

The New Dominion Club of Ottawa: The First Organized Ballclub in Canada's Capital

By Steve Rennie

Baseball arrived later in Ottawa than in other parts of Ontario. The city's geographic location—about an hour's drive north of the Canada–United States border today, but a longer journey in the middle of the nineteenth century—may have contributed to this delay. But that seems a stretch; The city is hardly in the hinterlands. Railways opened in the mid-1850s between Ottawa and Montreal to the east and south to Prescott, Ontario, which sits across the St. Lawrence River from Ogdensburg, New York. The Prescott and Montreal rail links are significant because of baseball's history in these parts of Canada. Thanks to the Centre for Canadian Baseball Research, we know of games as early as 1860 in Prescott.¹ Meanwhile, there is at least one account of soldiers playing baseball in August 1863 in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec, which is about 150 miles east of Ottawa.² The game also made its way to Montreal as a soldiers' pastime by September 1865.³

But for whatever reason—or reasons—baseball took a few more years to establish itself in Ottawa. Perhaps the earliest recorded game in Ottawa's history was held at a picnic in the village of Metcalfe on September 13, 1865. This gathering included many different games, including "cricket and base ball."⁴ The *Ottawa Daily Citizen* noted that the day ended with "a game of ball played by the ladies—alone." This might be a reference to baseball or another bat-and-ball game popular at the time, or it could describe some other activity altogether.

BASE BALL MATCH.

The expected match of base ball between the New Dominion Base Ball Club and the Ottawa Cricket Club came off yesterday afternoon on the ground in rear of the skating rink. The contest was a very spirited affair, and created a good deal of excitement between the lovers of the two games. Quite a number of spectators were present, who seemed to take a good deal of interest in the match.

Of course the cricketers were under a disadvantage in playing a game foreign to their favorite one, and as might be expected were beaten. On Thursday next a return match of cricket will be played between the base ball and cricket clubs.

The following is the score of the game played yesterday:

| <i>Ottawa Cricket Club.</i> | | O. R. | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Ammond 1st b..... | 3 | 2 | |
| Baker s s..... | 2 | 3 | |
| Benjamin p..... | 9 | 5 | |
| Blackmore c f..... | 1 | 4 | |
| Hinsworth r f..... | 0 | 4 | |
| Langton 2nd b..... | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Scott c..... | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Shelton 2nd b..... | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| McMurry 1 f..... | 2 | 3 | |
| Total | 15 | 27 | 3 |

| <i>Base Ball Club.</i> | | O. B. L. | |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Walsh 1 f..... | 1 | 6 | |
| McKinson s..... | 1 | 4 | 1 |
| Wood 2nd b..... | 2 | 4 | |
| F. Cluff 2nd b..... | 1 | 5 | 1 |
| Lang r f..... | 4 | 2 | |
| McMerran c f..... | 1 | 5 | |
| Brown 1st b..... | 2 | 4 | |
| H. Cluff c..... | 3 | 2 | |
| Hodgson p..... | 0 | 5 | |
| Total | 15 | 20 | 2 |

Runs each Innings—O.C.C.—1st, 5; 2nd, 0; 3rd, 10; 4th, 6; 5th, 6. Total 27.
N.D.B.C.—1st, 21; 2nd, 4; 3rd, 6; 4th, 3; 5th, 1. Total 26.

BOARD OF SCHOOL TRUSTEES.

The Ottawa Times, July 31, 1868

The first baseball club in the city was established in 1867. Calling themselves the New Dominion Club of Ottawa, they likely drew inspiration for their name from the newly formed Dominion of Canada. A man named Mr. Routh is credited with starting the club.⁵ This may be the team's left fielder, A. Routh (his first name is not provided, so it also could have been another member of the Routh family).⁶ Relatively little is known about their first year of existence. Their president was a man named R.S. Wood, who also served as the team's short stop.⁷ We know they played at least one organized game in 1867—a 141–20 loss in Ogdensburg in late August. The lopsided score suggests that baseball itself may have been new to the Ottawa players—a theory supported by an Ogdensburg newspaper's account of the game.

“In explanation it is proper to say that the Ottawa boys were not well posted on the rules of the game, and consequently missed making several tallies, and also got out several times when they should have avoided it,” wrote the *Daily Journal*. “They have, however,

good material to make base ball players, and will do better next time. Their pitcher and catcher are as good as average, and all will do well when they understand the game better. They did not come boasting, but requested the privilege of coming to learn the game. Another year we shall expect to see them a match for the best.”⁸

By 1868, baseball was gaining popularity in Ottawa, with the New Dominion Club emerging as the city’s leading team. The club had over 60 members, making it the largest in the city.⁹

At least early on, there did not seem to be many other teams to challenge the New Dominion Club. The New Dominion Club planned to play a Victoria Day game against Metcalfe.¹⁰ When that fell through, they ended up playing a game among themselves. The New Dominion first nine triumphed over the second nine with a resounding 94-25 victory. “The spectators were very numerous, including a large number of the fair sex, which gave the ground quite a lively appearance, and added to the spirits of the players,” reported the *Ottawa Times*. “Further interest was thrown into the game by two prizes being offered, namely, a beautifully finished bat for the highest scorer, and a regulation ball for the best general player.” Short stop R. Wood led the New Dominion first nine with 14 runs scored and won the bat, while his teammate Walsh caught six fly balls in left field and earned the prize ball.¹¹

The New Dominion Club held regular monthly meetings in a room at the Ottawa Skating and Curling Club,¹² which opened a rink on Albert Street in 1867.¹³ They played their games on a field right behind the rink—which today is in the heart of the city’s downtown core.

Not content with playing games against themselves, the New Dominion Club would soon face a tougher test. During the 1868 Dominion Day festivities in Ottawa, the New Dominion Club held its own against a visiting team from Ogdensburg. By the third inning, Ottawa had built an impressive 24-run lead over their opponents. But Ogdensburg somehow rallied to win the game by a score of 57–49.¹⁴ It seems like there were no hard feelings, as the players dined together after the game, which was customary at the time. “The reception our boys met from Ottawa was princely and the supper provided most magnificent,” the *Ogdensburg Journal* wrote. “They all come home with the greatest admiration for the people of the Capital of the Dominion, and unable to find words to express their good feeling.”¹⁵

Back in Ottawa, the New Dominion Club dominated local baseball. A team of local mechanics fell to the New Dominion Club by a score of 109–15.¹⁶ In late July, they defeated the Ottawa Cricket Club in a game of baseball by a much-closer score of 36–27. However, the tables turned in the return cricket match, with the New Dominion Club suffering a heavy loss of 173–54. “However well the New Dominion Club may play

baseball,” wrote the *Ottawa Times*, “they will have to practice cricket a while before playing matches.”¹⁷ They ended up playing two more times that summer, although the newspapers offered no details about the final matches.¹⁸

Ottawa returned to Ogdensburg for a return match in late August. This time, they lost by a score of 53–19.¹⁹ The team was disappointed to suffer such a loss to Ogdensburg after their narrow defeat earlier in the summer. But their spirits were no doubt lifted by the lavish post-game reception, where drinks flowed freely as toasts and songs filled the air well into the early hours of the morning.²⁰

The next and final mention of Ottawa’s baseball team appears the following year in an *Ogdensburg Journal* article, previewing a July 4, 1869, game against the St. Lawrence Club in Ogdensburg.²¹ After that, the club, for all intents and purposes, disappeared.

Two years later, the fate of the New Dominion Club was revealed in a letter to the editor of the *Ottawa Times*, written by a member of the newly formed Ottawa Base Ball Club.

“Sir: In your issue this morning your reporter incorrectly states that the Maple Leaf Club of Ogdensburg is a newly organized one, and not the old Maple City Club. As this statement would materially lessen the credit accorded us for having beaten them, I beg leave to give you the following facts,” he wrote.

“Four years ago we played against this same club under the name of the Ogdensburg Club, for the purpose of learning the rudiments of the game, and we were beaten by some one hundred and twenty runs. The Ogdensburg Club was then organized about six years. We played against them during the following season in Ottawa, and were again beaten, but by a majority of only eight runs. Unfortunately for our old New Dominion Base Ball Club we were unable to continue practice on account of the grounds on which we played being subdivided and sold, and our club became defunct. This season a new organization was formed, with four or five of the old players as members, under the name of the Ottawa Base Ball Club, and on the 30th June we played at Prescott against our old opponents from Ogdensburg, who had in the interval changed their club name to the more euphonious one of ‘The Maple City.’ The result of this match was that we were beaten by only one run. Our next meeting took place yesterday, when with a fair field and no favor, we had the extreme felicity of beating one of the best clubs in Northern New York.”²²

Two members of the New Dominion Club who went on to play for the Ottawa Base Ball Club were catcher Harry Cluff and his brother, Tom.²³ Tom Cluff has been credited with introducing baseball to Ottawa, although there are holes in this story. He fought in the Civil War on the Union Side, enlisting as a private, according to both his obituary²⁴ and a booklet detailing the lives of Loyalists and their descendants buried at Ottawa’s Beechwood Cemetery.²⁵ Military pension records from July 1903 show a Thomas

Cluff—who used the alias George Stephens—served with the 10th Regiment Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, Company A, and filed for a US army pension from Canada.²⁶ Since there are no other records of his military service, it's not certain that this is actually the same Tom Cluff from Ottawa, or someone else with the same name.



Tom Cluff. From Bytown Fire Dept. website

We don't know much about Cluff's early years in Ohio. But we do know that he was back in Ottawa by the late 1860s, working as a blacksmith. He married Diantha Adelaide Clark in September 1869.²⁷ In the summer of 1870, Cluff was once again Ohio, where another brother, Edward (who also went by Ned), lived. The story goes that Tom Cluff watched three Cincinnati Red Stockings players put on a show for picnic-goers at a rural Ohio farm. The dazzling display apparently left Cluff spellbound. He sought them out afterward, eager to learn more and bring that knowledge back to Ottawa.²⁸

The problem with this story is that we know Tom Cluff was already playing baseball in 1867 for the New Dominion Club—three years before he purportedly saw the Red Stockings' exhibition in Ohio. He may not have been baseball's pioneer in Ottawa, but he was undoubtedly one of its earliest players.

Both Tom and Harry Cluff were on the field when the Ottawa Base Ball Club played the fabled Boston Red Stockings in 1872 and 1873. Each of those games took place at the club's new grounds on a 10-acre plot of land at the foot of Elgin Street near the Rideau Canal.²⁹ Although Ottawa fell short both times, baseball had gained a foothold in the capital. The New Dominion Club may have been short-lived, and their contributions to Ottawa's baseball history are long forgotten, but they paved the way for teams like the Ottawa Base Ball Club and others that followed.

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- 1 "Base Ball in Canada," *New York Clipper*, August 25, 1860: 2.
 - 2 "Montreal Artillery Excursion," *Montreal Herald and Daily Commercial Gazette*, August 20, 1863: 2.
 - 3 "Montreal Volunteer Cavalry," *Montreal Herald and Daily Commercial Gazette*, September 11, 1865: 2.
 - 4 "Sons Of Temperance Pic-Nic," *Ottawa Daily Citizen*, September 21, 1865: 2.
 - 5 "The Dinner," *Ottawa Times*, July 3, 1868: 2.
 - 6 "Base Ball," *Daily Journal* (Ogdensburg, New York), September 2, 1867: 3. "A. Routh" is likely Alexander J. Routh (1844-97), a watchmaker.
 - 7 "The Dinner," *Ottawa Times*, July 3, 1868: 2.
 - 8 "Base Ball," *Daily Journal* (Ogdensburg, New York), August 31, 1867: 3.
 - 9 "Local News," *Ottawa Times*, August 7, 1868: 2.
 - 10 "Base Ball," *Ottawa Times*, May 23, 1868: 3.
 - 11 "Base Ball," *Ottawa Times*, May 27, 1868: 2.
 - 12 "Base Ball," *Ottawa Times*, June 4, 1868: 2.
 - 13 "Club History," Ottawa Curling Club, Accessed October 21, 2024. <https://ottawacurlingclub.ca/index.php/about-the-club/28-club-info/151-club-history> The rink is about where Confederation Park is today.
 - 14 "Base Ball Match," *Ottawa Times*, July 3, 1868: 2.
 - 15 "Base Ball at Ottawa," *Ogdensburg Journal*, July 3, 1868: 3.
 - 16 "Base Ball," *Ottawa Times*, August 5, 1868: 2.
 - 17 "Base Ball vs. Cricket," *Ottawa Times*, August 7, 1868: 2.
 - 18 Cricketers at Base Ball," *Ottawa Times*, August 18, 1868: 2.
 - 19 "Base Ball Match," *Ogdensburg Journal*, August 22, 1868: 3.
 - 20 "Base Ball Club," *Ogdensburg Journal*, August 24, 1868: 3.
 - 21 "Local and Miscellaneous," *Ogdensburg Journal*, June 4, 1869: 3.
 - 22 "Base Ball," *Ottawa Times*, July 28, 1871: 2.
 - 23 "Base Ball," *Ottawa Times*, August 5, 1868: 2.
 - 24 "Pioneer Of Bytown Is Fatally Injured," *Ottawa Citizen*, May 11, 1925: 16.
 - 25 "Descendants of Loyalists in Beechwood Cemetery: Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Dominion Association."

26 "United States Civil War and Later Pension Index, 1861-1917," FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:NHNF-TYZ> : March 24, 2016), Thomas Cluff, 1903.

27 Thomas Cluff and Diantha Clark. "Marriage Record," Ottawa, September 8, 1869.

28 David McDonald. "Aug. 27, 1872: The Day the Tide Turned in Ottawa," *Ottawa Citizen*, August 27, 2005.

29 "Manly Sports," *Ottawa Daily Citizen*, August 12, 1872: 1.

New Bedford, Massachusetts Baseball Began in 1858

By Kyle DeCicco-Carey

The earliest mention of baseball I've located in the New Bedford newspapers is in the *New Bedford Evening Standard*. On August 11, 1858, the paper reported that a group of 25 had met on the evening of August 10 to form a baseball club. A president pro temp and secretary were chosen. A committee was appointed at the meeting that "reported" a constitution and bylaws which were adopted.

Ten days later, the club, calling itself the Ironsides Base Ball Club, now with 31 members, met for its first practice.

The club's members ranged in age from around 19 to 28 years old. Many appeared to have been employed as merchants and clerks and served during the Civil War. Among the members of the club was Savillion Van Campen, who some readers may recognize as the illustrator of the 1867 booklet, "Base Ball as Viewed by a Muffin."