

Baseball and the War

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Depending on who you talk to, Abner Doubleday did or didn't invent baseball in 1839. He did fire the first Northern shot of the Civil War and commanded the 1st Corp at the Battle of Gettysburg after Lancaster, Pa General John Reynolds was killed at the beginning of the battle. Some people credit the creation of baseball to Alexander Cartwright in 1845 when he refined the rules and created the New York Knickerbockers baseball Club and had the first recorded game in 1846. This was the same year Walt Whitman wrote, "I see great things in baseball. It's our game, the American game".

Regardless as to whom invented baseball, the game was well established prior to the Civil War in the New York area, parts of New Jersey and even filtered up to the Capital in Washington. The President learned and loved the game prior to his election campaign in 1860. A popular newspaper even published a political cartoon showing him batting against his opponents in his campaign. During the Civil war he even had a baseball field constructed on the White House lawn. There are stories such as he was late for a war council meeting and said, " They will just have to wait. It is almost my turn at bat".

The Civil War did something unique. Rather than minimizing a sport, it expanded baseball and set up a scenario that would make the game explode throughout the country and quickly make it a professional business. Remember, just prior to the war baseball was fairly confined to the New York and surrounding area. During the war there were long periods of encampments waiting for the next battle. Soldiers drilled and drilled and became bored resulting in low morale. The New Yorkers started teaching their comrades from Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Michigan, Ohio and other northern states the game of baseball. They loved it and played as often as they could. Generals actually sent reports saying promote baseball activities in your camps. It promotes good health and keeps the mind off of the war. It is good if all ranks play together. Every encampment and most of the Companies had their own one piece baseball pattern. They would get a walnut and start wrapping it with yarn until the cut horsehide would fit around it tightly. Then they would sew it up and have their baseball for the games. Oak limbs were cut and carved for bats. If your company was lucky, professionally made bats from Cooperstown, NY were shipped with your supplies. Gloves were not used until the 20th century.

So how did the southern soldiers learn the game of baseball? Well, there were 160 prisoner of war camps. Not all of them presented the horrors of Elmira and Andersonville. Many prisoners learned and played the game in prison. It became popular to have games between Northern and Southern teams and the games were very competitive. The game was so loved it even

expanded to the battlefield. George Putman, a Union soldier fighting in Texas wrote home saying, "We were playing baseball near the front lines after a break in our skirmish. Suddenly there was a scattering of fire, which three outfielders caught the brunt: the centerfielder was hit and captured. The left and right field managed to get back to our lines. The attack was repelled, but we had not only lost our centerfielder, but the only ball we had in Alexander, Texas".



Union prisoners playing ball at Salisbury, N.C., ca. 1863. (Library of Congress)

The Civil War started and ended in April, the traditional beginning of the now baseball season. The soldiers on both sides went home and brought baseball with them. The game exploded in communities all over the country. They were often referred to as the Textile Leagues. The areas had their best and most competitive teams. They were similar to the minor league teams of today. Colleges adapted the game and played competitively. Penn University and Princeton were huge rivals. Then in 1869 the game became professional and players were paid. The first team was the Cincinnati, Red Stockings. They won every game the first year. The next year the other teams started paying so they could also recruit the best players. Even the ladies quickly learned to love the game. The Dolly Vardens were the first recognized baseball team and first women's African- American team. They were established in 1867. Then there was the Philadelphia Blue Stockings the champions in 1869. The Female Baseball Club of Philadelphia was the first female team to play male teams in the 1880's. It seems everyone wanted to play baseball.

Since the civil war baseball became baseball. The teams continued to wrap their walnut, yarn and horsehide balls until 1889 when a machine was invented to wrap string around a core. Because of a shortage of horses, a law was passed eliminating the use of horsehide and two pieces of cowhide were used in making the ball instead of one. You may find it amazing that with all our great inventions since the Civil War, no one has invented a machine to adequately sew a baseball together. All MLB baseballs are hand sewed in Costa Rica. The Civil War made baseball explode. The same may happen again since the baseball factory producing all our balls every season, is based at the foot of an active volcano. Like the Northern Civil War soldier in Texas, we may lose all our new balls. It is certain baseball advanced traumatically because of the Civil War.

SOURCE: <http://www.pacivilwartrails.com/stories/tales/baseball-and-the-civil-war>

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