

HOBOKEN & THE BEGINNINGS OF BASEBALL

June 19 was the 152nd anniversary of what has come to be regarded as the first baseball game. Nevertheless, the other day the editor encountered someone walking down a local street wearing a shirt that said "Cooperstown, Birthplace of Baseball." So, we suppose, it is probably time to reprint the following, an abridged version of an essay published by the Hoboken Historical Museum to commemorate the 150th anniversary of that all-important game in Hoboken.

BY NICHOLAS ACOGELLA

The unadorned fact is that no one "invented" baseball. Not, at least, the way Edison invented the incandescent lamp or, probably a better analogy, the way Naismith invented basketball.

People have been swatting balls with bats for recreation at least since the ancient Egyptians. (There is a 3,500-year-old mural of Pharaoh Thotmes III hitting fungoes to two of his priests in the Temple of Deir-er-Bahari. Most commentators ascribe a religious significance what they are doing, but it is altogether possible that the clergymen just needed the practice.) People have been playing ball games on these shores at least since Christmas Day, 1621, when William Bradford,

the Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, reprimanded some young men for playing stool ball. (The game involved two bases, designated by stools, between which players ran after hitting the ball with bare hands.)

More sophisticated was rounders. Originally a children's game, rounders was played by two teams of unspecified size. Each team remained at bat for as long as its players, wielding an 18-inch truncheon one-handed, hit safely in an effort to advance runners through four bases to score a "rounder." (The "bases" were posts driven into the ground about 40 feet apart.) The opponents scattered about the field and tried to retire the hitting team's players either by catching a batted ball on the fly or on one bounce, or by hitting a runner with the ball while he was off base. This practice, known as "plugging" or "soaking," was not so painful as might appear since the ball was stuffed with rags.

Rounders evolved into town ball, an informal folk game, for the most part, with rules that varied from place to place. Fairly common were the prevalence of a square field, the batter's "stand" between the first and fourth base, the "back game" that allowed hitting the ball behind the batter (as in cricket), and plugging/soaking. One variation awarded a contest to the team



with the most total bases rather than the most runs scored. Another was the number of players — which depended, as often as not, on how many people were still sober at the annual Fourth of July picnic when the game began.

Rounders, town ball, round ball, and base ball (or simply base) became virtually indistinguishable terms referring to a variety of similar but locally delineated games played throughout the eighteenth century. John Newberry's *A Pretty Little Pocket-Book*, first published in London in 1744 and reprinted in the colonies as early as 1762, includes a woodcut illustration and a description (rhymed, no less) and of what the author calls Base-Ball but is almost certainly a form of rounders. The first written mention of an actual contest is by George Ewing, one of Washington's troops at Valley Forge, who wrote in his diary on April 7, 1778: "exercised in the afternoon in the intervals played base."

By the 1840s, the most common bat and ball sport was the Massachusetts Game, played by teams of 10 to 14 players on a 60-foot square field with bases at the corners. As in rounders and town ball, the batter stood between the first and fourth bases, there was no foul territory, and soaking was still the order of the day. Differences with the older folk games included overhand pitching from a distance of 30 feet, one out to retire the side, the addition of three strikes for an out, no one-bounce outs on fly balls, and a specified number of runs scored to determine the winner.

ALEXANDER CARTWRIGHT AND THE KNICKERBOCKER CLUB



Born in 1820, Alexander Cartwright had been playing a different version, the New York Game, recreationally since 1842, first at Madison Square, then at 34th Street and Fourth (Madison) Avenue. A clerk at the Union Bank and a volunteer fireman, the young Cartwright helped form the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of New York. Organized on September 23, 1845, this social and athletic club resembled a college fraternity or a country club more than a modern professional sports franchise. Its members were middle-class young men, whose circumstances allowed them to get away at 3 o'clock for regular Monday and Thursday games and provided them with sufficient income to pay an initiation fee of two dollars and annual dues of five: lawyers, doctors, merchants, brokers, bank and insurance clerks — in effect, the yuppies of the day.

The newly organized Knickerbockers rented — for \$75 for the year — a playing field and dressing rooms at Elysian Fields. Their Manhattan field was getting too congested for team sports, and Hoboken, only a short ride away on the Stevens-Barclay Street Ferry and already a playground for New Yorkers, was a natural choice for the fledgling group. The fare was just 13



*A Base-Ball Match at the Elysian Fields, Hoboken—Harper's Weekly, 1859.
Courtesy of the Hoboken Public Library Picture Collection*

cents, round-trip. Elysian Fields, conveniently located on Hoboken's northern riverfront and a popular spot for trysting and other recreational pursuits, had often been used for pre-Cartwright versions of Base Ball. It didn't hurt either that the field was within walking distance of established eateries such as McCarty's Hotel and, later, the Odd Fellows Hall, where the players repaired for postgame banquets that were at least as important to the participants as the ball games themselves.

Soon after the formation of the Knickerbockers, Cartwright set down the first baseball rule book. The Knickerbockers used most of the 20 new regulations in four intramural games. The first recorded in the club's scorebook took place on October 6, 1845, an 11-8 game with seven men on a side. (An earlier game had gone unrecorded.) The next season, on June 19, 1846, the Knickerbockers were the hosts in what just about everyone recognizes as the first organized baseball game. In that contest, the New York Base Ball Club defeated the Knickerbockers 23-1, in four innings. A nice footnote is that Cartwright, who served as umpire, fined James Whyte Davis of the New York Club six cents for swearing during the game.

The New York Club, however loosely organized, had existed as early as 1843. On October 21, 1845, its team, playing a form of Base Ball, defeated by a score of 24-4, a Brooklyn squad that included a number of prominent cricket players. Played at Elysian Fields, this contest included three players (including the profane Davis) who would appear against on Elysian Fields eight months later to best the Knickerbockers. The results of the 1845 game were reported in the *New York Morning News* the following day and included a box score, similar to a cricket tally — the first for a Base Ball game score to appear in a newspaper. Three days later, the New York Club won a return match, played in Brooklyn, by a 37-19 score.

From this distance it is impossible to discern the differences between the 1845 games and the one played in 1846. (Even the 1845 box score was indistinguishable from the one kept for the 1846 game.)

THE CARTWRIGHT RULES

Cartwright did not invent Base Ball out of whole cloth; on the contrary, his rules formalized several longstanding practices while adding a few new ones. This in no way denigrates Cartwright's accomplishment. On every evolutionary scale, there are moments — epiphanies — when something emerges that, while similar in some respects to what had gone before, is a totally new creature. Cartwright's rules was just such a moment. The 1846 game was the first known to be played between two distinct clubs, under formal, written rules that, in many important respects, resemble those of modern baseball. That is as good a line of demarcation as we are likely to get.

Some of Cartwright's precepts are as much a part of major league baseball today as they were for him and his amateur associates; others have been eclipsed. To understand his contribution, it is worth looking at what those rules included.

Cartwright formalized the role of the umpire, who decided "all disputes and differences" without the possibility of appeal. So, not only is the umpire always right, he always has been. He also recorded the number of runs scored and outs made by each player, as well as incidents such as Davis's fine. The Knickerbockers' statistics may not have been as comprehensive as those in *Baseball Weekly*, but the impulse toward tabulation of accomplishments was present from the beginning.

He specified the dimensions of the field, 42 paces between home and second and between first and third. The Cartwright rule that has attracted the most controversy, the 42-paces requirement has been interpreted several ways. If a pace equals three feet, then the distance between home and second and between first and third works out to 126 feet, or just a foot and a third shy of the 90 feet between the bases that has been standard since 1857. If, on the other hand, the three-foot definition of a pace appeared only in the late nineteenth

century and the actual dimension at mid-century was two-and-a-half feet, then the distance from home to second would have been 105 feet, with slightly less than 75 feet between bases.

He also created foul lines — with dramatic repercussions. Without foul lines, every batted ball, as in cricket, is in play, and there is no way for spectators to get close to the action. Foul lines not only focus the game for the players, they also create a prescribed place for fans to stand or sit — close enough to become engaged in what is taking place on the field. This innovation helped spread the popularity of Cartwright's rules and enabled them to eclipse other versions of the game. While he allowed no base to be made on a "fould strike," a foul ball did not become a strike on the batter until 1901; for Cartwright, it was simply no pitch.

He formalized "Three strikes and you're out." But in Cartwright's day there were no called strikes or balls; a batter could stand at the plate all day waiting for a pitch, walks were nonexistent, and a batter had to swing and miss for a strike. An embryonic definition of the strike zone was introduced in 1858, allowing for called strikes. Five years later, called balls — and the base on balls — were introduced. But Cartwright's requirement that the "behind" (or catcher) handle a third strike has remained unchanged.

He defined interference as an out, initiated the first balk rule, specified three outs to a half-inning, and mandated a regular batting order.

What he didn't do is equally instructive. He did not specify nine men to a side. From accounts of games, however, we know that nine to a side was the norm; in a game played in May 1847, for instance, the Knickerbockers had 22 players available but chose to field only nine on each side and to keep two players on each team as reserves. But nine to a side was a norm, not a requirement, and deviation from the custom was common. Aside from those of the pitcher and catcher, the positioning of the nine players would be unfamiliar to a modern fan: Basemen stood directly on their respective bases, there was no shortstop, and there were four outfielders.

His definition of a game was not nine innings but "twenty-one counts, or aces." An 1857 convention of amateur ballplayers overturned this primitive solution by giving approval to the inspired perception that a baseball game ends, not when one or the other team scores 21 runs, but after nine innings — more only to evade the abhorrent vacuum of a tie. No one, however, has ever even suggested tampering with the Cartwright-ordained right to last licks for the team that is losing.

He required that "the ball must be pitched, and not thrown, for the bat." Since Base Ball was deemed to be about hitting and fielding rather than pitching, the feeder (or pitcher) had to lay the ball in underhand and within easy reach of the batter. That is obviously no longer the case. Curiously, nowhere in Cartwright's rules is there any mention of the pitcher's distance from the batter. The 1857 rules established the distance between home plate and the pitcher's location at 45 feet, probably formalizing what had been custom. In 1893, after a brief experimentation with a 50-foot distance, the pitching distance was set at the current 60 feet, six inches.

He allowed but did not insist on catching the ball on the fly; grabbing it on one bounce was good enough for an out. As early as 1859, the Knickerbockers adopted the "fly game" for intramural contests. At their insistence, but only after years of debate on the issue, the National Association of Base Ball Players decreed in 1860 that, to record an out, a fielder had to catch a batted ball before it bounced and, until 1865, only if both teams so agreed beforehand.

He eliminated soaking but did not create the force out. Instead, he replaced it with two possibilities. One was the tag out; the other a sort of proto-force out that allowed a fielder to record an out by holding the ball and standing on the base toward which a runner was headed. (Little wonder, then, that the basemen stayed put on their respective bases.) An 1848 revision allowed such putouts only at first base, a refinement still in effect; and it left the team in the field with only the tag-out option at other bases— even when there were runners on preceding bases. The force out, which allows a

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fielder in the example above to record an out merely by stepping on the bag with the ball in his possession, has often mistakenly been included among Cartwright's innovations; it was not introduced, however, until 1854.

He defined what was, in effect, a ground rule single, a rule that no longer exists, although the modern rule book does provide for the ground rule double.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GAME

By 1858, there were, in the New York area, 60 organized clubs playing under Cartwright's rules. That same year, patrons were asked for the first time to cough up the price of a ticket: 50 cents for each of three all-star matches, between teams made up of the best players from Brooklyn and New York City, played at the Fashion Race Track in Long Island. Four years later, an entrepreneur named William Cammeyer built the first enclosed baseball park, Union Grounds in Brooklyn, and charged admission on a regular basis. From there it was only a short hop to a demand by players for a share of the gate; a series of quick skips to paying players under the table, the creation of the all-professional Cincinnati Red Stockings in 1869, and the end of baseball as a gentlemanly amateur recreation; and a middling jump to multi-million dollar, long term, no-cut contracts.

While the New York Club disappeared from history soon after the 1846 game, the Knickerbockers continued to play intramural matches. Their next match game was on June 3, 1851, when they defeated the Washington Club 21-11 at the Red House Grounds in Harlem. Later, the Knickerbockers became one of the bulwarks of the National Association of Base Ball Players, the governing body of amateur baseball from 1857 to 1869. Their sporty uniforms of blue woolen pantaloons, white flannel shirts, and straw hats became familiar reminders of the club's historical primacy.

The Knickerbocker Club resolutely resisted charging admission to games, however. Clinging to its amateur status until 1882, the club eventually foundered on its opposition to professionalism. (The once profane James

Whyte Davis, who became a member of the Knickerbockers after the demise of the New York Club, had obviously mended his ways and, with age, adopted a redoubtable moralistic stance: He resigned from the Knickerbockers in 1870 in protest over the club's compromise of participating in games at which admission was charged even though it refused to accept any of the gate receipts.) Nevertheless, the effort to keep baseball the private preserve of gentlemen and amateurs was doomed from the moment the first fan stepped up to the ticket booth at the Fashion Race Track and put down his four bits.

Elysian Fields continued to be used for ball games for some years. In 1859, eight clubs used its facilities on a regular basis. In the same year, a cricket match between the United States and England attracted 24,000 spectators to the site. And, on October 21, 1861, Brooklyn and New York all-star teams met there before a crowd of 15,000. (Brooklyn won 18-6.) The United States government acquired the site in 1917 and turned what had been an idyllic park into a collection of war-related warehouses. The Maxwell House division of General Foods acquired the property in 1938.

Cartwright himself was long gone from New York even before the game he codified had spread even as far as Philadelphia or Boston. In 1849, he joined the rush to the California gold fields, and, in 1852, he moved on to Hawaii for his health. But his pioneering included a role as baseball missionary. Traveling overland, he organized baseball games along the way, using as players — a spectacle to be imagined with relish — mountain men and Native Americans, as well as traveling companions. He also introduced baseball on what were then the Sandwich Islands. He died in 1892, one of Honolulu's leading bankers and merchants, the founder of the city's library and its fire department, and the manager of the Hawaiian royal family's finances.



ALEXANDER CARTWRIGHT

THE DOUBLEDAY MYTH

The fantasy that Abner Doubleday was somehow the spontaneous progenitor of a brand new game called Base Ball is less a myth than one of the great historical hoaxes of all time. It was conceived by Albert G. Spalding, a star pitcher in the 1870s, the manager of the first National League pennant winning club in 1876, the owner of the same Chicago White Stockings in the 1880s, and the founder the sporting goods company that still bears his name. Distressed by the prevailing view that baseball had evolved from rounders — a belief championed by British-born sports writer and baseball chronicler Henry Chadwick in a 1903 article — Spalding formed a commission two years later to study the origins of the game. As such things often go, he had predetermined that baseball was an exclusively American game. (He was given to pronouncements on the “manly virtues” of the game, virtues he associated with the United States and considered antithetical to anything associated with England.) For more than two years, the commission, headed by former National League president A.W. Mills, did little but collect old reminiscences and partisan diatribes on the rounders/no rounders debate. Then came the letter from Abner Graves.



ALBERT GOODWIN SPALDING

Recounting events that had allegedly taken place 68 years earlier, Graves told how, in 1839, his boyhood chum Abner Doubleday had reconfigured town ball for a prep school contest in Cooperstown, NY, because, with 20 to 50 players on a side, the older game had resulted in too many injuries from collisions. In the process, Graves maintained, Doubleday not only invented a new game but also christened it Base Ball. Ignoring the initial protests of commission member Chadwick (not to mention the available historical evidence), Spalding pounced on this “proof” that the game's beginnings were “free from the trammels of English tra-

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ditions, customs, and conventionalities." On December 30, 1907, Mills issued his report, crediting Doubleday not only with the spontaneous creation of baseball but also with the abolition of soaking — this last despite Graves's explicit recollection that the practice was integral to Doubleday's "new" game.

The truth did not emerge until the late 1930s, after baseball officialdom had decided to locate its Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. In the midst of preparations for the "centennial" of Doubleday's spontaneous domestic creation, to be marked by the opening of the Hall of Fame, a librarian named Robert W. Henderson published several papers in which he cited nineteenth-century books about sports to prove conclusively that baseball had indeed evolved from rounders. At about the same time, Bruce Cartwright, a grandson of the old Knickerbocker, produced diaries detailing his ancestor's role in baseball's origins. This combination of events sent the baseball hierarchy and Cooperstown's city fathers into a tizzy. They resolved their dilemma by going ahead with their plans for 1939 but paradoxically electing Cartwright a member of the misplaced Hall of Fame in 1938. The most that can be said for the inscription on his plaque is that it is at least more accurate than the Mills Report:

ALEXANDER JOY CARTWRIGHT, JR.

"FATHER OF MODERN BASEBALL"

SET BASES 90 FEET APART.

ESTABLISHED 9 INNINGS AS A GAME
AND 9 PLAYERS AS A TEAM. ORGANIZED
THE KNICKERBOCKER BASEBALL CLUB
OF NY IN 1845. CARRIED BASEBALL
TO PACIFIC COAST AND HAWAII
IN PIONEER DAYS.

No one any longer takes seriously the official fable, although the Hall of Fame still possesses a dilapidated old ball that Graves's son found in a trunk and that was once celebrated as the one Doubleday used in his ur-game. Even Thomas R. Heitz, from 1983 to 1994 the Librarian at the National Baseball Library and Archive, a branch of the Hall of Fame, concludes in an entry on

the “Rules and Scoring” he co-authored for Total Baseball that “some basic baseball principles can be traced back for centuries” and “the codified Knickerbocker rules serve as a direct link to the rules of today.” (He nowhere mentions either Alexander Cartwright or the City of Hoboken in his essay, however.) Organized baseball’s approach to the matter has vacillated between gingerly and wistful. Heitz has even come up with a second Abner Doubleday, a cousin of the future general. This Abner Doubleday lived in Cooperstown in 1839 and Graves probably confused him with his more famous relative. Whether this other Doubleday was given to drawing diagrams of games with a stick is immaterial; the game Graves describes, absent the embellishments of the Mills Report, is still town ball or rounders with the number of participants limited for reasons of safety. For the most part, though, baseball officialdom’s commitment to Cooperstown comes with a wink, as if to say, “If baseball wasn’t born here, it should have been.”

And the village, nestled at the southern tip of Lake Otsego, is admittedly beautiful. Perhaps, if baseball’s origins had been rural instead of urban, the game should have been born there. But baseball is more than a myth to the village of Cooperstown; it is the major source of the community’s tourist trade and the basis of its economy. No one there — or, for that matter, in organized baseball, which has so much, both financial and otherwise, invested in the place — is going to gainsay the Doubleday hoax or entertain the possibility that Alexander Cartwright and Hoboken can supplant their “inventor” and their claim. (Also, the village has a near stock in trade in hoaxes. Another of its popular tourist attractions is the Cardiff Giant, a stone statue that was once advertised as the petrified remains of an oversized man. Another attraction, less well known, is an “historical” marker on the eastern shore of Lake Otsego, the Glimmerglass of several of James Fenimore Cooper’s novels; the plaque purports to mark the place



where Chingachgook, Natty Bumppo’s companion in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, repaired to die. The only difficulty, of course, is that the last of the Mohicans was a fictional character.)

And then there is Doubleday himself. Born in Ballston Spa, 65 miles northeast of Cooperstown, and schooled in Auburn, 85 miles northwest of that village, he is an unwitting and unlikely party to the conspiracy. There is no record of his ever having set foot in the place with which his name has been linked in baseball lore. Nor could he have been there when Graves said he invented

the national pastime to accommodate the boys at Otsego Academy and Green’s Select School: In 1839, at the very time he was supposed to be drawing a diagram of the first baseball diamond in the Cooperstown dirt, he was, in fact, a West Point plebe and ineligible for leave.

Doubleday later had a distinguished Army career, rising to the rank of major general during the Civil War. He wrote extensive memoirs without ever once mentioning baseball. Since he died in

1893, he was not around to protest the unwarranted use of his name by Graves, Spalding, and Mills. By all accounts a gentleman of integrity, he might very well have done so, and directly, since he and Mills were old war buddies who belonged to the same veterans group. (Aside from his friendship with Mills, who served as one of the general’s pallbearers, the only known connection between Doubleday and baseball is that one of his descendants is currently the majority owner of the New York Mets.) Perhaps most damning to the hoax is that baseball officialdom has never been imprudent enough to award Doubleday a Cooperstown plaque. If he were to be so honored, the inscription writers would have to look no farther than the judgment of Branch Rickey, the then-St. Louis Cardinal executive, who, referring to the fact that Doubleday commanded the battery that fired the first shot from the Union side at Fort Sumter in 1861, said, “The only thing Doubleday started was the Civil War.”