

EVANGEL UNIVERSITY

Baseball's Origin:

Discovering the Truth Amidst the Myth

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11/5/07

Seminar In History

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Abstract

The origin of baseball has been a mystery to historians for some time. In order to better understand the National Pastime's beginning, one must distinguish between theories, myths, and factual data. A brief look at the popular theories and the men who proposed them will allow the reader to more fully grasp the history of baseball. Abner Doubleday, Alexander Cartwright, Albert Spalding and other "fathers" of baseball will be analyzed for their legitimacy as the founders of the game. Also, the historical evidence for baseball's earliest American colonial references will be taken into account.

The earliest childhood memories many American youth have of patriotism and pride in American history came through the exciting stories of baseball greats told by their fathers and grandfathers. For scores of Americans, the national pastime of baseball is truly an American tradition. Baseball transcends the game itself as the game has become an intricate piece of the cultural puzzle that connects American history, ideals, and heritage. Examples of baseball's handprint on American life could fill the pages of multiples volumes. To fully grasp the significance of baseball on American life, one would inevitably be led to the game's humble beginnings, but baseball's earliest days are shrouded in mystery as the origins of the game have been disputed for nearly a century. During this time, baseball historians have presented arguments and theories for when the game was first played, baseball's founding fathers, the process by which it came about, and its authenticity as a truly American sport. Many of the historians' ideas clash with each other. In fact, controversy has been the only true constant in the search for baseball's origin. How then, in the midst of all the debate, can one ascertain a clear and concise resolution to the question of origins? To fully answer the question without any doubts, one would have to have been present when the game was created. In other words, there is no obvious solution or easy answer to the question of baseball's origin. The purpose of this paper is to use the available historical evidence combined with the theories of the leading historians to analyze the information, compare and contrast the theories, and apply the resulting conclusions into a combined theory of baseball's origin.

For centuries young and old have played games involving bats and balls of some sort. Some of those games, such as stool ball, are recorded as far back as the late 16th century.¹ Modern baseball has some similarities to these early games. However, in order to understand the distinct beginnings of baseball as it is known to Americans today, the time period of study must be narrowed considerably. Thus, the late 18th Century to the end of the 19th century will be the focus of study.

Henry Chadwick made the earliest response to the question of origin. Known as the "Father of Baseball," Chadwick was a widely respected promoter and historian of the game in the United States. According to Chadwick, baseball was a direct descendant of an English game, rounders.² Rounders was played on a square field with four posts around which runners ran clockwise and a batter was out if he missed the ball three times, hit a ball that was caught in the air, or was hit by the ball while running between the posts.³ In this game, the batter and pitcher were called "striker" and "feeder" respectively.⁴ Chadwick's claim that baseball was a descendant of rounders was based completely on the logical similarities between the two as Chadwick did not produce any documentation to support his assumption. Chadwick was born in England, leading the majority of American sportswriters during this time to believe that Chadwick's English heritage gave him a biased opinion about the origin of baseball. Another prominent baseball historian, Albert G. Spalding, revealed the sentiments felt by many writers, writing, "Mr. Chadwick, who, by the way, is of English birth, and was rocked in a

¹ Robert W. Henderson, *Ball, Bat and Bishop* (New York: Rockport Press, 1947), 70.

² *Ibid.*, 171

³ William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World* (New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), 139.

⁴ Warren Goldstein, *Playing For Keeps: A History of Early Baseball* (New York: Cornell University, 1989), 10.

'Rounders' cradle..."⁵ Ultimately, Chadwick's rounders theory would be dismissed by Spalding and the public because his theory did not support American roots of the game.

In contrast to Chadwick's theory, Spalding, a former baseball player and sporting goods tycoon, produced a strictly American theory for the origin of baseball.⁶ Spalding was well known and respected in the baseball world as a promoter of the game. A fellow baseball historian, Francis C. Richter, praised his efforts, saying, "He was the greatest propagandist and missionary the game ever knew and spent more time, labor and money in spreading the gospel of Base Ball than any other man of record."⁷ Spalding refused to accept Chadwick's notion of English descent, stating, "I have been fed on this kind of `Rounders pap' for upwards of forty years, and I refuse to swallow any more of it without substantial proof sauce of it."⁸ In order to back up his strong sentiments, Spalding challenged Chadwick to research the matter of baseball's origin and return to him with evidence. Spalding, in turn, would work on his own research. When both parties had felt their own research was complete, the two would compare evidence and publicly declare the true beginning of baseball. Spalding's challenge was published in his *Official Base Ball Guide* for 1905.⁹ In order to appear unbiased and official, Spalding created a commission made up of six men, all of who were respected leaders and associated in some regard with the game of baseball. Two prominent businessmen, two Senators, and two former Presidents of the National League of Baseball comprised the commission. One of the members, A.G. Mills publicly issued the committee's report in late 1907.¹⁰ Not surprisingly,

⁵ Henderson, 173.

⁶ Steve Wulf, "A Home of Their Own," *Sports Illustrated* 107 (2007): 62-70.

⁷ Henderson, 171-172.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

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the report reiterated Spalding's earlier claims, declaring Baseball an uniquely American sport. The report stated that baseball "... has no relation to, or connection with, any game of any other country."¹¹ Henry Chadwick's response to the report was simply to restate his belief that baseball was a direct descendent of rounders. However, Chadwick's answer appeared insignificant compared to Spalding's commission as he lacked evidence besides logical conclusions.

The Spalding Commission forever changed the public's perception of baseball's beginnings. Spalding claimed Abner Doubleday invented baseball on the playing fields of Cooperstown, New York in 1839.¹² Spalding's seemingly random assertion came from another man by the name of Abner Graves. Graves, an engineer from Colorado, replied to Spalding's public challenge in 1905 to find information on baseball's genesis by writing a letter to Spalding in which he described baseball's first day.¹³ Graves was originally from New York and grew up with the older Doubleday. Graves claimed Doubleday gathered fellow schoolmates to play a new game Doubleday called "Base Ball," in which Doubleday had written down the rules on paper after explaining them to his friends. Graves also stated that he witnessed Doubleday draw a diagram of the field with player positions and a diamond shape.¹⁴ Spalding took Graves at his word, and proclaimed Abner Doubleday the creator of baseball and Cooperstown the founding city. Despite the obvious lack of supporting evidence, Albert Spalding and the American people accepted the Doubleday theory as gospel truth. Only two decades after the Commission's 1907 announcement, the Baseball Hall of Fame was built in Cooperstown, NY.¹⁵ From that point on,

¹¹ Ibid., 175.

¹² Henderson, 177.

¹³ Diane Cole, "A Dispute at First," *U.S. News and World Report* 141, no. 6 (2006): 68-69.

¹⁴ Henderson, 177.

¹⁵ Wulf, "A Home of Their Own," 62-70.

Doubleday was considered an American hero. Doubleday was in fact an American hero, but on a very different field. As a Major General, Doubleday countered the Confederate assault on Fort Sumter with cannon fire of his own, courageously fighting on the battlefield of the Civil War.¹⁶ Albert Spalding was overly eager to find an American source for baseball, and Graves' account was the perfect fit. The majority of Americans professed strong nationalistic feelings at the time, only a few short years away from the outbreak of World War I.¹⁷ Spalding most assuredly knew the American public would approve of a war hero as the founder of a national pastime. The American people accepted the Doubleday theory as just another example of American ingenuity.

After years of an unquestioning belief in Doubleday and Spalding, baseball historians began to doubt the theory. Taking the lead in attempting to debunk the Doubleday theory was Robert W. Henderson, a librarian and sports historian from New York. Henderson viewed the Doubleday theory as pure myth. He began his rebuttal by examining a copy of Graves' letter to Spalding. The letter began, "The American game of base ball was invented by Abner Doubleday of Cooperstown, N.Y., either the spring prior or following the 'Log Cabin and Hard Cider' campaign of General William H. Harrison for Presidency."¹⁸ Furthermore, Graves stated that Doubleday was enrolled in Green's Select School at the time he invented the game. Henderson pointed out that Doubleday had enrolled in West Point Academy on September 1, 1838, well before the spring of 1839 and 1840 as described in the letter. Pointing out the discrepancy between Spalding's report and Graves' letter, Henderson claimed that Spalding invented Graves'

¹⁶ Matthew Goodman, Stephen Bauer, "From Elysian Fields: Baseball as the Literary Game," *Sewanee Review* 101, no.2 (1993): 226.

¹⁷ Cole, 68-69.

¹⁸ Henderson, 184.

witnessing of the first game ever played at Cooperstown field. Graves wrote in the letter, "I do not know, nor is it possible for anyone to know, on what spot the first game was played according to Doubleday's plan."¹⁹ Yet, Spalding claimed that Cooperstown field was where Doubleday had drawn out a diagram of the bases and first played his game of base ball. Another problem arose from the Graves letter. Graves credited Doubleday with the invention of the name 'base ball' in his letter, which was later promulgated by Spalding. However, the term "base ball" had been in existence long before 1839 for variations of games played by English and American boys.²⁰ Henderson, at the very least, revealed critical errors in Spalding's account of the origins of baseball, but to most historians, he clearly proved the Doubleday story to be myth.

The search for baseball's origins was once again open for debate. Many historians, including Henderson, leaned toward a more elaborate form of Henry Chadwick's theory. Their thesis supported a "multilinear" evolution of baseball.²¹ Henderson asserted baseball's beginning was a process that involved rounders, as Chadwick had claimed, in addition to many American rules and adaptations through years of play.²² Numerous instances are recorded in history of various games played by children and adults that resemble the modern game of baseball in one way or another. The supporters of an evolution theory point to these instances as proof of baseball's gradual development into its modern state. One of the earliest published references to baseball appeared in *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, written in 1744 and published in London by John Newbery. The book included a poem entitled "Base Ball."

¹⁹ Ibid., 186.

²⁰ Ibid., 189.

²¹ David Q. Voigt, *American Baseball* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1966), 7.

²² Henderson, 194.

*The Ball once struck off,
Away flies the Boy
To the next destin'd Post,
And then Home with Joy.*²³

The reference to a post being used as a base indicates the game was probably rounders rather than baseball. Nonetheless, adherents to the evolution theory maintain the poem supports the premise because the game is labeled "Base Ball" instead of rounders. In 1799, celebrated writer Jane Austen referred to the game of "base ball" in her novel *Northanger Abbey*.²⁴ Baseball was also mentioned in other, non-published records. George Ewing, a Revolutionary War soldier in George Washington's Army, wrote a journal entry at Valley Forge dated April 7, 1778. The entry read, "Exercisd in the Afternoon in the intervals playd at base."²⁵ In another entry, Ewing mentions a game of cricket that was played by some of the men. The latter entry distinguished the game of base from cricket, establishing strong evidence for a distinction between the two sports. Early forms of baseball were popularized in American universities beginning in the late 18th Century. Princeton University led the way in 1761 with a ban on playing ball next to the President's house. Apparently, students had been playing ball for a while before the ban was established, probably beginning in the late 1750s. One student's diary tells of a game of "baste ball" played in 1786 by students. "A fine day, play baste ball in the campus but am beaten for I miss catching and striking the ball."²⁶ Striking and catching indicate the student was referring to rounders or an American variation. In his early years, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow attended Bowdoin College where he wrote about a baseball experience in 1824. He stated, "There is nothing now heard of, in our leisure hours, but ball, ball, ball."²⁷ Another famous American,

²³ Henderson, 133.

²⁴ Goodman, 226.

²⁵ Henderson, 136.

²⁶ Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The People's Game* (New York: Oxford University, 1990), 131.

Daniel Webster, wrote about playing 'ball' at Dartmouth in 1797. North Carolina, Harvard, Brown, and Williams College all had a form of baseball played on campus by students in the 1820s. In fact, a team from Brown University was the first recorded team to walk a batter. Williams Latham, a Brown University student, explained the walk in a letter. Latham criticized the team from Brown because their pitcher "did throw so fair [a] ball, They are afraid [sic] the fellow will hit it with his battstick."²⁸ Baseball was not only confined to colleges during the early 1800s. Records reveal that Americans were playing forms of baseball in city streets and fields at this time as well. Two recently discovered articles dated 1823 describe baseball being played in Manhattan. In an interview, prominent baseball historian John Thom elaborated on the findings when he stated, "The interesting thing about this is that it is the first contemporary account of an organized baseball match played not only for recreation but for the presumed interest of spectators."²⁹ All of these instances are proof of baseball's existence before Doubleday's game in 1839. The examples are also important evidence for the evolutionary theory of baseball. Historians like Henderson took these isolated examples and chronologically structured them into a connected group that formed baseball's beginning. The result of all of these findings was a game with no definitive starting point.

The evolutionary theory provides a good foundation for understanding the origin of baseball and putting the Doubleday myth to rest. However, the theory does have a flaw that leaves out an important part of baseball history. The examples of baseball before 1839 were of games with different rules and styles that separated them from modern

²⁷ Ibid., 132.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Susan Stamberg, "Interview: John Thom discusses the discovery of two articles from 1823 describing baseball being played in Manhattan," *Weekend Edition*, 14 July 2001.

baseball. These different forms of baseball were called by many names, but the vast majority of baseball games played before 1845 were of one particular type. This style was referred to as the "Massachusetts game" and was similar to rounders. The Massachusetts game had a field with bases shaped in a square, an inning ended with only one out, and the first team to score one hundred runs won. Most notably, the Massachusetts game still employed the technique of throwing the ball at a base runner to get him/her out.³⁰ The turning point in baseball's history, which the evolutionary theory fails to fully grasp, was the appearance of the "New York game." In 1842, a group of businessmen started to meet in Manhattan to play ball games for recreation. Three years later, Alexander Joy Cartwright, a member of the group, proposed to formally organize a club for playing ball. Through Cartwright's persistence, a club named the Knickerbockers of New York was formed.³¹ The group was a social club with membership limited to forty men, dues of five dollars each, and banquets after games.³² Cartwright's club also formed a set of rules for playing. The rules were unique, divergent from the "Massachusetts game" rules. The Knickerbockers had been playing a new style, the "New York game," when they implemented their new rules. In this groundbreaking set of rules, the field was a diamond shape, a ball hit outside of the first and third base lines was foul, three missed pitches or strikes was an out, an umpire would make decisions over differences in the game, and a balk was illegal. Most importantly, rule thirteen stated, "A player running the bases shall be out, if the ball is in the hands of an adversary on the base...it being understood, however,

³⁰ Goldstein, 13.

³¹ Henderson, 162.

³² Baker, 140.

that in no instance is a ball to be thrown at him."³³ Before rule thirteen, ball games around the country allowed a player to throw at a base runner. The Knickerbockers' "New York game" caught on as the club moved from Manhattan to Hoboken, New Jersey to a place called the Elysian Fields.³⁴ The Knickerbockers played their first game against another club, the New York Base Ball Club, at the Elysian Fields on June 19, 1846. Playing for the first time under the new set of rules, the Knickerbockers lost 23-1. The loss did not dampen the spirits of the Knickerbockers as they continued to play their new game. Baseball started to gain ground with other groups, and by 1857 the Knickerbockers and fifteen other clubs formed the National Association of Base Ball Players.³⁶ The group modified some of the rules and maintained a standard code of play that has carried over to modern baseball.

Almost every historian, including Henderson, would agree to some extent that Alexander J. Cartwright helped structure baseball into the game of today that it is today. Some historians have even called Cartwright the "father of American baseball".³⁷ Cartwright and the Knickerbockers deserve far more than just "credit for bringing the game of baseball into a robust maturity," as Henderson claimed.³⁸ The set of rules the Knickerbockers created, along with Cartwright's organization, marks a profound turning point in the game of baseball. The "Massachusetts game" eventually faded out and the Knickerbockers' "New York game" became the foundation for modern baseball. Yet, the evolution theory is still important to understanding baseball's origin. Baseball does owe much to the English pastimes of rounders and cricket.

³³ Henderson, 165.

³⁴ Geoffrey C. Ward, *Ken Bums, Baseball: An Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Baker, 140.

³⁸ Henderson, 161.

The early American population also played an important role by continuing the enjoyment of baseball in the New World. If one keeps in mind the many influences on baseball, without taking too much away from Cartwright and the Knickerbockers, then a new perspective can be seen that holds baseball's origin in a balanced view.

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