

# Baseball's Geographic Spread Through 1870— By the Numbers

By Bruce Allardice

One way to statistically measure the spread of baseball is by counting the number of clubs formed in each city (or each state—a future article will do a state-by-state analysis) prior to the 1871 start of professional baseball leagues.

The Protoball database ([www.protoball.org](http://www.protoball.org)) of “pre-professional” clubs, with almost 10,000 club entries, is the best single source for data on these clubs. While it will never be 100% complete, it is robust enough for this kind of analysis.

Obviously, while the number of clubs is a pretty good proxy for the interest in baseball in a locality, it is not a perfect measure. Clubs frequently changed their names and the “same” club may be listed two or more times under these names. How many clubs we have found in each city depends on the newspaper coverage for that city, and whether a thorough search has been made to try and list all the clubs in that city through 1870.

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With all these caveats, I performed a Protoball search in Dec, 2021, and a few patterns emerged:

- 1) Given sufficient local newspaper coverage, modern research can find about one pre-1871 club for every 1,500 residents of an average major city.
- 2) The cities where baseball first was played have more clubs per capita. Which should come as no surprise. See the three NJ cities especially.
- 3) In clubs per thousand residents, Chicago stands out among the “later” cities (cities outside New York, where baseball started later), due in large measure to the local newspaper's obsessive coverage of amateur baseball.
- 4) In another article in this newsletter I analyze how by 1857 Brooklyn overtook NYC as baseball's center. The club data here, which goes through 1870, confirms that conclusion, with Brooklyn having twice the clubs per capita that NYC had.
- 5) Given the above patterns, the clubs per thousand in these big cities are pretty comparable from one city to the next.
- 6) The Southern cities (Richmond, Memphis, New Orleans, Charleston, Mobile) have about the same percentage of clubs to population as the Midwest cities. Which suggests a uniform pre-1871 growth of baseball outside the Northeast.
- 7) The city boundaries were changing during this time, and do not always correspond to modern boundaries. For example, Boston annexed Roxbury in

1868 and Dorchester in 1870, but the Boston club numbers in Protoball don't reflect Roxbury or Dorchester clubs. The Roxbury and Dorchester club numbers are included in the table below. These constantly shifting city boundaries should be taken into account when analyzing the numbers.

- 8) The numbers indicate which cities seem to have fewer clubs per thousand and where further research on early baseball should be focused.

## 40 biggest US cities, 1870, with number of pre-1871 clubs (per Protoball, as of 12-21-2021) and clubs per population

### City Population Clubs Population Per Year of First (in thousands) Club Baseball

New York City<sup>1</sup> 942 216 4,360 1831/45 Philadelphia 674 180 3,700 1858 Brooklyn<sup>2</sup> 396 226 1,700 1845 St. Louis 310 134 2,300 1859 Chicago 298 280 1,070 1856

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Baltimore 267 99 2,700 1858 Boston<sup>3</sup> 250 90 2,800 1853 Cincinnati 216 122 1,800 1858 New Orleans 191 136 1,400 1859 San Francisco 149 52 2,900 1858 Buffalo 117 82 1,400 1856 Washington DC 109 59 1,850 1859 Newark NJ 105 143 750 1855 Louisville 100 39 2,600 1858 Cleveland 92 50 1,800 1858 Pittsburgh 86 53 1,600 1860 Jersey City NJ 82 147 550 1855 Detroit 79 48 1,700 1859 Milwaukee 71 30 2,400 1859 Albany NY 69 62 1,100 1856 Providence 69 60 1,150 1857 Rochester 62 28 2,300 1858 Allegheny<sup>4</sup> 53 12 4,400 1860 Richmond 51 45 1,100 1866 New Haven 50 53 900 1857 Charleston SC 49 49 1,000 1866 Indianapolis 48 39 1,200 1865 Troy<sup>5</sup> 46 70 660 1859 Syracuse 43 27 1,600 1858 Worcester 41 14 3,150 1858 Lowell 40 29 1,400 1857 Memphis 40 30 1,300 1860 Cambridge 39 31 1,300 1857 Hartford 37 33 1,100 1860 Scranton 35 15 2,300 1865 Reading 33 24 1,400 1865 Paterson NJ 33 44 750 1857 Kansas City 32 10 3,200 1866 Mobile 32 17 1,900 1867 Toledo 31 10 3,100 1860

<sup>1</sup> At this time New York City only included Manhattan Island.

<sup>2</sup> At this time Brooklyn and New York City were separate cities. Totals are for the Borough of Brooklyn.

<sup>3</sup> Includes clubs for Roxbury and Dorchester, annexed by Boston in 1868 and 1870.

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<sup>4</sup> Pittsburgh and Allegheny were really one city (they combined in 1903). The combined city had 139,000 residents and 60 clubs, with 1 club to every 2,300 residents.

<sup>5</sup>Troy's numbers don't include West Troy (now, Watervliet) which had 10,693 residents in 1870, or Green Island.