An 1802 Petition on Dining at Yale College

To the President of Yale College,

Sir,

Sensible of the important purposes for which the Commons were originally designed, and convinced of the salutary consequences of which they might, with propriety, be expected to result, we cannot but regard the degenerate practice of so valuable an institution with indignation, and with the persuasion that the President is ignorant of the conduct of those employed in the Hall. We beg leave respectfully to demonstrate and submit to his consideration the following facts:

1. We have satisfactory proof that they have unwarrantably converted to their own use sundry articles belonging to the kitchen.
2. They have sworn up a part of our provision in a most palatable manner, which, for a sufficient reward, they have appropriated to the use of individuals.
3. They have continually harboured the low
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[1]
Petition regarding Commons, page 1, circa 1800-1801, Bates Family Papers (MS 65), Box 1, folder 5

In a December 1995 “Old Yale” column from the Yale Alumni Magazine [2], Chief Research Archivist Judy Schiff traces the history of dissatisfaction with dining facilities, service, and fare all the way back to the opening of the first Yale College building in New Haven in 1718. Sometime in 1800-1801, more than two and a half decades before the infamous Bread and Butter Rebellion of 1828, four members of the Class of 1802 sent a petition to Yale President Timothy Dwight protesting against the immoral and wicked behavior of the kitchen staff. The petition survives in Box 1, folder 5 of the Bates Family Papers (MS 65) [3] in Manuscripts and Archives. Herewith the text of the petition:

To the President of Yale College.

Sir,

Sensible of the important purposes for which the Commons was originally designed, and convinced of the salutary consequences of which they might still be productive, we cannot but regret the unfortunate perversion of so valuable an institution.

With these impressions, and with the presumption that the President is ignorant of the conduct of those employed in the Hall, we beg leave respectfully to remonstrate, and submit to his consideration the following facts.

- 1st. We have satisfactory proof that they have unwarrantably converted to their own use sundry articles belonging to the kitchen.
- 2d. They have served up a part of our provision, in a more palatable manner, which, for a pecuniary reward, they have appropriated to the use of individuals.
- 3d. They have continually harboured the low, riotous, and immoral inhabitants of this town.
4th. They are destitute of cleanliness.
5th. By deserting the hall, for the purpose of prosecuting their own private, they have shamefully neglected the duties of their occupation.
6th. They have in the presence of the more young and inexperienced students, traduced the character of the Authority.
7th. They admit into the hall, to the exclusion of others, those who will furnish them with spiritous liquors.
8th. They have appropriated to their own use much more than an equitable portion of the better provisions provided by the steward.
9th. They are notorious for excessive drinking.
10th. They are openly profane.
11th. They constantly violate the sabbath, by admitting into their company disreputable persons, and by diverting themselves with ludicrous and improper amusements.

It is therefore the unanimous request of the Junior Class that for these and many other improprieties, the President would take into consideration the conduct of the Cooks and make such regulations as he shall think proper.

Isaac C. Bates, Wm. F. Brainard, Jeremiah Evarts, Junius Smith, Committee in behalf of the Class

The “Commons” in question in the petition was the first separately standing Commons building on Yale’s Old Campus. It was built in 1782 as a dining hall, or Commons, and designed by Jeremiah Atwater. Its location was behind South Middle College (today’s Connecticut Hall) and behind the Chapel Street location where Street Hall was eventually constructed in 1864, approximately in the present location of the southern end of McClellan Hall. It served as the dining commons for Yale College students until 1820, when a larger Commons building was constructed nearby. From 1820-1888 the building was used as a chemical laboratory and known as the Old Laboratory [5], and from 1885-1887 also served as the first home for the Yale Cooperative Society [6] (which after 1893 became the Yale Cooperative Corporation). The building was demolished in 1888, contemporaneously with the construction of the new Kent Chemical Laboratory [7] building across High St. from the Old Library (now Dwight Hall) at the corner of Library St. (on a site now occupied by Jonathan Edwards College).

And what of the four members of the Class of 1802 selected by their classmates to petition the Yale College president seeking some kind of redress for the perceived abuses of the Commons staff?

- Isaac Chapman Bates [8] (January 23, 1779-March 16, 1845) practiced law in Northampton, Massachusetts, and later served in the U.S. House of Representatives (1827-1835) and the U.S. Senate (1841-1845) representing Massachusetts.
- Jeremiah F. Evarts [9] (February 3, 1781-May 10, 1831) also was a lawyer, served for many years as treasurer then secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. He was one of the leading opponents of Indian removal, and engaged in lobbying efforts attempting unsuccessfully to defeat the Indian Removal Act of 1830.
- Junius Smith (1780-1853) also practiced law, and later in his life was a determined supporter of efforts to build a fleet of transatlantic steam ships [10].
