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Calhoun Who? Yale Drops Name of Slavery Advocate for Grace Hopper

By Andy Newman And Vivian Wang
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A student walking through the courtyard of Grace Hopper College, which was formerly Calhoun College, at Yale University in New Haven on Friday. Credit Jessica Hill for The New York Times

In a dining hall at Yale University, the portrait of an avid proponent of slavery has been replaced with a shield depicting a heraldic dolphin.

On Tuesday, beneath the dolphin's fearsome eye, Yale's president and the Navy's chief of operations will make speeches, a chaplain will offer a blessing, and a secret ceremonial object will be unveiled.

With that, Yale's Calhoun College, named for John C. Calhoun — a vice president, senator from South Carolina, and founding forefather of the Civil War — will recede further into the New Haven university's past. The gothic stone building, one of the 14 residential colleges where undergraduates live and eat, will be dedicated as Hopper College, after Rear Adm. Grace Murray Hopper, a boundary-smashing computer pioneer and naval officer. The dolphin on the Hopper College shield is a nod to her maritime career.

The ceremony caps a bitter, exhausting fight that included years of student protests, a smashed stained-glass window depicting slaves, a decision by Yale to keep Calhoun's name and then, in a reversal, to drop it.

And it comes at the end of a summer of unrest across much of the nation over how to remember and whether to honor those on the wrong moral side of the nation's greatest conflict.

For Calhoun College students who fought for the name change, returning to campus to see signs for "Grace Hopper College" was energizing. "I think for a lot of people this summer has shown that it's sort of beyond this ivory tower intellectual debate," Maya Jenkins, a Hopper senior, said on Friday.

Admiral Hopper helped build the nation's first electromechanical computer, developed the first compiler, proposed the idea of writing computer programs in words rather than symbols, and retired from the Navy at age 79.

Not that the university went far enough, Ms. Jenkins, a black student from Indiana, added in an email. "The college being renamed after a white woman does not fully rectify the violences of Calhoun's legacy," she wrote.



Rear Adm. Grace Hopper saluting crew members aboard the USS Constitution in Boston's Charlestown section during her 1982 retirement ceremony after serving over 40 years in a Navy uniform. CreditBettmann, via Getty Images'

The university has opened two new residential colleges this semester, one named for a black Yale Law School alumna and civil rights leader, Anna Pauline Murray, and the other for Benjamin Franklin. The latter decision, too, has left many people "a little miffed," said Vivian Dang, a Hopper College junior. "It's another old white guy being honored."

Calhoun, who graduated from Yale in 1804, is not vanished from the campus. His name and likeness remain in the stonework above a couple of archways at Hopper College.

A plaque in the courtyard honors the “Renovations of Calhoun College in 1989,” funded in part by “the generosity of S. Roger Horchow, Class of 1950.”

“We’re never taking this down, because he was a great supporter of the renovation,” Prof. Julia Adams, the head of Hopper College, said of Mr. Horchow, a mail-order catalog mogul and Broadway producer. There is still an eight-foot statue of Calhoun high up on the university’s Harkness Tower, too.

Nor has Yale seen its final battle over an icon that some people now find offensive. Last month, the school said it would remove a “problematic” doorway carving that shows a Puritan settler aiming a musket at a Native American, after drawing criticism for simply covering up the gun.

And critics have pointed out that for all the effort Yale has expended on figuring out ways not to honor a 19th century white supremacist, the proportion of African-American students at the university — 8 percent — is about the same as in 1980, a trend that holds at most elite universities. Another 6 percent of current Yale students identify as multiracial, a category that did not exist until 2008.

But Yale’s president, Peter Salovey, said that the renaming was part of the school’s effort to make itself more welcoming to students of all backgrounds (along with more generous financial aid).

A black freshman at Hopper on his way to lunch on Friday agreed. “I think the name is a step toward inclusion and equality,” said the student, Mark Barnett, 18, of Sikeston, Mo.



A carving of the likeness of John C. Calhoun will remain over a couple of doorways in the courtyard of Grace Hopper College at Yale. Credit Jessica Hill for The New York Times

For the minority of Calhoun College members who wanted to keep the name, closure is bittersweet.

“For me it will always in a sense be Calhoun,” said Lauren Lee, a sophomore in Hopper who fought the name change because she believed that Calhoun’s contributions to political theory, not his racist views, were the heart of his legacy.

The residential college was named for Calhoun when it opened in 1933. Since at least the 1970s, students complained about the association. Unlike many 19th century apologists for slavery who saw it as a necessary evil, Calhoun deemed it a “positive good” for both master and slave.

After the Charleston, S.C., church massacre in Calhoun’s home state in 2015 and the fights over the display of the Confederate flags, the rumblings at Yale demanding removal became a roar.

In April 2016, Mr. Salovey drew outrage when he announced that the Calhoun College name would remain. “Universities have to be the places where tough conversations happen,” he said then. “I don’t think that is advanced by hiding our past.”

Opponents would not let the matter drop. Many Calhoun members stopped using the name. “For most of my sophomore year, my friends and I would just say we belonged to F.K.A.,” for “Formerly Known As,” said Ms. Dang.

Similar protests were going on at Princeton, Georgetown and other universities over their racial histories.

Meanwhile, Mr. Salovey formed a Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming. It established guidelines to decide whether to change a building’s name, including whether the legacy of a building’s namesake conflicted with the university’s mission and whether the named building “plays a substantial role in forming community” at Yale.

In February, Mr. Salovey, following the committee’s recommendation, announced that the Calhoun name would go, because his legacy and values were “at odds with this university.”



A new coat of arms featuring a gold dolphin and the blue color of Yale replaced a portrait of John C. Calhoun in the dining hall at Grace Hopper College. The dolphin is a nod to Admiral Hopper's naval career. Credit Jessica Hill for The New York Times

On Friday, he said he was proud that Yale had come up with “a systematic way of deciding these questions on matters of principle rather than one-off decisions” and that administrators at other schools had told him the principles were useful.

“I feel good in general about where we ended up,” he said.

The decision has not sat well with some alumni. Now more than ever, said Jerrold Petruzzelli of the class of 1974, a corporate lawyer, the university should not overwrite history or give in to the identity politics that are tearing the country apart.

“The fact that we have a president that is so divisive elevates the pitch here,” said Mr. Petruzzelli, 64, referring to President Trump, not Mr. Salovey. “What’s happening now with the Civil War monuments has caused everybody to view things through a tribal lens.”

In a deft bit of revisionism, Yale has offered Calhoun College alumni the option to retroactively change their affiliation to Hopper.

“I jumped at the chance,” Jeremy Epstein of the class of 1982 wrote in an email. “The reason I did so was pretty simple: I have much more personal interest in a badass Navy computer geek than in a long-dead old slave owner.”

At Hopper College, a series of windows in the Calhoun College common room, including one that once depicted a shackled slave kneeling beside him, have been removed, and another committee is soliciting proposals for replacements.

An installation at the college will be dedicated to memorializing the Calhoun student experience, including the battle over the renaming, said Professor Adams, the Hopper College head.

As for Admiral Hopper herself, “she’s a STEM person, and she’s also a woman in the military, which is traditionally an all-male bastion.” said Ms. Dang, a biomedical engineering major.

“I think it’s a fantastic name.”