

# Before Doubleday and Cartwright: The Reminiscences of Adam E. Ford and a Canadian Claim for Baseball's Earliest Documentation

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In a May 1886 letter to the editor of the American weekly, *Sporting Life*, one Dr. Ford wrote a description of baseball play near his home in Oxford County, Ontario during the days of his youth. To quote Ford's opening paragraph:

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 the general rejoicing. The chief event at the village of Beachville, in the County of Oxford, was a baseball match between the Beachville Club and the Zorras, a club hailing from the townships of Zorra and North Oxford.

The lengthy text of the remainder of Ford's letter provides a description of the game played on that 1838 date, including the names of the players taking part, an explanation of the rules invoked, a diagram and measurements of the playing field, the equipment used, and a commentary on the skills demonstrated by the players. Ford's narrative is both lucid and rich. If Ford's account is legitimate, then it stands as one of the earliest records of baseball, since the game he described occurred before those documented by either the Doubleday myth or the saga of Alexander Cartwright and the New York Knickerbocker Baseball Club. Establishing the credibility of Adam Ford is the essential key towards accepting the documentation as valid and

authoritative, especially when one remembers only too well the now discredited pronouncement of the Mill's Committee of 1907.

Research on Ford himself, a person heretofore uninvestigated within the context of sport, reflects a portrait of an individual who was active in athletics throughout his life – as a player, organizer, administrator, public servant, and private celebrator. Ford's sports were baseball, cricket and curling, the latter of which commanded his greatest energies as a player and sports organizer. Apart from these activities, Ford committed many of his reminiscences of sport to paper. His literary contributions to the Ontario Curling Association Annual Reports on the subject of mid-nineteenth century curling in Ontario form an important notation on that sport's early history in Canada. Historians point to Ford's reminiscences on early Ontario curling history as being authoritative and definitive.

As far as baseball is concerned, two questions are addressed on the subject of Ford's credibility as an annotator of early baseball play in Canada. Was "Ford's game" of the 1830s really baseball as we know it to have occurred in various forms prior to 1850? How exact, really, was Ford's memory, when his reminiscences are subjected to rigorous historical inquiry? An investigation of specific primary sources, including newspaper accounts, genealogies, obituary data, gazettes and directories, combined with the use of various secondary sources, renders strong support for the validity of Ford's recall.

Placing Ford's reminiscences in the context of early baseball history leaves strong implications for our broader understanding of the process of sport change, particularly in the nineteenth century. It clearly shows the existence of a long-lived local, communal tradition of baseball played in one small Ontario community. It further reflects the nature of change to this baseball tradition, and emphasizes continuity in the context of change. Baseball continues to change to this day; but always within the context of that which came before. For this reason, the significance of Adam Enoch Ford's reminiscence extends far beyond a mere baseball game played on a June day in 1838.



Presidents all in a row.