Some Tips\(^1\) on Finding Early Ballgames and Ballclubs

This guide attempts to help new researchers learn how to find information on early base ball clubs and games in particular areas. It includes some practical advice from some of our most productive current origins researchers. Most of the numerous recent finds have come from digital searches of period newspapers. \textit{Note}\(^2\)

\textbf{Tip 1: Befriend a local hands-on search specialist!}

Many participants will be attempting to find very early ballplaying data for their hometowns or other areas of special interest. They may find important practical advice from their municipal or educational libraries. Reference librarians are commonly patient and thoughtful suppliers of useful search advice, and may also know of special collections or local search aids. If so, tell them thanks from the Protoball Project!

\textbf{Tip 2: Try some internet sites that earlier origins diggers have found useful!}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item We asked a brain bank of our most wizened Search Wizards for some savvy help here. Their tips are sprinkled below. And Jeff Kittel’s list of things he wishes he’d known when he started is in the Appendix at the end of this shortish document.
\item About microfilm. Search Wizard R.H. writes: For smaller localities, it is sheer dumb luck to find the local newspapers online. More generally you need to search them the old-fashioned way, by looking at microfilm. Where to find the microfilm? In addition to the local library, I would check the local historical society. Next after that, many states have state archives and/or state libraries for this kind of thing. Academic libraries tend not to be the best sources of newspaper microfilm, but this isn’t an absolute rule, so look there as well. The local public library may or may not be able to get microfilm through interlibrary loan (ILL) assuming they have a microfilm reader. Make friends with the person who handles ILL. Make sure that the microfilm you want exists before you request it, so as to maintain credibility.
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Below is a tabulation of several online search sites that have proven productive to earlier origins researchers, and that includes practical insights from several accomplished diggers. The sites are arranged in the general order of their reported utility to making new finds – Those seen as the best bets are listed toward the top of each subcategory.

This is just an initial list – it’s only version 1.1. We hope to continually improve it and to organize a version 2.0 in a few weeks. Please send us information from your own experience to help us assemble a more complete and error-free update.

Special thanks to Search Wizards John Thorn, Chris Ryland, Jeff Kittel, and Richard Hershberger for major contributions to this initial document.

On-line Search Sites

A. Broad Base Ball Coverage – free Note

[] Chronicling America (1836-1922) http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/

[] UPenn’s Guide to US newspapers http://guides.library.upenn.edu/historicalnewspapersonline Note

[] Sporting Life digital collections (1883-present) http://search.la84.org/ Note

[] Paper of Record (via SABR) http://sabr.org/paperofrecord Notes

From Search Wizard J.K.: “Between UPenn, Chronicling America, the pay site GenealogyBank and 19th Century US Newspapers, you can find most anything.”

Among the search veterans whom we consulted, the first two sites, Chronicling America and UPenn, emerged as the best places to try first: about Chronicling American Search Wizard C. R writes, “it’s a great way to get started and start to learn what possibilities the digitized newspapers have to offer.”

Search Wizards J. K. and B. A. suggest this site as one good place to start. From J.K.: “The list is really good and covers pretty much everything I use.”

Click on “research”
42[] Google Books http://books.google.com Note⁸

43[] Google Newspapers Note⁹ http://news.google.com/newspapers

44[] Online Historical Newspapers http://sites.google.com/site/onlinenewspapersite/

45[] Illinois Digital Newspaper Collection http://veridian.library.illinois.edu/cgi-bin/illinois? a=p&p=home&e=-------en-20--1--txt-txIN-------

47[] NYTimes (1851 to 1923) http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?srchst=p


49[] American Memory Project - http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html

50[] Newspaper Cat Catalog of Digital Historical Newspapers http://ufdc.ufl.edu/hnccoll

53**B. Top Pay Sites**¹⁰

54[] Genealogybank.com Note¹¹ http://genealogyback.com/gbank/

55[] Ancestry.com http://ancestry.com

56[] Newspaperarchive.com http://newspaperarchive.com

58**C. Commercial Databases Available Via Some Libraries and Universities**

59Note¹²

26¹¹ You’ll need your SABR ID and password. Search Wizard B.A. notes that this site has mostly Canadian and Mexican sources.

28¹ Click on “More,” then “Books”

29¹³ This site is, helpfully, organized by state

30¹⁴ Search Wizard B.A. notes that also, there’s a British newspaper archive online (for pay) for those researching British ballplaying.

32¹¹ Search wizard R. H. writes: This is by far the most useful pay site. It is the only one I subscribe to.

34¹² Ask your favorite new librarian friend!

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Accessible Archives [http://www.accessible.com/accessible/preLog]


America's Historical Newspapers (Readex) (1718-1876) [http://www.newsbank.com]


World Newspaper Archive [http://www.crl.edu/collaborative-digitization/world-newspaper-archive]

D. Some Already-Known Regional and Local Sites

Fulton – New York State [http://fultonhistory.com/]  
Toronto Star – Canada - [http://thestar.pagesofthpast.ca/]

Northern NYS – [http://nyhistoricnewspapers.org]


Suffolk County NYS - [http://www.live-library.com/historicnewspapers.org]

PA Civil War era papers [http://digitalnewspapers.libraries.psu.edu/Default/Skins/civilwar/Client.asp?skin=civilwar&AW=1393338664156&AppName=2]


Atlanta Historic Newspapers [http://atlnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/atlnewspapers/search]

Index to Early Memphis Newspapers [https://umdrive.memphis.edu/mckibben/www/index.html]

California Digital – [http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc]

Idaho, Utah – [http://lib.byu.edu/digital/]

Colorado - [https://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org]

Searches here may duplicate those of Genealogy Bank, above

Several Search Wizards report that the Fulton site can be hard to use.
Historical Newspapers in Washington [http://www.sos.wa.gov/history/newspapers.aspx]

Historic Oregon Newspapers [http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/]


Western Canada – [http://britishcolonist.ca/]

E. Iffy Sites – Evaluation for Local Origins Searches Needed!

Hathi Trust Digital Library [http://www.hathitrust.org/]

Internet Archive [https://archive.org/]
E. Some Useful Search Strategies


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Search Wizard C.R. writes: When you search historic newspapers, you are almost always searching the optically scanned text, which was generated by a computer program. Because of the age and poor quality of most of these original sources, your search will never be any better than the faulty text that lies behind the image. Because of the magnitude of these errors, you may want to be creative at searching in order to outsmart them. For example, the words “base ball” are often indexed as “base hall,” and a search for “base ball” on Chronicling America will also never discover the “bare hall match” played between the Jefferson and National base ball clubs in 1866. So despite the power of the advanced search discussed below, sometimes it is better to start out simple, in order to encounter as few errors as possible.

Advanced Search. Most sites have an “advanced search” function that allows you to control your search and limit by newspaper or year. The examples below are not necessarily applicable to all sites, but most sites provide these functions in some form, either by filling out a form, or by entering a string of words.

1. Most sites will automatically search for results containing all the words entered in the search. Sometimes to be sure this is happening, you will need to combine words using the word “AND.” For example, base AND ball.

2. OR allows you to search for either one of two or more words, but not necessarily both. For example, championship OR trophy will bring you articles mentioning one or the other, but not necessarily both.

3. String searching allows you to search for a phrase, using quotation marks. For example, “base ball match” will bring you articles that only contain those words in that order. Chronicling America and other sites allow you to enter the phrase in a text box for searching.

4. NOT allows you to remove a word from your search. For example, if your results are being cluttered by references to football championships, you can search for championship NOT football. Google search uses a minus sign for this: championship -football. Chronicling America does not appear to allow this kind of searching.

5. A wild card allows you to search for a missing word in a string. For example, the Google News Archive allows you to substitute an asterisk (*) for any word in a search. For example, searching for “new * base ball club” returns results including the New Haven Base Ball Club and the New Dominion Base Ball Club. Wild cards are common in commercial databases available through libraries.

6. Proximity search allows you to search for words near each other. For example, Chronicling America’s Advanced Search allows you to enter words and then set them to be within 5, 10, 50, or a 100 words of each other. Some commercial databases, especially those available through libraries, will allow you to specify the number of words, using the NEAR command.

Search Wizard M. B. writes: I would recommend that you pay attention to the form of the terms you find as you go further and further back in time. The more rural, the more unique and peculiar the successful search terms. What I would suggest is it is important to pay attention...
Many, but not all, sites will helpfully look for exact strings of characters when put in quotation marks – thus, “base ball” will be more precise query than plain base ball, which may count as hits all the many “ball” cites and “base “sites, precious few with relevance to your favorite pastime.

Is your find really new? To determine if a particular club or game is already known, run a quick check by doing an “enhanced” search at http://protoball.org/Special:EnhancedSearch. And/or check the interactive map for your immediate area, to be found by repositioning the interactive map at http://protoball.org/Pre-pro_Baseball.

MLB Official Historian John Thorn, our Yoda, has generously offered to assist local groups if they get stuck or need advice. You can reach him at john.thorn@mlb.com.

F. Local-Origins Bibliography

We have begun compiling a sortable bibliography on local origins at http://protoball.org/Local-Origins_Bibliography. Please add to this initial 95-item list.

Don’t forget: send corrections and additions to Lmccray@mit.edu for Version 2.0 of this wee guide to origins-era searches.

Appendix

To the names and details within your find stories, and use those as your key search terms. I use all the terms listed here, and look at the common club names – Eagle, Pioneer, Knickerbocker, etc.

Search wizard B.A. writes: I’ve had some luck with the search term "match game"–so long as you can exclude the word "billiards" from the search!
Things Jeff Kittel Wishes He’d Known at the Outset

Start with a simple Google search. You never know what you’re going to find. This also applies to any database or search engine you can get your hands on. Don’t be afraid to look ten, twenty, fifty pages deep.

You’re looking for leads/clues - any piece of information that will lead you to what you’re really looking for. The odds are that you’re not going to find what you want immediately so embrace any piece of information that moves you closer to your goal. You never know when a random name, place or date will lead to another, more fruitful search.

Be persistent. Don’t give up. I’ve been looking for a specific piece of information for over a decade now and still haven’t found it. That doesn’t mean I’m going to quit. Believe that the information is there and that it’s only a matter of time and effort before you find it.

"Base ball" is two words, not one. Searching for "baseball" will not get you what you want. Also, searching for "town ball" will get you countless articles about town halls. Searching for "ball game" will get you countless articles about people getting scammed. Try variations of bat, ball, club, game, etc. Be creative. Different search engines are more responsive than others and what works with one will not necessarily work on the other.

The Protoball Glossary of Games has a nice list of games that you can search for if you’re looking for early bat and ball games in an area.

Search the Protoball Chronology. It will give you an idea of what is already known about an area and source material that you should look at.

Secondary historical sources are also a good place to start. You might find a history of a city, county or state that mentions early baseball. Read the footnotes and bibliographies. The bibliographies will give you other material to search that you may not be aware of and you never know what you’ll find in a footnote. I found a reference to 18th century ball playing in St. Louis in a footnote in a book about French colonial agriculture. You just never know.

Memoirs, biographies, diaries, collections of letters can be tedious to go through but also fruitful. If you can find searchable, electronic copies, that certainly makes it easier. A lot of state historical society websites have these collections.

Google books is a great resource. Searching free Google ebooks will weed out newer books that you can’t access, leaving you with a lot of 19th century books that are fully accessible.

Try searching "history [the city or state you’re looking at] base ball [or game, club, etc.]

Something like "Illinois history town ball" turns up all kinds of good stuff.

Local genealogical sites can also be fruitful. There are many that have a great wealth of searchable information and, even if they don’t, they can point you to places that do

Email to the Protoball Project, March 8, 2014.
Local historical societies and history museums usually have archives that you can go through, as well as staff that will help you find what you're looking for. Stop by and see what they have.

Search all of the free online newspaper databases that you can find. This is where all of the meat is going to be and where you're going to find the primary source evidence you're looking for. But be aware of the history of newspapers in the area you're looking at and when they started publishing. They may not cover the time frame you need or want. Also, be aware of the fact that they may not be covering sporting activities. Some did, some didn't. Some started doing it later than others.

Your local library may have an archivist or researcher on staff. Talk to them. Your library probably offers public access to databases that individuals don't have. ProQuest, 19th Century Newspapers, and that kind of cool stuff is usually accessible at a local library or online if you have a library card. Also, don't be scared of the microfilm. Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty and to do this the old fashioned way.

If all of this fails to work and you don't find what you're looking for, start over. Don't be afraid to do through a database again and again. You may have missed something. Redefined search terms may turn something up. Blind random luck may strike. Just don't quit. Find better sources.

Never be afraid to ask for help. There is always somebody out there smarter than us who knows more. And usually they're nice folks who like to help with stuff like this.

"Take good notes and document where you found every piece of information" is something I wish someone had told me ten years ago.