

# Baseball in Buffalo

By Jim Gates

Hemmed into the far western edge of New York state, the city of Buffalo is sometimes lost in the baseball shuffle to New York City, where the Yankees and Mets dominate. However, even a cursory examination will show that this city has a long and storied history of baseball, dating to the earliest days of the game.

In “The 100 Seasons of Buffalo Baseball,” Joseph Overfield wrote “Nobody knows when baseball was first played in Buffalo. There is evidence to show it was played in some form at least as far back as 1832, the year the city was incorporated. Ordinance #19 of the first city charter read as follows: “The City Council shall have the authority to make laws regulating the rolling of hoops, flying of kites, playing at ball, or any other amusement having a tendency to annoy persons passing in the street and sidewalks of the city, or to frighten teams of horses within the same.”

Regardless of these efforts, the game played on with the first organized team being the Niagaras, whose early scorebooks from the 1850s and 60s are maintained by the library staff of the Erie County Historical Society. This amateur squad was the toast of Buffalo, but other teams like the Cliftons, Travelers, Perrys, Alerts, and Crickets also formed and organized themselves into the Buffalo Amateur Baseball League, becoming an important part of the local scene.



**Buffalo Bisons, 1887**

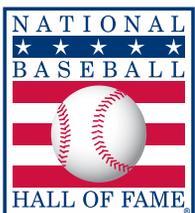
The amateur game gave way to professional baseball in the nation’s cities and Buffalo was involved from the start, hosting its first paid team in 1877. The city moved into organized baseball the very next season, serving as home for an International Association team. Thus began a long-term relationship with minor league baseball that continues to this day. Known by several names, but mainly the Bisons, this team has served as the focus of Buffalo fans for several generations.

Over the decades, with teams in the International Association, Players League, Eastern League, American Association, and today’s Triple A International League squad, Buffalo fans have had the chance to watch some of the great names in baseball history. Hall of Fame inductees who have been affiliated with Buffalo include Connie Mack, Old Hoss Radbourn, Jimmy Collins, Jim O’Rourke, John Montgomery Ward, Dan Brouthers, and Pud Galvin from the 19th century, along with 20th century stars like Joe Tinker, Lou Boudreau, Johnny Bench, Jim Bunning and Ferguson Jenkins.

A close examination of the history books also shows that Hall of Famer Frank Grant, an early African-American star, played in the Buffalo area. There was a very active group of black teams in the vicinity, whose development of talented ball players was well known. In fact, Grant played several seasons with the Bisons in the International League, thereby becoming one of the first African-American professional players.

In addition to the list of stars, the Bisons have also been involved in other aspects of baseball history. For example, on July 4, 1930, over 11,000 fans converged on Bison Stadium to watch a night game under electric arc lighting. This was five years before the first major league night game, and as was noted by Rochester club president, and future National League President, Warren Giles “...this system exceeds my fondest expectations. There seems nothing to indicate night baseball will be anything but successful...”

Buffalo’s baseball legacy is long and rich, and will continue. As Joseph Overfield noted in his book, “I have a thousand memories of the old park (Offerman Stadium) – some joyful, some sad. But no matter how the game came out, there was always another game tomorrow, and always another season, as surely as spring followed winter.”



*Jim Gates is the librarian for the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Image provided by the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library. This is one of a series written for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2011.*