

NEW YORK

Volume 2 • Number 4 • Spring 2003

archives



Americans revere Cooperstown and Abner Doubleday as icons of baseball, although historical evidence leaves both birthplace and inventor in doubt

The Ongoing Fable of **Baseball**

BY MARK MCGUIRE

The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York contains:

- 2.6 million library documents
- 30,000 “three-dimensional” artifacts, including 6,251 balls, 447 gloves, Babe Ruth’s bowling ball, and Christy Mathewson’s piano
- half a million photographs
- more than 15,000 files on every Major Leaguer who ever played
- 12,000 hours of recordings
- 135,000 baseball cards
- one pervasive, massive, enduring myth

For in this mecca of the sport, history and historical fancy co-exist. Undoubtedly, the village that’s synonymous with baseball’s glory is the home of baseball. It’s just not baseball’s hometown.

Hall of Famer Hughie Jennings

Many kids first learning about the game's lore hear that baseball was invented by Abner Doubleday in Cooperstown. But most historians—and even the Hall—acknowledge that the Doubleday tale is a myth concocted with the thinnest of evidence early in the twentieth century, a yarn promoted by a sporting goods magnate determined to prove that the game was a uniquely American invention.

And Doubleday was truly a unique American. A West Point graduate, he fought in the Mexican War in 1846–48. He is credited with firing the first Union shot of the Civil War, at Fort Sumter, South Carolina. He was a brigadier general commanding volunteers in charge of defending Washington, D.C. In 1862, he was promoted to major general, later fought at Gettysburg, and served until his retirement in 1873. Thousands saw him lie in state after his death in 1893.

In short, this pious Ballston Spa, New York native deserves to be exalted and remembered, since he did it all.

Except invent baseball.

Maybe if history had gotten it right the first time, Hoboken, New Jersey would now be widely hailed as the birthplace of baseball. And if anyone deserves to be called the Father of Baseball, it's Alexander Cartwright, not Abner Doubleday.

But in all likelihood, no one person can take complete credit for evolving the sport from the primordial ooze of a dozen bat-and-ball games that were played at the time. The Hall's library director, Jim Gates, calls any endeavor to identify a single birthplace "quixotic."

So the Baseball Hall of Fame, which embraces both scholarship and legend, deftly balances competing interests. As the Hall's own 2001 yearbook states:

Whatever may or may not be proved in the future concerning Baseball's true origin is in many respects irrelevant at this time. If baseball was not actually first played here in Cooperstown by Doubleday in 1839, it undoubtedly originated about that time in a similar rural atmosphere. The Hall of Fame is in Cooperstown to stay; and at the very least, the village is certainly an acceptable symbolic site for the game's origin.



Abner Doubleday fired the first Union shot of the Civil War at Fort Sumter.

NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY

But make no mistake: for all the romance surrounding the Cooperstown fable, the Hall is a repository of research. If you doubt it, consider this:

Cartwright is enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Doubleday isn't.

Origins of the Game

People have probably been hitting round items with sticks since the Stone Age. The British played two well-known games based on the concept: cricket, the sport of men, and rounders, a children's game. In America, various derivations of these games arose, including town ball, trap ball, and barn ball, to name just a few.

A critical rung in the game's evolutionary ladder can be traced to New York City, where

Maybe if history had gotten it right the first time, Hoboken, New Jersey would now be widely hailed as the birthplace of baseball.

in the first half of 1842 men gathered to play a bat-and-ball game. They first played at Madison Avenue and 27th Street, and later at the foot of Murray Hill.

On September 23, 1845, Alexander Cartwright, a tall, twenty-five-year-old shipping clerk, corralled twenty-eight men to establish the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club of New York City, baseball's first organized club. The name >>

picnic area with a view of downtown. "People began to take an interest in the game, and sometimes we had as many as a hundred spectators watching," wrote Doc Adams, president of the Knickerbockers and a New Hampshire physician.

On June 19, 1846, Elysian Fields was the site of the first pre-arranged game, pitting the Knickerbockers against the New York Club (formerly identified by historians as the New York Nine). The latter team won, 23–1. Historians, using the scorebook as a guide, believe the Knickerbockers did not play their first string: Cartwright umpired and, in fact, levied a six-cent fine against a player for profanity.

But even these historically documented events leave doubt as to whether that Knickerbocker–New York game was really the first. As noted by novelist and baseball historian David Nemeec in his book *Great Baseball Feats, Facts & Firsts*:

(H)ow did the Knickerbockers, purportedly the first club ever to organize mainly for the purpose of playing baseball, manage to lose so egregiously? Who were the New York Nine? When and where did they assemble and start mastering the intricacies of the new sport? How sure are we that they didn't secretly play a slew of games to prepare for Cartwright's bunch and that those games were the first ones? Well, the unhappy truth is that we're not at all sure; nor, probably, will we ever be.

In 1849, Cartwright left for California in a quest for gold and riches, taking with him a bat, ball, and the Knickerbocker rule book. He was the Johnny Appleseed of the sport, playing it all along his transcontinental trek. "It's comical to see mountain men and Indians playing the new game," he wrote in his diary in Independence, Missouri.

Cartwright would not find his riches in California; instead he became a wealthy merchant in Hawaii. He lived long enough to see his game become a national craze before the Civil War, then grow into the National Pastime.

All of which begs the question:

Where did Abner Doubleday come in?

Alexander Cartwright

came from a volunteer fire company to which Cartwright and several other players belonged.

Again from the Hall of Fame's own yearbook:

ALEXANDER CARTWRIGHT Born April 17, 1820 at New York, N.Y. Died July 12, 1892 at Honolulu, HI. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 1938...often referred to as "The Father of Modern Baseball." Though the appellation may be an overstatement...Cartwright likely played a key role in formalizing the first published rules of the game, including the concept of foul territory, the distance between bases, the three-out innings, and the elimination of retiring base runners by throwing batted baseballs at them.

Cartwright and the Knickerbockers' rules and concepts posited that the infield was a diamond instead of a square. First and third bases were forty-two paces apart. Foul lines were implemented. Pitchers threw underhand from forty-five feet, elbow and wrist straight. Batters got three missed swings. The balk was defined and outlawed. Runners could either be tagged or thrown out. Soaking (hitting a runner with a throw to retire him) was banned. A schedule of fines for ungentlemanly conduct was imposed.

Open space was hard to find in a city absorbing a flotilla of immigrants, so the Knickerbockers found a new home a ferry ride away at Hoboken's Elysian Fields, a grassy

Henry Chadwick



Albert Spalding



In this 1905 letter, Abner Graves claimed that Abner Doubleday invented baseball.



NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY

Who Really Invented Baseball?

Henry Chadwick, an English-born newspaperman, was a convert from cricket to baseball. Possibly even more than Cartwright, he nurtured the game from the cradle, convincing *The New York Times* and other dailies to run game scores. He later became the first newspaper baseball editor (for the *New York Clipper*) and worked for more than forty years at the *Brooklyn Eagle*. In addition to writing baseball guides and yearbooks, Chadwick perfected baseball's shorthand, the box score.

In 1905, Albert Spalding was a fifty-five-year-old former pitcher, manager, club owner, and executive. For years he and Chadwick had waged a friendly feud over the game's beginnings. But when Chadwick wrote that the sport had evolved from the British games of cricket and rounders, Spalding had enough.

He (of Spalding Sporting Goods fame) was convinced that the game had been concocted by "some ingenious American lad," and appointed a commission to investigate that claim. The Mills Commission was named after Colonel A.G. Mills, a New Yorker and past president of the National League (1882–84). Former ballplayers, a pair of U.S. senators, and the president of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) rounded out the panel.

In April, 1905 came a letter from Abner Graves, a mining engineer from Denver and a "reputable gentleman," who told of his Cooperstown classmate Abner Doubleday designing and naming baseball by abandoning the rules of the old game of town ball. The story went that in 1839, kids from the Otsego Academy were playing Green's Select School

in a game of town ball. One Otsego player—Doubleday—sat down and at that moment drew up the rules for a new game, to be called baseball, although first he and the others had to chase the cows out of Elihu Phinney's pasture to play it.

Spalding pleaded for Graves' letter to be given serious consideration. "It certainly appeals to an American's pride to have the great national game of baseball created and named by a major general in the United States Army," he said. (The Hall's Jim Gates has a personal unproven theory that Spalding did not want to antagonize the Irish—many of whom played baseball and bought his sporting goods—by claiming that their beloved game came from the British.) So on December 30, 1907, the commission declared:

The first scheme for playing baseball, according to the best evidence obtainable to date, was devised by Abner Doubleday at Cooperstown, New York, in 1839. >>

Jim Gates was beginning to think it was a waste of time. In 1999, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum's library director was going through boxes that had arrived via a Kentucky bank and that had been bequeathed to the Hall by the estate of one Jack M. Doyle.

Mostly it was relative junk, a bunch of old Spalding Guide publications that the Hall already had.

They had belonged to Doyle's father, John T. Doyle, once the president of American Sports Publishing Company, which in turn had been owned by Albert G. Spalding, the man who, nearly a century ago, had orchestrated the drive that would end up designating Cooperstown as the birthplace of baseball.

Then came the last two boxes. In them were documents thought to have been lost in a fire at a Spalding property in 1916. Their discovery was, as Gates called it, a "jaw-dropper."

"These were the A.G. Spalding papers used to create the Mills Commission, and some of the early papers that were part of their investigation on the origins of baseball," Gates said. "We knew what we had when we found Abner Graves' business card and the letter he sent, which started Cooperstown on the road to becoming the mythological birthplace of baseball."

Picture stumbling upon Aesop's rough drafts: these papers were the seeds from which a fable would grow.

"The Doyle papers are easily the most important library acquisition since I arrived in 1995, and probably for some time before that," Gates said.



NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY

The National Baseball Hall of Fame opened in Cooperstown in 1939.

Make no mistake:
for all the romance
surrounding the
Cooperstown fable,
the Hall is a repository
of research.

Some of the evidence available at the time (or later unearthed) would ultimately debunk the Doubleday genesis:

- Doubleday was at West Point during the entire summer of 1839, a time when cadets were not allowed off campus. There were plenty of Doubledays living in Cooperstown, including another Abner Doubleday.
- Graves was five years old at the time he was supposed to have witnessed the historic birth of the game.
- “Reputable gentleman” Graves was later declared criminally insane, and died in a sanitarium after fatally shooting his wife.
- After his death in 1893, Doubleday left behind more than twenty journals. Not one mentioned baseball.

But twenty-seven years after the Mills Commission’s ruling, there was a find in Fly Creek, New York, just outside Cooperstown. A trunk that had once belonged to Graves was found in an attic. Inside was a baseball—gnarled, undersized, misshapen—but a baseball nonetheless. Stuffed with cloth, with a criss-cross-stitched cover, it was dubbed the “Doubleday Baseball.” For Cooperstown advocates, it was the smoking gun.

The ball was purchased by a local philanthropist who promulgated the idea of displaying it and other baseball memorabilia in a museum that would also enshrine the game’s greats. In 1936, the Hall’s legendary “first class” was elected: Ty Cobb (the high vote-getter), Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner, Christy Mathewson, and Walter Johnson. The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum was officially dedicated on June 12, 1939.

More than sixty-three years later, Cooperstown’s Main Street accommodates nearly 400,000 pilgrims a year. They come for the displays, the gift shops, the nostalgia scented with wisps of their youth. They come for the artifacts, including a brown gnarled ball in a glass case. They come to be players in the ongoing fable of baseball. ■



Located in the heart of picturesque Cooperstown, New York, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum is one of the country’s most popular destinations and is surely the best-known sports shrine in the world. A historical treasure since 1939, the Hall of Fame stands as the definitive repository of the game’s treasures and as a symbol of the most profound individual honor bestowed on an athlete. The Baseball Hall of Fame’s mission is to preserve history, honor excellence, and connect generations.

“Inside Pitch” is the free, official e-mail newsletter of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Sign up today for “Inside Pitch” and learn something new about baseball history every week. Log on to www.baseballhalloffame.org, or call 888-Hall-Of-Fame for more information.