

Major League Baseball Comes to Altoona, Pennsylvania—Or Did It? The 1884 Season

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The year 1884 marked the inaugural season of the ephemeral Union Association League; a league which challenged the baseball establishment of the period and its reserve rule, and whose flaccid administrative practices, revolving franchises, and caliber of play leaves both questionable and arguable claim to the League's legitimacy as a major league. Equally suspect were some of the Union's franchise cities, specifically Altoona, Pennsylvania.

From its founding by The Pennsylvania Railroad Company in 1849, Altoona developed a rich baseball tradition, stemming from the Company's initial transplanting of the sport from Philadelphia. By 1884, Altoona emerged from its amateur baseball heritage to join the professional ranks of the major league. From November, 1883, to February, 1884, The Altoona Base Ball Association, Limited, joined or considered membership in three different leagues; The Inter-State Base Ball Association, The Eastern League, and The Union Association, respectively.

The Altoona Club's membership in the Union Association was largely due to the City's location as a railroad connection between eastern and western baseball cities, and League president, Henry Van Noyle Lucas, who provided financial support for the Altoona franchise. Confirmed for membership at the League's spring meeting on March 2, 1884, Altoona joined seven other clubs to form an eight team circuit.

On April 17, 1884, the Altoona Club made its major league debut in Cincinnati with a three game series against that City's Union team. But the series results, three losses, was perhaps an omen for the season. Over the next month and a half, Altoona's courtship with major league baseball was a brief and frustrating experience. By May 31, 1884, the Altoona Club was forced to disband having played only twenty-five games, and compiling a record of 6 wins and 19 losses.

The demise of The Altoona Base Ball Association, Limited, was multifaceted, and at least partially reflective of the Union Association's own demise after one season. Altoona was the first of several Union franchises to disband. Poor management, the League's failure to honor the reserve rule and liberal support for player freedom to actively seek larger salaries, led to Altoona's early exit. Other factors include inferior caliber of play, poor attendance, and profiteering by Club stockholders. But for one and a half months and twenty-five games, the city of Altoona had a fling with professional, major league(?), baseball.