THE PIONEER ERA IN A NUTSHELL

This work is intended to be a history of baseball before 1870 but not a chronicle, so the accumulation of names, dates, and similar minutiae has been kept to a minimum. But naturally readers will need to keep a few of each in mind, so here is a convenient listing of some of the most significant ones. This is not remotely a complete list, nor should it be assumed that a club or player listed here is more important than others that are omitted. These are simply the names that figure most prominently in this narrative.

Timeline of Key Events

Before 1843: Bat-and-ball games with similarities to baseball are played in all regions of the United States. Regional variants abound, however, and no effort is made to standardize them.

1843 (approximate): The Knickerbockers of New York City form a club to play baseball.

1845–1846: The members of the Knickerbocker Club formally adopt rules and begin playing match games.

1853–1854: After a period of little growth, during which the Knickerbocker Club’s existence is quite tenuous, multiple clubs around New York begin to adopt the Knickerbockers’ rules.

1857–1858: The game’s first governing body, the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP), is founded. In spite of the use of the word “national,” almost all of the clubs that use the Knickerbockers’ rules are in or near New York City.

1859–1860: Considerable spread of the Knickerbockers’ game begins. The Excelsiors of Brooklyn embark upon the first important tour.

1861–1865: The Civil War slows the growth of the game and ends the career of many clubs and ballplayers.
1866–1867: A great boom of baseball enthusiasm occurs, with far more clubs participating than ever before. The National Club of Washington becomes the first Eastern club to tour west of the Alleghenies. Professionalism continues to be prohibited by the NABBP, but under-the-table arrangements become increasingly common. The Eastern cities begin to be plagued by troubles resulting from professionalism and a spirit of competitiveness.

1868: A troubled year brings an end to the amateur era. The problems that had previously been restricted mostly to the East become widespread.

1869: Professional play, increasingly common for several years, is reluctantly legalized by the NABBP. The Red Stockings of Cincinnati are one of about a dozen clubs to play openly as professionals. The club’s undefeated record and gentlemanly conduct lead to short-lived hopes that the professional era can retain many of the characteristics of the era when clubs were ostensibly amateur.

1870: The decision to disband the Red Stockings after a tumultuous season leaves little doubt that the pioneer era of baseball is over. After the season the first professional league, the National Association, is formed. Amateur ballplayers form their own organization but never again receive anywhere near the attention given professionals.

Key Clubs

Knickerbocker Club of New York City: the club most responsible for baseball acquiring standard rules.

Olympic Club of Philadelphia: a “town ball” club that had been in existence since the early 1830s, its decision to switch to the Knickerbockers’ game was an important development.

Tri-Mountain Club of Boston: the first New England club to switch from the “Massachusetts game” to the Knickerbockers’
rules, a crucial step toward arriving at a set of standard national rules.

Excelsiors of Brooklyn: the first club to go on a prominent tour and act as ambassadors for the game of baseball. The Excelsiors were a national power before the Civil War and likely the first to hire a paid player, but they soon became disenchanted by post-war changes to the game and ceased to be a contender.

Pastimes of Brooklyn: a prewar club of gentlemanly, socially prominent young men. They symbolized the idea that a club didn’t have to be very good at baseball in order to have a great time playing it.

Athletics of Philadelphia: the first national contender from outside New York, though chicanery by the New York clubs prevented them from ever being recognized as champions. The club had a troubled transition to professionalism, exemplified when their club president blasted them for turning their backs on the club’s founding principles.

Nationals of Washington: the first Eastern club to tour west of the Alleghenies in 1867, the club enjoyed the generous support of the U.S. Treasury Department. Many looked the other way at the governmental backing the Nationals received, but others resented it.

Cincinnati Base Ball Club (universally but unofficially known as the “Red Stockings”): the club that took the country by storm in 1869, the first year of open professionalism. The club went undefeated and took on all comers, even traveling to California, while becoming synonymous with gentlemanly conduct. But the next season saw both losses and lapses in conduct, with the result that the Cincinnati Base Ball Club pulled its support for the professionals at season’s end.

(Note: Club names during the era were generally rendered with the nickname preceding the city name; e.g., the Eckford Base Ball Club
of Brooklyn, or, for simplicity, the Eckfords of Brooklyn. Only as the era was ending did the order begin to be reversed.)

Key People

Daniel Adams: a founding member of the Knickerbockers. He was one of the men most responsible for keeping the club going during the late 1840s because he made sure that functional baseballs were always on hand—no easy task in those days.

Frank Pidgeon: one of the founding members of the Eckford Club of Brooklyn in the early 1850s, he wrote a memorable description of the club’s early days. He was regarded as one of the top pitchers of the 1850s, but when professionalism began to change the game he was one of many who turned his back on it.

Jim Creighton: the game’s first superstar. He was probably also the first paid player, and was certainly the man most responsible for increasing the pitcher’s role. He died in 1862 at age twenty-one.

Henry Chadwick: pioneer sportswriter and influential voice in baseball development throughout the nineteenth century. Chadwick would come to view the early game condescendingly as primitive, but he never lost his fondness for its players.

Harry Wright: captain of the Red Stockings, his father’s career as a professional cricketer left him with an intense conviction that there was nothing wrong with being paid to play baseball. It was shared by his younger brother George, shortstop of the Red Stockings and one of the era’s greatest players.
CHAPTER 1

Before the Knickerbockers

The Knickerbocker Club of New York City first took up baseball around 1843, and historians now unanimously credit this club’s members with a major role in the game’s development. Yet initially they could not possibly have had any sense they were doing anything particularly noteworthy, let alone historic. To begin with, there was nothing remotely novel about Americans playing bat-and-ball games. Nor was there anything out of the ordinary in the fact that the Knickerbockers changed some of the rules, since variants were played all over the country. As a result, it would have shocked the Knickerbockers had anyone suggested that their game might one day become America’s national pastime—or indeed that any game would fill such a role. A review of the bat-and-ball games being played in this country before 1843 will help us understand why this was so.

If reconstructing the details of long-extinct forerunners of baseball doesn’t sound like much fun, relax. This chapter will include descriptions of such early American bat-and-ball games as wicket, round-town, and town ball, because a general sense of how these games were played is useful to appreciating the contributions of the Knickerbockers. But there won’t be any quizzes about these details, and indeed anyone who tries to commit the rules of each game to memory has missed the point. Bat-and-ball games of this era were played much as small children today play hide-and-seek or tag—a few general principles remain standard, but most of the rules can be adapted to specific
conditions, number of players, or just a sudden whim. The essence of such games was and is their fluidity: their rules are flexible by design so as to allow variation from region to region, from site to site, and even from day to day.

Of course none of these traits was true of cricket, which had well-established rules by the time it first arrived on American shores. But cricket's stability did not prove to be an asset. As a writer explained in 1860: “Cricket we have always had, as an exotic. It has been played for years at Hoboken and other retired localities, but chiefly by Englishmen, and it is still regarded, even by American players, as an English game.” It was precisely its inflexibility that made cricket a niche sport whose rhythms defied adaptation to the conditions of the New World. This in turn prompted Americans to devise bat-and-ball games that could be adapted to local climates and conditions.

Just as crucially, this country in 1843 was still very much the United States of America: a group of states that had agreed on certain general principles but had agreed to disagree on a long list of specifics. Even the country's name was still regarded as a plural entity; people said “the United States are” instead of “the United States is.” The desirability of centralized legal and governmental systems was still a hotly debated topic, so the idea of a national pastime would have seemed bizarre. And even if Americans had perceived a national sport as a desirable concept, the notion would have been hopelessly impractical in a vast country with primitive transportation and communication. Just getting the staples of life and essential news from town to town was an ordeal; trying to disseminate the rules of a game would have seemed absurd.

As a result, regions developed their own bat-and-ball games, some of which had generally agreed-upon practices while others were so fluid that their rules and even their names changed constantly. Adding to the imprecision, most of the surviving accounts of these games were written long after the fact and use hindsight to impose more structure and consistency than seems
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plausible. Thus these reports are most valuable for the sense they give us of the spirit in which these pre-Knickerbocker games were played.

On a first examination of these descriptions, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the baffling array of accounts of pre-1840 American bat-and-ball games. A large part of this confusion is the natural result of the nation's continued reliance upon oral communication. Word-of-mouth transmission creates imprecision in any endeavor, and this is especially true in the case of an ephemeral activity such as a game.

"The variants of tag have descended to us and are played today," explained the popular historian of colonial American customs Alice Morse Earle in 1899, "just as they were played when Boston and New York streets were lanes and cowpaths. The pretty game, 'I catch you without green,' mentioned by Rabelais, is well known in the Carolinas, whither it was carried by French Huguenot immigrants.... Stone-tag and wood-tag took the place in America of the tag on iron of Elizabeth's day. Squat-tag and cross-tag have their times and seasons, and in Philadelphia tell-tag is also played. Pickadill is a winter sport, a tag played in the snow. Another tag game known as poison, or stone-poison, is where the player is tagged if he steps off stones." Obviously, each of these versions can be treated as a distinct game, yet it is not misleading to refer to all of them as tag. Similarly, an impressive number of regional American bat-and-ball games thrived during the mid-nineteenth century, but their distinguishing characteristics should not cause us to overlook their underlying unity.

A good place to begin our survey is in Connecticut, with a game known as wicket. It originated in Bristol around 1830, soon spread to Litchfield, Hartford, and several rural counties, and remained popular for half a century. As its name implies, wicket borrowed extensively from cricket, with each side getting two innings during which the batsmen defended a wicket from a ball thrown by the bowler. But, as an 1880 account
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pointed out, “it is not cricket by any means,” and each of the modifications gave wicket the flexibility that the British game lacked.

For starters, the wickets were placed only a few inches above the ground, while the ball was softer and nearly twice as big as a cricket ball. The bats were correspondingly larger and thicker; eventually they came to bear “a strong resemblance to a Fiji war-club, the material being well-seasoned willow,” but in the early days it is likely that any large chunk of wood might be called into service. These features eliminated much of the finesse associated with cricket—as one observer explained, wicket “is a game for fun and exercise only, affording little scope for what is called scientific play.”

Another distinguishing characteristic of wicket was that it could be played by as many as thirty players per side, with all the players except the two bowlers “swarming afield as ‘bartenders,’ ‘close-tenders,’ and fielders generally.” While the score was tracked, it was done in far less detailed fashion than in cricket: “no record is kept of the fielding, nor are the achievements of the bowlers credited to them on the score-book.”

A Hartford resident later recalled wicket’s popularity in the late 1840s and early 1850s, when games were typically “played in Cooper Lane, now Lafayette street, at its northern end where the roadway meets Washington street. It was an ideal spot for the game because of the broad street and level ground. Very many matched games were here played with clubs from the towns around Hartford, and usually a great game was played on Fast day, although many good people objected to such sports on that day.

“Wicket was played in various locations in the city, for instance: Hill boys played at the junction of Garden and Myrtle streets where the old reservoir now stands. At the south end Buckingham Square was the rallying place; at the north end, where several streets meet near the tunnel, made a fine spot for the game; while over on the east side Prospect street between [14]
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Grove and Atheneum streets was used by lads living in that vicinity. But the best games of all in many respects were the early morning games, played by clerks who were employed in stores and banks about State House (near City Hall) Square. These games which were kept up for two or three years in the early '50's were played in the early morning for four or five months on Main street in front of the State House. The bats, balls and wicket sticks were kept in front of the cellar of Welles's drug store, next north of the Phoenix bank.

"As it was customary for the drug, jewelry, dry goods and some other stores, also for banks and insurance offices, to have one or more clerks sleep in the place of business there were probably two score young men in the vicinity, most of whom were glad of the sport and exercise. It was customary for the one who was first awake at 5 o'clock to dress, and make the rounds of the square, knocking on the doors and shouting 'Wicket.' By 5:30 enough would be out to begin playing, and soon with 15 to 20 on a side the game was in full swing.

"There was very little passing of teams and but little danger of breaking store windows, although cellar windows would occasionally be broken, and paid for. Most stores had outside shutters to the windows, so they were protected. These games would end about 6:45, in time to open the stores at 7 o'clock. It was good exercise, and very enjoyable, and I have no doubt that many of our older merchants and bankers will recall with pleasure the good old wicket games in State House Square in 1852–3–4."

While wicket was most closely associated with Connecticut, the increasing mobility of mid-nineteenth-century Americans enabled one region's game to surface in unexpected locales. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 created a steady flow of traffic between the Northeast and the Great Lakes states, with the result that toward the end of the 1850s wicket became popular in western Michigan. It enjoyed a brief vogue in Grand Rapids around that time, only to be outstripped by the arrival of the
Knickerbockers' game. Similarly, until the advent of “hard”
baseball in the late 1850s, boys in Kalamazoo “played a form of
cricket with a big soft ball as large as a modern football, but
round and made at home of twine and leather and bowled over
a level field to knock down wickets less than its own height from
the ground.” In equally unpredictable fashion, wicket made ap-
pearances in Brooklyn and Hawaii as well as in several New
England states.

Massachusetts also had a game of its own, which was most
commonly known as round ball at the time but which eventually
came to be referred to as the Massachusetts game. (And, typi-
cally, other names such as “Massachusetts Run-Around” appear
to have been used as well.) Stoughton native Billy de Coster
later recalled: “We used to play what was called the Massachu-
setts game. That was where we had a square, instead of a dia-
mond, and ran four bases. We had a small ball and a small bat,
and the ball could be thrown at a base runner and if it hit him
before he got to the base he was out.” This element of fielders
throwing the ball at base runners was, as we shall see, one of the
most popular and best-remembered features of all these games.
As with the games themselves, this practice was known by many
names, but the most common one was “soaking.”

In rural Virginia the ball game of choice was known as
round-town, a sport that was “well understood and is much en-
joyed by every country boy, though only a few of their city
cousins know the first rudiments of it.” According to a later ac-
count: “The game of round-town is played in this manner: two
sides are formed, the number of players of the division being
equal. Four bases are used and are placed in the same manner
as if they were being fixed for a game of baseball, although men
are only placed in the positions of the pitcher, catcher, and first
baseman, the rest of the players being scattered in the field
where they think the ball is most apt to be knocked. The first
hatsman on the opposing side takes his place at the plate, and
he has in his hand a paddle an inch or two thick, and in which
This is the only known photograph of the Massachusetts game being played on the Boston Common. Space constraints were an ongoing problem for ballplayers at the Common, and this issue proved crucial in the eventual demise of the Massachusetts game. [Courtesy of Mark Rucker]

only one hand is used in striking. The pitcher delivers a solid gum ball with all the swiftness attainable, the use of the curve never being thought of, and it is therefore very seldom that a ‘strike out’ occurs. The batter hits the ball at the first opportunity and endeavors to drive it over the hands of his opponents, for if it is caught on the fly or the first bound the runner is called out, and also if it is gotten to the first baseman before the runner arrives at the base. Should the runner reach first base safely he can continue to run to the other bases if he wishes, but his opponents have the privilege of hitting him with the ball, and as it is very painful to be struck with a gum ball, the runner is very cautious, and if he is struck he is counted out of the game, although should he reach any of the other bases he is safe.”

Obviously round-town was not a highly structured game. And in all likelihood these rules were even more flexible than is
suggested by this account, with many of their components subject to modification as needed.

While wicket, round-town, and the Massachusetts game retained strong affiliations with a single state, the game known as town ball sprang up in a number of large cities without following any obvious pattern. It first came to prominence in Philadelphia, where it was closely associated with one of the country’s pioneer ball-playing clubs. The Olympic Ball Club was formed in 1833 from the remnants of two groups of town ball players and lasted long enough to celebrate its golden anniversary in 1883 (though it had switched from town ball to baseball in 1860). As with the Knickerbocker Club, one of the secrets of this aggregation’s longevity was a more formal structure than other clubs of the era. The Olympics’ constitution was published in 1888 and suggests a high degree of organization.

But just as was the case with the Knickerbockers, this appearance is deceptive. The club’s steps toward formal organization seem to have been a matter of self-preservation, as the Olympics were often battling to survive. One of their predecessors was able to convince only four men to attend their first outing, which forced them to play the simple game known as “Cat Ball” or “Two Old Cat.” Nonetheless this foursome had so much fun that they “told some of their younger friends of the pleasure and advantage they found in resuming their boyish sports,” and soon had a group of fifteen to twenty regulars.

Their fun, however, was soon menaced by new impediments. Philadelphia had a law against ball-playing, so the group began to take a ferryboat to Camden, New Jersey, on Saturday afternoons to play. The locale had much to recommend it, as Camden was still “a very small village, comparatively little resorted to by Philadelphians, the means of communication with the city limited, slow, and imperfect, consisting mainly of two or three small horse ferry-boats, which left the wharf at the north side of Market street at intervals of about half an hour, and occupied about fifteen minutes in crossing. The ground on which
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The clubhouse of the country's pioneer ball-playing club, the Olympics of Philadelphia, which began playing town ball in the early 1830s and switched to the Knickerbockers' game in 1860. Clubhouses were a powerful symbol of the pride felt by early clubs and were decorated with flags, pictures, trophies, gilded game balls, and other mementos of the club's triumphs. [Courtesy of John Thorn]

the play began and continued for several years was common and open to the street on which it bordered: no rent was paid for it, and no permission given or asked to use it. The players made their own bats and balls, and kept them at one of the public gardens on Market street, the keeper of which sent out a pail of ice-water to the ground, and supplied the ball players at his garden when the game was over, about sunset, with a bowl of lemon-ade, etc., at a very moderate charge."

At first the isolated location enabled the Olympics to remain delightfully informal in their play: "Their first Association had no constitution or by-laws, or elected members, but the absence of these formalities was not felt, and was no disadvantage; for there were no quarrels or disputes among the players, who always found the principles of good-fellowship and gentlemanly intercourse a sufficient rule for their guidance, and what the Society of Friends [the Quakers] call the ‘weight of the meeting’ a
sufficient authority to restrain any inclination to a breach of good order.”

But they soon encountered another significant obstacle: “So great was the prejudice of the public against the game at that time, that the players were frequently reproved and censured by their friends for degrading themselves by indulging in such a childish amusement, and this prejudice prevailed to a great extent for many years.” Eventually the club made concessions to those who took a dim view of adults playing ball games. Thus the adoption of a more formal structure appears to have been part of the price the Olympic Club had to pay to attain respectability, rather than something the club members perceived as innately desirable.

Town ball gradually spread to a number of other cities, with mixed results. The game was reported to have acquired “quite a footing in St. Louis” before the arrival of regulation baseball in the late 1850s. Meanwhile in Davenport, Iowa, it was reported in 1858 that “two ‘Town Ball’ clubs have been formed from the original one, and they are now proceeding to a regular organization. They will have a big list of members, a lot of their own for playing purposes, and a good time generally. They have their rules and regulations printed, and everything will be done on system.”

Cincinnati also had a couple of town ball clubs, but according to one observer, “Town ball found more favor in those days than any other sport, yet the number who patronized it were very few. But two clubs of our city could lay claim to excellence, the Excelsior . . . and the Buckeye, a foster child of the Excelsiors composed mainly of teachers. Loafing had more attraction for the great mass of our boys than any active exercise. The orphan Asylum grounds, on Elm street, were the scene of operations for these clubs, whose performances failed to arouse the public to the point of assembly in numbers to witness them. Nothing like popularity could be claimed for the game, and the few who played, finally tired of it, and it was soon forgotten.”
References to town ball are more plentiful than detailed descriptions of how the game was played. One of the better sketches was provided by Hiram Waldo of Rockford, Illinois, who recalled many years later that the game "consisted of a catcher, thrower, 1st goal, 2nd goal and home goal. The inner field was diamond shape: the outer field was occupied by the balance of the players, number not limited. The outs were as follows: Three strikes, 'Tick and catch,' ball caught on the fly, and base runner hit or touched with the ball off from the base. That was sometimes modified by 'Over the fence and out.'”

Note that even this account of how town ball was played in one specific locale suggests a very loose structure, with both the few rules and the number of players subject to change. Since town ball spread entirely by oral transmission, it is safe to assume that there were still greater variations from region to region. And it is quite conceivable that the game known as "town ball" varied so much from one locale to another that "town ball" itself was effectively a catchall term.

Lending credence to this possibility is the name "town ball." Most of the era’s bat-and-ball games bore names derived from a distinguishing characteristic, whether it was a wicket or round ball or square ball. This is even true of the name “base ball,” which became more common as stakes were replaced with flatter objects. In contrast, "town ball" is a vague phrase, suggesting that it may have been applied to a variety of different bat-and-ball games. And at least a couple of early ballplayers claimed that town ball received its name because it was played at town meetings, an origin that would suggest a high degree of fluidity in the rules.

While we cannot be entirely sure of the extent to which town ball was a generic term, it is almost certain that this was the case with some of the era’s other bat-and-ball games. For example, longtime Detroit resident Henry Starkey reported that before 1857 "we played the old-fashioned game of round ball. There were no 'balls' or 'strikes' to that. The batter waited
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until a ball came along that suited him, banged it and ran. If it was a fly and somebody caught it, he was out and couldn’t play any more in the game. If the ball was not caught on the fly, the only way to put a batter out was to hit him with the ball as he ran. There were no basemen then; everybody stood around to catch flies and throw the ball at base runners.”

Yet across the state in Kalamazoo, another pioneer later recollected that that city’s early residents played a game called patch ball, which “was played very much like pass ball is played today only instead of throwing a man out at first base we threw the ball at him as he was running between the bases. I see it has not altogether gone out of style yet, as this is the game often played by boys now when they can not get enough together to play the regular game.” Based on these descriptions, there appear to be no significant differences between what the one man described as “round ball” and the other as “patch ball.” Indeed these descriptions could just as easily have been provided by eyewitnesses to numerous other games.

The reality that multiple names were used to describe the same basic game can also be seen in other accounts. Robert S. Pierce, one of Cleveland’s earliest baseball editors, reported that when baseball arrived in that city it displaced “what was known as ‘long ball,’ ‘square ball’ and ‘sock ball,’ in which a soft ball was used. One of the ways of getting a batter or base runner out was to hit or ‘sock’ him with the ball before reaching or while off his base.” Major Julius G. Rathbun, an early Hartford ballplayer, made clear that he saw little distinction between “ballplaying, barnball, one, two or three-old-cat, and games with chosen sides, a larger or smaller number.”

Other early ballplayers were later unable to recall any special name for the game they played. John McNamee, who became sheriff of Brooklyn and a well-known sculptor, reminisced in 1876 that, “years before the formation of the Atlantic Club, I used to get some of the ‘boys’ together on a good afternoon, and go in there and play the old game, where you used to ‘sock’ one
another with the ball.” Even the Knickerbockers, recollected
an original member, Duncan Curry, evolved from a group who
“would take our bats and balls with us and play any sort of a
game. We had no name in particular for it.” Another original
member, William Wheaton, confirmed that the Knickerbockers
were preceded by an aggregation that played by looser rules
and used “no regular bases, but only such permanent agents as
a bedded boulder or old stump, and often the diamond looked
strangely like an irregular polygon.”

No doubt some of these versions included specific rules now
lost to history, but these accounts suggest that the rules were of
little import. The essence of these games was a few basic simi-
larities, especially a great deal of running, an inherent flexibil-
ity that allowed the game to be played on almost any field and
by almost any number of players, and the use of a soft ball with
which runners were “soaked,” “socked,” or “patched.” As we
have seen, this last aspect was the one that featured most
prominently in memoirs, in large part because it was eliminated
by the Knickerbockers’ rules. As one early participant put it, “I
forget now as to many points of the game, but I do remember
that we used to run bases, and the opposite side to ours would
try to get the ball, and you would have to be hit with it before
out while running your base to get home.”

One game that has not been mentioned thus far is rounders,
which a number of sources have credited with being the forefa-
ther of baseball. The historian David Block, however, has effec-
tively demolished that claim, showing that rounders is not of
great antiquity and that much of its support derives from being
the game that the influential sportswriter Henry Chadwick
played as a boy in western England.

As Chadwick explained, rounders shared the same essentials
as the games preferred by Americans: “This pastime was merely
a source of fun and frolic with a bat and ball, the interesting fea-
ture to both sides being the chances afforded to ‘plunk’ a fellow
with the ball when running the bases. No skill was required to
play the game, swift and accurate throwing being the main requisite, and any schoolboy could learn to play it in ten minutes.” And thus it clearly belongs to the family of games that helped pave the way for the Knickerbockers’ version.

But Chadwick’s additional claim that rounders “was the parent of America’s national game of base ball” cannot be justified. At most, rounders is one of a family of games that shares that distinction, and considering that its popularity in America was limited, the game does not deserve precedence over the other candidates. In addition, Chadwick’s own description suggests that insofar as rounders differed from the multitude of American bat-and-ball games, it did so by including elements that did not become part of baseball, such as using a hole for home base and aligning the bases into a circle.

So this leaves us with Americans of the early 1840s playing an array of bat-and-ball games which were known by a variety of names, and which exhibited significant rule variations from region to region. “Significant” might not in fact be the best word, because few if any of the participants seem to have viewed the rules as being important enough to write down at the time or to remember with much precision. By and large, the only traits that early players could later recall about these early games were the few recognizable features they all shared. As a result, when the Knickerbockers introduced the way of playing what we now consider baseball, no one failed to recognize it as a modified version of a familiar American game.

Many, indeed, embraced the new version as an inherited pastime because they saw it as pretty much town ball (or one of the other games) without the soaking. An 1879 account in the Cincinnati Enquirer conveyed this adroitly: “Base-ball sprang entirely from the old game of town-ball, which our fathers, when they were college boys and young business men, played with as much excitement attending the sport as now attaches to this latter-day game. Twenty years ago town-ball clubs existed all over the country—regularly organized clubs like the clubs of
to-day. Many clubs had their exclusive grounds, and the great-
est rivalry existed between certain clubs. There were town-ball
teams which went so far in the excitement as to visit neighbor-
ing cities and engage in friendly contest with their neighbors.
The balls which were first used were soft, light and harmless. It
was necessary that they be soft, for in those days the runner
was put out by being hit with the ball from the hands of some
opponent. There were no basemen to whom the ball was
thrown, but the sphere was hurled directly at the base-runner.
As the excitement of the game intensified the ball began to be
made harder and heavier to aid the throwing. This led to an un-
usual number of accidents, resulting from the players being hit
by a too solid ball. It was this dangerous outgrowth of town-ball
playing which first suggested to some Yankee mind (whom no-
body knows) to put basemen on the bases and let the ball be
thrown to them instead of at the runner.”

Thus when the Knickerbockers arrived on the scene, Amer-
ica already was home to a number of bat-and-ball games that
featured a man hitting a soft ball with a stick and running
around bases while fielders tried to retrieve the ball and throw
it at him. Many variations existed, based on how many players
participated and on how well- or ill-suited the field and equip-
ment were, with some calling the game by a different name
when the conditions varied dramatically. But most of the play-
ers didn’t attach much significance to changes in the rules or
care very much what the game was called. After all, it was just
a game.