

## TOPIC 2: BASEBALL DURING THE CIVIL WAR, 1861–1865

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. During war, following natural disasters, or in the midst of economic hardship, the 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 ironic 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.

### Baseball on the Battlefield

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. “Town Ball” is a direct descendant of the British game of “Rounders.” It was played in the United States as far back as 1800. Although these 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 (1911) 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.”

Very little documentation exists regarding Civil War-era games, and most information has been derived from letters written by officers and enlisted men to their families from the home front. Of the hundreds of photographs taken during the Civil War, there is only one photo in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. 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 (Photo 1)).

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 divided country and helped both Union and Confederate soldiers temporarily escape the horror of war.

The mass concentration of young men in army camps 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 a 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 (Photo 2).

The benefits of playing while at war went far beyond fitness, as often the camaraderie 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 twentieth 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” (Ward and Burns 1994:11). 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” (Brown 2020).

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 centerfielder, but . . . the only baseball in Alexandria, Texas” (Enders 2016:44).

## **Baseball in Civil War Prisons**

Army encampments were not the only locations to host “Town Ball” games. Prisons also held them as prisoners of war (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 16 acres purchased by the Confederate Government on November 2, 1861. The prison consisted of an old cotton factory building measuring 90 x 50 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 romantically 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 (Kirsch 2003:43). During his time there he produced a drawing that depicted the game in a more pastoral than prison-like setting (Figure 1).

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. [Cassevens 2007:135]

"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 2020). Gray fondly recalled that baseball was played almost every day. Sgt. William J. Crossley of Company C, 2<sup>nd</sup> 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."

## **Founding Father?**

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 (Baseball-Almanac.com 2020). 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.

Doubleday was an 1842 graduate of West Point and served in both the Mexican and Seminole Wars (Photo 3). 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. Doubleday commanded a division of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps at Sharpsburg and Fredericksburg, as well as at Gettysburg, where he assumed command 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 (The History Channel 2020).

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’” (Spalding Commission 1908)

Since then, Alexander J. Cartwright, Jr. has been designated as the game’s principal founder (Photo 4). 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. [Fort Ward Museum 2020]

Cartwright left the New York area in 1849 to travel (Martin 2009). 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 1892 (Martin 2009). 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 balked 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 in Spotsylvania and Orange Counties, Virginia. At the time of the engagement in early May, Doubleday was in command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, 1<sup>st</sup> Corps. According to sources at the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park (FSNMP), Doubleday was in the area from the summer of 1862 through the Battle of Fredericksburg in December, and the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863 (FSNMP, personal communication 2020).

It has been determined that baseball was played by Union soldiers in nearby Stafford County, Virginia, 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. One noteworthy contest took place in the Union Army’s winter encampment between the Battles of Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. At this time baseball became a welcome reprieve once the weather began to warm up. Officers from the 13th New York and the 140th New York played a game on April 2, 1863, in their camps near Stoneman’s Switch in Stafford County.

This game went to extra innings, but ended in a tie score, 33–33 (Figure 2) (Society for Baseball Research 2020).

## Great Games

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 71<sup>st</sup> New York Regiment defeated the Washington Nationals baseball club by a score of 41–13 (Dcist.com 2019). When the 71<sup>st</sup> New York later returned to man the defenses of the capital in 1862, the teams played a rematch, which the Nationals won, 28–13 (City of Alexandria 2020). Unfortunately, the victory came in part because some of the 71<sup>st</sup> 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 nineteenth century occurred on Christmas in 1862 when the 165<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteer Regiment (Zouaves) played at Hilton Head, South Carolina (Table 1). 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 (Society for Baseball Research 2020).

According to George B. Kirsch’s 2003 book *Baseball in Blue & Gray*, John G.B. Adams of the 19<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment recounted that “base ball fever broke out” at a Falmouth encampment in early 1863 with both enlisted men and officers playing (Kirsch 2003). 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 27<sup>th</sup> 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. [Kirsch 2003:28]

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.” (Stevens 1866)

## The Modern Game

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 Native American 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 (Figure 3). 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 (Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice 2020). 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 (Baseball-Almanac.com 2020).

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." (City of Alexandria 2020).

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## Figures/Photos/Tables



Figure 1: Civil War-era lithograph depicting Union prisoners held at Camp Salisbury, North Carolina, playing a game of baseball (Battlefields.com 2020).

**BALL PLAY IN THE ARMY.**—The “boys” of the 14th Reg. N. Y. S. V. and the Old Ninth N. Y., had their first base ball match of the season at Culpepper Court House, Va., on the 20th ult, but the game was not played as well as it might have been, had they had a little more practice. Johnny Grindell, the Soldier Ped, says that if Gen. Grant does not send them to have a match with Gen. Lee, they are willing to have another friendly match, but if he does, the blue coats think that the leaden balls will be much harder to stop than if thrown by friendly hands on the club grounds, which is a very philosophical view of the case. Below will be found the score:

| FOURTEENTH N. Y. S. M. |           |    |  | NINTH N. Y. S. M.      |           |    |  |
|------------------------|-----------|----|--|------------------------|-----------|----|--|
| O.                     | B.        | R. |  | O.                     | B.        | R. |  |
| Spowers, p.....        | 6         | 2  |  | Connolly, p.....       | 2         | 4  |  |
| Bennett, c.....        | 2         | 3  |  | Baines, c.....         | 5         | 3  |  |
| Long, 1st b.....       | 5         | 3  |  | J. Tompson, 1st b..... | 4         | 4  |  |
| McGuire, 2d b.....     | 2         | 4  |  | Joyce, 2d b.....       | 3         | 4  |  |
| Brown, 3d b.....       | 3         | 4  |  | Blaney, 3d b.....      | 4         | 3  |  |
| Slattery, s s.....     | 2         | 4  |  | Tabelle, s s.....      | 1         | 5  |  |
| Welsh, r f.....        | 5         | 1  |  | Biggs, r f.....        | 4         | 4  |  |
| Cottier, l f.....      | 1         | 4  |  | Vredenburgh, l f.....  | 2         | 5  |  |
| Baldwin, c f.....      | 1         | 4  |  | G. Tompson, c f.....   | 2         | 4  |  |
| <b>Total.....</b>      | <b>29</b> |    |  | <b>Total.....</b>      | <b>36</b> |    |  |

**RUNS MADE IN EACH INNINGS.**

|                          | 1st. | 2d. | 3d. | 4th. | 5th. | 6th. | 7th. | 8th. | 9th. |
|--------------------------|------|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Fourteenth Regiment..... | 4    | 2   | 0   | 3    | 5    | 4    | 5    | 4    | 2—29 |
| Ninth Regiment.....      | 1    | 6   | 5   | 0    | 7    | 4    | 3    | 6    | 4—36 |

Umpire—Lieut. A. M. Burtis, Q. M. Ninth N. Y.  
 Scorers for the Fourteenth—John H. Fisher.  
 “ “ Ninth—F. O. Flood.

**A SECOND MATCH** between the nines of the Ninth and Fourteenth Regiments was played on the 25th ult. Although the day was windy, John Grindell, our famous New York pedestrian, says “the soldier boys had some excellent sport, victory finally perching on the banners of the gallant Fourteenth.” We here give the score:

| FOURTEENTH.         |           |    |  | NINTH.                |           |    |  |
|---------------------|-----------|----|--|-----------------------|-----------|----|--|
| H.                  | L.        | R. |  | H.                    | L.        | R. |  |
| Axtell, p.....      | 2         | 5  |  | Connolly, p.....      | 3         | 4  |  |
| Bennett, c.....     | 4         | 4  |  | Baines, c.....        | 2         | 5  |  |
| Baldwin, 1st b..... | 3         | 4  |  | Thompson, 1st b.....  | 4         | 2  |  |
| McGuire, 2d b.....  | 5         | 3  |  | Joyce, 2d b.....      | 1         | 5  |  |
| Brown, 3d b.....    | 5         | 3  |  | Tabley, 3d b.....     | 6         | 1  |  |
| Welsh, r f.....     | 1         | 6  |  | Blaury, r f.....      | 3         | 4  |  |
| Long, l f.....      | 2         | 4  |  | Vredenburgh, l f..... | 3         | 4  |  |
| Britt, s s.....     | 2         | 5  |  | Davis, s s.....       | 4         | 3  |  |
| Slattery, c f.....  | 3         | 4  |  | Boggs, c f.....       | 1         | 5  |  |
| <b>Total.....</b>   | <b>38</b> |    |  | <b>Total.....</b>     | <b>33</b> |    |  |

**RUNS MADE IN EACH INNINGS.**

|                 | 1st. | 2d. | 3d. | 4th. | 5th. | 6th. | 7th. | 8th. | 9th. |
|-----------------|------|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Fourteenth..... | 6    | 2   | 4   | 1    | 11   | 3    | 4    | 5    | —38  |
| Ninth.....      | 4    | 3   | 2   | 8    | 1    | 3    | 7    | 2    | —33  |

Umpire—Lieut. G. W. Martin, of the Fourteenth.  
 Scorers—Messrs. J. H. Fisher, Fourteenth, and Flood of the Ninth.

Figure 2: Civil War-era box score, 14th New York Versus 9th New York (Battlefields.org 2020).

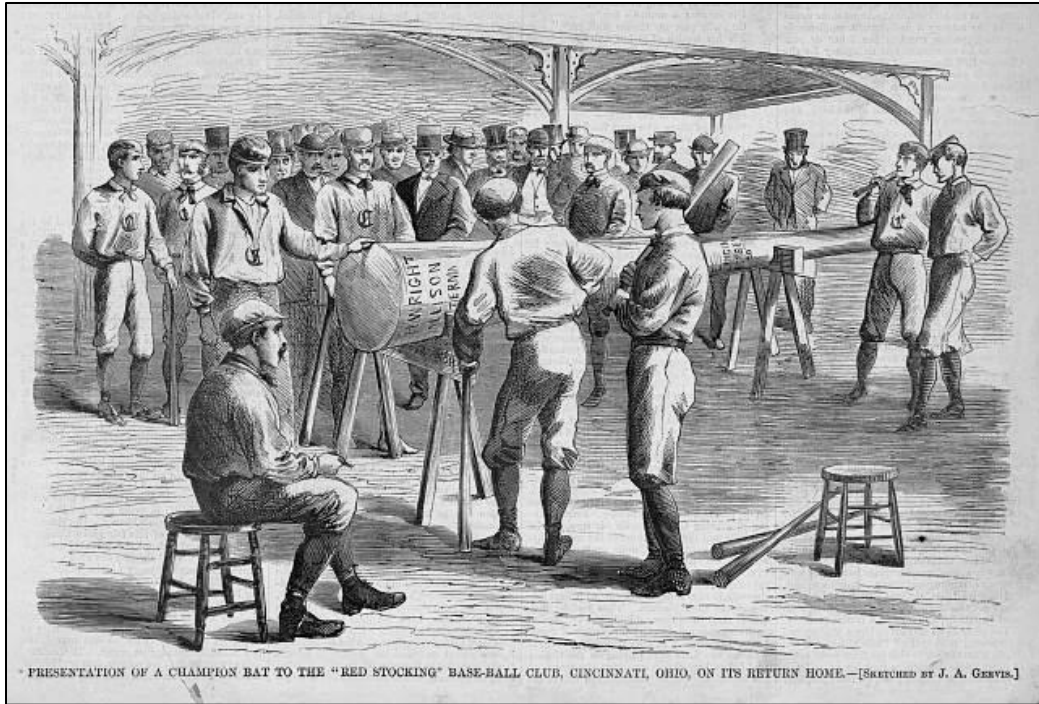


Figure 3: Champion Boston Red Stockings receiving “Champion Bat” (Harper’s Weekly. Reprinted by Baseball Comes Alive 2020).

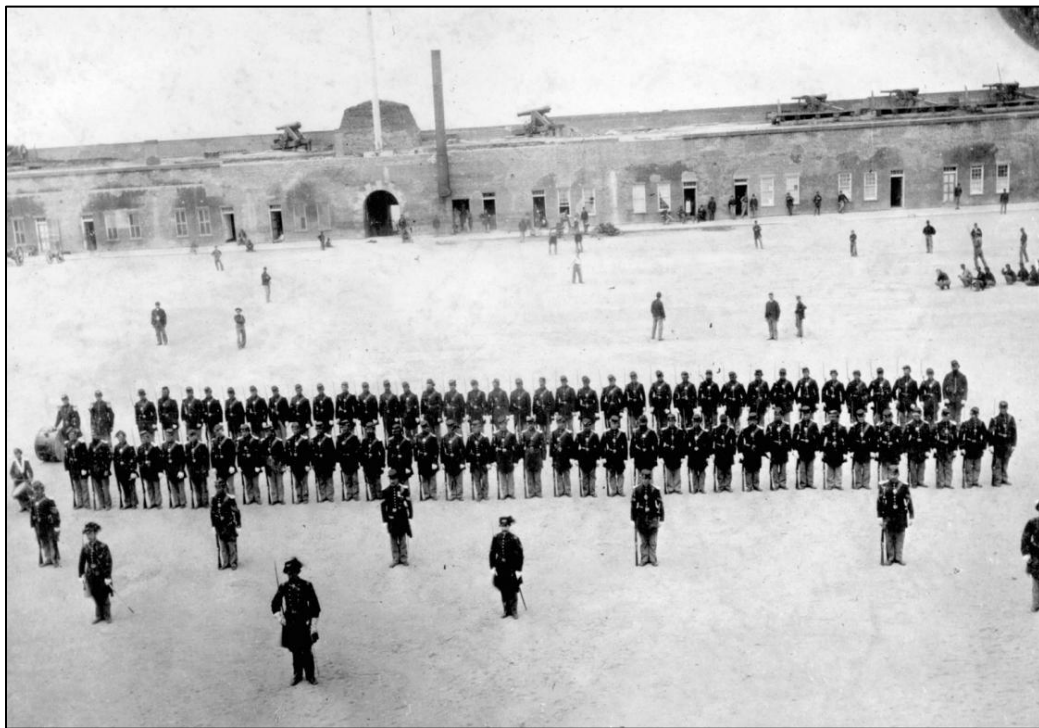


Photo 1: As Company H of the 48<sup>th</sup> New York Regiment posed for a photograph at Fort Pulaski in 1863, some of their comrades played baseball behind them (Battlefields.org 2020). This is among the earliest photographs of baseball ever taken.



Photo 2: Civil War-era baseball found on battlefield (Baseball Comes Alive 2020).

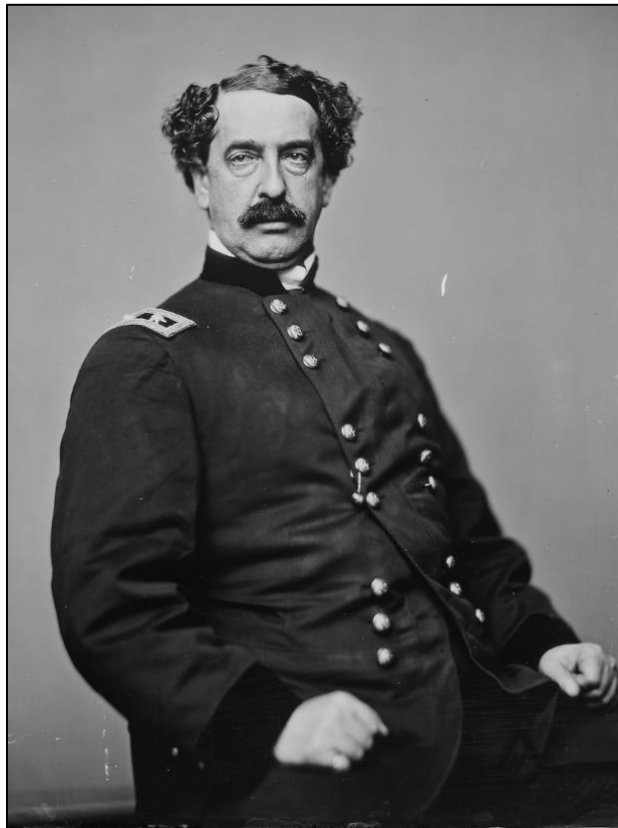


Photo 3: Union General Abner Doubleday (Britannica.com).

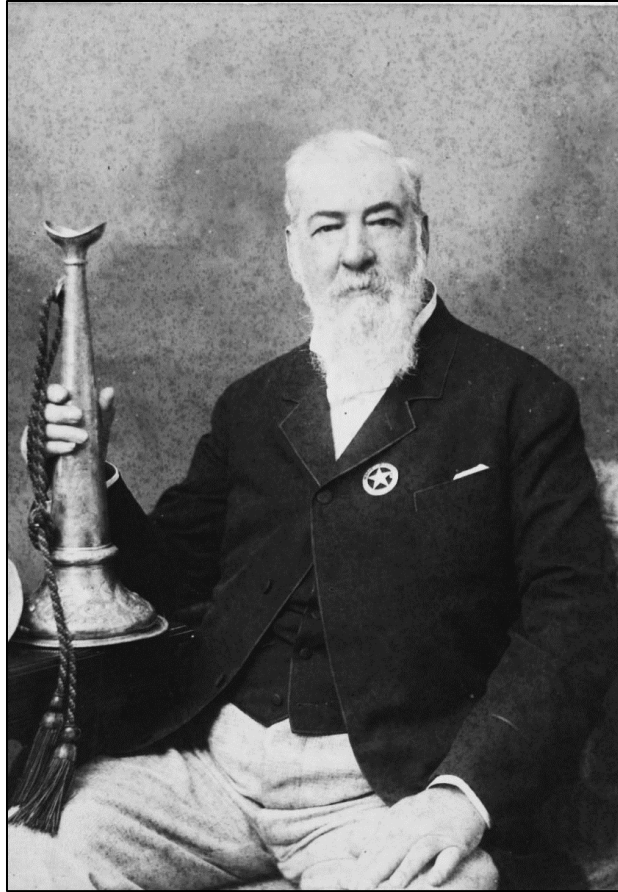


Photo 4: Baseball Founder Alexander J. Cartwright (Baseballhall.org 2020).

Table 1: Significant Games 1862–1865.

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 "townball" and "roundball" will be referred to as baseball.)

| Date | Cause | Participants   | Notables  |
|------|-------|--|---|
| 1862 | Union | Trainees from 13 <sup>th</sup> Massachusetts and 51 <sup>st</sup> Pennsylvania vs. themselves                            | Games were played evenings on the drilling field in many training camps prior to deployment.  |
| 1862 | Union | 165 <sup>th</sup> New York Infantry (Second Duryea's Zouaves) vs. NY 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 | 57 <sup>th</sup> New York vs. 69 <sup>th</sup> New York  | Incoming Confederate cannon fire ended this game abruptly.  |
| 1862 | Union | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 2 <sup>nd</sup> 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.  |

| <b>Date</b> | <b>Cause</b> | <b>Participants</b>   | <b>Notables</b>  |
|-------------|--------------|---|--|
| 1863        | Confederate  | 24 <sup>th</sup> Alabama vs. themselves   | Rebels, played daily while stationed in wait of the advancing Federal Army led by General William Tecumseh Sherman.              |
| 1862        | Union        | Soldiers played each other on the White House lawn  | Northern troops posted to Washington D.C. played baseball to pass the time.  |
| 1863        | Union        | 13 <sup>th</sup> New York and the 140 <sup>th</sup> New York  | Game played prior to Battle of Chancellorsville. Went to extra innings, but ended in a tie score, 33-33.                         |
| 1863        | Union        | 26 <sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania vs. 22 <sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts vs. 13 <sup>th</sup> New York and 62 <sup>nd</sup> NY Volunteers | All four regiments met for games, but disputed the differences between the MA and NY rules.                                      |
| 1863        | Union        | 13 <sup>th</sup> Massachusetts and 1 <sup>st</sup> Rhode Island Light Artillery vs. misc. Army                                    | Both teams had recorded so many victories; many felt that they were capable of beating any professional team of the late 1800's. |
| 1863        | Union        | 1 <sup>st</sup> New Jersey Artillery, Battery B vs. themselves  | Game played before the Battle of Chancellorsville in Stafford County.  |
| 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.                               |
| 1864        | Union        | 2 <sup>nd</sup> New Jersey Volunteers vs. 77 <sup>th</sup> New York Volunteers All-Star nine                                      | Billed as another big game, newspapers openly criticized the 77th after a no-show.   |
| 1864        | Union        | 1 <sup>st</sup> New Jersey Artillery vs. 10 <sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry  | New York Clipper newspaper covered the game at Brandy Station. NJ lost 13 to 15.   |
| 1864        | Confederate  | 11 <sup>th</sup> Mississippi POWs at Union Prison Camp in Sandusky, OH (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.          |
| 1861–1865   | Union        | POWs detained at the Confederate Prison Camp in Salisbury, NC   | Despite pleasant accounts of baseball early on, many players later died due to overcrowded conditions.                           |