

# The First Big Upset—Some Words on American Culture and the Regatta of 1871

by  
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The first regatta of the Rowing Association of American Colleges was held in late July of 1871 at Ingleside, near Springfield, Massachusetts. For the first time time race for the “championship” of American colleges was opened to schools other than Harvard and Yale. This first regatta had Harvard, Brown and Massachusetts Agricultural College as competitors, as Yale refused to participate because of a disputed race with Harvard in Worcester, Massachusetts the previous year. The Cambridge crew was favored heavily to win the “championship,” just as it had done for so many years. Mass. Aggie, however, won the three-mile straight pull in a record-smashing time, beating the second place Harvard crew by fourteen boat-lengths (approximately 700 feet).

The enthusiasm created by the outcome of the race, however, did not reflect a mere favoring for an underdog, at least according to editorials in the media. This race was used to disprove the unpopular Brahmin Theory of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., which was basically a defense of Holmes’ belief in the existence of an intellectually superior class. Holmes’ theory created the impression that anyone who was of this “class,” more specifically the upper class to which he belonged, could defeat anyone in any contest simply by brain power alone. Naturally, when the “Farmers” defeated the “Brains” some pounced upon the outcome to disprove the theory.

In addition, editorialists implied in their articles a belief that the victory upheld the simplicity and virtue of country life over the modern urban life, and the pragmatic over the intellectual side of life.

This victory had great implications for the development of intercollegiate sport. Mass. Aggie’s victory showed to many reluctant student bodies of small institutions that they could play the big schools and win, thus stimulating the smaller schools to form teams. Values first found in crew were later transferred to other sports, thus stimulating the development of such activities as football and baseball.

The victory also contributed much to the early development of Massachusetts Agricultural College, now the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The crew race took place at the end of the first commencement week of the infant college. The amount of publicity brought regional and national attention to the college, showing it to be a fine developer of young manhood.

The purpose of this paper is to take this particular athletic victory, which in itself was just that, and measure the public reaction to it, expressed in articles and editorials in the media, in order to discover something about that public.