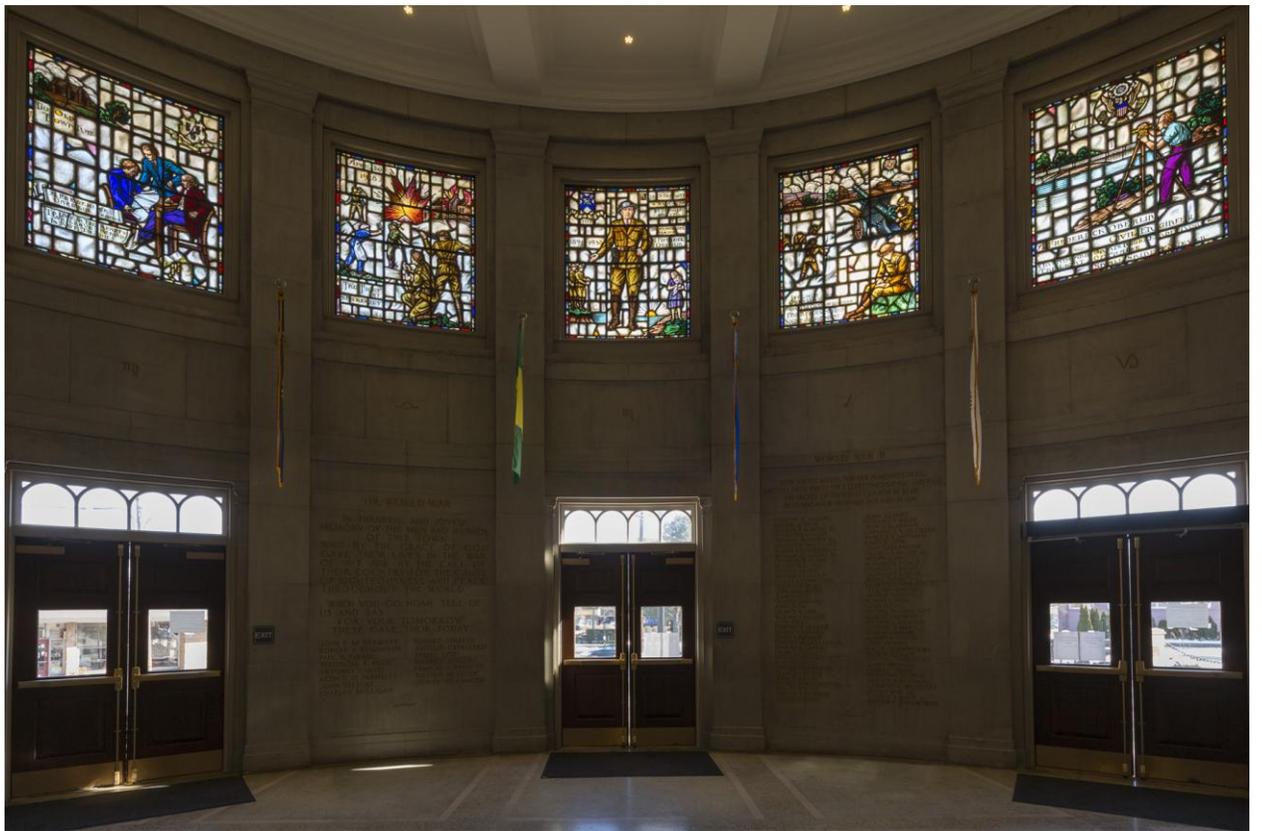


THE OBERLIN MEMORIAL WINDOWS



4/6/2017

Hamden Memorial Town Hall, Connecticut

Laura A. Macaluso, Ph.D.

New Haven in World War I

The History Press, 2017

The Oberlin Memorial Windows

HAMDEN MEMORIAL TOWN HALL

INTRODUCTION

The town of Hamden is in possession of a series of five stained glass windows which are unique in the long history of memorializing war in Connecticut.

Bronze plaques and statues and white marble crosses and bas relief carvings are the most common forms for remembering the sacrifice of war. New Haven County has many examples of these, but a story told of heroism in the Great War in stained glass is an entirely different experience. These windows connect us to cathedral church windows of the Middle Ages. There is something sacred about working with pieces of colored glass, where stories of saints were pieced together with soldered lead. People have been making windows like this for more than a thousand years! When light filters in from behind, shifting with the movement of the sun, the room changes with it—colored light filtering across polished limestone walls and the granite floor. How then did Hamden get such a beautiful work of art and what story are the windows whispering to us from one hundred years ago? The centennial of the American entry into World War I on April 6, 1917 is an opportune moment to ask this question.

During the course of my research for the book *New Haven in World War I*, several people told me about the windows, but I neglected to follow-up on their suggestion, as my hands were full trying to track down pieces of the Elm City past. With work for another project I finally visited Hamden Memorial Town Hall, and the effort was rewarded. How could I not have known about these stunning windows? But, the truth is, before I wrote the book, even if I had seen the windows, I would not have understood their full significance. Yes, I would have recognized their skillful execution and historic value, but, what of the meaning of the “Fight for Seicheprey” seen in window number two? And, who was A. Frederick Oberlin, the large figure presented in the central window? Let me share with you what I have learned over the course of these past few months while preparing my book for the centennial.



Turn your mind back to the late 1930s. The United States is still in the midst of the Great Depression, and many are watching Europe warily—Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime are gaining political power and mechanizing their growing army. On the home front, people continue to actively remember the Great War, which although more than twenty years have passed, is certainly not forgotten. Veterans and their families continue to gather in neighborhood clubs and organizations, participate in parades and commemorate their comrades when they die with gravesite services. The New Haven Chapter of the Yankee Division Veterans Association is one of the area’s most active groups; two years earlier in 1937, the YDVA commissioned their own large scale bronze monument to Timothy Ahearn in West River Memorial Park in New Haven. John Dillon, the commander of the YDVA, was chair of that project and would be on hand to help Hamden with their WWI memorializing project.

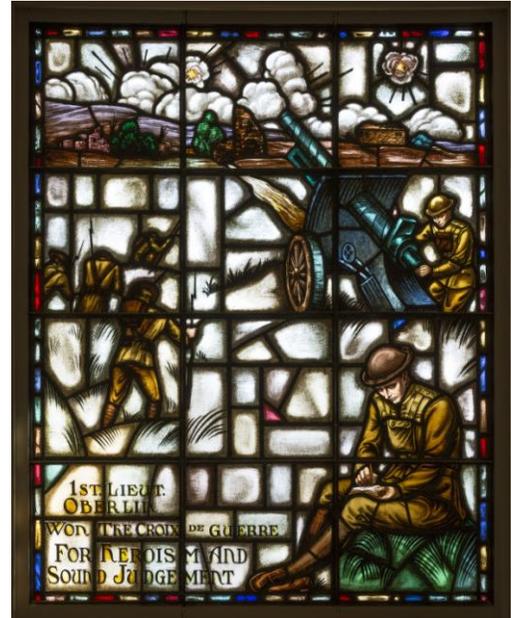
Dillon, like A. Frederick Oberlin, was a veteran of the 102nd Regiment of the 26th “Yankee” Division, created from two Connecticut National Guard units in August 1917. And, Oberlin, like Dillon, had survived the Battle of Seicheprey, on April 20, 1918. This fight, the first for any American regiment on the western front without direct French support, was a brutal experience of “violent artillery bombardment” and hand-to-hand combat. Take a look again at window two—now, we are beginning to understand the importance of Seicheprey to Connecticut WWI veterans. A Boche (German infantry soldier) throws a stick hand grenade while a French cook from the village of Seicheprey picks up a meat cleaver for defense. These actions happened, and were documented by veteran author Daniel Strickland, a captain with the 102nd, who later became a pastor. Strickland’s book *Connecticut Fights, The Story of the 102nd Regiment* was published in 1930, a book gathered from direct sources such as Oberlin, who lent Strickland his war-time papers. Strickland attended the dedication ceremony of the Oberlin Memorial Windows on Sunday, June 25, 1938 and gave both the invocation and benediction. Projects such as the commissioning and installation of the Oberlin Memorial Windows kept these YD men in close contact with each other in their post-war lives.



A. Frederick Oberlin was born in Hamden in 1891, the son of Gustave and Rachel Oberlin. He enlisted in the Connecticut National Guard as early as 1913, and went to the Mexican border in 1916 during the “Punitive Expedition” against Pancho Villa. His brother Gustave also joined and served. On April 8, 1917—just two days after the United States officially enters the Great War—Oberlin re-enlisted as a 2nd lieutenant in New Haven. His value to the regiment was quickly seen, because by July Oberlin was made a 1st lieutenant, then a captain and eventually a major. Oberlin proved his value on the front, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre at Seicheprey, the day when 40 Connecticut members of the 102nd Regiment were killed, including 18 New Haveners. According to one newspaper account, Oberlin was gassed twice, taken prisoner, and eventually hospitalized for a month in France after the Armistice (the end of war, November 11, 1918). Supporting the words on the central window, where Oberlin stands in his doughboy uniform, that “His Strength Was As The Strength of Ten,” Oberlin was also given the

Distinguished Service Cross (“D.S.C”) when he voluntarily carried “information of great value, five or six times, through an exceedingly heavy barrage” at Beaumont. Oberlin is seen writing notes, part of his intelligence work, in the lower right corner of window four.

But, the fact is, like many injured war veterans, Oberlin died young in 1938, due to an unspecified “long illness brought on by his injuries in France.” Perhaps his lungs had been weakened from exposure to gas, a fate that befell his 102nd comrade Timothy Ahearn. Oberlin lived long enough though to marry and have a son (seen in the lower right corner of the central window) and contributed greatly to the development of Hamden through his post-war professional work, seen in the fifth window in the cycle, as the assistant town engineer. He helped to lay out new roads and designed the Davis Street Bridge over Lake Whitney, which in 1939, was renamed for him during the same ceremony as the dedication for the windows erected in his memory. The Oberlin Memorial Windows design committee, chaired by Benjamin C. Bamford, commissioned the firm of Payne-Spiers Studio of New Jersey for the work. Hamden Memorial Town Hall had been completed in 1924, replacing an earlier structure (seen in the upper left corner of the first window). As far as is known, the earlier windows were plain glass. But, Hamden and the architect Richard Williams took advantage of their building project—just six years after the end of the war—to design a town memorial, which now remembers Hamden veterans from eight wars, from the American Revolution to Operation Enduring Freedom: Afghanistan.



Although the name of Seicheprey is unknown to Connecticut residents today, members of the YDVA continued to remember the event every April until the early 1980s, when the last Connecticut doughboys passed. The sacrifices of World War I veterans, and their families on the home front, were enormous and reshaped the society we live in today. Hamden’s Oberlin Memorial Windows help us to remember their story.

The author thanks Kimberly Renta of the Town of Hamden and Beth Shutts of the Hamden Historical Society for their help in the preparation of this history. Photographs by William Sacco (2017).