



## **BASEBALL'S CIVIL WAR & JOHNSON'S ISLAND HISTORY**

BY JIM BARNARD

### **JOHNSON'S ISLAND**

While Abner Doubleday has generally been credited with the establishment of rules for baseball, the game had been in existence for many years prior to his involvement. The first game was most likely started by Alexander Cartwright in 1845. The first intercollegiate game is believed to have been played between Amherst and Williams Colleges in 1859.

Baseball likely evolved from ancient stick and ball games, which were played in a variety of ways with various rules. These games had names such as "one-hole-cat," "old cat," "base," "rounders," "town ball," and "sting ball." Variations were known as the "Massachusetts Game," the "Philadelphia Game," and the "New York Game."

These games all had similar elements. A batter hit a ball and attempted to run to a base or goal before the ball was caught or the batter was put out by being tagged with the ball. In some games the batter could be out if he was hit by the thrown ball.

Some of these games allowed for 11 or more players on a team, while others had the entire team bat before a half-inning was completed. This produced some remarkable scores.

Eventually the New York Game dominated baseball in the U.S. As New York became the predominant city in the nation, its form of the game easily became the most popular.

The Civil War was actually the instrument that promoted the game throughout the entire nation, as returning veterans taught the game to their neighbors and friends.

At the start of the Civil War, many men from the various teams joined the ranks of the Union. Some men elected to join the Confederacy. Men from both sides were said to have taken their baseball equipment with them when they went off to war.

The only known photograph of a baseball game played during the Civil War was that of Company G, 48th New York State Volunteers played at Fort Pulaski, Ga., in 1862 or 1863. It is now in the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library.

Two prison camps became well known for their baseball games. One was at Salisbury, N.C., and the other one on Johnson's Island, near Sandusky.

Johnson's Island prison in Sandusky Bay was restricted to captured officers. Conditions there were generally better than at many prisons, except in the bitter cold winter. In the summer, however, the weather was fine for baseball. One prisoner noted in his diary a player had been injured when a bat flew out of a batter's hands and struck him during a game of ball. Another player was banned for injuring several players of the other team by throwing excessively hard.

During one game, an estimated 3,000 residents of Sandusky watched, some standing on rooftops to view. The commanding officer was removed from his position as a result of complaints about the game. A local newspaper had recorded details of the event, which resulted in these complaints.

As conditions worsened at Johnson's Island, the prisoners took to finding food wherever available. One source came from the local rat population. This prompted the "Rat Game Club" to be put on the same level as the "Chess Club," the "Base-ball Club," and other such recreations.

It has been reported one game between Union and Confederate troops ended when one side murdered the other side's right fielder, captured their center fielder and ran off with the game ball.

A local historian, John Husman, has challenged the notion the Union men taught Confederates how to play. His research into diaries of the time indicate Louisiana troops played the game prior to the war, and after capture, played the game in prison camps like Johnson's Island.

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