

**2011 EDWARD C. SOBOTA  
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**IT'S A WISE CHILD THAT KNOWS  
ITS FATHER: A SEARCH FOR  
BASEBALL'S ORIGIN**

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On March 1, 2011, Commissioner Bud Selig named me Major League Baseball's official historian.<sup>1</sup> In mid-month he announced my major duty over the next two years: to chair a special Baseball Origins Committee. Among its eleven panelists are four top-drawer baseball scholars and seven baseball-loving individuals who are also broadly concerned with history: Ken Burns, Jane Leavy, George F. Will, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Steve Hirdt, Len Coleman, and the commissioner himself.<sup>2</sup>

To those of a suspicious cast of mind—and I include all attorneys in the audience—some questions may leap to mind. First, if a historian is official, is he still a historian? Or is he oxymoronic, like a jumbo shrimp? To that I answer with confidence that no predetermined conclusions await my imprimatur. Second, why would baseball, as a multibillion dollar business thriving in the internet age, care about its origins? The

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<sup>1</sup> Press Release, Major League Baseball, John Thorn Named Official Baseball Historian (Mar. 1, 2011), *available at* [http://mlb.mlb.com/news/press\\_releases/press\\_release.jsp?ymd=20110301&content\\_id=16776310&vkey=pr\\_mlb&fext=.jsp&c\\_id=mlb](http://mlb.mlb.com/news/press_releases/press_release.jsp?ymd=20110301&content_id=16776310&vkey=pr_mlb&fext=.jsp&c_id=mlb).

<sup>2</sup> Press Release, Major League Baseball, Thorn to Lead Baseball Origins Committee (Mar. 15, 2011), *available at* [http://mlb.mlb.com/news/press\\_releases/press\\_release.jsp?ymd=20110315&content\\_id=16957038&vkey=pr\\_mlb&fext=.jsp&c\\_id=mlb](http://mlb.mlb.com/news/press_releases/press_release.jsp?ymd=20110315&content_id=16957038&vkey=pr_mlb&fext=.jsp&c_id=mlb).

answer to that is more complex, and hints at the continuing importance of baseball in America even as it may relinquish its status as the nation's most popular sport.

"The best part of baseball today," Larry Ritter, author of *The Glory of Their Times*, was fond of saying, "is its yesterdays." The old marketing adage is that in any field there are two positions worth holding: the first and the best. And with baseball's current success—the game on the field is unquestionably superior to that of a century ago—that a special quality of interest pertains to its early years; for it is with institutions as with men, as Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer wrote a century ago in another context, "the greater their importance in adult life the greater is the interest that attaches to their birth and antecedents, the incidents of their youth, and the influences that molded their spirit and shaped their destinies."<sup>3</sup>

More recently, the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould observed, "Most of us know that the Great Seal of the United States pictures an eagle holding a ribbon reading *e pluribus unum*. Fewer would recognize the motto on the other side (check it out on the back of a dollar bill): *annuit coeptis*—'he smiles on our beginnings.'"<sup>4</sup> That is why we now look to study baseball's origins—in the England, Iceland, or Egypt of long ago, as well as the more recent serial beginnings of the game in Texas, or Idaho, or the Dominican Republic, or Japan.

In the labors of the new Baseball Origins Committee over the next two years, archival data gathered by scholars such as myself will be supplemented by fans' memories and perhaps artifacts. The public may be expected at first to care little about who threw a ball to whom in 1823. The idea is to branch from "who first played the game, ever, anywhere" to "who first played the game in your town" and "who first played the game in your family." Aided by the vast resources of MLB.com and such social networking tools as Facebook and Twitter, we can build an international, national, regional, local, and family album of baseball's beginnings.

A third question that knowledgeable baseball fans might ask of me in my new official position (thirty-seven years after writing my first baseball book, I have become an overnight sensation) is:

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<sup>3</sup> SCHUYLER VAN RENSSELAER, *New Amsterdam, in HISTORY OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY* vi–vii (1909).

<sup>4</sup> STEPHEN JAY GOULD, BULLY FOR BRONTOSAURUS: REFLECTIONS IN NATURAL HISTORY 45 (1991).

wasn't there a previous baseball origins group? Wasn't Abner Doubleday anointed as the inventor of the game? The answer is yes.<sup>5</sup> That commission's efforts have been cast into a deep and not altogether deserved opprobrium, even if, as now seems likely, we are to overturn its key ruling. The quasi-legal efforts of the Special Base Ball Commission of 1905–07 (today most commonly called the Mills Commission after its chairman, Abraham Gilbert Mills) form a useful precedent for the current proceedings.<sup>6</sup>

Commission Secretary James E. Sullivan, acting as a law clerk, gathered the evidence and testimony, reducing (and often redacting) the comments for distribution to Mills and his aged panelists. Disputants Henry Chadwick and Albert Spalding—whose longstanding feud had been the impetus for the commission—supplied legal briefs for their opposing views of an English origin versus an American origin for the game.<sup>7</sup> So did John Montgomery Ward, a famous shortstop who, law degree in hand, had led the great player revolt of 1890 against the reserve clause. Sorting the evidence, gathered in desultory fashion for an increasingly bored panel, Mills acted less as committee chairman than he did trial judge—issuing a directed verdict for Abner Doubleday and Cooperstown, in 1839, when the jurors could not produce a decision in accordance with the facts as presented.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the new Baseball Origins Committee may be regarded as an appellate court for the fans!

*Caveat lector:* I am not a lawyer and I do not play one on television.

Recent scholarship, particularly that of David Block in *Baseball Before We Knew It*, as well as my own current offering, have opened us to the notion that bat and ball games are exceedingly ancient, and that even in America we have no Edison of baseball, no Newton upon whose head a ball plummeted and sparked a great idea.<sup>9</sup> Neither Abner Doubleday nor Alexander Cartwright may be credited as a sole inventor; although certain

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<sup>5</sup> ROBERT HENDERSON, BALL, BAT AND BISHOP: THE ORIGIN OF BALL GAMES 184–85 (1947), *reprinted in* EARLY INNINGS: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF BASEBALL, 1825–1908, at 285–86 (Dean A. Sullivan ed., 1995).

<sup>6</sup> ANDREW J. SCHIFF, “THE FATHER OF BASEBALL”: A BIOGRAPHY OF HENRY CHADWICK 202 (2008).

<sup>7</sup> See James E. Sullivan, *The Origin of Base Ball*, in ALBERT SPALDING, SPALDING'S OFFICIAL BASE BALL GUIDE (1908), *reprinted in* EARLY INNINGS, *supra* note 5, at 287–94.

<sup>8</sup> See *id.* at 295.

<sup>9</sup> See generally DAVID BLOCK, BASEBALL BEFORE WE KNEW IT 1–12 (2005) (discussing competing theories of the origin of baseball).

unfamiliar personages—Daniel Lucius Adams, William Rufus Wheaton, and Louis Fenn Wadsworth (the first a medical doctor, the latter two, attorneys)—may be credited with specific innovations. Wheaton codified the rules, Wadsworth gave us nine men and nine innings, and Adams gave us ninety feet and the position of shortstop, which had not been a part of the original playing combination.<sup>10</sup>

Chairman Mills knew nothing of Adams or Wheaton, but he was given a tip that Wadsworth may have been an important figure, the one who brought a diagram to the Knickerbocker playing field. He pursued this lead even after he concluded, while holding his nose, that baseball was invented by Doubleday one day during the Hard Cider Campaign of Tippecanoe and Tyler Too—the ill-fated William Henry Harrison (who caught a cold delivering his inaugural address and died within the month) and his running mate, John Tyler. Today I would like to sketch the story of A. G. Mills and the earlier baseball origins group: its reason for existing, its successes and failures, and why, a century later, the question of baseball's origin is unsettled. It has turned out in my view that Spalding and Chadwick—like the plainly calculating exponents of Doubleday and Cartwright—were not mere liars and blowhards. They were conscious architects of legend, shapers of national identity, would-be creators of a “useful past,” and binding archetypes (clever lads, noble warriors, despised knaves, sly jesters, wounded heroes, and so on). In short, they were *historians* as that term once was understood. They were trying to create a national mythology from baseball, which they identified as America's secular religion because it seemed to supply faith for the faithless and unify them, perhaps in a way that might suit other ends.

In the words of psychiatrist George E. Vaillant, “[T]he passage of time renders truth itself relative. . . . It is all too common for caterpillars to become butterflies and then to maintain that in their youth they had been little butterflies. Maturation makes liars of us all.”<sup>11</sup> And so it was with the rough and ready game of baseball, constructing a legacy in support of its social and business models. Chadwick wished to attach America's national pastime, which he had done so much to promote, to the land of his

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<sup>10</sup> John Thorn, *The Father of Baseball?*, ELYSIAN FIELDS Q., 1992, at 85; Randall Brown, *How Baseball Began*, 24 THE NATIONAL PASTIME 51, 53–54 (2004).

<sup>11</sup> GEORGE E. VAILLANT, ADAPTATION TO LIFE 195, 197 (1977).

birth and the noble traditions he falsely imagined to have inspired cricket as England's national game. Spalding wished baseball to have an American origin and an "American dad," equally untrue.

A belief in the prospective utility of an artfully constructed antiquity was by no means limited to these two. As I reveal in *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*, baseball was busily inventing its past too, almost from the point of its formal organization. "Who controls the past," George Orwell wrote, "controls the future."<sup>12</sup> The legal profession, in its reliance upon precedent, understands that full well. But as Orwell added, "who controls the present controls the past."<sup>13</sup>

Here we enter the realm of politics. Let's look back to the Mills Commission and how it came to settle upon Abner Doubleday, to Cooperstown's enduring benefit and, I am hoping, your entertainment.

By Monday, December 30, 1907, sixty-four-year-old A. G. Mills, chairman of the Special Base Ball Commission on the game's origins, knew he could put off his final report no longer. The investigative mandate of the group, commenced in the spring of 1905, would cease at year's end, and the responsibility to summarize its findings fell to him.

Albert Goodwill Spalding had appointed all the members of the commission. All were, like himself, baseball luminaries of an earlier day: Morgan G. Bulkeley, titular first president of the National League in its inaugural season of 1876, although Chicago club president William A. Hulbert made all the decisions; Nick Young, the league's first secretary and fifth president, following Mills; Al Reach and George Wright, star players of the era before the advent of the League whose successful sporting-goods businesses had been quietly purchased by Spalding and permitted to continue in business under their old names; and Mills himself, fourth president of the National League and author of the landmark reserve clause—binding a player to one club for life, while the club obligation to the player was for ten days only—over which players and owners battled for nearly a century until free agency became the new standard. United States Senator Arthur P. Gorman of the amateur Maryland club of the 1860s, another commission appointee, would die in midterm and

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<sup>12</sup> GEORGE ORWELL, NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR 35 (1949).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

not be replaced on the commission. Sullivan, president of the Amateur Athletic Union as well as a Spalding factotum, gathered and, to a significant degree, filtered the evidence.

Over the next two years the commissioners attended to their charge in desultory fashion, although Sullivan did receive hundreds of interesting letters and documents. Upon his return from an extended stay in Europe, Mills had been greeted by a bulging packet of edited statements and news clippings—a condensation of the material that had been provided to each member of the commission over the past two years. Upon riffling through the documents he instantly perceived that he had been boxed in. “From the nature of the case,” Sullivan had written to Mills and the other commissioners in a covering letter, “and the preponderance of the evidence submitted it would seem that there is but one decision that can be made as to [baseball’s] American or foreign origin.”<sup>14</sup>

In a letter that Mills alone received that morning of December 30, Sullivan repeated what he had said a few days earlier when they met on the subway: that he had heard from all the others except Mills himself. Mills had been waiting to receive some additional information about a mysterious “Mr. Wadsworth,” first name unknown to him, but now Mills knew that “if I got anything off on the subject this year I would have to hustle.”<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, that afternoon he dictated a draft letter that “the star stenographer of our staff quickly presented . . . in such perfect typographical form that I fired it off as it was.”<sup>16</sup> And so this hurried first draft, still wanting data, became baseball history.

Constrained by the lack of compelling evidence pointing in another direction, Mills, who was trained as an attorney, knew he

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from James E. Sullivan to A. G. Mills (Oct. 12, 1907) (on file with the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library).

<sup>15</sup> Letter from A. G. Mills to James E. Sullivan (Dec. 31, 1907) (on file with the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* Mill’s letter reads in full:

Dear Sullivan, Receiving a letter from you, yesterday, reminded me of what you said in our talk in the subway recently, to the effect that you had heard from all the others on the Base Ball question, excepting only me. I was then waiting, and still am, for a reply to a letter I wrote in regard to the Mr. Wadsworth who presented a diagram of the game to the Knickerbocker Club; but, when your letter came yesterday, it occurred to me that if I got anything off on the subject this year I would have to hustle, and, accordingly, in the afternoon I dictated a letter which I intended as an original draft to be amended, but the star stenographer of our staff quickly presented it to me in such perfect typographical form that I fired it off as it was. *Id.*

would have no choice as the commission chair but to anoint Abner Doubleday as baseball's inventor, who was said to be a resident of Cooperstown, New York, in 1839 or 1840, the attested period of invention. As a youth, Doubleday had cared nothing for games: "I was brought up in a bookstore, and early imbibed a taste for reading," he wrote to a New York *Sun* editor who had inquired about his boyhood habits.<sup>17</sup> "I was fond of poetry and art, and much interested in mathematical studies. In my outdoor sports I was addicted to topographical work . . . ."<sup>18</sup>

Although Doubleday could not imagine the celebrity status that would attach to him in death as baseball's Thomas Edison, he was no stranger to accidental fame. On April 12, 1861, after a Confederate assault upon Union troops at Fort Sumter with cannon fire at daybreak, Captain Doubleday "took breakfast leisurely"; thus fortified, he 'aimed the first gun on our side in reply to the attack.'" All the same, he was in later years, pleased to be referred to in print as "the old Sumter hero": the man who, by engaging the Rebellion, had "started" the glorious Civil War.

Complicating Doubleday's postmortem coronation as the man who had started baseball was the fact that he and Mills had been personal friends for twenty years.<sup>19</sup> Mills was a New York City lad who enlisted with the 5th New York Volunteers in 1862 and was mustered out in 1865. After the war, Mills enrolled at Columbian Law School, now George Washington University, in Washington, D.C. While there, he also became president of the Olympic Base Ball Club and tried unsuccessfully to recruit a young pitcher from Rockford, Illinois, named Albert Spalding. Spalding had become a national sensation when, at age seventeen, he had defeated the touring Washington Nationals. By 1876, both Mills and Spalding would relocate to Chicago where, with White Stockings President Hulbert, they staged a baseball coup by creating a rival league before their contract-

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<sup>17</sup> *Great Men's Boyhood: Curious Autograph Answers to a Bold Question*, THE SUN (N.Y.), Mar. 25, 1888, at 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

From Mendham, N.J., comes the little note of Major-Gen. Abner Doubleday, dated Nov. 20, '87, and written in a neat running hand. 'You ask for some information as to how I passed my youth. . . . As I am moving to New York I am much hurried, and cannot give more details at present. *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> MY LIFE IN THE OLD ARMY: THE REMINISCES OF ABNER DOUBLEDAY FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF THE NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY 10 (Joseph E. Chance ed., 1998).

breaking club could be expelled from the five-year-old National Association.

Mills had first met Abner Doubleday in “1873 at a meeting of the Lafayette Post of the Grand Army of the Republic in New York City.”<sup>20</sup> When the Major General died in 1893, it was Mills who organized his memorial service at New York’s City Hall and arranged for his burial at Arlington. Yet not once in the intervening two decades of their friendship had Doubleday mentioned to Mills—who was widely known as an attorney serving Hulbert, president of the National League, and after Hulbert’s death, league president himself—anything about the game he had dreamt up one fine summer day in Cooperstown.

Over the past century historians have positioned Mills as an architect of the Doubleday myth, his friendly feelings overriding his reason. But close review of the commission documents reveals him to have been a dupe of what appears today to have been a conspiracy. Particularly galling to Mills was his belief, which he held for the rest of his long life, that he had been manipulated to boost one old friend (Doubleday) by another old friend (Spalding), at the personal expense of his credibility. At the National League’s fiftieth anniversary dinner in New York on February 2, 1926, reporters asked the eighty-one-year-old Mills what conclusive evidence he had for Cooperstown as the birthplace of the national pastime, he replied:

None at all, as far as the actual origin of baseball is concerned. The committee reported that the first baseball diamond was laid out in Cooperstown. They were honorable men and their decision was unanimous. . . .

I submit to you, gentlemen, that if our search had been for a typical American village, a village that could best stand as a counterpart of all villages where baseball might have been originated and developed—Cooperstown would best fill the bill.<sup>21</sup>

After Hulbert had died in 1882 he was succeeded in the ownership of the White Stockings by Spalding, who by turns became a force in league affairs, a sporting-goods magnate, and a world-touring missionary for the game that had given him everything. It was Spalding who recruited his old allies, including Mills, to the Special Base Ball Commission; he knew his own mind beforehand, but the matter needed to be settled with

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<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> Richard J. Tofel, *The “Innocuous Conspiracy” of Baseball’s Birth—Two Long-Lost Letters Show how Doubleday was Credited with the Game’s Invention*, WALL ST. J., July 19, 2001, at A20.

seeming respect for honest inquiry and due process.

Spalding's motive to investigate baseball's origins might have been jingoism, or mercantilism, or overweening ego—or it may have been mere pique with Henry Chadwick, the octogenarian editor of his self-branded annual *Guide*. *Spalding's Guide* was the annual bible of the game, reporting on league matters, championship races, player performances, and official year-end statistics for every club in Organized Baseball.<sup>22</sup> It was also the centerpiece of Spalding's American Sports Publishing empire, which provided guides for other sports and games and instructional manuals for youngsters wishing to become the next idols of the nation. Chadwick, who had edited *Spalding's Guide* each year since 1881, had been declaring in print for as long as anyone could remember—since before Spalding himself first set foot on a ball field—that the grand old game, which all the early players believed to be purely American, in fact derived from an older English schoolboy game called rounders. Spalding and others countered that no American could be found who would testify to having played a game of that name, even if the rules of some scrub (shorthanded) versions of baseball, particularly “old cat,” seemed similar to the English game. When professional baseball players first traveled to England in 1874, to exhibit their game in the home of cricket, they were informed that it was simply rounders, made duller by the dominant role of the pitcher.

The long simmering if good-natured argument between Spalding and Chadwick came to a head after the latter used the 1903 *Spalding's Guide* as his bully pulpit to dust off his rounders theory, first aired in 1860 in the premier issue of *Beadle's Dime Base-Ball Player*, the handbook of the game when young Albert was a pup. In the 1904 *Guide*, Chadwick went on further to discuss the game's evolution in America, in the form of “town ball,” which he viewed as nothing more or less than American rounders.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See generally SPALDING'S OFFICIAL BASE BALL GUIDE (Henry Chadwick ed., 29th ed. 1905) (listing league records for 1903 and 1904).

<sup>23</sup> DAVID BLOCK & TIM WILES, BASEBALL BEFORE WE KNEW IT: A SEARCH FOR THE ROOTS OF THE GAME 23 (2006) (“The game of rounders first began to be played in England . . . .’ [Chadwick believed] that ‘early emigrants’ brought the game to America, where it eventually became known as ‘base ball.’”); see also JAMES A. VLASICH, A LEGEND FOR THE LEGENDARY: THE ORIGIN OF THE BASEBALL HALL OF FAME 8–9 (1990) (“Town ball was an Americanized version of the old English game of rounders which dated back to the seventeenth century, and baseball was town ball with American modifications.”).

Chadwick had it largely right when he observed, invoking *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "Like Topsy, baseball never had no 'fadder'; it jest growed."<sup>24</sup> But so did Spalding. Baseball grew to become an American institution not entirely by chance—it had not one father but several, though none named Doubleday.

Later in 1904, Spalding, patriotically and entrepreneurially galled at having yet again provided space to Chadwick's Anglophilia, began writing to colleagues from bygone days, pointedly soliciting evidence that would support his belief that the games of cat and town ball, which he saw as unquestionably American, gave rise to baseball. One may see in Spalding's correspondence his bald intent to obtain precisely that outcome, but it is unfair to say "the fix was in" for Doubleday at this time.

Baseball historians have treated Albert Spalding as a combination of Daddy Warbucks and Mr. Micawber because of his penchant for both profit and fustian. "Base Ball," he once declared, "is the exponent of American Courage, Confidence, Combativeness; American Dash, Discipline, Determination; American Energy, Eagerness, Enthusiasm; American Pluck, Persistency, Performance; American Spirit, Sagacity, Success; American Vim, Vigor, Virility."<sup>25</sup> But it turns out, as I relate in *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*, that Spalding was something of an idealist too, one who loved the game for its pure amateur spirit, for its joy, for its uplifting qualities. It has been easy to make him out as the architect of the plot, by turns evil and comic, to concoct baseball's origin. At some point, however, during his final years at the Theosophical Society compound at Point Loma in Southern California, he may have become the plot's unwitting victim, afflicted with early-onset dementia that left him in thrall to others. Two of his sons thought so, and upon his demise in 1915, sued Spalding's widow for twisting his mind and his assets toward the interests of the religious cult.<sup>26</sup>

When, on March 20, 1908, the commission conclusions—along with the briefs supplied by Spalding, Chadwick, and Ward—were revealed in the *Guide*, Spalding emerged triumphant.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Letter from Henry Chadwick to Daniel Lucius "Doc" Adams (Aug. 16, 1898) (on file with the Yale University Library).

<sup>25</sup> ALBERT G. SPALDING, *AMERICA'S NATIONAL GAME* 4 (1911).

<sup>26</sup> *Spalding Heir Gives Reasons*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 7, 1915, at II7; *Spalding is Bitter Against Step-Mother, Former Local Woman*, FORT WAYNE JOURNAL-GAZETTE, Nov. 16, 1915, at 12.

<sup>27</sup> PAUL DICKSON, *THE DICKSON BASEBALL DICTIONARY* 545–46 (Skip McAfee ed., 3d ed. 2009).

Chadwick, who would live only one month longer, had been trounced. Mills, who endured until 1929, never learned that only one week after the public issuance of his report, his mysterious Mr. Wadsworth, whom he was never able to locate, had died in a poorhouse in Plainfield, New Jersey, where Wadsworth had been an inmate for ten years.<sup>28</sup>

Such is the legacy of baseball's first organized search for its origins. We will look to do better this time.

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<sup>28</sup> John Thorn, *Debate over Baseball's Origins Spills into Another Century*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 13, 2011, at SP11.