

Yale Crew's Compound at Gales Ferry

Origins, Additions, Renovations 1878—2026 Kim Millar

The Yale-Harvard Regatta is America's oldest intercollegiate athletic competition. It began in 1852, and in 1878 was established in Gales Ferry. The Regatta has occurred annually since then, with a few exceptions for war time.

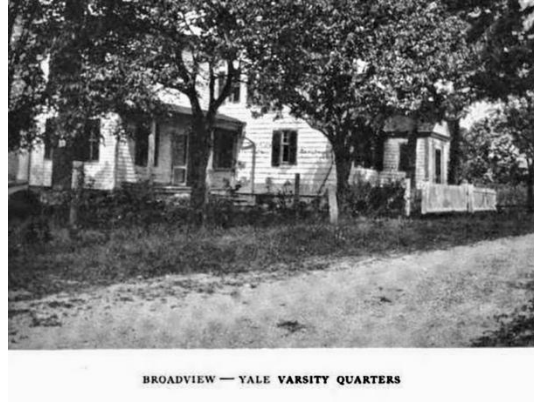
In 1878, Latham Brown hosted the Yale rowers at his newly built Italianate (Victorian) style "farmhouse" near the Thames. Legend has it that he sent his six children out to the barn to sleep, emptying their bedrooms to be used by the rowers.



Drawing, left, 1897 and photograph, right, 1893, both from Harper's Weekly Magazine

By the late 1880s, the Yale-Harvard Regatta was a huge event, attracting spectators from all walks of life but particularly the newly rich entrepreneurs of the Gilded Age. The advent of sports coverage by newspapers and magazines brought journalists to Gales Ferry. They reported daily on the training occurring in both camps, stoking the rivalry. Their reporting could be read across the nation.

By 1930, both Yale and Harvard had established compounds in Gales Ferry. In 1906 Morton Plant, who owned the Griswold Hotel in Groton, purchased the Latham Brown house and gifted it to the Yale Navy. The Yale Navy had also purchased the Thomas Geer house on the corner of Hurlbutt Road and Riverside Place. This gambrel-roofed cape was built in 1796; several additions were made over time to add a dining area and more room for staff and coaches. It was named "Broadview."

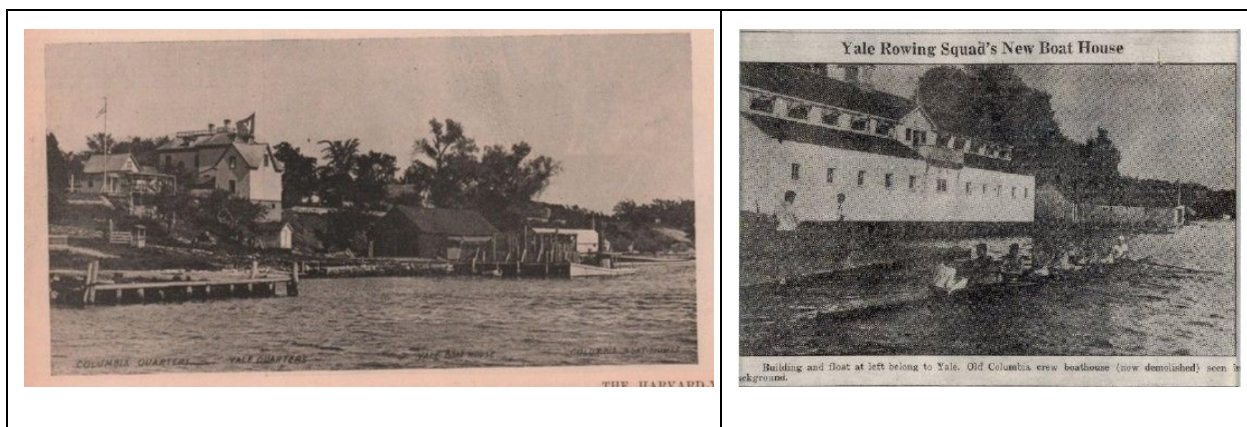


Payne Whitney, 1876-1927, was captain of the Yale crew in 1898. After his graduation, he inherited a considerable fortune and used some of those funds to build a substantial addition to Broadview, comprising bedrooms, kitchen, dining areas, and a large room for games, entertainment, and relaxing.



Payne Whitney addition on left, with original Thomas Geer house on the right

The original Yale Gales Ferry boathouse was rudimentary. With Yale's continued successes in the Regatta, a group of alumni donors donated funds to build a new boathouse in 1915. The boathouse was designed by prominent architect James Gamble Rogers, who also designed Sterling Memorial Library and many residential colleges at Yale, and the Columbia-Presbyterian hospital complex.



Original Yale boathouse circa 1876 on left, current boathouse built in 1915

Like all historic buildings, Yale's compound has required repairs and upgrading over the years. With each renovation, careful attention has been paid to the preservation of original features. The most recent renovations were performed from 2017 to 2022, with the Latham Brown house receiving the most extensive improvements. Gales Ferry Village benefits significantly from this example of retaining, preserving, and paying homage to these historic structures, ensuring their continuation for future Yale athletes and Gales Ferry residents.

Harvard Crew's Compound

Origins & Evolution 1878—2026 Kim Millar

When the Harvard crew came to Gales Ferry for the Yale-Harvard regatta, they stayed at Charles Stoddard's large Italianate-style house, currently at the intersection of Long Cove Road and Military Highway. They stayed here for the 1878, 1879, and 1880 regattas. However, these accommodations were apparently unsatisfactory. In preparing for the 1881 race, the crew captain told the Harvard University Boat Club that the team would not go to the regatta unless they had a better place to stay. The HUBC raised \$2000 within a week, enough to buy the land and build a serviceable house, ready for the 1881 contest.

The first "Red Top" was built close to the Thames and the Harvard boathouse, as shown in this photograph from 1884 (left) and a 1910 postcard (right) and a photograph from about 1900. The name "Red Top" refers to the red shingled roof, and the traditional Harvard crimson.



HARVARD QUARTERS: "RED TOP" IN 1884
From a photograph taken by Dr. J. N. Borland, of New London, Connecticut



These quarters were adequate until about 1910, when more rowers were coming to the Yale-Harvard regatta, including freshman crew members. A Harvard alumnus donated money to buy portable houses, and land north of Red Top was leased to position the houses there. The freshmen were then sent to lodge at the original Red Top house by the river.

In 1928, Robert F. Herrick, a Harvard crew captain from the class of 1890, bought about 5-6 acres of land from Carl W. Brown that comprises the current Red Top grounds and the boathouse. On the tract were two buildings from about 1780: a Cape Cod style one and ½ story house, and a smaller house closer to Military Highway.

A group of alumni then raised funds to build a set of buildings for the compound, as outlined in the New London Day.

The Day
Sat, Mar 16, 1929 · Page 13

Harvard to Have \$200,000 Crew Quarters at Red Top; Building to Start in June

Harvard's old crew quarters at Red Top are to give way to a new group to cost \$200,000. It was announced recently by a committee of nine named to raise the fund and plan the structures. The first building will be ready before next June. This will be the varsity quarters, and in it will be comfortable accommodations for the two varsity crews and substitutes.

Eventually there will be five main structures, comprising the varsity quarters, a boathouse, freshman quarters, a dining hall and quarters for the coaches and doctors. Work on these buildings will be begun as soon as sufficient funds are available. At present only sufficient money for the varsity quarters is on hand.

The varsity house will provide a private room for each member of the crew and a large living room with a fireplace. The frame structure will be faced on the outside with shingles and will be placed on the point ap-

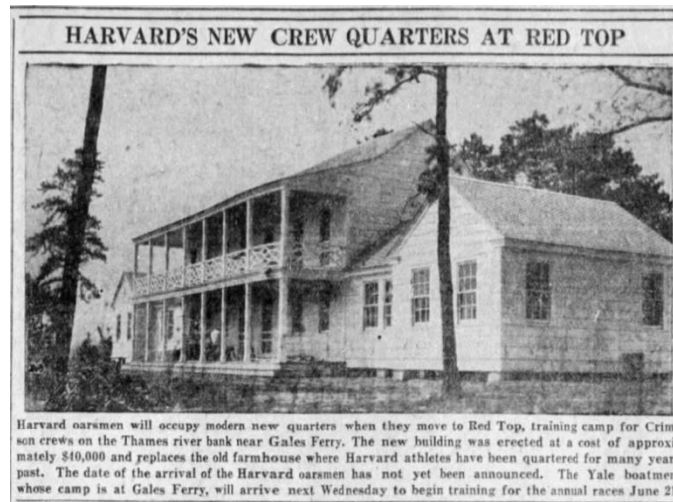
proximately where the old varsity building now stands. Further south on the Thames will be the boathouse.

On the east side of the New Haven railroad tracks will be the freshman quarters, nearer the boathouse than the varsity. Midway between the varsity and freshman quarters will be the dining hall and directly back of the dining hall will be the coaches' quarters.

Provision for six shells has been made on the central racks in the boathouse. Others can be accommodated on the side racks. Dressing rooms and clothes-drying equipment will be provided in the boathouse.

The committee which is raising the fund consists of Charles F. Adams, '88, secretary of the navy; Robert F. Herrick, '90; F. L. Higginson, '00; Oliver D. Filley, '08; George Whitney, '07; Henry S. Morgan, '23; Arthur L. Hobson, Jr., '24; Geoffrey Platt, '27, and Forrester A. Clark, '29.

The first structure built was the Varsity Crew Quarters, with a commanding view over the Thames and the Yale-Harvard regatta course. The dining hall and freshman quarters followed.



Dining Hall, left, and Freshman Quarters, right, photographed 2026



The original Varsity Quarters, set across the railroad tracks from the other Harvard compound buildings, 2026



These two buildings, presumably built about 1780, are still in use today at Red Top. 2026

As at Yale's Broadview compound, the buildings at Harvard's Red Top show an appreciation of those who came before. Both compounds have:

- 1) Original simple colonial houses from the late 1800s, with modifications and additions
- 2) Dormitories and boathouses built by affluent alumni of both institutions, Yale's in 1909-1915, Harvard's from 1929 to 1931
- 3) Continued use of these antique and unique buildings, with renovations embracing the original style, massing, and placement of the buildings
- 4) On the Harvard compound, a burial ground dating from the early 1800s is preserved and protected.
- 5) Open space is preserved. Large lawns provide for gatherings, play, and give a sense of ease.

Gales Ferry Village benefits significantly from the Yale and Harvard crew compounds, not simply because the regatta is the longest-running intercollegiate event in the United States. Indeed, they set an example of retaining, preserving, and paying homage to historic structures, ensuring their continuation for future Yale and Harvard athletes and for Gales Ferry residents.