for help for the Michigan residents who had lost everything in the fire, Goodspeed claimed that the college property was one of the main concerns during the fire. "Men were trying to keep the fire from the College buildings," he wrote, but "these buildings, although of brick, were burning." Though the fire may have burned these buildings, Van Vleck survived.¹⁹

In 1883, after Hope College had been incorporated for seventeen years, the Academy building was given its current name, Van Vleck Hall, named for Academy principal John Van Vleck. Van Vleck Hall continued to house students, and the *Hope Bulletin* noted that seventeen rooms were available for students, though candidates for the ministry were given preference. The first president of Hope College, Philip Phelps, Jr., also lived in Van Vleck between 1859 and 1884, and four of his children were born there.²⁰ One of his sons, Philip Tertius Phelps, wrote his childhood impressions of Van Vleck: "'Twas made of brick, three stories high / I thought it very tall / Trees round it reaching to the sky / The house named Van Vleck Hall."²¹

Since its early days, Van Vleck has undergone a series of renovations, as well as having seen countless changes in function. As more buildings were added to Hope's campus, starting with a student and faculty-built structure erected in 1862 that served as both the chapel and the gymnasium, Van Vleck came to serve more as a dormitory and less as an all-encompassing building. It was Van Vleck's history of fires that created the need for a new building to house Hope's six thousand-volume library. The librarian remarked, "It is sheer nonsense to leave a valuable library in a building constantly

occupied by a score of students."²² Thus, Graves Library, along with Winants Chapel, was completed in 1894.

Electricity was added to the building in 1899.²³ In 1923, Van Vleck underwent more modernization with a major renovation, bringing the building from its former primitive state to that of a "modern" dormitory. The heating system was repaired, all of the rooms were given new hardwood flooring, and showers were installed on every floor.²⁴ With a project of this magnitude, students were forced to adapt to the discomfort of construction during the academic year. The Van Vleck residents jokingly wrote to Hope's *Anchor*, "During the Christmas vacation carpenters and plumbers tore up things in general and did not leave many rooms intact."²⁵ The renovations were completed and residents able to enjoy the comfortable new living standards when fire struck in April of 1924.²⁶ Another remodeling was carried out in 1927.



Van Vleck Hall when it housed male students

One of Van Vleck's most drastic changes occurred in 1942 "when the women students invaded the hallowed halls."²⁷ Van Vleck was converted from an all-male to a women's dormitory, which it remains to this day. World War II brought a decrease in male enrollment and Hope needed another place to house the increasing numbers of female students. Voorhees Hall, the only women's dormitory at the time, was full to capacity, and more women were applying to Hope. Those men remaining in Van Vleck were moved into fraternity houses and Western Theological Seminary-owned Zwemer Hall, as well as private local housing. Forty-four women were to live in Van Vleck during the 1942-1943 school year, numbers which necessitated another remodeling. A first floor reception room and housing for the matron were also added to the building.²⁸

Van Vleck achieved recognition when it was designated as a Michigan Historic Site in 1976. Because of its role in the

beginnings of Hope College, as well as its ability to survive the 1871 fire, Van Vleck became the second location on the Hope Campus to become a historic site. The other historical marker, in front of Graves Hall, denotes the founding of the college. The Hope College Archives Council and the Bicentennial Committee worked to achieve this recognition for the hall, and a marker in front of Van Vleck still proclaims the building's historical status.²⁹

Van Vleck saw another renovation in 1979, when \$350,000 was donated to "bring the building as close as possible to its original design and still offer residents a comfortable, modern living environment."³⁰ In order to accomplish this blending of modernity and historical veracity, the interior had to be ripped out of the structure, but the brickwork and wood paneling left intact. A four-story stairwell and a fire escape were also added, bringing the structure up to fire code, and the basement was converted into a kitchen, television room, study lounge, laundry room, and storage facility.³¹ The 1979 layout in the hall still exists today. To fund this project, Hope President Emeritus Irwin Lubbers assisted President Gordon J. Van Wylen with fundraising. He wrote a letter appealing to alumni for donations. Former Van Vleck residents sent in their contributions, along with letters about their fond memories of life in the hall. One graduate from 1928 remarked, "I am sure you will have no difficulty in collecting the funds necessary for the restoration of dear old Van Vleck Hall."³² Another alum pledged support, stating: "We can only grow rich in Heritage by careful preservation and restoration of the American Antique—I'm glad that Hope College is taking constructive action for its history."³³ Indeed, Lubbers and Van Wylen were able to collect the necessary donations, and in 1980, Van Vleck reopened.

The newly-remodeled hall's residents described the dormitory's atmosphere as "subdued, cozy, and warm . . . like living in a house."³⁴ However, in a twist of irony, just as the hall's renovations were being completed, the building again caught fire. A contractor was using a torch to strip away old paint, and the flammable material in the attic caught fire. Upon hearing the news of the fire, female residents rushed out of class only to see their dormitory burn, and a newspaper headline read: "Fire Ruins Memories, Landmark Dormitory."³⁵ Van Vleck was far from ruined however, and after another extensive renovation, this time including a sprinkler system, the dormitory opened again in the fall of 1981.³⁶

At the laying of the cornerstone in 1857, *De Hollander* carried an article commemorating the simple celebration. To the men working on the construction of Van Vleck, the writer of the article remarked: "Your day's labor may mark an important date which will perhaps be handed down through

the centuries of the future."³⁷ Indeed, Van Vleck has endured through a century and a half. As President Van Wylen commented at the dedication ceremony for the Van Vleck historical marker, "Van Vleck Hall is a constant reminder to the Hope community that we are benefactors of a great tradition."³⁸

(Endnotes)

- ¹ Charles Scott, "Rev. John Van Vleck," *Anchor*, 2 (November 1888), 6.
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- ³ Ibid.
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- ⁵ Willard Wichers, *A Century of Hope: 1866-1966* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 41.
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- ⁷ Ibid. 6.
- ⁸ G. Van Schelven, "Van Vleck Hall," *De Grondwet*, 6 August 1912.
- ⁹ "The Holland Academy," *De Hollander*, 7 June 1857.
- ¹⁰ John Van Vleck to Rev. John Garretson, 18 August 1857, Joint Archives of Holland (JAH).
- ¹¹ *Holland City News*, 14 June 1883.
- ¹² *Holland Evening Sentinel*, 18 August 1866.
- ¹³ Michael J. Douma, *Veneklasen Brick* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 9-10.
- ¹⁴ G. Van Schelven, "Van Vleck Hall," *De Grondwet*, 6 August 1912.
- ¹⁵ Van Vleck Hall Fundraising Brochure, 1980, JAH.
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- ¹⁷ Samuel Streng, "Life in Van Vleck Hall in the Early Seventies," *Anchor*, June 1894.
- ¹⁸ *Excelsiora*, 7, no. 5 (1882).
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- ²⁰ *Century of Hope*, 104.
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- ²² *Century of Hope*, 129.
- ²³ "Centuries of Campus Life Linked by Van Vleck Hall," *Holland Evening Sentinel*, 18 August 1966.
- ²⁴ "Van Vleck Hall Is Being Modernized," *Holland City News*, 10 January 1923.
- ²⁵ "Ichabod," *Anchor*, 24 January 1923.
- ²⁶ "Fire Threatens the Life of Old Van Vleck," *Anchor*, 23 April 1924.
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- ²⁸ "Van Vleck Hall at Hope to Become Girls' Dormitory," *Holland City News*, 25 May 1942.
- ²⁹ "Van Vleck Named as Historic," *Holland Evening Sentinel*, 9 October 1976.
- ³⁰ "History Lives at Van Vleck," *News From Hope College*, August 1979.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Regina Buss Brown to Irwin J. Lubbers, 30 May 1979, JAH.
- ³³ *News from Hope College*, August 1979.
- ³⁴ Debbie Hall, "Cozy, Historic Van Vleck Reopens," *News From Hope College*, December 1979.
- ³⁵ Jim Mencarelli, "Fire Ruins Memories, Landmark Dormitory," [*Grand Rapids Press?*], JAH.
- ³⁶ Keith Grigoletto, "Van Vleck to open in fall; reconstruction has begun," *Anchor*, 1 May 1981.
- ³⁷ "Laying of the Corner Stone of the Holland Academy," *De Hollander*, 20 May 1857.
- ³⁸ Van Vleck Hall Fundraising Brochure, 1980, JAH.

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Van Vleck Hall as it appears today