

Battlefield

Baseball!

THE BIRTH OF A NATIONAL PASTIME

by Michael Aubrecht

It is considered America's National Pastime, but far more than just a mere sporting event, baseball has become a major part of the American consciousness. In their book *The Pictorial History of Baseball*, John S. Bowman and Joel Zoss stated, "As part of the fabric of American culture, baseball is the common social ground between strangers, a world of possibilities and of chance, where 'it's never over till it's over.'" Rooted in the American Spirit, rich in legends, folklore and history, it is ultimately a timeless tradition where every game is a new nine-inning chapter and every participant has the chance to be a hero.



After long details at camp, recreational games such as baseball eased the boredom and created team spirit among the men. *Dyja, Thomas. "America's Rites of Passage," Civil War Times Illustrated, Vol. XXXVII, Number Two. May 1998*



Courtesy of Fort Ward Museum

Not unlike today, many political pundits loved the game of baseball and used its imagery to help satirize candidates. This image depicts future President Abraham Lincoln apparently standing above the competition.

One of the simplest and best explanations of the game's impact on society was penned in 1866 when Charles A. Peverelly wrote, "The game of baseball has now become beyond question the leading feature of the outdoor sports of the United States . . . It is a game which is peculiarly suited to the American temperament and disposition; . . . in short, the pastime suits the people, and the people suit the pastime."

During war, following natural disaster, or in the midst of economic hardship, this game has always provided an emotional escape for people from every race, religion and background who can collectively find solace at the ballpark. Therefore, it somehow seems fitting that the origins of modern baseball can be traced back to a divided America, when the country was in the midst of a great Civil War. Despite the political and social grievances that resulted in the separation of the North and South, both sides shared some common interests, such as playing baseball.

Although a primitive form of baseball was somewhat popular in larger communities on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, it did not achieve widespread popularity until after the start of the war. The mass concentration of young men in army camps and prisons eventually converted the sport

formerly reserved for “gentlemen” into a recreational pastime that could be enjoyed by people from all backgrounds. For instance, both officers and enlisted men played side by side and soldiers earned their places on the team because of their athletic talents, not their military rank or social standing.

Both Union and Confederate officers endorsed baseball as a much-needed morale builder that also provided both mental and physical conditioning. After long details at camp, it eased the boredom and created team spirit among the men. Some soldiers actually took baseball equipment to war with them. When proper equipment was not available they often improvised with fence posts, barrel staves or tree branches for bats and yarn or rag-wrapped walnuts or lumps of cork for balls.

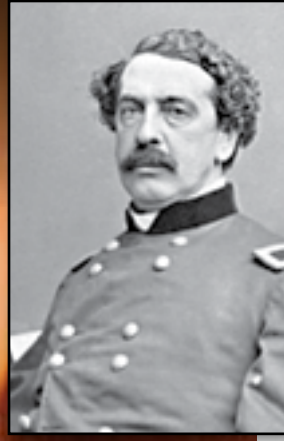
The benefits of playing while at war went far beyond fitness, as often the teamwork displayed on the baseball diamond translated into a teamwork mentality on the battlefield. Many times, soldiers would write of these games in the letters sent home, as they were much more pleasant to recall than the hardship of battle. This was perhaps one of the earliest forms of sports journalism and the precursor to the “box-score beat writers” of the 20th century.

Private Alpheris B. Parker of the 10th Massachusetts wrote, “The parade ground has been a busy place for a week or so past, ball-playing having become a mania in camp. Officers and men forget, for a time, the differences in rank and indulge in the invigorating sport with a schoolboy’s ardor.”

Another private writing home from Virginia recalled, “It is astonishing how indifferent a person can become to danger. The report of musketry is heard but a very little distance from us . . . yet over there on the other side of the road most of our company, playing bat ball and perhaps in less than half an hour, they may be called to play a Ball game of a more serious nature.”

Sometimes games would be interrupted by the call of battle. George Putnam, a Union soldier, humorously wrote of a game that was “called-early” due to the surprise attack on their camp by Confederate infantry: “Suddenly there was a scattering of fire, which three outfielders caught the brunt; the centerfield was hit and was captured, left and right field managed to get back to our lines. The attack . . . was repelled without serious difficulty, but we had lost not only our centerfield, but . . . the only baseball in Alexandria, Texas.”

It has been disputed for decades whether Union General Abner Doubleday was in fact the “father of the modern game.” Many baseball historians still reject the notion that Doubleday designed the first baseball diamond and drew up the modern rules. Nothing in his personal writings corroborates this story, which was originally put forward by an elderly Civil War veteran, Abner Graves, who served under him. Still, the City of Cooperstown, New York dedicated Doubleday Field in 1920 as the “official” birthplace of organized baseball. Later, Cooperstown became the home of the National Baseball Hall of Fame.



Although an enthusiastic fan and promoter of the sport, Union General Abner Doubleday was incorrectly identified as the inventor of baseball. To his credit, the general is said to have denied assertions that he was the founder of the national game when approached on the subject.

Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-B8172-1497 DLC

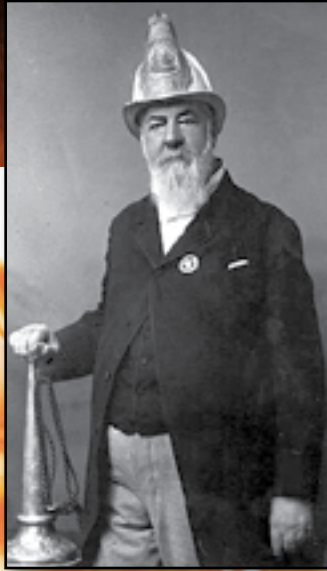
Doubleday was an 1842 graduate of West Point (graduating with A.P. Stewart, D.H. Hill, Earl Van Dorn and James Longstreet) and served in both the Mexican and Seminole Wars. In 1861, he was stationed at the garrison in Charleston harbor. It is said that it was Doubleday, then an artillery officer, who aimed the first Fort Sumter guns in response to the Confederate bombardment that initiated the war. Later he served in the Shenandoah region as a brigadier of volunteers and was assigned to a brigade of Irwin McDowell’s corps during the campaign of Second Manassas. Doubleday commanded a division of the 1st Corps at Sharpsburg and Fredericksburg, as well as at Gettysburg, where he assumed command of the 1st Corps after the fall of General John E. Reynolds on the first day’s fighting. His corps helped to repel Pickett’s Charge on the third day of the battle at Gettysburg.

Strangely, General Doubleday’s outstanding military service is often forgotten, yet his controversial baseball legacy lives on. A report published in 1908 by the Spalding Commission (appointed to research the origin of baseball) credited Union General Abner Doubleday as being the “father of the modern game.” It stated, “Baseball was invented in 1839 at Cooperstown by Abner Doubleday—afterward General Doubleday, a hero of the battle of Gettysburg—and the foundation of this invention was an American children’s game called ‘One Old Cat.’”

Since then, Alexander J. Cartwright, Jr. has been designated as the game’s principal founder. According to sources at the Fort Ward Museum, “In 1842, at the age of 22, Cartwright was among a group of men from New York City’s financial district who gathered at a vacant lot at 27th Street and 4th Avenue in Manhattan to play ‘baseball.’ In 1845, they organized themselves into the Knickerbockers Base Ball Club, restricting the membership to 40 males and assessed annual dues of five dollars. The following year, Cartwright devised new rules and regulations, instituting foul lines, nine players to a team, nine innings to a game and set up a square infield, known as the ‘diamond’ with 90-foot baselines to a side, bases in each corner. He also drew up guidelines for punctuality, designated the use of an umpire, determined that three strikes constituted an out, and that there would be three outs per side each inning.”

Alexander Cartwright is considered by most historians to be the “father of baseball.” His team, the New York Knickerbocker Base Ball Club, was named after his Fire Engine Company, apparently sometime between 1842–1845.

*Courtesy of “Mr. Baseball,”
Alexander Joy Cartwright, IV*



Cartwright left the New York area in 1849 to travel. He was drawn by the Gold Rush and stories of adventures in the West. Along the way, he taught the game to Native Americans and mountain men he encountered, spreading interest in the fledgling sport west of the Mississippi. Cartwright died in Hawaii in July of 1892. However, for decades to come, it was Doubleday who remained in the hearts and minds of enthusiasts everywhere as baseball’s father.

To his credit, the general is said to have always demurred on assertions by others that he was the founder of the national game. Yet the legend persisted decades after his death. Regardless of falsely being credited as the sole “inventor” of the modern version, Doubleday was an evident student and fan of the game. Some historians believe that he helped to organize contests in camp, possibly prior to the Battle of Chancellorsville. At the time of the engagement in early May, some 142 years ago, Doubleday was in command of the 3rd Division, 1st Corps. According to John Hennessy, chief historian at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Doubleday was in the area from the summer of 1862 through the Battle of Fredericksburg in December, and the Battle of Chancellorsville in May of 1863.

It has been determined that baseball was played “extensively” by Union soldiers in nearby Stafford County during that time, but there is no known documentation of Doubleday’s hand in games thereabouts. Perhaps a more realistic accolade would credit him with the promotion of the exercise as opposed to the invention of it.

Many of these contests were attended by thousands of spectators and often made front-page news equal to the war reports from the field. Ultimately, the Civil War helped fuel a boom in the popularity of baseball, evidenced by the fact that a ball club called the Washington Nationals was born in 1860—145 years before a Major League Baseball team in Washington, D.C. was given the same name.

In 1861, at the start of the war, an amateur team made up of members of the 71st New York Regiment defeated the Washington Nationals baseball club by a score of 41–13. When the 71st New York later returned to man the defenses of the capital in 1862, the teams played a rematch, which the Nationals won 28–13. Unfortunately, the victory came in part because some of the 71st Regiment’s best athletes had been killed at Bull Run only weeks after their first game. One of the largest attendances for a sporting event in the 19th century occurred on Christmas in 1862 when the 165th New York Volunteer Regiment (Zouaves) played at Hilton Head, South Carolina. The Zouaves’ opponent was a team composed of men selected from other Union regiments. Interestingly, A.G. Mills, who would later become the president of the National League, participated in the game.

According to George B. Kirsch’s 2003 book *Baseball in Blue & Gray*, John G.B. Adams of the 19th Massachusetts Regiment recounted that “base ball fever broke out” at a Falmouth encampment in early 1863 with both enlisted men and officers playing. The prize was “sixty dollars a side,” meaning the winning team paid the losers that sum. “It was a grand time, and all agreed it was nicer to play base than minie ball.”

Adams reported that around the same time, several Union soldiers watched Confederate soldiers play baseball across the Rappahannock River in Fredericksburg. Nicholas E. Young of the 27th New York Regiment, who later became a president of baseball’s National League, played the game at White Oak Church in Stafford County. Union soldier Mason Whiting Tyler wrote home that baseball was “all the rage now in the Army of the Potomac.”

George T. Stevens of the New York Volunteers said that in Falmouth, “there were many excellent players in the different regiments, and it was common for one regiment or brigade to challenge another regiment or brigade. These matches were followed by great crowds of soldiers with intense interest.”

Although early forms of baseball had already become high society’s pastime years before the first shots of the Civil War erupted at Fort Sumter, it was the mass participation of everyday soldiers that helped spread the game’s popularity across the nation. In his 1911 history of baseball titled *America’s National Game*, Albert G. Spalding wrote, “Modern baseball had been born in the brain of an American soldier. It received its baptism in the bloody days of our Nation’s direst danger. It had its early evolution when soldiers, North and South, were striving to forget their foes by cultivating, through this grand game, fraternal friendship with comrades in arms.”

He added, “No human mind may measure the blessings conferred by the game of Base Ball on the soldiers of our Civil War. It calmed the restless spirits of men who, after four years of bitter strife, found themselves at once in a monotonous era, with nothing at all to do.”



This photograph is believed to be the only one in existence to have captured a military baseball game during the Civil War. It features soldiers of Company G, 48th New York State Volunteers playing a game at Fort Pulaski, Georgia.

Courtesy of Fort Pulaski Military Park

During the War Between the States, countless baseball games, originally known as “Town Ball,” were organized in army camps and prisons on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. Very little documentation exists regarding these games and most information has been derived from letters written by officers and enlisted men to their families on the home front. Of the hundreds of pictures taken during the Civil War by photographers, there is only one photo in the National Archives that clearly captured a baseball game underway in the background. The image was taken at Fort Pulaski, Georgia and shows the “original” New York Yankees of the 48th Volunteers, playing a game in the fortification’s yard.

Several newspaper artists also depicted primitive ballgames and other forms of recreation devised to help boost troop morale and maintain physical fitness. Regardless of the lack of “media coverage,” military historians have proven that baseball was a common ground in a country divided and helped both Union

and Confederate soldiers temporarily escape the horror of war.

“Town Ball” is a direct descendant of the British game of “Rounders.” It was played in the United States as far back as the early 1800s and is considered a steppingstone toward modern baseball. Often referred to as “The Massachusetts Game,” it is still played by the Leatherstocking Base Ball Club every Sunday in Cooperstown. According to the game’s official rules as published by The Massachusetts Association of Base Ball Players, May 13, 1858: “Basetenders (infielders) and scouts (outfielders) recorded outs by plugging or soaking runners—a term used to describe hitting the runner (tagging them did not count) with the ball.”

Some additional “Town Ball” rules that are similar to today’s standard “Baseball” game include: “The Ball being struck at three times and missed, and caught each time by a player on the opposite side, the Striker shall be considered out. Or, if the Ball be ticked or knocked, and caught on

the opposite side, the Striker shall be considered out. But if the ball is not caught after being struck at three times, it shall be considered a knock, and the Striker obliged to run. Should the Striker stand at the Bat without striking at good balls thrown repeatedly at him, for the apparent purpose of delaying the game, or of giving advantage to players, the referees, after warning him, shall call one strike, and if he persists in such action, two and three strikes; when three strikes are called, he shall be subject to the same rules as if he struck at three fair balls."

Army encampments were not the only locations to host "Town Ball" games. Prisons also held them as POWs struggled to escape the hopelessness of their situation and combat the mind-numbing boredom that confronted them each day. One such institution was Salisbury Prison, located in North Carolina. The compound was established on sixteen acres purchased by the Confederate Government on November 2, 1861. The prison consisted of an old cotton factory building measuring 90x50 feet, six brick tenements, a large house, a smith shop and a few other small buildings.

Day-to-day life was tough, but prisoners had a large yard with plenty of room to move about. One of the favorite activities before the prison became overcrowded was baseball. So prevalent was the game at Salisbury that it was captured in an 1863 print. This illustration represents one of the earliest depictions of the game and recalls the days before overcrowding greatly diminished the camp's living conditions. The illustration was penned by Otto Boetticher, a commercial artist from New York City, who had enlisted in the 68th New York Volunteers in 1861 at the age of 45. He was captured in 1862 and was sent to the prison camp at Salisbury. During his time there he produced a drawing that depicted the game in a more pastoral than prison-like setting.

A field reporter named W.C. Bates mentioned the presence of baseball at Salisbury in his *Stars and Stripes* publication. He added that, "we have no official report

of the match-game of baseball played in Salisbury between the New Orleans and Tuscaloosa boys, resulting in the triumph of the latter; the cells of the Parish Prison were unfavorable to the development of the skill of the 'New Orleans nine.' Prisoner Gray mentions that baseball was played nearly every day the weather permitted. Claims have been made that these were the first baseball games played in the South."

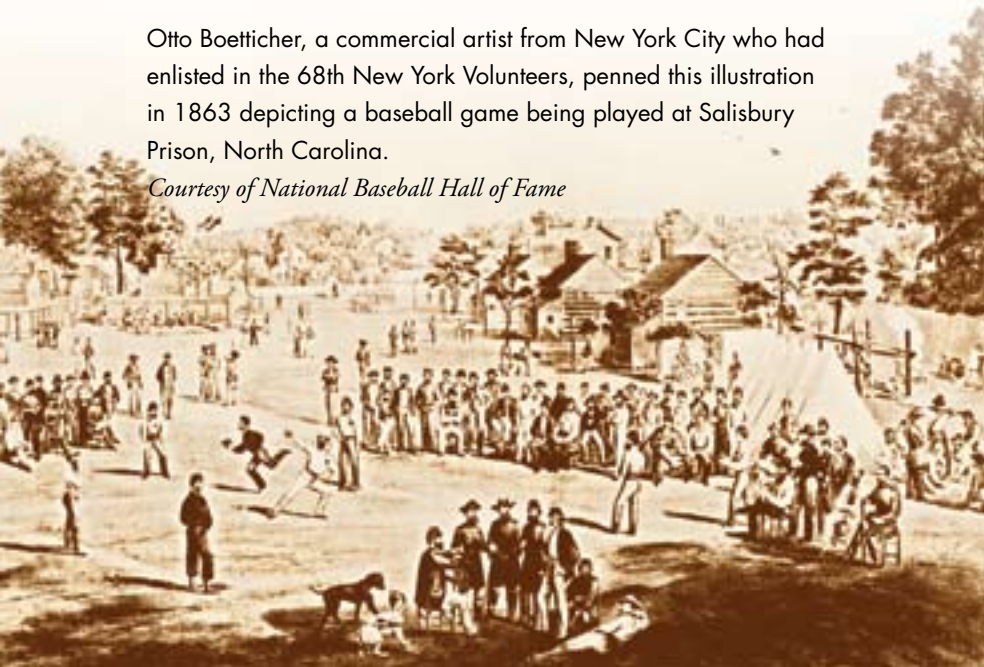
"Prisoner Gray" was actually Dr. Charles Carroll Gray, who indicated in his diary on July 4th that the day was "celebrated with music, reading of the Declaration of Independence, sack and foot races in the afternoon, and also a baseball game." Gray fondly recalled that baseball was played almost every day. Sgt. William J. Crossley of Company C, 2nd Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry, described in his memoirs at Salisbury prison that "the great game of baseball generated as much enjoyment to the Rebs as the Yanks, for they came in hundreds to see the sport."

More than a decade after the Civil War ended, the National League was developed. Coincidentally, it was the same year that General George Armstrong Custer was killed, along with 264 Union Cavalry troopers, after engaging Indian warriors at Little Bighorn. The year was 1876, and the National League of Professional Baseball was formed with an eight-team circuit consisting of the Boston Red Stockings, Chicago White Stockings, Cincinnati Red Legs, Hartford Dark Blues, Louisville Grays, Philadelphia Athletics, Brooklyn Mutuals and St. Louis Browns. It has been reported that many members of the U.S. Cavalry, most of them veterans of the Civil War, engaged in baseball games to pass the time while protecting the western territories. Some of them returned home to witness the likes of Ross Barnes of Chicago hit the first National League home run, which was an inside the park variation. A Cincinnati pitcher named William "Cherokee" Fisher served up that historic pitch.



Otto Boetticher, a commercial artist from New York City who had enlisted in the 68th New York Volunteers, penned this illustration in 1863 depicting a baseball game being played at Salisbury Prison, North Carolina.

Courtesy of National Baseball Hall of Fame



The Gettysburg College baseball team as they appeared in 1900. Several of the Bullets' former players made it to the big leagues, including Eddie Plank, George Winter, Rube Yarrison, Steve Bowers, and Harry O'Neill.

Courtesy of Gettysburg College



QuikFACTS


Civil War Baseball

The following table represents a few of the games that had been recorded for historical significance either by participants or observers (for simplicity, all forms of the game including "Town Ball" and "Round Ball" will simply be referred to as "baseball").

DATE	CAUSE	PARTICIPANTS	NOTABLES
1862	Union	Trainees from 13th Massachusetts and 51st Pennsylvania vs. themselves	Games were played evenings on the drilling field in many training camps prior to deployment.
1862	Union	165th New York Infantry (Second Duryea's Zouaves) vs. New York Regiment All-Star nine	Perhaps one of the most famous of all Civil War games, this one was witnessed by 40,000 troops.
1862	Union	The Irish Brigade vs. themselves	Confederate sentries stationed across the Chickahominy River watched Union games played during General McClellan's march to Richmond.
1862	Union	57th New York vs. 69th New York	Incoming Confederate cannon fire ended this game abruptly.
1862	Union	2nd Brigade, 2nd Division, Army of the Potomac vs. selected members of the "Honey Run Club" team	Members of both the brigade and the 1859 champions practiced regularly throughout the war.
1863	Confederate	24th Alabama vs. themselves	Rebels played daily while stationed in wait of the advancing Federal Army led by General William Tecumseh Sherman.
1863	Union	26th Pennsylvania vs. 22nd Massachusetts vs. 13th New York and 62nd NY Volunteers	All four regiments met for games, but disputed the differences between the Massachusetts and New York rules.
1863	Union	13th Massachusetts and 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery vs. misc. Army	Both teams had recorded so many victories that many felt they were capable of beating any professional team of the late 1800s.
1863	Union	1st New Jersey Artillery, Battery B vs. themselves	One of the printed drawings published of a baseball game thought to be played before the Battle of Chancellorsville.
1863	Union	Union soldiers encamped in Alexandria, Texas	During this game the camp was attacked, resulting in the loss of the center fielder and the ball.
1863	Union	Federal POWs detained at the Confederate Prison Camp at Salisbury, North Carolina	Despite pleasant accounts of baseball early on, many players later suffered and died due to overcrowded prison conditions.
1864	Union	2nd New Jersey Volunteers vs. 77th New York Volunteers All-Star nine	Billed as another big game, newspapers openly criticized the 77th after a no-show.
1864	Union	1st New Jersey Artillery vs. 10th Massachusetts Infantry	<i>New York Clipper</i> newspaper covered the game at Brandy Station. NJ lost 13–15.
1864	Confederate	11th Mississippi POWs at Union Prison Camp in Sandusky, Ohio ("Confederate Club" vs. "Southerners")	One game recorded ended with the Confederates winning 19–11.
1865	Both	Union and Confederate soldiers from both the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia	Following General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, soldiers from both sides played to pass the time.

Eventually organized baseball grew in popularity abroad and helped bring together a country that had been torn apart for so many years.

Regardless of its location, whether in prison camps or in the field, baseball provided an escape from the harsh realities of war and ultimately improved the morale of troops who were obviously homesick, scared, and in some cases, traumatized by the horrors they had witnessed on the battlefield. After the war ended, many men from both sides returned home to share the game that they had learned near the battlefield. Eventually organized baseball grew in popularity abroad and helped bring together a country that had been torn apart for so many years.

Today, over a century later, baseball is still a popular American institution and remains a testament to both “Billy Yank” and “Johnny Reb” who laid down their muskets to pick up a ball and help to establish a National Pastime. Perhaps it was Walt Whitman, one of America’s most prolific poets, who correctly predicted how a game played with a stick would grow into one of our country’s most prized possessions. He wrote: “I see great things in baseball. It’s our game—the American game. It will take our people out-of-doors, fill them with oxygen, and give them a larger physical stoicism. Tend to relieve us from being a nervous, dyspeptic set. Repair these losses and be a blessing to us.” 

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Michael Aubrecht is an author and historian living in Fredericksburg, Virginia. From 2000–2006 he provided over 400 studies on the history of baseball as a contributing writer for *Baseball-Almanac*. He is the author of several religious books on the Civil War including *Onward Christian Soldier*, *Christian Cavalier*, and *The Southern Cross* (release pending), as well as a contributing writer for *The Free Lance-Star* newspaper. Michael is currently working on a regional study for The History Press titled *Houses of the Holy: Historic Churches of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania*. For more information, visit his Web site at www.pinstripepress.net.