A DETECTIVE STORY IN WILLIAMSTOWN
A MYSTERY SOLVED?
By Ernest F. Imhoff

Thousands of Williams College students have walked between two pillars of the Hopkins Memorial Gate below West College, the original 1793 building on the campus.

They still pass between a poem and two brothers.

On the pillar at the left as students face West College are a dozen inspirational words:

“CLIMB HIGH CLIMB FAR YOUR GOAL THE SKY YOUR AIM THE STAR”

On the pillar at the right are words honoring two 19th Century Williams educators and brothers: “IN MEMORY OF MARK AND ALBERT HOPKINS” and at the bottom, “AD 1927.”

Many times I walked up and down the steps when I lived in West College in 1957-58 as a Williams student. No one knew who wrote the words “Climb high…” I often wondered.

The gate is never closed; it is actually not a gate but fifteen open steps. The town is encircled by hills and the college song is “The Mountains”, so the climbing thoughts at the Hopkins steps seem allegorical and fitting for a college of academic excellence.

The author is listed in some places as “Anonymous” or “Williams College Gate”. The poem’s use is widespread, far beyond the college which has long found it valuable as a motto to symbolize excellence, inspire students, promote the school and raise funds in annual campaigns.

The words are among the most notable public declarations in town. But “Climb High…” goes beyond Williamstown. The poem is on many Web inspirational lists, a book title for a quotes collection, the names of technical mountaineering groups and challenges, summary lines in motivational speeches, teachers’ lessons, inspiration for athletes, quotations in news stories.

My 50th Williams reunion class of 1959 used an image of the Hopkins Memorial Gate on the cover of its 2009 reunion book.

The motto is also on another college gate, erected in 1925, as one entry to Jackson’s Garden, at Union College 50 miles away in Schenectady, N.Y.

Spokesmen for both colleges don’t know the source of the words. A Union spokesman says the college had the same trouble finding the scribe as Williams did: “We’ve tried to track down the authorship on previous
occasions and haven’t been able to identify the person as other than “anonymous.””

A quick Williams history aside is in order. Mark Hopkins (1802-87) was president of the college from 1836 to 1872 and the subject of the famous aphorism by James A. Garfield: “The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other.”

His brother Albert (1807-72) is lesser known today but famous and respected in his day. He was a professor, outdoorsman, preacher and a moral leader at Williams from 1832 to 1872. The brothers were close.

In recent years as a reporter and lifelong hiker who grew up in Williamstown, I saw the unknown author as a detective story to solve. Whether other people sought his identity or even cared, I didn’t know. But I became focused on trying to find the writer.

Several years ago I asked Linda Hall, archives assistant at Williams, about the words and she kindly related some facts.

“Miss Susan S. Hopkins found the quotation [“Climb high…”] on a bit of paper among Albert Hopkins’ papers. Albert Hopkins died in 1872. Susan was the last surviving child of [Albert’s brother] Mark Hopkins. She died in 1944 at age 89 at her home in Denison Park, Williamstown.

“She was the anonymous donor of the Hopkins gate and stairs leading to West College (her identity came out later) and was one of the founders of the Williams College Infirmary. The gate’s cornerstone says “1927” which was during Harry A. Garfield’s presidency of the college. Over the years, no one has found a source for the quotation.”

I put those facts aside, figuring the mystery unsolved since no author’s name was attached to the poem.

Other things were checked, a couple years passed and nothing new turned up. One day in early 2015, I picked up the subject again while doing research for a mountain book. Albert Hopkins in Williamstown started the first hiking club in America, a fact I learned years ago. That now intrigued me. What else did Albert do?

More exploring followed. One step led to another and I have now put some pieces together. I have a theory about the matter based on a meal of delicious circumstantial evidence.

Mark Hopkins’ younger brother Albert Hopkins was known as a “vigorous pedestrian” his entire life. He spent much of it hiking in the Berkshire Hills in western Massachusetts where he lived and taught, reported “Forest and Crag”, an authoritative Northeastern mountain climbing history.
He loved the Berkshires, according to his biographer, Albert Cole Sewall in “Life of Prof. Albert Hopkins” (New York, 1879) which I read. “Not a glen or cascade nor a ledge of rocks or isolated boulder or majestic tree on all these hills and among these mountains escaped his closest attention. The mountain paths, so intricate in their windings, were as familiar to him as the village streets, and in nothing did he seem to take more delight than in ‘exploring.’”

After graduating in 1826 from Williams College, Albert began tutoring there and in 1829 began teaching mathematics and philosophy. Students said their strict, popular teacher made boring subjects fun. He was known as “Prof. Al”.

The young teacher organized outdoor clubs. In the 1830’s Albert founded both the Natural History Society of Williams and the Horticultural and Landscape Gardening Association which beautified the town.

The association’s “members, under Hopkins, tended a college garden, planted the elms and maples which, in time, became an asset to the entire community, and constructed an artificial trout pond which became known as Christmas Lake”, reported “Mark Hopkins and The Log” by Frederick Rudolph.

On land purchased east of Spring Street, known as the Old Campus, were created a wooden gymnasium, a baseball field and a small park near Hopkins garden. Christmas Lake was short-lived. Formed by damming Phebe’s Brook, it was later neglected and partly replaced by a new college heating plant in 1903.

Albert had many interests. He was fascinated with the skies and astronomy. He travelled to Europe in 1834 at his own expense and initiative while making $700 a year as a professor. He was the first Williams teacher to visit Europe. His purpose was to buy instruments with his own money and build the country’s first astronomical observatory associated with a college.

Hopkins brought a transit and other parts back over the Atlantic and in 1835, after failing to raise funds in Boston and elsewhere, went to work on the observatory.

“He designed it, funded it and helped students quarry the rock [on East Mountain] that went into it”, said “Williams: 1793-1993: A Pictorial History”. Moved twice, the structure today sits as the Hopkins Observatory on the south side of Consumption Hill opposite Griffin Hall on Main Street in Williamstown.

The next year, 1836, Albert was climbing mountains in the Adirondacks with a respected geologist Ebenezer Emmons who was making geological explorations to study ages of rocks. Emmons led a group on the first climb
of Mount Marcy. Soon the two and 18 others sailed by schooner to Nova Scotia on another scientific trip that brought specimens back to Williams.

Adding to his academic workload at Williams, Albert Hopkins in 1838 was elected professor of astronomy and natural philosophy. He enjoyed showing students the science and beauty of looking at stars.

A Calvinist Christian, Albert was licensed and ordained to preach. He was called to churches in the Berkshires, New York state and Vermont near Williamstown. He saw preaching as his duty; it meant walking distances in the hills. On February 15, 1839, he wrote this in his Journal:

“Mind today not fixed on Christ fully, but feeling resolved to rest satisfied with no other state. The weather being inclement and snow very deep--unprecedently so--visited North East Mountain to relieve the poor.”

Albert wanted to erect other star-gazing sites. Nearby Mount Greylock, the highest mountain in the state, challenged him. In 1841, Albert raised funds from area residents to help him and students build a three-story summit observatory. The first two log stories were 20 feet by 20 feet. The third story, 70 feet up, was a tower of sawed wood.

It was a place for anemometers, barometers, thermometers and astronomy students. The Hopkins tower offered only a dozen years of weather and star watching. Vandalism and fire destroyed it.

In the Hopkins tower was born a famous quotation about Williams College by Henry David Thoreau who climbed Greylock and slept in the tower. In describing the observatory of “Williamstown College”, in “A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers”, Thoreau wrote:

“It would be no small advantage if every college were thus located at the base of a mountain, as good as one well-endowed professorship. It were as well to be educated in the shadow of a mountain as in more classical shades. Some will remember, no doubt, not only that they went to the college, but that they went to the mountain.”

Hopkins balanced a modest observatory in a tree on a favorite site, Mount Williams overlooking the town. He dreamed of future observatories on Bald Mountain in the Greylock Range and on Berlin Mountain, Drury’s Point and at Snow Hole on the Taconic Crest near where Massachusetts, New York and Vermont come together.

Albert married Louisa Payson in 1841, their son Edward Payson Hopkins was born two years later. Louisa died in 1862. Edward died two years afterwards in 1864 in the Civil War. Albert would marry Elizabeth Kilby in 1869.

The son Edward had caught the father Albert’s exploring bug and wrote about being on the Emmons trip to Greenland in summer of 1860. During
the Civil War, he left Williams College before graduating to enlist in the Army on Jan. 6, 1864.

Edward entered service as a first lieutenant in the 1st Massachusetts Cavalry, Army of the Potomac. Four months later, he was leading a cavalry charge on May 18, 1864 at Ashland, VA in the Battle of the Wilderness. He was shot from his horse and instantly killed. His father brought him home and buried him in Williamstown.

Having lost his wife, Albert had now lost their only son. “Mourned afresh. Felt that God ordered it all”, Albert wrote in his Journal.

It was then in 1863, still a vigorous hiker in his fifties, that Albert Hopkins founded the first mountaineering club in the United States, The Alpine Club of Williamstown, reported the book “Forest and Crag.” It was a society “chiefly of young ladies.”

For several years he and the 20 Williamstown hikers climbed the Taconic Range, the Greylock Range and other Berkshire County hills in about 20 outings a year. In 1865 they mounted a two-week expedition in the White Mountains in New Hampshire; one night they slept atop Mount Washington. The group dissolved when Hopkins turned his attention elsewhere.

That Hopkins loved mountains and what he found there, the heavens included, struck me forcefully when Ms. Hall, the Williams archivist, helped me once again. She located fifteen columns titled “Northern Berkshire” written by Hopkins and printed in the 1860’s in the Adams Transcript.

(It was later renamed the North Adams Transcript which owners merged with the Berkshire Eagle on January 20, 2014. The name Transcript disappeared. The Transcript where I began my 40-year newspaper career had been published for more than 170 years).

The pieces by Albert Hopkins were essays filled with adventures in the Berkshire woods. Hopkins recorded exchanges with people addressed as Frank and Fanny and Carrie and Thomas. They were his Alpine Club members. His signature was “White Oaks”, the small community in north Williamstown where Hopkins founded a church.


The relaxed journalism was collected in a small book called “The Mountains and The Months: Sketches from The White Oaks, of Scenery and Scenes in Northern Berkshire.” They told many stories.
One day Hopkins and his fellow scramblers climbed “The Cobble” known now as Pine Cobble. His mentor Dr. Emmons studied the stones with another geologist and said “Here the life force began to play its mysterious part on this planet.” Hopkins wrote “We were both climbing mountains but their purpose was higher than ours.”

On a hill, across the valley from Pine Cobble, Albert’s hiking group found their best summit for seeing Williamstown.

“As Mount Williams is about 2,400 feet above the valley, it is rarely ascended. Those, however, who have the courage and strength to make this ascent, will find themselves repaid…by a very enjoyable park-like area at the summit, diversified by small hillocks with level plats between them covered by soft green moss—the whole covered with a fine overgrowth of wood, mainly birch and spruce…Simply for the picturesqueness…Mount Williams takes precedence over all our other noted summits.”

Astronomer Hopkins and the hikers admired the complexity of the skies. He wrote “…the most brilliant of the heavenly sentinel kept pace with the moving nucleus of the shower…amongst these great sentinel stars the winter signs and constellations were marshalled…the Pleiades, the Hyades and Orion, most brilliant of all. It adds to the winter view that the objects have for a background, the Milky Way!”

Hopkins was a frequent writer of pieces besides articles about the Alpine Club and nature. He wrote uplifting sermons and prayers, a history of Williams evangelism, lectures, lessons about the wider world.

In one ironic, rhetorical judgement after the Civil War, he wrote “Let me ask you how you liked Frederick Douglas last night…I trust the time is passed in this country when men are judged by the color of their skin.”

His Journal was filled with convictions such as “Convinced that the love of money is the reigning sin in our world.”

“Forest and Crag” described Albert as a “congenital organizer of outdoor clubs”. In 1863, he founded yet another group, the Sunrise Club.

After caring for his ailing wife for years, Albert Hopkins himself became sick. He died at age 64 on May 4, 1872. That year the annual report of the national Commissioner of Education, Department of the Interior, carried obituaries of respected educators.

“Professor Hopkins was one of the first in this country to apprehend the value of object-teaching. This led him with Dr. (Ebenezer) Emmons to originate those scientific expeditions which have continued, at intervals since 1832, to visit Europe [to buy the astronomical apparatus for an observatory at Williams] and other ventures…”
“He was active in promoting the study of natural history….had fine taste and great interest in everything connected with natural scenery. But for him the college grounds would not have been enlarged and beautified as they have been. As a teacher and lecturer, Professor Hopkins was interesting and successful but his great power lay in his moral and religious influence. This arose from the steady, even supremacy in him of the spiritual nature, in his manifest unselfishness and the evident reality of his community with God.

“For nearby forty years he was seldom absent from the noon prayer meeting which he established in 1832…He was quiet and courteous in his bearing and interested himself in all classes of people, especially in the poor. His philanthropy was thoroughly Christian and democratic.

“There was also an element of poetry and romance in his composition which added much to the pleasure of personal intercourse, and gave him a powerful hold of some people especially the young. His presence was always an element of peace, no cause of or discipline among students ever originated from their relationship to him.”

Albert Cole Sewall’s biography of Hopkins, a 340-page book, leaned heavily on Hopkins’ personal Journal. It is the story of the experiences of a pious, serious man seeking to do God’s will, seeing himself sometimes failing (“I am not free from sin”), hoping people strive to do their best for others and lifting spirits especially those of the poor.

Professor Philips said of Hopkins, “He might have been a monk, except that he was held back from the life of a recluse by his warm, human sympathies…He had a poet’s soul…”

At Hopkins’ request, Dr. Paul A. Chadbourne, gave the funeral sermon at the First Congregational Church in town. The sermon cited Daniel, 12:3.

“And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever.”

I thought again how after Albert’s death in 1872 his niece had found the unsigned poem, “Climb High….” on a slip of paper in Hopkins’ papers. The poem about climbing and the sky and the star and the striving.

Then it dawned on me. I have written poetry at home, kept the scribblings lying around and never signed the poems, neither expecting nor wanting them to be published. It’s a natural thing for any writer. A person who gives sermons, writes articles and keeps a Journal surely jots down many ideas. The words found in Albert’s own papers but not signed may actually be evidence he wrote the lines.

Here we have the versatile Albert Hopkins, an explorer in the hills and in the skies. An outdoor man of poetic spirit. A mountain climber. An

I think Albert Hopkins wrote those lines starting “Climb High.” He saw climbing as not only an allegory but also something literal.

Somehow the words became public and famous after his death. I have no definitive proof. But clues I found lead me to him.

Yet if he wasn’t the author, it’s little wonder such words were discovered in his papers. It fit the person known to recorded history as Albert Hopkins.

I was rewarded by the search as well as the goal. Looking for the writer of the famous words, I got to tell a good story, solve a mystery, fill a blank Williamstown page and find the inspiring story of a person who lived in another time and was significant in his own right, an individual quite apart from his distinguished brother Mark Hopkins.

I keep some images in my mind from Albert’s Journal.

One is Albert Hopkins, the walker, trudging home over the Taconic Trail one bleak day after preaching in Troy, New York:

“Sept. 26, 1839: Returned last evening after a very tiresome walk from Troy in the rain. Coming over the mountain as I turned the summit, it was dark, the clouds darting just before and beneath me. As I passed on, I had a very deep impression of that awful day when Christ will come ‘with clouds’…arrived at my brother’s weary, convinced, however, that I am perfectly patient and perfectly contented…Have preached and tried to do some good.”

One morning, Hopkins recorded the sun rising and the dawn’s light descending on and brightening Williamstown’s familiar hills.

“The sunrise from Bozez [a cliff at the Biblical Michmash catching the suns’ rays (I Samuel 14:4)]—to see it creeping gradually from the Taconic summit, down to the Beehill, Stonehill and Northwest Hill and finally touching and glorifying, one object, one dwelling, one spire, one college building after another.”

Baltimore
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(Ernest F. Imhoff was born in New York in 1937. He grew up in Williamstown from 1941 to 1962, attended Williamstown schools, graduated from Mount Hermon School in 1955, Williams College in 1959 and the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University in 1960. He walked many of the hills Albert Hopkins walked, climbed all 65 mountains in New England over 4000 feet and is writing a book about mountains. He
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