THE BANNERS OF YALE

Text and photographs by Gustavo Tracchia

Editor’s note: This paper was presented at the 25th Annual Meeting of NAVA, held in Minneapolis in 1991, where it received an honorable mention for the Captain William Driver Award for Best Paper. Although some time has passed between the paper’s composition and its publication, it remains an important contribution to vexillology. Where necessary, small changes have been made to bring the account up to date.

THE ARMS AND FLAG OF YALE (Figure 1)

Yale University was founded in 1701 as the Collegiate School, in Killingworth, Connecticut. In 1718 the college was renamed “Yale” after Elihu Yale (1649–1721), an English merchant and president of the East India Company and a benefactor of the original college in Connecticut who donated land in New Haven to build the college.

The arms and the device on the flag of Yale are derived from the seal adopted by the Trustees of Yale College in the early eighteenth century. The flag is adapted from the arms and seal, and has a field of solid blue, known as Yale Blue for to its peculiar hue described as dark grayish blue (Pantone Matching System number PMS 289).

The field is charged with an open book in white at the center of the field, inscribed with the Hebrew characters הָאוּרִים וְהַתֻּמִים—for ha-Urim veha-Tummim, or Urim and Thummin. The use of Hebrew identifies the book as the Bible; the text refers to the names of sacred lots cast for the purpose of ascertaining divine will (e.g. in Exodus 28:30; Leviticus 8:8; Numbers 27:21; Deuteronomy 33:8; I Samuel 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65). When the Old Testament was translated into Greek in the third century B.C., the literal meaning of the terms “Urim and Thummin” was no longer clear; among the ancient renderings given were “Light and Truth”. This interpretation was chosen and used in Latin as the motto of the college: “Lux et Veritas”, usually inscribed on a ribbon below the shield.
THE ARMS AND FLAGS OF THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGES OF YALE

Yale’s residential colleges followed the example of the small colleges of the great English universities in Cambridge and Oxford. At first, the curriculum emphasized the intellectual welfare of the students and included social studies, the humanities, and natural sciences. With time, Yale increased in size and its curriculum became more complex and diverse. In 1930 Edward S. Harkness (class of 1897) donated funds to build eight residential colleges in the tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth century England. Donations by John W. Sterling and Frederick William Vanderbilt followed, adding two more units to the residential college complex. Finally with donors such as Paul Mellon and John Hay Whitney two new colleges were added in 1962 making a total of twelve. [Ed. note: two more were added in 2017.] Although some of the buildings follow the archetypical U.S. “Ivy” college building style, some show daring modern architectural concepts.

Delighting this flag enthusiast, all of these colleges adopted distinctive symbols and shields of arms represented in flags and banners following European heraldic traditions. The flags are actually armorial banners but unlike the English colleges, which display their flags outdoors on special occasions, in Yale’s case the flags are kept indoors, adorning special halls and/or banquet halls. The actual shields, however, are seen in the entrances of nearly all of the residential college buildings.
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Each college also adopted a bookplate, china and silverware, a mace, a blazer, and a tie (which can be replaced by a scarf for less formal occasions).

BERKELEY
Reverend George Berkeley (1685–1753), Dean of Derry and Bishop of Cloyne (Ireland) donated land and books to Yale College in early 18th century. With a gift in 1934 by Edwards S. Harkness this residential college was named in honor Bishop Berkeley. Berkeley’s flag has a red field with a white chevron and white pattée (or formée) crosses taken from the seal shown on the deed of the plantation Berkeley donated to Yale in 1733. The original coat of arms of Bishop Berkeley had the arms chosen for the college in the 1st and 4th quarters only. The arms are shown at the main entrance of the college building (figure 3).

Figure 2: The flag of Berkeley College.
Figure 3: The arms of Berkeley College.

BRANFORD
In 1702, ten Connecticut congregational ministers, by donating books, founded the Collegiate School’s library. Their first meeting was held in 1701 in the home of Reverend Samuel Russel in the town of Branford. The construction of Branford College began in 1917 and its flag has two horizontal stripes in 1:4 proportions from top to bottom (figure 4). The upper is yellow with three elm leaves in green to symbolize the permanent establishment of Yale in New Haven. The lower is a field of Yale Blue charged with ten open books of white, displayed in rows of four, three, two, and one, from top to bottom.
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Figure 4: The flag of Branford College.

CALHOUN
John C. Calhoun, the southern politician who wielded great influence on the political history of the United States, was an alumnus of Yale. He served in many administrations and to balance the ticket, Calhoun was John Quincy Adams’ vice-president (1825–1828). He served previously as Secretary of War for James Monroe (1817–1825) and later, between 1844 and 1845, as Secretary of State for President Tyler. To that, we must add several terms in the House and in the Senate. The flag has two horizontal stripes in 1:4 proportions. The top stripe is dark blue reproducing the main device of Yale’s flag, an open white book with the main Hebrew inscription Urim and Thummin. The lower stripe is white with an engrailed saltire cross of black representing Calhoun’s Irish-Scottish heritage. The mace of Calhoun College is John C. Calhoun’s original walking stick. [Ed. note: in 2017 Calhoun College was renamed Grace Hopper College.]
Figure 5: The flag of Calhoun College.

DAVENPORT
As with Berkeley, the flag is an adaptation of the family arms, a white field with a black chevron and three crosses crosslet fitchy also in black (figure 6). The actual arms of Reverend John Davenport can be seen at the entrance of Davenport College, with two “Yales” as supporters (figure 7). Yales (also known as centicores), like griffins or dragons, are fabulous heraldic beasts of ancient lineage (figure 8). With diverse and capricious descriptions, Yales have been represented in various different forms, generally as an antelope- or goat-like four-legged creature with the tusks of a boar and large horns that it can swivel in any direction. The word may derive from the Hebrew yael, meaning ibex. Rev. John Davenport was a descendent of one of the founders of the colony and the first to propose establishing a college in New Haven.
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Figure 6: The arms of Davenport College.

Figure 7: The flag of Davenport College
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Figure 8: A flag with a yale.

EZRA STILES
This residential college was designed by the famous Finnish architect Eero Saarinen (1910–1960) who studied architecture at Yale and was known for the St. Louis Gateway Arch, the TWA Terminal at John F. Kennedy Airport, and Morse Residential College. For this building Saarinen departed from the conventional “ivy” league type of construction and chose instead the sober Etruscan style seen in the northern towns of Italy, particularly the town of San Gimignano. Ezra Stiles (1727–1796) was a theologian, lawyer, scientist, and philosopher who graduated from Yale in 1746. He served as Yale’s president from 1778 to 1795. The flag is based on the arms granted to Stiles by the College of Heralds in 1785: three horizontal stripes of equal size, black over yellow over black (figure 9). On the top black stripe, two yellow *fleurs de lis*. The center stripe is yellow with a design that heraldry called “fretty”, which can be loosely translated as “ornament”. The lower black stripe has one yellow *fleur de lis* at the center.
JONATHAN EDWARDS
A theologian, philosopher, and naturalist, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) graduated from Yale in 1720. The flag for this college was taken from the arms engraved on a silver tankard. The tankard is preserved at the New Haven Historical Society. I had the opportunity to see the actual engraving which was the basis for the arms and flag. The main device for the flag is featured in the first and fourth quarter of the family arms: a rampant lion in green. The second and third quarters of the Dwight arms are ermine. The college flag combines these two elements of the family arms into an ermine field with a rampant green lion at the center (figure 10).
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Figure 10: The flag of Jonathan Edwards College

MORSE
This residential college, whose modern building was also designed by Eero Saarinen, honors Samuel F. B. Morse (1791–1872), class of 1810 and inventor of the telegraph (figure 11). The flag of the college is based on the Morse family arms, a white field with a red axe per pale between three black bezants in a 2 over 1 configuration (figure 12). The axe is frequently but incorrectly called a battle axe (but a battle axe has two blades, one on each side). The heraldic name of the disc form known as a bezant derives from Byzantine coins in circulation during the Middle Ages and considered legal tender. A joke among students residing at Morse College holds that the dots on the family arms might have inspired Morse to create in the widely known Morse code of dots and dashes. It is only a joke.
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Figure 11: Morse College building
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Figure 12: The flag of Morse College

PIERSON
Reverend Abraham Pierson (1646–1707) was Yale’s first rector. The flag has a black field with three yellow suns displayed vertically at the center (figure 13). On each side of the suns a narrow yellow vertical stripe is charged with black ermines. The arms are referred as “canting arms”, as the golden suns and the black color suggest the syllables of the bearer’s name: the sun piercing the darkness.
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SAYBROOK
This Tudor mansion-style building recalls the town of Saybrook, Connecticut, the last site of Yale College before it moved to New Haven. The name of the town is a combination of the names of the original owners of the site, Lord Saye and Sele and Lord Brooks. The field of the flag is divided in four equal quarters reproducing the arms of these two nobles (figure 14). The first and fourth quarters are of a blue field with three rampant lions in gold on a two over one configuration representing the arms of Saye and Sele. In the second and third quarters are the arms of Brooks, a black field with a yellow Greek engrailed cross with a yellow border with five black roundels on the cross, one at each arm and one at the center of the cross. The students of Saybrook residential college go by the nickname of Seals.
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Figure 14: The flag of Saybrook College.

SILLIMAN
Benjamin Silliman (1779–1864) was the first professor of chemistry at Yale, teaching from 1802 to 1853. He later expanded into mineralogy, geology, and pharmacy. Silliman has been called “The father of American Scientific Teaching”. The flag has a white field with three vertical wavy stripes of red converging at the base of the flag (figure 15). At the center of the field is a green horizontal stripe with three yellow acorns. The colors of the flag derive from the four elements, red for fire, white for the air and water, and green for earth. The acorns are devices taken from the Vanderbilt coat of arms (for the college’s benefactor). The college holds an important collection of minerals—among them one discovered by Silliman, very appropriately named Sillimanite (figure 16).
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Figure 15: The flag of Silliman College
Yale had two presidents named Timothy Dwight. The first (1752–1817), class of 1769, is known as TD IV and his grandson (1886–1899), with the same name, class of 1849, is known as TD V. The flag of this residential college is a banner of the arms of the Dwight family. Like Jonathan Edwards College, the actual arms of the senior Timothy Dwight are seen engraved on a silver tankard of his grandfather, although only the first quarter was used for the college’s arms. Red is the only color that can be seen on that tankard. As such, the flag is a white field with two horizontal stripes of 1:3 (figure 17). The upper stripe is red with a white crescent at the center, points upward. This crescent is the mark of cadency used in heraldry to denote the second son, although in many instances the descendants of that second son incorporate the cadency as part of their own arms. The lower stripe is white with a passant lion in red and a cross crosslet fitchy below the lion, also in red. As in the case of Davenport, the arms are seen on the iron gates of the residential college supported by Yales (figure 18).
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Figure 17: The flag of Timothy Dwight College

Figure 18: The arms of Timothy Dwight College
TRUMBULL
Jonathan Trumbull (1710–1785) was governor of the colony and later the first governor of the state of Connecticut. The flag is white with three bull’s heads in black, two over one, the old device of the Trumbulls (sometimes Turnbulls or Trumbles) of Scotland. The current designs of the flag and arms of the college are adapted from the seal of Governor Trumbull (figure 19). However, on the actual flag the bulls are white and not black (figure 20). The field is not white, as it should be, but gray. Perhaps the fabricators took the description of the arms as a “field of silver” too literally, not knowing that on flags and banners silver is represented by the color white. Nevertheless the same situation occurs on the flags of Calhoun, Davenport, and Morse.

Among the armorial devices seen inside the college are the arms of three colleges/universities that conferred degrees to Jonathan Trumbull: Harvard, Yale, and Edinburgh. At the opposite end of the dining hall, over the door, appear the arms of George Washington, one of Trumbull’s closest friends, and beneath the arms the motto “we must consult Brother Jonathan”, a frequent saying of George Washington, referring to Trumbull’s wise counsel.
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Figure 20: The flag of Trumbull College

NOTES

I have tried to describe the flags using vexillological rather than heraldic terminology. However, sometimes when trying to describe complex devices shown on the flags but taken from the arms, vexillology’s sister discipline heraldry saved the day.

For a bibliography on the subject of these colleges, to the best of my knowledge there is none. The information on this paper is the result of a personal research done on site, mainly at the Yale Library, but also in the libraries of the residential colleges. Furthermore, residential college administrators and students who were very much impressed when first exposed to vexillology, and were excited and eager to provide archival information on the subject, although no one seemed curious about why their residential college had this or that device. However, in all fairness, when my access to information available only to those with scholarly credentials was blocked, those administrators and students were inspired by the idea of flag research and overcame many barriers on my behalf.

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- Ann Marie Thomas, Assistant Master, Saybrook College

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On heraldic vocabulary and proper heraldic terminology my sources were: *A Guide to Heraldry* by Ottfried Neubecker and *Basic Heraldry* by Stephen Friar and John Ferguson.¹

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