

# A Lamentable Failure: Worcester and the Disputed Regatta of 1870

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Crew was the first intercollegiate sport to gain widespread interest and Harvard and Yale were the first two "major sporting powers." It was only fitting that the annual Crimson and Blue regatta attracted the attention of so many people, not only in New England, but in other parts of the country. Nine of the first eleven regattas were held on Lake Quinsigamond, a narrow body of water which forms a natural boundary between Worcester and Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. Every year several thousand rowing enthusiasts crowded into the city for a week of activities.

Citizens from all levels of Worcester society joined various committees to plan the many events. As with all such annual events, certain traditions became associated with it. A concert and dance was held in the beautiful Mechanics Hall the night before the race, while a baseball game was played the morning of the event. Local stores, hostelrys and places of entertainment readied themselves for the great increase in business.

The Regatta of 1870 promised to be the most exciting of all the races held in the Heart of the Commonwealth. Harvard launced a veteran crew, and was thought to be the sure winner again that year. Yale, which had been forced only shortly before to make substitutions in its crew, still intended to upset the Cambridge lads. The addition of the four freshmen crews representing Harvard, Yale, Amherst and Brown, an unprecedented number, created much interest in an hitherto lowly regarded event. Three four-oared crews and two single sculls from Worcester provided two other races to watch.

The first race between the two wherries was the only contest pulled without a foul that day. First the results of the Worcester four-oared race, then the freshmen race, then the varsity race were left to the decision of Referee Edwin Brown. The victors, as chosen by Brown, were naturally satisfied with the fairness of his decision. The defeated, of course, were bitter about their losses. None was so embittered as the Yale varsity crew, which had defeated Harvard by several boat-lengths in the final contest, and had thought it had rightfully gained its long sought after victory. When the referee decided that Yale had fouled Harvard at the turn stake and had thus forfeited the victory, the Connecticut crew vowed never to row on Lake Quinsigamond again.

Brown's decision soon grew from a collegiate disagreement to a full-fledged controversy which flowed into the newspapers. Some accused Brown of dishonesty, while others attacked Harvard for "dirty tactics." Most, however described the inadequacy of a race with a turn in it, and the need for a body of water which could accommodate a straight race.

The bitterness of Yale prevented it from participating in the Regatta of 1871 on the Connecticut River near Springfield, Mass. But this lapse in the Harvard-Yale rivalry did allow an unheard-of institution, Massachusetts Agricultural College, not only to enter this race, but to win it in a most convincing manner. The victory interested other small colleges to take up the sport.

The real loser of the Regatta of 1870 was the City of Worcester. Although college crew racing did return there in later years, it would never generate the excitement and civic pride created by the annual Harvard-Yale race.