

The Doubleday Myth is Coopertown's gain

Pastoral village has become the
heart of baseball folklore

By Craig Muder

Cooperstown. It's a place that's pure Americana, a one-stoplight town nestled between the Adirondacks and the Catskills in central New York, with its name drawn from the family of James Fenimore Cooper, whose works of literature have become American standards.

So it's fitting that Cooperstown has become synonymous with another American standard – baseball – thanks to a story about a Civil War general and the country's enduring love for a timeless game.

By the last half of the 19th Century, baseball had emerged as the national pastime. The United States was a little more than 100 years old, and baseball had evolved with the country. But the game's origin was a mystery. Enter the Spalding Commission, a board created by sporting goods magnate and former major league player A.G. Spalding to establish the genesis of baseball. After a few years of searching, they found their answer.

It came from Abner Graves, a mining engineer who proclaimed that Abner Doubleday – a decorated Union Army officer who directed the first shot in defense of Fort Sumter at the start of the Civil War and later served at the Battle of Gettysburg – invented baseball in 1839 in Cooperstown. (Doubleday did apparently have a connection to the town. Records indicate he attended private school there in the 1830s.)

That account was good enough for the Spalding Commission, which came to its conclusion in 1907.

Three decades later, Stephen C. Clark – seeking a way to celebrate and protect the national pastime as well as create an economic engine for his hometown – asked National League president Ford C. Frick if he would support the establishment of a Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. The idea was welcomed, and in 1936 the inaugural Hall of Fame class of Ty Cobb, Walter Johnson, Christy Mathewson, Babe Ruth and Honus Wagner was elected.

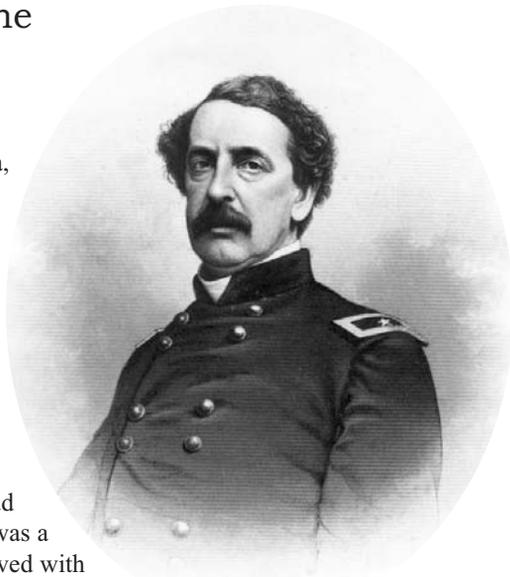
Three years later – on June 12, 1939 – the Hall of Fame building officially opened.

To mark the occasion, *Time* magazine wrote:

“The world will little note nor long remember what (Doubleday) did at Gettysburg, but it can never forget what he did at Cooperstown.”

The Doubleday Myth has since been exposed. References to baseball games in America date back to the 18th Century. While its origins remain debated, baseball's formative rules for the modern game were likely devised in the 1840s. Doubleday was at West Point in 1839, yet “The Myth” has grown so strong that the facts will never deter the spirit of Cooperstown.

As a result, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum continues to thrive as an unrivaled sports shrine in the town where baseball's pulse still beats the strongest.



Abner Doubleday



Craig Muder is the director of communications 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.