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Baseball discovers its 'Garden of Eden'

By Brian Macquarrie

Abner Doubleday, the mythic inventor of baseball, has some explaining to do.

Cooperstown, New York, where Doubleday reputedly first played the game, has long been debunked as baseball's birthplace. But now officials in Pittsfield, a town in the picturesque Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts, have released a 1791 document that the National Baseball Hall of Fame called "irrefutable" evidence of the first written reference to the game ever found.

The document, a town meeting ordinance found buried and forgotten in the public library, forbids Pittsfield residents from playing "baseball" within 80 yards of the new meetinghouse and its fragile windows.

"For the Preservation of the Windows in the New Meeting House," the town meeting bylaw reads, "no Person or Inhabitant of said town, shall be permitted to play at any game called Wick-et, Cricket, Baseball, Football, Cat, Fives, or any other game or games with balls, within the Distance of Eighty Yards from said Meeting House."

The document, released Tuesday, has been authenticated by the



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Williamstown Art Conservation Center in Massachusetts.

Ted Spencer, vice president and chief curator of the National Baseball Hall of Fame, said it regarded the document as an undisputed precursor to the earliest previous reference to baseball: an 1823 newspaper article about "base ball" in New York City.

"This is a wonderful story," Spencer said. "This is a great piece of history in the development of the game."

The Pittsfield reference was found by John Thorn, a baseball historian, about a year ago in a 19th-century book

about the city's history.

Thorn relayed the news last month to Jim Bouton, a former New York Yankees pitcher who is a partner in a project to renovate and reopen Pittsfield's historic Wahconah Park, a favorite of baseball traditionalists where the game has been played since 1892.

Then the original document was located, verified by the conservators, and displayed Tuesday at a news conference at which James Ruberto, the mayor of Pittsfield, declared his town to be baseball's "garden of Eden."

Thorn said he had stumbled on the discovery during a serendipitous Internet search about the origins of baseball.

"What's so delicious about it is its accidental quality," Thorn said. "Its existence was unknown. Baseball's history is far earlier than we would have thought 10 years ago."

Spencer said baseball's true birthplace might never be known. A soldier at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, during the American Revolutionary War, for example, wrote about "playing at base." But Pittsfield is entitled to some crow-

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ing, according to Spencer.

As Bouton sees it, baseball had been a nuisance in Pittsfield for decades before the national pastime was born in Cooperstown in 1839, as legend formerly had it.

That story, Spencer said, is "a total myth." In fact, he said, the first written rules for the game date to 1845 and a New York team that was called the Knickerbockers.

"I'm tremendously excited," Ruberto said of the discovery. "Pittsfield has had a long tradition of minor-league baseball, and this just fits with everything we have known about Pittsfield being a baseball town."

Wahconah Park, located on a site where baseball has been played since 1892, had long been an attraction for baseball traditionalists until minor-league baseball there ended last season.

Bouton said he expected to begin renovations on Wahconah Park in July, and to have the park lovingly "downgraded" with old-fashioned wooden seats in time for the 2005 season.

"This was a bolt from the blue," he said. "Baseball, to me, has always been about the past."

Thorn said Pittsfield could lay claim, with some justification, to the Pittsfield mayor's Garden of Eden boast.

"I think that's pretty fair because they're celebrating the spirit of early baseball," Thorn said. "The message here is that baseball grew up in rural areas, and in urban areas, too. It was growing everywhere, like a field of dandelions."

The Boston Globe