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SOUTHEAST TEXAS BASEBALL AND THE NATIONAL GAME

by John M. Carroll

During the past decade there has been significant new research concerning the origin, growth, and establishment of baseball as the national game in post-Civil War America. The three most important full-length studies are Melvin Adelman's pioneering work on the rise of modern athletics in New York City, A Sporting Time: New York and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-70 (1986), and two more recent books: George Kirsch, The Creation of American Team Sports: Baseball and Cricket, 1838-72 (1989); and Warren Goldstein, Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball (1989). All three books focus on the origins and development of the game in the Northeast with heavy emphasis on New York City, the cradle of modern baseball. The historians extend their theories on modern baseball to other parts of the country, but in fact, there has been little systematic research on early baseball outside of the northeastern states. Almost nothing has been done in terms of careful research with regard to the origins and early development of the game in Texas. The purpose of this essay is to compare the recent research findings on early baseball in the New York City area with the origins and establishment of the game in Southeast Texas.  

Although Adelman, Kirsch, and Goldstein differ on a number of points concerning the rise of baseball as the national game, they agree on many fundamental issues. The recent interpretations emphasize that the growth and development of baseball (specifically, the New York game based on rules set down by Alexander Cartwright in 1845) stemmed from a process of rapid modernization associated with industrialization of major American cities. Baseball began as an urban pastime, not a rural sport, as some historians have claimed, and expanded rapidly from its base in New York City and Brooklyn to other cities in the Northeast and Midwest, and eventually to rural areas. It originated in social clubs that stressed rituals of gentlemanly fair play and sport as a form of exercise and comradeship. These clubs emphasized refined social customs, and often hosted banquets and/or balls after match games. The new interpretations demonstrate that baseball was first played by members of the middle to upper-middle classes, rather than the elite or upper class, as most historians had maintained. Members of the social clubs as well as early sportswriters emphasized the manliness of the game to separate it from traditional boys' ball games such as "base," "one-old-cat," and "town ball." Part of the early appeal of the game, the authors argue, was that it was a sport of gentlemen and not boys. Baseball quickly caught on with urbanites of all classes and ethnic groups. The popularity and growth of the game was hastened, in part, by an ideology taking hold in urban America that

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emphasized health and exercise which ran counter to traditional Puritan inhibitions against sport and idleness.  

The new books on early baseball also focus on the game’s rapid tendency toward competitiveness and professionalism. In general terms, the authors maintain that the desires of early club members for exercise, fellowship, and fair play were, in many cases, quickly displaced by equally strong passions to compete, to excel, and quite simply to defeat, rival clubs. The process toward professionalism started with more frequent practices, specialization by positions, “match play” against nearby clubs, contests for local or city championships, and intercity matches. Increasingly, fewer club members participated in the sport when outsiders, with baseball talent, were encouraged to join the clubs or play on the teams as “associates.” Competitive matches and championship contests led to the awarding of prizes and later money to the winning teams. It was a short step from these developments to the practice of paying the best available players to compete for the club to assure victories. To meet expenses, playing fields were enclosed so spectators could be charged an admission fee. By the early 1870s, semi-professional and professional baseball was common in the Northeast and Midwest.

Clubs which hired outsiders or recruited “associate” members skilled in baseball, the authors agree, faced new and difficult problems. Some contemporary commentators criticized the new semi-professional teams for violating the concept of amateurism and abandoning the ideal of sport for the sake of exercise and comradeship. Other observers were appalled by the increasingly apparent manifestations of intense competition and professionalism. Corrupting practices most frequently mentioned are: unsportsmanlike conduct and rowdyism by both players and spectators; heckling and abuse of the umpire by players and fans; gambling; excessive drinking at games by spectators, many of them from an urban sub-culture associated with crime and violence; allegations that games were “thrown” to win bets or set up rematches; the practice of “revolving,” i.e. players moving from team to team in response to the highest bid for their services. The authors point out that not all clubs opted for semi-professional or professional teams, but clearly the nation’s best baseball players turned in that direction.

The weakest segments in each of the books under discussion are those devoted to explaining why baseball rather than cricket or some other sport became America’s national game. To be fair, none of the authors claim to have studied the origins and development of baseball outside of a limited area in the Northeast. They do, however, suggest theories as to why the New York game was adopted with enthusiasm in other regions of the country after the Civil War. Four somewhat overlapping explanations emerge: 1) the Civil War unleashed a wave of nationalism which caused Americans to view baseball as part of the nation’s character and tradition as opposed to the British-dominated game of cricket, another widely-played team
sport; 2) baseball was a simpler and more easily understood game than cricket and fit American requirements in terms of time, pace, excitement, and playing field requirements; 3) New York City, the nation’s largest and most energetic city, exported the New York game to the rest of the nation through its players, traveling businessmen, and printed media in a kind of “urban imperialism,” and 4) the game emerged as a popular pastime at a critical time to fulfill America’s need for a team sport to justify athletics in a rapidly industrializing society. The theories are rational and provocative, but are yet to be supported by a careful examination of the origins and early development of baseball on a state or regional basis.5

In terms of scholarship relating to the rise and evolution of baseball on the state level, the South has been one of the most neglected regions. The early history of baseball in Texas has yet to be written. My own limited research on the origins of baseball in Southeast Texas, however, provides some data to compare with the findings of Adelman, Kirsch, and Goldstein. It seems likely that the New York game of baseball was first played in Texas either just before or immediately after the Civil War in either Houston or Galveston. Clearly, a variety of children’s ball games called “town ball” were popular pastimes in the state for several decades prior to the introduction of the New York game. It is also certain that cricket was at least known to, if not played by, Texans during the 1840s and 1850s in Galveston, which hosted a British consulate dating back to the days of the Republic of Texas.6

Although it is not known for certain if the first game of baseball under the New York rules was played in Houston in 1861 or in Galveston in 1865, it is clear that baseball in Texas began in an urban environment. Mary Lou LeCompte and William Beezley also report a baseball game in San Antonio, the state’s second largest city behind Galveston, played in 1867. The available evidence on Texas’s first baseball games also suggests that the recent research linking baseball and modernization holds true in the Lone Star State. Both Houston and Galveston were small but thriving commercial cities with trade and communication links to the rest of the nation. Houston was rapidly becoming the railway center of the state by the 1860s. Galveston was a cosmopolitan community of about 9000 in 1861, and had long-standing sea links with New Orleans as well as the northeastern ports of Boston and New York.7

Why Texans embraced the New York game, how they learned to play it, and why it became so popular in the state is a matter of speculation. The only first-hand account of a baseball game during the Civil War era is by Jesse Ziegler, who remembered seeing Union occupation troops playing the New York game in Galveston in 1865. That version of baseball was played on a diamond-shaped field, required nine men per side, and allowed three outs an inning during a nine-inning game. It did not allow the “soaking” of runners, which was a common town ball practice of recording outs by hitting runners with a thrown ball as they ran between
bases. Ziegler related that the soldiers' game was similar to town ball, which the Galveston boys played, but "with a few additional features." He recalled that the boys were angry with the soldiers and "never forgave the Yankees for making the steal." Assuming for the moment that the Union army introduced baseball to Texas, one might conclude that this scenario would undermine the argument that a wave of nationalism associated with the Civil War helped spread baseball throughout the country. Clearly in Galveston, as in other Southern cities, a connection between the New York game and Union occupation troops might have been fatal to the new game.8

From this evidence, it seems probable that some urban Texans, excluding Ziegler, were familiar with the New York game before the Civil War. The existence of the Houston Base Ball Club in 1861 and historian Dale Somers's research, which shows that organized teams in nearby New Orleans played under the New York rules by 1859 or 1860, seem to support this conclusion. As far as cricket is concerned, it is clear that many Galvestonians were familiar with the game, but there is no evidence that natives of the city participated in the sport. Ziegler mentions that town ball was played with a bat that was flat like a cricket bat, but says that cricket was played in Galveston only by English cotton buyers. The available evidence seems to suggest that the New York game was exported to Southeast Texas before the Civil War from New Orleans or was introduced to the area by New York sporting newspapers and/or Northeastern merchants, and that it became popular as part of a process of modernization that was under way in the region.9

Another factor appears to have been important in spreading and popularizing the New York game in the Texas Gulf Coast area which scarcely is mentioned by the scholars under discussion. William B. Ruggles, a longtime Galveston sportswriter, points out that many Texans of means went east to college in the 1850s and must have picked up the game. His father, for example, pitched for the University of Virginia in 1871, and by that time the game had been played there for a number of years. Experts on early Galveston baseball emphasize that some of the best players in the 1860s and early in the 1870s were former college men. Nationalism, or at least regional patriotism, also seems to have been a factor in the acceptance of the New York game in Texas. While in New York patriotic team names such as Washington, Franklin, or Union were common, two of the clubs in the Houston-Galveston area were the Stonewalls and the Robert E. Lees. Many of the match games, moreover, were played on the Fourth of July or San Jacinto Day (Texas Independence Day).10

Galveston's first recorded baseball team, the Galveston Base Ball Club, was organized in the Winter of 1867 and it held practices to which the public was invited. Although a number of "field meetings" were held in front of the city hospital, there is no record of the club ever playing a match game. This is consistent with the research on New York baseball,
which indicates that the first clubs played baseball for exercise and comrade ship and not for the competition. *The Galveston Daily news* reported that shop owners objected to clerks being absent to play baseball, but the newspaper declared that the exercise would be beneficial. Apparently the first club members in Galveston were content to play among themselves for the fellowship and health benefits. It also appears from the limited evidence that the first players were clerks and artisans, members of the city’s middle class, and roughly comparable to the first participants in New York City.\(^{11}\)

The Robert E. Lee Base Ball Club of Galveston is the first team for which there is sufficient information to make more careful generalizations with regard to the membership, class make-up, and social customs of Texas teams early in the baseball era. It was organized by members of a volunteer hook-and-ladder fire company of the same name. According to the New York evidence, it was common for firehouses to sponsor baseball teams in the nineteenth century, although Warren Goldstein seems uncertain whether New York firemen were middle class or part of a violence-prone, sporting, sub-culture attempting to gain middle-class status. In Galveston and Houston, it is clear that firemen, judging by their social activities, were respectable middle-class citizens. They were prominent participants in city-wide parades and festivals and hosted elegant balls and galas. The Stonewall, No. 3 Fire Company of Houston played a similar role in the social life of the Bayou City. Based on the evidence, it appears likely that the Robert E. Lees and the Stonewalls had been involved in match play in their respective cities for at least a season prior to their historic game for the state championship at the San Jacinto Battleground on April 21, 1868. In a letter accepting the Stonewalls’ challenge for a championship

*The Galveston Sandcrabs 1899 champions of the Texas League.*
match, the Lee club's secretary noted that the Stonewalls already claimed the state title. The letter also was signed by A. Forrest, who identified himself as "Match Champion."12

The Houston Daily Telegraph's account of Texas's first intercity match game indicates that Gulf Coast baseball was still in a stage of development that mainly emphasized sociability, fellowship, and fair play. Both teams made their way to the San Jacinto Battleground by steamboat with a full compliment of spectators, a few of whom were veterans of the historic battle in 1836. The Houston team embarked for San Jacinto to the tunes of a German band aboard the steamboat White-law, which towed a barge equipped for dancing and merriment. Stonewall players were clad in "showy uniforms consisting of red caps, white flannel shirts, and black pants" in the style of the day. Galveston's steamboat St. Clair beat the Houston vessel to the San Jacinto landing by a half hour. When the team captains "tossed for innings," Captain Forrest of the Lees won and his team batted last. That was the extent of the Galveston triumph that day. The Stonewalls soundly defeated the Lee fire brigade, 34-5. The Galveston club gave up the game and acknowledged itself "beaten fairly and squarely" at the end of the eighth inning. The Daily Telegraph writer reported that "three cheers were then given for the Lee Club, three for the Stonewalls, three for the umpire and scorers, and three for San Jacinto, when the bases were taken up, everything gathered together, and all started for Lynchburg, for the ball."13

This game summary indicates that Texas baseball in 1868 had many of the characteristics of gentlemanly club play which Adelman, Kirsch, and Goldstein found in New York City during the early years of the game. The contest at San Jacinto had most of the earmarks of New York match games which often served as preambles to banquets or other social occasions. It is important to note, however, that some tendencies toward more competitive play and professionalism already were apparent in Gulf Coast baseball. Two days before the match at San Jacinto, the Lees tuned up for the championship contest by defeating the St. Elmo Club of Galveston by a score of 37-31. The Galveston Daily News reported that the game was played "for a ball, which was won by the R.E. Lee Club." It is the first record of a prize of any kind being awarded to winning teams in Texas. The historians of early New York baseball all point out that the awarding of prizes, no matter how insignificant, was often an important first step toward more intense competition and creeping professionalism. Even the newspaper account of the San Jacinto game, which mainly emphasized genteel behavior and fellowship among players, spectators, and the umpire, contained the following competitive words: "the Lees disheartened by the success of their antagonists, gave up the game and acknowledged themselves beaten ...." As in the case of New York and the Northeast, Southeast Texas baseball gradually evolved from a fashionable recreation for gentlemen to a more competitive pastime. In 1928, Galveston baseball
expert Humphrey Boyd, recalling a game in 1872 between the Lees and the Island City Club, an amateur team composed largely of clerks, noted that most, but not all, players were members of the respective social organizations. Boyd's testimony might be read as an indication that outsiders or associate members already played for the clubs. Despite these trends, however, Texas Gulf Coast baseball was still a long way from fielding an all-professional team.¹⁴

In the 1860s and 1870s, baseball in Southeast Texas remained largely a sport of middle-class clerks and artisans with an emphasis on fellowship, fair play, and manliness. From the beginning, the Houston and Galveston clubs included women as part of the ball playing festivities. Music, dancing, and a gala dinner, which were part of the San Jacinto day proceedings in 1868, seemed designed to encourage the presence of women at match games. In later years, separate sections of grandstands were set aside for women and reduced-price "ladies' days" became common in both cities. The Galveston Daily News reported in April 1888 that the management of the city's team in the all-professional Texas League "will inaugurate what will be known as ladies' day, which will be each Wednesday, when ladies with escorts will be admitted free." Later that season, when attendance at Beach Park slackened, women were admitted free to all games. According to the New York research, the attendance of women at games was desired to assure gentlemanly behavior and prove the manliness of the sport. Club members as well as sportswriters wanted to make it clear that baseball under the New York rules was not to be confused with traditional boys' games of "base" or town ball. It was a manly game played by gentlemen. In 1873, the Galveston Weekly News apparently spoke to this point when it reprimanded a member of the Island Boys Base Ball Club (and other boys' teams) for being delinquent in reporting scores which the club wanted recorded in the paper. The tone of the rebuke indicates a condescending attitude toward the boys and their games.¹⁵

As in the case of New York City, baseball in Galveston and Houston was adopted by all social classes and ethnic groups. Early in the 1870s, games were played on virtually every vacant lot in Galveston, and there were dozens of organized amateur teams representing various professions, age groups, and interests. The names of some of the first clubs indicate the widespread interest in baseball in the city: Major Burbank's Artillery, Turf Association, The (Galveston Daily) News, Drummers, Santa Fe (Railroad), Island Juniors, Bricklayers, Cornice Makers, and Western Union. As early as July 14, 1868, the Houston Daily Telegraph reported under the heading "Black Ballers" that a club "composed of colored boys bearing the aggressive title 'Six Shooter Jims'" would play a game "with any other colored club in the state." A black team from Galveston in the 1880s, the Flyaways, was so proficient at the game that they challenged the local professional team of the Texas League to a game at $500 a side. Later the Flyaways extended the challenge to all clubs in the state, white
or black, professional or amateur, but there were no takers because baseball usually was segregated strictly in the state. Other minority groups such as Chinese, Irish, and Germans also organized teams in Galveston late in the 1870s. Despite the process of democratization, most of the best teams in Houston and Galveston remained middle-class oriented until the 1880s.16

A professional baseball league, the Texas League, was organized in 1888, with both Galveston and Houston as members. Prior to that, however, the manifestations of increasing competitiveness and professionalism were apparent in Southeast Texas. Reports on games in the 1870s and 1880s indicate many of the abuses and tendencies which Adelman, Kirsch, and Goldstein have associated with the rise of professional baseball in the East. Both fans and players heckled the umpire, and spectators verbally abused visiting teams and occasionally their own players. Apparently the earliest spectators in Galveston were from the middling to upper class and mostly well-behaved. In describing the first fenced-in field at Beach Park in 1888, the Galveston Tribune noted that "the people who were wont to witness the games at Beach Park last season from the hotel gallery or their carriages, without the formality of purchasing tickets will be shut out this season, and will either scale the fence or purchase their pasteboards." The same year the Galveston Daily News predicted that "taunters of the umpire, tantalizers of the players and ridiculers of decisions for unenduring periods of time will be conspicuously humiliated by ejection from the grandstand or official assistance through an opening in the fence." No such thing ever happened. Many observers did not find Galveston fans as mild mannered as these descriptions suggest. Later the same season, a Texarkana newspaper maintained that "the strength of the Galveston team seems to be in the grandstand, which, when judiciously loaded, can knock out any visiting competitors." Local baseball expert Albert Reese speculated that the New York Sporting Times of 1888 may have had Galveston in mind when it quoted a Cincinnati umpire as saying "he would not umpire through a league season in Texas for $500." Reese also recalled that catcher Ed Tray of Galveston's first entrant in the Texas League, the Giants, was "continuously cursed by fans" and "railed at by newspapers."17

The awarding of prize money and gambling also became a more noticeable part of so-called amateur baseball in Galveston and Houston. There are numerous references to managers, players, and especially fans betting large sums on the outcome of games. This apparently was how some managers supported teams and how at least some players were compensated. Members of Jeff Tiernan's famous Galveston Island City Club of the 1880s were paid a salary, most of which Tiernan obtained from betting on games. Galveston sportswriter Albert Reese recalled that during the 1880s several establishments in Galveston kept fans appraised of scores of both local and national games by the use of baseball tickers. He
explained that "these were installed, of course, for purposes of gambling, then very closely connected with baseball. Odds on every game were quoted by the newspapers and no story was complete without some such observation as 'Galveston (Giants of the Texas League) dropped or picked up a bundle on today's game.'" The Galveston Daily News reports at least one instance of an alleged "thrown game," in which a Houston umpire accused of betting on the home team was run off the field by a mob of angry spectators from Galveston. 18

Violent behavior was also a problem. In 1887, for example, Jeff Tier- 
nan, the manager of the state champion Island City team of Galveston, was restrained from entering a controversy concerning a disputed call in a game played in Austin by "the pressure of a small cannon in his side." By the 1880s, moreover, it was more common to find enclosed ball parks in Galveston and Houston so that spectators could be charged admission. In the first year of the Texas League, general admission was set at twenty-five cents for adults and fifteen cents for children. Another symptom of intensifying competition and the undermining of amateur standards was the practice of "revolving," which became common in Texas by the 1880s. Revolving referred to the custom of players moving from club to club in search of better positions or better salaries. Early in the 1880s, the top amateur (really semi-professional) teams in Southeast Texas were hiring talented ball players from around the state and from New Orleans. 19

In contrast with New York, the Northeast, and the Midwest, however, the trend toward professionalism was much slower to take hold in Texas. The Cincinnati Red Stockings became the first all-professional team in 1869, the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players was formed in 1871, and the National League was organized in 1876. The following year the Indianapolis "Irish Team," which joined the National League in 1878, played two games in Galveston as part of a Spring training tour which revealed the still rudimentary state of Southeast Texas baseball. Indianapolis defeated two "crack" Galveston amateur teams, the Amateurs and the Pastimes, by scores of 59-0 and 30-0. The Galveston Weekly News gave extensive coverage to the first Spring training game in the Island City. Braving unseasonably cold weather, Edward "The Only" Nolan, who played five seasons of major league ball, introduced the curve ball to Galveston and struck out twenty-six Amateurs in the process. The only Amateur to get a hit was retired on a hidden-ball play, the first seen in Galveston, orchestrated by shortstop Denny Mack, also a future major leaguer who had been recruited from New Orleans. The newspaper account conceded that the Irish Team was "assuredly the finest looking body of ball-players that ever graced the grounds of the Park." Although the reporter maintained that "it is no discredit to the Amateur boys to fail in hitting Nolan's pitching," it was clear to all that the caliber of baseball in Southeast Texas was far below professional standards.20

The rather slow development of top-flight professional baseball in
Texas had a lot to do with the demography and geography of the state. The Galveston Evening Tribune succinctly stated the problem in 1888: "The fact is, professional baseball is a trifle too rich for Texas. The cities are all small, comparatively, and a long ways apart; the expenses of keeping up a high-salaried nine something enormous, and the patronage extended the game in most Texas cities is very limited." During the first Texas League season, the Galveston Giants and the Houston Babies folded because of inadequate attendance, and the league temporarily collapsed. After several decades of struggle, however, the Texas League became known for its high quality of play and as a source of major league professional talent. Two eventual major leaguers played in the Texas League that first season and many more would follow, including more than a dozen future members of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

The popularity of Texas League baseball increased in the period just before and after World War I. The golden era of the Texas League began in the 1920s and continued into the 1950s, with only a small loss of momentum during the depths of the Great Depression. By the late 1950s, however, the expansion of major league baseball and the increasing number of televised games adversely affected minor league baseball, including the Texas League. Attendance declined drastically and franchises folded or shifted locations. Yet the Texas League survived the economic tailspin and began a significant comeback in the late 1970s. Beginning in 1962, major-league baseball came to Southeast Texas when the National League Colt .45's, later the Astros, played their first game in Houston. Texas added a new dimension to major league baseball in 1965 with the inauguration of indoor play at the Astrodome, Judge Roy Hofheinz's "eighth wonder of the world." In 1972 the Texas Rangers began play in the Dallas-Fort Worth area to give Texas fans a choice of major-league teams from the rival leagues. Although baseball under the New York rules took hold slowly in Southeast Texas and around the state, it is clear that Texas has had a long and exciting tradition of baseball.

A shorter version of this essay was delivered at the Texas State Historical Association Convention in Dallas on March 7, 1991.

NOTES

Numerous writers have emphasized the rural orientation of baseball and/or the elite make-up of the social clubs that played the game.

Semi-professional teams are those on which some players are paid. On professional clubs, all players are paid.


6The Houston Weekly Telegraph, April 11, 1861, describes the formation of a “Base Ball Club.” It seems likely that the team used the New York rules, but the brief notice does not make this clear. Jesse A. Ziegler, Wave of the Gulf (San Antonio, 1938), p. 184, witnessed a match game of baseball under the New York rules played by Union occupation troops in Galveston in 1865.


8Ziegler, Wave of the Gulf, p. 184-85.


10William B. Ruggles, The History of the Texas League of Professional Baseball Clubs (Dallas, 1951), p. 18; Galveston County Commissioner Humphrey D. Boyd commented on the number of former college men on the first days in the Galveston Tribune, March 16, 1928; Goldstein, Playing for Keeps, pp. 28-29. The first intercity game in Texas was played on San Jacinto Day in 1868.


12Goldstein, Playing for Keeps, p. 28. A reading of the Galveston newspapers in the postwar years indicates the role played by the various fire brigades in city celebrations. S.O. Young, A Thumb-Nail History of the City of Houston, Texas (Houston, 1912), p. 59; Cochran’s Insurance Agency, One Hundred Years in Houston (Houston, 1955), p. 4; Houston Daily Telegraph, April 16, 1867; Flake’s Bulletin (Galveston), April 19, 1868.


16Galveston Weekly News, April 21, 1873; State of Texas Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration, Houston, pp. 216-17; Reese, “Professional Baseball,” Galveston Daily News, April 11, 1942; McComb, Galveston, pp. 115-16. On at least one occasion in the 1880s the Flyaways played a white amateur team in Galveston.


Galveston Weekly News, March 19, 1877.

The first two Texas Leaguers to play major-league baseball were George Stallings, who played for Galveston in 1888, and "Voiceless" Tim O'Rourke, who played for the Dallas Hams the same year.