

Search...

- [History & Archaeology](#)

That Time 150 Years Ago When Thousands of People Watched Baseball on Christmas Day

During the Civil War, two regiments faced off as spectators, possibly as many as 40,000, sat and watched

||
[Share on redditReddit](#) | [Share on diggDigg](#) | [Share on stumbleuponStumble](#) | [Share on emailEmail](#) | [More Sharing Services](#)

- By John Hanc
- Smithsonian.com, December 21, 2012, [Subscribe](#)

[View More Photos »](#)



Company H of the 48th New York Regiment, stiffly posed for this 1863 formal portrait at Fort Pulaski, in Savannah, GA, seems oblivious to the more informal baseball game in progress behind them. The photo is one of the earliest known photographs of a baseball game. (Courtesy of Heritage Library Foundation)

Photo Gallery (1/4)



Explore more photos from the story

More from Smithsonian.com

- [Smithsonian.com's Holiday Guide](#)

On a Christmas morning in South Carolina 150 years ago, two teams took the field for a game of what was not yet the national pastime.

The epic Christmas Day faceoff between two teams representing New York regiments stationed on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, may be one of the most significant contests in baseball's early decades, even though it retains a whiff of mystery.

Details are scarce. We don't even know the final score. But it was played before an enormous audience: various sources say 40,000 people watched the game on Hilton Head—also known then as Port Royal—on that Christmas morning.

We do know one of the players: A.G. Mills. Then a young private with the 165th New York Regiment, Mills later went on to become president of the National League. It was probably his re-telling of the great Christmas Day game that helped add to its mystique—although, for reasons we shall explain, Mills is hardly the most reliable source on baseball history, least of all his own.

Why Hilton Head? In 1862, it was not yet a tourist destination or golf mecca but rather, the site of an enormous federal base. The 12-mile-long, 5-mile-wide island was a linchpin in the Union's three-pronged "Anaconda" plan, formulated at the outbreak of hostilities to squeeze the Confederacy into submission. "Hilton Head was at the center of one of those three prongs...the blockade," says Robert Smith, past president of the Heritage Library Foundation, a Hilton Head historical organization. (The other two prongs were attacking up the Mississippi River from New Orleans and an invasion of Virginia.) The

island's strategic location between Savannah and Charleston made it an ideal refueling and supply base for ships involved in the Union naval blockade, denying the Confederacy supplies or access to the cotton markets of Europe.

In November, 1861, Federal troops had seized the island, then home to 25 plantations, and never relinquished it throughout the war. About 13,500 troops came ashore in the invasion, bringing with them 1,500 horses and another 1,000 civilian construction workers who set out to create one of the most formidable military installations of the war.

"People poured in, and they built this city," said Smith. A town center was constructed, with a department store, a U.S. post office, a three-story hotel and a theater. To help re-coal the ships enforcing the blockade, a 1,600-foot-long dock was built, as was a massive military hospital. There were also schools on the island, set up by the American Missionary Society to educate the children from among the population of 9,000 freed slaves. And of course, there were vast tent cities where thousands of Union troops were bivouacked. There, surrounded by water, the men drilled and labored.

Except on Christmas Day.

On that rare day off, soldiers looked for ways to relax. One way in 1862 was playing and watching baseball, New York style.

While most soldiers from the North would have been familiar with some form of bat and ball game, the version played in New York and Brooklyn was the one that had exploded in the late 1850s. New York games differed from others—most notably the style practiced in Massachusetts—in that they were played on a diamond shape field, nine men on a side, with rules prohibiting "soaking" (throwing the ball at a runner to record an out, which was legal in other early forms of the game).

Pitchers in this era threw underhand; but there were fair and foul balls. The positions were the same, although sometimes the second baseman played closer to that base, and the shortstop played in the outfield.

"It would have probably resembled a Sunday morning old guy's softball game," says George B. Kirsch, professor of history at Manhattan College and author of *Baseball in Blue & Gray: The National Pastime during the Civil War*. "The idea was to get the ball into play, so scores were usually pretty high."

In his book, Kirsch describes the Massachusetts game--the other major style of baseball at the time --as being descended from a bat and ball game that was played in New England as far back as the 1700s. The Massachusetts style of baseball he presents as "similar to New England townball, with a square field, overhand pitching, no foul territory, ten to twelve men per side, one out to retire all and victory belonging to the team that first scored one hundred runs."

Given the popular preference for the New York brand of baseball, it was no accident that the game held on Christmas Day was between teams representing New York regiments, Mills' 165th, and a "nine" composed of members of the 47th and 48th New York.

Read more: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/That-Time-150-years-Ago-When-Thousands-of-People-Watched-Baseball-on-Christmas-Day-184432511.html#ixzz2H2H0JO00>

Follow us: @SmithsonianMag on Twitter