



# HISTORY OF COLLEGIATE CREW IN CONNECTICUT

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## Yale University A General History

### The Early Years

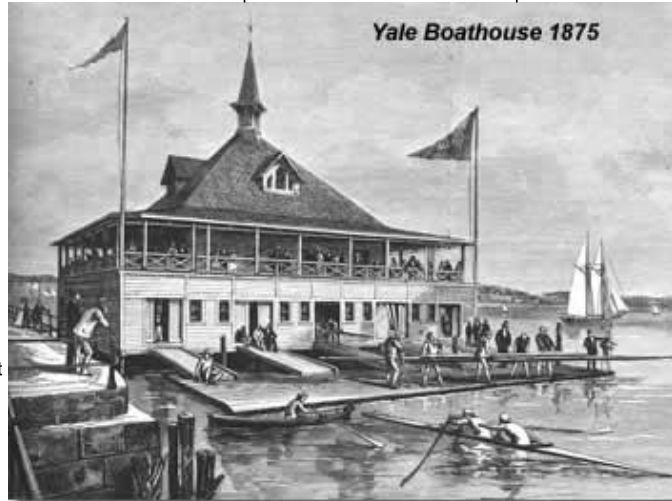
In the mid-1800's many northeastern colleges began forming rowing clubs of an informal character, similar to today's intramural athletics. For Yale, the onset of rowing began in the spring of 1843, when a Yale University student named William Weeks purchased a four-oared 19' long boat, the "Pioneer". The Pioneer was used by the club for two years and was succeeded by a 30' long six-oared racing boat, the "Excelsior". Shortly thereafter, the first eight-oared racing boat, the 38' long "Augusta" was added to the fleet. During its first ten years, the Yale boat club purchased and maintained a total of 15 boats.

In 1852, Yale students extended an invitation to Harvard students to meet at an agreed upon place to, "test the superiority of the oarsmen of the two colleges." This friendly invitation led to the first formal intercollegiate athletic competition in America, a crew race on Lake Winnepesaukee, New Hampshire. On August 3, 1852, Harvard emerged victorious in the eight-oared "Oneida". The success of the race led to another meeting, three years later, on the Connecticut River in Springfield, Massachusetts, and eventually to the establishment of what is now known as the annual Harvard-Yale Boat Race (Hypertext and link to more text specifically on this race and its history make the hypertext and link on the words Harvard-Yale Boat Race) in New London.



In 1853, the Yale boat club organized formally as the Yale Navy. A varsity crew was established and, in 1858, a six-oared 45.5'-long racing shell, initially named the Yale and later called the Atlanta, was purchased specifically for the varsity crew team. That same year, the Harvard-Yale Boat Race was cancelled due to the drowning death of a Yale crew member, the first casualty in the history of the Yale Navy.

At first, housing of the accumulated boats was primitive. The "Pioneer" was suspended from davits on the north side of Tomlinson's wharf on New Haven harbor. As the fleet grew, space was found in Riker's loft, Yale's first boathouse, located on the more sheltered Mill River above Tomlinson Bridge in New Haven. There, a makeshift boat house was erected at the foot of Grand Street in an old lumber yard.



The Yale Navy numbered over 300 members prior to the 1860s, but with the onset of the Civil War saw a significant depletion in membership. It was during the Civil War years, however, that the first Yale boathouse was erected, near Tomlinson's Bridge. The war did put a temporary stop to most collegiate rowing until 1870; however, Yale and Harvard persevered and continued to row during this period of unrest.

### The Late 19th Century

1870 was an important year in the history of the Yale crew program. The Yale Navy adopted a new constitution of racing rules and guidelines and changed the organization name to the Yale University Boat Club. As part of an effort to reverse a string of four consecutive losses to Harvard, Yale hired

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Walter Brown as their new crew coach in 1870. Coach Brown retrofitted the Yale boats with the new sliding seat, which was used for the first time in an intercollegiate race at the 1870 Harvard-Yale Boat Race (for more information about sliding seats, visit [www.rowinghistory.net/Time%20Line/TL%201850-1899im.htm](http://www.rowinghistory.net/Time%20Line/TL%201850-1899im.htm)), Yale lost the race on a foul despite the fact that the boat finished the course well ahead of Harvard. A dispute stemming from this race led to a temporary break from the annual competition for several years. The race resumed in 1876.

1870 was also the year that Bob Cook, then a sophomore and captain of the Yale crew, went to England for three months to study rowing at London, Cambridge and Oxford. Returning, he brought with him an understanding of the English Orthodox style of rowing, which he introduced to Yale and to America at large. Cook would later become head crew coach at Yale and produce an extraordinary record of success from 1872 until his departure in 1899. To this day, no other college in America has produced an amateur alumnus crew coach with such an outstanding record of success. The Bob Cook boathouse on the Housatonic River stands as a monument to his significant contribution to American collegiate crew.

A significant event of 1870 was a Yale crew visit to the Thames River in New London, Connecticut. The site was considered as a potential location for future Harvard-Yale Boat Races. The 1876 and 1877 races were conducted on the Connecticut River in Springfield, Massachusetts; in 1878, the race was relocated to the Thames River in New London, where the four-mile race continues to be staged each year.

## **The 20th Century**

In 1910, the Adee Boathouse was completed. Located on the eastern side of the Quinnipiac River and across from Tomlinson's Bridge, this boathouse served as the sole home to the Yale crew for only six years. A Junior Varsity crew team was established in 1914, and by 1916, the high winds and traffic congestion of New Haven harbor forced Yale's crew team to move. A new site was selected along a five-mile stretch of the Housatonic River, above the Stevenson Dam in Derby, eight miles from the Yale campus.

Collegiate crew was affected again by war in 1917. That year, due to WWI, the Harvard-Yale Boat Race was cancelled. In 1921, coach Guy Nickalls, a professional oarsman from England, labeled his 1921 varsity crew as "gutless," only to be abruptly fired upon their dramatic victory over Harvard. In 1924 Yale opened a new boathouse at Derby, abandoning crew on New Haven Harbor. Named after legendary Bob Cook, the boathouse was used by Yale until 1999. Under the tutelage of coach Ed Leader, Yale became a dominant force in rowing during the 1920s, with the Yale crew representing the United States at the 1925 Olympics in Paris,

winning the gold medal. Since 1924, Yale crew has been a presence on the national rowing scene, with its varsity VIII representing the U.S at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne Australia, again winning the gold. Yale was represented on every U.S Olympic team between 1956 and 1988. In 2000, Yale completed a new boathouse-Gilder Boathouse at its site in Derby.



For more on Yale and its rowing heritage see:

- For heavyweights: [http://www.yale.edu/rowing/hvy\\_history.html](http://www.yale.edu/rowing/hvy_history.html)
- For women: [http://www.yale.edu/rowing/wom\\_history.html](http://www.yale.edu/rowing/wom_history.html)
- For lightweights: [http://www.yale.edu/rowing/lt\\_history.html](http://www.yale.edu/rowing/lt_history.html)

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