

John Franklin Crowell, Methodism, and the Football Controversy at Trinity College, 1887-1894

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On Thanksgiving Day 1888, a football team representing Trinity College (now Duke University) met a team from the University of North Carolina in the first game of scientific football played south of the Mason-Dixon line. The game was contested on the North Carolina State Fairgrounds in the capital city of Raleigh and was witnessed by a crowd of some five hundred curious onlookers. To the surprise of the University eleven and the dismay of most of the spectators, upstart Trinity won the game rather easily, 16-0. The team from the small, Methodist-supported school had been expertly tutored by none other than the school's second-year president, a young Ivy League educated Pennsylvanian and self-styled football expert, John Franklin Crowell.¹ Writing forty years after the event, this first game remained vivid in Crowell's mind. "That single game," he recalled "probably did more than anything else to send into limbo the age-long habit of the condescending attitude with which certain friends of that venerable institution [the University of North Carolina] were inclined to look upon the denominational colleges in general and Trinity College in particular."²

With this kind of support from the school president the future of football at Trinity seemed bright. Yet barely a half decade after the 1888 Trinity football team heralded the arrival of a newly energized academic institution, football at Trinity was under a concerted attack and a disillusioned Crowell was fighting for control of the school. As a result of this struggle Crowell resigned under fire and intercollegiate football was banned at Trinity—a ban that would hold for a quarter of a century. How and why was the bright promise of Trinity football so quickly dissipated?

1. Jim L. Sumner, "The North Carolina Inter-Collegiate Foot-Ball Association: The Beginnings of College Football in North Carolina," *The North Carolina Historical Review* LXV (July, 1988): 266-270. The author defines scientific football as football played by the generally accepted rules of the day, in this case the rules accepted by the Intercollegiate Football Association. A football game played earlier that autumn by the University of North Carolina and Wake Forest College was contested under a potpourri of improvised rules, many of which were not a part of contemporary intercollegiate football. The same applies to an 1873 match between Washington and Lee and Virginia Military Institute, occasionally cited as the South's first game, which featured a rumored fifty players to a side.

2. John Franklin Crowell, *Personal Recollections of Trinity College. North Carolina. 1887-1894* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1939). 228.

Modern American intercollegiate football evolved from the British game of rugby in the 1870s and 1880s in such elite northeastern schools as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, and Rutgers. The game generated controversy virtually from its inception. Football's numerous advocates argued that the vigorous sport helped develop character and virility, promoted school spirit and solidarity, and provided a valuable antidote to the prevailing softness of college life. The work of such innovators as Yale's Walter Camp and the establishment of the Intercollegiate Football Association in 1876 helped Americanize the game, standardize rules, and provide a focal point for the expansion of the game southward and westward.³

All this spirit and vitality had a negative side, unfortunately. The amount of time and energy spent on the sport distressed critics, while the advent of quasi-professional players, some of whom shopped their skills from school to school, compromised academic integrity and distorted college life. The most virulent criticism of college football, however, focused on its appalling brutality. The development of mass formations such as the infamous flying wedge resulted in frequent injuries, even deaths. As brutality in college football became more prevalent, so did sentiment for the game's elimination. Calls for football's abolition by educators, the clergy, the medical profession, and muckracking journalists were endemic by the first decade of the twentieth century. Even the



The First Football Team at Trinity College (1888). Courtesy Duke University Archives.

3. The best overall account of late nineteenth century football is in Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1988. Also see Smith, "Preludes-to the NCAA: Early Failures of Faculty Intercollegiate Athletic Control," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 54 (December, 1983): 372-382; John Hammond Moore, "Football's Ugly Decades," *Smithsonian Journal of History* II (Fall, 1957): 49-68; Allen L. Sack, "Yale 29-Harvard 4: The Professionalization of College Football," *Quest* 19 (Winter, 1973): 24-34; John S. Watterson, "Inventing Modern Football," *American Heritage* 39 (September/October, 1988): 102-113; and Donald J. Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983).

game's supporters recognized that the game needed reform to survive. This reform came gradually during the early years of the twentieth century. Dangerous formations were outlawed, games were shortened, and the forward pass was legalized. Most important was the 1906 establishment of what would become the National Collegiate Athletic Association. These reforms assured the survival of college football. The problem of football violence during this period has received considerable scholarly attention.⁴

Yet the football controversy at Trinity occurred more than a decade before the culmination of the brutality crisis in 1906. Brutal play was a factor in the Trinity banning as were other characteristics of 1890s college football such as eligibility disputes, scheduling, money, and questions over the proper role of football on a college campus. There were other factors at work, however. Football at Trinity became a symbol in a bitter power struggle between Crowell, the progressive outsider, and Trinity's conservative constituents. Football's failure at Trinity was both a result of the sport's negative attributes and also its role in the school's power struggle.

If John Franklin Crowell brought the promise of intercollegiate football south, he also brought its perils. Crowell was born in York, Pennsylvania in 1857, and was educated at both Dartmouth and Yale. He received a B.A. from the latter in 1883, after which he became principal of Schuylkill Seminary in Reading, Pennsylvania for the 1883-1884 academic year. He then returned to Yale for a year in Divinity School and another year in graduate school. In the fall of 1886 he came back to Schuylkill Academy, which had been moved to Fredericksburg, Pennsylvania. He was at Schuylkill in 1887 when he was offered the position of president of Trinity College by that school's board of trustees.⁵

Crowell had become an enthusiastic supporter and knowledgeable observer of football while at Yale. Although not a member of the varsity eleven, he played in less formal campus games and wrote about football for the *Yule Daily News* and the *New Haven Morning News*. Crowell attended Yale during the period when that school, under the tutelage of Camp, the so-called "father of college football," established itself as the dominant power in intercollegiate football. In 1888, the year Crowell introduced football to Trinity, the Yale team outscored thirteen overwhelmed opponents by an astonishing margin of 698 to 0. Thus, Crowell's enthusiasm for the sport was developed at the institution which best exemplified big-time intercollegiate football. Crowell lost little time in transplanting that enthusiasm in the South. Within days of his arrival at Trinity eager students were seeking out their new expert for advice on the latest playing

4. In addition to the works cited above see Guy M. Lewis, "Theodore Roosevelt's Role in the 1905 Football Controversy," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 40 (December, 1969): 717-724; Roberta Park, "From Football to Rugby and Back, 1906-1909: The University of California-Stanford University Response to the Football Crisis of 1905," *Journal of Sport History* II (Winter, 1984): 5-40; John S. Watterson, "The Football Crisis of 1909-1910," *Journal of Sport History* 8 (Spring, 1981): 33-49; and Ronald A. Smith, "Harvard and Columbia and a Reconsideration of the 1905-06 Football Crisis," *Journal of Sport History* 8 (Winter, 1981): 5-19.

5. William S. Powell, ed., *The Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, Projected multivolume series, 1979 —), I, 466; Earl W. Porter, *Trinity and Duke, 1892-1924* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1964). 6-9.

techniques. The next autumn Crowell was training a formally organized team in the scientific subtleties of the game and was promoting the sport throughout the state. Shortly before that first Trinity-University of North Carolina game in 1888 Crowell wrote a lengthy and authoritative article on the history and nature of the game for the *Raleigh News and Observer*. That same autumn he included a strong endorsement of football in a formal report to North Carolina's Methodists. So closely associated with Crowell was the Trinity team that it was routinely referred to as the "Crowell team," or the "Crowell eleven."⁶

Crowell found much to admire in football. He recognized that the exercise, healthy diet, regular hours of sleep, and outdoors environment of the football player were conducive to youthful physical development. But football for Crowell was more than just fresh air and exercise. He was convinced that what he deemed its moral qualities set it apart from any other aspect of campus life. He credited football with developing virility, self-control, daring, courage, discipline, self-sacrifice, coolness and quickness of judgment, and general leadership qualities. Football was a social equalizer that destroyed "the namby-pambyisms of caste; it breaks up cliques . . . and brings everybody face to face to stand on his merits." On one occasion he wrote that football was "first among those sports in which the qualities of the soldier are capable of being developed." It prevented softness and helped steer impressionable young collegians away from "sensual indulgence, mollicoddling, and gambling, to say nothing about drinking and carousing." Crowell maintained that "twenty-five young men [have been] saved from dissipation by the discipline required in college athletics to one that was injured by it." The youthful energy that previously led to "the old-fashioned sort of devilry like putting oxen in chapel or a goose in the professor's desk," could now be channeled to a more productive pursuit. Football was particularly well-suited to the college environment, where only it was able to blend the physical and the intellectual to produce what Crowell called the well-rounded physical and social man. Football was not an afterthought or a trivial pursuit for Crowell. Rather its unique qualities made it an integral and essential part of a progressive, modern education. Crowell made it clear that the sport was a crucial part of his plans to remake sleepy Trinity College into a modern educational institution.⁷

6. *News and Observer* (Raleigh), November 1, 1888; Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 224-226, 228; R. L. Durham, "The Beginning of Football at Trinity," *Trinity Alumni Register IX* (November, 1923): 144-145; Smith, *Sports and Freedom*, 84-88; *Trinity Archive I* (October, 1887): 16; Sumner, "The North Carolina Intercollegiate Foot-Ball Association," 265-267; *Report of the President of Trinity College, North Carolina, 1887-1888* (Raleigh: E.M. Uzzell, 1889), 31-32. For early Yale football see Thomas G. Bergin, *The Game: The Harvard-Yale Football Rivalry, 1875-1983* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984). For Camp see the reprint Walter Camp, *American Football* (1891; reprint New York: Arno Press, 1974). Although Crowell is occasionally listed as Trinity's first football coach, a more accurate term would be advisor. Trinity had no formal coach during this period, relying heavily on the captain and a student manager.

7. Crowell's views on the benefits of intercollegiate football come from a variety of sources. The first and fourth quote are from *Report of the President of Trinity College 1887-1888*, 32; second quote from *News and Observer*, November 1, 1888; third quote from Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 227; Fifth quote from undated manuscript entitled "College Athletics," in Crowell Papers. Trinity College Papers, Duke University Archives, Durham, N.C. Also see Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 224-227, and *Annual Report of the President of Trinity College, Durham, North Carolina to the North Carolina Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, Autumn, 1893* (Durham: Trinity College, 1893), 21-26. Crowell's high opinion of football was shared by football's



John Franklin Crowell, president of Trinity College (1887–1894), who introduced modern football at that North Carolina institution.

The introduction of football to Trinity came at a time of great ferment at the school. When Crowell arrived in the fall of 1887 he found an ailing institution that gave him “a case of the most severe disillusionment.” The disappointed young educator nearly turned around and went back to Pennsylvania.⁸ Trinity College in 1887 had more than its share of problems. The death in 1882 of long-time Trinity president Braxton Craven (born 1822) had deprived the school of badly needed leadership. The financial condition of the school was so precarious that the presidency was allowed to remain vacant for five years. Instead the school was operated by a three-man Committee of Management, consisting

other advocates, who frequently cited the game as “a symbol of college and national virility.” Smith, *Sports and Freedom*, 96.

8. Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 36.

of Winston businessman James Gray, Durham industrialist Julian Carr, and Winston attorney James Alspaugh. Isolated in rural Randolph County in the central part of North Carolina, five miles from the nearest train station, and constrained by the pervasive poverty of late nineteenth century North Carolina Methodism, the school came perilously close to closing its doors for good in 1886.⁹

The search for a president to replace Craven was entrusted to a search committee, which reported to the board. The committee was dominated by the practical business acumen of Gray, Carr, and Alspaugh. Although the three were devoted Methodists, they agreed that Trinity needed a more progressive and secular identity in order to survive. Crowell was recommended to Trinity not by a church leader but rather by Horace Williams, a Trinity professor who had known Crowell at Yale. Significantly, neither of the other two final candidates for the post, Joseph L. Armstrong, and C. H. Cobb, were men of the cloth. Both were professional educators. In many respects Crowell was the polar opposite of his predecessor. Craven was an ordained Methodist minister and a native North Carolinian well schooled in the ways of the state. Although Crowell had studied at Yale's Divinity School, he was not ordained. In fact he wasn't even Methodist, although his Evangelical Church religion was compatible with Methodism. Certainly, some elements of the Trinity community would have preferred to replace Craven with someone more grounded in North Carolina Methodism. However, the state of the school in the 1880s warranted a new approach. The dynamic Crowell offered energy, ambition, and a thorough grounding in the latest progressive, educational theories. Trinity decided he was worth the gamble.¹⁰

Crowell lost little time in shaking up the school. He quickly modernized the curriculum, which prior to his arrival was heavy in such traditional subjects as theology, metaphysics, Latin, and Greek, and was largely designed to produce preachers and teachers. Crowell particularly enlarged the offerings in the social sciences and humanities. He also expanded and improved the faculty, strengthened the library, instituted stricter entrance requirements, and found badly needed new patrons. Convinced that the school's rural location in Randolph County limited its future, Crowell successfully fought for a controversial and expensive move seventy miles to the northeast to the burgeoning tobacco manufacturing city of Durham; a move completed in the fall of 1892. All of these moves met resistance from conservative elements at the school, some of whom characterized Crowell as "having come from the North as a disquieting element in the otherwise peaceful work of the College."¹¹

9. Porter, *Trinity and Duke*, 5; Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 35-38; Nora Campbell Chaffin, *Trinity College, 1839-1892: The Beginnings of Duke University* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1950), 350-372. Other Methodist supported colleges were also faced with increasing secularization during this period. For example, at Vanderbilt legal efforts instituted in 1905 succeeded in freeing that school from ecclesiastical control. Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), 303-304.

10. Porter, *Trinity and Duke*, 6-8; Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 9-19; Chaffin, *Trinity College*, 383-390.

11. Porter, *Trinity and Duke*, 5, 11-14, 25-29; Chaffin, *Trinity College*, 411-424; Crowell, *Personal*

Some conflicts were more a matter of personality than policy. Crowell could be abrasive, high-handed, and authoritarian. Even his friends conceded that he was a better visionary than administrator. Despite increased financial support from its new Durham patrons, including the wealthy Duke family, Trinity's expansion and relocation kept the school in financial difficulty. In 1892, the beleaguered president was relieved of all financial duties. Angry faculty, charging that a power-hungry Crowell was usurping their responsibilities, left the school in ominous numbers in the early 1890s. One professor wrote that Crowell drove the faculty away "by his insincerity, by his attempt to absorb all the power into his own hands and by his not paying any attention to the experience and requests of his colleagues."¹² Yet nothing Crowell did in his seven-year tenure at Trinity created more controversy or engendered more hostility than his introduction of football.

Trinity quickly found that the reality of intercollegiate football did not match the promises of Crowell's lofty rhetoric. Although not invincible on the gridiron, Trinity did win more than its share of games against such local rivals as the University of North Carolina, Wake Forest College, the University of Virginia, and Furman. Trinity won all three of its 1891 contests, including a 96-0 drubbing of Furman, after which it claimed the southern championship for that year- a dubious honor considering how undeveloped the game was in the South.¹³ Yet off the field problems arose almost from the onset. The student-controlled North Carolina Intercollegiate Football Association-which consisted of teams from Trinity, the University of North Carolina, and Wake Forest- lasted barely a year after its 1888 establishment before falling prey to disputes involving player eligibility, professionalism, officiating, and scheduling. Both the University of North Carolina and Wake Forest dropped football for a year before reinstating it under firm faculty control. In 1890, University of North Carolina president Kemp Plummer Battle, in stark contrast to his Trinity counterpart, told his school's trustees that intercollegiate football was "an incitement to drinking and rowdyism" and was "brutal and dangerous."¹⁴

Trinity was intimately involved in these controversies. In fact some argued that Trinity was the catalyst. As early as 1889 opponents accused the school of

Recollections, 160; Charles L. Raper, *The Church and Private Schools of North Carolina: A Historical Study* (Greensboro: Joseph J. Stone, 1898), 188-189. Raper was a member of the Trinity faculty during this period. It is not clear how much of a factor sectional differences were in the controversy. North Carolina in the 1890s was largely free of the kind of North-South animosity that characterized Reconstruction. In fact the state's New South advocates actively sought northern capital and expertise. However, some conservative critics of Crowell clearly regarded him as an outside interloper. In general it seems that Crowell's difficulties were more a result of his status as an outsider rather than as a northerner. *per se*. Crowell felt that "Taking the state of North Carolina as a whole. I think its people generally welcomed the experiment of bringing in a Northerner as the head of one of their leading denominational colleges." Crowell. *Personal Recollections*, 16.

12. Crowell, *Personal Recollections*. 204; Porter, *Trinity and Duke*, 31; Raper, *The Church and Private Schools of North Carolina*, 191-192.

13. Glenn E. (Ted) Mann, *A Story of Glory: Duke University Football* (Greenville, S.C.: Doorway Publishers, 1985), 48-50; Robert L. Durham, "The Beginning of Football at Trinity, Continued," *Trinity Alumni Register* IX (December, 1923): 190-192.

14. Sumner, "The North Carolina Intercollegiate Foot-Ball Association," 283-285; University of North Carolina Trustee Minutes, June 1883-February, 1891, VIII, 461-462, University of North Carolina Archives, Chapel Hill, N.C.

using ringers, including a transfer from Yale and a 225 pound railroad agent from the nearby town of Trinity. Rival Wake Forest complained that Trinity's lax policies concerning player enrollment would "ruin foot-ball in North Carolina." Crowell's perceived role in these circumstances can be seen in Wake Forest's 1889 jibe that "Trinity's center rush is like President Crowell's interest in foot-ball-abnormally developed." A scheduling disagreement involving Trinity and the University of North Carolina resulted in an unplayed game that both schools claimed as a forfeit victory in a bitter and unresolved dispute. Both UNC and Wake Forest imported northerners to teach the latest techniques and counteract Crowell's alleged proficiency. By 1891, it was reported that Trinity's best players "have been receiving flattering offers from various colleges," but that they could not be enticed to leave.¹⁵

Although North Carolina football escaped the fatalities that plagued the sport nationally in the 1890s and early 1900s, rough play was a genuine concern. One incident led an aggrieved Trinity player to challenge a University of North Carolina player to a duel after their 1888 contest. The two students went so far as to select seconds and complete arrangements before Crowell convinced them that "in the intensity of football playing such misunderstandings were perfectly natural." Injuries such as the broken leg suffered by UNC captain Steve Bragaw in an 1889 game against Trinity, were not uncommon. Three years later, it was claimed, with some apparent pride, that the entire Trinity team was unable to walk without a limp.¹⁶ In one particularly ugly game against Wake Forest in 1889, Trinity star Tom Daniels was ejected for unsportsmanlike conduct during which, according to his opponents, he "seemed determined to cripple our team by every means in his power." At least one Trinity player participated under an assumed name, in order to keep his involvement a secret from his disapproving parents.¹⁷

Some of this criticism could be dismissed as nothing more than jealous rivalry. In the early 1890s, however, opposition to Trinity football increasingly came from a more disquieting source, the school's friends and supporters. At this time Trinity College was financially dependent to a significant extent on the state's two Methodist conferences, the North Carolina Conference and the Western North Carolina Conference, the latter of which was established from the former in 1890. A new charter adopted the next year reduced church influence somewhat by eliminating conference ownership of school property. Nonetheless the conferences named two-thirds of the school's 36 trustees, made substantial monetary contributions to the school, and sent many of their best Methodist students to Durham.¹⁸

15. *The Wake Forest Student IX* (December, 1889): 132-133; *The Trinity Archive IV* (June, 1891): 153. Interestingly, a century later both Duke and UNC still claim a forfeit victory for that unplayed game.

16. Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 46; *The Wake Forest Student XIII* (April, 1889): 308-309; Durham, "The Beginning of Football at Trinity, Continued," 191.

17. Sumner, "The North Carolina Intercollegiate Foot-Ball Association," 276; *Trinity Archive VI* (November, 1892): 65.

18. Porter, *Trinity and Duke*, 28. Each of the two conferences named 12 trustees, while the alumni named an additional 12. The North Carolina Conference covered the entire state prior to the establishment of the Western Conference.

Many ministers in the newly formed Western Conference were never able to reconcile themselves to Trinity's move eastward to Durham, and Crowell consistently had more trouble with this group than with its eastern counterpart. At its annual meeting, held in the late autumn of 1892 in Winston, the Western Conference threw down the gauntlet, going on record that intercollegiate football was a "source of evil, and of no little evil," and should be immediately abolished at Trinity. This vague but forceful proclamation was the first shot in a battle that would snowball out of control in the next eighteen months.¹⁹

This resolution was followed by a year-long campaign by North Carolina's influential Methodist weekly, the Raleigh *Christian Advocate*. Although the paper had called for the discontinuation of intercollegiate games as early as the spring of 1892, the campaign increased the next year, both in frequency and intensity. Throughout 1893, the paper ran articles, editorials, and letters critical of intercollegiate football. Much of this concern was based on second-hand information, including reprints of articles from the national Methodist press. The annual Princeton-Yale game, then held in New York City, received the special ire of northern Methodists, as recent games had led to wild behavior by intoxicated fans. In January of 1893, the *Christian Advocate* reprinted a lengthy article written by northern minister C. H. Payne and originally published in the *New York Christian Advocate*. The article, which compared the morals of intercollegiate football to those of "the blood-curdling games of the [Roman] Colosseum," was particularly effective in agitating North Carolina Methodists.²⁰

Christian Advocate editor Frank L. Reid, in most respects a firm friend of Trinity, joined in the intensifying debate of intercollegiate football and amplified the vague charges of the Western Conference. Football, according to Reid, was expensive, brutal, took valuable time away from studies, and led to such bad habits as gambling, drinking, and profanity. In words that must have stung Crowell, Reid professed that "Sensible, observant men . . . laugh in their sleeves at those presidents of colleges . . . who boast of the absence of such evils from the game." On another occasion Reid added the charges that the game smacked of professionalism and "unduly excites and cultivates the *unimul*."²¹ Yet, despite their undenied vitriol Reid's attacks, like those of the Western Conference, were general in nature. Neither directly linked Trinity with any of these abuses. It is not clear whether these critics were being coy or simply lacked evidence of specific wrongdoing.

Crowell's problems increased during the spring of 1893. That May a vocal minority of trustees unleashed a serious, if ultimately unsuccessful attempt to oust Crowell at the spring board of trustees meeting. This attempt was fueled largely not by concern over football but by disgruntled faculty upset over low

19. Crowell, *Recollections*, 84,210-211; Porter, *Trinity and Duke*. 20; *Journal of the Western North Carolina Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Third Session Held at Winston. N.C., Nov. 30th to Dec. 5th, 1892* (Greensboro: C.F. Thomas, 1892), 44.

20. *Christian Advocate* (Raleigh). March 30,1892, January 11, 25, February 1, March 1, March 22, April 12. 1893.

21. *Christian Advocate*, first quote January 11, 1893; second quote, March 22, 1893.

salaries and loss of autonomy to Crowell. The problem of low salaries had been especially aggravated by the Panic of 1893. One particularly strong critic was John R. Brooks, both a trustee and an influential minister from the Western Conference. Crowell, wrote Brooks in an all-encompassing critique, "has lost his hold on the faculty, students & . . . the public; . . . he is largely a failure as a teacher, preacher & financial manager."²²

Although Crowell was reelected at this meeting, he tendered his resignation the next month at a specially called board meeting. In an emotional resignation letter Crowell charged that the majority of trustees had "ceased to accord to my administration either the just consideration or the moral support" necessary to run the school without undue influences.²³ The board of trustees refused to accept the resignation and asked him to reconsider. Crowell withdrew the resignation only after the board acceded to three demands: a public vote of confidence, an increase in faculty salaries, and most importantly, "that the Athletic policy of the institution be left to the President, Faculty and Students."²⁴

At this point it appeared that Crowell had stared down his opponents and that his interests might have been best served by some fence-mending diplomacy. However, he continued on the offensive, attacking his detractors vigorously, not only in the local press but also in such national publications as the *Boston Globe*. Crowell told the *Globe* that most college football opponents knew nothing of the sport and that "much injury . . . is being done by persons whose fund of vanity and ignorance impels them to decide for colleges and universities what they ought to do."²⁵

For the most part the controversy remained confined to the North Carolina Methodist community. The state's major newspapers paid little attention to the debate. Reaction on the Trinity campus was evidently pro-Crowell, or at least neutral. Although some acknowledgment was made of the problems of football, there seems to have been no student sentiment for either abolition or deemphasis of the sport. The *Trinity Archive*, the school's student monthly, was consistently supportive of Crowell and football, in words that sometimes echoed those of the school's president. Football's critics, wrote the publication, were "only those men that stood aloof from college circles and draw the remembrances of youth and vigor in dyspeptic, unsympathetic pessimism."²⁶

By this time Crowell appeared to have considerable faculty support, somewhat surprising considering his sometimes difficult relationship with that group. Of course, his most vocal faculty opponents had left the school. Many of

22. John R. Brooks to Benjamin Duke, May 8, 1893, Trinity College Papers, Duke University Archives; Porter, *Trinity and Duke*, 43. Brooks favored replacing Crowell with James Atkins, a Methodist minister and president of Emory and Henry College.

23. Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Trinity College, September 29, 1891 to February 19, 1900, Duke University Archives, 131-133.

24. Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Trinity College, 134-137; Crowell, *Personal Recollections*. 215-216, 245; *Christian Advocate*, June 14, July 5, 1893.

25. The *Boston Globe* interview was reprinted in the *Trinity Archive* VII (March, 1894): 67.

26. *Trinity Archive* VII (October, 1893): 17.

the younger faculty had played football, including law professor B. B. Nicholson, and athletics director Tom Daniels, both members of Trinity's inaugural team. History professor John Spencer Bassett, who did not play collegiately, found that it eliminated on-campus sectional differences between the rougher up-country students and the more refined low-country students. On one occasion the *Archive* noted favorably that "The interest taken in foot-ball by the Faculty . . . has inspired the new students as well as the old."²⁷

Conspicuously absent from the discussion was the board of trustees, which consistently maintained as low a profile as possible. In theory the board acted as a conduit between the president and the conferences. In practice the board had a long history of ineffectiveness. Most of the trustees were ministers. Scattered across the state, busy with their local pastoral duties, and forced to pay their own expenses to the semiannual meetings, many trustees were unable to attend meetings. As a frustrated Crowell wrote about the board: "Effort after effort on my part to secure their collective counsel and suggestions resulted in so slim an attendance as to be discouraging." A faculty member confirmed this assessment when he complained that the trustees failed to keep "themselves acquainted with their institution's affairs and real condition." This lack of interest was not a major problem during periods of consensus, but was a crucial defect during the football controversy. Certainly a better organized and led board of trustees could have offered a medium of compromise between the president and the conferences.²⁸

Throughout the dispute the football team continued to be successful, although not without adding fuel to the fires of controversy. The team developed a habit of pregame parades and post-game parties that disconcerted conservative observers.²⁹ Trinity claimed the unofficial state championship for 1893 with a 6-4 victory over the University of North Carolina in a game hailed as "the finest ever played in the State," after which the Methodist campus underwent a "great rejoicing."³⁰ One week after conquering North Carolina Trinity defeated an inexperienced University of Tennessee team 70-0 in a game mercifully stopped after only twenty-five minutes.³¹ Thus when Trinity traveled north to play the University of Virginia in Lynchburg on November 11, they were confident of victory. However, this confidence was badly misplaced. Virginia jumped all over the visitors, aided, according to the Trinity players by the "incompetence

27. Sumner, "The North Carolina Intercollegiate Foot-Ball Association," 276; *Trinity College Catalogue and Announcements for the Year 1893-'94* (Durham: Trinity College), 9; John Spencer Bassett, "Old Trinity Days," *Trinity Alumni Register* III (October, 1917): 192; R. L. Flowers, "Blake Baker Nicholson," *Trinity Alumni Register* III (October, 1917): 203-205; Chaffin, *Trinity College*, 539-541; *Trinity Archive* VII (October, 1893): 28. The faculty were also explicitly thanked for their support of football in the *Trinity Archive* III (November, 1889): 37.

28. Crowell. *Personal Recollections*, 219-221; Raper, *The Church and Private Schools of North Carolina*, 192.

29. *Trinity Archive* II (October, 1888): 9; II (April, 1889), 137; R. L. Durham, "The Beginning of Football at Trinity Concluded," *Trinity Alumni Register* X (January, 1924): 23; J. Robert Morse, "Memories of Old Trinity," *Trinity Alumni Register* II (October, 1916): 263; Mann, *A Story of Glory*, 50.

30. *News-Observer-Chronicle* (Raleigh), October 29, 1893. The Raleigh News and Observer was briefly known as the *News-Observer-Chronicle* because of a merger with the Raleigh *Chronicle*.

31. *News-Observer-Chronicle*, November 5, 1893.

and inefficiency of the umpire.” Trailing 30-0 late in the first half, an angry and frustrated Trinity team withdrew in a huff and refused to continue. Although details are sketchy, the Trinity team apparently drowned its sorrows in a keg of beer on the return train trip home, and some details of the revelry became known to the general Methodist community.³²

For North Carolina Methodists nothing could provide stronger proof of football’s moral debauchery than the indiscriminate use of spiritous liquors by the prime of the state’s young Methodist manhood. The North Carolina Conference had gone on record as favoring statewide prohibition at the beginning of the 1880s. By the end of that decade North Carolina’s otherwise largely apolitical Methodists were in the vanguard of that state’s anti-liquor forces. Likewise, it was not readily apparent how walking off the field in the middle of a contest reflected the character building manly self-control promised by Crowell.³³

About a month after the Lynchburg debacle the two North Carolina conferences held their annual conventions for 1893, the Western Conference first in Charlotte, followed shortly by the North Carolina Conference in Wilmington. Again Crowell took the offensive, delivering a lengthy written report on the state of Trinity College to both conferences in which he strongly defended football in the by-now familiar terms: it developed character, was essential to a well-rounded college life, and blended moral and mental recreation to create solidarity and community among students, faculty, and alumni. Moreover, whatever abuses “real or imaginary,” might have appeared at other colleges, they were certainly not in evidence at Trinity. Crowell boasted that “no event in the entire . . . year has so strengthened the self-respect of the college community” as the recent victory over the University of North Carolina. Not surprisingly he did not mention the Virginia game. Crowell admitted that abuses occurred at some schools but maintained the football was well under control at Trinity.³⁴

Crowell did not stop at just defending football, however. He also blasted his detractors in unusually harsh terms. They were ill-informed, small-minded, and provincial. Worst of all they were sneaky, fighting Crowell from behind closed doors rather than meeting him in open, manly discourse. It was Crowell’s contention that a small group of activists were distorting the real wishes of the conference membership. Although well-meaning, these men were prepared to do the college irreparable harm. Any attempt to limit football would be the “gravest blunder,” and would have a “damaging effect” on the college’s otherwise bright future.³⁵

At the Western Conference meeting this report was sent, as was the custom,

32. *News-Observer-Chronicle*, November 11, 1893; Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 227.

33. Daniel Jay Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina, 1715-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945), 63-65, 107-108. Methodists were equally active in the prohibition movement in other states. One historian states that prohibition was the “paramount issue of Methodist social witness.” Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 348. The Trinity football team was obviously aware of this sentiment. In 1889 the team was widely praised for taking an antiliquor pledge. *Trinity Archive III* (November, 1889): 36.

34. *Annual Report of the President 1893*, 21, 23-24.

35. *Annual Report of the President 1893*, 25.

to the Education Committee. Not surprisingly, the committee did not take kindly to Crowell's comments, which it termed "neither courteous nor correct." The committee reiterated its opposition to football, maintained that this opposition expressed "the intelligent will of the Conference," and demanded that Crowell take this opposition to the faculty at "an early date." Drawing the particular ire of the committee was the fact that Crowell's report devoted almost twice as much space to athletics at Trinity as to the school's religious life.³⁶

This reply was read in the conference on its last day, December 4. An angry Crowell rose to protest: "I am convinced," he replied, "that the members . . . have not fully informed themselves on this vital question of college policy. They may not know the difference between a back pass and a goal kick, but they should at least be informed on. . . ." At this point Crowell was shouted down; an action he later termed a "savage rebuke." After informing the conference that he could only interpret this report as a "condemnation of my administration," Crowell stormed out of the hall. For the president it was intolerable that anyone saw fit to challenge his autonomy by meddling in affairs they knew nothing about. The report of the Education Committee was accepted by the convention as read, with little, if any opposition.³⁷

The North Carolina Conference, held about one week later, was less stormy but likewise resulted in a resolution that condemned football as "dangerous to the health, life and morals of many of our young men" and "most heartily" requested Trinity to refrain from the game. This report further raised the specter that staunch Methodist parents would soon refuse to send their children to any school that engaged in such barbarous behavior as intercollegiate football.³⁸

In his published recollections Crowell wrote that he decided to leave Trinity shortly after the tumultuous Charlotte conference.³⁹ If so, he played his cards close to the vest. Despite the apparent rashness of his Charlotte outburst, Crowell took his time coming to a firm decision, although he did increase his options by successfully applying for a fellowship at Columbia University's School of Political Science.⁴⁰

In the early part of 1894, debate on Trinity football continued along previously drawn lines. The board of trustees maintained a low profile, no doubt hoping the whole thing would go away. The *Christian Advocate*, despite a change in editors, continued to chastise intercollegiate football, while the *Trinity Archive* continued to defend both football and Crowell. The latter mounted a strong attack against the conferences and their members, whom it characterized as uninformed, ill-educated country preachers, who in challenging the informed opinion of "those more competent to judge from an intellectual

36. *Journal of the Western North Carolina Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Fourth Session Held at Charlotte, N.C., Nov. 29th to Dec. 4th, 1893* (Charlotte: The Blakey Printing House, 1894), 61-62.

37. Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 246-247, 258.

38. *Journal of the North Carolina Annual Conference Held of Wilmington, N.C. Wednesday December 6th, to Monday 11th, 1893* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1894), 26.

39. Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 239.

40. Porter, *Trinity and Duke*, 50.

standpoint” had brazenly arrayed themselves against the trustees, faculty, and students of the school. A more thoughtful analysis came from an anonymous player, who admitted that brute strength had taken over football and that mass plays should be eliminated on humanitarian grounds. Although reforms were necessary for the survival of the game, the anonymous student believed its survival was desirable.⁴¹

Crowell finally broke his silence at the May board of trustees meeting when he submitted a formal letter of resignation, to take effect on July 1. Compared to his intemperate remarks of the previous fall, this letter was a model of circumspection. He made only the most oblique references to the football controversy and expressed his confidence that the school was on a sound financial footing and had a bright future.⁴² Several of the trustees, especially North Carolina Supreme Court Justice Walter Clark, and tobacco magnate Benjamin Duke, were adamantly opposed to his departure. The trustees initially refused to accept the resignation, and a petition was circulated signed by over 100 students urging Crowell to stay. This tactic had worked once before and evidently did cause some second thoughts from the school president. Shortly after his letter of resignation, he told a Raleigh newspaper that his decision to resign was “open to correction.”⁴³ Despite this apparent wavering he eventually held to his determination to leave. After a stormy June board meeting resulted in little more than hard feelings, his resignation was formally accepted in early July.⁴⁴

Crowell left Trinity for Columbia, where he earned a Ph.D. in economics, and began a successful career as an economist, including a six-year tenure as director of the World Market Institute in New York.⁴⁵ Intercollegiate football at Trinity did not long survive its founder, however. After being turned down by its first choice, Collins Denny, a Vanderbilt professor and Methodist minister, the board of trustees named John Kilgo, a Wofford, South Carolina minister, as the school’s new president on July 31. Although there is no evidence that the board made opposition to intercollegiate football a prerequisite for the position, Kilgo lost little time in expressing his distaste for the game. As he told one North Carolina church, it was his opinion that football was “unfit to be played by young men at college, especially at a Christian College.”⁴⁶

41. *Christian Advocate*, December 20, 1893, January 31, 1894; *Trinity Archive VII* (December, 1893): 22. The column “Reform in Foot-Ball,” by “A Player,” was in the *Trinity Archive VII* (December, 1893): 16-19.

42. Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Trinity College, September 29, 1891 to February 19, 1900, 169-171. The text of the resignation letter is in Crowell, *Personal Recollection*, 254-256 and was also published at the time in the *News and Observer*, May 24, 1894. Despite the Panic of 1893, the school’s financial condition had improved by 1894, largely because of the sale of \$40,000 worth of bonds. Ironically, the nation’s poor economy may have helped Trinity in one respect. One historian maintains that the depression enabled Trinity to fill its faculty vacancies with a higher quality of professor than would otherwise have been the case. Porter, *Trinity and Duke*, 48.

43. Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Trinity College, 171; Crowell, *Personal Recollections*, 252-253; *New and Observer*, May 6, 1894. The 100 Trinity students represented a little more than half of the student body.

44. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 196-197.

45. Powell, ed., *DNCB*, I, 466.

46. Porter, *Trinity and Duke*, 52; *Trinity Archive*, VIII (November, 1894), 33; *Smithfield Herald*, October 24, 1895; Paul Neff Garber, *John Carlisle Kilgo: President of Trinity College, 1894-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1937), 158.

Methodism and the Football Controversy at Trinity College

The Western Conference had a predictably positive response to such statements:

After hearing President Kilgo's statements and views with reference to the conduct of Trinity College, we are willing to commit the administration of that institution, with reference to certain matters criticized at our last Conference, into his hands, believing that he will happily solve, satisfactorily to us, the problems confronting the college.⁴⁷

Trinity students made a desperate, if ill-fated, attempt to save football. The football team protested to Kilgo that no one could "truthfully accuse us of aught that has been criminal, ungentlemanly or unkind." Yet this plea fell on deaf ears. Kilgo quickly forbade Trinity from playing games outside North Carolina. As a result only a single game was played in the fall of 1894, a dispiriting 28-0 loss to the University of North Carolina.⁴⁸

This would be Trinity's last intercollegiate contest for some time. When the students returned in the fall of 1895, they found severe limitations on their athletic freedom. In sports such as baseball the only contests now allowed had to be held in the state and only against other college teams. As far as football was concerned Kilgo proclaimed that it "has grown to be such an evil that the best tastes of the public have rebelled against it. . . . under no condition will a match game with another college be allowed." Kilgo was as good as his word. Football at Trinity was dead.⁴⁹

The Trinity ban was notable for its length. Despite frequent and insistent demands for reinstatement by students, the ban lasted until 1920 and was lifted partially because it placed the school in the ludicrous position of telling World War I veterans that football was too dangerous for their health and morals.⁵⁰

How and why did Trinity football cause a crisis that led to the downfall of the Crowell administration? Clearly the gap that separated Crowell from football's opponents was genuine. The depth of opposition to intercollegiate football among North Carolina Methodists can be seen in the length of the ban that quickly followed Crowell's departure. For Crowell's part his consistent and forceful advocacy of the importance of football left him little room for compromise. Nor was this conflict restricted to just Trinity. Only a few miles to the east, Baptist-supported Wake Forest College banned football from 1895 to 1908 for reasons similar to those that caused the Trinity abolition.⁵¹

Yet the evidence suggests that more was at work than just a disagreement over a new sport. During Crowell's seven years at Trinity College the school played

41. *Minutes of the Fifth Session of the Western North Carolina Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Held in Statesville, N.C., November 28-December 3, 1894*, (Asheville: Asheville Publishing Company, 1894), 24.

48. *Trinity Archive VIII* (October, 1894): 36; Mann, *A Story of Glory*, 50.

49. *Trinity College Catalogue and Announcements for the Year 1895-'96* (Durham: The Educator Co., 1895), 74-75.

50. Porter, *Trinity and Duke*, 191-192, 216-217; Mann, *A Story of Glory*, 52-55.

51. Wake Forest briefly reinstated football after its one year ban before banning it again in 1895. Sumner, "The North Carolina Intercollegiate Foot-Ball Association," 285; George Washington Paschal, *History of Wake Forest College*, 3 vols. (Wake Forest, N.C.: Wake Forest College, 1935-1943), II, 315-317.

an unimposing total of sixteen games of intercollegiate football, never more than four in a single academic year. All were played in North Carolina, or neighboring states South Carolina and Virginia, all in front of small crowds. The football team absorbed all expenses, putting the school in no direct financial jeopardy.⁵² Yet this seemingly modest activity generated a firestorm of continued criticism that Crowell felt made his position at the school untenable. For the most part the charges mounted against Trinity football by the Methodist community were vague and nebulous, almost generic. The debate attracted little attention outside the Methodist community. The sins of 1890s Trinity football may have warranted censure or stronger institutional control but hardly seem to have justified abolition. Clearly intercollegiate football at Trinity had taken on a symbolic importance all out of proportion to its real significance on campus.

Intercollegiate football could almost certainly have survived in some form at Trinity despite resistance from Methodist leaders with a spirit of compromise. However, the seven-year power struggle among Crowell, the Methodist conferences, and the faculty had eroded those relationships to such an extent that compromise was not a realistic possibility. In the final analysis the football issue cannot be divorced from the other controversies that made Crowell vulnerable. A geographical outsider, Crowell, by his own admission, found Trinity's supporters parochial and provincial.⁵³ The decision to move from Randolph County to Durham, the continuing squabbles with the faculty, and the financial difficulties of the school were among the areas in which Crowell had made his share of enemies. Shortly after his May 2 resignation letter, Crowell informed a Raleigh newspaper that the real reason for his resignation was exhaustion from seven years of dispute and struggle.⁵⁴ Crowell's decision to make football the highly visible symbol of his administration also helped make it the lightning rod for critics of that administration. Intercollegiate football at Trinity was the victim of its visibility as much as its excesses.

52. Trinity won ten of these games against six losses and no ties. The 1891 "forfeit" game is not included in this total. Information on the expenses incurred by the football team is sketchy. After the 1891 season, the team reported that expenses for the season were "three hundred dollars above receipts." *Trinity Archive V* (December, 1891): 135.

53. In reference to football, he wrote that "This breaking out of the shell of provincialism awakened misgivings in certain timid minds." Crowell. *Personal Recollections*. 226.

54. *News-Observer-Chronicle*, May 10, 1894.