



Who Invented Baseball?

Albert G. Spalding was determined to establish that baseball was as American as apple pie and, well, baseball.

Spalding devoted his life to the game. As a pitcher, he led Boston to four pennants, and ended up 207–56. He went on to own the National League’s Chicago White Stockings (who became the Cubs, not the White Sox) and the A. G. Spalding Company, which supplied baseballs to the American League and sporting goods to the rest of America. He was a publisher, too; the annual *Spalding’s Official Base Ball Guide* was the game’s most important record book. But his greatest and most lasting influence was as baseball’s mythmaker.

There’s the story he told, for example, about a delegation of Republicans who arrived in Springfield, Illinois, to inform Abraham Lincoln that the party had nominated him for president. Lincoln, Spalding explained, was “engaged in a game of Base Ball.” So Lincoln informed the delegation they would have “to wait a few minutes until I make another base hit.” As with most Spalding stories, this one was often repeated and never verified.

His most famous contribution to baseball mythology was, of course, Abner Doubleday. Doubleday, Spalding insisted, invented baseball. The time was 1839, the place small-town America. More specifically, Cooperstown, New York.

“Cricket is a splendid game,” he wrote, “for Britons. Our British Cricketer, having finished his day’s labor at noon, may don

his negligee shirt, his white trousers, his gorgeous hosiery and his canvas shoes, and sally forth to the field of sport, with his sweet-heart on one arm and his Cricket bat under the other, knowing that he may engage in his national pastime without soiling his linen or neglecting his lady."

"Not so the American Ball Player," he continued. "We have a game too lively for any but Americans to play."

Others, most notably the Spalding guides' English-born editor Henry Chadwick, disagreed. Chadwick argued baseball evolved from a British bat-and-ball game, though not cricket. Baseball's ancestor, Chadwick believed, was rounders. To be sure, there were differences: in rounders, bases were stones or posts, any number could play on each side, fielders had no set positions, and they retired runners by throwing the ball at them. But there was a "pecker" or "feeder" who threw the ball and there was a "striker" who tried to hit it. And the striker then circled the bases, albeit running clockwise. Besides, Chadwick didn't claim rounders and baseball were the same, just that the former was the latter's ancestor.

"From this little English acorn of Rounders," he wrote in 1868, in what seemed a pretty conciliatory way to put it, "has the giant American oak of Base Ball grown."

To Spalding, these were fighting words. In 1905, after years of squabbling with Chadwick, Spalding set up a special commission to establish baseball's origins once and for all. He appointed two senators and several businessmen. The chairman was one-time National League president A. G. Mills. The commission spent two years investigating without coming up with much. Then, in 1907, Spalding submitted letters from Abner Graves, then a mining engineer in Denver. Graves recalled how, in Coopers-town back in 1839, Abner Doubleday drew the first diagram of a diamond with all the fielders' positions marked.

"He went diligently among the boys in the town, and in several schools, explaining the plan, and inducing them to play Base Ball in lieu of other games," Graves wrote. "Doubleday's game was played in a good many places around town: sometimes in the old militia muster lot, or training ground, a couple of hun-

dred yards southeasterly from the courthouse, where County Fairs were occasionally held.”

For those who believed baseball was wholly American, Doubleday was an ideal choice. He was a military hero: he aimed the cannon for the Union’s first shot of the Civil War at Fort Sumter, distinguished himself at Gettysburg, and retired as a major general. He later moved to San Francisco and built the nation’s first cable car system. In case the commission didn’t get it, Spalding spelled it out. “It certainly appeals to an American pride,” he explained, “to have the great national game of Base Ball created and named by a Major General in the United States Army.” And what better place for the game’s origins than pastoral Cooperstown, the boyhood home of the great American novelist James Fenimore Cooper?

Doubleday himself could not testify, having been buried in Arlington National Cemetery since 1892. But Graves’s word was enough for the commission. Its report concluded: “First—That Base Ball had its origin in the United States; Second—That the first scheme for playing it, according to the best evidence obtainable to date, was devised by Abner Doubleday.”

Mills added his own interpretation of how it happened. “In the days when Abner Doubleday attended school in Coopers-town, it was a common thing for two dozen or more of school boys to join in a game of ball,” he wrote. “Doubtless, as in my later experience, collisions between players in attempting to catch the batted ball were frequent, and injury due to this cause, or to the practice of putting out the runner by hitting him with the ball, often occurred.”

Mills continued: “I can well understand how the orderly mind of the embryo West Pointer would devise a scheme for limiting the contestants on each side and allotting them to field positions, each with a certain amount of territory; also substituting the existing side and allotting them to field positions, each with a certain amount of territory; also substituting the existing method of putting out the base runner, for the old one of ‘plugging’ him with the ball.”

In 1939, to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the game’s supposed invention, the National Baseball Hall of Fame

and Museum opened in Cooperstown. The Doubleday story was now set in stone, or at least brick. Well before then, however, baseball historians were chipping away at its foundations. Some calculated that in 1839 Graves was five years old, making him an unlikely playmate for the twenty-year-old Doubleday. Others noted that Doubleday was at West Point, not Cooperstown, from 1838 to 1842. Moreover, Doubleday and Mills had been lifelong friends, yet the game's inventor apparently never mentioned his brainstorm to the National League president. Chadwick dismissed the whole Doubleday story as a "joke between Albert and myself."

The story was, indeed, pure fiction, as much a hoax as the Cardiff giant, the ten-foot-tall giant housed in Cooperstown's Farmer's Museum, just down the road from the Hall of Fame. Even the Hall, to its credit, conceded the story's appeal was mostly sentimental. Its exhibit on Doubleday includes the following: "In the hearts of those who love baseball, he is remembered as the lad in the pasture where the game was invented. Only cynics would need to know more."

Cooperstown, in fact, was an entirely inhospitable setting for baseball. As historian Alan Taylor recounted in his book *William Cooper's Town*, in 1816 the village trustees, intent on imposing the proper order on their streets, passed an ordinance banning ballplaying of any sorts in the town center. "Cooperstown," Taylor concluded, "can better claim to have tried to prevent the invention of baseball."

If not there, where? And who?

The Mills Commission itself provided an alternative to the Cooperstown-Doubleday myth. The place was Hoboken, New Jersey, the person was Alexander Joy Cartwright. Though the commission designated Doubleday as the game's inventor, it credited Cartwright with improving the rules and putting them down on paper. Wrote Spalding: "To Alexander J. Cartwright, beyond doubt, belongs the honor of having been the first to move in the direction of securing an organization of Base Ball

Players. It is of record that in the spring of 1845, Mr. Cartwright, being present and participating in a practice game of ball, proposed to others the formal association of themselves together as a Base Ball Club."

Cartwright was a member of a group of businessmen and clerks who called themselves the New York Knickerbockers. At first, the Knickerbockers played various bat-and-ball games on Manhattan's vacant lots. As the city built around them, the group crossed the Hudson River to a resort known as Elysian Fields. In 1845, Cartwright, a clerk at a Wall Street bank and then co-owner of a bookstore and stationery shop, organized the Knickerbockers into a club and codified the rules. Cartwright's game still varied considerably from modern baseball: the game ended not after nine innings but after one team scored twenty-one runs, and the batter was out if a fielder caught a ball on one bounce. Still, Cartwright's game, like Doubleday's, was recognizably baseball. The bases were laid out in a diamond, fielders were assigned positions, base runners were tagged out and not thrown at.

Hoboken has no Hall of Fame, only a small plaque claiming the game's origins. Nearby, in a small grass triangle known as Elysian Park, a sign reads, "No Ball Playing." Yet there is far more documentary evidence to back Hoboken's claim than Coopers-town's. The Knickerbocker Game Book, now in the New York Public Library's Spalding Collection, records variations of the rules in 1845 and 1846, as well as a primitive box score of the club's first match, against a team identified as the "New York Nine."

That game, according to the game book, took place June 19, 1846. The book doesn't say much about the opponents, who may have been cricket players or a pickup team with some outsiders and some Knickerbockers. In any case, the New York Nine had clearly mastered the game: they beat the Knickerbockers 23-1 in four innings. As Spalding put it, the Knickerbockers were admirable gentlemen, but "it does not appear that any of these were world-beaters in the realm of athletic sports." Indeed, he added, "there is reason to believe that these fine old fellows

shone more resplendently in the banquet hall than on the diamond field.”

By putting the rules down on paper, Cartwright (and his lesser-known colleagues William R. Wheaton, William Tucker, and Duncan Curry) assured that the Knickerbocker game would spread, first among other New York clubs, then to other parts of the country. In 1849, Cartwright joined the California gold rush, teaching the game on his way west. Later, Cartwright moved to Hawaii, and by 1852 the game was being played there. Even in Cooperstown, his significance was not denied: his portrait hangs in the Hall of Fame; Abner Doubleday’s does not.

It was Cartwright’s game that took hold. Yet that is not the same thing as saying that his was the original. Baseball historian John Thorn has made a strong case that Daniel “Doc” Adams played as great a role as Cartwright in creating baseball—and played it at least five years earlier. Thorn rediscovered an 1896 interview with Adams, in which the then-eighty-one-year-old recalled playing the game as early as 1839. Adams played on a club called the New York Base Ball club, many of whose members later formed the Knickerbockers.

Other bat-and-ball games were played in other places. In Philadelphia, for example, clubs played a version of “town ball,” a game whose origins dated back to before the Revolution, when farmers would come to town to play. The Philadelphians had no foul territory and no limit on the number of players, and they laid out their bases on a square much smaller than today’s infield. But they did have at least one feature of the modern game lacking in New York: in Philadelphia, pitchers threw overhand.

The Philadelphia game spread to Ohio and Kentucky as well as other parts of Pennsylvania, but the New York game eventually wiped it out. In May 1860, the Philadelphians started playing by Knickerbocker rules.

The Massachusetts version of town ball lasted longer, codifying its rules in 1858 and spreading throughout New England. In the Massachusetts game, pitchers threw overhand, and fielders had to catch the ball on the fly, but there were also many elements that would seem strange today: there were no foul lines, the bases were wooden stakes, the batter stood between first and

“fourth base,” runners were “plugged” or “soaked” by throws rather than tagged out, and the teams got only one out per inning. The game’s biggest drawback, and the reason it lost out to the New York version, was that it took one hundred runs to win. An 1860 state championship game between the Unions of Medway and the Winthrops of Holliston took six days to reach that total. As one reporter noted, “The time occupied in playing the game under such rules was, we think, rather too much of a good thing.”

By the end of the Civil War, most New England teams had adopted the Knickerbocker rules.

Increasingly, historians have come to agree with Henry Chadwick that all these early versions of baseball—whether New York’s or Philadelphia’s or Boston’s—evolved over decades, even centuries. The history of these games is still largely unknown, partly because, unlike cricket, they were played by working-class people or children. These lives were rarely documented.

Still, some evidence remains. *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, published in 1744, contained a description of “base-ball” and a picture illustrating a game. One soldier at Valley Forge, for example, wrote in his journal that George Washington’s troops passed the time by playing “base.” In 1791, the town council of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, was sufficiently concerned about “the preservation of the windows in the new meeting house” to prohibit a slew of games within eighty yards of the building. The bylaw explicitly names baseball as one of the culprits. *A Boy’s Own Book*, published in 1829, included a set of rules for rounders remarkably similar to those for baseball. In 1834, *The Book of Sports* printed the same rules for the game of “Base,” adding that was the name “generally adopted.”

All this is part of baseball’s history, as are town ball, old cat, rounders, and other games played in England and colonial America. There was no single moment when Abner Doubleday or Alexander Cartwright or Doc Adams imagined an entirely new game.

Why, then, does the Doubleday story persist?

Partly it's because it appeals to America's nostalgia for its rural past. "Part of the agreeable nonsense about baseball being an echo of our pastoral past is the myth that Abner Doubleday invented the sport one fine day in 1839 in the farmer Phinney's pasture," wrote political columnist George Will. "The untidy truth is that the sport evolved from two similar, but interestingly different, games, based in two cities, New York and Boston."

Partly, too, there's a longing for that single moment of creation. Evolution, whether of humanity or baseball, is a more difficult story to grasp than one about Adam and Eve, or Abner Doubleday and Alexander Cartwright. "Creation myths," wrote paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, "identify heroes and sacred places, while evolutionary stories provide no palpable, particular thing as a symbol for reverence, worship, or patriotism."

Yet evolutionary stories bring their own satisfactions. Asked Gould: "We may need heroes and shrines, but is there not grandeur in the sweep of continuity? Shall we revel in a story for all humanity that may include the sacred ball courts of the Aztecs, and perhaps, for all we know, a group of *Homo erectus* hitting rocks or skulls with a stick or femur? Or shall we halt beside the mythical Abner Doubleday, standing behind the tailor's shop in Cooperstown, and say 'behold the man'—thereby violating truth and, perhaps even worse, extinguishing both thought and wonder?"

To investigate further:

Gilbert, Thomas. *Elysian Fields*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1995. Though written for a young adult audience, this is a very thorough history of the game's early years.

Gould, Stephen Jay. *Triumph and Tragedy in Mudville*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2003. Gould's two great passions were biology and baseball.

Henderson, Robert. *Ball, Bat, and Bishop*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001. Originally published in 1947, this was one of the earliest and most thorough debunkings of the Doubleday myth. Henderson traces ball sports back to Egypt.

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Seymour, Harold. *Baseball: The Early Years*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1960. The first of three volumes written by the man *Sports Illustrated* called “the Edward Gibbon of baseball history.”

Spalding, Albert G. *America's National Game*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. Originally published in 1911, this draws heavily on not only Spalding's recollections but also the writings and scrap-books of Henry Chadwick. “No book has shaped our understanding of early baseball history more deeply,” wrote historian Benjamin Rader.

Springwood, Charles. *Cooperstown to Dyersville*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996. A cultural anthropologist's study of American narratives of pastoralism and nostalgia. Dyersville, Iowa, is the site of the baseball field made famous by the movie *Field of Dreams*.

Thorn, John. “Doc Adams.” Thorn's essay is part of the Society for American Baseball Research's biography project at <http://bioproj.sabr.org>. Thorn also was responsible for rediscovering Pittsfield's 1791 law.

Voigt, David Quentin. *American Baseball: From Gentleman's Sport to the Commissioner System*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966. Like Seymour, Voigt wrote a multivolume history. He emphasizes the sociology and economics of the game.