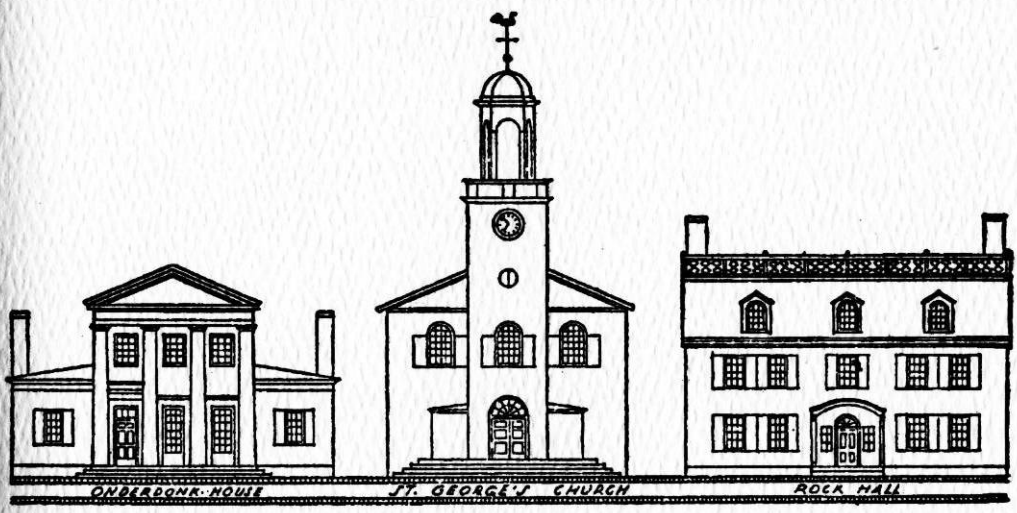
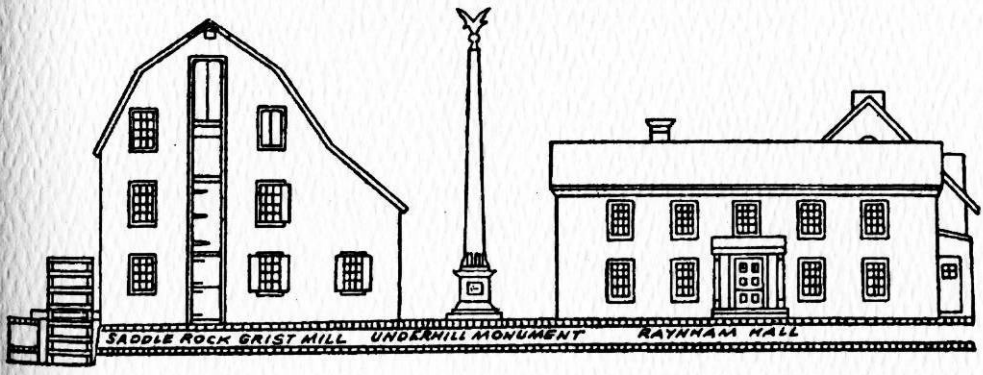


THE NASSAU COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY JOURNAL



Volume 80 2025

THE NASSAU COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY JOURNAL 2025

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Jean Henning was Director of Education at the Nassau County Museum of Art for more than 25 years. She has led numerous tours at the museum and in museums and art galleries in New York City, as well as for the Roslyn Landmark Society, and she has published articles in *The Journal of Art Education* and *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*. She was a member of the Board of Trustees of the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities (now Preservation Long Island) for 10 years. While she has a degree in art history from Smith College, she has always had a particular interest in architectural history and in the people and social forces that impact that history.

Gary Monti was the Director of Museum and Theater Operations at the Cradle of Aviation Museum from 2001 until retiring in 2020. Previously, when he worked for the Nassau County Museums, he helped develop the Old Time Base Ball Program at Old Bethpage Village Restoration. He was a player for the vintage base ball games from 1986 to 1997, program coordinator, 1992 to 2002, and senior umpire, 2007 to present. (His base ball nickname is "Reverend.") In the Village of Westbury, he is the Village Historian, Chairman of the Landmarks Conservation Commission, and Chair of the Zoning Board of Appeals. He is a trustee of the Nassau County Historical Society (NCHS) and its second Vice-President. His article, "The Cradle of Aviation Museum: Eighty Years in the Making" appeared in this *Journal* in 2024 (79:1-23).

Natalie A. Naylor has been editing this *Journal* since 1989, is a past president of the NCHS (2008-2020), and currently program chairperson. She is retired from Hofstra University where she taught Long Island and American history and was director of its Long Island Studies Institute. from 1985 to 2000 Dr. Naylor edited several books for the Institute, has written numerous articles on Long Island history in this and other journals, and is the author of *Women in Long Island's Past.*

Paul D. van Wie is a lifelong resident of Franklin Square, the founder of the Franklin Square Museum, and served as its president for more than three decades, and was a trustee of the Franklin Square Public Library for eighteen years. He is currently Chairman of the Town of Hempstead Landmarks Preservation Commission, President of the Friends of Hempstead Plains at Nassau Community College, a Trustee of the NCHS, and of the Agricultural Society of Queens, Nassau, and Suffolk Counties. Dr. van Wie is currently Professor of History and Political Science at Molloy University and Associate Editor of this *Journal.*

The Nassau County Historical Society Journal

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The Editor's Message

Long Island is an extraordinary place. Its one hundred and eighteen miles stretching from Manhattan to Montauk is undoubtedly one of areas richest in history and culture anywhere in the United States. This issue of the *Journal* documents and exemplifies that richness, with a diverse offering of articles.

Gary Monti's article on Old Time Baseball focuses on the importance of Old Bethpage Village Restoration in the revival of the national pastime played under nineteenth-century rules. It is a story of love for the game, though it reminds us yet again that the Restoration Village is much more than a collection of architectural landmarks. Old Bethpage Village is truly a living entity, engaging the Long Islanders of today: precisely what its founders had envisioned.

Trinity Episcopal Church in Roslyn is an architectural gem from the Gilded Age of the great North Shore estates. In her article on the church, Jean Henning documents the planning, design, and construction of this Gothic-Revival church which is still very much in use, and in nearly pristine condition. The engaging personality of Katherine Mackay, the force behind the creation of Trinity Church, enriches this interesting story.

Nassau County's multi-ethnic past and present is reflected in the history of the Plattduetsche Home, contributed by Paul van Wie. Created by an immigrant community from northwestern Germany over a century ago, this home for the elderly has become an important cultural and social institution as well as a landmark. The Home combines a rich history with a vibrant present.

In this issue of the *Journal* our editor, Natalie Naylor, has contributed "A Short History of a Long Island," a concise summary which serves to confirm the richness of our Island's history and culture. Dr. Naylor's article distills the essence of our history in a manner everyone can appreciate. It includes references to some of our many museums and historic sites which can be visited to further enhance understanding of our past.

Dr. Naylor has also catalogued the comprehensive array of published works—books, articles, and pamphlets—by our late esteemed County Historian and Nassau County Historical Society Trustee Edward J. Smits. An examination of this compilation of his writings is eloquent testimony to the work and legacy of a distinguished historian whose achievements will benefit generations to come.

Regular features include President Scott Fairgrieve's "Message" and Natalie Naylor's "Last Word," which includes information on the Society's programs and Long Island's 250th Commemoration, as well as "History News," and "Recent Books on Long Island history."

— Paul D. van Wie

Striker to the Line: The Birth of Vintage Base Ball

Gary Monti

On a hot summer afternoon, August 25, 1979, during a Civil War encampment at Long Island's Old Bethpage Village Restoration, two teams were formed to play a game of base ball. The umpire called out "Striker to the Line," today we say, "Batter Up." It was at this moment that Vintage Base Ball was born.[1]

In 1845, America was realizing its manifest destiny. The nation's urban centers were undergoing a rapid industrialization and were experiencing unprecedented population growth. Urban living created a culture shock. The American Transcendental movement was a reaction to this rapidly changing environment. In 1845, Thoreau was at Walden Pond writing about growing his beans, and in 1845, a group of men gathered in New York City to play a new game called Base Ball.[2]

An aspect of Transcendentalism was an adulation of nature. This is evident by the creation of New York's Central Park, Brooklyn's Prospect Park and its Greenwood Cemetery; the pastoral landscape designs of municipal parks and cemeteries were a feature of this time. The first officially recorded base ball game (two words in the 19th century) was played on the aptly named Elysian Fields (a blissful place) in Hoboken. The game was played in New Jersey because there was not suitable open ground in Manhattan.

In 1855, Walt Whitman wrote, "I see great things in base ball. It's our game – the American game. It will take our people out of doors, fill them with oxygen, give them a larger physical stoicism. Tend to relieve us from being a nervous dyspeptic set. Repair these losses and be a blessing to us."[3]

The first organized base ball team that played by rules that were a direct precursor to modern baseball was the New York Knickerbockers. A member of that team, Alexander Cartwright, has in the past been credited as the originator of modern baseball. However, Knickerbocker team co-founder Daniel "Doc" Adams" is now recognized as the father of baseball. He codified the rules of the game that have continued to this day. Adams is considered by baseball historians to be the most influential person in the history of the game. Besides the diamond shape of the field, his "Knickerbocker Rules" specified ninety-foot base paths, three outs per inning, and the creation of the short stop position, making it nine players on the field. Doc Adams was the first person to play the position that he invented.[4]

Baseball's roots come from the English game of Rounders, which resembled baseball, but had a rectangular field layout rather than a diamond

shape, and it had very different rules. Most notable of the Rounders rules, and one that many wrongly associate with early base ball, is that a base runner could be called out after being "soaked" or hit by a thrown ball. Rounders was called Town Ball in the United States, variants of which were also known as the Massachusetts game and the Philadelphia game.

Sportswriter Henry Chadwick wrote in 1860, "This invigorating exercise and manly pastime may now be justly termed the American game of ball, for though of English origin, it's been so modified and improved of late years in this country, as almost to deprive it of any of its original features."[5]

The Myth of Abner Doubleday and Baseball

Let's dispel the myth. Abner Doubleday had nothing to do with baseball. In 1905 former star player, team owner, and sporting goods magnate Albert Spaulding created the "Special Commission," headed up by A.G. Mills, former president of the National League. It became known as the Mills Commission. At the turn of the century, there was a movement to find the American origins of institutions and conventions, disassociating them from European influences; in this case refuting that baseball had evolved from the English game of Rounders.[6]

The Mills Commission received a letter from an elderly man, Abner Graves, who was then living in Colorado. Graves claimed that as a young boy in 1839, he witnessed fellow Cooperstown, New York resident, Abner Doubleday sitting under a tree next to nearby Glimmerglass Lake, and that Doubleday with pencil and paper in hand laid out the field dimensions and the rules of what would become baseball. That was good enough for Albert Spaulding and the Mills Commission who officially designated Doubleday as the creator of baseball. A.G. Mills acquiesced to this even though he didn't believe it, because Mills was friends with Abner Doubleday for twenty years prior to Doubleday's death in 1893. Mills claimed that Doubleday never mentioned baseball.[7]

Doubleday was readily chosen by the Mills Commission because he was a Civil War hero. He was Major Robert Anderson's executive officer at Fort Sumter, and it was he who fired the first return shot at the Confederate batteries. He later rose to the rank of Major General and was instrumental in beating back the Confederate attack on the left wing of the Union lines on the first day of the battle at Gettysburg.

Doubleday never spoke about baseball. He kept a daily diary from the age of fifteen to his death; baseball does not appear anywhere in its pages. Also, in 1839, when he purportedly was in Cooperstown inventing the game, he was at West Point as a cadet. It gets worse. A few years after the commission's findings, the source of this legend, Abner Graves, a raging alcoholic suffering

from dementia, was remanded to a mental institution after murdering his wife. The Baseball Hall of Fame Museum opened in 1939, at the centennial of and as a result this myth. The Hall of Fame later debunked the Mills Commission's findings and the reason for its location in Cooperstown. The legend, however, lives on.[8]

The Birth of Vintage Base Ball

Vintage Base Ball originated at Nassau County's Old Bethpage Village Restoration (OBVR). It had a curious beginning for a program that would go on to become one of the most successful practices of living history in the country. Old Bethpage Village is a museum portraying mid-19th century Long Island. It is a division of the Nassau County Parks Department. In 1979, the Village Site Director Elizabeth Hitz, asked Research Curator Harrison (Terry) Hunt "to look into the possibility of creating a historic baseball game." Her motivation was that the County Parks Commissioner was an avid baseball fan.[9]

Hunt consulted period local newspapers and found that they covered community-based ball games. He discovered two early town teams playing in 1859, the Mineola Washingtons and the Hempstead Eurekas. He directed Museum Interpreter James McKenna, who was a history major at Hofstra University, to find instructions on how to play the game. McKenna consulted a volume that contained the 1859 "Knickerbocker Rules." Armed with this information, Hunt and the village's program coordinator Rick Jagels set out bring the old game back to life.[10]

The next step for Harrison Hunt, was to find players. As it happened, he was on a bowling league run by John Morrison. Morrison, who would in later years become an icon of vintage base ball, also happened to head up a men's softball league. The game at the 1979 Civil War encampment at Old Bethpage Restoration, "Old Time Base Ball" as it was named, was first

Vintage Base Ball is born. The first season at Old Bethpage Village, August 1980: The "Mineola Washingtons." Captain John "Blue Streak" Morrison, the longest continuous vintage base ball player in the world, is second from the right, first row. *Photo courtesy of James McKenna.*

played by choosing up sides amongst the Union soldier reenactors to play against Morrison's softball team, TKB (Tappa Kega of Beer). This first game experiment was successful, so Hunt and Jagels moved forward to make Old Time Base Ball a regular program at the village the following year.[11]

The year chosen to represent early base ball was 1864, which is the mid-range date for the village's overall interpretation, though the game was played by a rudimentary version of the 1859 rules. In the first regular season in 1980, Morrison's TKB team became the Mineola Washingtons and he arranged for another team in his league to be the Hempstead Eurekas. The Washingtons' uniforms were blue, the Eurekas, grey. This began the tradition of The Old Time Base Ball program at the village as being all volunteer, a tradition that continues to this day.[12]

The Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM) is an organization that brings together those involved in living historical farms, agricultural museums, and outdoor museums of history and folklife. Members of ALHFAM get together at their annual convention and share programming ideas. Old Bethpage Village's Rick Jagels attended the July 1980 conference and presented its Old Time Base Ball program. The Ohio Historical Society ran with the idea and in 1981 created the Muffins base ball team at its living history museum, Ohio Village in Columbus. (A "muffin" is a base ball player who can't catch. It's where the term to "muff it" derives).[13]

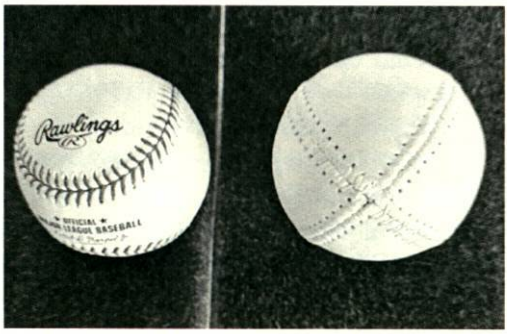
Playing the Old Game

Visitors entering Old Bethpage Village Restoration would often see a base ball game being played in a historic setting. Doug Stewart, writing his cover story for *Smithsonian Magazine*, described the setting as, "Nostalgia incarnate, a grass field, wooden benches and backstop, and in the distance a red barn with a gambrel roof of 1840s vintage."[14] The first difference visitors notice, besides the 19th-century uniforms, was that none of the players wore mitts—bare-handed play was the norm until the early 1890s. Then there was the "bound" rule, meaning that a ball could be caught on one bounce for an out anywhere on the field, including foul territory, and including a foul tip to the catcher on any pitched ball. A runner could advance on a bound out without being required to tag up as when the out was the result of a caught fly. This one rule made the strategy of this version of base ball very different than its modern successors.

From 1859 to 1872 pitching was underhand from within two pitcher's lines 45 feet from home plate. After 1873, pitching was three-quarters (side arm), 55 feet to home plate; in 1874 a pitcher's box at that same distance was introduced. The modern game has a pitcher's mound 60-½ feet from home plate.[16] When a pitcher has a bad outing, an old terminology is still used to

this day; it is sometimes said that he got "knocked out of the box," even though the pitcher's box hasn't existed for 130 years.

The Ball. The pre-1868 vintage ball has crisscrossing stitches known as the lemon peel design, versus the modern pattern where the seams run parallel at points for a better grip for the pitcher. The vintage ball is roughly six ounces in weight and ten inches in circumference. It is larger than a modern baseball at five ounces and a nine-inch circumference. Compositions are different, rubber vs. a cork core. From 1868 going forward, the baseball looked like and was the same size as a modern baseball, though it kept the rubber core until 1918 when cork core was implemented.[17] The cork center ball came to be known as the "Live Ball." Balls with rubber cores, which up until then were called baseballs are now referred to as the "Dead Ball," because rubber core balls did not carry as far as its cork offspring. The cork ball changed the game. It ushered in the "Live Ball Era," also known as the "Home Run Era" of baseball.[18]



A modern Major League baseball and an 1858-design base ball used until 1873. *Photo by Gary Monti.*

There were no regulations for bat sizes in 1864. Some unusual examples. *Photo courtesy of Tom Fesolowich.*

The Bat. The bat size was not stipulated until 1868. Prior to that, the recommended bat sizes were 30 to 40 inches in length but there were no restrictions.[19] Players used any wooden length that they could get their hands on to fashion into bats. Wagon wheel spokes were utilized for instance. Bats lasted many seasons. Old Bethpage's original pump handle bat was used for 14 seasons before a player absconded with it.[20]

The Rebirth of Vintage Base Ball at OBVR

From 1980 to 1989, four games a season were played at the Restoration Village, once a month from June to September. Though it was the first of its kind anywhere, it was a sleepy little program, and its vintage rules were spotty

at best in their accuracy. The rules, besides the bats and balls, along with the one bounce out rule and the absence of gloves, left much to be desired. Once the program was initiated by the village curators, it was left to the volunteer TKB players to carry out the game.

By 1991, the program was down to one game a year, which was a shame and made it hardly worth doing. At that time, the author (a player starting in 1986, senior umpire since 1997), was the Nassau County Museums' Special Projects Curator and arranged many outsourced events. In 1990, I learned that documentary filmmaker Ken Burns was following his Civil War series with one on baseball. I suggested to my director that we should take advantage of what will be a popular documentary series and do more with vintage base ball, to take it on the road to local communities and perhaps form new teams that could play there and at Old Bethpage. He shot the idea right down.[21] He was not interested in baseball and said that visitors to Old Bethpage would much rather watch decoy carving and quilt making. I knew it was a good idea and wasn't ready to let it go. At the time, I was the president of the Westbury Historical Society. I concocted an idea to have the society sponsor an 1887 base ball team called the "Westburys" (an actual team of the time) and also put together a second team to play in communities. I contacted the people heading up the Freeport Centennial Committee because I heard that as part of their commemorations they were recreating a period base ball team, the Freeport Athletics (again, an actual team of the period).

I arranged with the Freeport team to play community games. I chose 1887 rules because I didn't want to directly compete with the 1860s program at Old Bethpage. It wasn't a matter of a conflict of interest because by this time I left the county museums and moved to the Brooklyn Museum; it was a courtesy, though not much of one. We played that summer season six times and it was great fun. At the end of the season, I got a call from Ken Balcom, the Assistant Supervisor at Old Bethpage, who suggested that I bring 1887 base ball to the village. The director who turned me down had retired and Ken was as enthusiastic about doing something with the base ball program as I was. So, in 1992 we played about twenty games in two leagues, 1864 and 1887.

The program immediately began to grow, and more teams were added to both leagues. In 1994 something amazing happened. Major League Baseball went on strike, which angered all baseball fans, a result of which we were inundated with the media using us as a positive juxtaposition against the pros. The program's player recruitment skyrocketed so that by the following summer the program grew to four 1864 teams and six 1887 teams. We played 60 games that season.

The 1864 teams were the Mineola Washingtons, the Hempstead Eurekas, the Brooklyn Excelsiors, and the Huntington Suffolks. The 1887 teams were the Westburys, the Freeport Athletics, the Hicksville Ozones, the Glen Head

Zig Zags, the Cold Spring Spiders, and the Bellmore Seminoles. All these teams were extant in the 19th century.

It was not uncommon to recruit visitors to the village to play in a game, especially so in the 1980s, when due to the paucity of games and players, it was difficult to field two teams and maintain their player rosters when there were so few games scheduled. This practice which continues to a lesser extent today involves visitors who ask how they can get involved. Many very good players started this way, some who would become stalwarts in the program. There was one such recruit who would go on to transform everything.[22]

Old Dutch

In July 1994 during an 1864 game, in which I was the umpire, a lone visitor stood on the side of the field watching intently for the entire game. At its conclusion, this very serious-looking man approached me and said that we weren't doing things exactly right, namely that the home plate should be round, like a dinner plate, that the base runners should be leading off the base and stealing, and that the striker's count of three swings was wrong. That was just for starters. I asked this interesting man to join us at our "pro-club," which were picnic tables on the edge of Old Bethpage's parking lot. Players would go there following the game for refreshments, to critique the game just played, and to engage in general banter. The man's name was Al Dieckmann. We quickly realized that Al knew what he was talking about. We invited him to suit up for the following week's game, which he did.[23]

Nicknames are a feature of vintage base ball. Many players attain these names organically, not by choice. The prevalence of using these names results in players, who have participated with one another for years, not knowing one another's real names. Case in point: the program has a British player, Danny Phillips. He played for twenty-two years without acquiring a nickname. One day he told us that his name wasn't Danny, it was Davey; he had never corrected anyone. From then on everyone called him Davey-Danny. That's how a nickname is acquired. Other notable, well-earned nicknames, to list a few, include Daffy, Big Bat, Dirt, Wheels, Kid Speed, Squid, Legs, Dandy, Pockets, Foul Ball Willy, Wildhorse, Two Bag, and Peach.[24]

Al "Old Dutch" Dieckmann joined the program as a player. He immersed himself in researching the particulars of the old game. Old Dutch garnered his nickname because of his German ("Deutsch") descent, that he was the second oldest player in the program, and because he was widely respected. He did not focus on just the 1864 and 1887 rules. It was his belief that you can't generalize about the rules, namely referring to 1860s, 1870s, or 1880s baseball because the rules they changed so often, every year had its particularities.[25]

Prior to Al's research we were playing "1860s" baseball with a softball flair. While we did play the one bounce out rule and did not wear gloves, the rest of what we did was filled in by beer league softball rules. There were no called balls or strikes, no stealing, no leading off the base, and three swings for the striker; if the striker swings three times whether they're misses or foul balls, it was an out. The Muffins from Ohio played in a similar fashion but added their own twists which are called conventions. The Muffins didn't permit sliding into a base or a fielder jumping for a ball because they did not believe that a gentleman's feet should leave the ground. They also had the novel practice of a runner who safely crosses home plate having to ring a bell.[26]

Al Dieckmann purchased every annual *Beadle's Base Ball Player Guide* for the years 1860 to 1881. He combed through these small volumes and other recounts of games in other guides and in newspapers. He developed a comprehensive set of rules, year appropriate, for the program to adopt. They included, but were not limited to the following:

1864 Rules

- Leading and stealing of bases were permitted.
- The umpire had total discretion on how he called pitches. Some didn't call balls and strikes, others did. If the umpire thought the game was being unduly delayed, he would call "Ball to Bat," which was a warning to the pitcher that he would start calling balls on bad pitches. Three balls after a warning resulted in a walk. Accordingly, if the striker was letting too many good pitches pass without swinging, the umpire would penalize the striker with a warning, then would call strikes on good balls that were not swung at. Three strikes after a warning was a called out. A feature in some games during the 1864 playing year was that the umpire would call strikes only when there were runners on base, disallowing the striker to take too many good pitches thus giving the base runners more opportunities to steal a base.[17]
- A striker upon hitting the ball could not overrun first base. If he did, he could be tagged out. This meant that the striker had to slide into first on a close play to stop his momentum.
- Where the batted ball first touches the ground determines whether it is fair or foul. This differs from modern baseball where a fair or foul ball is defined by its ultimate trajectory out of the infield.
- The "Fair-Foul" rule. As noted above the determination of a fair or foul ball is where it first touches, thereby creating an unusual feature of the old game. A skilled striker can hit the ball straight down in fair territory in the infield and have it roll foul. It is very difficult for a fielder to get to this ball and make a play to first base. Starting in 1877, when the Fair-Foul was no

longer a rule, hitting a ball straight down in fair territory, in front of home plate, became known as the "Baltimore Chop."

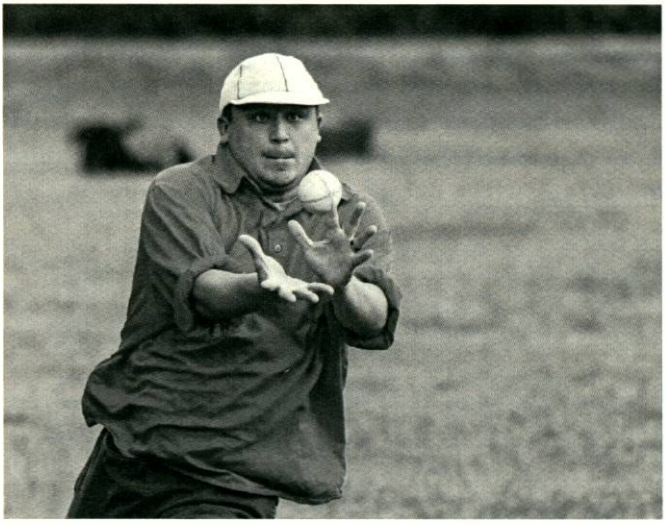
- No base runner can advance on a foul ball. This rule is crucial to base running strategy. In modern baseball a base runner will run to the next base upon hearing the sound of the bat hitting the ball. If the ball goes into foul territory, the runner gets a "free back," meaning he can walk or trot back to the base he had occupied, touch it with his foot and wait for play to resume. Not so in 1864. If a runner is caught off base after a foul ball, even if it's not caught on a fly, he must get back to the base he occupied before the ball gets into the hands of the pitcher, who can then throw the ball to a baseman to step on the base for an out, or he can position himself on the base to make the out himself. There is no tagging up on a caught foul ball. This rule can create great hazard for a base runner. It's the bane of rookie players.
- Batting order. During the course of the game, the batting order is determined by who made the last out. For instance, if a runner is on second base with a double and then is followed by a striker who hits the ball, then the third out is made on the runner going from second to third base making him the last out. At the start of the team's next inning, the last striker is up again.
- There was no infield "round the horn" between each inning. This practice started in the summer of 1921 when the first baseball game was carried on the radio. The players threw the ball around the infield to kill time for commercials.
- The last major difference was significant. Foul balls were not strikes. As noted earlier a foul tip back to the catcher on any pitched ball is caught by the catcher either on a fly or on one bounce is a "hand down," what is called an "out" today. This happens often to the great frustration to the striker.[27]

1887 Rules

The 1887 game was also improved by Al Dieckmann's research. It was very different from the 1864 game but still different from modern baseball. It's an overhand game with a pitcher's box at 55 feet from home plate. The batter's count was five balls and four strikes. The four balls and three strikes that we are familiar with today did not become the norm until 1889.[29] As in the 1864 rules, the base runner did not get a free back on a foul ball. The ball would first have to get into the hands of the pitcher who could then throw out the errant runner. The difference was that the pitcher had to stay in his box. Old Dutch showed us that as in 1864, foul balls were not counted as strikes and that in the 1887 game, a foul tip into the hands of the catcher on any swing, not just the last strike, was an out. The rule changes in both the 1864 and 1887 games, especially the one on base stealing, met with opposition from many of today's players.

Playing by the Rules

Presentism, as defined by Webster's *Dictionary*, is "An attitude toward the past dominated by present-day attitudes and experiences." Some players insisted that it was impossible to throw out a base runner without fielding mitts. The research and game accounts spoke otherwise. Most of the vintage players are baseball enthusiasts who were intrigued by the old game. However, some brought their preconceptions with them. One 1887 player complained, saying "why don't we stop this nonsense and put on our mitts?" He was told that there were plenty of baseball fields down the road at the State Park and that perhaps he should consider going there. He stuck around and came around as did all the players.



Bare handed play was a feature in 19th century and vintage base ball. Rudimentary mitts were not introduced until the early 1890s. *Photo courtesy of Tom Fesolowich.*

We called the field at Old Bethpage, the "Field Laboratory." We would take the old rules and see how they played out. We learned that this was a different way to play the game and, not only did the old rules work, but the field experience also showed us why rule adjustments were made year by year. Before long the players realized that mitts were unnecessary and that their predecessors knew what they were doing.

Ken Balcom, Assistant Site Director at Old Bethpage, once remarked, "By recreating the old game we have created a new sport." It's important to note that vintage base ball is not a reenactment, it's a re-creation of the early game. For instance, a Civil War reenactor goes off to replicate a specific battle, knowing the predetermined outcome and knowing that he will be coming home for dinner alive. While the stakes are not that high in vintage base ball, the rule of play determines the game's outcome. This makes vintage base ball the purest form of living history.

Prior to 1994, the media who covered us did "fluff" pieces. The print media wasn't too bad, but the TV stations would send their "hilarious" morning guy or sometimes the weather man to play in a game and act goofy. We did not mind this so much because any publicity was good for the program. In 1996, an old-school sportswriter from *Newsday* did a piece on us. He appreciated what we were trying to do and wrote a wonderful multi-page story. This led to a photojournalist, who published his piece in the American Airlines in-flight magazine (*American Way*), which was read by the sportswriter for the *Boston Globe*. In 1997 he wrote a major story on us that appeared on the front page of the sports section of the *Globe* on the first day of that year's World Series. A *Smithsonian Magazine* cover article followed that which was instrumental for spreading the word about vintage base ball. At one time or another we were in every major newspaper and on multiple TV shows, notably ESPN and all three networks.[30]

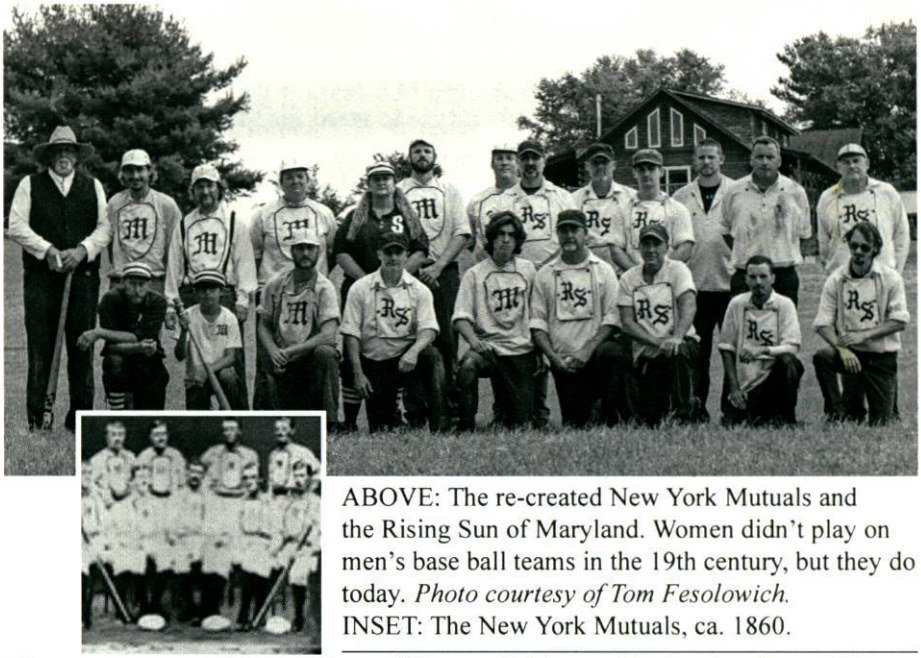
On The Road

In late 1995, Al Dieckmann proposed that we form a traveling team for the following season. The team would become a re-creation of the Brooklyn Atlantics, a powerhouse team of its time. Fortunately, there are many photographs and drawings of the Atlantics, since it was a prestigious team. This allowed us to accurately replicate their uniform. Our Long Island town team uniforms are based on generic unform colors and designs of the period. There are no photos of these teams. That's because up until the turn of the 20th century, photographs were a luxury item. By 1900 photographers would canvas neighborhoods to contract with families for a photo in front of their houses. Prior to that, if you had the means, you might have a photo of your wedding, or a memorial photo of a diseased person.[31]

The new Brooklyn Atlantics was formed as an independent team made up of the best players on the Old Bethpage team rosters. It was not part of the Old Bethpage season schedule. It was formed expressly for the purpose of travel and festivals.

As a result of all the local and national publicity about the program, Old Bethpage Village was receiving numerous requests for information on how to start a team. The Atlantics went up and down the east coast and west to Ohio and Minnesota, and north to Canada. Teams there were created soon after. There were about thirty teams in 1992. The Ohio Muffins were similarly engaged in demonstrating the game. The outcome was that by 1998 there were seventy teams in the Northeast and Midwest.[32]

For 1998, Old Dutch organized the first vintage base ball festival at Old Bethpage. Teams from the East and the Midwest participated. For the first time, the Ohio Muffins were on the same playing field as the Old Bethpage teams.



ABOVE: The re-created New York Mutuals and the Rising Sun of Maryland. Women didn't play on men's base ball teams in the 19th century, but they do today. *Photo courtesy of Tom Fesolowich.*
INSET: The New York Mutuals, ca. 1860.

Three games at a time on three different fields would play by three different rule sets. The rules had been so well researched that it was possible to play different games of different years simultaneously. A visitor to the village could watch an 1887 or 1884 game on one field, then move on to an 1873 game on the next field, and ultimately see an 1864 game on yet another field. The festival was such a success that it has become an annual event, always on the first weekend of August. Old Bethpage hosted the 26th festival in 2025.

The Atlantics would later split and a new traveling team, the New York Mutuals, was formed. A later split of the Mutuals resulted in another team, the Brooklyn Eckfords. The Mutuals and the Eckfords, like the Atlantics, were powerhouse teams in the 19th century. The Atlantics moved to the Smithtown Historical Society farm field in Suffolk County where they host teams when not traveling. The Mutuals and the Eckfords do the same. Their home field is at Old Bethpage. While the Eckfords travel, they are also part of the season schedule of games at the Village.

The Mutuals are strictly a traveling team, but like the Eckfords and the Atlantics play at Old Bethpage Village for special exhibition games and festivals. These teams have been instrumental in the growth of vintage base ball. Today, there are more than four hundred teams in twenty states, and in Canada. Gettysburg held its 14th annual festival this past July. Thirty teams participated in sixty-two games over the weekend; thousands of spectators attended.[33]

The Old Time Base Ball program at Old Bethpage Village was being taken seriously which was good because we were serious about what we were doing.

Occasionally we would still get the local TV personality to do his thing as a player, but we made sure he would go home with some bruises. We didn't much like fluff pieces anymore. That brings us to 2004 when Conan O'Brien came. He did the goofiest bit that has ever been done on us. We loved it. He regularly credits this piece as the best thing he has ever done on his show, *The Late Night*. He told his staff that he wants it played at his funeral. The piece *Conan O'Brien/Old Time Baseball* can be seen on YouTube. It currently has more than five million views. It has done wonders towards the creation of new teams around the country.[34]

The program started its 45th season in April 2025 with the annual New York-New Jersey Cup Festival. One player, John "Blue Streak" Morrison, captain of the blue-shirted Mineola Washingtons, has played every season since the program's inception in 1979, thus making him the longest continuous vintage base ball player in the world. John did not receive his Blue Streak moniker until late into his playing career. It was based on his base running speed, or more specifically his lack thereof.

Al "Old Dutch" Dieckmann passed away in 2001. His mantle has been picked up by player researchers Ed "Pigtail" Elmore and Dean "Bucket" Emma of the Atlantics, Tom "Big Bat" Fesolowich of the Mutuals, and Eric "The Express" Miklich of the Eckfords. Eric complied all the rules for all the years including field layouts, equipment, and other technical details into a book available on his website, "19thcbaseball.com." Old Dutch's legacy also continues through his past efforts in the creation of the Vintage Base Ball Association (VBBA) a national organization dedicated to the promotion of vintage base ball.

We all have our own takes on the old game. Some simply enjoy a new way of playing a game that they love. Others delve into the game's rich history. Then there's the way that it looks on the field, the old colorful, quaint-looking uniforms against a verdant background that is timeless. The participants of the four hundred plus vintage base ball teams should take great pride in their dedication to the old game and to the high level of on how they play it. It's a beautiful thing to behold.

As stated in the classic line from the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*: "The one constant through all the years has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game, it is a part of our past. It reminds us of all that once was good and it could be again."[35]

Vintage Base Ball has become a national phenomenon; the old game is now a new sport. Its origin in Nassau County at Old Bethpage Village Restoration where it continues to this day is something that its residents can be proud of.

Notes

[1] Interview, James McKenna, former site director, Old Bethpage Village restoration, January 24, 2025.

[2] Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 18, 21-22; Henry Davis Thoreau, *Walden; or Life in the Woods* (New York: Library Classics of the United States, 1985), pp. 446-55.

[3] Jack Pelikan, *Vintage Base Ball's Enduring Legacy* (Punxsutawney, PA: Pocol Press, 2023), p. 6; Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York, Library Classics of the United States, 1982), p. 61; Walt Whitman, *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 23,1855; Walt Whitman, *Brooklyn Times*, June 18, 1858.

[4] Kevin Baker, *The New York Game: Baseball and the Rise of New York City* (New York: Knopf. 2024), pp. 8, 23-24. For many years there has been a concerted effort to get Doc Adams into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

[5] Pelikan, *Vintage Base Ball's Enduring Legacy*, p. 25. The game of Cricket was also popular in Philadelphia.

[6] Baker, *The New York Game*, pp. 6-7.

[7] Pelikan, *Vintage Base Ball's Enduring Legacy*, pp. 12-14.

[8] Ibid; Baker, *The New York Game*, pp. 6-8, 24. The Doubleday myth along with Parson Weem's George Washington fantasies, and the Betsy Ross legend endure. The idealized American image of early base ball is of mid-western boys playing on a farm field. This was also a creation of the Mills Commission and another reason for placing the Baseball Hall of Fame in rural Cooperstown rather than "in the dirty, immigrant infested city."

[9] Interview, Harrison Hunt, July 9, 2024; Pelikan, *Vintage Base Ball's Enduring Legacy*, p.98; Vintage Base Ball Association, VBBA.org website; Doug Stewart, "The Old Ball Game," *Smithsonian Magazine*, October, 1998), p. 100.

[10] Hunt, Interview. James McKenna would later become the Site Director at Old Bethpage Village Restoration.

[11] Hunt, Interview; Interview; John Morrison, June 2024.

[12] Hunt, Interview; *Newsday*, August 10, 1980.

[13] Hunt, Interview; Pelikan, *Vintage Base Ball's Enduring Legacy*, p. 99.

[14] Stewart, *The Old Ball Game*, p. 101.

[15] Dean Emma, "The Birth of Baseball in America and the Evolution of the Rules" (Master's thesis, Stony Brook University, 2008), pp. 1-12.

[16] *Beadle's Dime Base Ball Player Guide* for 1864, December 9, 1863, pp 3-7. 1864 was the last year of the bound game. The following year and going forward, a ball had to be caught on a fly to make an out or a hand down as it was referred to then. A bound out could still be made on a foul ball, a practice that lasted until 1876. The pitching distance from the front line of the pitcher's line to home base in 1873 was 50 feet. Not until 1887, when the pitcher was required to start on the back line of the pitcher's box, did the distance become 50 feet, 6 inches from home base.

[17] Pelikan, *Vintage Base Ball's Enduring Legacy*, p. 29.

[18] Ibid, p.37; *Beadle's Dime Base Ball Player Guide* for 1864, p.1. Babe Ruth began his career simultaneously with the introduction of the live ball. His home run prowess changed the game. By comparison, Ty Cobb, one of the game's greatest players, holds the record for highest lifetime batting average of .366. However, Cobb had very few home runs because he played most of his career in the "Dead Ball" era of baseball. In the early year of vintage base ball, there were only two programs, Old Bethpage Village and Ohio Village. Initially, Old Bethpage's shoemaker constructed a leather ball that was used for OBVR's first season. Soon after both OBVR and Ohio Village purchased handmade balls (the Ferguson) named for the leather craftsman in Kentucky who produced them. They were expensive, $35 each in 1985, would be $106. today. With the expansion of vintage base ball, Mr. Ferguson couldn't keep up with demand and stopped making the balls. Seeing the need, a few enterprising players/enthusiasts started their own businesses making base balls. They are now machine made to precise specifications. This new approach and economy of scale allowed for balls that not only lasted longer but cost just $20 each, less than today's modern baseballs.

[19] Pelikan, *Vintage Base Ball's Enduring Legacy*, p. 29.

[20] Ibid, p. 7.

[21] Memo, Gary Monti to Edward Smits, November 14, 1990.

[22] Stewart, "The Old Ball Game," *Smithsonian Magazine*, pp. 100-101.

[23] Interview with Ed Elmore, Captain of the Freeport Athletics; Pelican, *Vintage Base Ball's Enduring Legacy*, p. 103.

[24] Stewart, *The Old Ball Game*, p. 103.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., p. 106.

[27] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 4, 1864. The 1863 *Beadle's Dime Base Ball Player Guide* was not printed because the convention secretary waited too long to send all of the convention information to the publisher in time to have a book printed before season started.

[28] Emma, *The Birth of Baseball in America*, pp. 1-12; Stewart, *The Old Ball Game*, pp. 106-7.

[29] Eric Micklich, *19thcbaseball.com.*

[30] Joe Krupiniski, "The Way We Were," *Newsday*, August 26, 1996; Stewart, *The Old Ball Game*, pp. 98-106; *Boston Globe*, October 18, 1997; Doug Merriam, "Old Time Base Ball," *American Way Magazine*, Spring 1997.

[31] Stanley B. Burns MD, *Sleeping Beauty, Memorial Photography in America* (Twelvetrees Press, 1990), Preface. The Brooklyn Atlantics over the next century evolved, becoming the Brooklyn Dodgers and later the Los Angeles Dodgers.

[32] Stewart, *The Old Ball Game*, p. 98; Pelikan, *Vintage Base Ball's Enduring Legacy*, p. 106.

[33] Ibid., pp.105-107; *Gettysburg National 19th Century Base Ball Festival*, 2024; The original Mutuals had the distinction of having William (Boss) Tweed as its financial supporter.

[34] Conan O'Brien, "Old Time Base Ball," YouTube.

[35] Film, *Field of Dreams*, Universal Studios, 1989.