The Rise of Baseball

In Albert G. Spalding’s classic early history and celebration of baseball, *America’s National Game*, he included a long newspaper description of the game as it was played by country boys long before the time of Doubleday or the Knickerbockers. The author of the story, undated from the *Memphis Appeal*, recalled that on Saturday afternoons “the neighborhood boys met on some cropped pasture, and whether ten or forty, every one was to take part in the game.” He explained that “self-appointed leaders chose sides and whirled a bat that decided who would hit first. The bat was “a stout paddle, with a blade two inches thick and four inches wide.” The ball “was usually made on the spot by some boy offering up his woolen socks as an oblation, and these were raveled and wound around a bullet, a handful of strips cut from a rubber overshoes, a piece of cork or almost anything.” The field might have four, six, or seven bases, which “were not equidistant, but were marked by any fortuitous rock, or shrub, or depression in the ground where the steers were wont to bellow and paw up the earth.” Home plate was “the den.” In addition, “there were no masks, or mitts, or protectors. There was no science or chicanery, now called ‘headwork.’” The pitcher’s object “was to throw a ball that could be hit. The paddleman’s object was to hit the ball, and if he struck at it—which he need not do unless he chose—and missed it, the catcher, standing well back, tried to catch it” for an out. After hitting the ball the batsman ran from base to base. “There was no effort to
pounce upon a base runner and touch him with the ball. Anyone having the ball could throw it at him, and if it hit him he was ‘dead’—almost literally sometimes. If he dodged the ball, he kept on running till the den was reached. . . . No matter how many players were on a side, each and every one had to be put out.” There was no umpire, and “very little wrangling.” The score was kept by someone cutting notches in a stick, and “the runs in an afternoon ran into the hundreds.”

Before the Civil War there were numerous variations on the rules and customs reported in this reminiscence. Young men in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City adapted and tried to improve the ball games that city youth and rural boys had enjoyed for generations. In 1831 a few young sportsmen began a new era of Philadelphia ball playing when they crossed the Delaware River for regular contests of “two old cat” at Camden, New Jersey. Before long they had recruited enough players for Saturday afternoon townball, despite being “frequently reproved and censured by their friends for degrading themselves by indulging in such childish amusement.” These ball players competed on public grounds, where neither rent nor permission was required, and made their own bats and balls. After another group of townball enthusiasts joined them in 1833, the two formally merged and organized the Olympic Ball Club, drawing up a constitution and field rules to govern their play.

These pioneer athletes were principally merchants and “respectable and well-known citizens of Philadelphia,” several of whom later distinguished themselves in their city’s business and professional life. They were remembered as a “conservative and temperate body of gentlemen who enjoyed mixing their sports with good conversation, wit, food, and drink.” A highlight of each season was the Fourth of July celebration, when their president read the Declaration of Independence and the members sang songs and heard “an address delivered for the perpetuation of the Stars and Stripes.” Thus townball displayed an early association between ball play and nationalism that would increase significantly during the Civil War era and well beyond into the twentieth century. That pastime remained popular in the Philadelphia area through the late 1850s, with several
clubs in Camden and Germantown joining Philadelphia’s Olympics, Excelsiors, and Athletics. There is some evidence that emigrants from the City of Brotherly Love carried their sport to Cincinnati, Ohio, and neighboring towns in northern Kentucky, where townball flourished before the Civil War.

Townball players in the Philadelphia region generally made their own bats and balls and competed according to rules that resembled English rounders. Brief newspaper accounts and box scores suggest that they played with eleven men on a side for either two or eleven innings. All men batted in an inning when only two innings were played. When one out retired a side the game lasted eleven or more innings. They also seemed to have used stakes as bases. Detailed box scores gave the total score, including runs per inning. Typically the victorious team scored at least 75 runs. The box scores also listed statistics for each man for “Fielding” and “How Put Out.” The “Fielding” section listed numbers for balls caught on the “fly,” on the first “bound,” and “behind” (probably tipped balls received by the catcher). The “How Put Out” part listed “fly,” “bound,” “behind,” and also “no balls” and “On Stakes.” “No balls” probably counted strikeouts (three missed swings). “On Stakes” likely meant runners put out on the bases, although there is no indication if runners were tagged out or if they were hit with balls thrown at them by fielders.

Yankee varieties of townball were called “base” or “roundball.” In 1856 a Boston enthusiast described that sport as “truly national,” a game that “is played by the school boys in every country village in New England, as well as in the parks of many of our New England cities.” He continued: “Base used to be a favorite game with the students of the English High and Latin Schools of Boston, a few years ago. . . . Base is also a favorite game upon the green in front of village school-houses in the country throughout New England; and in this city, on Fast Day . . . Boston Common is covered with amateur parties of men and boys playing Base.” Boston’s truckmen attracted large crowds of spectators, who admired their “supply of muscle that renders them able to outdo all competitors in striking and throwing.”
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This “Massachusetts game” generally matched sides of eight to fifteen men on a square field with bases or tall stakes (up to five feet high) at each corner. The batter stood midway between first and fourth (home) base and tried to hit a ball “made of yarn, tightly wound round a lump or cork or India rubber, and covered with smooth calf-skin in quarters... the seams closed snugly, and not raised, lest they should blister the hands of the thrower and catcher.” The round bat varied from three to three and a half feet in length and was often “a portion of stout rake or pitchfork handle... wielded generally in one hand by the muscular young players at the country schools.” The pitcher threw the ball swiftly overhand (not underhand, as in the New York version), “with a vigor... that made it whistle through the air, and stop with a solid smack in the catcher’s hands.” The receiver had to be able “to catch expertly a swiftly delivered ball, or he would be admonished of his inexpertness by a request from some player to ‘butter his fingers!’” The batter could strike the ball in any direction, there being no foul territory. James D’Wolf Lovett recalled that when he played as a boy for a junior club near Boston, batters sometimes shortened up on the bat, grasping it near the middle, “and by a quick turn of the wrist [struck] the ball, as it passed them, in the same direction in which it was thrown, thus avoiding the fielders and giving the striker a good start on the bases.” After hitting the ball, the striker ran around the bases until he was put out or remained safely on a base. He could be retired if the catcher caught three missed balls, or if a hit ball was caught on the fly, or if he was struck by a thrown ball while running the bases (called “soaking” or “burning” a runner). Usually one out ended the inning, and the first team to score a fixed number of runs won the game.

The first modern baseball organization in Massachusetts was the Olympic Club of Boston, whose members began playing in 1854, formally established the club in 1856, and published rules and regulations in 1857. That year brought many spirited intrasquad games and matches against newly formed clubs on Boston Common. In late June about 2,000 spectators attended the first round of an informal Massachusetts championship tournament between the Olympics and the Wassapoag Ball Club of Sharon. Each team had twelve men...
to a side, twenty-five runs were needed to win the game, and three victories decided the match. Wassapoag defeated the Olympics but then lost to the Unions of Medway. A dispute over rules canceled the return contest for the title and eventually led to the Massachusetts Baseball Convention in Dedham in May 1858, at which the Massachusetts Association of Base Ball Players was created and a constitution, bylaws, and rules and regulations were approved.

At this convention representatives of the Tri-Mountain club tried to persuade the delegates to adopt the code of the New York version of the game, which had been created by the New York Knickerbocker club back in the 1840s. It featured a diamond instead of a square for the bases, with the batter standing at home plate. The New York regulations also stipulated that the ball had to be pitched underhand, not thrown overhand; that a ball knocked outside the range of first or third base was foul; and that a player was out if a hit ball was caught on the fly or first bounce, or if a fielder held the ball on a base before the runner arrived, or if, between bases, a fielder touched the runner with the ball. “Soaking” the runner was prohibited, three outs retired the side, and twenty-one runs (called aces) decided the game, provided each side had an equal number of outs. But the majority of the Massachusetts men preferred their traditional style of play and rejected the upstart New York version. They approved rules which formally established a game similar to traditional New England townball, with a square field, overhand pitching, no foul territory, ten to twelve men per side, one out to retire all, and victory belonging to the team that first scored one hundred runs.

The convention’s labors bore fruit, for during the years remaining before the Civil War the “Massachusetts Game” flourished. In September 1858 a Boston correspondent to the New York Clipper reported a sharp increase in public interest in both cricket and baseball, which he attributed in part to the favorable notices from the local press and to the cooperation of city merchants who closed their doors on summer Saturday afternoons. He also credited much of the excitement to the recent formation of the state association of baseball players, adding: “Base Ball is getting to be the most predominant
institution of this State. Clubs are now forming in every country town and village, and a great many matches have been played this season.” Proof of the baseball fever sweeping New England was evident in a September 1859 match played for the Massachusetts state championship between the Unions of Medway and the Winthrops of Holliston. Several railroads issued excursion tickets to Boston’s Agricultural Fair Grounds, where a large crowd bet heavily on the two-day encounter, won by the Unions, 100–71.

While the Massachusetts form of baseball thrived during the 1850s, it faced a formidable rival in the New York City version, which mushroomed in popularity during these years. Modern baseball derives most immediately from the New York version, created by the Knickerbockers during the mid-1840s. As Melvin Adelman has shown, the majority of these sportsmen were prosperous (but not affluent) middle-class merchants, bankers, doctors, lawyers, clerks, and other white-collar workers. None belonged to the city’s elite, although a few ranked just one rung below the city’s aristocracy. These first ball players sought health, exercise, and good fellowship in their sport and were not very much interested in seeking out other nines for interclub competition. Perhaps because of their defensiveness about playing a child’s game, or because they valued privacy, they did not seek publicity in New York’s daily or weekly papers.

One of the chief organizers of the Knickerbockers in 1845 was Alexander J. Cartwright, Jr. While he certainly deserves far more recognition than Doubleday for the creation of baseball, it is doubtful whether his contribution was so critical as to justify his later enshrinement in the Hall of Fame. The son of a shipping proprietor, Cartwright began his business career as a clerk and then joined with his brother to open a bookstore and stationery shop during the mid-1840s. He belonged to a volunteer fire company and played baseball with friends and fellow firefighters on the east side of Manhattan. Some baseball historians believe that Cartwright was the one who first suggested that the Knickerbockers try a diamond instead of a square for the bases, with the batter standing at home plate. He is often credited with the codification of its first rules, but it is more likely that he shared that task with several of his teammates—
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especially William R. Wheaton and William H. Tucker. As described above, the distinctive features of their regulations included the infield diamond for bases, underhand pitching, foul territory, the force out and tag play for retiring runners, three outs to a side, and victory to the first team to score twenty-one runs.

The Knickerbockers played intrasquad games in the Murray Hill section of Manhattan, then in 1846 moved to the Elysian Fields of Hoboken, New Jersey. There they competed in a few matches against other teams, including a semi-organized outfit called the New York Club. The Gothams (originally named the Washingtons), the next formal baseball club, began play in the early 1850s at the St. George Cricket Club ground in Harlem. The Eagles (1852) and the Empires (1854), both of New York City, and the Excelsiors (1854) of South Brooklyn increased to five the number of teams playing by the Knickerbocker rules before 1855. During the next six years a veritable baseball mania overtook the greater New York City region, as more than two hundred junior and senior clubs sprang into action in Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, Westchester, and northern New Jersey.

Neither Abner Doubleday or Alexander Cartwright or any other person created the modern sport of baseball; rather, it evolved in stages from earlier bat and ball games. Historians today believe that Henry Chadwick was correct in linking baseball to English rounders. Robert Henderson, for example, has shown that early nineteenth-century American sports books printed rules for rounders under the heading “Base, or Goal Ball.” Townball seems to have been an Americanized variation of rounders, and both probably developed as team versions of the traditional game of “old cat.” Strictly speaking, modern baseball is a refined, United States variety of townball and therefore is certainly an indigenous sport. While its ancestry is English, its essence is clearly American. Chadwick made this point as early as 1860 when he wrote that, although baseball was “of English origin, it has been so modified and improved of late years in this country, as almost to deprive it of any of its original features beyond the mere groundwork of the game.” In 1864 Wilkes’ *Spirit of the Times* compared the children’s pastime of rounders with

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1. Henry Chadwick (1824–1908). Known as the “father of baseball,” he was an English immigrant who became a sporting journalist, promoter of the early game, and inventor of the first system for compiling box scores and statistics. In the early twentieth century he argued that baseball derived from rounders, an old English pastime. Used with permission of the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, NY.
the adult sport of baseball, describing the former as “a very simple
game, and designed only for recreation during the intervals from
study in schools, and . . . entirely devoid of the manly features that
characterize base-ball as played in this country.”

Despite their different views on the linkage of rounders and
baseball, Spalding, Chadwick, and sporting journalists agreed that a
distinctly American process of modernization changed a traditional
town game into a late nineteenth-century sport. This transformation
began in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City during the period
1830–60, as each of these cities developed versions of baseball. During
the 1850s these types competed for dominance with each other
and also with the English game of cricket—the first modern team
sport in the United States. By the Civil War the New York City
variety had established itself in most parts of the nation, and by the
mid-1860s it had defeated its rivals to become the favored form of
ball play in the United States.

Before 1861, then, the three leading centers of adult orga-
nized ball playing in America were Philadelphia, Boston, and New
York. Prior to the outbreak of war the “New York game” was rapidly
invading New England, the Philadelphia area, and even southern
and western states in a drive to become the nation’s most popular
team sport. How exactly did the New York version of the game
spread? Why did it surpass competing versions of ball playing? And
why did it prevail over cricket, which was firmly established in
many American cities and towns before baseball burst upon the
sporting scene?

During the late 1850s New York City baseball enthusiasts taught the
rules of their game to friends in neighboring towns and distant cities.
Edward G. Saltzman, a member of the New York Gothams, helped
to found Boston’s Tri-Mountain Base Ball Club in 1857. He became
president of the new organization and taught the members the New
York rules, which were new to Boston and which the club adopted.
Also, the treasurer of the Tri-Mountains, while visiting New York,
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watched the Empires practice and was invited to play with the Gothams. Personal contact and visits helped to plant the “New York game” in Baltimore as well. In 1858 Joseph Leggett of the famous Brooklyn Excelsiors invited George Beam, a wholesale grocer in Baltimore, to see a game in New York. Beam became a baseball enthusiast and organized a ball club (also named the Excelsiors) in his home city, made up primarily of businessmen. Within a year there were several other nines in Baltimore.

Long-distance geographical mobility brought New York baseball to the Midwest and the West Coast. Theodore Frost (from Rochester College) and Mathew M. Yorston introduced baseball to Cincinnati in 1860, recruiting high school students and businessmen to form the Live Oak Base Ball Club. They worked hard to demonstrate the superiority of this new game over townball, and before long the city’s Excelsior and Buckeye townball clubs adopted the rules of the “New York game.” Alexander Cartwright crossed the Great Plains in the 1840s, apparently teaching the game he helped to invent to interested sportsmen. Though he stayed only briefly in northern California before moving on to Hawaii, the first California club was organized in San Francisco in 1858; two years later, M. E. Gelston of the New York Eagles, an all-star player in the 1858 New York versus Brooklyn series, became captain of a San Francisco nine, which renamed itself the Eagle club in his honor. At a November 1860 tournament Gelston’s team defeated a Sacramento club, captained by E. N. Robinson, formerly of the Putnams of Brooklyn. Thus an old New York—Brooklyn rivalry was reenacted on the Pacific Coast, perhaps a foreboding of the more famous migrations of entire New York and Brooklyn clubs nearly one hundred years later. Gelston and Robinson were followed by many other easterners who took the sport along on their journeys to the Golden State. William and James Shepard, two New Yorkers who had played with famous ball stars of the 1850s, traversed the plains on their way to San Francisco in 1861, where they continued to enjoy the game they had learned in the East.

Intercity competition was another means of popularizing the “New York game” before the Civil War. While baseball nines were
not as mobile as cricket elevens during this era, there were a few urban rivalries that gave the new sport a big boost. Perhaps none was more intense than that between New York and Brooklyn clubs. Since civic pride was keen on both sides of the East River, it was only natural for the leading Brooklyn teams to challenge their New York City counterparts to a three-game series between their best players. In 1858 *Porter’s Spirit*, in a burst of hyperbole, predicted that a crowd of one hundred thousand would see “one of the grandest tournaments that has ever been witnessed in the history of the world.” Although Brooklyn lost the 1858 series, the following year its baseball fraternity established its dominance over neighboring teams. That city surpassed all its rivals in both the number of clubs and the quality of their performance. As the *Brooklyn Eagle* crowed, “Nowhere has the National game of Baseball taken firmer hold than in Brooklyn and nowhere are there better players.” That paper noted every triumph over a New York club, at one point proclaiming: “If we are ahead of the big city in nothing else, we can beat her in baseball.” With the Manhattan-Brooklyn competition as a model, Newark, Bloomfield, Jersey City, New Brunswick, and other New Jersey towns inaugurated spirited intercity baseball competitions. Teams from Baltimore and Washington, D.C., followed suit in 1860. Whenever baseball fever infected a new city, it was only a short time before its best teams looked elsewhere for other nines to conquer.

Outside the greater New York metropolitan area the 1860 tours of the Brooklyn Excelsiors excited thousands of sportsmen throughout upstate New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. In July this “crack club” visited Albany, Troy, Buffalo, Rochester, and Newburgh, and news of its victories flashed across the state’s telegraph wires. Spalding believed that these exhibitions inspired young men to hope “that they might win for their cities a glory akin to that which had been achieved for [Brooklyn].” According to the *Clipper*, the Excelsiors’s visit advanced baseball in Baltimore by three or four years, and the paper predicted that their excursion would stir up interest in the sport in other cities further south. The Excelsiors concluded their travels in Philadelphia, where they defeated a select nine from the local clubs that had adopted the New York rules that season.
Partly because of this visit, baseball in Philadelphia exploded in popularity. The New York version of the sport soon conquered the City of Brotherly Love, leaving townball a quaint relic of the past.

Championship match competition among the leading clubs also gave the New York game a huge boost prior to the Civil War. The Brooklyn teams monopolized public interest before 1861 as early fans followed the exploits of that city’s Excelsiors, Atlantics, and Eckfords. The rivalries among these nines also carried social class overtones, since the membership of the Excelsiors included many merchants, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals, while the men of the Atlantics and Eckfords were skilled workers. The Atlantics, founded in 1855 and named after a Brooklyn street, enrolled many butchers and others from the food preparation trades. The Eckfords were mostly shipwrights and mechanics. Their seven founders named their association after Henry Eckford, a Scottish immigrant who became a prominent Brooklyn shipbuilder.

During the late summer of 1860 a three game championship series between the Excelsiors and the Atlantics became both a showcase for baseball’s early success and also an ominous foreboding of future troubles. A riotous scene at the third and deciding game resulted in much ill will. These two crack teams had split the opening contests—the Excelsiors won the first game easily but lost the second by a single run. On August 23 they met on the neutral site of the Putnam Base Ball Club’s grounds in Brooklyn in front of a crowd estimated at about 15,000 fans. The excitement among the baseball fraternity was intense, as rumors circulated that the Excelsiors would not be allowed to win a close contest. During the early play one of the Atlantics agitated part of the crowd by refusing to yield immediately to an umpire’s call. Then, in the top of the sixth inning, with the Excelsiors ahead 8–6, a group of rowdies renewed their “insulting epithets and loud comments on the decision of the umpire.” Joseph Leggett, the Excelsiors’s captain, warned the spectators that his team would withdraw if the hooting continued. Members of the Atlantics appealed to their supporters to let the game go on, as one hundred policemen tried to restrain the unruly crowd. But the troublemakers only increased their yelling and abuse of the umpire and the Excelsi-
ors, prompting Leggett to order his players off the field. A large mob pursued them and pelted their omnibus with stones as they drove off. Most newspapers blamed the disorders and interference on gambling and condemned the behavior of those spectators who had disrupted the contest. It was unfortunate that “sports which are healthful and respectable in themselves should be rendered disreputable by their surroundings,” commented the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, which then added that “a little further decadence will reduce the attendance at ball matches to the level of the prize ring and the race course.”

Baseball also benefited greatly from the publicity provided by the New York City weekly sporting periodicals. The Clipper, Porter’s Spirit, and Wilkes’ Spirit published editorials extolling the game and printed all the convention news as well as detailed stories and box scores on major and minor matches. While these periodicals also printed material on townball and the “Massachusetts game,” the New York City version got far more space. Before the Civil War even local daily newspapers began irregular coverage of baseball, giving the sport a crucial boost in numerous cities and towns across America.

Among all of the early sportswriters, none was a more tireless advocate of baseball than Henry Chadwick. Born in Exeter, England in 1824, he moved to America with his family in 1837. He inherited both a love of journalism and a passion for outdoor recreation from his father, an editor. As a young man Chadwick was a good athlete who became a skilled cricketer but initially had little enthusiasm for townball, partly because he disliked being hit in the ribs with accurately thrown balls. In 1868 he recalled that his passion for baseball began in 1856 when he watched an exciting match at Hoboken’s Elysian Fields between the Eagle and Gotham teams. As an active member of the New York Cricket Club and Manhattan’s National Base Ball Club during the 1850s he played and reported on both games during their infancy in the United States. A life-long resident of Brooklyn, he wrote first for the Clipper and later for the Brooklyn Eagle, the New York Times, the Herald, the World, the Sun, and the Tribune. Through countless articles and his editing
of Beadle's *Dime Base Ball Player* and later the *Spalding Baseball Guides* he exerted a powerful influence on the development of baseball rules. Perhaps even more importantly, he devised scoring systems that helped reporters compile box scores, averages, and other statistics. Through this contribution he provided an invaluable means of communicating the action on the field to innumerable fans across the nation. Always a Victorian gentleman, he stressed the health, moral, and character-building advantages of the sport, repeatedly condemning rowdyism and gambling whenever they threatened to ruin baseball's reputation.

Individuals, clubs, and the press all gave baseball a big boost during the 1850s, but perhaps the key event in the sport's early modernization was the founding of its first centralized governing body—the National Association of Base Ball Players, or the NABBP. As historian Harold Seymour has pointed out, the creation of this organization in 1857 was crucial in baseball's history, launching an era in which players met annually to refine the rules, resolve disputes, and control the sport's development. When the 1858 convention decided to perpetuate itself by drawing up a permanent constitution, bylaws, and rules of the game, self-designation as a *national* association indicated ambitious designs. Although only clubs from the New York City vicinity were represented, the aim was to rule the continent. Its hubris did not go unnoticed. The *Clipper* scolded the leadership by pointing out that “the convention seems to be rather sectional and selfish in its proceedings... there having been no invitations sent to clubs in other States.” Furthermore, the association was “a mere local organization, bearing no State existence even—to say nothing of a *National* one.” The paper urged delegates to invite baseball players from everywhere “to compete with them, and endeavor to make the game what it should be—a truly National one.” The last two meetings of the NABBP before the Civil War did attract representatives from Boston, New Haven, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Detroit. Most encouraging was the attendance of five Philadelphia clubs in December 1860, which reflected that city's recent baseball mania. Thus while the NABBP was still dominated by New York and Brooklyn clubs, in just a few years it
had considerably broadened its base and its influence, prompting the Clipper to state in 1860 that “this association is national in every respect, and is intended to include delegates from every club in the Union.”

In the long run, the most important work of the national conventions involved rule revisions. The 1857 meeting adopted virtually all of the Knickerbocker regulations but changed the method of deciding the outcome of matches, switching from awarding victory to the first team to score twenty-one runs to awarding it to that team which scored the highest number after nine full innings. One year later the delegates approved a rule that permitted the umpire to call a strike if a batter repeatedly refused to swing at “good balls.” The most heated debate occurred over the rule that counted a batter out if a fielder caught the ball on the first bounce. Opponents of this rule wished to replace it with the “fly game” rule, which preserved all of the other modes of retiring a runner but mandated that a ball caught on the first bound was fair and in play. They argued that the bound rule made baseball less scientific and “manly.” For a time, tradition and conservatism prevailed as delegates repeatedly voted down the fly rule. That innovation finally passed in 1864, however, in the very different circumstances that prevailed during the Civil War.

One of the stated objectives of the NABBP was “the cultivation of kindly feelings among the different members of Base-Ball clubs.” To promote good sportsmanship and friendly competition, the association passed several regulations concerning the eligibility of players for club matches. In particular, it required competitors to be regular members of the clubs they represented for at least thirty days prior to a contest, the purpose being to prohibit any club’s use of talented outsiders to gain an advantage. The 1859 gathering prohibited gambling by contestants and umpires, as well as interference by spectators. It also barred professionals by prohibiting any player who received compensation from competing in a match. The banning of paid players was clearly an attempt to preserve baseball as a recreation rather than as a vocation, yet it was not universally popular within the game’s fraternity. The Clipper questioned whether outlawing professionals had “something of an aristocratic odor” and,
as such, exhibited “a rather uncharitable disposition toward poor
players.” But Francis Pidgeon, a skilled craftsman and member of
Brooklyn’s Eckford club, did not want to see the more affluent clubs
hire the most skilled athletes. He maintained that the rule was
passed “to protect ourselves against the influence of money, and give
‘honest poverty’ a fair chance, and in a struggle for supremacy be-
tween clubs to let skill, courage, and endurance decide who shall be
the victors.” Undoubtedly gentlemen’s clubs (such as the Knicker-
bockers) abhorred the idea of playing for money; and men like Pid-
geon realized that while professionalism might aid some indigent
players, it would hurt many artisan nines.

The creation of baseball coincided with an intense wave of political
and cultural nationalism that swept the country during the middle
decades of the nineteenth century. In the domestic arena, the rise
of sectionalism in the South threatened the unity of the nation and
also made northerners and westerners more conscious of their at-
tachment to the Union. The influx of foreigners inflamed patriotic
passions, as many citizens resented the arrival of thousands of Irish,
Germans, English, and other Europeans. In foreign affairs the
United States defeated Mexico in a war that secured Texas and
brought Utah, New Mexico, and California under the Stars and
Stripes. A negotiated settlement with Great Britain over the Oregon
boundary averted another war, although Anglo-American relations
remained tense. As “Young America” became a popular slogan of
the Democratic Party, the United States expanded its trade and in-
fluence into Latin America and Asia. In their cultural lives, Ameri-
cans strove for a literary and artistic independence from European
(and especially British) influence that would match their political
separation from the Old World. Cultural nationalism also appeared
in the realm of sport, as Brother Jonathan challenged John Bull in
horse racing, yachting, and boxing.

Given this atmosphere of chauvinism, it is understandable
why the idea of a national game appealed to the American imagina-
tion during this era. But in the 1850s it was not yet clear which sport would earn that distinction. In addition to the multiple forms of baseball, cricket was well established in many cities, especially Philadelphia, and initially enjoyed more extensive newspaper coverage in the New York City sporting press. But although the English game of cricket was America’s first modern team sport, by 1860 it was already clear that baseball had surpassed it to earn recognition as the country’s national pastime. Cricket was attractive to thousands of sportsmen, but it suffered from serious disadvantages in its competition with baseball. It required more care for its grounds and was more expensive to play. Its association with the British alienated some, especially as Englishmen generally used the game to reaffirm their ethnic heritage. Cricket’s subtleties and skill requirements were also quite challenging to the uninitiated. Spectators who were unfamiliar with the sport disliked the length of the matches and their slow pace and lack of action. Americans who tried to adapt the game to their own sporting tastes discovered that its English adherents preferred to retain old customs. The tide of modernization carried baseball players along in a surge of time-consciousness, and they came to prize action and speed; but cricketers resisted this momentum.

References to the “national game of baseball” appeared frequently in the daily and sporting press throughout the late 1850s, even before the modern form actually achieved a truly national scope. Commenting on the work of the first baseball convention in January 1857, Porter’s Spirit urged that baseball “ought to be looked upon in this country with the same national enthusiasm as Cricket and Football are regarded in the British Islands. . . . We recommend it because there should be some one game peculiar to the citizens of the United States. The Germans have brought hither their Turnverein Association. . . . and it certainly was quite time that some attempt was made to set up a game that could be termed a ‘Native American Sport.’ ” In 1860 the Clipper confirmed that baseball “may now be considered the National game of ball.”

The early association between baseball and American nationalism appears in several symbols that players adopted for their clubs, including names and flags. Many selected such patriotic titles
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as Young America, Columbia, Union, Independent, Eagle, American, Continental, Empire, National, Liberty, and Pioneer. Others honored such heroes as George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Benjamin Franklin. Flag presentations by women to members of athletic clubs or military regiments were common both in Europe and the United States during the nineteenth century. The American flag was also commonly used to consecrate baseball. For example, in 1859 in the small town of Danvers Centre, Massachusetts, a bevy of ladies presented the Stars and Stripes to the local Essex Base Ball Club. Their delegates praised the men for their healthy recreation, which the ladies thought was far preferable to the frequenting of “the gilded saloon, or the table of chance.” When Amherst College defeated Williams College in the first intercollegiate baseball match in 1859, some spectators on the nearby roof of the Young Ladies Institute waved a “Star Spangled Banner” at the players. In 1860 a song sheet cover for the “Live Oak Polka,” dedicated to the Live Oak Base Ball Club of Rochester, New York, featured both a shield adorned with stars and stripes and a draped American flag. Baseball had clearly begun to acquire familiar connections with love of country, freedom, virtue, morality, the work ethic, and other traditional American values.

Another indication of the connection between baseball and nationalism appeared in the presidential campaign of 1860. Abraham Lincoln’s rise to political prominence, his election as the nation’s chief executive, and his term as commander-in-chief occurred during the years when the game was achieving increasing popularity in all regions. The earliest association between Lincoln and baseball appeared in a Currier & Ives political cartoon published in November 1860, shortly after Lincoln defeated three rivals to claim the presidency. The print was entitled: “THE NATIONAL GAME. THREE ‘OUTS’ AND ONE ‘RUN’, Abraham Winning the Ball.” It depicted all four candidates holding baseball bats inscribed with their respective political positions—“fusion” for John Bell of the border state Constitutional Union party; “non-intervention” (on
2. “The Live Oak Polka.” This 1860 song sheet cover includes a dedication to the Live Oak Base Ball Club of Rochester, N.Y. Note the American shield, flag, and bunting. The diamond shaped field indicates that the Live Oaks followed the New York rules. Used with permission of the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, NY.

the slavery issue) for Stephen Douglas, a northern Democrat; and “slavery extension” for John C. Breckinridge, a southern Democrat. Lincoln’s bat is labeled “equal rights and free territory,” and he is also raising a ball, signifying that he was the winner. The words in each figure’s text bubble contain the baseball slang of the era: Bell thinks that it is “very singular that we three should strike ‘foul’ and be ‘put out’ while old Abe made such a ‘good lick.’” Douglas explains: “That’s because he had that confounded rail, to strike with.
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I thought our fusion would be a 'short stop' to his career.” Breckinridge, holding his nose and turning away, proclaims: “I guess I’d better leave for Kentucky, for I smell something strong around here, and begin to think that we are completely 'skunk'd.' ” The victorious Lincoln has the last word: “Gentlemen, if any of you should ever take a hand in another match at this game, remember that you must have 'a good bat' and strike a 'fair ball' to make a 'clean score' & a 'home run.' ” Clearly, Currier & Ives believed that its customers would easily relate the sport and its special language to the presidential campaign of that season.

A geography of baseball before 1861 illustrates the growing national popularity of the game. Most formally organized teams were located in cities, but a few also appeared in rural areas. Among the competing versions, the NABBP rules were well known, dominating in most of the larger communities. The hotbeds of baseball fever were in the New York City vicinity, the Hudson River Valley, central and upstate New York, and the Boston area; and during the 1850s the game also took root in numerous eastern, western, and southern localities.

In the northeast the “Massachusetts Game” remained the sportsmen’s favorite form of ball play in New England, even as the NABBP rules made inroads. Although some thought that the Massachusetts version was more “scientific,” it was obvious that the NABBP/New York style of play was winning converts. A report from the Bay State noted that fifty-nine clubs observed the Massachusetts rules while eighteen followed those of New York. In the New York City vicinity the NABBP rules naturally dominated, with only a few pockets of old-style townball remaining. Manhattan had dozens of clubs competing there and across the river in Hoboken, New Jersey. But the real center of baseball mania was Brooklyn, which fielded over one hundred junior and senior clubs before 1861. Over in New Jersey, at least 130 baseball clubs were active between 1855 and 1860, with Newark alone accounting for 36 junior and senior organizations and Jersey City adding another 42. The first club in Philadelphia to play the New York style of baseball was the Penn Tigers.
3. “The National Game. Three ‘Outs’ And One ‘Run.’” This Currier and Ives political cartoon features the four presidential candidates in the election of 1860. The title and the association of baseball with that campaign represent an early identification of the sport as the national pastime. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

(later the Winonas), during an intrasquad match in late 1858. The next year brought Philadelphia’s first full season of interclub play, as about a dozen nines laid out diamonds and played a primitive form of baseball. The “New York game” took a major step toward conquering the City of Brotherly Love in 1860, when the Olympic Ball Club dropped townball after nearly thirty years and adopted the NABBP
rules of play. Townball and the “Massachusetts game” still lingered in Pittsburgh and in such rural hamlets as Allegheny, Mauch Chunk, and Conneaut Lake.

The Midwest and West also shared in the excitement over baseball. Baseball in general and the New York version in particular were becoming familiar pastimes across the continent prior to the Civil War. Larger midwest cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, and St. Paul and smaller towns such as Nininger City, Minnesota territory, Oberlin, Ohio, Davenport, Iowa, Fox Lake, Wisconsin, all reported clubs and matches to the New York sporting journals. On the Pacific Coast, California claimed at least five teams in San Francisco, Stockton, and Sacramento, and several tournaments played according to the NABBP regulations in the fall of 1860 created much interest in the new team sport in the Golden State. A baseball fanatic from Boston, Brooklyn, or Philadelphia had a pretty good chance of finding a ball game as he traveled westward before 1861.

As the “New York game” swept the ball-playing fraternities in many antebellum cities and towns, it also penetrated into more remote areas. When its advocates introduced the sport into small communities, they repeated familiar patterns of cultural interaction between rural and urban America. Folk versions of baseball originated in country villages, but the modern sport was rationalized and modernized in the emerging commercial and industrial cities of the mid-nineteenth century. Then it was re-exported into the hinterland, where it prospered. The New York Times captured this process in action in an 1858 editorial: “We predict that [baseball] will spread from the city to the country, and revive there, where it was dying out, a love of the noble game.” There are many instances of city players instructing farm boys in the latest “scientific” rules and techniques of the sport. For example, in November 1860 several members of the Athletics of Philadelphia journeyed to Mauch Chunk to play ball with some of that Pennsylvania town’s young men. The Athletics and their hosts agreed to one contest of townball and one of New York–style baseball, thus introducing the more modern game into a rural area. In 1866 an early surveyor of American sport cred-
4. “Home Run Quick Step.” This song sheet cover, published around 1860, includes a dedication to the members of the Mercantile Base Ball Club of Philadelphia, PA. The Mercantiles were among the first Philadelphia players to adopt the New York game. Used with permission of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. Thomas S. Sinclair, lithographer, Bb07B291.
it the Athletics with having “done more to advance the popularity of the game, by visits to towns and villages where baseball was previously unknown, than almost any other club in the United States.” While the teaching of modern baseball proceeded, the sport never lost its special quality of being part pastoral country game and part scientific, rational urban amusement.

Modern forms of baseball encountered more resistance in the South than in other parts of the nation. But even there, while slave masters on plantations and leading citizens in inland towns showed little interest in the game, prominent merchants and other citizens of a few southern seaports adopted it with enthusiasm. Historian Kenneth Greenberg has argued that southern masters were indifferent to baseball because the sport “seemed to embody a set of values at odds with their culture.” According to his view, men of honor disliked such elements of the game as the act of running after a batter hit the ball, because of the role reversal and change of status as a hitter ceased being a subject and became an object pursued by the fielders. Although Greenberg cites just one example of a planter refusing to run after a hit and cursing the game after he was tagged out, it is probably true that most masters had some difficulty with the democratic elements of the new sport. Baseball had no clear fixed or privileged positions, not even the pitcher, who was supposed to throw “good balls” that players could strike.

While southern plantation owners showed little enthusiasm for baseball, there is some evidence that their slaves occasionally enjoyed some forms of ball games. Historian Kenneth Wiggins has compiled a few cases of slaves who recalled playing games that resembled rounders or townball before and just after the Civil War. For example, while James Henry Stith of Arkansas was born after slavery ended, as a young child he remembered seeing older boys playing baseball, and he speculated that they must have learned it “in slave time.” Another Southerner, Henry Baker, remembered participating in townball on a plantation in Alabama after the war.

A good example of both a sports journalist’s propaganda in behalf of baseball and the lack of enthusiasm for the sport in a major
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southern town is Henry Chadwick’s personal campaign to stimulate interest in the game in Richmond, Virginia. In 1848 Chadwick married a young lady from that city, and he and his wife regularly visited her relatives there. While in town he tried to organize both cricket and baseball clubs, with little success. In March 1861 the Clipper expressed surprise at the tardy development of these sports in a town with good fields and plenty of young men with ample leisure time, noting that “as organizations already so successfully commenced in Baltimore and Washington have initiated the institution in Southern cities, we hope Richmond will this season follow suit, by getting up a club of her own.” The paper advised any interested parties to contact “H.C.” in the hope that a nine might be formed by mid-April. A few weeks later, however, the firing on Fort Sumter and the ensuing Civil War spoiled plans to initiate baseball in a city that soon became the capital of the Confederacy.

Yet several southern seaports and a few river communities were more hospitable to baseball, in part because of the model and tutelage provided by touring ball players and visiting businessmen from the North. Although southern urbanization lagged behind that of the North during the antebellum era, the South’s larger cities did exhibit certain cultural characteristics similar to their northern counterparts, including baseball. In fact, the sport that was conquering northeast communities made its first inroads in southern towns. Early baseball was an urban phenomenon, better suited to the values and needs of merchants, clerks, journalists, skilled workers, and other townspeople than to those of slave masters or rural folk. The Brooklyn Excelsiors’s tour had sparked the creation of several Baltimore clubs, while Washington, D.C., inaugurated the Potomac and National clubs in 1860. New Orleans experienced a baseball boom in 1859 when seven teams were started, and two more followed the next year. These early New Orleans nines at first used the Massachusetts rules, but by 1860 they all had switched to the NABBP regulations. In 1860 Kentucky boasted four clubs in Louisville and one in Newport, while Missouri had five in St. Louis and one in St. Joseph. In Texas townball games were common in Galveston prior to the
Civil War, and the new railroad center of Houston produced a baseball club on April 11, 1861, with three 5:00 A.M. practice sessions per week!

By the spring of 1861 the regional diffusion of baseball suggested that it was well on its way to becoming the true “national pastime” of the United States, thereby achieving a distinction that sporting journalists had prematurely granted it during the late 1850s. It was also clear that the “New York game” was prevailing over its rivals. But why was the NABBP version reigning supreme? One answer is simple: both spectators and players favored its rules. To a modern eye, the New York variety seems more efficient and appealing, especially considering the symmetry of the diamond compared to the townball square. The containment of play by foul lines permitted spectators to crowd closer to the action and cut down the ground that fielders had to cover. Furthermore, the NABBP game was undoubtedly safer, simpler, and easier for adults to learn and master. Surely the older players must have preferred the force and tag rules for putouts, instead of the townball custom of throwing (or “burning”) the ball at the runners. James D’Wolf Lovett’s preference for the “New York game” was shared by many: “The pitching, instead of swift throwing, looked easy to hit, and the pitcher stood off so far, and then there was no danger of getting plugged with the ball while running bases; and the ball was so lively and could be batted so far!” Three outs to a side also seemed to be an improvement over the New England custom of “one-out, all-out,” permitting more action, more base runners, and hence more tension and drama. Nine innings brought the game to a conclusion within three hours, while many Massachusetts matches failed to reach a deciding one hundred runs before nightfall.

Yet the Massachusetts game and other variants of townball also had their good points and excitement, such as overhand pitching and the fly rule, later adopted by the NABBP and its successors. In fact, even as the New York game spread across America, several townball players and clubs remained loyal to their premodern form of ball. In Newark, New Jersey, the Knickerbocker Antiquarians remained true to their time-honored game. In Wisconsin one
old timer much preferred the rule that allowed plugging base runners with balls. He criticized the New York game as “indolent, sickly, puerile, effeminate and disgusting to behold,” condemning the new pastime as nothing more than a “‘yaller kivered’ game to suit the shiftlessness of the age.” Rule differences thus provide only part of the reason why the “New York game” won out over its rivals.

A better explanation may be found in the “urban imperialism” of the great city on the Hudson. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, New York extended its economic influence throughout the west and south via its monumental transportation network of canals, railroads, and steamships. New York traders and bankers were active in attracting business toward their home city, and in doing so they established contacts with many strangers who came under their influence. At the same time the city was becoming a cultural center and a major threat to Boston as the leading literary and communication headquarters. Its sporting weeklies, as previously emphasized, also played a significant role in promoting New York baseball. Wherever New York businessmen and newspapers appeared, they carried with them their local sport. Thus it was not surprising to find baseball thriving in those cities where New Yorkers were active: Baltimore, St. Louis, New Orleans, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. More significantly, in many of these communities sportsmen imitated the men from Manhattan and Brooklyn by naming their clubs after the famous Atlantic, Excelsior, Eagle, and Empire clubs. Even Boston and Philadelphia came under the New York baseball influence as they fell further behind in population and commercial power. Thus, just as New York was defeating its major trade rivals and strengthening its position as the largest and most powerful city in the United States, it was also exporting and promoting its native sport as the American national pastime—an entertaining product that it marketed extremely well. There were certainly many men in smaller communities who looked to the big city for leadership, even as they may have resented its dominance. In contrast, Philadelphia and Boston were not as influential in the hinterlands, and their styles of ball play were not as attractive and could not compete with the game from Gotham.