

BASEBALL HISTORY

Philadelphia— Cradle of Major League Baseball

David Q. Voigt
Albright College

Among the radiating centers where the evolution of major league baseball took place in nineteenth-century America Philadelphia stands out as a focal point of the action. During the formative years when various versions of baseball struggled for existence and acceptance, Philadelphia was a stronghold of “Town Ball” where the Olympic Ball Club formally organized to play this version of the game in 1833. And later, with teams opting for the “New York Game” during baseball’s amateur era, Philadelphia was represented by several teams, including one of the first all black teams, the Pythian BBC.

During the amateur era the famous Philadelphia Athletic BBC became one of America’s strongest nines. By 1865 this team pioneered in the professionalization of the game by paying Al Reach \$25 a week to play in its ranks and then paying its entire first nine by 1868. When the first professional major league, the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players was organized, a Philadelphian served as the circuit’s first president and the Philadelphia Athletics won the first pennant (1871). Over the Association’s five year stint, Philadelphia contributed three teams with the Athletics accompanying Harry Wright’s Boston Red Stockings on their pioneer baseball mission to Britain (1874).

In 1876 the Athletics became a charter member of the newly founded National League, but for failing to play its required number of games the team was one of the first to be expelled from NL ranks. A second Philadelphia team, the Phillies, was admitted to NL ranks in 1883, the year that a reborn Philadelphia Athletic team won the American Association pennant. It was the first season the AA played as a recognized major league and it ushered in the dual major league system that lasted until 1891.

Philadelphia teams were also represented in the interloping major league ventures of 1884, when the Union Association staged its abortive bid for major league recognition, and in 1890, when the Players League mounted its strong bid for such recognition. And when the major American Association collapsed after the 1891 season, the Philadelphia Athletics were one of four teams to be jettisoned from major league ranks.

During the “big league” era of 1892-1899 Philadelphia was represented by the Phillies in the 12-club NL. From 1884-1893 the great Harry Wright, the father of professional baseball, managed

the Phillies. It was Wright's last stint as a baseball manager and he fashioned an awesome, hard-hitting outfield of future Hall of Famers in Sam Thompson, Billy Hamilton, and Ed Delehanty.

Highlights of Philadelphia's early major league history, including pictures of key players, were part of a slide presentation which accompanies the paper.