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Legacy of a Landmark: The History of Elizabeth R. Voorhees Hall

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By the turn of the twentieth century, Hope had been incorporated as a college for more than twenty-five years, grown from an 1866 enrollment of thirty students to a student body nearing one hundred, and had expanded to include the Van Vleck, Graves, Carnegie Gymnasium, and Van Raalte buildings.¹ Although Hope began holding classes in 1862, the college was not officially incorporated until 1866. By the time Voorhees was constructed in 1907, Hope's student population had grown to ninety-nine students, twenty-three of whom were women.² Even though females still comprised a smaller percentage of the student body than did men, Hope had by this time developed a strong tradition of women's education. The first female graduates, one a daughter of Hope's first president, Philip Phelps Jr., received their degrees in 1882.³ The number of women enrolled gradually increased, so that by the turn of the century, women comprised a regular part of the student body. One female student, Anne Riemans, was even valedictorian of her class in 1902.⁴ The majority of these female Hope students hailed from the surrounding Holland area; few journeyed from beyond western Michigan, much

less the state's borders. In the 1907 class, only five of the twenty-three female students enrolled were from outside the immediate Holland area.⁵

The lack of campus housing for women undoubtedly contributed to this pattern: Van Vleck Hall could accommodate only twenty-three students at the time, all of which were

male. Female students without family or relatives in Holland had to secure accommodations in boarding houses or private residences with rooms for rent. As female enrollment increased, however, the need for a female residence became progressively more apparent. President Gerrit Kollen acknowledged: "We have a difficulty in securing boarding places for young women," and agreed that there should be "a



dormitory of thirty or forty rooms, together with music rooms, parlors and a refectory, all under the control of a lady superintendent who would be a worthy example of Christian culture and refinement for the girls."⁶ With this objective in mind, college administrators began the search for a donor to support the construction of a new women's residence.

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From the Director



Greetings from Hope College and Holland! Here, we have had a wonderful summer full of sunshine, warm temperatures and researchers. It doesn't get any better than that.

In this issue, Hope College senior Lauren Berka has penned a well-written and informative article on the history of Elizabeth R. Voorhees Hall. This fall,

the college celebrates the completion of this campus landmark 100 years ago. Originally designed for the housing of an ever increasing female student population in 1907, it now houses both male and female students and possibly the ghost of Dr. John Nykerk, according to some former students. You have to like a historic building with a personality, right?

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Legacy of a Landmark (continued from page 1)

The necessary financial backing came from philanthropists Ralph and Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees of New Jersey. Although neither of them had attended Hope, they had long-standing relationships with Dutch communities and the Reformed Church on the East coast. Mr. Voorhees was of the distinguished Eastern Dutch family, Van Voorhees, and Elizabeth was the daughter of a well-to-do New York shipbuilder. After coming into their fortune after the death of Elizabeth's uncle, they were prolific benefactors of mission work, charitable projects, and colleges and universities. They were patrons of educational institutions around the country, including colleges in New Jersey, Wisconsin, South Dakota, and Tennessee.⁷ Their philanthropic activities even stretched beyond the country's borders, as they were also the sponsors of a college and school for the blind in India.⁸ In his biography of Elizabeth Voorhees, the Rev. Anthony Luidens wrote that the "Universities like Harvard, with \$41,000,000 endowment, did not attract her. The struggling denominational colleges of the South and West were her particular interest."⁹ In biographies of Ralph and Elizabeth, it is noted that although the Voorheeses came into a considerable fortune and could have significantly elevated their lifestyle, they chose to live in their modest farmhouse in the same manner as before.¹⁰

In this altruistic spirit, the Voorheeses donated \$100,000 to Hope, \$65,000 of which was used to endow two chairs, the Voorhees Chair of Greek and the Rodman Chair of Latin.¹¹

The remaining \$35,000 was designated for the construction of a women's residence, which would become Voorhees Hall. Hope's connection to the Voorheeses was developed through the efforts of President Kollen, who during the Phelps and Scott presidencies worked extensively as a fundraiser to make contacts with donors in the East. After the Voorhees' generosity began to gain recognition, "many soliciting letters, and numerous visits from presidents and agents of colleges and other institutions" arrived at the door of their New Jersey home.¹² Kollen was among those individuals who made the Voorhees' acquaintance, and in 1905 he secured their vow of financial support for a new women's dormitory.

With the Voorhees' financial backing assured, construction on the new dormitory began in 1906. The original plans for the building were drawn up by Hope biology professor Samuel Mast and featured a Flemish design of orange-red Veneklasen brick and Bedford limestone.¹³ Whereas Hope's previous buildings, Van Vleck and Graves Library/Winants Chapel, were built in the Italianate and Richardsonian Romanesque styles, Voorhees Hall reflected a Dutch Renaissance Revival fashion.¹⁴ The exterior reveals this style through the use of stepped gables, limestone detailing, and contrasting brick laid in a Dutch cross style formed in diamond patterns in the gables.¹⁵ Voorhees Hall's distinctively Dutch-inspired appearance was intended to hearken back to the college's Netherlands heritage and embody Hope's commitment to this legacy. Although the design is Flemish, the large yard surrounding the structure is more reminiscent of an English approach, and its simple, clean-hewn style reflects a distinctive American influence.¹⁶ In the dedication ceremony for the new building, the Rev. Oscar M. Voorhees, nephew of Ralph and Elizabeth, spoke not only of Hope's connection to the Netherlands, but also noted the "kind of kinship between the Hollanders who landed in Michigan" in the mid-1800s, such as Van Raalte and the settlers of Holland, and "the Hollanders who landed on the eastern coast" two centuries earlier.¹⁷

When completed in 1907 at the cost of \$40,183, the Elizabeth R. Voorhees Hall demonstrated the height of modernity. The 1907-1908 college catalog described the campus' newest addition in this way:

Complete accommodations are provided for women students in Voorhees Hall. This building, lighted by electricity and heated by steam, is capable of housing one hundred girls. It is equipped in the most modern way in every detail. There are large general baths and toilets, individual lavatories, reception parlors and dining room.¹⁸

The Voorhees dining room, the first formal dining room on Hope's campus, was able to accommodate one hundred and eighty students and was a *dining* room in the fullest sense.¹⁹ All of the campus gathered at appointed meal times, prayers were recited before eating, and students were served by the Voorhees wait-staff. Although a far cry from the hurried and elbow-throwing tussle for food that most current Hope students are accustomed to, hungry students of today can still commiserate with those of one hundred years ago. In a poem published in the 1948 issue of *The Anchor*, entitled "Ode to a Voorhees Plate of Meat," one famished male student laments the:

wee tiny insignificant scrappies
 Hardly enough to fill a wee lassie
 I stare at you on my big plate
 To devour you up I can hardly waite.
 After you are gone I can't ask for more
 They bought just enough when they went to the store.²⁰

Completed in July of 1907 and formally dedicated during that year's commencement



Ralph Voorhees

exercises, Voorhees Hall was opened for student residents in the fall of 1907.²¹ During that first year, only thirteen female students lived in the dorm, even though it was capable of accommodating more than one hundred. Many questioned why the college would construct so large a building; Voorhees contained around thirty more rooms than the only other campus

residence, Van Vleck. Furthermore, it was peculiar that the college would elect to provide so many rooms for women when it could not even accommodate all of its male students in campus housing, who still comprised a majority of the student body. Many wondered if the college would come to regret this curious "white elephant."

Perhaps college leaders were more visionary, however, than they were given credit for. Less than ten years later, in 1916, Hope graduated seventy-four women students, a ten percent increase over ten years.²² Eight years afterwards, the September 1924 *Anchor* reported that "Voorhees Hall is, as usual, filled to overflowing" and that



Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees

the college "was obliged to refuse twelve applications for admittance because of lack of room."²³ The presence of women on campus proved to be a trend that has continued into the present, as recent Hope enrollments have consistently hovered around sixty percent female.²⁴

Despite its long-term potential, many of the rooms in Voorhees sat vacant for the first few years of the building's existence. In an effort to utilize the overabundance of space, the college housed the department of music there and also began allowing unmarried faculty members to live in apartments on the first floor.²⁵ Professor John Nykerk, then chairman of the English and Music Departments and now namesake for the Nykerk Music building, was one who took advantage of the offer. Nykerk, a life-long bachelor with a reputation for being somewhat eccentric, garnered some friendly suspicion over the years for living in the all-girl dormitory, and was reportedly chided as "the bachelor who lives in the henhouse."²⁶ Later on, however, there were enough girls to fill the dormitory, but Dr. Nykerk apparently refused to move out, much to the consternation of the dean of women in charge of the hall. Nykerk's resolve outlasted that of his objectors, remaining a resident in Voorhees until the day he died.²⁷ His legacy appears to endure however, over the years there have even been rumors of the "ghost of Nykerk" haunting the dorm's corridors and roaming its halls. In a 1999 *Anchor* issue there appeared an article on the "ghost of Voorhees" in which students claimed that Professor Nykerk's ethereal incarnation was often responsible for the unpredictable bathroom water pressure, dysfunctional elevators, lights that mysteriously turned on and off, and doors that suddenly slammed shut.²⁸

Besides playing host to a ghost story or two, Voorhees Hall has fulfilled numerous functions and garnered several reputations on Hope's campus over the years. Because it housed so many students and was the location of the dining hall, Voorhees quickly became a center of campus social life. The lobby was frequently filled with impatient young men awaiting the arrival of their dates, that is, every night except Tuesday nights. Included among the "Voorhees House Rules" was the mandate that "Monday and Tuesday nights shall be dateless nights for Freshmen. Tuesday night shall be a dateless night for all."²⁹ As a part of the residence program, girls living in Voorhees had to abide by a set of house rules and submit to the authority of a "house mother" in charge of all residents. The first dean of women students in Voorhees was Christine Van Raalte Gilmore, daughter of Holland founder A. C. Van Raalte. In addition to the rules about date-less nights, there were curfew and lights-out rules. All underclasswomen were required to turn their lights out at 10:15 P.M., juniors had to be in bed by 10:30 P.M., but the seniors were allowed to stay up latest of all, until 11:00 P.M.³⁰

An earlier 1915 version of the Voorhees Hall rules mandated that rooms were to “be kept neat and ready for inspection at all times,” required that all students “obtain permission to be out after 7:00 p.m.,” and even prohibited “whistling or singing in the corridors at any time.”³¹ Not that these rules were always followed, however. Voorhees alumnae have recounted stories of young men who helped their dates sneak back into the hall after curfew, passing their dates “through a dining room window,” where an accomplice was waiting to lend a hand.³²



Voorhees Hall dining room and wait staff, ca. 1914

Although Voorhees had long been the center of social life and home to all Hope’s women students, its position in campus life began to wane with the opening of Durfee in 1950 and Phelps in 1960. These new modern, squarish, and utilitarian buildings left Voorhees looking gawky and antiquated. Some on campus began advocating getting rid of the old building altogether and using the space for the construction of a newer dormitory capable of accommodating more students. Many cited the aging building’s out-dated safety features and inadequate fire protection as grounds for its unsuitability for student living. In November 1966, forty Voorhees residents were concerned enough about the state of the hall that they marched in front of the President’s House in an effort to call President VanderWerf’s attention to Voorhees’ shortfalls. Their worries proved justified when in February 1969 a small electrical fire broke out in the dormitory.³³ Caused by a spark in a circuit breaker, the fire was enough to prompt the administration to relocate all those students living in Voorhees at the time to other campus housing. There were not enough spaces in regular housing for all the Voorhees “refugees,” so some residents were moved to the Warm Friend Hotel³⁴ downtown for the remainder of the semester.³⁵ Voorhees sat vacant until the following summer, when it was decided that it would be converted into faculty offices to help alleviate some of the stress experienced by other administrative buildings.

Although there was discussion about converting it permanently into an administrative building, Voorhees Hall’s tenure as an

administrative building was short-lived. With the opening of the Peale Science Center and renovation of Lubbers, more and better-suited locations for faculty offices were provided, so Voorhees was no longer needed for administrative purposes. However, although Voorhees was no longer needed to accommodate faculty, it was still unsafe for use as a student residence. A 1979 *Anchor* editorial argued that “The complete destruction of Voorhees (*sic*) would, it is true, leave a handy spot for the construction of a classy modern twin to Dykstra and Gilmore,” but reflected the sentiments of many on campus in saying: “however, we feel the heritage preserved in this building is worth keeping as a part of our campus.”³⁶ The now nearly seventy-year old building was in need of serious repairs, foremost among these being the required fire and safety code updates.

Through the efforts of various campus groups and individuals to preserve Voorhees as a residence for students, it was decided that Voorhees would be once again returned to its original function. A large part of the “Revitalize Voorhees” renovation effort was driven by some of Voorhees Hall’s own former residents. These Hope alumnae helped to finance the over one million dollar cost of renovating Voorhees by contacting other former “Voorhees girls”; the rest of the funds came from the sale of tax-exempt bonds.^{37,38} The building received a new roof and windows, sidewalks, a heating system, and completely refinished woodwork.³⁹ In order to bring Voorhees up to the current safety and accessibility requirements, sprinklers, fire alarms, and an elevator were also added.⁴⁰ The renovations purposely left the exterior of the building unchanged, maintaining the original integrity of the design. The only exterior aesthetics that were altered were the addition of a small courtyard in the rear of the building and the removal of ivy that had overgrown its orange-brick walls. Although the ivy may have given Voorhees its collegiate feel, it was unfortunately weakening the building’s structural integrity. In order to acknowledge and preserve Voorhees Hall’s role in women’s education at Hope, special rooms and wings were designed to honor significant women in Hope history. Then-President Van Wylen noted that “Because Voorhees Hall has served as a women’s residence, its renovation will be a reminder of the important role women have had in the life of Hope College.”⁴¹

Renovations were completed in 1981, and Voorhees once again opened its doors to students. But this time, rather than housing just women, Voorhees was made co-ed for the first time in its history. Changing campus demographics necessitated more housing for men: it was decided to house men on the third floor, but to keep the first and second floors for women.⁴² This decision generated some controversy, not over co-ed living facilities (Hope’s first co-ed dorm was Kollen Hall) but because of Voorhees’ special historic

association with women students and women's education. Objections came from several groups and individuals, especially alumnae who had once been Voorhees residents themselves.

There also was discussion about making Voorhees "a special dorm for more serious-minded students."⁴³ To achieve this, it was suggested that the dorm would have its own guest lecturers, more quiet hours than other halls, and a specific charter of community goals and objectives.⁴⁴ Preference would be given to juniors and seniors and those students "committed to their academic work and to living in an environment surrounded by others who possess similar goals."⁴⁵ This endeavor generated some controversy on campus: an *Anchor* editorial argued that Voorhees would be in danger of becoming an "honors dorm" separated from the rest of campus. "We are opposed to the concept of an honors dorm. Such a situation would be elitist and unfair to the rest of the academic community."⁴⁶ This perception of Voorhees as a "more serious-minded" dorm still endures.

Regardless of the changes its campus reputation has undergone in its one hundred years, Voorhees Hall has remained a vital fixture of Hope's campus. Although there were female students in Hope's early years, the lack of a residence for women significantly limited the possibility of an education at Hope for women not from Holland or the surrounding area. It is significant that nearly since Hope's inception, the education of women has been included in the college's mission. In a time when some of the nation's foremost universities had not yet begun admitting women, even fewer small liberal arts colleges were ready to start educating women, much less provide housing for them. Writing on the inauguration of Voorhees, *The Anchor* of October 1907 declared:

We are all justly proud of this magnificent addition to our college and hope it will be a means of bringing many more women students into our midst, and by giving both the young men and the young women opportunities of acquiring culture and refinement within its walls add to the development of true manhood and womanhood.⁴⁷

As the Elizabeth R. Voorhees Hall turns one hundred this year, it stands as a reminder not only of Hope's commitment to coeducation but also of the important role women have played in the history of Hope College.

(Endnotes)

¹ Van Raalte Hall was constructed in 1903 and served as the college's administration building until 1980, when it was destroyed by fire.

² *Hope College Bulletin 1907-1908*, 36-39.

³ *Hope College Anchor*, 5 November 1937, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The Anchor*, 11 April 1928.

⁶ *A Century of Hope*, 138.

⁷ Rutgers College in New Jersey, Carroll College in Wisconsin, Huron College in South Dakota, and Maryville College in Tennessee.

⁸ Oscar M. Voorhees, *Ralph and Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees: A Tribute* (New York: The Tribute Press, 1927), 129-30.

⁹ Anthony Luidens, "Biographical Appreciation of the Life of Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees, Clinton, New Jersey, Benefactress to the World" (Joint Archives of Holland, typescript), 13.

¹⁰ Voorhees, 121.

¹¹ *A Century of Hope*, 138.

¹² Voorhees, 121.

¹³ Michael J. Douma, *Veneklasen Brick* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 41.

¹⁴ Annette Stott, *Holland Mania: The Unknown Dutch Period in American Art & Culture*, (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1998), 158.

¹⁵ Stott, 156.

¹⁶ Dan Stid, "The Tradition of Voorhees Hall" (JAH, 19 March 1985, student paper).

¹⁷ "Voorhees Address," *Holland City News*, June 1907.

¹⁸ *Hope College Year Book 1907-1908*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *The Anchor*, 15 April 1948.

²¹ *Hope College Year Book 1907-1908*.

²² *Hope College Year Book 1916-1917*, 58-62.

²³ "Voorhees Rooms Are Taken Early," *The Anchor*, 17 September 1924, 1.

²⁴ Registrar's Enrollment Report, First Semester 2007-2008. <<http://www.hope.edu/admin/registrar/enrollment/Fall2007.pdf>>, accessed 11 September 2007.

²⁵ "Dedication of Voorhees Dormitory," *Holland City News*, June 1907.

²⁶ Stid.

²⁷ Gordon W. Mackay, "John Bernardes Nykerk" (H88-0111 John B. Nykerk file, Biographical 1891-1963 folder, JAH, Spring 1961, student paper).

²⁸ Jane Bast, "Spirit Roams Halls of Voorhees," *The Anchor*, 27 October 1999.

²⁹ "House Rules for Voorhees," *Hope College Handbook*, (JAH).

³⁰ "House Rules for Voorhees."

³¹ "Regulations for Voorhees Hall," 1915, (JAH).

³² Marian Stryker to former Voorhees residents, June 1980, (JAH).

³³ Tom Hildebrandt, "Voorhees Fire Ousts Coeds," *The Anchor*, 21 February 1969.

³⁴ The building on the corner of 8th St. and Central Ave. has been the Warm Friend Resthaven center since the 1980s, but was formerly the Warm Friend Hotel.

³⁵ "Voorhees Vacated," *Hope College Alumni Magazine*, April 1969.

³⁶ "Voorhees' [sic] fate in balance," Editorial, *The Anchor*, 11 October 1979.

³⁷ Rusty Yonkers, "Ivy hall to live again," *The Anchor*, 14 February 1980, 3.

³⁸ "Voorhees progresses; cottages acquired," *The Anchor*, 24 September 1980.

³⁹ "Voorhees Hall to be reopened," *The Anchor*, 5 March 1981, 14.

⁴⁰ S. Van Eyl, "Voorhees doors open to students," *The Anchor*, 19 March 1981, 3.

⁴¹ "Voorhees to Remain a Residence Hall" *News from Hope College*, December 1979.

⁴² Kim Mooi, "Voorhees becomes co-ed," *The Anchor*, 16 April 1981.

⁴³ S. Van Eyl, "Voorhees Hall to be reopened."

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ "Voorhees Special," Editorial, *The Anchor*, 16 April 1981.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ "Voorhees Girls' Dormitory," *The Anchor*, October 1907, 19.



President Wynand Wichers and female students enjoy a social event in the Voorhees Hall lobby, ca. 1940