Baseball in the 19th Century
Part Two

by Priscilla Astifan
This issue of Baseball in the 19th Century Part Two continues Part One (Summer 1990) prior to the Civil War. Part One explored the formative years of the game while Part Two reveals its struggle to mature. In an upcoming issue, Part Three will explore the ending years of amateurism from 1869 through 1875. A final issue will chronicle Rochester’s first year of professional baseball in 1877. These issues are the makings of a book soon to be published by the author.

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<td>Barrett, 3d base</td>
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<td>Colby, shortstop</td>
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O. Folsom, scorer for University Club
E.B. Jennings, scorer for Flour City Club
George H. Dana, umpire

After the first reported organized baseball game in 1858, newspaper reporting continued to include more detailed box scores and inning by inning summaries and game commentary. Union & Advertiser, June 19, 1858.

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In the spring of 1866, at least seven prominent teams (and many less significant ones) competed for baseball space on Jones Square and other small urban parks that still served as primary playing fields. According to Hester Hopkins Cochrane, whose maternal uncles Sam and Farley Porter were prominent early ball players, “base ball” was once again Rochester’s “reigning diversion.”  

The Changing Nature of the Game

As ball clubs reorganized after the war, however, they became dominated by younger members and/or those who had occupations that allowed the time, energy, and flexibility needed to meet the game’s increasing demands for perfection. Old timers’ reflective comments indicate that at least three major pre-Civil War teams, the Live Oak, Flour City, and Olympic organizations, now declined regular play and became social clubs who met for yearly reunion games. Some of their members had been able to find positions with other teams. But others found it necessary to take a back seat and encourage others who could make the necessary sacrifices to practice and uphold the reputation of the village. A number of early Rochester ballplayers became prominent businessmen, lawyers, or politicians and they continued to aid local baseball by providing financial, legal or political support.

Opportunities for the advancement of baseball increased as the game continued to spread and gain a broader influence. Migrating Americans, including former Rochester residents and returning Civil War soldiers, actively encouraged the game’s southward and westward expansion. On July 26, 1866, the Evening Express announced that three former Rochester men had helped to found the Live Oak National Base Ball Club, “the first organization of its kind in Cincinnati.” Growth was also aided by improvements in railroads and steamships which allowed more distant competition and extended team tours.

Greater use of the telegraph continued to supplement tedious mail correspondence for extending out of town challenges, and it improved newspaper reporting by speeding up the transmission of scores and other game details.

Rochester newspapers, which had previously relied on club secretaries or other correspondents for reporting game accounts, began sending their own reporters to cover prominent teams. At distant games they dispatched inning by inning highlights back to the local telegraph office where eager fans and reporters waited for them. Newspapers also began publishing more scores and highlights from significant regional or national games, even those that didn’t involve local clubs. And they experimented with styles of reporting that included more detailed box scores and inning by inning summaries, and more game commentary.

The local dailies continued to publish the latest rule changes or other special announcements from the National Association of Base Ball Players in New York City which still served as the game’s national governing body. And they reprinted published solutions to local disputes or critical editorials of interest from The New York Clipper, an authoritative voice and clearing house for the game in its early development. They continued to defend the health, moral, and spiritual value of baseball and provided an ongoing source of encouragement and constructive criticism.

President of the National Base-Ball Association, George F. Sands, was elected president at the convention of the National Association of Base Ball Players, which met in Philadelphia in 1867. He opposed gambling and wanted the game to include the support of the “moral and educated classes of the community.” Many who attend the Red Wing games at Rochester’s Frontier Field today and experience its wholesome family atmosphere, would agree that his ideal has been realized. Harper’s Weekly, May 16, 1868, p. 305.
Local newspapers also forecasted details of the game’s future.

Baseball retained many of its earlier elements of a social affair engaged in by gentlemen who played mainly for health and recreation. At local matches the losing team still treated the winner to a post-game supper during which both teams were expected to bolster each other’s confidence. And the usual reward for winning was still the privilege of keeping the regulation ball which was furnished by the challenging club. Trophy balls from matches were displayed in a glass case in the Reynolds Arcade or another prominent public location.

In the mid-1860s, prize balls which were purchased by local businessmen and gilded by jewelers with silver or gold plate became popular. Other prizes given to reward teams or individual players included such items as silver cups, souvenir rosewood bats and bound score books. Cash prizes were occasionally offered by the promoters of Agricultural Society fairs, who hoped a baseball match would boost attendance, or by sponsors who hoped to make a profit by charging an admission fee to a tournament.

Businesses in the Reynolds Arcade included the local telegraph office where baseball fans could wait for inning by inning scores and highlights from out-of-town games. They could also come here to see trophy balls on display. Rochester Public Library.

Baseball games were a common form of recreation during the Civil War. They gave both Northern and Southern soldiers who were already familiar with the game, opportunities to renew their skills. Others learned how to play the game and went home to teach it. Union prisoners at Salisbury, N.C. drawn from nature by Otto Boetticher; lithograph of Sarony, Major & Knapp, New York, 1863.

Rochester Baseball Becomes Segregated

Before the Civil War, in Rochester and many other American communities, black players shared club membership with white players. After the war, however, separate Negro teams became customary. Rochester player Frank Stewart organized the Unexpected, a club comprised exclusively of his fellow African American players in 1866. Like other black teams, they followed the rules and etiquette of the National Association, although it formally excluded them or even integrated teams from joining. The Unexpected competed with other regional African American teams, including the Lincoln of Niagara Falls. Although the club’s game accounts are few and their information is limited, they suggest that Charles Douglass, son of Rochester’s famous orator, abolitionist, and women’s rights activist, was a member. Black players in Rochester continued to share playing fields with white players, and Stewart, a highly esteemed citizen, often served as an umpire for white organizations.
The following year, in 1867, Stewart left for Washington, D.C. and played that season with a Washington, D.C. Negro team. On July 27, the Express reported that he had made three home runs during a game played to determine the (Negro) championship of the Capitol District. Stewart as a player, local newspapers agreed, was hard to beat. When he died four years later of tuberculosis, a common cause of death then, the Rochester Union and Advertiser eulogized him as “the best general ball player in the state.” Had it not been for his color, they proclaimed, Stewart “could have commanded a high salary from the best club in the country.” Charles Douglass would also move on to gain recognition in early Negro baseball.

Many women at this time had probably played some form of early baseball as children, and a number of them began attending regulated Rochester baseball matches from the beginning. They were customarily escorted either singly or in a group by a brother, father, husband, or another designated male. Special seats, usually behind the catcher, were provided for them and their presence encouraged civility, respectability, and incentive for the players.

“We can hardly remember how many matches our boys have won simply because a lady encouraged them by a word or look,” the Express commented on August 1, 1987. In Rochester and other cities, a lady might surprise a player who had performed particularly well by “sending down” a bouquet of flowers. Or, an entire team might receive boutonnieres from a group of ladies. At rural matches especially, women sometimes provided a festive picnic for the customary post-game supper.

Beginning in 1866, however, adult women began taking more active roles in at least three New York State communities. A baseball team was formed that year at the recently established Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. In 1867, the Express mentioned a ladies’ team in Hallsport, New York, 97 miles south of Rochester. And on September 8, 1868, they reprinted a colorful description of a club in the Madison County community of Peterboro, which included junior and senior divisions of female players of varied ages, who dressed in “neat and easy, and exceedingly beautiful” uniforms and “short blue gaiter shoes.”

Charles Redmond Douglass, son of Frederick Douglass, may have played for the Unexpected, a local African American team, before joining the Mutuals, an African American team in Washington, D.C. in 1870.

Women also played early baseball as did this female baseball club at Peterboro, NY in the late 1860s.
But as baseball continued to develop, old problems persisted as the modern game struggled to mature. Unruly truant boys still hung around ball fields and distracted the players by throwing sticks, stones and bunches of grass at them. In spite of boundary ropes and assistance from city policemen, excited spectators often crowded in on players, especially the catcher, and also scorers and newspaper reporters. And nearby residents continued to object to an activity that broke their windows and tainted the restful nature of their urban green spaces with noise, profanity, rowdymism, intemperance, and blatant gambling.

Ball fields still varied widely from the thick sod with etched or whitewashed boundary lines that Rochester players experienced at New York City games, to grass so long it nearly had to be “chased with a scythe” in outlying communities. Although attempts were being made to improve them, baseball diamonds generally remained poorly located and laid out, improperly drained and otherwise quite primitive by later standards. Fielding was referred to as “leather hunting,” and certain ground balls were aptly named “daisy” or “thistle” cutters. The ball, which was never out of play, was sometimes retrieved through a sea of legs with the help of a spectator. Fielders were also expected to scramble over fences or even to wade or dive into nearby bodies of water to capture fair or foul balls.

Special baseball shoes soon helped to increase traction, but the lack of padded gloves and any kind of shin, chest, or head protection resulted in severe bruises, broken bones and sprained fingers, concussions, contusions, and knocked out teeth. But players were expected to continue the game in spite of all but the most serious injuries. If necessary, a player exchanged his position for a less taxing one. Sun strokes and fits of exhaustion, especially among pitchers, were still common, and the outcome of a distant match was often influenced by players fatigued from a long train trip or seasick from a rough Lake Ontario crossing.

The lone umpire who served at each game was unsalaried and untrained. Often he was ignorant or indifferent to the latest rules and regulations (especially those pertaining to balls and strikes) which the National Association continued to modify. Also, rule enforcement could vary from place to place. Worse yet, umpires were subject to the bribery of the professional gamblers who frequented the game. Nevertheless, proper etiquette required that both players and spectators respectfully obey and accept their decisions.

In spite of those who questioned the biblical validity, the legal prohibition of Sunday baseball would continue for decades. City violators were likely to be jailed overnight and/or charged a fine. Residents who sneaked off to nearby Irondequoit or other communities, where Sabbath day play was not illegal, were subject to public admonishment by the press.

Most of the nation’s players were still amateurs. But some were already unacknowledged professionals who accepted various forms of undisclosed compensation for playing ball, especially those in metropolitan New York City where “the New York game” that became modern baseball had been organized the longest. But player conduct continued to
change as regulated baseball inadvertently struggled to become a professional sport.

The gentlemanly ideals of the game persisted, however, and local newspapers continued to encourage them. On June 15, 1866 the Express admonished the Pacifics for their uncontrolled tempers and noisy criticism of the umpire’s decisions. And after the Rochester Knickerbockers traveled to Pittsford to play the Orions on July 24, they were commended by town officials for using “no profane or unchaste words,” (even after the game and late at night) and for refusing anything stronger than lemonade to drink.

As competition grew more serious, more clubs attempted to fortify their ranks with the best players available for important matches. The result was more frequent team jumping or players’ breach of the National Association rule that a player must be a member of a club for 30 days prior to any interclub competition. Also, players under 21, who were restricted to compete with Junior (under 21) organizations only, often passed themselves off as Senior players, or those who were 21 and over.

In spite of the game’s growing pains, “base ball fever” continued to rage throughout the nation. An Express article on September 7, 1867 proclaimed that every village and school district seemingly had its own club and that “Young America is in danger of getting base ball on the cranium if indeed it has not already.” The increased number of reported matches in the area, which also included industrial and commercial firms, Sabbath Schools and groups of civil service employees, illustrates the local popularity of the game.

By the end of organized baseball’s first recorded season here in 1858, the game was hailed by players as “our national game,” and the title would continue to grow more official. By now, the “New York game” had eliminated other early versions of baseball, including the Massachusetts game, which was more similar to Rounders and Town Ball.

Cricket had directly influenced the modern organized game. But it was considered too long and tedious for Americans, who in the 1860s, were already referred to as pragmatic and time-pressed. Baseball historians also point out that as America struggled to bolster its confidence as an independent nation, its citizens were eager for a sport of their own rather than one adopted by a country from which they had recently gained their independence.

Valued for its beauty, drama, and suspense, baseball continued to create its indelible and endearing influence on everyday American life as the players and spectators alike realized the excellent metaphors, analogies, and parables for the situations, challenges and trials of everyday life the game provided. Religious leaders, some of whom played organized baseball themselves, helped the game to overcome a lingering negative attitude toward recreational sports. Sometimes referred to as “muscular Christianity,” baseball continued to gain favor for promoting physical strength and endurance and for encouraging good moral character by providing a favorable outlet for the excessive energies of youth. Although it had the ability to encourage selfish pride, dishonesty, greed and corruption, it also promoted team cooperation, respect for rules and authority, success with humility, defeat with grace, and a strong sense of community spirit.

The Scientific Game Develops

When regulated baseball was new in 1858, spectators were simply content to watch the game, and they found even the errors or “muffing” entertaining. But a growing emphasis on precision now prevailed, and “first class” playing would be determined not only by the number of runs scored but also the number of scoreless innings (referred to as “goose eggs,” “skunks,” or “whitewashes”) a team could inflict on its opponents. The public continued to demand shorter, more sharply contested and evenly matched contests. “Tedious muffing games” of three or four hours were becoming intolerable. Wild throws and misses were criticized as
players expanded their skills to include swifter stopping and more accurate throwing, running catches, and one-handed catches. Double and “treble” plays became more common, and the practice of base stealing added to the drama of the game and encouraged runners, basemen, and fielders to keep alert.

Pitchers were still basically obligated to throw a straight, underhanded ball that would allow the batter a good hit to thrill spectators and challenge fielders. Changes in Association rules and regulations further encouraged this by allowing the batter to indicate how high or low he wanted the delivery. A balk rule insisted that the pitcher deliver the ball after making any visible attempt to do so. By 1866 the pitcher’s mark had evolved from a single twelve-foot line to a box four feet long and twelve feet wide, with the front edge still forty-five feet from home base. Further adjustments would be made in the following years, and in 1868, pitchers were no longer required to keep both feet on the ground. Individual pitching styles continued to develop, and as strategy continued to supplement speed and force, Rochester pitchers remained among the nation’s most innovative.

“Swiftly pitched balls don’t trouble experienced batsmen; it is having the power to send a ball just where you want it, and of course, where the batsmen can’t hit it, that is the point of pitching” declared an editorial comment in the Evening Express, which was reprinted from the New York Clipper on August 20, 1866. “This is a fact we have tried to impress upon ball players of this section time and again,” the Rochester paper added. They explained that “full control of the ball, dexterity in putting on the twist, quick acquisition of the batter’s notions, using judgment accordingly are the requisites of a first class pitcher nowadays.” They also thought it would be a good idea for clubs to have two pitchers who could change off, one who was right handed and the other left handed.

In a Rochester versus Oswego game reported on July 21, 1866, Oswego pitcher Miller’s style was described as “cool, calculating and deceiving.” According to an August 3, 1867 game account, an Express reporter was awed by a Dansville Athletics pitcher who delivered “the slowest balls ever seen pitched in a match.” They were elevated to a height of twenty feet, after which they dropped over the base in a manner so confusing he retired some of the very best Rochester players on “skyscrapers” (high flies).

Pitched balls were increasingly referred to as “bother-some” or “puzzling,” and batters were described as “trying to get the hang of them.” Pitchers were now expected to hold down runs, and more local teams who had the means were changing pitchers for strategic reasons as well as to rescue injured or exhausted regulars.

As the demands for precision and excellence continued to grow, editorial comments from a “well known lover of the National Game,” printed in the Express on August 13, 1866 questioned the national superiority of the New York City teams. Why, the writer wanted to know, did metropolitan New York City still boast the nation’s best players and teams? “There is nothing calculated to promote physical activity in the breezes that float around and above Manhattan Island, that is not wafted to us on the wings of those that come up from the valley of the Genesee!” he exclaimed. He called for more frequent and consistent practice that would emulate the New York clubs and suggested that players might benefit from permanent positions according to their individual skills, and that the best players from several mediocre clubs might be gathered into one good team to represent the city. He also addressed the needs for more clearly defined and consistently enforced rules from the National Association and for more financial support from the public.

Expanded Competition and Baseball’s Broadened Scope

As upstate New York clubs strove to improve their skills, they were eager to find a superior among themselves. In August, 1866, an announcement for a tournament funded
by regional businessmen, and planned to coincide with the Cayuga County Agricultural Fair in Auburn promised that opportunity. Instead, the grand scale competitive event, delayed by wet weather until October, showcased much that needed improvement in the loosely regulated game that was extremely vulnerable to corruption. After four days of competition in a single elimination series involving twelve teams that ranged from Albany to Buffalo, the Excelsiors of Rochester earned the first place championship and the Pacifics the second. But they were cheated out of the Gold and Silver prize balls their teams had won and a number of individual prizes their players had earned. Influenced by gamblers and injured civic pride, judges and sponsors boldly changed the rules. The Rochester teams were forced into additional playoff activity until they were provoked into resigning from the tournament to protect their sense of honor and dignity. Meanwhile, the Gold Ball was awarded to the Auburns of Auburn and the Silver Ball to the Niagaras of Buffalo.

Disillusioned Rochester teams apparently shunned a tournament in Detroit, Michigan, open to all U.S. and Canadian players the following summer (1867). But the Alleganies of Allegany, New York took second place, and an *Express* reporter who attended the contest encouraged baseball improvements in Rochester. He praised the level grounds surrounded by a high board fence and sawdust scattered along the base lines to aid umpires. He was especially impressed by the special accommodations for the many reporters: a huge box constructed around the trunk of a large elm which gave them a splendid view of the entire field.

There is also no report found of Rochester clubs attending an international tournament at Niagara Falls the following June (1868). The top feature, a match between the current U.S. and Canadian champions, failed to attract the number of spectators hoped for because of the area’s reputation for high prices, and the tournament became a financial failure.

But Rochester players had other chances to improve team and individual skills as an increasing number of prominent teams made game playing tours across the state and the nation. Those that accepted invitations to stop in Rochester in the mid-1860s included the Nationals of Washington, D.C. on November 8, 1865 and the Union of Morisania, a renowned Brooklyn team on July 11, 1867.

In 1867, Rochester clubs also began the practice of touring. The Alerts, a prominent junior club, was bold enough to travel eastward, "directly toward the headquarters of baseball." They successfully challenged a picked nine from three Brooklyn clubs. And during their return trip which included games in upstate New York communities of Kingston, Albany, Utica and Syracuse, they suffered only one loss, to the Mutuals of Albany.

### The Development of Commercialism

As baseball grew more sophisticated and transportation improvements allowed more distant competition, club expenses continued to increase. They included train or steamship tickets, hotel rooms and meals, and subsidizing visiting clubs as the home team customarily paid at least part of their expenses and provided entertainment for them.

Regular admission or “gate fees” at games were already common in New York City and other large eastern cities where clubs were more likely to have enclosed grounds. But the practice didn’t begin in Rochester until 1868. That year, the Philadelphia Athletics, who were planning a tour through Western New York, accepted an invitation to play the Excelsiors only if they would be provided with an enclosed ground and half the gate fees to cover their expenses.

The enclosed ground stipulation would be waived, but meanwhile the Excelsiors petitioned City Council to allow all ball clubs to be permitted to collect gate contributions. After that it became customary to ask for donations of up to twenty cents for matches involving local teams and twenty-
five cents for those involving “foreign” clubs. Although the Express continued to defend the need for public support and to remind the public that a successful ball club also brought a good reputation to the town, an audience who had long been accustomed to free ball games resisted. Admission fees were declared mandatory, however, during charity fund raising games.

Charity games, which involved prominent city clubs or casual organizations of policemen, postal workers, civic employees, or city and county politicians were played to raise funds for police widows, victims of epidemics, natural disasters, or other misfortunes. They also benefitted two city hospitals, St. Mary’s and Rochester General.

One of the most popular clubs to play in charity contests was the “Birds and Worms.” They evolved after a picnic at Judge Gardiner’s farm in Gates on August 19, 1868, which featured a humorous, old fashioned recreational baseball match which involved men from various levels of life and occupations. The Birds and Worms continued to dress in “grotesque and gaudy” uniforms, and to delight the public who missed the laughter of the game’s early blundering days by embellishing their game with intentionally fumbled plays and other humorous antics. They were also accompanied by a band that played appropriate “musical airs” for various actions.

The Twilight of Amateurism

The rules and regulations of the National Association continued to forbid compensation of any kind, but an increasing number of ballplayers were accepting various tangible incentives, such as shared gate receipts, job incentives/inducements, or undisclosed salaries, to play for the public. Period Rochester newspaper accounts and later old timers’ reflective articles offer no obvious clues as to whether any Rochester players were receiving any of these. However, local newspaper accounts were already distinguishing between “professional” ball players who played regularly and engaged in serious competition and the “non-professionals” who played on industrial, commercial, civic and neighborhood teams strictly for exercise and recreation. A number of former Rochester players had already joined prominent teams in other cities where they obviously received some form of payment for their effort and a measure of national fame.

“Rochester makes a lively show in base ball throughout the country, and many of the best nines in the U.S. have Rochester boys for members,” the Express declared on October 25, 1866. “Berthrong” and “Studley” were playing for the famed Nationals of Washington, D.C. and “Cromble” was a first nine substitute for the champion Brooklyn Atlantics. They also mentioned that a Toledo club which had “waxed almost everything in Ohio,” had three Rochester boys on its nine. In 1868, the impressive number of baseball players evident in Rochester inspired a Buffalo citizen to comment that “every family in Rochester seemingly raises a ball player.”

Priscilla Astifan is a freelance writer who lives in Webster.

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• Gary Larder, the organization’s current President.
• Joe Altobelli, former Red Wing and major league player and manager, currently the colorful co-announcer during home games.
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• The staff of the National Baseball Library and the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown.

ENDNOTES

1. Various reflective comments indicate that as many as two-thirds or even nine-tenths of “the Rochester baseball fraternity” served in the Civil War and that most returned. A reflective article written by Edmund Redmond on July 24, 1927, entitled, “Subject of Famous Verse, ‘Casey at the Bat,’ Played Ball on Early Team Here.” (Rochester Democrat and Chronicle on July 24, 1927) offers several names of those who served in the war: George (“Teddy”) Adams, Frank A. Schoeffel, and Patrick H. Sullivan of the Lone Star club; Charles J. Powers of the Flour City club; John A. Reynolds of the Olympic club; Samuel Porter Jr. of the Washington club, and Dennis Coughlin of the Charter Oak club. Redmond mentioned that Fred Lane of the Genesee Valley club lost an arm in the battle. An obituary of African American ballplayer, Frank Stewart (Rochester Union and Advertiser, Sept. 14, 1871) mentions that Stewart served in the war with the Rhode Island regiment.


5. Rochester Evening Express, July 27, 1867.


10. Rochester Evening Express, Sept. 21, 1867.

11. Ibid., Sept. 8, 1868.


15. Ibid., Sept. 7, 1867.


21. Ibid., July 21, 1866. Miller’s first name is not now known.

22. Ibid., Aug. 3, 1867.

23. Ibid., Aug. 13, 1866.


25. Rochester Evening Express, Aug. 21, 1867.


27. Ibid., Aug. 22, 1867.


29. Ibid., June 24, 1868.

30. Ibid., Aug. 20, 1866.

31. Ibid., Oct. 25, 1866. Note: Full names are rarely found in early 19th century newspaper accounts and the first names of Studley and Cromble still need to be found, if possible. The Great Encyclopedia of 19th Century Major League Baseball features a Henry W. Berthrong (nicknamed Harry), in a photograph with the 1871 Washington Olympics and praises him as “one of the finest all around athletes of the post-Civil War era” (page 9). Statistics in a player register on page 717 identify him as an outfielder who was born in Mumford, N.Y. on January 1, 1844 and died on Apr. 28, 1928.

32. Rochester Evening Express, Aug. 24, 1868.

Back cover: Baseball on ice was also played in Rochester. On January 16, 1860, ball players from the city’s prominent clubs played a game on ice skates on Irondequoit Bay near the Float Bridge (Empire Blvd.). Another reported game was played on New Year’s Day in 1861. This game was played at Washington Park, Brooklyn, by Brooklyn teams “Billy” Barnie against Henry Chadwick’s team made up of players from Adelphi and Polytechnic Institute in Brooklyn. Harper’s Weekly, Jan. 26, 1884, p. 64.