

PUSHES & PULLS

Life before the residential colleges: Brick Row, boarding houses and a ‘splendid gift’

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One hundred years ago, Yale College boys lived scattered around New Haven in boarding houses and in Old Campus dormitories. Students ate meals in exclusive eating clubs and at Commons. The residential college system, which has come to be a hallmark of the Yale College experience, was in its first stirrings. Now, the residential college system is more developed than ever. There are twice as many colleges today than there were when the first seven opened in 1933. Two opened to students within the last decade.

But undergraduates are still dispersed between on-campus dorm rooms and the neighborhoods in New Haven surrounding Yale’s campus. In the 2024-2025 academic year, 1,757 undergraduates lived off-campus — more than twice the number who lived off-campus in the 2019-2020 school year, according to data from the Office of Institutional Research.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused administrators to implement policies requiring a large portion of students to live off campus, the number of students living off campus during normal school years increased dramatically.

In response, Yale administrators have made a push to bring students back to campus, shifting which classes get priority in the room draw to encourage rising juniors not to move off campus in the first place.

With some students skeptical of the value of on-campus living and administrators insisting that residential life is a cornerstone of the Yale College experience, students’ living habits before the opening of the first seven colleges in 1933 offer a view of what undergraduate life looked like without a residential college system.

A scattered student body

In the 1860s, most first years and sophomores lived off campus, and seniors and juniors competed for the limited desirable rooms in the Brick Row, a strip of dormitory buildings on College Street, through a lottery system. Low-quality food and a lack of beds contributed to a prevalence of students

living off campus. In the following decades, policies and residential construction spearheaded by various University presidents aided in bringing social and residential life back onto Yale’s campus. River Sell ’25, who wrote a paper tracing the development of Yale residential culture in the 19th century for the class “Yale and America,” said in a phone interview that in the second half of the 19th century “you have a series of presidents who are all really committed to the quadrangle idea, to creating a literal fortified wall on the edge of Old Campus.” In his 1915 book “Yale Yesterdays,” Clarence Deming wrote that rich students bought high-up slots in the lottery from poorer students and formed cliques in certain entryways.

Commons was established in 1866, but the silky dumplings and hearty pastas of today’s dining hall were nowhere to be found. Instead, breakfasts were “hashed up from the remnants of yesterday’s dinner, and fried into a consistency that baffled digestion,” Lyman Hotchkiss Bagge wrote in his 1871 book “Four Years at Yale,” which led to students’ dissatisfaction and “bread-and-butter rebellions.”

Social life was centered around fraternities and the eating clubs where students took their meals. The members of these clubs, run by a poor student “steward” partnered with a townspeople, governed themselves and decided which new students would be admitted. Often, Bagge writes, prep school acquaintances formed elite clubs at the start of their first year.

Sell mentioned that Yale’s integration with New Haven was tense at times, with brawls occurring between students and townspeople.

“You had a growing town, a growing college, students who were, you know, very entitled and Protestant, unlike a lot of the new Catholic immigrants. You had tensions,” Sell said.

As such, administrators, led by professor Noah Porter, convinced the wealthy businessman Henry Farnam to donate money for the building of new halls that faced inward in a quadrangle, thereby isolating college life from the streets of New Haven.

Farnam Hall was the first to be built, but

many quickly followed. According to Sell, new buildings, such as Phelps Hall, were designed to be a fortification against the town. The new dormitories of Old Campus, with their superior ventilation and heating, drew many students to live on campus.

However, beyond Old Campus, much of the campus of one hundred years ago looked different than today’s Yale. At the corner of Elm and College street sat the Divinity School, which would be torn down in 1931 for Calhoun College.

The residential college plan

As Yale made its way into the 20th century, new problems arose with the residential system.

Enrollment numbers were increasing by the year. According to “A Yale Book of Numbers,” a compilation of statistics by historian George Pierson, in 1890, 832 undergraduates attended Yale. By 1930 that number had more than doubled to 1680 undergraduates, even despite a drop in enrollment and a gradual recovery during and after World War I.

Increasing enrollment created a housing shortage, and the administration became so concerned that in 1923 they capped the freshman class at 850 students, according to Brooks Mather Kelley’s “Yale: A History.”

A larger Yale was a problem, also, because it undermined the sense of “solidarity” that students found within the small community of each class year, Charles Seymour, the university provost and soon-to-be master of Berkeley College, wrote in a 1933 essay for The Yale Alumni Weekly.

Creating a residential system similar to those at Oxford and Cambridge might solve this problem, some administrators suggested.

“The College Plan seeks to capitalize values characteristic of the old Yale, some of which run the danger of disappearance under modern conditions. Change is necessary in order to avoid decay,” Seymour wrote.

By 1925, President James Rowland Angell was actively pushing for a residential system. What the University lacked was donors to finance the new project.

In January 1930, the News reported the announcement of Edward S. Harkness’

“splendid gift,” which would finance the first eight residential colleges, including carving two colleges out of the Memorial Quadrangle — composed of the now-named Branford College, Saybrook College and Harkness Tower.

Harkness, a graduate of the class of 1897, donated nearly \$16 million to build several residential college quadrangles. Harkness was one of the wealthiest individuals in the country at that time, with a family fortune from investments in Standard Oil.

Branford, Calhoun, Davenport, Jonathan Edwards, Pierson, Saybrook and Trumbull Colleges opened in September 1933, the News reported at the time. The eighth college, Berkeley, was still being built and would open the next year.

Harkness’ gift made possible “provision” for students “who might otherwise be deterred by reason of the requirement that ten meals must be taken in the college dining halls” through a work-study program that would cover “full board in the college dining hall,” the News reported.

Mitigating the effects of socio-economic class differences among students was one of the appeals of the new residential model.

Jay Gitlin ’71 MUS ’74 GRD ’02, who teaches the course “Yale and America,” said in an interview with the News that a purpose of the residential college system was “recapturing, even though Yale University is now growing larger, this kind of small, friendly environment” in the 20th century when people were more anonymous.

Gitlin said that disparities in the experiences of students of different social classes were a result of the housing shortage before the construction of the new colleges.

“There was a sense of trying to produce a more democratic environment where everybody got along, even if you were wealthy and you weren’t.” However, that effect was limited because “some colleges were more high-toned than others,” Gitlin said.

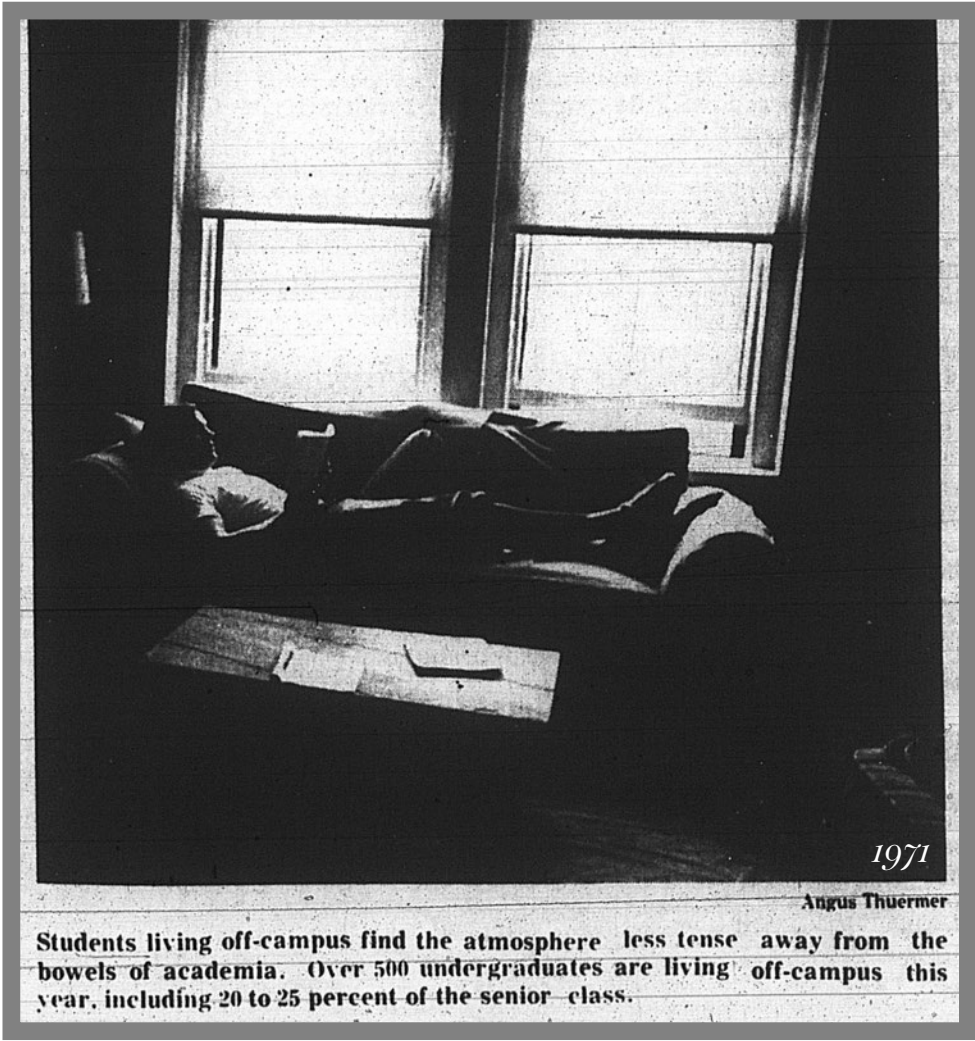
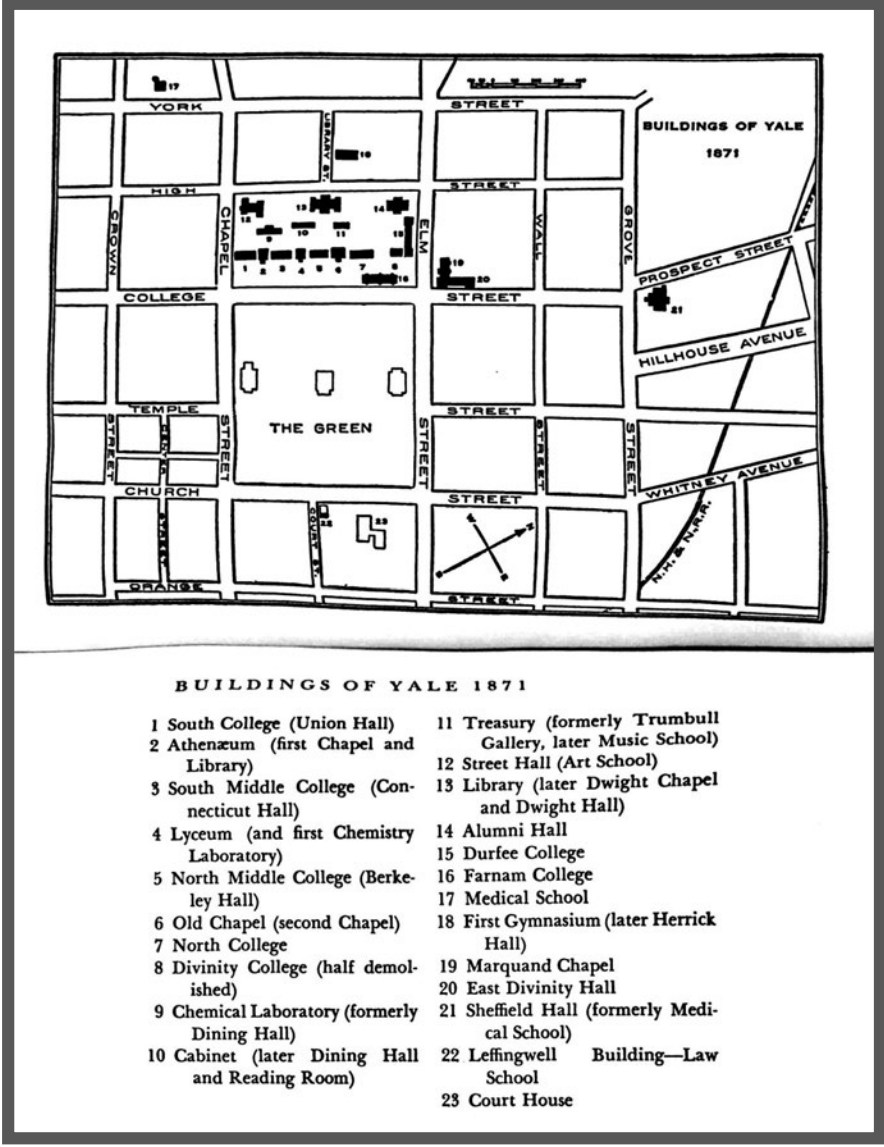
The ninth residential college, Timothy Dwight, opened in 1935.

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Yale Divinity School circa 1872 / Yale News



The Berkeley Oval in the early 1900s / Library of Congress