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Out of the Attic

Play ball: Evidence of baseball in 19th-century Alexandria

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Image: Camp of 44th New York Infantry near Alexandria, Library of Congress..

Now that March Madness is over, we can fully turn our attention to that which truly matters this time of year – the start of the baseball season. This week's Out of the Attic was provided by Alexandria Archaeology, where some of the tools in the archaeological toolkit have been used to look into Alexandria's early baseball history.

Generally, archaeologists do not dig up much related to baseball. This should not come as a surprise given that despite requiring a large footprint, no permanent infrastructure is needed to play the game and the few pieces of material culture required to play leave little trace in the archaeological record. This isn't to say archaeologists cannot or should not look, though. Elsewhere, archaeologists have documented Mesoamerican ball courts and Greek and Roman sports complexes with great success.

A search through Alexandria Archaeology's collections, which house fifty years of excavations in the city, allowed us to identify two intriguing artifacts that might be related to baseball. Both are balls comprised of wrapped leather strips, straps or cord of varying thicknesses, between just one and two inches in diameter and are missing their outer layers (by rule, modern baseballs are to be between 2.86 and 2.94 inches in diameter).

These were recovered from brick shafts, likely wells or privies, on the 300 and 500 blocks of King Street and date to sometime in the mid-19th century. Early baseballs were notoriously unstandardized and were generally made by cobblers, tanners or other craftsmen working with leather, textiles or similar materials that they had on hand. It is impossible to say for certain whether or not these are actually the cores of early baseballs and not just leftover industrial scraps, but it certainly is tempting.

Baseball was largely considered a northern game until after the Civil War, played outside the factories in places like New York City. However, the detail of a well-known Civil War photograph of the 44th New York Regiment, camped at the head of King Street and at the foot of Shuter's Hill, documents baseball in the city as early as 1861. The dirt, diamond-shaped base paths seen just above the central camp arch were located near what is now the King Street Metro Station and reveal what these New York soldiers did to occupy themselves while stationed here during the war.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

This isn't the only photographic evidence of early baseball in Alexandria. Using a series of aerial photographs from 1927, we have been able to identify at least twenty-nine early 20th century baseball fields in the city, ranging in scale and splendor from Baggett Stadium with a grandstand, bleachers, scoreboard and dugouts, to just four worn-out spots of dirt located 90ish feet apart from each other at vaguely right angles. Some have visible pitcher's mounds, others do not. Some have dirt base paths, some do not. A few are clearly manicured and maintained, but many appear to be little more than the result of some kids playing baseball in the same place over and over again.

By asking the right questions of the archaeological record, a couple of wrapped pieces of leather and some worn out spots in the grass become physical evidence of America's pastime here in Alexandria.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.