

John V. B. Hatfield and Revolving in Professional Baseball: A Study of Individual V. Collective Needs, 1860-1879

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Baseball as the national pastime is subjected to intense scrutiny by scholars and researchers. Baseball research, however, has both temporal and topical shortcomings. While labor history, specifically the reserve clause, has not been entirely neglected, revolving [unrestricted player movement for financial gain], as one of the primary antecedents, generally has been omitted or treated in a perfunctory manner. In addition to its role in the formation of the reserve clause, the elimination of revolving and gambling as twin evils was of particular importance in allowing nineteenth century baseball to evolve and develop as a viable economic enterprise for both players and owners.

John V. B. Hatfield, a professional player in the 1860s and 1870s, is noteworthy in any discussion of revolving for a number of reasons. First, his playing career spanned the limited professionalism of the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP), the total professionalization of the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players (NAPBBP), and the further systemization of professionalism with the formation of the National League. In the transition and evolution of the leagues, Hatfield played through unencumbered revolving, the thirty day rule (making a player ineligible for thirty days following revolving), the sixty day rule (sixty days of inactivity following revolving), and the reserve clause. Second, when Hatfield chose to leave the Cincinnati Ball Club for the New York Mutuals in 1869, the Cincinnati club published a legal document denouncing Hatfield's revolving [a copy appeared in the *New York Clipper*]. Third, Hatfield was considered an infielder without a superior and a preseason favorite to win the New York CLIPPER medal [a nineteenth Century all-star squad similar to those compiled currently by the *Sporting News*]. This, combined with the basic notion he was a player in demand through the revolving process, suggests a talent in the upper echelons of his day.

The revolving issue placed two diametrically opposed factions against one another. The player as a rational economic man wanted to improve his own economic circumstances. Owners, represented by management, desired to keep expenses in the form of salaries as low as possible so that the surplus value or profit would remain large. Into this fray was thrown the game itself which needed to continue to grow and develop. Baseball was an enterprise where the single greatest source of revenue was gate receipts. Therefore, the interests of spectators and how the loss of a favorite player through revolving served to alienate interest must be incorporated into the construct. The revolving issue is suited to a conceptual framework with a theoretical basis in the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, Thomas Hughes, and Thorstein Veblen. While neither scored a total victory,

the needs of collectivism superseded those of individualism when the National League adopted the reserve rule in 1879.