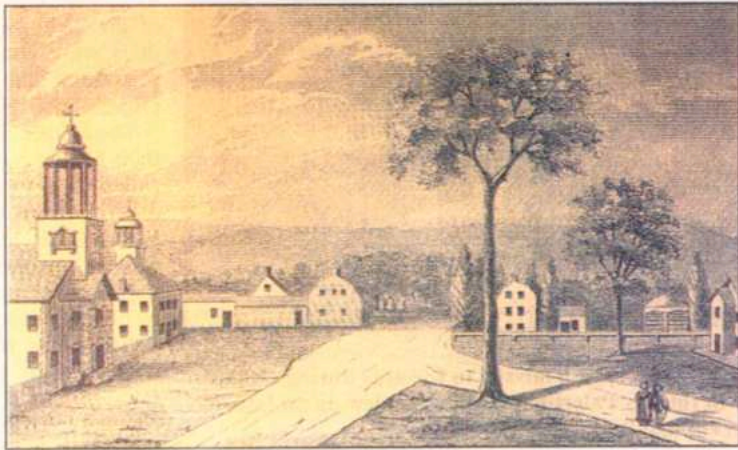


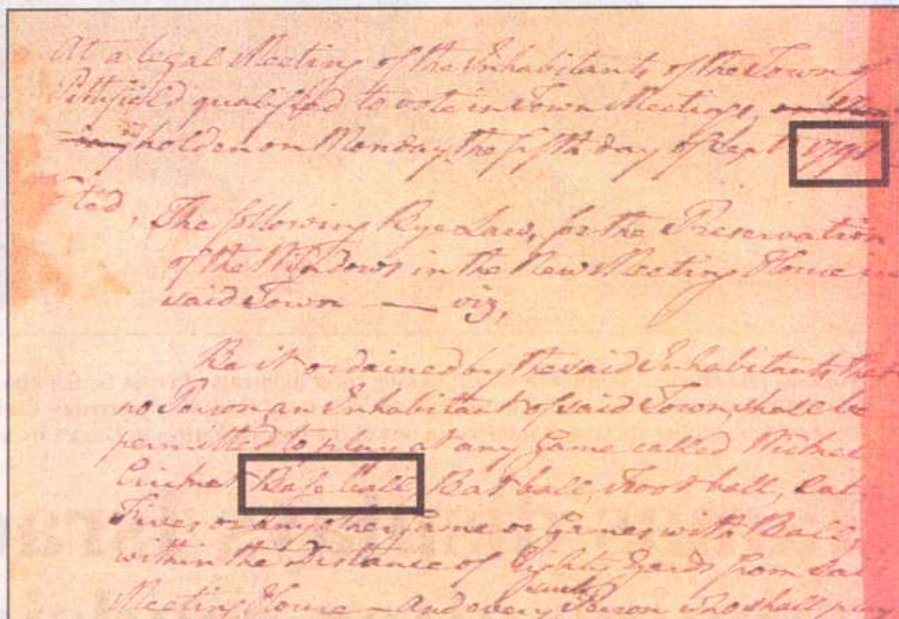
The Berkshire Eagle

Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Wednesday, May 12, 2004

Joy in Mudville!



A Pittsfield bylaw of Sept. 5, 1791, at right, took precautions to protect the windows of the new meetinghouse on Park Square by banning the playing of various ballgames, including baseball, within 80 yards of the building. The year and the word 'Base ball' are outlined. Engraving above shows Park Square and its famous elm tree in the 1790s.



Pittsfield scores a first: 1791 bylaw banned 'baseball' near meetinghouse

Who founded baseball? Who knows?

By Tony Dobrowolski
Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD — Who really invented baseball?

Although there have been mentions of bat and ball games played since before the birth of Christ, it was widely believed that Abner Doubleday "invented" baseball in 1839, before that myth was abandoned in favor of a story involving Alexander Cartwright in 1845.

Noted baseball historian John Thorn of Kingston, N.Y., recently discovered a document in the Berkshire Athenaeum dating from 1791 that he said contains the first written reference to baseball in North America.

Thorn was asked yesterday whether the existence of the 1791 document means Pittsfield was the first place where baseball was mentioned in North America, or if it establishes the city as the birthplace of the game.

'Until further notice'

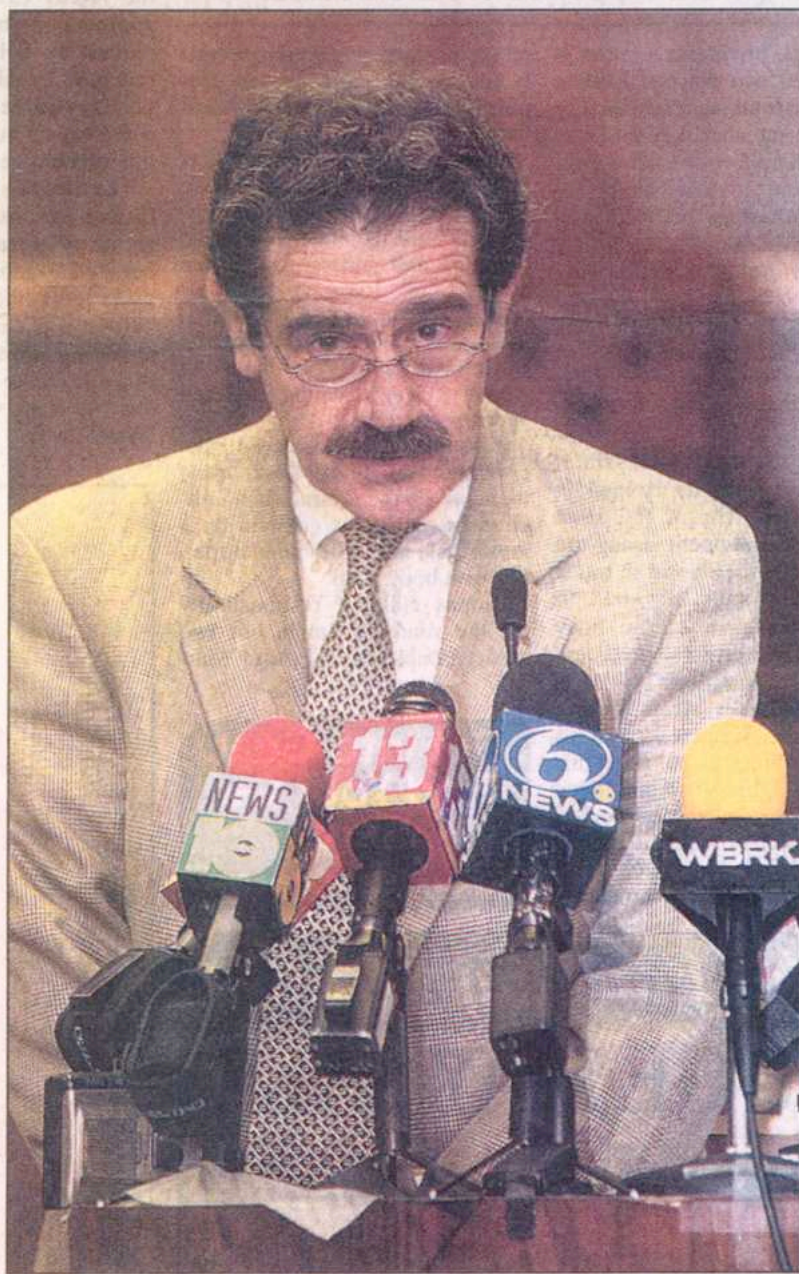
"It's the birthplace until further notice, let's put it that way," Thorn said. "Do we believe that baseball was really played here [first]? No.

"The way I like to put it is, baseball is like a field of dandelions. It was growing up everywhere in the late 18th century anyway. Looking back from the vantage point of 200 years, it's important to identify the first dandelion."

The official "founder" of the modern game of baseball has been shrouded in mystery since the beginning of the 20th century when a commission of former players and baseball executives determined that Doubleday had founded the game in Cooperstown, N.Y., in 1839.

According to several baseball

HISTORY, continued on A4



Historian John Thorn describes the importance of the discovery of a reference to baseball in a 1791 Pittsfield town ordinance at a City Hall press conference.

'It's clear that not only was baseball played here in 1791, but it was rampant. It was sufficiently rampant to warrant an ordinance against it.'

Historian unveils earliest written reference to game

By Tony Dobrowolski
Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD — Is Pittsfield the first place where baseball was played in North America? A noted baseball historian said yesterday that it very well could be.

John Thorn of Kingston, N.Y., who has written and researched several baseball books, has discovered a document in the Berkshire Athenaeum that he said is the earliest known written reference to baseball being played in North America.

During a packed news conference at City Hall yesterday, Thorn said the document, a Pittsfield bylaw issued on Sept. 5, 1791, predates the previous oldest mention of baseball in North America by 32 years. (In 2001, a librarian at New York University discovered two newspaper articles published on April 25, 1823, that note that an organized game known as "base ball" was played in Manhattan, according to The Associated Press.)

The Pittsfield bylaw states, "... for the Preservation of the Windows in the New Meeting House ... no Person or Inhabitant of said Town, shall be permitted to play at any game Called Wicket, Cricket, Base ball, Bat ball, Foot ball, Cat, Fives or any other Game or Games with Balls, within the Distance of Eighty Yards from said Meeting House."

To protect windows

According to information supplied by the Berkshire Athenaeum, the bylaw was written by Woodbridge Little, the first lawyer in Pittsfield and a longtime selectman. The document was presented for vote on Sept. 5, 1791, for the purpose of creating a bylaw that would ensure the protection of the windows of the new meetinghouse. The building referred to is the Congregational Church on Park Square — a wooden structure, not the present gray stone church.

"It's clear that not only was baseball played here in 1791, but it was rampant," Thorn said. "It was sufficiently rampant to warrant an ordinance against it."

BASEBALL, continued on A4