

Mont Vernon celebrates its baseball pioneer

'Doc' Adams just missed out on Hall of Fame in 2016

By Andrew Sylvia

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MONT VERNON – Daniel Lucius “Doc” Adams was born in 1814 in Mont Vernon, eventually leaving the Souhegan Valley for greener pastures. If he didn't, then Fenway Park may have a square instead of a diamond.

A key figure in the early history of baseball, Adams graduated with a medical degree from Harvard in 1838. Soon after that, he moved to New York to establish his medical practice. He also eventually became a member of the New York Knickerbockers, known today as the first true baseball club.

In the early half of the 19th century, various “proto-baseball” games became popular across the country, ranging from variations on cricket to “Town ball,” a game comparable to today's baseball that used a square base configuration along with a “goal base.”

However, the Knickerbockers were the first group to codify a set of rules among the early forms of baseball, with the Knickerbocker rules becoming the core of what is known as baseball today.

Adams helped keep the club together during the early years, constructing equipment by hand and exhorting teammates to regularly attend practices.

By the end of the 1840s, new baseball teams using the Knickerbocker rules began to spring up and Adams was established as one of the team's leaders.

In the 1850s, Adams led the way in further formalization of the sport's laws, heading a convention of teams that set the number of innings in a game at nine, setting the number of players in the field at nine and establishing the distance between bases at 90 feet.

Adams also is widely credited with the invention of the shortstop position and advocated for the end of the “bounding flyball” rule, which allowed players to still record an out if they caught a flyball after only one bounce. Although Adams couldn't convince others to eliminate the bounding flyball in the 1850s, his viewpoint quickly did become the norm in baseball.

Along with his role as a player and organizer, Adams also umpired games, including an all-star game in 1858 where he became the first umpire to announce a called third strike, with earlier iterations of the sport only recording strikeouts when a batter swung at a pitch.

The humble Mont Vernon native remained largely forgotten until the 1980s when efforts began to recognize his efforts in the preservation and growth of baseball during its early years.

Many baseball historians such as John Thorn, the official historian of Major League Baseball, have touted Adams' achievements.

Until recently, Alexander Cartwright, another early member of the Knickerbockers, obtained credit as baseball's inventor. However, Thorn notes that everything on Cartwright's plaque in the National Baseball Hall of Fame was actually brought to the game by Adams.

"In my estimation, he is the most important individual in the game's history not to have been inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame," Thorn said.

"Doc" fell just short of induction into the Hall on a ballot in 2016, garnering 10 of the 12 needed votes to achieve induction through the Hall's Pre-Integration Era Committee.

Marjorie Adams, a great-granddaughter of Adams, has travelled across the country for several years to spread the word about her ancestor, including last week in Mont Vernon.

She believes "Doc's" time growing up in Mont Vernon definitely played a role in transforming him into a baseball pioneer.

"His father was a very strict disciplinarian. 'Doc' was expected to excel, he was not allowed to be mediocre," Adams said. "That Puritan upbringing was focused on hard work and precision. That's what 'Doc' brought with him from Mont Vernon."

Four "vintage baseball" teams, including one based in Mont Vernon, are expected to participate in the Doc Adams Invitational, a baseball tournament using rules from Doc's era.

The tournament will take place Sept. 23 at Lamson Farm. It is sponsored by the Milford Rotary Club, the Mont Vernon Historical Society, members of the Adams' family and the Lamson Farm Commission.

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