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Our Reconciliationist Pastime: How Baseball Contributed to the Reunification of White America

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Abstract

As early as the 1850s, the game of baseball was being referred to as “our national game.” At a time when the nation was being ripped apart at the seams, it served as a relatively new symbol of national identity. Baseball did not fully reach its unifying potential until after a bloody war that pitched North against South. However, these reconciliationist qualities did not strike at the heart of all Americans. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Our Reconciliationist Pastime: How Baseball Contributed to the Reunification of White America

April 1, 2016

By *Jeff Lauck '18*

As early as the 1850s, the game of baseball was being referred to as “our national game.” At a time when the nation was being ripped apart at the seams, it served as a relatively new symbol of national identity. Baseball did not fully reach its unifying potential until after a bloody war that pitched North against South. However, these reconciliationist qualities did not strike at the heart of all Americans.

Civil War soldiers often turned to baseball between battles. George Putnam, a Union soldier fighting in Texas, recalled a game that had to be cut short due to a surprise Confederate attack.

“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.”

Abraham Gilbert Mills, a sergeant with the 165th New York Volunteers (Duryea’s Zouaves), carried a bat and ball with him in addition to his rifle and accoutrements. He also participated in a Christmas Day 1862 baseball game at Hilton Head, South Carolina before a crowd that numbered as many as 40,000 – more than can fit in Fenway Park to watch a Boston Red Sox game today.

This crowd was notable for more than just its size, however. A great number of the attendees were Confederate prisoners who did not have much choice in watching. While originally a predominately Northern sport, many Confederate soldiers were exposed to baseball in Union prison camps or by the few Southerners who had played before the war. One game was even

played between Union and Confederate soldiers in the aftermath of the surrender at Appomattox. Civil War armies served as cultural melting pots and baseball took advantage of this to truly spread throughout the nation. In the wake of 4 years of fighting, baseball became something that Northerners and Southerners could share.



Union POWs play baseball at a prison camp in Salisbury, North Carolina. Prison camps served as cultural diffusion mechanisms that allowed the game of baseball to be spread between captured and captors. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

In 1888, Americans took their love of baseball abroad. Albert Spalding, a former pitcher and founder of the A. G. Spalding sporting goods company, took an all-star lineup of American players on a tour around the globe that included a game played beneath the Pyramids of Giza. After their return in 1889, the troupe attended a dinner at Delmonico's Restaurant in New York City attended by over 300 guests, including Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the baseball-bat-wielding-Union-soldier A. G. Mills, now the president of the National League, who emceed the dinner. Despite indisputable similarities between baseball and the earlier British game of Rounders, speeches at the dinner claimed baseball was "purely American, invented by Americans, and now had been taught to the rest of the world by Americans." These speeches coincided with chants of "No Rounders! No Rounders!" from the audience.

Henry Chadwick, a Briton and a friend of Spalding, disputed these claims that baseball was "purely" American. In 1903, he published an article claiming that baseball had in fact been adapted from Rounders. Spalding responded with his own article that refuted Chadwick's claim

and called for a committee to be formed to resolve the question of baseball's origins. Our old friend A. G. Mills was chosen to chair this committee, which came to be known as the "Mills Commission." Mills immediately put out advertisements asking for anyone with knowledge about the founding of baseball to come forward. Abner Graves, a 71-year-old mining engineer from Akron, Ohio, answered the call, claiming that he witnessed Abner Doubleday sketch out the field positions and rules for the game of baseball in a dirt field near Cooperstown, New York the "spring prior to or following the Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign of Gen. William H. Harrison [1839 or 1841]." Spalding pressed the commission to accept this circumstantial evidence, which Mills and the rest of the commission did despite hesitation (Some baseball historians claim this push by Spalding came from a belief that making baseball "American" would encourage more people to buy his sporting goods).

In many ways, Doubleday was the perfect pick to be the "founder" of baseball. A Union general during the Civil War, Doubleday fit the war hero archetype that was being celebrated both at Blue-Gray reunions and in the wake of the lopsided American victory in the Spanish-American War. Most importantly, he had died fourteen years earlier and could not testify against the dubious claim that he was baseball's founding father. In reality, Doubleday could not have possibly invented baseball in Cooperstown in 1839. None of his extensive diaries ever once mention inventing the game, nor did anybody else corroborate Graves's story. Doubleday's family had moved out of Cooperstown two years earlier in 1837, and in the spring of 1839 – when Graves claims he was playing ball in Cooperstown – Doubleday was a cadet at West Point. Abner Graves, who would later be institutionalized in an insane asylum, would have been only five-years-old in 1839, hardly a reliable source – especially as the *only* source – for the founding of baseball. None of this mattered to Spalding or the Mills Commission, though. Indeed, they made better ballplayers than historians.

Spalding had his narrative. Chadwick was wrong, and baseball was as American as apple pie. It had, after all, helped reunite the nation after the Civil War. This is only partially true. While undoubtedly helping to get white Union and Confederate soldiers to "clasp hands across the bloody chasm," baseball only worsened the social rift between white and black America. Immediately after the Civil War, whites and blacks organized themselves into baseball clubs and leagues. In 1868, the all-black Pythian Base Ball Club of Philadelphia applied for and were denied membership in the all-white National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP), setting the stage for the later Negro Leagues that operated separately from the Major League Baseball leagues. While the Pythians and other all black teams would occasionally play all-white teams in the post-Civil War years, even these interracial games would die out, a casualty of the racial inequality and discord of Reconstruction and the late nineteenth century.

While baseball helped stitch together a broken nation in the years following the Civil War by giving Americans a shared national game, it did little to prevent the growing racial divide in

America. In many ways, baseball was a microcosm of the era itself: laden with racial prejudice, white reconciliationism, and American jingoism. Even better, its appealing but fraud-laced claims of American origins evoke Mark Twain's definition of the era as a "gilded age." In any case, the select breed of baseball-happy Civil Warriors can relish in the American tradition that links Union soldiers to men like Mike Trout and Clayton Kershaw.

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