



Let's start with a quiz. Who can tell me the P.O. Box number in the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame's mailing address? Or the last 4 digits of the Hall's phone number? Both are 1838, and this morning you'll learn why.

Baseball in Canada has a deeply rooted history. We know of "a game of base ball" in Saint John, New Brunswick, in 1793, and of baseball-related games in the 1830s and 1840s in such diverse areas as Victoria, Nova Scotia and Manitoba's Red River Settlement. During these decades, and the 1850s, the game's evolution in Canada paralleled that in the United States, as more organization and structure developed, and rules of play were formalized. Just as the New York area, and Brooklyn in particular, was the hotbed of baseball activity at that time, so ours was southwestern Ontario. The first teams were formed in Hamilton in 1854, and in London the next year. In 1860 the first international match was played in what is now Niagara Falls, Ontario, between the Burlington club of Hamilton and the

Queen City club of Buffalo. And Canadian teams have been part of Organized Baseball's structure since the entry of Guelph and London into the International Association in 1877.

But it was a game apparently played in a farmer's field behind a blacksmith's shop, and not described until nearly 50 years afterward, that put Canada on the baseball map. Referred to today as the Beachville game, it has been celebrated by both the Canadian postal service and the Royal Canadian Mint, yet it remains a subject of debate among historians.

St. Marys Beginnings

Beachville is a small farming community in Zorra Township, Oxford County, southwest of here between Ingersoll and Woodstock. It was on the family farm just outside Beachville that Adam Ford was born to Irish immigrant parents in 1831. After local schooling, he travelled to Cobourg, Ontario, and Victoria College, where he studied medicine, obtaining his medical accreditation in 1855. A subsequent job search took him to St. Marys, a mere 25 miles northwest of his family home (and now the home of the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum).

Seemingly comfortable with his familiar surroundings, Ford settled in St. Marys as the local physician. He



Adam Ford and family, ca. 1872. Seated is father-in-law Lauriston Cruttenden, one of the founding settlers of St. Marys.

adopted a healthy and active lifestyle, befitting his profession, and became an enthusiastic advocate of both curling and horse racing, as well as maintaining the passion for baseball of his youth in Zorra Township.

He was a man of zeal and initiative, immersing himself in community affairs and sports administration, in addition to his professional duties. Personable and gregarious, he infiltrated the town's higher social circles, aided somewhat by his

BASE BALL.

London vs. St. Mary's.

A base ball match was played in St. Mary's on Wednesday last, between the "second nine" of the London Tecumseh Club and the "Young Atlantic" Club of that place. The game was well contested, and was won by the Londoners by thirty-nine runs. The following is the score:—

LONDON.		YOUNG ATLANTIC.	
Wharton, c.	0 8	J. Cook, c.	0 8
McLellan, p.	3 8	J. Clyde, p.	1 6
Harris, s.s.	2 9	T. Larkin, m.	5 3
Peddie, 1b.	2 10	T. Moseley, 3b.	4 3
Love, 2b.	1 10	J. Robison, 2b.	3 3
Adams, 3b.	4 8	B. Barney, 3b.	3 5
Cadigan, 1f.	1 10	Dr. Ford, cf.	1 1
C. Kilmer, cf.	3 8	Foley, rf.	2 4
Cruckshank, rf.	6 5	Warring, rf.	4 4
27 78		27 27	
Home Run—Wharton 7; Cadigan 1.		H.R.'s—Larkin, Moseley, Foley, 1 each.	
Innings—1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9			
London—25 5 9 5 7 1 5 0 18—76			
Atlantic—3 0 0 9 4 5 6 2 8—37			
Umpire—Mr. W. A. Cooper, and Messrs. Henry and Tracey scores.			
It is the intention of the second nine to play the Excelsior Club of Strathroy next week.			

Excursion to Paris.

38-year-old Dr. Ford plays center field for the Young Atlantics of St. Marys. *London Free Press*, August 13, 1869

marriage to the daughter of one of St. Marys' most influential and respected citizens, eventually being elected mayor. His office was established in one of the downtown's finest stone buildings. He was popular and successful, in his personal life, his business, and in politics. But he had also acquired a fondness for alcohol, a weakness that led to his temporary undoing.



First Hutton Block, 91 Queen St. East, St. Marys. Dr. Ford's office was on the top floor.

The doctor fell into the habit of hosting late-night drinking parties in his downtown office, earning the disapproval of both the conservative elements of the community generally and the burgeoning local temperance movement in particular. After one such evening's festivities, a young man staggered into the street in obvious distress, claiming that Dr. Ford had poisoned him. Bizarrely, the man was a vocal temperance proponent. He later died, and Ford was held on suspicion of his murder. Ford spent time in jail, but was eventually released, primarily the result of lack of apparent motive, and was never formally tried or convicted. During the course of the investigations, an association was also revealed between the married Ford and a young woman of questionable repute. It was an altogether tawdry affair, and decidedly bad for business. In 1880 Ford decamped to Denver with his sullied reputation and his sons.

A Game from 1838

It was from Denver, on April 26, 1886, that Adam Ford penned a letter to the editor of the popular sporting weekly *The Sporting Life* in Philadelphia. The letter was printed in the edition of May 5 under the heading "Very Like Base Ball – A Game of the Long-Ago Which Closely Resembled Our Present National Game."



The Sporting Life,
May 5, 1886.

In his letter, Ford describes in impressive (and surprising) detail a game played in his hometown of Beachville on June 4, 1838,

VERY LIKE BASE BALL.

A Game of the Long-ago Which Closely Resembled Our Present National Game.

DENVER, Col., April 26.—Editor SPORTING LIFE—The 4th of June, 1838, was a holiday in Canada, for the Rebellion of 1837 had been closed by the victory of the Government over the rebels, and the birthday of His Majesty George the Fourth was set apart for general rejoicing. The chief event at the village of Beechville, in the county of Oxford, was a base ball match between the Beechville Club and the Zorras, a club hailing from the townships of Zorra and North Oxford.

The game was played in a nice, smooth pasture field just back of Enoch Burdick's shops. I well remember a company of Scotch volunteers from Zorra halting as they passed the grounds to take a look at the game. Of the Beechville team I remember seeing Geo. Burdick, Reuben Martin, Adam Karn, Wm. Hutcheson, I. Van Alstine, and, I think, Peter Karn and some others. I remember also that there were in the Zorras "Old Ned" Dolson, Nathaniel McNamee, Abel and John Williams, Harry and Daniel Karn and, I think, Wm. Ford and William Dodge. Were it not for taking up too much of your valuable space I could give you the names of many others who were there and incidents to confirm the accuracy of the day and the game. The ball was made of double and twisted woollen yarn, a little smaller than the regulation ball of to day and covered with good, honest calf skin, sewed with waxed ends by Edward McNamee, a shoemaker.

The infield was a square, the base lines of which were twenty-one yards long, on which

and witnessed by a young Ford. He recalls the day as a holiday, and that a passing detachment of Scottish volunteer soldiers stopped to view the proceedings. His memories include the names of many of the participating players and the location of the field within the town. He provides a layout of the diamond, and describes the equipment used, and their materials. The basic rules under which the game was played are outlined. Finally, Ford compares and contrasts his 1838 game with the more modern (1886) game, not surprisingly showing preference for the former.

The letter is an extraordinary feat of recall, particularly when one recognizes that Ford must have been only seven years old when he witnessed the game, and that nearly 50 years had passed between the witnessing and the writing. As Bill Humber

Adam Ford's letter to the Editor.

has suggested, Ford's account suffers not from lack of detail, but rather from the opposite: it's almost too good to be true.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the letter was viewed with some skepticism. But the possibility of such a game piqued the interest and curiosity of Bob Barney, a professor in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of Western Ontario (now Western University). Bob had noted a reference to the game in Bill Humber's book *Cheering for the Home Team*. As a sport historian, he adhered to

the prevailing belief that when southwestern Ontario had been visited by waves of American migrants following the end of the Revolutionary War, migrants westbound in search of land and better opportunities in such areas as what are now Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, many of these migrants settled in Upper Canada, bringing with them their pastimes and recreations. He viewed a possible game in that area at that time as further validation of the belief, and decided to investigate.

Following the lead of one of his graduate students, Nancy Bouchier, Barney visited Beachville and its local museum. There, the two pored over everything they could find: the census records, the land registries, the tax records, the geographical maps from the time, the headstone evidence, military histories. Everything they uncovered provided affirmation of Ford's account. Men of those names were residents of the area, and were of an appropriate age. The purported owner of the blacksmith shop was listed, his shop was where it was stated to be, and behind his shop, where the game was said to have been played, was an open field.

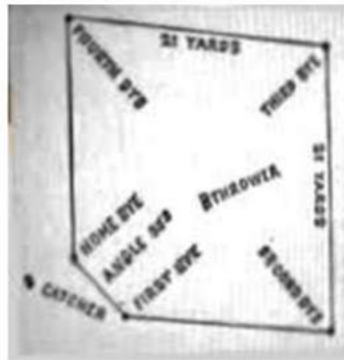
SECOND REGIMENT OXFORD.	
BLENHEIM, BLANFORD AND WOODSTOCK.	
Col. A. W. Light, Jan'y 19, 1838,	Lieutenant W. S. Light, Jan 19, 1838,
Lieut. Col. P. Graham Feb. 8, 1838,	" Jacob Choat, " "
Major C. Beale, April 23, 1838,	" Wm. Carroll, " "
Captain J. Gibson, Jan. 19, 1838,	" Robt. Deedes, " "
" Ed. Deedes, " "	" Henry Finkle, " "
" John Jackson, " "	" H. de Blaquiere, " "
" D. Burnes, " "	" P. Graham, jr., Sep. 27, "
" H. Chambers, " "	" Wm. Lawson, " "
" M. Johnston, April 25, 1838,	" C. Beard, " "
" R. H. Place, Sept. 23, 1838,	" F. Groves, " "
" H. McGregor, " "	Ensign George Cazlott, Jan. 19, 1838,
" Elijah Nellis, " "	" Alex. Light, " "
" Wm. Morygold, " "	" Wm. Burtch, " "
Lieutenant J. Rouviere, Jan. 19, 1838,	" J. Reynolds, " "
Adjutant Hugh Chambers, January 19, 1838.	

THIRD REGIMENT OXFORD

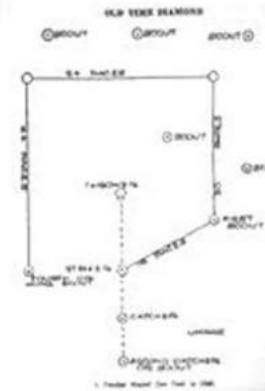
From the *Oxford Gazetteer*, 1852.

Sources of Oxford County military history revealed the presence of the Second Oxford Regiment in the area in the summer of 1838, likely Ford's passing spectators. (This was true of the Third Oxford Regiment as well.)

The diamond layout described by Ford bears a striking resemblance to one shown in George Moreland's *Balldom*, an early attempt (published in 1914) at a history of the game; Moreland describes his "diamond" as "A Peculiar Shaped One Used in 1842," a mere four years after the Beachville game. Note the similarities, in particular the use of 4 bases, and the short distance between home and first base. Ford's description is consistent with Moreland's. We'll return to these diagrams later.



Ford 1838



Moreland 1842

But perhaps the most telling feature of Ford's account was the game's date, June 4. By statute of Upper Canada, June 4 was indeed a holiday, Militia Muster Day, in recognition of the birthday of King George III. The day was to be set aside for military training and parades, much consumption of food and drink, and recreational pastimes of just such a nature as a game of baseball. Canadian historical artist Charles W. Jefferys described the festivities thus:

"The fourth of June, the birthday of King George III, was the most important holiday of the year in early Upper Canada. On that day, the annual muster of the militia was held. Every able-bodied male between the ages of eighteen and sixty was enrolled, and all were expected to turn out for the occasion. For most of them this annual muster was the only opportunity they had for receiving any instruction in military exercises...The warriors dispersed themselves among the houses of their neighbors. Many sought the tavern, the bar-room did the biggest trade of the year. There was a dinner for the officers and gentry, with a long toast list... The day was made the occasion of wrestling matches, horse shoe pitching contests, or the settling of old scores by a fight, which frequently ended in a general melee with plenty of black eyes, bloody noses and sore heads, but with general satisfaction to all concerned."

Charles W. Jefferys: Training Day, 1945

General satisfaction indeed. Bouchier and Barney published their findings in 1988 in the *Journal of Sport History*. The article served (almost literally) to put Canada on the early baseball map.



Canada Post 1988
150 Years of Baseball in Canada



Royal Canadian Mint 2018
180 Years of Canadian Baseball

The Beachville game was celebrated by Canada Post in 1988 with the issuance of a stamp, and was featured on a silver coin issued by the Royal Canadian Mint in 2018 in celebration of 180 years of baseball in Canada. It was a watershed moment in Canada’s baseball history.

Or was it?

The Controversy

Despite the corroborative evidence supplied by the Bouchier and Barney paper, there are aspects of Adam Ford’s account that invite skepticism. In fact, the credibility of the event as a whole has been questioned by some historians, among them some of the most respected of baseball’s research community.

Researcher David Block is one who admits to needing further convincing. Block, an expert on bat and ball games, and baseball’s origins in particular, discusses the Beachville game in his book *Baseball Before We Knew It*. He finds Ford’s memory

“The absence of direct corroboration that the game ever happened is probably the biggest reason for my doubts, but I don’t dismiss the possibility that Ford could have remembered witnessing some sort of baseball-like contest at Beachville as a child. However, I still maintain that, unless he was an extraordinary savant, it is virtually impossible for a chronic drinker to remember with uncanny specificity the rules, the precise dimensions, and the exact names of the participants of an event he witnessed 48 years earlier when he was but seven years of age.”

David Block, Email with author, December 2020

“My principal objection to Ford’s report is that it appeared in print nearly 50 years after the fact. In 1838 he would have been seven years old. The Beachville story, a game said to have been played in 1838 (with no contemporaneous reference) but recollected by Dr. Adam Ford almost 50 years later, may be filed with Abner Graves’ recollections of Abner Doubleday inventing the game ... when Graves was five and Doubleday 19 or 20.”

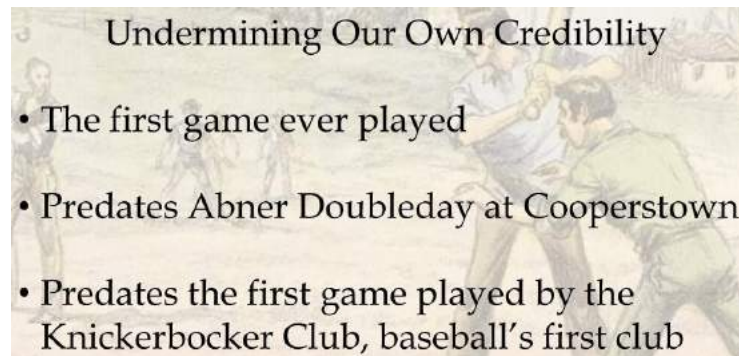
John Thorn, Email with author, December 2020

“prodigious,” particularly for a seven-year-old remembering 48 years after the fact. He would prefer a secondary reference, another account of the game from an independent source, before accepting its legitimacy.

Major League Baseball's official historian, John Thorn, is somewhat more blunt in his assessment. In a documentary film, *No Joy in Beachville*, produced for the Canadian television network Sportsnet in 2015, Thorn likened the Ford tale to the Doubleday myth, terming it "all baloney."

If you're not familiar with the Doubleday myth, please ask me about it during the question period. It goes back to a long-running debate between Henry Chadwick and Albert Spalding, two of the most influential figures in 19th century baseball.

It should be noted as well that some Canadian sources have done the game's credibility no service by overstating its significance. Misguided attempts at nationalistic one-upmanship have prompted the use of such phrases as these:



Undermining Our Own Credibility

- The first game ever played
- Predates Abner Doubleday at Cooperstown
- Predates the first game played by the Knickerbocker Club, baseball's first club

There are many flaws in these descriptions. There is no first baseball game: Baseball evolved, it wasn't born. Abner Doubleday was nowhere near Cooperstown in 1839, and had no involvement with baseball.

And the Knickerbocker Baseball Club was not only not the first baseball club, it was not even the first baseball club in New York. Suffice to say that statements that are either demonstrably false or irrelevant do more harm than good.

There are undoubtedly problems with Ford's account, the most obvious the suspicious clarity of the recollection. It's one thing to recall the names of some of the participants; after all, these families would have been among Ford's neighbors when he was a child. (And I remember the names of some of the families on my street when I was 7, as the children were my schoolmates.) It's quite another to remember with exactitude such details as the distances between bases, distances that were likely not measured precisely to begin with. There are also identifiable errors.

Recall the grounds layouts of Ford in 1838 and George Moreland in 1842, whose overall similarity helps confirm Ford's account. The most striking aspects of these diagrams as viewed today are the use of 4 bases rather than 3, and the shorter distance between home and first. These were features of what was called the Massachusetts game. One of the means of retiring a runner in this game was

called soaking, or plugging, which was hitting the runner between bases with a thrown ball that was necessarily softer than today's. First base, then, was made deliberately close to home so that it was easier to get runners on base, whence the fun began (sort of a cross between baseball and dodgeball). The plugging game was the dominant game in 1838, so Ford's claim to have witnessed plugging is consistent. A problem arises later in his account, though.

As play during the 1850s became more competitive, and the game edged closer to the full professionalism of 1869, what was called the New York game became more prominent, eventually gaining the ascendancy. This was basically today's game, with its harder ball (and therefore no plugging!). The New York game had been favoured by the professionals because it was faster and more difficult to play, allowing their superior skills to stand out. Late in Ford's account, he admits to having participated in a game played with that game's harder ball upon his return home from his university studies. Since he obtained his medical degree in 1855, this would have been shortly thereafter. But the first game known to have been played in Canada under the New York rules does not appear until May of 1859, so something doesn't add up.

The delay between the 1838 witnessing of the game and the 1886 publication of its description seems less problematic. By 1886 Adam Ford was 55 years old. Memories, particularly fond ones, often prompt people of that age to share them in some way. Of greater import is a comparison with the writings of William Wheaton. Wheaton's unsigned history, entitled "How Baseball Began – A Member of the Gotham Club of Fifty Years Ago Tells About It," was published in the *San Francisco Examiner* on November 27, 1887.

In it, Wheaton describes the game as it was being played on the common areas of New York in the 1830s, and the founding of the Gotham Baseball Club (which he claimed to be the first) in 1837. That's 50 years before the article's 1887 publication. It is noteworthy that Wheaton's memories, published 50 years after the fact, have not been questioned on that issue as have been Ford's. (Wheaton was a respected member of the early baseball establishment in New York, having been as well a member of the influential Knickerbocker Club.)

As to a secondary source for the Beachville game, it is unreasonable to expect one will be found. Why would a newspaper, for example, commit any of its presumably limited resources to the coverage of an event of so little importance as an informal bat and ball game played as part of holiday celebrations? Particularly if that event was considered in no way out of the ordinary? Nevertheless, there have in recent years been uncovered some documents providing additional support to the credibility of the Ford tale.

Recent Evidence



San Francisco Examiner,
November 27, 1887

Two of the Beachville families mentioned in the *Sporting Life* account are Williams

and Dolson. Author and historian Brian Dawe, in a post to MLB historian John Thorn's *Our Game* blog, notes that both of these families are part of an extended family named Burdick. (Enoch Burdick was the owner of the blacksmith's shop in front of the pasture in which Ford's game was said to have been played.)



Berkshire County,
Massachusetts

The Burdick family emigrated to the Beachville area in the late 1790s from Lanesborough, Massachusetts, the neighboring town to Pittsfield in Berkshire County. This is the same Pittsfield that enacted a 1791 bylaw prohibiting baseball play for fear of broken windows. The Burdicks and a number of other Berkshire families had accompanied Major Thomas Ingersoll (after whom the present-day town nearby is named) as

Ingersoll set about assigning land to families for settlement. The movement of the families, and their accompanying social customs and traditions, provide a means by which baseball play became a part of recreational life in the Beachville area. Note that this also fits nicely with the general theory of baseball migration northward and westward in the years following the Revolutionary War.

Of more direct relevance to Dr. Ford's account is the discovery by Bill Humber of a game played in Hamilton, Ontario (then Upper Canada), in 1819. The game was first mentioned in the *Hamilton Times* in 1874, but reproduced in the *Woodstock Sentinel* later that year.

The report records a Hamilton old-timer's memories of what he refers to as Training Day, an alternate name for Militia Muster Day, in 1819. The old-timer describes the requisite military training in the morning, after which the fun began: fisticuffs and general belligerence, fueled by great quantities of potent drink. The "most jolly time" included as well the pursuit of various recreations, one of which was "the old style of base ball." Note especially the date of the festivities: June 4 again, King George III's birthday. Here is a record of another game of baseball of some form, again on the fourth of June, played 19 years before the Beachville game described by Dr. Ford. This report can't be an attempt to verify, or substantiate, Ford's account, as it was published in 1874, 12 years before the *Sporting Life* letter of 1886. It represents what is likely the strongest corroborative support discovered to date.



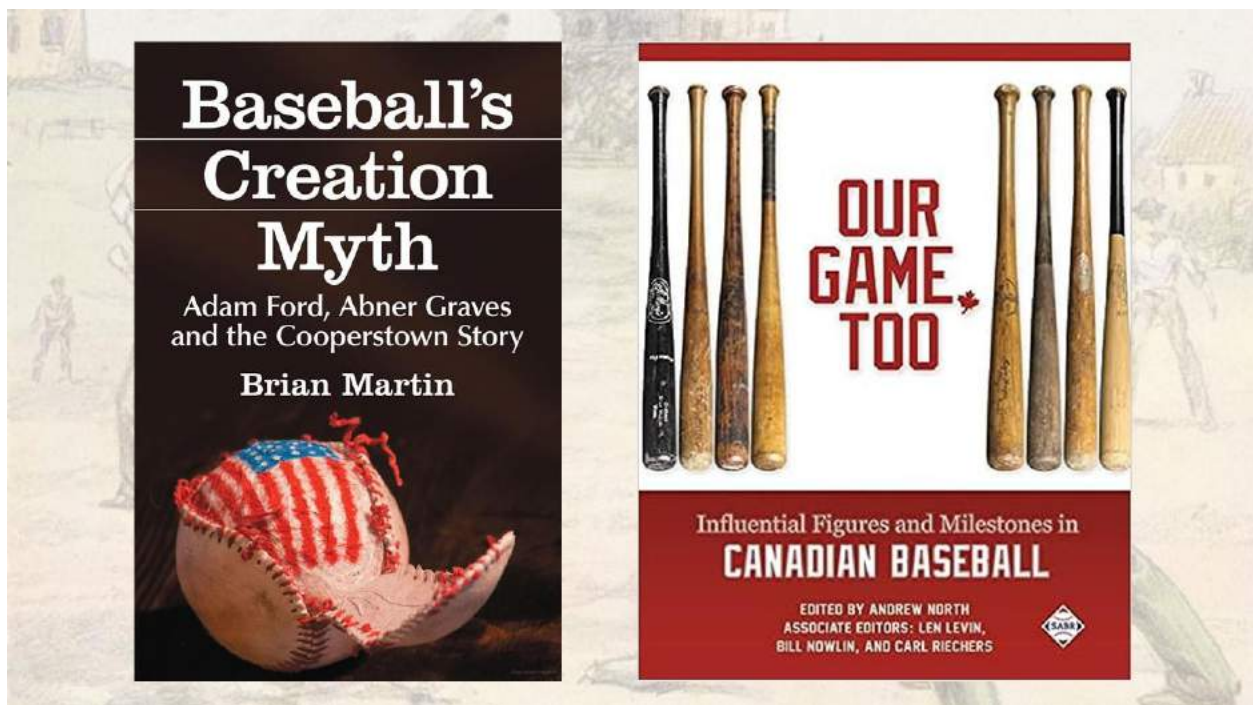
Woodstock Sentinel,
July 10, 1874

It's true that none of this evidence constitutes definitive proof that the game happened. However, the recent discoveries, particularly the recurrence of the June 4 date known to have historical significance in Upper Canada, provide support for those aspects of Adam Ford's letter already confirmed by the research of Bouchier and Barney. That a game of the type described should have been played in the Beachville area in 1838, and in Hamilton in 1819, fits nicely with the concept of the spread of migration following the Revolutionary War. If indeed those emigrating from the American Northeast to southwestern Ontario following the upheaval of the war, bringing with them the game's rudimentary aspects and fundamental tenets, were responsible for sowing baseball's seeds in the area, then the Beachville game could be considered the most substantial manifestation of early growth.

Why is this Important?

Why does this matter? It does affect our understanding of the game's evolution. The game represents a signpost along baseball's developmental highway. The great majority of the writing about baseball history has originated from the United States. That writing attributes virtually all credit for the game's development to the northeastern region of the U.S., ignoring both baseball's early stages in the southwest of England, and its growth in Canada, as if these never happened.

My colleague Mr. Humber likes to use the analogy of the *USAToday* weather map. In that map, the weather systems approach the Great Lakes from the southwest, and once they reach Lake St. Clair they disappear into the abyss, only to resurface suddenly at Buffalo. But that weather happened nonetheless. So was baseball activity spread northward and westward into Lower and (especially) Upper Canada. Rather than being nurtured in Brooklyn and Philadelphia, and then exported to Canada as a finished product, we know that baseball evolved north of the border as it did south, driven by the same social and economic impulses. The same things were happening, and at roughly the same times. It's claimed that



baseball is America's game, but it can fairly be said that it's our game, too.

Note: None of the above is original research. It is a summary of work done some years ago by Bob Barney, Bill Humber and others. For details of Adam Ford's

tribulations, and the Doubleday myth, see Chip Martin's book *Baseball's Creation Myth*. As well, the 2022 SABR book *Our Game, Too* contains a number of essays related to 19th-century baseball in southwestern Ontario.

Andrew North
November 2023