



old yale

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## Yale's First Student

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by Judith Ann Schiff

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**In the beginning, Yale was a simple place:** one teacher, one student, no campus.

Founded in 1701 as the Collegiate School, the college that would become Yale opened for business in March 1702, when a young man named Jacob Heminway arrived at the parsonage of Abraham Pierson in Killingworth (now Clinton), Connecticut, paid his 30 shillings for a year of tuition, and began his studies. Heminway, the first student to receive instruction at Yale, graduated three centuries ago.

In October 1701 Connecticut had granted a charter to establish Yale. On November 11, the founding trustees, then also known as "undertakers," held their first meeting. During three days of deliberation in the town of Saybrook (now Old Saybrook), they organized the school, appointed Pierson as the first rector (president), and decided that admission to the school would depend wholly upon a reading knowledge of the classics. The rector was empowered to examine candidates in person, "and finding them duly prepared and expert in Latin and Greek authors, both poetic and oratorical, and also making good Latin," to admit them. The founders intended that there should be four years of instruction for the bachelor of arts degree, but if the student was qualified, he could finish early. During the first decade nearly all of the students graduated in three years.

**Admission to Yale depended wholly upon a reading knowledge of the classics.**

Jacob Heminway was born in East Haven, a village of New Haven, in 1683. His father, Samuel, was one of the wealthiest men in the area. Jacob had nine brothers and sisters, including an older brother, Abraham, who was the direct ancestor of Ernest Hemingway. Jacob's family belonged to the New Haven parish of the Rev. James Pierpont, the principal founder of Yale, who probably prepared him for admission.

When the 19-year-old Jacob settled in the rector's home, no other students were ready. Ezra Stiles, Yale's seventh president, recorded Heminway's comment that he "solus was all the College the first half-year." In September, three students joined Jacob, and by the time he graduated the student body had 15 to 20 members. As the classes grew, Pierson acquired the assistance of a recent Harvard graduate, who taught the younger students.

It was a rigorous education. Classes began about 6:30 a.m., right after morning prayers. Following a hearty midday dinner of boiled meat and vegetables with cider and beer, the students had an hour and a half of recreation. The afternoon classes were followed by early evening prayers. Study ended at bedtime, which was 9 p.m. The principal subjects were Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, with additional instruction in Latin texts on logic, metaphysics, mathematics, and physics. All recitations were in Latin, and students were expected to speak Latin outside the classroom as well.


**Since Yale's mission was to educate youth** "for publick Imployment both in the Church and in the Civil State," instruction in theology and rhetoric was mandatory. On

Sunday the students attended church twice, and the rector required that they be prepared to repeat his sermons.

John Hart, who had transferred from Harvard in September 1702, was the solitary graduate in 1703. (Yale awarded its first diplomas in 1702, but those degrees went to four Harvard grads and a student who had received a private education elsewhere.) Jacob had two classmates in the Class of 1704—Phineas Fiske, who became a minister, and John Russell, who became a civic and military leader.

Jacob himself had no trouble finding a job. Two months after his graduation a new Congregational church forming in East Haven was charged to "seek Sir Heminway that he would give them a taste of his gifts in the preaching of the word." He was approved informally, at a salary of 50 pounds a year, until the General Court confirmed the agreement in 1706 and supplemented his pay with wood and "a good convenient dwelling-house." Heminway continued as sole pastor until his death in 1754. He left a substantial estate—valued at 6,556 pounds—after his death, but bequeathed just five pounds to his only child, Lydia, whose second husband was a member of the Church of England.

In 1936, Heminway's portrait was commissioned for the 225th anniversary of his church in East Haven, now known as the Old Stone Church. As there was no known likeness of Heminway, the artist, Donald Kirby '35BFA, aided by Yale English professor Samuel B. Hemingway '04, '08PhD, used portraits of later Hemingways to create a composite.

For their part, the later Hemingways never forgot Jacob. Marcelline Hemingway Sanford, Ernest Hemingway's sister, wrote in her 1962 memoir *At the Hemingways*, "Grandfather was rather proud of his descent from Jacob Hemingway ... He also told us the family legend that the first student at Yale was a Hemingway." 

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