

# The Baseball Magnate and Urban Politics in the Progressive Era, 1895-1920

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I examined the role of urban politicians in professional baseball in three American cities during a period when big city bosses exerted a pervasive influence over various aspects of urban society. I found that political figures were prominent among the owners of baseball clubs and that their presence was functional for the teams and the political organizations. The franchises obtained preferential treatment from the municipality, and the machine secured a source of patronage and honest graft. This situation created an important paradox since a sport universally praised as epitomizing the finest virtues of this country was not managed by Progressive types who espoused those ideals, but by political bosses who symbolized the basest qualities of urban America.

In Atlanta, the team's owners in 1895 included Alderman Joseph Hirsch and Councilman Joseph E. Maddox. The team was financially assisted by the traction companies who were deeply involved in local politics and wanted to use the team as an attraction to encourage traffic on their routes. The owners' political clout enabled them to protect their investment in 1895 when community opposition to the location of the ballpark almost resulted in the revocation of their license.

From 1902 until 1905, the club was operated by Abner Powell, a New Orleans baseball magnate. He aroused the displeasure of prominent Atlantans who disapproved of the proceeds from their tickets going to an outsider, and a clique of potent leaders decided in 1904 to drive Powell out. They placed great pressure on him by such measures as establishing a high license fee and getting the city to purchase the baseball field. Powell succumbed shortly thereafter, and sold out to a syndicate headed by W.R. Joyner, fire chief from 1885 to 1906, when he was elected mayor. Joyner's group sold the Crackers in 1907 to a traction company which promptly moved the club to a site located at the end of one of its street car lines.

The Chicago National League team was owned from 1882 until 1905 by Albert G. Spalding, the head of the sporting goods trust, and his associates who included County Sheriff Edward Barrett and City Clerk Adrian Anson. The American League team was operated by Charles Comiskey, a famous player and manager, whose father had been a Chicago alderman for eleven years. The Cubs were sold in 1905 to Charles

W. Murphy, a sportswriter, who was financially backed by Charles P. Taft, older brother of William Howard Taft, and a leading Ohio Republican. Taft sold the Cubs in 1916 to a syndicate of notable Chicago Republicans, including William Wrigley and Albert D. Lasker, a National Committeeman, and head of the Shipping Board in the Harding administration.

The Chicago owners were able to utilize their political power to assist their teams in its relations with the municipal government. They helped keep license fees low, received free police protection, prevented unwanted interference against ticket scalpers and gamblers, and even influenced the court proceedings in the Black Sox scandal.

New York's baseball teams were closely tied to Tammany Hall. The Giants were owned from 1895 until 1902 by Andrew Freedman, an intimate friend of Boss Croker, and a member of Tammany's powerful finance committee. Freedman exploited his influence to bully other magnates and prevent interlopers from invading New York. He used his position as a director of the IRT to prevent the traction line from subsidizing an American League team in New York and building a subway station near the Dodger's field. The Brooklyn team was owned by Charles Ebbets, who had served in both the state assembly and the city council. Ebbets utilized his political skills to help abrogate the restrictive blue laws which prevented Sunday baseball.

The American League succeeded in placing a team in New York in 1903, but only after the franchise was given to a Tammany group led by Frank Farrell, the head of the gambling syndicate, and William Devery, a former chief of police. These people had the inside information needed to obtain a suitable site and also the influence to counter Freedman. The construction contracts were awarded to Thomas McAvoy, the local Tammany district leader.

The political connections of the New York magnates remained strong throughout the Progressive Era. In 1915 the Yankees were sold to Colonel Huston and Jacob Ruppert, who was a leading Tammany contributor. Ruppert was a member of the finance committee and had served four terms in Congress. The Giants were purchased in 1919 by another Tammanyite, Charles Stoneham, who was closely associated with men like Tom Floey and Al Smith.