Armed with endorsements of four western clubs, William Ambrose Hulbert, president of the Chicago Base Ball Club, met on 2 February 1876 with representatives of six eastern clubs at the Central Hotel in Manhattan. Nothing could deter Hulbert, not even the rain and the gale-force winds that whipped through Manhattan’s streets at seventy miles per hour. According to baseball lore, after all the delegates had entered his room, he locked the door behind them and then, with a dramatic flourish, dropped the key into his pocket. Hulbert thereby symbolically held the eastern men captive until they agreed to his plan for the creation of a radically new professional baseball league. They discussed and refined Hulbert’s proposal into the evening hours before finally signing a pact creating the National League of Professional Base Ball Clubs (NL). Appropriately, given baseball’s claim as the national pastime, the fateful meeting took place during the nation’s centennial year of 1876. Perhaps it should also be remembered that the league began play in the same spring that chiefs Rain-in-the-Face,
Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse annihilated General George A. Custer and his troops near the Little Big Horn River in southern Montana.

The creation of the NL, along with more than a dozen other leagues during the 1870s and 1880s, was an important step in the evolution of professional baseball. Although professional baseball leagues only gradually evolved into the economic cartels familiar to fans today, baseball men early on recognized that the formation of leagues could promote their mutual interests. The first pro baseball league, the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players (1871–75), had no grand plan for winning public favor or maximizing the income of its member clubs. It was merely a loose confederation designed to provide a system for naming a national championship team. But its successor, Hulbert's National League, aspired to become a circuit composed of only the premier clubs. It sharply restricted the number of clubs that could join the league, took steps to curb player freedom, and sought, not altogether successfully, to present itself as a fortress of Victorian propriety.

On 17 March 1871, St. Patrick's Day, ten delegates representing clubs fielding professional baseball teams met in New York City, where they founded the first organized league, the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players, usually known simply as the National Association (NA). Although the inclusion of "Base Ball Players" in the title of the new association suggested that it was a player-controlled organization, the players did not entirely dominate either the NA or most of its member clubs. True, of the eleven teams that enlisted for the first season, five were described as "cooperative" nines. Organized by the players themselves and thus without the patronage of a joint-stock company, the cooperative teams paid expenses from gate receipts; if there was any money left over, they divided it among the players. Nonetheless, Harry Wright, who was as concerned with club management as with the fate of the players, was the only active player at the 1871 NA founding meeting. Apart from Wright, only two (or possibly three) active players ever attended the annual conventions of the NA. The NA did elect player-captain Robert Ferguson, who was associated at different times with the New York Mutuals, Brooklyn Atlantics, and the Hartfords, as president for two terms, but Ferguson himself acknowledged that the league presidency was a ceremonial position. The
club directors bestowed it on him as a token recognition of the “playing class’s” contribution to the game.

Although the National Association exhibited few characteristics of a modern sports league cartel, it was important to the history of professional baseball. With the demise of the fraternal-oriented National Association of Base Ball Players in 1870, the new association became by default the rule-making body for all of baseball. Never again would the fraternal-centered version of baseball significantly affect the game’s rules. More importantly, the NA also established a procedure for naming a pro team as the national champion. Each club was to play a best-of-five-game series with all other members. Such a system was awkward, inasmuch as teams did not play the same number of championship games during the season and each club had to schedule its own games. To maximize revenues, the clubs scheduled many games against non-NA foes.

In 1871, the association’s first season of play, Chicago’s White Stockings, the Athletics of Philadelphia, and the Bostons embarked on an exciting three-way race for the championship pennant. Unfortunately, Chicago’s Great Fire burned down the White Stockings’ new field, which seated 7,000 spectators. Although the White Stockings lost their park, uniforms, and equipment in the fire, they decided to carry on anyway. Wearing suits of “various hues and makes, ludicrous in the extreme” that had been loaned to them by other nines, the ill-dressed and ill-fated Chicagoans lost the flag by a single game on the last day of the season to the Philadelphians. Because of the Great Fire, Chicago did not field an association team in either the 1872 or 1873 season.

For the next four seasons (1872-75), no club successfully contested the hegemony of the Bostons, as Harry Wright’s team was known. Led by their gaunt, full-bearded, clerical-looking manager, the team won four consecutive pennants and compiled a staggering 227-60 cumulative won-lost record. In 1875, the final season of the association, Boston ran away with the league flag, winning seventy-one games and losing only eight. In terms of the NA’s total welfare, the Bostons may have been too good; other teams paled in comparison. It must have been difficult for Brooklynites, for example, to grow excited about their Atlantics. During the 1875 campaign, the abysmal Atlantics won only two of forty-six league games.

Boston’s phenomenal success stemmed in large part from the recruitment of superior players. Wright had at his disposal his brother George, a superb fielding, hard-hitting shortstop. At second base, he employed Roscoe
Barnes, the league’s perennial batting champion, and behind the plate was the league’s most admired superstar, Jim “Deacon” White. White picked up his nickname because, unlike most of his fellow players, he regularly attended church services, toted a Bible with him wherever he went, and always behaved as “a gentleman in his professional and private life.” In the pitcher’s box, Wright had big Albert Spalding, who at six feet and two inches in height towered over his contemporaries and was the league’s most successful hurler. Spalding compiled a 207-56 won-lost record and a .320 batting average while at Boston. “On receiving the ball,” read a contemporary account of Spalding’s pitching style, “... he gazes at it two or three minutes in a contemplative way, and then turns it around once or twice to be sure that it is not an orange or coconut. Assured that he has the genuine article... and after a scowl at the short stop, and a glance at home-plate, [he] finally delivers the ball with the precision of a cannon shot.”

Although notions of the earlier fraternal era lingered on in Wright’s thinking, he approached the game in a far more businesslike manner than did most of the other men associated with the pro game. Whereas stockholders frequently placed more value on potential psychic and political rewards than on profits, Wright depended on baseball for his livelihood. “Base ball is now a business,” he flatly explained in a letter to Nicholas Young of the Washington Olympics. The pro clubs, he maintained, should drop freewheeling practices that, while admittedly enhancing a sense of equality and fraternity among the players, might impair a team’s prospects for success. Wright not only carefully managed such details as club scheduling and finances but, above all, firmly established his authority over the players. Acting as a paternalistic patriarch, he even dictated their living arrangements. In Boston, “George [Wright], Harry [Wright], and [Charles] Gould live together,” reported the Spirit of the Times in 1871, “and the other seven ‘boys’ live next door in a private house, so they are all under Harry’s wing.” No longer did the players rule their own destinies. At least for the Bos- tons, a clear-cut employer-employee relationship existed between the man-ager and his “boys.”

Although no fewer than fifteen new clubs were clamoring to get into the National Association for the 1876 campaign and more than 3,000 fans frequently attended the games of major foes, not all was well with the loop. Not only did it suffer from Boston’s lopsided superiority on the playing
field, but for those who believed that pro baseball could achieve greater success by mirroring Victorian America, the NA was little short of a disaster. Rather than serving as models of order and propriety, association games too frequently erupted into incivility and anarchy. Ugly confrontations and long delays in play regularly arose over the choice of umpires and their decisions. As in the past, the NA, which required that the home teams pay umpires $5 per game, followed the practice of having the home team pick an umpire from a list of names submitted by the visitors. But with money now at stake and fraternal ties largely eroded, nothing kept home teams from objecting to all the proposed arbiters. Accompanied by growing crowd unrest, arguments over the choice of an umpire sometimes held up starting the contests for an hour or more.

Agreement on an official for the game by no means terminated the possibility of controversy. Umpires held unenviable positions. They needed to master a complex set of rapidly changing rules, they had to make countless decisions during the course of a game, and given the size of the playing field, a single umpire was sometimes in a poor position to make good calls. Until the practice was prohibited in 1880, umpires still occasionally consulted with nearby players or bystanders before rendering a final decision on fly ball or base calls. Frequently confronted with vociferous complaints about their rulings from players, managers, and fans (who as likely as not had wagered on the contest), it was little wonder that umpires sometimes lost their tempers or simply quit in the middle of games. Few umpires, however, responded as forcefully as Robert Ferguson. Angered by the “growling” of Mutuals’ catcher Robert Hicks, Ferguson, while serving as umpire of a game between the Lord Baltimores and the Mutuals in 1873, grabbed a bat and broke the offender’s arm in two places. He thereby disabled Hicks “for the remainder of the game.” At the game’s conclusion, a constable stepped forward to arrest Ferguson, but the injured catcher refused to press charges.

Game fixing and gambling also plainly mocked Victorian values. Wagering on games was common everywhere; both Brooklyn and Philadelphia even allowed pool selling in their parks. The frequency of game fixing cannot be precisely determined, but players on some teams, such as the Mutuals of New York City, acquired a notorious reputation for their willingness to take money from gamblers in exchange for playing poorly enough to lose games. In the 1874 and 1875 seasons, newspapers repeatedly reported instances of suspected game fixing by the Mutuals. Referring to an 1874 win by the White Stockings over the Mutuals, the Chicago Tribune
declared that “for the first time in the history of baseball in Chicago, the national game has been disgraced by a palpable and unbelievable fraud.” According to the *Tribune,* there was “ample reason to believe that at least four [Mutuals] players were hired to throw the game and had no intention of winning at any stage.” This and more than a dozen similar incidents, none of which led to punitive action by the NA’s judiciary committee, cast a dark shadow of suspicion over the “squareness” of association games.

Nevertheless, neither Boston’s dominance on the playing field, the behavior of ball players, nor the common practice of players revolving from one club to another is sufficient in itself to explain the association’s demise. The National League coup of 1876 was mostly the work of a single individual, William Ambrose Hulbert. The burly Hulbert had no nostalgia for the earlier fraternal game. As a successful Chicago coal merchant, an active Republican, and a member of the city’s prestigious Board of Trade, he approached baseball solely from the perspective of a businessman, politician, and civic booster. Hulbert loved Chicago. “I would rather be a lamp-post in Chicago than a millionaire in any other city,” he allegedly said repeatedly. In the wake of Chicago’s Great Fire of 1871, Hulbert saw in professional baseball an opportunity to promote the revival of his beloved city.

For baseball to contribute to the Windy City’s civic renewal, the team had to perform well enough to engender pride in its accomplishments. Therefore, Hulbert, as president of the White Stockings, set about recruiting the best players he could find. He secretly and boldly defied the NA rule against signing players from other clubs while the season was in progress. In the midst of the 1875 campaign he persuaded Albert Spalding to join the White Stockings as a pitcher, captain, and manager for the upcoming 1876 season in exchange for a salary of $2,000 plus 25 percent of the team’s gate receipts. On receiving the news that Spalding and three other Boston players had defected to Chicago, the Worcester *Spy* reported that “Boston is in mourning. Like Rachel weeping for her children, she refuses to be comforted because [her] famous baseball nine . . . the city’s most cherished possession, has been captured by Chicago.”

Hulbert’s employment of Spalding was especially fortuitous. The charismatic Spalding not only was a superb pitcher, but he also aided Hulbert in convincing Boston stars Jim White, Cal McVey, and Roscoe Barnes, along with Philadelphia’s hero Adrian “Cap” Anson, to sign contracts with Chicago. Fear that the eastern clubs might retaliate for these audacious player raids by expelling the Chicago recruits and perhaps the club itself
from the NA was, according to Spalding, the inspiration for Hulbert’s conception of an entirely new league. “Spalding,” Hulbert exclaimed, “I have a new scheme. Let us anticipate the Eastern cusses and organize a new association . . . and then we’ll see who will do the expelling.”

Hulbert and his cohort concluded that pro baseball could be stabilized by forming a league restricted to the most powerful representative nines of the larger cities. The National Association had allowed any club fielding a pro team, regardless of whether it was located in a small town or the nation’s largest city, to join and compete for the championship pennant. The only requirement was that the aspiring club pay a $10 entry fee. Thus, dozens of clubs from both the smaller towns and the big cities had regularly joined and shortly dropped out; several did not even complete a single season of play. Under such unstable conditions, fans in the large cities had special difficulties identifying a particular team as the city’s representative nine. That fifteen additional clubs were seeking admission to the association for the 1876 season created a special sense of urgency among those seeking to form a new circuit. If the “whole gang be let in,” predicted the Chicago Tribune, half the clubs would fail to meet expenses. The only solution, the Tribune concluded, was either to reform the NA or form a new league organized as a “closed corporation.” Hulbert adopted essentially the latter idea.

Composed initially of teams located in Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Hartford, Louisville, New York, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, the National League departed sharply from the practices of the NA. To offset some of the disparities in the markets arising from differences in population among the NL cities, the league provided that visiting teams would receive 50 percent of the base admission price to each game. (As higher-priced seats were added to league ballparks, the share of total receipts going to visiting teams fell.) A club wishing to join the new league had to obtain the approval of the existing clubs, only one club could represent each city, and no club could be located in a city with a population of less than 75,000. Each club enjoyed a territorial monopoly in another sense. When a team from one league city, such as the Chicago White Stockings or the Bostons, came to another league town, they could play no other pro club except the NL team representing that city. The founders hoped that these strictures would enable them to establish a premier circuit, one that would establish a clearly separate identity and a superior quality of play compared to competing baseball clubs or leagues.

The NL abandoned all pretenses of being a player-centered enterprise.
Although player delegates were not specifically prohibited from attending annual league meetings until 1878, by confining the game to "regular [joint-] stock companies," the NL got rid of the cooperative nines that had played in the NA. It also quickly implemented labor policies similar to those of the industrial corporations of the day. Although the NL founders did not initially have enough gall or foresight to bind players to one club for their entire playing careers—or perhaps they doubted the legality of such a move—they did forbid negotiations with players affiliated with other clubs while the season was in progress and granted the clubs the power to expel players from the league for violating team rules.

Led by Albert Spalding, the league founders nourished the legend that the NL saved professional baseball from utter ruin. Had it not been for the timely creation of the NL and the sagacious decisions of its leaders, so the fable went, the national pastime would have continued its downward slide into complete degradation. The league introduced a new player discipline; it avowed to end rowdy behavior and make "Base Ball playing respectable and honorable." In a further bid to dissociate itself from the NA, portray itself as a civic rather than a profit-driven enterprise, and appease suspicious Victorians, the league organizers banned Sunday games (officially in 1878) as well as liquor sales and gambling in their parks. They also hoped that a minimum admission price of fifty cents would prevent attendance by ruffians while encouraging "the better classes [to] patronize the game a great deal more." No doubt at a cost of some support among the working class, especially working-class ethnics, the NL ostentatiously presented itself as the national pastime's main moral guardian.

These measures by no means ensured the fledgling league’s survival. Custodians of Victorian propriety remained suspicious. "You should never go to a ball game," lectured Pittsburgh Judge J. W. F. White in 1887 to a defendant in a larceny case. "Baseball is one of the evils of the day." Although on paper few other business cartels bound their membership in so many particulars, like other gentlemen’s agreements, the baseball cartel had no legal standing; its restrictive agreements could not be enforced in the courts. Therefore, each club was ultimately free to place its interests ahead of the league’s welfare. "The [baseball] magnate must be a strong man among strong men," concluded Spalding years later, "else other club owners in the league will combine in their own interests against him and his interests." With its effectiveness entirely dependent on the voluntary compliance of the member clubs, the NL faced awesome challenges to its very existence.
Both on and off the field of play, Chicago’s baseball men orchestrated the NL’s early history. Off the diamond, there was the formidable duo of William Hulbert and Albert Spalding, who had founded the NL and put together the 1876 “all-star” White Stockings team. Spalding pitched and managed the White Stockings to the 1876 NL championship, but thereafter until his retirement in 1878 he played sparingly. In the meantime, he charted the beginning of another important career. In February of 1876 the Chicago Tribune announced that Spalding was opening a “large emporium in Chicago, where he will sell all kinds of baseball goods and turn his place into the headquarters for the Western Ball Clubs.” He obtained the exclusive right to furnish the official NL baseball and to publish Spalding’s Official Baseball Guide, an annual that included the league rules, records, articles, and Spalding’s views on the main issues confronting the game. Spalding later expanded his business into both the manufacturing and retailing of sporting goods, and it soon became the largest such organization in the world.

While Spalding was launching himself as a sporting goods entrepreneur, Hulbert guided the NL through its perilous early years. An industrial depression in the late 1870s furnished the league with its first great challenge. With widespread unemployment and reduced incomes for many, the amount of money available for leisure expenditures dropped drastically. For the 1876 season probably none of the clubs save Chicago earned a profit. Hoping to avoid further financial losses, both the Athletics of Philadelphia and the Mutuals of New York decided to forgo their final western road tours. Hulbert, who had been installed as the league president after Morgan G. Bulkeley of Hartford had been chosen by lot as president the first year, responded sternly. He obtained the expulsion of both clubs, thus denying the NL access to the nation’s two largest cities. Even the tears of the Athletics’ contrite president failed to reverse Hulbert’s decision.

In 1881, when the Cincinnati club persisted in selling beer at its park and playing Sunday games, Hulbert hounded them out of the league as well. “We respectfully suggest, that while the league is in the missionary field,” responded Oliver P. Caylor of the Cincinnati Enquirer, “... they [also] turn their attention to Chicago and prohibit the admission to the Lake Street grounds of the great number of prostitutes who patronize the game up there.” Caylor’s red herring apparently availed nothing but per-
haps chuckles. Hulbert was determined that no club would successfully challenge the league’s authority.

Hulbert likewise cracked down on loose player behavior. Charges surfaced at the conclusion of the 1871 season that four Louisville Grays’ players had fixed games. The powerful Grays needed to win only eight games to clinch the championship pennant, but during the stretch drive the talented four played like a team of local sandlotters. They made costly errors and carelessly got picked off bases. Even worse, one of the four, James Devlin, the Grays’ star pitcher, suddenly lost his stuff. A subsequent league investigation found the players guilty of taking money for throwing the games. Hulbert again acted without mercy; he promptly banned the four culprits from the NL for life. Pleading abject poverty, Devlin regularly begged the NL for reinstatement. “I am living from hand to mouth all winter [and] I have not got a Stitch of Clothing [n]or has my wife and Child,” Devlin lamented in a letter to Harry Wright. But the league did not bend. On one occasion, according to Spalding’s recollection, Hulbert gave the offender $50 from his own pocket while exclaiming, “Damn you, you have sold a game, you are dishonest, and [the] National League will not stand for it.” At the tender age of thirty-three, the pathetic Devlin died (cause unknown) while serving as a Philadelphia policeman.

Although Hulbert’s stern measures against clubs and players strengthened the National League’s authority and its image of integrity, such actions failed to ensure the prosperity of league franchises. Indeed, during its first fifteen years of existence, twenty-two different cities had teams in the NL; only Boston and Chicago fielded clubs for the entire 1876-90 era. Until the mid-1880s, the NL could be accurately described as “Chicago’s league,” for not only did Chicago men manage the league, but the other teams in the NL depended to a large extent on the revenues they received from playing the White Stockings.

Neither did the NL establish its ascendancy over all of professional baseball. Indeed, dozens of strong pro clubs continued to operate independently of the NL. In 1877 delegates from eighteen of these clubs founded the International Association of Professional Base Ball Players, which, since it allowed any club to join, resembled the old National Association. Nor did Hulbert’s loop establish its clear-cut ascendancy on the playing field. Several nonleague pro teams were fully as good as the NL teams. In 1877 alone, according to a careful count by Harold Seymour, NL teams lost seventy-two games to outside foes, and even at that the league teams were frequently accused of avoiding the strong independent clubs.
Acting in the monopolistic manner of the industrial corporations of the day, the NL tried to control or eliminate competition from other teams and leagues. In 1877 it organized the League Alliance. All pro clubs that joined the alliance would have their territorial rights and player contracts protected from one another as well as from the NL clubs. Conversely, clubs that refused to join the alliance could have their rosters preyed upon freely by other clubs. The NL also welcomed into its fold the stronger International Association clubs. Conveniently overlooking its requirement that franchises could be located only in cities with 75,000 or more residents, the NL took in clubs from three smaller cities: Syracuse and Troy, New York, and Worcester, Massachusetts. Finally, the league ordered a halt to all games with nonleague foes on league grounds, thereby cutting off lucrative earnings by outsiders in NL ballparks.

The high-handed methods by which the National League was undertaking "to control the baseball fraternity" was "unreasonably absurd," declared A. B. Rankin, a leader of the International Association. "Are we to submit to the caprice of a clique, or ring?" he asked rhetorically. Yet the dream of resurrecting a loosely formed association to which all pro baseball teams could freely join and through which they could compete with one another for a championship pennant was rapidly fading. By the time the International Association collapsed in 1880, the NL's more binding kind of cartel had demonstrated a capacity to withstand conflicts among its members and challenges from both the players and teams outside the league's fold.

In 1882 Hulbert died, and Spalding assumed his mantle. At the age of thirty-two, Spalding became president of the White Stockings, a position he held until 1891, and though he did not serve as league president (an office of nominal authority after Hulbert's death), he was the most dominant voice in league counsels. Ostensibly to convert foreigners to baseball but no doubt to expand sales of his sporting goods as well, in 1888–89 Spalding arranged a highly publicized worldwide tour that matched his Chicago team against a team of NL all-stars. Although the foreigners were singularly unimpressed with the exhibitions of America's national game, and although Spalding lost money on the venture, the exotic nature of baseball games in far-off Australia, in the shadows of Egyptian pyramids, in Rome's Colosseum, and on the leading cricket grounds of England intrigued Americans at home.

As Hulbert and Spalding directed the destinies of the NL off the field, on the diamond no players were more important than Chicagoans Adrian "Cap" (so named because of his captaincy of the team) Anson and
Michael "King" Kelly. They formed the nucleus of one of the most powerful teams in big league history; in the 1880s the White Stockings won five pennants in seven years. In that decade only Anson was left from the championship squad of 1876, but the six-foot, two-inch, 200-pound-plus first baseman, "a veritable giant," as he was described by contemporaries, continued to be one of the best players in the game, even until his retirement in 1897. He won four league batting crowns and in twenty-two seasons failed to hit .300 only twice. Anson became the playing manager of the White Stockings in 1879, a position he retained until his retirement. The fans loved to hear Anson, who had a booming voice, bellow out directions to the players or epithets aimed at the umpire. One of Anson's recruits, lightning-fast but weak-hitting William "Billy" Sunday, later achieved renown as one of the nation's leading evangelists.

King Kelly competed with Anson for the adoration of Chicago kranks. A colorful player both on and off the field, Kelly excelled at hitting and base running. "Slide, Kelly, Slide!" later became a hit song. Apart from baseball, Kelly loved horses and drinking. Tall, dark, and handsome, "as Celtic as Mrs. Murphy's pig," he was one of the first of many players who trod the boards of vaudeville; he starred in a skit titled "He Would be an Actor, or The Ball Player's Revenge." Kelly inspired many legends, most of which revolved around his opportunism and trickery. During one game, as the sun began to set toward the end of the twelfth inning, Kelly pulled one of his most startling stunts. With two out and the bases full, Kelly, as the right fielder, leapt into the twilight trying to catch a mighty drive that would win the game. As he came down, he held his glove high in the air and jauntily jogged to the dugout. The umpire bellowed: "Out number three! Game called on account of darkness!" "Nice catch, Kell," exclaimed his teammates. "Not at all, at all," Kelly responded. "Twent a mile above my head." In the days before players wore gloves, however, Kelly was no iron man. While catching in a game for Cincinnati in 1879, a Cal McVey pitch bruised his hand. Kelly refused to intercept any more of McVey's "cannonball" pitches, so the Cincinnati manager brought in a slower-throwing "change pitcher" who, according to a press report, proceeded to "take his lumps" from the Providence club.

In 1887 Spalding shocked the baseball world by selling Kelly to the Boston team for the then-astronomical sum of $10,000. The Boston fans promptly labeled him "the $10,000 Beauty," after a local actress who used that title as a promotional gimmick. If anything, the Boston Irish loved Kelly more than his followers in Chicago did. The fans even chipped in
their hard-won earnings to buy the King a pair of handsome gray horses and a fancy gig so that he could ride out to the ballpark on Washington Street in proper style. Kelly added to the grandeur of the occasion by wearing needle-pointed shoes and a tall top hat.

“Beer Ball League,” hooted the Chicago Tribune, a mouthpiece of the National League, in 1881. The Tribune referred to the newly created American Association of Base Ball Clubs (AA). And it was true that brewery owners sat on the boards of directors of six of the clubs in the new association. In addition, the AA brazenly authorized the sale of beer at its games, permitted play on Sundays (in cities where it was legal), and set a base admission price of a mere twenty-five cents a game. By such measures, the AA sought to tap into a large pool of potential baseball fans who had been abandoned by the NL’s ostentatious capitulation to Victorian standards of propriety. Few ethnics or workingmen cared a whit for either temperance or a strict Sabbath. Indeed, few occasions pleased them more than the opportunity to drink beer on a hot Sunday afternoon while watching a ball game.

The stage for the creation of the AA had been set by the return of prosperity in the 1880s. Industrial production again leapt forward, real incomes rose, and from both the European and American countrysides millions flocked into the nation’s cities. Cut off from their traditional rural and village pastimes, the urban dwellers sought excitement and communal experiences in commercial recreation. They increasingly patronized theaters, circuses, dance halls, saloons, and commercial sports. Responding to the growing spectator demand for baseball, the number of pro teams and pro leagues proliferated. Not only did two new leagues—the American Association (1882–91) and the Union Association (1884)—challenge the NL directly for major league status, but by the end of the decade seventeen other pro leagues existed, scattered from Maine to California.

The initiative for the American Association came mainly from Alfred H. Spink of St. Louis and Oliver P. Caylor of Cincinnati, two sportswriters whose cities had been squeezed out of the NL. Both cities had large German ethnic constituencies that enjoyed beer drinking and Continental Sundays. In St. Louis, Spink found an invaluable ally in Christopher Von der Ahe, a thick-accented German immigrant. In the summer of 1881 the two men added Sunday baseball games and beer to the other attractions of Von der Ahe’s amusement park. Such a formula worked wonders, attracting
unusually large crowds. Among the teams that cashed in on the opportunity offered by the St. Louisians were Caylor’s newly organized Cincinnati Reds and the Dubuque, Iowa, Rabbits, who featured a young ex-newsboy, Charles Comiskey, at first base. Witnessing the success of Spink and Von der Ahe, entrepreneurs in Cincinnati, Baltimore, Louisville, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh joined the St. Louisians to form the AA in 1882.

The NL recognized in the AA a serious challenge to its claim as the nation’s only major league. The NL quickly reversed its long-standing ban on baseball in New York and Philadelphia. It gently pushed aside the existing clubs in the smaller cities of Troy and Worcester and in 1883 welcomed John Day’s Gothams (soon to be known as the Giants) from New York and the Philadelphias (later to be known as the Phillies) of Alfred J. Reach. To prevent all-out guerrilla warfare for players, after the 1882 season NL president Abraham G. Mills, who was yet another leader from the Chicago club, engineered a tripartite truce with the AA and the Northwestern League, a minor league operating in Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois. At the heart of the 1882 agreement was the mutual recognition of reserved players and the establishment of exclusive territorial rights.

National League Cities, 1876–1902

(pennant-winning years in parentheses)

Baltimore, 1891–99 (1894–96)
Boston, 1876–1902 (1877–78, 1883, 1891–93, 1897–98)
Brooklyn, 1890–1902 (1890, 1899–1900)
Buffalo, 1879–85
Chicago, 1876–1902 (1876, 1880–82, 1885–86)
Cincinnati, 1876–80, 1890–1902
Cleveland, 1879–84, 1889–99
Detroit, 1881–88 (1887)
Hartford, 1876–77
Indianapolis, 1878, 1887–89
Kansas City, 1886
Louisville, 1876–77, 1892–99
Milwaukee, 1878
New York, 1876, 1883–1902 (1888–89)
Philadelphia, 1876, 1883–1902
Pittsburgh, 1887–1902 (1901–2)
Providence, 1878–85 (1879, 1884)
St. Louis, 1876–77, 1885–86, 1892–1902
Syracuse, 1879
Troy, 1879–82
Washington, 1886–89, 1892–99
Worcester, 1880–82

American Association Cities, 1882–91
(pennant-winning years in parentheses)

Baltimore, 1882–91
Boston, 1891 (1891)
Brooklyn, 1884–90 (1889)
Cincinnati, 1882–89, 1891 (1882)
Cleveland, 1887–88
Columbus, 1883–84, 1889–91
Indianapolis, 1884
Kansas City, 1888–89
Louisville, 1882–91 (1890)
Milwaukee, 1891
New York, 1883–87 (1884)
Philadelphia, 1882–91 (1883)
Pittsburgh, 1882–86
Richmond, 1884
Rochester, 1890
St. Louis, 1882–91 (1885–88)
Syracuse, 1890
Toledo, 1884, 1890
Washington, 1884, 1891

The guns of warfare had hardly been silenced when a third contender for big league status, the Union Association, entered the fray. Unlike many of the men behind the AA, the Union Association’s founder and financial angel, Henry V. Lucas, a young St. Louis millionaire, was not motivated by the financial opportunities to be derived from beer or Sunday games. An ardent fan and apparently sympathetic to players’ resentments arising from their inabilities to offer their services to the highest bidder, Lucas (or “Saint Lucas,” as he was dubbed by an irreverent press) determined to build a circuit without strictures on player freedom. Although Lucas’s eight-team loop attracted a few first-rate players from the NL and the AA, there were simply not enough fans to support thirty-four big league teams. After Lu-
cas's fortune had been dissipated and "his combativeness destroyed," the NL extended mercy to him and the players who had jumped to his Union Association. At the close of the 1884 season, the NL allowed the disloyal players to return and provided Lucas with a franchise in St. Louis.

In the meantime, the predecessor of baseball's modern World Series began to take shape. In the fall of 1883 clubs from the two leagues played fifty-eight exhibition games against one another, but the AA's Philadelphia Athletics, after having lost seven of eight exhibition games to lesser NL foes, prudently decided to cancel a postseason series with the NL champion Bostons. The next year the NL pennant-winning Providence team won all three postseason games from the AA's flag-bearing New York Metropolitans, but these games attracted negligible public attention. A turning point came in 1885, when Von der Ahe's St. Louis Browns and Spalding's Chicago White Stockings played a controversial postseason series. The Browns won the three games completed, but one game ended in a tie because of darkness, and the umpire forfeited another game to Chicago after St. Louis manager Charles Comiskey angrily protested an umpire's call by taking his team off the field.

In 1886 the teams confronted each other again in the first contest to be billed as "the world's championship." A wager between Spalding and Von der Ahe calling for the winner to receive all the gate receipts added to the public excitement. The series started in Chicago, where the White Stockings "Chicagoed" (shutouts in those days were called "Chicago" games) the Browns 6-0, but the next day the St. Louisians reciprocated the embarrassment by Chicagoing the Chicagoans 12-0. Chicago took the final game in the Windy City, but then disaster befell the proud White Stockings. In St. Louis the Browns swept the remaining three games and took the championship.

A jubilant Chris Von der Ahe ordered up champagne for his players. Spalding, on the other hand, was furious. He refused even to pay the White Stockings' train fare back home. He, along with his manager Cap Anson, privately blamed the club's humiliating losses on the nightly drinking sprees of the players. He sold the main offenders (including King Kelly) to other clubs and the next spring shipped the team off to Hot Springs, Arkansas, with instructions for Anson to work the liquor out of the players' systems. The strategy apparently misfired, for Chicago failed even to win the NL flag in 1887.

No rules or formulas governed the conduct of these early series. One league champion challenged, the other accepted, and then they agreed on
such details as the number of games, where they would be played, and how the gate receipts would be divided. For instance, the series of 1887 between the Browns and the Detroits called for fifteen games to be played in St. Louis, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Brooklyn, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston, Baltimore, and Chicago. The series netted about $12,000 for each team. Although by 1886 the series had become a more or less established fixture, it came to an end in 1890 because soon thereafter the AA and NL commenced another trade war. If the series proved nothing else, it demonstrated the equality of AA teams on the playing field. The powerful St. Louis Browns, managed by young Charles Comiskey, won four consecutive pennants (1885–88) and a postseason championship from the NL pennant winner in 1886.

The AA departed from the NL not only by aggressively and openly seeking the patronage of ethnics and workingmen but by fielding black players on one of its teams. Unofficial bans had prevented blacks from playing in either the National Association or the National League, but as early as 1872 a black player, John "Bud" Fowler, played on a white pro team located in New Castle, Pennsylvania. For a dozen years he performed in obscurity before surfacing again in 1884 on the roster of a club in Stillwater, Minnesota, in the Northwestern League. "The poor fellow's skin is against him," reported Sporting Life at the end of the 1885 season. "With his splendid abilities he would long ago have been on some good club had his color been white instead of black. Those who know say there is no better second baseman in the country." In the mid-1880s the color line briefly relaxed. Along with Fowler, at least fifty-four other blacks played on racially integrated professional teams between 1883 and 1898. Among them were a pair of brothers, Moses and Welday Walker, who played in 1884 with Toledo of the AA. But the Walkers lasted only one campaign.

The season of 1887 was a turning point for race relations in baseball. During that summer, several events signaled a retreat from integration that would end by the turn of the century in the total exclusion of blacks from professional white baseball. The biggest blow came in the International League, a top-flight minor league in which six of its ten teams fielded black players. "How far will the mania for engaging colored players go?" queried Sporting Life. In July, in the face of protests from some of the white players, the league banned the admission of any more blacks into the circuit. Only a few days later Cap Anson refused to allow his White Stockings to take the field against Newark, an International League team, in an exhibition contest unless George Stovey, Newark's star black hurler, was
kept out of the game. Although Stovey won a record-shattering thirty-three games, he was dropped by Newark at the end of the season. After 1887 conditions rapidly worsened, climaxing in the complete exclusion of blacks from white professional teams. The banning of blacks in white professional baseball corresponded in time with a more general implementation of segregation in the United States.

In the meantime, as the 1880s closed, both the NL and AA faced new challenges. Internecine warfare threatened the AA's very existence. Although Von der Ahe on several occasions lent financial aid to his less fortunate fellow AA owners, he also embarked on a personal vendetta against the Brooklyn Bridegrooms (so named because several of the players got married, an unusual occurrence in an age when the overwhelming majority of the players were bachelors). When the association chose a puppet of Von der Ahe as president in 1890, Brooklyn and Cincinnati angrily pulled out of the AA and joined the NL. To accommodate the two new clubs, the NL conveniently ignored the Tripartite Agreement that it had signed in 1882. But from the standpoint of the owners in both leagues, an even more ominous shadow fell across baseball. In 1890, the players launched a formidable uprising of their own.