

10-1-2011

# The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 21.03: Fall 2011

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*Hope College*

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## Recommended Citation

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**Published in:** *Joint Archives Quarterly*, Volume 21, Issue 3, Fall October 1, 2011. Copyright © 2011 Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

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# The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

Volume 21 Number 3

Fall 2011

## *Envisioning Hope College*

by Elton J. Bruins

Albertus C. Van Raalte and Philip Phelps Jr. were two men with very different backgrounds, temperaments, and personalities who became closely associated through the cause of Christian higher education in the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church<sup>1</sup> in the second half of the nineteenth century in the State of Michigan. They were a study in contrasts in many ways: Van Raalte was born and raised in the Netherlands, Phelps in Albany, New York. Van Raalte, as his letters indicate, had an uneven temperament that depended on the state of his health; Phelps, however, seemed always to be on an even keel. Van Raalte was forceful in personality; Phelps was quite reserved.

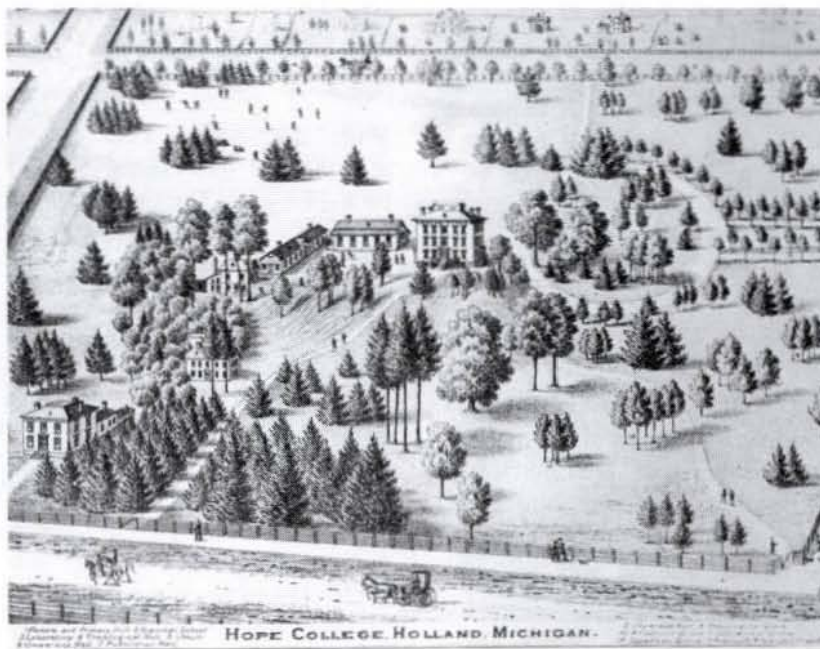
In 1859 Phelps left New York at Van Raalte's request to become the principal of the Holland Academy in Holland, Michigan. Working together to establish quality education for the children and youth of the Dutch immigrants who had arrived in Michigan (some as early as 1847), the two men formed a close bond that remained strong throughout the years. Eventually, their work in education led to the founding of a college and a seminary.

The ninety-four surviving letters written by Van Raalte to Phelps, 1857-75, reveal the kind of people these men were and the work they did in education.<sup>2</sup> The letters of Phelps to Van Raalte, unfortunately, are not extant, but

some documents written by Phelps have survived and tell much about him. In order to understand these men better and what drew them together, brief biographical sketches follow.

Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte was the eleventh of seventeen children born to Rev. Albertus Van Raalte and his wife, Catharina Christina Harking. At the time of his son's birth on 17 October 1811,

Rev. Van Raalte was serving a Dutch Reformed congregation in the village of Wanneperveen in the eastern province of Overijssel, the Netherlands. The family moved to the father's next pastorate in Fijnaart in the province of North Brabant when son Albertus Christiaan was six years old. He matriculated at Leiden University at the age of eighteen and at first studied medicine, but after a conversion experience he decided to study theology, following the path of his father.<sup>3</sup>



*A romantic view of the Hope College campus, 1866*

*(continued on page 2)*

## From the Director



As the holidays approach, I am reminded how much we are blessed at the Joint Archives of Holland with hard-working staff, volunteers, and talented writers, such as Dr. Elton Bruins. With the publishing of his largest work to date, I have asked Elton to give us a small sample of his new book to read. After reading this

short article, you will want to buy your own copy of *Envisioning Hope College: Letters Written by Albertus C. Van Raalte to Philip Phelps Jr., 1857-1875* to learn more about the founders of Hope College and their educational legacy. To order a copy, contact the Hope-Geneva Bookstore at (800) 946-4673 or visit [www.hopebookstore.com](http://www.hopebookstore.com).

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

### *Envisioning Hope College (continued from page 1)*

Leiden was a good place for Van Raalte to get an education; it was well established and offered high-level instruction. In addition he made many lifelong friends there, including the de Moen family, residents of Leiden. He became acquainted with their daughter Christina Johanna, whom he married in 1836, soon after he finished his theological training at Leiden University.<sup>4</sup> His close friend and classmate Anthony Brummelkamp, who was instrumental in leading Van Raalte to an experiential expression of the Christian faith, also married a de Moen daughter, Maria Wilhelmina.

In 1834, one year before Van Raalte finished his theological education at Leiden, a split occurred in the public (or state) church of the Netherlands, the church in which his father had been a pastor. Van Raalte had planned to enter the ministry of the Dutch Reformed Church in which he was raised, but he was denied entrance when the answers he gave to questions posed during his examination for the ministry made the examiners suspicious that he would not be willing to abide by church regulations. Reluctantly, he joined the newly-formed Separatist Church, as did Anthony Brummelkamp, his brother-in-law.

Van Raalte spent the years between 1836 and 1846 as a pastor in four Separatist congregations: a joint pastorate in Mastenbroek and Genemuiden, one in Ommen, and a pastorate held jointly with Brummelkamp in Arnhem. Separatists (*Afgescheidenen*) were intensely disliked by many in the Netherlands, and during his ten years as a pastor, Van Raalte suffered persecution, as did a number of fellow Separatist Christians. The persecution had

ceased, however, by the time Van Raalte decided in late summer 1846 to lead a group of people to America. Religious freedom was no longer a major issue, but the economic depression in the Netherlands was. The potato disease that plagued Ireland had crossed the English Channel to the Netherlands, causing bad times for many Netherlanders.

During the difficult summer of 1846, while he was suffering from a severe illness, Van Raalte felt led to leave his home country. Many Separatists had emigrated to America, settling in Wisconsin, Iowa, and New York. One family with whom Van Raalte had corresponded settled in Boston, and Van Raalte feared that unless someone went to America and formed these Separatists into congregations, they would leave the Reformed faith. Consequently he decided to be that leader for the Separatist immigrants in America. He and his family set sail for America on 24 September 1846 and, after a nearly two-month-long voyage, reached the New York City harbor. On board ship Van Raalte spent time attempting to learn the English language. Although he never completely mastered written English (as his letters show) and was never able to preach easily in English, he was able to communicate well with Americans who did not know Dutch.

With the advice and assistance of some leading Dutch Reformed Church ministers in New York, particularly Rev. Thomas De Witt in Manhattan and Rev. Isaac N. Wyckoff in Albany, Van Raalte decided to settle in Michigan, where he developed a colony as the base for providing



A. C. Van Raalte

leadership to the Dutch Separatists in the United States. The colony—Holland Colony—was located in Ottawa County on the edge of Black Lake (later called Lake Macatawa), which emptied into Lake Michigan. In just a few years, Holland Colony, which included not only the town of Holland but also the villages of Graafschap, Overisel, Zeeland, Drenthe, and others, grew to about three thousand people. The area was just opening up for development when Van Raalte and his settlers arrived, and they were able to purchase land from the federal government, some at \$1.25 per acre, some at higher prices; the average was \$2.32 per acre. Native Americans were still in the area, although by 1849 most of them had migrated to northern Michigan.

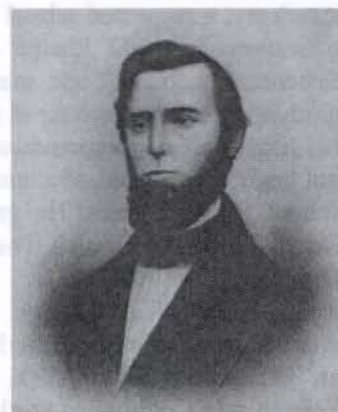
Soon after arriving in Michigan, Van Raalte was consumed with the many needs of the colonists, but first, he built a log home for his own family, his wife and five children. As leader Van Raalte needed to help the immigrants establish villages, farms, businesses, and homes. He and his wife expended their personal funds to help the new arrivals, who were coming by the hundreds, to obtain land and build farmsteads. He also assisted several men in establishing new businesses in the village of Holland. By 1850 he had petitioned the United States government to fund the development of Holland Harbor, an essential facility if the colonists were to export the goods they produced.

The Holland Colony regarded itself as a Christian colony; therefore, Van Raalte's role as a pastor was to work actively on the development of church life. His congregation, which became known as First Reformed Church, was the center of worship in the colony. He conducted two worship services there each Sunday and taught catechetical classes for children and youth during the week. In 1848 he organized other churches that had formed in nearby villages of the colony into a governing body called Holland Classis. By 1850 he had led Holland Classis into union with the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church (hereafter the Dutch Reformed Church) of New York and New Jersey that had been founded in 1628 on Manhattan Island. Congregations in this same church had welcomed him and his fellow immigrants when they first arrived in America. Six years later in 1856, Van Raalte was instrumental in uniting the Dutch immigrant churches in the Midwest into the Synod of Chicago, demonstrating his interest not only in the congregations of the colony, but also in all Dutch immigrant churches, including those formed by Rev. Hendrik P. Scholte, founder of Pella, Iowa, who was an ineffective church leader.

Among the many aspects of Van Raalte's leadership role with the Dutch immigrants which are revealed in his letters to Phelps, one of the most important was his role in the development of Christian education. Van Raalte, and nearly all of his followers, arrived in Michigan with intentions to found Christian parochial schools in the Holland Colony. This goal was overridden, however, by the more pressing needs that confronted them as they settled a new country and left them with insufficient funds to establish a separate Christian school system. Instead Van Raalte used public funds to organize a school system in 1848 in Holland Township where the colony was located, so that the children of the colonists were able to obtain at least a primary education. This public education system was dominated, however, by Van Raalte and members of his congregation, and therefore, could have been considered quasi-Christian.

A major challenge for congregations in the colony was to find pastors when the founding pastors died. This challenge provided the primary motivation for establishing secondary education to make it possible for young men to prepare for Christian ministry. As in other areas of community life, Van Raalte provided leadership to this effort. In October 1851, just four years after the founding of the colony, he established a secondary school called the Pioneer School, which was not supported by public funds. With the help of the Dutch Reformed Church, he found Walter Taylor of New York State and hired him to be the first principal. Given that Van Raalte was rather difficult to get along with at times, it is not surprising that by 1854, he needed a new principal. He hired Rev. Frederik Beidler, who lasted only one year, and then in 1855 offered the position to Rev. John Van Vleck, who remained until 1859. All the principals came out of the Dutch Reformed Church but taught in English. Although Dutch was used almost exclusively in all other aspects of life in the Holland Colony, the new generation of students was educated in English.

Van Vleck reorganized the Pioneer School in 1857 and renamed it the Holland Academy. Several male students who graduated from the Holland Academy decided to enter the Christian ministry. They enrolled in Rutgers College in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and then attended the Theological Seminary of the Dutch Reformed Church, which was also located in New Brunswick. The second generation of pastors for the Dutch immigrant congregations was thus prepared for the ministry. The primary goal for the school was fulfilled, and Van Raalte's far-reaching vision of the benefits of union with the Dutch Reformed Church was proved to be wise, making it possible for the churches of the Dutch Colony to thrive and to grow.



*John Van Vleck*

In 1859 Van Raalte invited Rev. Philip Phelps Jr. of Hastings-on-Hudson, New York to be Van Vleck's successor. Phelps was well qualified for the position and for inaugurating the next chapter in Christian education in the Holland Colony, but it is a little difficult to see why he would have been interested in moving to Michigan to live and work with Dutch immigrants. He had some Dutch heritage through his father (his mother was Scottish), but he did not know the Dutch language, which forced Van Raalte and others to communicate

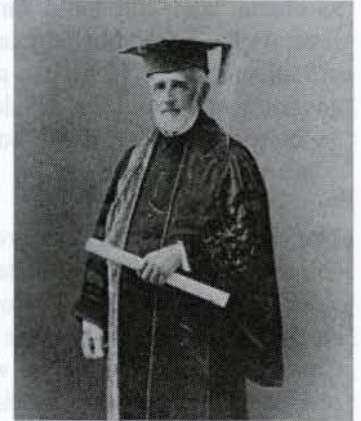
with him in English. His family was a distinguished one in New York State, with a history of having been in America since 1635. His main link with the Michigan Dutch may have been through his pastor, Rev. Isaac N. Wyckoff, who served the Second Reformed Church in Albany for thirty years, from 1836 to 1866. Wyckoff had befriended Van Raalte and his followers when they passed through Albany, heading west on the Erie Canal; indeed Wyckoff had formed a society to assist Dutch immigrants going to Michigan. Phelps's wife, Margaret Anne Jordan, knew some Dutch and had worked with the Dutch immigrants in Albany. Possibly his wife's link, and Wyckoff's, to the Dutch immigrants had sparked some interest in Phelps in the Dutch and in going west sometime during his career. Other details of Phelps' life give background to this discussion.

At the time Philip Phelps Jr. was born on 12 July 1826 to Philip and Hannah Marcroft Phelps, his father was employed by the State of New York in the Comptroller's office, a position he held for fifty years. The family's financial resources enabled the parents to provide a good education for their children, including Philip, for whom "no money was spared in his education." Phelps spent nine years, from age seven to sixteen, at the Albany Academy, a respected school well known for its rigorous education. In 1842 Phelps entered Union College in Schenectady, New York, matriculating as a junior, and graduating two years later at the age of eighteen. During his time there, he experienced a conversion, but he did not begin theological education until 1846, after teaching school for two years. He graduated in 1849 from the Dutch Reformed Church Theological Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

After his ordination in 1850, he entered his first pastorate at Elmsford, New York, which was located in Westchester County just north of New York City. During his first year, he also served a missionary congregation in Hastings-on-Hudson, about five miles south of Elmsford, but from 1851 to 1859, he was pastor only at Hastings. He married Margaret Anne Jordan in 1853. During a trip to Davenport, Iowa, in September 1856, Philip and Margaret decided to visit the Van Raalte colony in Michigan. They wanted to see for themselves what they had heard about the Holland Colony from Isaac Wyckoff and from reading the *Christian Intelligencer*, the denominational publication. Wyckoff had visited the Holland Colony in 1849 and had then written a lengthy document extolling the strength of Van Raalte and his people. Subsequent to that visit, Wyckoff was of great assistance to Van Raalte in facilitating the union of Holland Classis with the Dutch Reformed Church at Albany, New York, in 1850.

Van Raalte was in the East on his first financial mission for the Holland Academy when the young Phelps couple visited Holland in September 1856; they did, however, meet Mrs. Van Raalte. When Phelps and his wife met Van Raalte later that year, it was the beginning of a lifelong friendship.

Van Raalte had many acquaintances during his lifetime, but Phelps was one of his few close friends. Van Raalte often addressed him as "Friend and Brother" in his letters and occasionally poured his heart out to him, something he rarely did with any of his other numerous correspondents. He may have confided in his brother-in-law, Anthony Brummelkamp, and certainly in Mrs. Van Raalte, but not in others outside his family except Phelps. His letters to Phelps reflect a genuine openness about his feelings and desires. Van Raalte and Phelps worked well together guiding the future of the Holland Academy.



Philip Phelps Jr.

In 1859 Phelps accepted Van Raalte's invitation to become principal of the Holland Academy. He lived with his wife in an apartment in Van Vleck Hall. Phelps was called to serve as a missionary pastor to the English-speaking people who had come to live in the Holland Colony in addition to his work at the Holland Academy. As pastor he conducted worship services on Sunday for his young congregation; his responsibilities, therefore, required that he work seven days a week. He fulfilled his pastoral role until the congregation was strong enough to call a full-time pastor in 1866. Rev. Giles Vande Wall assisted Phelps at the academy until his departure in 1861 for missionary service in South Africa.

Philip Phelps had learned something about running an academy from attending the Albany Academy for nine years and from teaching school himself for two years. He plunged into the work at the Holland Academy by carefully classifying the academic level of each of its thirty-two students and then dividing them into classes that could then be conducted at the same time. This made it easier as well to chart their progress and to know when students were ready to begin college studies. By 1862 he believed that nine students were ready for college work. Normally, they would have gone to Rutgers, as several students had done during the 1850s, but in 1862 Phelps decided that he would begin college

instruction right at the Holland Academy, thus making him essentially the founder of Hope College.

There is no documentation extant to show that Van Raalte had any part in instituting college classes at the academy, but he undoubtedly would have approved. Offering college classes was evidently Phelps' idea, and it required a great deal of work and sacrifice on his part. Phelps at first taught all of the college courses himself, in addition to keeping up his work as principal of the academy and as pastor of the English-speaking congregation. He appointed some student tutors to assist him, such as William Gilmore to handle the music program. Gilmore was a mature student from Illinois and a former school teacher. Each year the demands grew, however, and new classes were added, so that by fall 1865, Phelps had teaching responsibility for four college classes. Phelps soon acquired staff to assist in the teaching at the academy and with the college classes. A board for the college division, separate from the Holland Academy board, was appointed with the approval of the denomination.

Expanding the Holland Academy and offering college classes brought added expenses, and the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, who supported the institution, demanded that Phelps raise a large endowment to assist with these growing costs. Consequently, Phelps went east to canvass congregations there for funds. He, like Van Raalte before him, was successful in this: he knew he had to succeed if the college were to survive financially.

In 1866 when the State of Michigan officially incorporated the college, Phelps was named its first president, and eight young men received bachelor's degrees as the first graduating class that summer. During these infant years of the college, Phelps became widely known and recognized in the denomination. New York University awarded him an honorary degree in 1864 (at the time NYU was headed by a member of the Dutch Reformed Church), and in the same year, General Synod elected him as its president. By the age of forty Phelps was a well-known and respected leader in Christian higher education.

Phelps and Van Raalte received permission from the denomination to establish theological education at Hope College in 1866, when the college graduated its first class. Phelps was then president of an institution that offered Christian education at multiple levels—primary, academy, college, and seminary levels. This quiet, genteel man was like a bulldog in pursuing goals for the institution, working diligently until they were realized. Phelps clearly viewed Hope College as a Christian institution. Virtually all of its first professors were

ministers and its instructors were theologically trained, and all of its board members were either ministers or elders of the church. In addition, for the most part, students who matriculated at the school were young Christians.

As one reads the letters of Van Raalte to Phelps, one gets a sense of how closely the two men worked together to achieve the goal they held in common: developing an institution of higher learning, which was critical to the life of the denomination in the Midwest. People like the Revs. Wyckoff and De Witt perceived as well how vital Van Raalte's people were to the future of the Dutch Reformed Church. Hence they and others like James Suydam and Samuel B. Schieffelin of New York City became major contributors to the Holland Academy and Hope College. Many church members in the East complained about the frequent demands of Van Raalte and Phelps for funds and their requests for permission to develop collegiate and theological education. The work, however, of Phelps and Van Raalte was the base, decades later, from which the Dutch Reformed Church received a new burst of life nationally. This was particularly true in the Midwest, where that which the church had achieved in only a small way prior to the arrival in Michigan of Van Raalte and his followers grew tremendously after they came.

Phelps and Van Raalte were very different people in family background, in personalities, and in temperament. Each was gifted in his own way, and each was devoted equally to the cause of Christian higher education. They worked together to achieve this shared goal as the letters indicate. The letters also reveal the demands they made of themselves. They were often weary and yet persevered. Their work eventually led to the establishment of Hope College, a Christian liberal arts institution, and of Western Theological Seminary, both of which thrive in the twenty-first century because of the foundations laid by Phelps and Van Raalte in the nineteenth century.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>For more information about Albertus and Christina de Moen Van Raalte, see Elton J. Bruins, Karen G. Schakel, Sara Fredrickson Simmons, and Marie N. Zingle, *Albertus and Christina: The Van Raalte Family, Home and Roots* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004).

<sup>2</sup>The Van Raalte family arrived on 17 November 1846 according to Albert Hyma; there was, however, an editorial in the 10 November 1921 issue of the *Banner* suggesting they arrived the 4<sup>th</sup> of November (Albert Hyma, *Albertus C. Van Raalte and His Dutch Settlements in the United States* [Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1947], 59).

<sup>3</sup>The Van Raaltes had had six children; their fourth died in early childhood, however, so that only five emigrated with them. Five more children were born later. Of the eleven only seven grew to adulthood.

<sup>4</sup>*American Biographical History of Eminent and Self-Made Men, Michigan Volume* (Cincinnati: Western Biographical Publishing Co.), 97.



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*Hope College's first graduating class, 1866*