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Eddie Plank Historical Marker

Garrett S. Gaydosh
Gettysburg College

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Eddie Plank Historical Marker

Description

Eddie Plank (1875-1926)

Baseball great. One of the most dominant pitchers of the twentieth century. "Gettysburg Eddie" compiled a record of 326-194 in a 17-year career (1901-17), mostly with the Philadelphia Athletics. He won 20 games or more eight times and helped the A's win six pennants and three world championships. Plank was born [near this spot], attended Gettysburg Academy, and retired and died in Gettysburg. Elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame, 1946.

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Keywords

Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Eddie Plank, baseball, Philadelphia Athletics, pennant, world championship, Baseball Hall of Fame

Disciplines

History | Social History | Sports Studies | United States History

Campus Location

Carlisle Street

Gettysburg College

Hidden in Plain Sight:
Eddie Plank Historical Marker

History 300

Historical Methods

Dr. Michael Birkner

By

Garrett Gaydosh

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The above is the text on the Eddie Plank Historical Marker located in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The blue sign lies on Carlisle Street, in between Stevens Street and Lincoln Avenue. An object I regularly pass when walking along campus, I never took much notice of the sign about some dead baseball player. But as I did some research on the sign, I discovered more about Eddie Plank, and the sign itself, than I at first thought I would.

To gain some insight into why the sign would be important, or erected in the first place, I did some research on Eddie Plank himself. I had some minor knowledge of Plank before my research; I knew he was from Gettysburg, and that he was a major league pitcher. I had also seen a plaque in Bream-Wright-Hauser Gym lobby on campus, mentioning his baseball career for the college. I had always assumed the Plank Gym was named after him as well. But other than these few things, I didn't know much of Plank or his contribution to the town of Gettysburg. My research would uncover some interesting things about "Gettysburg Eddie" and the marker on Carlisle Street.

Edward Stewart Plank was born in Straban Township in Adams County, Pennsylvania, on August 31st, 1875. "Eddie's" parents were David L. Plank and Martha A. McCreary, farmers. Plank spent the first twenty-five years of his life working on his parent's farm just four miles north of town, but he had always loved baseball even as a

youth.¹ It is even reputed that Plank's first "backstop" was a haystack.² He and other neighborhood kids organized the "Good Intent" team, which with Plank as pitcher soon developed into one of Adams County's elite teams, sometimes referred to as "the 'terror' of the other teams in the county."³ At age twenty-five, his skills were noticed by the baseball coach at Gettysburg College, and although seemingly old, Plank was enrolled at Gettysburg Academy, the college's preparatory school. He pitched well for the college varsity team for two years, leading them to winning records, and before long was noticed by Cornelius McGillicuddy, better known to the world as baseball manager Connie Mack. Mack had a penchant for signing obscure young players to his team, and soon Plank was signed to the Philadelphia Athletics, with their peculiar white Elephant logo, but not before Plank finished out the remaining two games of the season at Gettysburg.⁴

Plank turned out to be a phenomenal pickup for the Athletics in the newly formed American League. In his rookie season Plank went 17-13, and over the next seventeen seasons he would establish himself as one of the most dominant left-handers in baseball history. He would pitch twenty-win seasons on seven different occasions, including a four-year tear from 1902-1905 which included two American League championships. In 1904 and 1912 he posted a career high twenty-six victories. In total he would help the Athletics to six American League titles and three World Series titles in 1910, 1911, and 1913. He would not have so much luck in World Series action, as David M. Jordan, President of the Philadelphia Athletics Historical Society remarks, "Eddie was the classic

¹ Joseph Lawler, "Eddie Plank." <http://www.anb.org/articles/19/19-00604.html>; *American National Biography Online*, February 2000; accessed February 2006.

² "Haystack Plank's First Backstop," *The Gettysburg Times*, February 25th, 1926, p. 1.

³ "Plank Wanted to be Farmer," *The Gettysburg Times*, February 26th, 1926, p. 1.

⁴ Lawler, "Eddie Plank," and also Jim Callis, "Ask Baseball America," <http://www.baseballamerica.com/today/columnists/askba03july.html>; *Baseball America* July 2nd, 2003; accessed February, 2006.

hard-luck pitcher in the Fall Classic.”⁵ Despite only winning two of his seven World Series appearances, he maintained a stellar 1.32 earned-run-average, and was crucial in clinching the 1913 World Series, limiting the New York Giants to only two hits to win the title.⁶

Despite winning an American League pennant in 1914, Connie Mack mostly disbanded or traded away his squad of the previous year, and Plank ended up with the St. Louis Terriers of the new Federal League, which wouldn't last more than a few seasons. He led the upstart league in 1915 with a 2.08 ERA and posted sixteen wins, and in the same year married Anna Myers, who would bear him “Eddie” Jr. When the league dissolved in 1916, he went on to the St. Louis Browns, where he posted sixteen wins. However, in 1917, age began to catch up to the dominant southpaw, and he had his only losing season, going 5-6. His final game was a 1-0 loss. Although forty-two years of age, he was traded to the New York Yankees, “but Plank insisted he was on the retired list and remained so.”⁷ The final game he would pitch in would be for the Gettysburg Alumni team on June 12th, 1923, when he held the college varsity to one hit in an 8-1 victory.⁸

Despite “several efforts [that] were made to lure him back into base ball”⁹ in playing, coaching, and managerial positions, Plank retired from the game and remained in his hometown of Gettysburg. Back in Gettysburg he would focus on running a car dealership and car garage with his brother, Ira, who was also a minor league pitcher and baseball coach at Gettysburg College for thirty-five years. Plank had even expressed a

⁵ David M. Jordan, as quoted in Ken Picking, “Plaque for Plank,” *The Gettysburg Times*, September 1st, 2000, p. B1.

⁶ Lawler, “Eddie Plank,” and also Picking, “Plaque for Plank,” p. 1.

⁷ “Eddie Plank’s Body to Lie in State At Presbyterian Church on Saturday; Baseball World Mourns Hurler’s Death,” *The Gettysburg Times*, February 25th, 1926, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, and also Lawler, “Eddie Plank.”

⁹ “Plank’s Body to Lie in State,” *The Gettysburg Times*, p. 2.

desire to move back to the old Plank homestead, saying “sometime soon I hope to take up farming at the old home place.”¹⁰ However only two days later Plank fell victim to a stroke, and died at the age of fifty on February 25th, 1926. Immediately upon his death came an outpouring of local media coverage. The *Gettysburg Star and Sentinel* exclaims that “Baseball’s greatest southpaw moundsman is dead,”¹¹ and that “Eddie Plank is dead ... [stroke] proves fatal to premier pitcher of decade ago.”¹² Indeed, local newspapers were flooded with editorials and letters of condolences praising Plank’s deeds both on the diamond and in private life. The Plank family was also inundated with telegrams, letters, and phone calls from friends, strangers, and baseball greats. Even former manager Connie Mack was “stunned when informed of passing of his one-time star moundsman,” and “found it very difficult to find words to express his great sorrow.” Mack claimed that “He never failed me; never complained . . . he worked hour after hour to perfect control of that cross fire [delivery], and it made him.”¹³ Thomas S. Shibe, then President of the Athletics, declared Plank was “a great ball player in his day and a lovable character; one of God’s noble men. I am grieved beyond power of expression.”¹⁴ Even Ty Cobb, one of the best hitters of all time, had only kind words. “The greatest pitcher I ever saw was Eddie Plank. He had everything, but most of all he had brains.”¹⁵ A good summation of many opinions of Plank then and now is that “although he lacked the popularity of many of his colorful or eccentric contemporaries, Plank earned the respect of teammates,

¹⁰ “Plank Wanted to be Farmer,” *The Gettysburg Times*, February 26th, 1926, p. 1.

¹¹ “Eddie Plank’s Body to Lie in State At Presbyterian Church on Saturday; Baseball World Mourns Hurler’s Death,” *The Gettysburg Star and Sentinel*, February 25th, 1926, p. 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8

¹³ Connie Mack, as quoted in “Connie Mack Is Stunned When Informed Of Passing Of His One-time Star Moundsman,” *The Gettysburg Times*, February 25th, 1926, p. 1.

¹⁴ Thomas S. Shibe, as quoted in “Connie Mack Stunned,” *The Gettysburg Times*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ty Cobb, as quoted in Brian A. Kennell, *Beyond the Gatehouse: Gettysburg’s Evergreen Cemetery* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Evergreen Cemetery Association, 2000), 81.

opponents, and fans through his industry, reliability, consistency, and durability.”¹⁶ Plank was buried in Evergreen cemetery in Gettysburg, remembered then as a baseball and local icon. In 1946, he was enshrined into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Undeniably, his statistics and achievements are exemplary. He holds the record among left-handers for shutout victories, complete games, and wins, going 327-193 in 622 games, with a lifetime 2.34 ERA. The numbers are even more impressive considering he began his career late at age twenty-five, with little experience beforehand, and was often asked to pitch in his teams’ toughest games. Perhaps his only fault or quirk was that “he took an unusual amount of time between pitches, much to the annoyance of opponents, umpires, and spectators.”¹⁷ Despite this, it seemed the consensus at the time that:

The memory of the great southpaw will remain forever. Our children’s children will no doubt read of the achievements of this mighty pitcher, because in every center of the country, the name Eddie Plank meant the noble ideals of a true American, clean, sound, wholesome, a likable fellow, a good father, a splendid husband and a gentleman at all times.¹⁸

With all of this acclaim and recognition, it seemed only natural that the name Eddie Plank would be long remembered and go down in the annals of time as a legend, at least in Gettysburg. But despite all of these achievements and recognition after his death, the memory of Eddie Plank seems to have slipped away from not just national attention, but even Gettysburg as well. The lasting effects of his legacy are few and far between. Despite plans in March 1926 to build a memorial, no real lasting monument had been erected; only a small plaque sits near his old car dealership/garage in town. A book, “Reminiscences of the Life of Eddie Plank,” though planned, was never completed; in

¹⁶ Lawler, “Eddie Plank.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “‘Eddie’ Plank”, *The Gettysburg Times*, February 26th, 1926, p. 4.

fact, there is no published biography of Plant's life.¹⁹ After his induction in 1946, there seems to be little in the way of remembrance of "Gettysburg Eddie." Most students at Gettysburg College fail to recognize him; some can place him as a pitcher, but didn't know he went to Gettysburg. I have to admit I knew little about Plank, and I consider myself to at least have a rudimentary knowledge of not only baseball, but Gettysburg history. Even Tom Collins, an Adams County Commissioner who grew up in Gettysburg and coached baseball at the college, admitted "other than what I read on the little plaque [at Plank Gym], we really didn't know that much about Eddie Plank."²⁰ How did such a dominating and well-known pitcher come to be mostly forgotten to history? It would take "the initiative and drive of a 'young pup,' Gettysburg's own Matt Kerr,"²¹ to finally get Plank back on the radar.

Matt Kerr was born and raised in Gettysburg, and graduated from high school there in 1992. He had heard of Eddie Plank, but like many residents didn't know much. It wasn't until Kerr was completing his graduate studies in 1998 that he decided to see what he could find out about Plank on his summer break. "The answer was, not much," Kerr says. "The visitor's center down on Carlisle Street didn't know anything. I thought it was somewhat shameful that Gettysburg had totally overlooked Eddie Plank." Kerr cited, as others would too, that "the town is so wrapped up in the Civil War that virtually anything else of historical relevance is ignored. I decided that the town needed a historical marker for Plank."²² Kerr did some research with the Adams County Historical Society and the Gettysburg College Library, and submitted his proposal to the Pennsylvania Historical

¹⁹ "Memorial May Be Erected to 'Eddie' Plank in Gettysburg," *The Gettysburg Star and Sentinel*, March 6th, 1926, p. 2.

²⁰ Picking, "Plaque for Plank," B4

²¹ Picking, "Plaque for Plank," B1.

²² Matt Kerr, interview by author, email, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 25 February, 2006.

and Museum Commission (PHMC), which oversees the blue and yellow historical markers located around Pennsylvania. At the same time, he tried writing letters to various organizations and local state representatives. No one seemed interested, and so Kerr assumed the project was rejected. However, in the summer of 1999, Kerr received a letter from the PHMC asking what text he wanted on the marker and how he was planning on paying for it. “Obviously, this was news to me,”²³ says Kerr, who was a graduate student in Ohio at the time. Unfortunately, while the PHMC would pay for half, Kerr was expected to come up with the remaining \$600 himself on his student income. “So, the project was put on further hiatus.”²⁴ It seemed like perhaps Eddie Plank would never receive any official recognition in Gettysburg.

In early 2000, however, Kerr received word from the Philadelphia Athletics Historical Society. They were willing to pay for the privately-funded part of the sign. “I had originally written to them in late 1998 about funding . . . so we began to get things organized,” remarks Kerr.²⁵ Once all ends had been tied up, a dedication ceremony was planned for August 30th, 2000, 125 years after Plank’s birth, 74 since his death, and 54 since reaching the Hall of Fame. In attendance were US congressman Bill Goodling, State Representative Stephen Maitland, the mayor of Gettysburg, and even Eddie Plank III, among others. Things were looking up for those who wanted Eddie Plank to get the recognition he deserved. Earlier in 2000 Plank had been named to the Philadelphia Athletics’ “All Century Team,” and with the marker, “I guess this just makes it his year,” remarked Eddie III, Plank’s grandson.²⁶ Kerr received praise for his initiative in getting

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Picking, “Plaque for Plank,” p. B4.

the marker erected. Congressman Goodling noted, “Us older folks should be embarrassed that it took a young pup to step up to the plate to show there’s more to celebrate than the Civil War (in Gettysburg).”²⁷ In reality, the sign seemed like a no-brainer. According to Representative Maitland, who at the time was on the state historical marker committee, “the main criteria [sic] that applications fail is that they do not meet the tests of statewide significance.” For this reason, only about 10-20 of the roughly 60-80 applications each year are approved. “It was pleasing that when Eddie Plank was proposed, his approval was a shoo-in.”²⁸ Kerr, although he acknowledges the process wasn’t as easy as Maitland suggests, concurred that Plank was important to the state’s history. Eddie Plank “was part of a new generation of early twentieth century small-town boys who began to find spots on the rosters of big league teams.” As boys from small towns across America began to join major league teams, people began to take a greater interest in baseball and this facilitated its “transformation from an East Coast club sport to a national pastime.”²⁹ Although a ‘victory’ had been achieved in the sign’s dedication, the troubles for Eddie Plank and his commemorative marker were not over.

Those who stop by the sign on Carlisle Street might be a little confused when reading the sign’s text. It states that “Plank was born (near this spot).” Actually, Plank was born four miles to the north, at the farmhouse where he spent the first quarter of his life. I hadn’t even noticed this until Kerr explained it. Kerr’s original proposal was to have the plaque placed near where Eddie was born, at the corner of Keller and Old Harrisburg Roads. However, Kerr explains, there were several problems that arose. For

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Bob Warrington, “Eddie Plank Honored With State Historical Marker!” <http://www.philadelphiaathletics.org/history/plank.html>; *Philadelphia Athletics Historical Society, Inc.*, 2000; accessed February 2006

one, although Straban Township was ready to dig a hole and install the sign, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation was opposed to putting a metal pole along the road (which, Kerr notes, there were plenty of other “objects that vehicle could hit – telephone poles, billboard supports, etc”).³⁰ The second problem was that Eddie Plank III wanted the pole in a more visible location (admittedly, the original location is what some would call “out in the boonies”).³¹ A new location, on the Gettysburg College campus along Carlisle Street, was chosen, as it was across from the house that Plank had lived (and died) in. The marker was installed and re-dedicated, but the text was never changed. Kerr says “I wasn’t even notified of it by either the PHMC or the Philadelphia Athletics Historical Society. The township supervisor only found out at the last moment and he called my parents to let them know.”³²

With everything finally done, Kerr has somewhat mixed feelings on the marker. He admits it was more of a hassle than it had to be, but more importantly “this recognition is long overdue for one of the more prominent individuals to come out of Gettysburg. I was frustrated that there were so many sites dedicated to the Confederates . . . and none to Plank . . . Gettysburg is not just three days in 1863.”³³ Unfortunately, even the marker has not made Plank a household name. While it brings some more recognition to a man who was an important part of Gettysburg and American baseball, he is still mostly overshadowed for the likes of Eisenhower, Lincoln, Lee, and Chamberlain. The sign itself, while on the college campus, is “off the beaten path of Gettysburg’s

³⁰ Kerr, interview.

³¹ The original location is about 5 minutes of out town on Business Route 15 North. Sure enough, the blue pole is still out there, I checked, and it’s definitely out-of-the-ways of the main traffic flow of Gettysburg...

³² Kerr, interview.

³³ Matt Kerr, as quoted in Picking, “Plaque for Plank,” B4

tourism.”³⁴ Few are interested in visiting his grave in Evergreen cemetery, and Plank’s exploits are becoming part of “an era that’s far beyond memory.”³⁵ Despite this, the marker is at least a sign that some in Gettysburg still remember and appreciate Plank and what he did. It also gives people a chance to learn about Plank, or at least provides a catalyst for interest (it inspired me to write a ten-page paper!). At best, you can say that “for Gettysburg, Plank's success helped to place his hometown on the map for reasons other than its Civil War history,”³⁶ regardless of how little acknowledgment he actually receives.³⁷

³⁴ John Bugbee, “Baseball Legend Long Forgotten,” *York Sunday News*, September 3rd, 2000.

³⁵ Brian Kennel, as quoted in Bugbee, “Legend Long Forgotten.”

³⁶ Warrington, “Plank Honored With Marker.”

³⁷ One final note to add that didn’t seem to fit into my paper . . . Kerr made a special point to try and debunk the misconception that Plank actually attended Gettysburg College. He only attended *Gettysburg Academy*, a prep-school attached to the college. The confusion arises because, at the time, he was over 25 years old, and he was also allowed to play for the college varsity team. I found a lot of variations on this, especially in the old newspaper articles, but finally and with Kerr’s reassurance I discerned the truth. Kerr mentions that “history books like to say that the 1908 World Series between the Athletics and the NY Giants was the first to feature two college-educated starting pitchers facing each other (thus signaling a change in the demographics of the players in the game),” but in reality it’s not actually true.

³⁸ Also, I accessed the Eddie Plank file at the Adams County Historical Society for many of the sources listed above and in the following bibliography. Anyone looking for find out more should check there, the special collections at the library, and should possibly look up Dr. Michael Birkner’s oral history with “Junie” Bream, who knew Plank and has interesting things to say.

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