

**THE STORY OF THE  
HARVARD-YALE  
RACE 1852-1912**

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The Story of the Harvard-Yale race 1852-1912 by James Wellman & Walter B. Peet

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**JAMES WELLMAN & WALTER B. PEET**

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PREPARING FOR THE START, NEW LONDON

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BY  
JAMES WELLMAN  
AND  
DR. WALTER B. PEET

WITH A COMPLETE RECORD  
AND ILLUSTRATIONS



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# THE STORY OF THE HARVARD-YALE RACE<sup>1</sup>

## PART I

1852-1885

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THE year 1912 brings the sixtieth anniversary of the first meeting between Harvard and Yale as rivals in sport. Their race in 1852 initiated a series of varied athletic contests, in which nearly all our better-known colleges have at one time or another taken part. Out of that race grew all American college boating. To it must be ascribed, indirectly, the credit of the physical development which many graduates trace back to the boating of their college days. For Harvard and Yale, by inaugurating races and other contests between students from different institutions of learning, furnished a needed stimulus to care of the body as well as of the mind, and hastened the recognition of physical education as an essential part of the college curriculum. If the benefits of college boating were limited to the six or eight representative oarsmen, the value of boating might well be questioned. But such is not the case. The fact that a picked crew is to be sent out to do battle against a rival does assuredly help to draw hard-reading men from their sedentary life to the

<sup>1</sup>Reprinted from Harper's *Boating Book*.



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gymnasium and the river. Without these annual races boating at Harvard and Yale would languish, and perhaps utterly perish. The years which have passed since these colleges were first pitted against each other on the water has brought a marked improvement in the physical welfare of the average college student, and in this, as I have indicated, the Harvard-Yale race has been no unimportant factor.

As regards equipment and methods, it is more than improbable that any changes which the future may bring will be as sweeping as those included in the records of the first thirty-three years of these contests. There will be no transition comparable to that from the clumsy barge, three and a half feet wide, rowed on the gunwale, to the slender shell of recent years. There will be no such series of changes as were presented by the early scratch-races on Lake Winnipiseogee, the turning races at Worcester, with their uproarious accompaniments, the intercollegiate regattas at Springfield and Saratoga, culminating in 1875 in the beautiful spectacle of thirteen six-oared crews ready at the starting-line, and finally, the eight-oared contests which began between Harvard and Yale in 1876, and between Cornell and the field in 1895 at Poughkeepsie. The conditions of both races have been well tried, and nothing better has been found.

But the experience and general perfection of methods represented in the college races of to-day are derived from much vain groping in the dark, from beginnings and experiments which seem laughable enough in the light of our present wisdom, and from many costly blunders. Many an

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old oarsman feels even now a dull ache at his heart as he remembers how the result of some hard-fought race betrayed his faith in a new "rig," a new stroke, or a new system of training. There may still be graduates who recall the fifty and sixty strokes to the minute, pulled by the men of the early days, and they may be inclined to regard the sliding seats and slower stroke of to-day as signs of degeneracy. *Consule Planco*, "when Wilbur Bacon pulled stroke of Yale," or, "when Harvard sent forth the Crowninshields, Watson, the McBurneys, and the Lorings," "then, indeed, there was a race of giants upon the earth." Well, the race endures, and the men who represent the two universities at New London, year by year, sustain the traditions of their predecessors. No Harvard or Yale graduate will admit that his interest in the race has waned. He may care little for other victories, except in football, but he never fails to watch the wires when the decisive news is expected from New London. No one but a Harvard or a Yale man can fully understand the force of this feeling. Properly directed it is a stimulus to open and honorable emulation. Left uncontrolled it has led in the past to recriminations and ruptures which, I have faith to believe, have occurred for the last time.

Boating began at both Harvard and Yale about 1844, but received little attention from the majority of the students until after the first Harvard-Yale race, in 1852. The challenge came from Yale, and was accepted by the Oneida Club of Harvard. The date of the race was August 3d, and upon August 10th, according to the fashion of those leisurely times, the *New York Tribune* published a report

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sent by a correspondent at Center Harbor, N. H. This account was as follows:

The students of the Yale and Harvard boat-clubs met each other in the depot hall at Concord, where mutual introductions took place, and they proceeded together to Weirs. Here the "Lady of the Lake" was in waiting to convey them to Center Harbor, where they arrived after a delightful trip of an hour and a half, just in time for a splendid dinner at the Center House. Some idea of the immense capacity of these boats may be gained from the fact that the captain requested the passengers not to seat themselves all on one side of the boat. . . . The students have free passage in her to any part of the lake; and indeed their whole trip, as we understand, was free, the expenses being defrayed principally, we understand, by the Boston and Montreal Railroad Company. . . . The Yale boats arrived on Monday, which was mostly spent in fishing and practising for the regatta on Tuesday. The boats are: From Harvard, the *Oncida*, 38 feet long, 8 oars; from Yale, the *Undine*, 30 feet long, 8 oars; the *Shawmut*, 38 feet long, 8 oars; the *Atlanta*, 20 feet long, 4 oars.

There is but one boat-club in existence at Harvard at present, which accounts for their sending but one boat. The crew have evidently had considerable practice—somewhat more than the boats at Yale. The *Oncida* is quite a model for fleetness and beauty. The first regatta was run on Tuesday at eleven in the morning. The shore was lined with a numerous and excited throng, and the betting ran quite high. At the third blast of the bugle, the boats shot forward almost with the speed of race-horses, while the band on the shore struck up a lively tune. The sight was perfectly enchanting, scarce a breeze ruffled the water, and the whole crowd were anxiously bending their gaze upon the boats, which were flying over the water with all the speed which the vigorous and rapid strokes of the young oarsmen could produce. Meanwhile, the little parties who were out in skiffs were urging on the oarsmen with encouraging shouts as they rushed by them. The distance to be run was about a mile and a half, to a boat anchored off upon the lake. The *Oncida* ran the distance in seven minutes, the *Shawmut* being about two lengths behind, while the *Undine* and *Atlanta* pressed closely after.

This was what was denominated the scrub-race, being merely a trial of the strength of the respective crews and no prize being awarded.

The grand regatta came off this afternoon at four o'clock. The boats (with the exception of the *Atlanta*, which was not allowed to compete