Old Yale: Sacrifice in Stone

THE NAMES OF YALE’S WAR DEAD ARE A CHRONICLE OF THE NATION’S HISTORY.

BY JUDITH ANN SCHIFF

If a visitor were to ask for directions to Yale’s Memorial Hall, probably no student, faculty member, or staff person would know which way to turn. Yet more foot traffic passes through it than any other campus building. Memorial Hall is the circular “connector” between Woolsey Hall and Commons, and its walls bear imposing marble tablets and sculptures in memory of the 1,020 Yale alumni who died in America’s wars from the Revolution through Vietnam.

Although the memorial now goes back to the 1770s, the inspiration for it had to wait until the end of the Civil War. In June of 1865, a Yale committee was formed to build a memorial chapel to honor the alumni who had died in that conflict. (Nearly 40 percent of Yale’s graduates had taken part, on both sides.) But it was not until the late 1890s that a plan was finally adopted to include a memorial hall in the Bicentennial Buildings—Commons and Woolsey—constructed to mark Yale’s 200th anniversary. After the completion of the hall, in 1902, the actual design of the memorial features lagged until William Howard Taft, Class of 1878, urged the formation of a committee to carry it out. In 1915, the Civil War Memorial was dedicated.

Designed by Henry Bacon, the architect of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, it was installed in the corridor leading from what was then called the University Quadrangle, and is now known as Beinecke Plaza. The names of 168 Yale men who lost their lives—113 in the Union army and 55 in the Confederate army—grouped by school, are carved on two tablets flanked by life-size bas relief figures by Henry Hering, a student of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, representing Courage, Devotion, Peace, and Memory.

At the 1915 Commencement, no one imagined that just four years later, many more names would have to be inscribed in Memorial Hall. The 224 victims of World War I are listed on the honor rolls flanking the passageway to the vestibule. The losses from earlier American Wars were not forgotten. In the late 1920s, after lengthy research, tablets were installed in the oval foyer next to the quadrangle for those who fell in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Spanish-American War and Philippine Insurrection. The earliest class honored is the Class of 1738, whose distinguished member, Brigadier General David Wooster, died in Danbury on May 2, 1777. The Revolutionary War dead even include a Yale President, Naphali Daggett, Class of 1748, who died from wounds suffered while defending New Haven and the campus during the British invasion of July 5, 1779. But the inscription to which most visitors are drawn is that for Nathan Hale, Class of 1773 and according to tradition the author of the lines, “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.” His memorial honors one who “resign’d his life, a sacrifice to his country’s liberty at New York, September 22d, 1776.”

Not all those memorialized were combatants. The tribute to Horace Tracy Pitkin, Class of 1892, records him as a missionary “killed at his post in Pao Ting Fu by the Boxers.” Allen Keith, Class of 1924, is remembered thus: “While saving others, he gave his life in the Rialto Theatre fire on the night of Nov 27, 1921.”

Before a generation had passed, yet another 514 names would have to be added to the roll of honor. Of the World War II dead, the last inscription is: “Robert Lachlan McNeill, 1946 Art, Second Lieutenant Army Air Forces, May 1, 1945 over Formosa.” Inside the passageway to the vestibule are listed the Yale men who died in the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Yale’s Memorial Hall has fulfilled the aims of the Bicentennial planners, who placed at the heart of what they described as “one of the noblest examples of college architecture in the whole civilized world” an enduring reminder “that their devotion may pass to others as a living fire.”

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