

THE ENDURING IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

A collection of perspectives

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The Spirit of 1776/1917: Town and Gown Go to War

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Abstract

In the summer of 1917 Americans began preparing to enter the European War. Cantonments and camps sprang up around the country, making doughboys out of farmhands, clerks, factory workers—and college students. New Haven, Connecticut was one such place: the site of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, makers of the Enfield and BAR rifles, home to Yale University and campsite of the 102nd Regiment of the Yankee Division. New Haven has had a sometimes productive, sometimes difficult relationship with the Ivy League school over the course of 300 years. The First World War helped to break down social and political barriers that had developed during the 19th century, when the city was becoming ever more ethnic, and the university was becoming ever more elitist. In 1917, soldiers made their first camp on the grounds of the Yale Bowl, Yale students and professors enlisted in the Yankee Division along with New Haveners and New Englanders, and Yale's great dining hall became the workroom of the New Haven chapter of the American Red Cross. Together, the New Haven Green and the Yale Campus became the centre for overt wartime preparations and both town and gown called upon the figure of Nathan Hale – America's first 'spy' – to instill a local and national sense of identity dating back to the American Revolution in 1776. The bronze Nathan Hale monument had been installed only four years earlier on Yale's Old Campus, but the figure of a Connecticut farm boy/university student/soldier-spy remains a focal point of university life even today, although few remember the ways in which the 'Spirit of 1776' was revived during the First World War. This article examines the relationship between town and gown in 1917, as both prepared to enter wartime Europe.

Keywords

Connecticut; First World War; monuments; Nathan Hale; New Haven; Spirit of 1776; USA; Yale University

In the summer of 1917, after fewer than three months of training at Camp Yale on the grounds around the Yale Bowl on the western edge of the City of New Haven, Connecticut, in the United States, a 'farewell program' was organised for the departing soldiers of the 102nd Regiment, the first time such an evening event had been held in the bowl (Fig.1).

Newspapers reported on the event the next day, calling it the 'most unique night event ... that has even been seen out of doors in New Haven or this state'.¹ Fifty thousand Connecticut residents and departing soldiers were treated to a seven-act vaudeville and musical performance, where a 'perfect fairyland of electricity' created 'one of the most remarkable and indescribable pictures possible'. After the circus-like acts and the playing of the *Star-Spangled Banner* by the 102nd Regiment band, the soldiers (and some sailors, too) marched across the bowl, and out towards their station. According to the newspaper, 'the

cheers of farewell that greeted them nearly drowned out the playing of the great band'.

The summer of 1917 changed everything for the United States. As of April, Americans were officially Allied participants in the Great War and as of June, the selective service or draft was enlisting men into regiments such as the 102nd. Preparations to enter the western front in France were in full force, and cantonments and camps sprang up around the country, making doughboys out of farmhands, clerks, factory workers, and college students. New Haven, Connecticut was one such active place: home to the Winchester Repeating Arms Manufacturing Company, maker of the M1917 Enfield and the M1918 Browning Automatic Rifle, as well as Yale University, the third oldest institution of higher learning in the country, now New Haven was also home to the newly formed 102nd Regiment of the 26th 'Yankee' Division of the US Army.

1 'Night Spectacle Seen by 50,000 in Yale Bowl', unknown newspaper, August 1917, in the European War folders, Local History Room, New Haven Free Public Library.

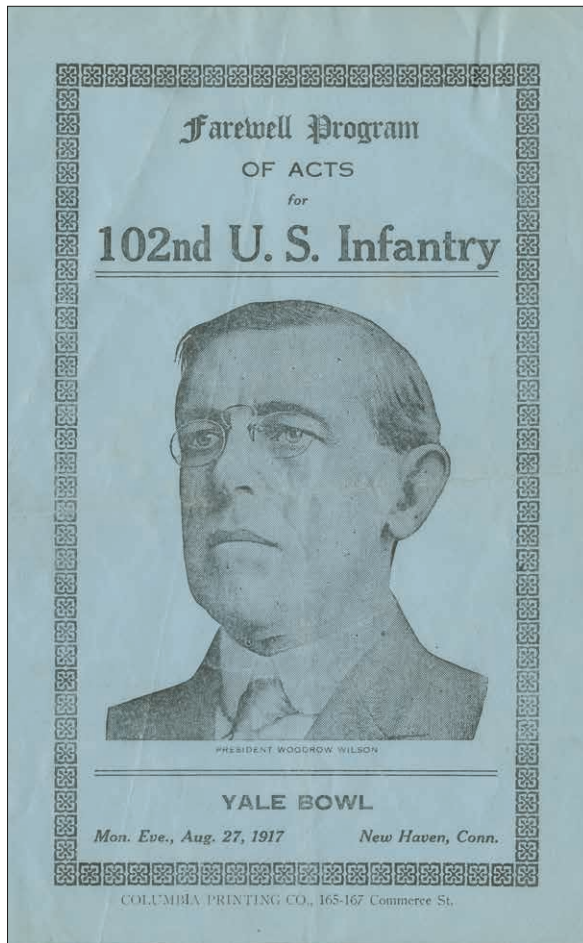


Figure 1. Program, Farewell Acts at the Yale Bowl.
Courtesy Yale University.

Called the Elm City for its once glorious tree cover, New Haven had a sometimes productive, sometimes difficult relationship with the Ivy League school over the course of its 200-year history. This included fistfights and rioting between town and gown especially during the 19th century, reaching a low point in 1854 when a Yale student shot a New Haven firefighter during a fight. But beginning in 1917 with the force of the statewide 'preparedness' movement, city and university began to work together in ways never before seen.² On the home front, at least for the time being, the Great War helped to break down social, economic, and political barriers that had grown exponentially in the previous century, when the city was becoming ever more diverse and the university was becoming ever more elitist.

In 1917 the 102nd made their first camp on the grounds of Yale Field in the shadow of the Yale Bowl, with Yale students and professors enlisting in various arms of the military including the Yankee Division, along with New Haveners and New Englanders. Iconic places such as the New Haven Green, Yale's Old Campus and the Dining Hall became centres for publicly visible wartime preparations.³ In this work, the revival of the 'Spirit of 1776'—a sentiment first expressed by Thomas Jefferson to give name to the self-determination and liberty expressed in the Declaration of Independence—served to unite town and gown with a common identity that would break down divisions that were part and parcel of American society, divisions clearly seen in the lives of townies verses gownies. The 'Spirit of 1776'—an idea later revived during the country's centennial in 1876—was a national one but could also be applied in regional and local contexts, something that Connecticut, as one of the thirteen original colonies and one of the five small New England states, could utilise.⁴ Thus, statues such as the Defenders' Monument and the Nathan Hale Monument instilled a local and national sense of identity dating back to the American Revolution and the iconic year of 1776, the year the Declaration of Independence was written, signed, and read aloud across the colonies. Hale is considered America's first 'spy' and was said to utter the words, 'My only regret is that I have but one life to give to my country'. He was hanged by the British, also in 1776.

The bronze Nathan Hale monument had been installed only four years earlier on Yale's Old Campus, but the figure of a Connecticut farm boy/university student/school teacher/soldier-spy remains a focal point of university life, although today few remember the ways in which the 'Spirit of '76' was revived locally during the First World War (Fig.2).

Even fewer recognise the Defenders' Monument, and the reach of history in which the figure of a farmer, a Yale student, and a militiaman defend the city from the enemy—a symbol of wartime cooperation most useful during the World War I years.⁵ This article suggests that by looking at sites of communal significance for town and gown in 1917, as both prepared to enter wartime Europe under the aegis of the 'Spirit of 1776', we can see how different people across New Haven were able to unite in their work. The article concludes, though, with a problematic legacy. As much as the legacy of the First World War led not to a lasting peace, but eventually to violence spread from one side of the world to the other in the Second World War, so too the robust relationship

- 2 See 'Governor's Holcomb's Preparedness Message', in the European War folders, Local History Room, New Haven Free Public Library.
- 3 'Great Military Review on Green', *New Haven Register*, 2 June 1917.
- 4 Laura A. Macaluso, 'How the Spirit of 76 Became World War I Propaganda', New England Historical Society, 2017, <http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/spirit-76-became-world-war-propaganda/>.
- 5 For New Haven and Yale's relationship to the American Revolution through the medium of bronze monuments, see George Dudley Seymour, *New Haven* (New Haven: The Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Company, 1942), 124–143; and Laura A. Macaluso, *The Public Artscape of New Haven: Themes in the Creation of a City Image* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2018), 71–88.

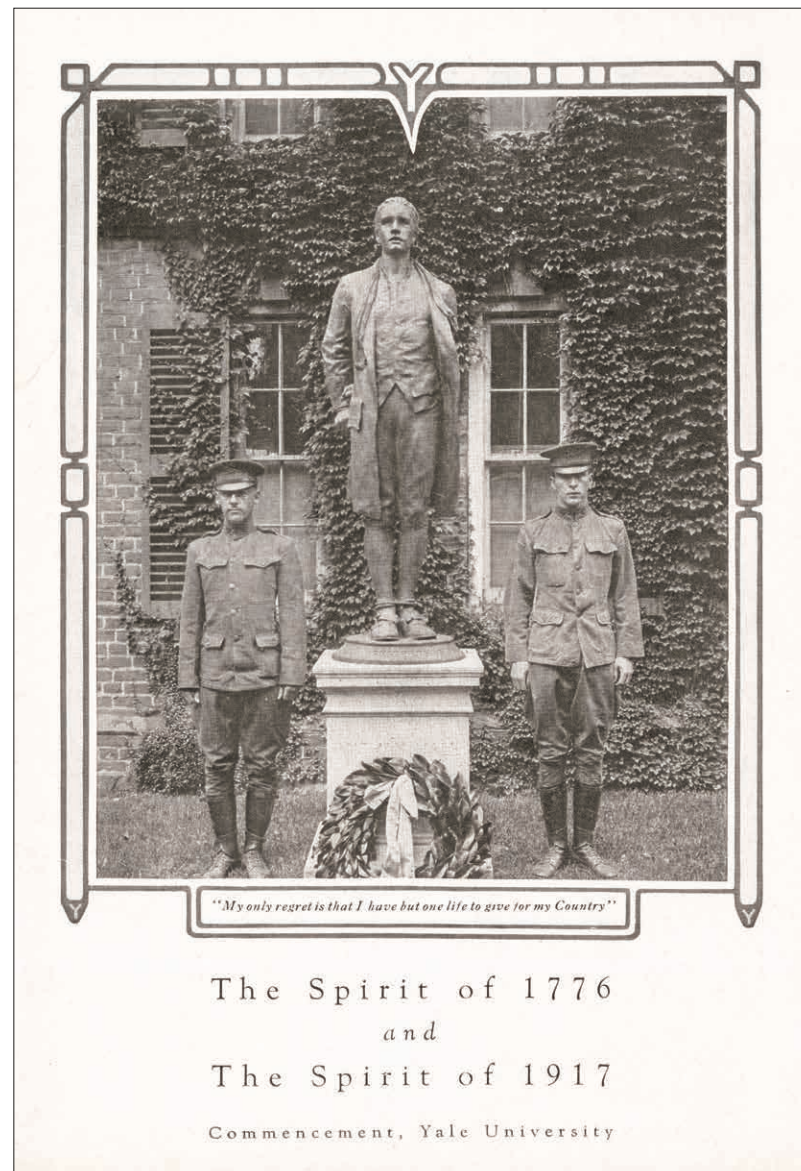


Figure 2. 1917 Commencement Cover. Courtesy Yale University.

between town and gown seen in 1917 in New Haven would also not last, eventually breaking down in violence.

Today New Haven, Connecticut retains some of the characteristics it possessed in 1917, some even reminiscent of its 17th century origins. The small city on Long Island Sound, halfway between New York City and Boston, was from the very beginning an ecclesiastical city of churches, education, and commerce—a triumvirate described clearly in a commemorative medal, made for the city's second centennial in 1838.⁶ New Haven was founded by English Puritans who believed their chosen settlement site was blessed by God himself. The First Church of Christ, or more informally Center Church, whose spire anchors the design of the medal, touching

the heavenly sky, is the very centre of the city's famous Nine Square Plan. To this day, the plan remains a central 'sacred' space around which the city revolves, with City Hall, municipal and county courthouses, the main library, commerce, and Yale University, located along its green squared edges.

Over the course of its existence, the New Haven Green—the centre square of the Nine Square plan—has been many things: graveyard, animal pasture, marketplace for agricultural goods—including the sale of human beings—a parade route for all sorts of holidays from Columbus to St. Patrick, a concert venue, memorialising site and protest site, and from the very beginning, a space for militia musters, military parades, and even

6 See Laura A. Macaluso, 'New Haven's Second Centennial Medal and the Origins of City Identity', *Material Culture: The Journal of the International Society for Landscape, Place, & Material Culture* 48, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 1–15.

the placement of cannon.⁷ But, by the turn of the 20th century, this military use of the city's most public space had long fallen out of favour for other green spaces within the city, such as Grapevine Point and Bayview Park, both in use during the last great conflict on the home front: the American Civil War. The First World War reactivated the New Haven Green militarily, to become a primary public spectacle which demonstrated both town and gown's dedication to wartime efforts.⁸ By 1917, the New Haven Green was once again alive to the spirit of 1776. Using the Green—even the upper area right next to Center Church, where hundreds of bodies lay interred beneath the grass in what was the city's first graveyard—was surely a form of propaganda for city residents, students, and the work force that travelled in and out of New Haven via trolley cars, trains, and even for some, automobiles (Fig. 3). The *New Haven Register* reported in 1917, 'the central green has become the drill ground for the city ... Yale is taking a big part in this work'.⁹ Several tents were put up on the Green, too, to 'inspire the people of this city with an appreciation of the fact that the men of the nation were being called to its defense'. Although

New Haven had an urban core by 1917, there were plenty of green, open spaces at the edges of the city and a city park system which could have been utilised, therefore the choice to use the Green was more than ease of location—it was a political and social statement. Inside Center Church, pastors gave 'Recruitment Sunday Sermons' while outside the church, Walter Camp, the father of American football and the Yale director of athletics, designed a 90-day exercise regimen for men between the ages of 45 and 60, in order to 'fit older men for work that will release their juniors to the front'.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, an army recruitment office was located close by the green on Chapel Street. Within a few short months, it was as if the Defenders of New Haven stepped off their bronzed base, bonding together against a common enemy.

As suggested, New Haven was primed to appreciate not only the spectacle of such sights, but also to accept and further the coming together of town and gown in the war effort. Public art in the form of parade performances, prints, and the installation of bronze monuments reshaped town and gown attitudes that were sour, if not outwardly hostile in the previous century. Two years



Figure 3. New Haven Green with canon. Courtesy of Yale University.

7 Eric D. Lehman, *Connecticut Town Greens: History of the State's Common Centers* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press), 133–137.

8 'Drilling on the Green Now and in Civil War', *New Haven Register*, 9 December 1917.

9 *New Haven Register*, 7 December 1917.

10 See 'Urge Recruiting in the Churches, Pastors in Many of Them Lay Emphasis on Second Regiment's Needs', *New Haven Register*, 1917 and for the Walter Camp stories, see 'Rugged Drills Put Senior Service Corps Men in Fine Shape', *New Haven Register*, 1917, both found in European War folders, Local History Room, New Haven Free Public Library. See also 'Making Middle-Aged Men Fit to Help in War', *New York Times*, 24 June 1917.

before Nathan Hale was installed on Yale's Old Campus in 1913, the City of New Haven erected the Defenders' Monument. Although mostly forgotten today, the Defenders' Monument is really a local story about the revival of the Spirit of 1776, the spirit of patriotism and liberty through cooperation. The monument celebrates the cooperation between town and gown, representatives of each depicted loading a cannon aimed at stopping the British invasion of New Haven. This was one of the long-standing New Haven legends about the American Revolution, which had endured for more than 125 years. By the 1910s, the waning years of the Gilded Age, these local legends were getting the bronze treatment.

The monuments, such as Nathan Hale and the Defenders, point to the relationship between town and gown after the turn of the 20th century, when the American melting pot took in millions of immigrants, and New Haven itself had changed considerably due to the influx of the Irish, Italians, Poles, and Hungarians among others. The city had its first Irish mayor in 1899 and would have its first Jewish mayor during the war years of 1917–1918. Some may read the installation of these bronze monuments as one way to hold on to white, Protestant culture that was coming under pressure from new people but, on the other hand, these bronzes also represent the idealisation of town and gown working together, both in the sense of the actual commission process and as a bandage to the lingering problems of the previous century. In support of this statement, one of the agents behind both the Defenders' Monument and the Nathan Hale Monument commissions was a non-Yalie named George Dudley Seymour. Although Seymour himself was not a Yale alumnus, he was a patent lawyer with an interest in all things historical. However, his cousin Charles Seymour was President of the University, and George Dudley Seymour believed that town and gown were better served if they worked more closely. Towards this end, Seymour worked on small ideas and big ones, advocating to Yale that its art gallery open on Sundays to make it easier for working class New Haveners to visit, as well hiring the well-known landscape architects Frederick Law Olmstead and Cass Gilbert to work on a city-wide urban redesign that would create better connections between institutions, city green spaces, transportation hubs, and the people they served.¹¹

The Spirit of '76 revived not only in New Haven but also across the United States in 1917, with a role to play both on the home and the western front. Soldiers from the Yankee Division painted insignia on their Brodie helmets that referenced the American Revolution, while the American public saw hundreds of propaganda images of Lady Liberty, Uncle Sam, and other symbols of independence and cooperation as they went about their everyday lives (Fig. 4). They dressed as the Spirit of '76 for parades in 1917 and 1918, and sang patriotic songs published by Tin Pan Alley in New York City. It is no surprise then that with commencement in the

late spring of 1917, Yale College put on its programme cover not images of students in their caps and gowns or Yale's storied Neo-Gothic architecture, but a picture of doughboys standing next to the Nathan Hale Monument. The Spirit of 1776 worked, and has always worked, on the American mind and attitude. This is why political groups even well into the 21st century reference the American Revolution and an easily digestible idea of liberty as a currency. These images, co-opted by groups such as the Tea Party's use of the historic Gadsden 'Don't Tread on Me' flag, are sentiments embedded very deeply in American culture.

But, how long did this feeling of town and gown cooperation exist during the First World War era? Although we might automatically think (or hope) that the legacy of 1917, of a year in which New Haveners and Yalies crossed boundary lines and became one force, continued on, allowing town and gown to work for the good of the whole, this was not to be the case. In the recent three-part documentary 'America in the Great War', a Public Broadcasting Station programme first aired in April 2017, filmmakers noted that though the war had ended successfully for the Allies—and even more so

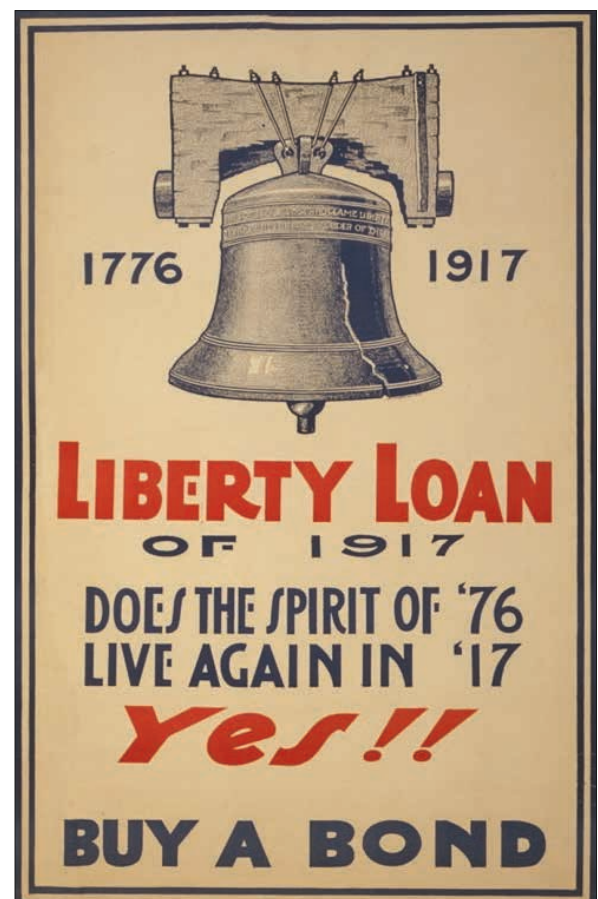


Figure 4. Liberty Bond poster. Library of Congress, 1917.

11 Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Cass Gilbert, *Plan for New Haven* (facsimile edition, San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press, 2012).

for the Americans, who had proved their worth on the battlefield—tensions and anxieties remained intact on the home front, leading to a resurgence in antagonistic behaviours between different groups of Americans. This resulted most visibly in race riots. The documentary suggested the deep suspicions and distrust Americans felt towards each other were exacerbated during the war years thanks to President Woodrow Wilson's curtailing of free speech. Wilson's administration put into place a series of impactful laws, first the Espionage Act of 1917 and then the Sedition Act of 1918, which were aimed at oppressing free speech, the antithesis to an open and democratic society and very things the United States claimed to be fighting for, across an ocean.¹²

Thus, after Armistice and the return of doughboys to the United States, places like Washington, DC, and Atlanta, Georgia, and more than 25 other American cities were embroiled in race riots during the so-called 'red summer' of 1919. The Spirit of 1776/1917 took a hit both nationally and locally. New Haven, Connecticut, did not see these race riots, but experienced an emphatic resurgence in something that had been put to bed in 1917: antagonism between town and gown reared its ugly head, on, of all days, the homecoming parade of the 102nd regiment to New Haven. Yale professor and historian Rollin Osterweis calls 24 May 1919 'one of the most tragic incidents in New Haven history, the town-gown battle of May 1919'.¹³ Although Osterweis, writing in 1952, noted that it was impossible to report on the full facts of the incident, local stories suggested that as veteran troops paraded past the Yale Campus an 'exchange of insults took place', with the soldiers calling the students slackers, and the students calling the soldiers 'tin soldiers'.¹⁴

But this wasn't the end of it. Over the course of the weekend, people were getting more agitated, and two nights later, townies stated that they heard Yale students hissing at the 102nd Regiment band which was playing at Poli's Palace Theater. The next day, the New Haven *Union*, printed the notice, 'It is said that plans have been made to have the servicemen gather at the Bennett Fountain (on the New Haven Green) at 8 o'clock tonight and from there it is claimed they intend to proceed to campus'. Five thousand New Haveners marched to campus, but the university was already on lock-down and the group—only 300 of whom were veterans—resorted to breaking windows and beating up unsuspecting males found in the street. The group tried to return the next night for another round of vandalism

and brutality but were dispersed by 'armed platoons of state guardsmen' and fire trucks with hoses at the ready.

Although Osterweis tried to downplay the division of town and gown in 1919 as an 'unfortunate deviation from the normal trend', assigning blame to the 'pent-up emotions of people who had just passed through the trying experience of a World War', if we look to find the Spirit of 1776/1917 in 1919 and after, the sentiment is gone.¹⁵ Yale University, growing in size and stature in the 1920s and 1930s, always included gates to keep town and gown separate.¹⁶ The gates remain shut and locked to townies to this very day.

To further the division, and pushing aside the Spirit of 1776/1917, town and gown erected separate monuments to the Great War in the succeeding decades. Yale was the first entity in New Haven to erect a monument to the First World War, choosing a cenotaph for Hewitt Quadrangle with inscriptions of the major America battle sites above, resting on the entablature of the Yale Dining Hall building, which had, during wartime, served the New Haven Red Cross¹⁷ (Fig.5). The City followed suit in 1929 with a memorial flagpole on the New Haven Green, its base inscribed with the same French names (Fig. 6). Neither monument makes note of the other. Today, one hundred years later, if one were to read the history of New Haven in the First World War from these two central monuments, the relationship between town and gown during wartime would not be known.

But, one marker does exist—in the most out of the way, difficult place to access—that reminds us of town-gown cooperation during the Great War, and not surprisingly perhaps, it was erected during the Second World War by veterans themselves. It is likely the concrete tablet was placed there to remember that Derby Avenue was the street that members of the 102nd Regiment used for marching between the New Haven Green and Camp Yale. But today, the road is used as a fast vehicle access route into the city, discouraging walking on the dusty street. Further, there is no parking lot, nor is there a sign to let anyone know that this marker and its accompanying empty flagpole are there. Like the Spirit of 1776/1917, the memory of town-gown cooperation during wartime, especially important for the First World War, when the United States entered the world stage, has been forgotten. Although townies and gownies no longer fistfight or shoot at each other, they also do not come together to celebrate their shared heritage, nor that special night in August of 1917 when everyone came together under the electric lights of the Yale Bowl.

12 To see how national laws meant to dissuade public anti-war sentiment were utilized to curb the speech and movement of residents in localities such as New Haven, see 'Uncle Sam Draws Sharp Line on Aliens' Movements Here', *New Haven Register*, 1917, and 'Uncle Sam Has Eye on New Haven Waterfront', *New Haven Register*, 8 September 1918.

13 Rollin G. Osterweis, *Three Centuries of New Haven, 1638–1938* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 407.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*, 409.

16 Catherine Lynn, 'Building Yale & Razing It, from the Civil War to the Great Depression', in *Yale in New Haven: Architecture & Urbanism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2004), 107.

17 'Yale's Famous Dining Hall Now a Very Busy Hive of Red Cross Gauze Workers', *New Haven Register*, 5 May 1918.



Figure 5. World War I Memorial, Hewitt Quadrangle. Photograph by Bill Sacco, courtesy of the author.



Figure 6. World War I Memorial on the New Haven Green. Photograph by Bill Sacco, courtesy of the author.

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