ENVISIONING HOPE COLLEGE

Letters written by
Albertus C. Van Raalte to Philip Phelps Jr.,
1857 to 1875

Elton J. Bruins
Karen G. Schakel
Editors

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Karen Schakel was the office manager and editorial assistant at the Van Raalte Institute from 1997 until her death in December 2009. She collaborated with Elton for many years on the preparation of these letters for publication.

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To

Jacob E. Nyenhuis

Director of the Van Raalte Institute, Hope College

Colleague, Friend, and Mentor
Technical Remarks

The following letters are no longer extant but are available only in transcriptions made from the original by Rev. George Scholten, husband of Adriana Otte, a granddaughter of Philip Phelps Jr. and Margaret Anna (or Anne) Jordan Phelps. Although at times he would retain Albertus C. Van Raalte’s misspellings and lack of punctuation, Scholten often made editorial and punctuation changes in the letters he transcribed. For example, the parenthetical material in the letter dated 14 August 1860 could have been added by Scholten or may have been in the original written by Van Raalte; we have no way of knowing. These transcriptions can be found in the Joint Archives of Holland, Michigan.

14 August 1860
19 August 1860
17 February 1864
20 August 1868
12 June 1869
[early] August 1869
6 November 1869 (Scholten placed this letter in the collection he gave to Hope College)
10 March 1870
8 July 1870
13 November 1871 (This letter exists only in a poor copy of the original)
5 December 1871 (George Scholten made a transcription of this letter and then gave it away in the early 1960s, as he did occasionally.)
[?] February 1873
31 October 1874
3 February 1875
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Acknowledgments

This book was a collaborative project. Each of the editors contributed according to their skills and expertise. Elton Bruins conceived of the project, wrote initial comments on the letters, researched and annotated places and people named in the letters, and revised and corrected subsequent versions. Karen S. Schakel did further research, added to the comments and footnotes on the letters, compiled appendices, and copyedited the first version.

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Earl Wm. Kennedy for his assistance throughout this project. Dr. Kennedy is currently annotating the Holland Classis Minutes, 1848-76, at the request of the A. C. Van Raalte Institute and the Dutch-American Historical Commission. The knowledge and the research expertise he acquired doing these annotations proved very valuable to us time and again. He willingly assisted us in tracking down people and places named in these letters and in placing certain issues and controversies mentioned in them in historical context.

In addition, I wish to thank Jacob E. Nyenhuis, Director of the A. C. Van Raalte Institute, for his support and encouragement. He called our attention to The Jefferson-Dunglison Correspondence, edited by John M. Dorsey, MD, University Press of Virginia (1960): we followed his advice and used it as our model for this project, adding narrative between letters.

Also to be thanked are Geoffrey D. Reynolds, Director of the Joint Archives at Hope College, and Lori Trethewey, his associate, for their assistance in providing photographs, responding to our numerous requests for historical items, and giving their full support to this project. I would also like to thank Peter J. Schakel, Cook Professor of English at Hope College, for his careful proofreading of the manuscript. Robert
P. Swierenga, A. C. Van Raalte Research Professor, and Jack Nyenhuis also made helpful suggestions for the improvement of the manuscript.

Unfortunately, Karen Schakel could not see the book through to its publication due to her death on 9 December 2009. Her able successor, JoHannah Smith, did the final editing of the manuscript and saw it through to press. Donald J. Bruggink, General Editor of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, provided counsel and advice throughout the project. Indispensable to the project was the tireless work of Russell Gasero, archivist of the Reformed Church in America, who formatted the manuscript in preparation for submission to the publishers.

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Preface

The correspondence between Albertus C. Van Raalte and Philip Phelps Jr. extended over a period of eighteen years, from their first meeting in 1857 in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, to a year before Van Raalte’s death in 1876. In 1857 Phelps was just thirty-one years old. A graduate of the Albany Academy, Union College, and the Theological Seminary at New Brunswick, he was serving as pastor of the First Reformed Church in Hastings-on-Hudson. Van Raalte at that time was forty-five years old and had been in the US just ten years. He was the primary leader of the Dutch immigration to West Michigan and had established the Holland Colony ten years earlier. The Phelps family moved to Holland in 1859, after Phelps accepted the call to be a missionary pastor to the non-Dutch-speaking residents and the principal of the Holland Academy. Through the years the association between these two men deepened into a close friendship.

The Phelps family saved ninety-five letters written by Van Raalte to Phelps, all of which are now in the Joint Archives of Holland.¹ They

¹ The Van Raalte/Phelps correspondence is located in the Van Raalte Papers, box two, Hope College Collection, Joint Archives of Holland, Michigan (hereafter cited as JAH).
were numbered and transcribed by Rev. George B. Scholten, the husband of Adriana Otte, a granddaughter of Phelps and the daughter of John and Frances Phelps Otte. The Otte family treasured the correspondence, as well as a scrapbook and other papers of the family. Following the death of Rev. Scholten in 1980, the family donated the letters to the Hope College Archives in order to preserve them and make them available for research. Only two of the letters Phelps wrote to Van Raalte are extant and are reproduced in appendix 7, along with some notes and memoranda written by Phelps. Any other letters may have been destroyed by Van Raalte himself. Reflection based on their correspondence is, therefore, rather one-sided, although there are other of Phelps’ communications to fill in the gaps.

The transcriptions of the letters in this volume were made for the most part from the original letters. We worked carefully, attempting to reproduce them as Van Raalte had written them. They are printed in a coordinating font to set them off clearly from our commentary. The transcriptions are our work entirely; we used Scholten’s transcriptions only when the original was missing or for reference when Van Raalte’s handwriting was difficult to decipher. Scholten edited the letters to a considerable degree; he fixed Van Raalte’s grammar and corrected misspelled words, whereas we retained the original in order to illustrate Van Raalte’s growing grasp of the English language. Van Raalte had to write Phelps in English, his second language, because Phelps did not know the Dutch language. Any words that are unclear or difficult to read are clarified in the footnotes.

In general the letters fall into three groups: (1) those relating primarily to Van Raalte’s fundraising efforts on behalf of the Holland Academy, (2) those written during the Civil War years when Van Raalte was preoccupied with congregational and personal concerns, and (3) those written during Van Raalte’s later years when he had time to reflect on the past and envision the future.

Scholten had a curious habit of giving away some of the originals, so that a few of the letters exist now in transcription only. Two of the originals (nos. 51 and 82) were returned to the collection by Gerrit Elzinga in the 1970s.

The Phelps children, Frances Otte and Philip Tertius in particular, were eager to enhance their father’s reputation in view of Phelps’ forced resignation in 1878 from the presidency of Hope College. Apparently, in an effort to ensure that at least some of the Phelps papers would survive for posterity, she and her brother placed about one-third of those papers in each of three institutions: Hope College, Western Theological Seminary, and the Holland Historical Trust Archives. Two-thirds of these papers—those at Hope College and Western Theological Seminary—are now together in JAH.