

What's in a Name? George Wright's Influence, Favors and Deals During the Organization of the Boston Unions of 1884

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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 newly installed reserve rule that subjugated players to the whims of owners. Because of the new League's defiance of the reserve rule, the Union Association is often viewed only as the first attempt to abolish a legal injustice. However, in a single season of existence the League left a colorful and somewhat storied history orchestrated by its President Henry Van Noye Lucas, who frequently made deals, granted favors, and sought out influential people who could contribute in some form to the success of the Union Association.

Although such wranglings were prevalent during the League's entire existence, such inducement was especially evident during early organizing efforts for selection of League franchise cities. This paper focused on the Boston, Massachusetts Union franchise and the role George Wright, that City's popular and well known baseball figure of the period, played in its organization, his degree of influence, and the favors accorded him by President Lucas and the Union Association.

In 1879, near the end of his playing career, George Wright became the first player to challenge the reserve rule, thus, pioneering the Union Association's advocacy of free agency. Now in 1884, George Wright, professional baseball player, manager and sporting goods entrepreneur, had virtually retired from the game to pursue business interests. In 1878, Wright merged his sporting goods business with Henry Ditson to form Wright & Ditson, Inc. The new partnership demanded more of George's attention and helped set the stage for both he and his Company's Union Association connection and ultimately a Boston franchise.

Following unsuccessful attempts to persuade the National League and The Union League of Professional Base Ball Clubs to adopt Wright & Ditson baseball equipment, Wright and his partner both attended the Union Association League meeting in Philadelphia in a sales promotion capacity. Although initially unsuccessful once more, League President Lucas took advantage of Wright's baseball prestige, especially in Boston, his sporting goods Company, and his pioneering participation and support for free agency, to ensure a Union Association franchise in Boston. In return for Wright's influence and organization of the Boston Union Athletic Exhibition Company, under which the Boston Club was run, Lucas assured the adoption of the Wright & Ditson Baseball, Scorebook, and Base Ball Guide for official use by the Union Association.

Ultimately, George Wright's contribution to the Boston Union Association Club was that of prestige, influence, and personal business interest, the latter from which he profited handsomely.