

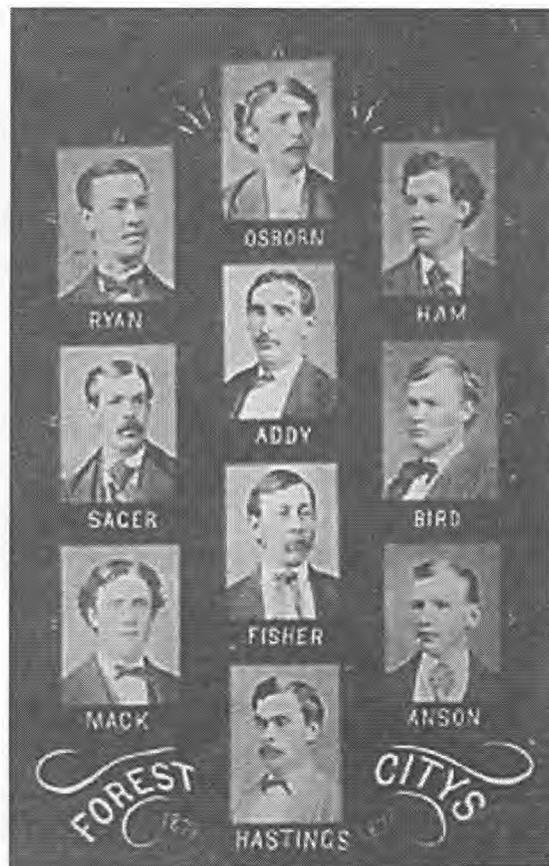
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# NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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## REBUILDING: THE FOREST CITY BASE BALL CLUB PREPARES FOR 1871

By John L. Molyneaux



Forest City Base Ball Club team picture dated about May 1, 1871. Before the season opened (May 6) Ryan and Osborn were replaced by Gat Stires and Al Barker. Sager left the team June 1, and his replacement was Chick Fullmer, who joined the team June 5.

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents another in a series of articles about the early years of the Forest City Base Ball Club by Dr. John Molyneaux. The Forest Cities were one of the finest base ball teams in the mid-west during the late 1860s. In 1871, the Forest City team became a charter member of the first professional league, the National Association. Unfortunately, three of their finest players were lured away with higher salaries by the Boston Red Stockings and became the nucleus of the team that dominated the National Association during its five years of existence. The Rockford team struggled to put together a team in 1871 and this is the story of that season.

Many of you know Dr. Molyneaux from his position as the Local History Librarian at the Rockford Public Library, a position he retired from after 20 years. Originally from New York State, he received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Virginia. Dr. Molyneaux taught at Rockford College before taking the position with the library. He is also a board member of the Rockford Historical Society and a frequent contributor to the *Nuggets of History*.

Dr. Molyneaux is an expert in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Rockford history and baseball is one of his favorite topics. He has written several articles about the Rockford Forest Cities and their rivals and is currently working on the book about the team. His previously published book, *African Americans in Early Rockford, 1834 - 1871* carefully documents a little known but important part of our local history.

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 986-4867.

Thomas Powers, Editor

## Rebuilding: The Forest City Base Ball Club Prepares for 1871

By John L. Molyneaux

On October 15, 1870, in the last official match of the season, the Forest City Base Ball Club (FC) finally defeated the Cincinnati Base Ball Club, better known as the Red Stockings. The game, at the Fair Grounds in Rockford, was as exciting as one could wish. FC took a 6-3 lead in the 2<sup>nd</sup> inning and never relinquished it. Gat Stires, Al Spalding, and Ross Barnes hit home runs; Spalding shut out the Cincinnati for the last five innings; and the classic FC game of hard line drives, sharp fielding, and exploiting opponent's errors produced a final score of 12-5.

The editor of the *Rockford Register* on October 22 wrote a pensive account of the game, pleased his team had won, yet sad the Cincinnati team had to lose. "We feel a pang of regret [in the Cincinnati loss] because the Red Stockings have done so much...to reclaim the game from its objectionable features, and elevate it to a standard where it could command the respect, sanction and support of the better portion of the people, and to make it what it should be..., the National Pastime of the youth of America." Turning his attention to the future, he continued "the Forest City Club exists no longer as a regular organization, the contracts with the players having expired on the 15<sup>th</sup>," but "the nine will remain together for a few further games." As a sort of afterthought he added, "Cincinnati wants three of the Forest Citys for next season's play, if Rockford has no use for them."

The newspaper's words were in fact a valedictory appreciation for both clubs. In a few weeks the professional Cincinnati club ceased to exist, while FC entered a downward spiral leading to oblivion. One man was the agent for the fate of both teams. This was Harry Wright, who led the way toward full professionalism in baseball. Wright had created the professional Red Stockings and took them to the most eminent place in the game. Following this example, the most ambitious clubs began efforts to create a fully professional league that would provide the best, and most exciting, play to the paying American public. Wright was the leading force behind the professional league idea, but he immediately encountered opposition from his own Cincinnati Base Ball Club. The Club's leadership announced the club would henceforth operate on a strictly

amateur basis. Wright's response was to take certain of the professionals—and the Red Stockings name—to Boston. Here he could build a new club and thrive in the proposed league, and also have plenty of money to reach for the stars. Central to Wright's plan was a raid on the FC club, an idea well known by October and probably originating even earlier. The changed situation in Cincinnati merely shifted Wright's plans to the east coast.

The entrepreneur's targets in Rockford were pitcher Al Spalding, infielder Ross Barnes, and Fred Cone, an outfielder/first baseman. Spalding and Barnes were superlative players, well known throughout the baseball world. Cone was outstanding defensively. The three men symbolized the essence of the FC game. The money offered them by Wright was certainly attractive, but equally important was the opportunity to play ball in a major eastern city. Some believed Wright tried to get Bob Addy as well, but Addy was newly married and had a tinsmithing business to keep him in Rockford and was not tempted.

By the end of 1870 the Club knew it had lost three men. Immediate steps were taken to find a pitcher around whom to rebuild the team and negotiations were started with George Zettlein, lately of the Brooklyn Atlantics. On January 5, 1871 the *Rockford Gazette* stated that Zettlein "is engaged as pitcher" and that "Those old time players, Messrs. Addy, Simmons, Hastings, Stires, Osborn &c. will put in an appearance this summer." The *Register* said on January 7 "Most of the old players signify their desire to remain with this organization, and everything promises well for a stronger team than we had last year.... Mr. Zettlin [sic]...has joined the F. C.'s and will pitch for the club this season."

On Wednesday, January 11, FC held its organizational meeting for the upcoming season. The city council rooms were crowded and "all the business of the meeting was transacted [with] vigor and unanimity." Industrialist John P. Manny was reelected president and an array of other prominent enthusiasts were involved in different official capacities, among them S. M. Church, Levi Rhoades, S. C. Withrow, H. W. Price, H. P. Holland, A. D. Forbes, and C. M. Utter. Each of the five city wards elected a vice president. Old baseball men were also in evidence: George King was elected treasurer, Hiram Waldo elected corresponding secretary. Money matters received full attention: "A large amount was subscribed by those present, and a committee appointed to solicit

subscriptions from the citizens generally." Minutes of this meeting survive and contain two very important items: the club would "employ ten players for the season, but on such terms that the whole expense of players shall not exceed seven thousand dollars (\$7000)." Furthermore, the playing season "shall not commence earlier than March 15<sup>th</sup> nor close earlier than October 15<sup>th</sup>." (FC BBC, Minutes of January 11, 1871, meeting: Local History Room, Rockford Public Library. Description of the meeting is from *Gazette*.) The *Register* was pleased with the meeting and stated complacently that "arrangements have been made with first class players and the nine can be said to be about complete." (January 14)

Copies of several contracts are in the Local History Room of Rockford Public Library. The earliest one is dated January 12, for Bob Addy, who was certainly a "first class player." Apart from this there is no evidence of other positive steps, and things began to unravel quickly. On January 19 the *Gazette* reported on negotiations with Zettlein and said that "the officers were instructed to close a contract...at the price name by him. We are assured that notwithstanding the announcement that Zettlein has been secured by the Chicago club, he will pitch for the Forest Citys." Things had changed since the 14<sup>th</sup>, and they got much worse. On the 21<sup>st</sup> the *Register* reprinted an article from a Chicago paper which stated that the White Stockings had indeed contracted with Zettlein, and had also signed Joe Simmons and Tom Foley from the 1870 FC team. The *Register* noted that Spalding, Barnes, and Cone were in Boston, while Scott Hastings was playing for the New Orleans Lone Stars. To this list we can add Joe Doyle, who was gone for parts unknown, and Gat Stires, who had let it be known he wasn't going to be playing professionally. By the end of January eight of nine 1870 regulars were gone and the contract negotiations with Zettlein had failed.

Over the next six weeks FC scrambled hard to find professional grade players but the small size and remote location of the city imposed severe limitations, especially combined with limited funds. On March 1, the *New York Times*, in an article on the upcoming professional baseball meeting, reported that six of the major professional clubs had completed their rosters, two others were very nearly complete, and "the Forest City Club of Rockford have to raise a new nine." A further article on the 6<sup>th</sup> reported that seven of the clubs were fully organized and that FC was one of four still incomplete. On March 13 the *Times* reported that "delegates from the prominent professional base-ball clubs of the country are [soon] to meet in convention," among

them Mr. Waldo of the Forest City of Rockford. This meeting established the National Association of Base Ball Players, commonly known simply as the National Association, on March 17.

FC had been hard at work locating players, though it was now clear this team would be quite different from last year's. Attracting players to Rockford proved to be very difficult. Nevertheless, by the middle of March, another roster was completed. On March 18 the *Rockford Register* reported "the nine is nearly complete.... Seven of the players are already here." The *Gazette* of March 23 published the new roster: Robert Addy, 3b, ss, c; Robert Mathews, p and lf; Thomas Carey, cf, ss; John Lennon, c; Peter Haskins, ss, 2b, lf; Samuel Sager, 1b, lf; Ballard Osborn, cf, 1b; Denny Mack, p, rf; John Ryan, lf, 2b. Mathews, Carey, and Lennon had played for the Maryland B. B. C. in 1871, but while on tour had jumped to the Kekiongas B. B. C. of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Mathews was a 19 year old fast pitcher, very promising, probably reminiscent of Al Spalding, though much shorter in stature. He and the two other ex-Marylanders were a package deal. Mack and Ryan had played for the Keystone B. B. C. of Philadelphia. Sager and Haskins had played amateur ball in Marshalltown, Iowa, and had played against FC a few months earlier when the Rockford club was on tour. Osborn had been a FC regular in '67 and '68, but had been away from the game for two seasons. Of the lot, only Bob Addy and the Marylanders could be recognized as experienced top quality players.

Alas, we'll never know how the March 23 lineup would fare in the National Association because the team disintegrated again, as quickly though not as thoroughly as in January. The most serious loss was Mathews, Lennon, and Carey, who reneged on whatever understanding they had with FC, deciding to stay in Fort Wayne for the 1871 season. Ryan and Haskins also disappeared, Ryan apparently due to a serious illness, Haskins for unknown reasons. Both had signed contracts dated March 15. Oddly enough, the loss of Mathews was most quickly mended. Before the end of March William "Cherokee" Fisher was hired. And Fisher probably brought Ralph Ham with him. Both came to Rockford from Troy, New York, where Fisher had played for the famous Haymakers and Ham, apparently, played amateur ball on lesser teams.

Cherokee Fisher (origin of his nickname is unknown) had the reputation of a heavy drinker, though this caused no known problems while with FC. More importantly,

he was a very good pitcher. While playing for the Buckeye Club of Cincinnati in 1868 he beat FC in Rockford, completely overpowering the team. On the other hand, in 1870, when FC came to Troy they knocked him around pretty well. Near the end of March he pitched to another newcomer, Adrian Anson, of Marshalltown, Iowa, who was trying out for FC. Anson later recalled "I could not successfully gauge his delivery, which was much swifter than anything I had ever been up against." When Anson did connect, the ball went into right field because he couldn't pull it. Al Spalding was the only other top professional pitcher Anson had faced (September 16 & 17, 1870, in Marshalltown), so we may assume Fisher was the harder thrower. A further difference between the two was that Fisher was rowdier on the playing field. In reporting the first FC game of the season the *Chicago Tribune* reporter complained of "the persistent shouting and annoyance that proceeded from 'Cherokee' Fisher" during the game. Fisher was good, and he was more colorful than FC fans were accustomed to.

Ralph Ham was a rookie amateur; he was assigned to third base. Another rookie was 18 year old Adrian Anson, a teammate of Sager and Haskins in Marshalltown, who followed them to Rockford. Anson's tryout was satisfactory and he was signed. He had been an infielder in Marshalltown, but when he appeared all the infield slots were filled and he was made catcher. This was a natural solution for FC because all of their catchers had been infielders (Al Barker, George King, Bob Addy, and Scott Hastings). Since the ex-Marylander John Lennon had decided to stay in Fort Wayne, Anson got the most pressing remaining job. Probably in early April another player was signed: George Bird, who had been playing in the region for several years, though never for FC. He was added as an outfielder. By the time of the first formal sparring game of the season, on April 16, FC had 8 players signed. They still needed one regular outfielder and a substitute.

The "first match game of this season" took place Saturday, April 16, with FC playing the Alert B. B. C. of Rockford. The centerfielder is listed as "Dickerman;" this is a Rockford name, but the player is otherwise unknown. The FC lineup and batting order: Mack, 1b; Addy, ss; Fisher, p; Dickerman, cf; Ham, 3b; Anson, c; Sager, 3b; Bird, lf; Osborn, rf. The Alert Club, previously unrecorded, featured a pitcher called Spalding, but definitely not Albert, who had gone to Boston on March 13. Two familiar FC names crop up with the Alerts: Al Barker at catcher and Gat Stires at second base. The game was won by FC 25-3, with Stires and Barker scoring two Alert runs (the third

run was made by Henry Irvine, the left fielder). FC evidently played the Alerts at least twice more, but game reports have not been found. On April 22 FC played the Scott B. C. of Ogle County. The FC lineup for this game: Mack, 1b; Addy, 2b; Fisher, p; Ham, 3b; Anson, c; Sager, ss; Bird, rf, Osborn, cf; Wilson, lf. (Wilson is otherwise unidentified.)

By the end of April the FC year had already been difficult but things now went from difficult to peculiar. Early in May—exactly when is not known—Scott Hastings came back to Rockford, ready to play. Exactly how and why Hastings reappeared is not known; plans had been progressing with no reference to him. The team he was currently playing for, the New Orleans Lone Stars, had come to Chicago in April, where they had played the Chicago White Stockings on April 16 (noted in BaseballPrimer.com). Hastings then left the Lone Stars and came to Rockford. Perhaps he was contacted by Hi Waldo; perhaps he came to Rockford to visit acquaintances; perhaps he planned to return all along. Whatever the circumstances, he was immediately signed and, with Anson now the catcher, was put into the outfield to replace the Dickerman-Wilson combination. The FC roster was now complete, though it appears this meant that Osborn was now to be the substitute. Not long after these moves, after April 22 but before May 15, a composite team picture was created, including Hastings. Also in the picture were John Ryan and Val Osborn, neither of which would play in 1871, for different reasons.

The addition of Hastings brought a certain complication. Under the new National Association rules, if a player switched clubs he could not play for his new club for sixty days. This was an effort to hinder contract jumping, which some professionals did to improve their wages or working conditions. Now, since New Orleans was not a member of the National Association, it is difficult to see how Hastings could be considered an ineligible player, but the National Association teams would play FC under protest through June 16. FC clearly believed they were allowed to play him under the rules, and did so. At the end of the season the Hastings issue became very important to National Association leadership and two teams in particular, the Boston Red Stockings and the Philadelphia Athletics (but not the Forest City). Under the new (and clumsy) Association rules, the winner of the Association pennant would be the club which won the largest number of five game series with other member clubs, not the club with the most total victories or best winning percentage. This left both Boston and Philadelphia

with claims to victory. FC had, however, won its series with the Athletics with Hastings playing. If the games were forfeit to Philadelphia because Hastings was ineligible, then Philadelphia won the pennant. Using considerable pressure, Philadelphia got the NA to rule the games were forfeit, and thus they became the first National Association champions. This was the only season in the five the Association operated that Harry Wright's Boston Red Stockings did not win: what the Athletics could not win on the playing field, they won in the committee room. By the time the decision was handed down, in December 1871, FC had disbanded and had only an academic interest in the issue, but it may have been gratifying to see that the team-building efforts of the spring had been the determining factor in deciding the National Association championship.

The opening League game for FC was scheduled with the Chicago White Stockings for May 3, but was rained out. Instead, the season opened May 6, with the Forest City club of Cleveland. On the day of the game another peculiar turn had occurred and another new face appeared in the lineup: Gat Stires. Stires had not intended to play for FC this season—indeed, he had played with the Alerts against FC. But there he was in the lineup on May 6, playing without a contract, apparently replacing Val Osborn, who had been in the FC outfield all spring. Exactly how this came about is not known-- perhaps Osborn found that he could not make the commitment to play the season. However it developed it probably involved heavy pressure from old teammates and Hi Waldo on Stires. We know his final decision was not yet made, however.

The FC lineup for the Cleveland game is: Mack, 1b; Addy, 2b; Fisher, p; Hastings, cf; Ham, 3b; Anson, c; Sager, ss; Bird, lf; Stires, rf. The *Gazette* observed "this is the first match game that the men comprising our club have played together." Because of this the first two games of the league season have the air of spring training, of trying to get the team settled into an acceptable configuration. The final score of the game was 12-4, with Cleveland winning after a disastrous first inning. Bob Addy (of all people) started the debacle with a seemingly innocuous error. This was followed by two errors by Sager, slow play from Ham, and Cleveland scored 6 runs. Before the game ended Anson had two costly passed balls, Ham made two errors, and Sager got picked off first base. FC had some good things happen, though. Anson doubled in a run on his first professional at bat, and Stires' first at bat with the team resulted in a triple

(though he did not score). Stires also made "a noteworthy one handed catch in the 2<sup>nd</sup>." There was one lineup change in the game, when Hastings and Bird exchanged positions in the 4<sup>th</sup> inning.

The next game was May 17 against the Olympic B. B. C. of Washington, a tough club that contained five of last year's Red Stocking players in its lineup. The FC starting lineup was the amended version of the first game, with a revised batting order: Mack, 1b; Addy, 2b; Fisher, p; Hastings, lf; Stires, rf; Ham, 3b; Anson, c; Sager, ss; Bird, cf. The game action quickly brought about a lineup change which would be basic to the rest of the season. In the 1<sup>st</sup> inning two runs scored on an Anson passed ball. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> inning Berthrong hit sharply to Mack, who dropped the ball. Berthrong then stole 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> "on underthrow of Anson." This was followed by an error from Ham, which allowed 2 more runs. In the top of the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning Hastings moved to catcher, Anson moved to 3b, and Ham moved to lf. These changes addressed the two most obvious defensive problems: neither of the rookies, Anson and Ham, could handle the positions they had been assigned, but both did well in the new positions for the balance of the season. This game ended well, though not without a scare. At the start of the 9<sup>th</sup>, FC had a 12-7 lead, but a collision between, Fisher and Sager ("very poor play" said the *Gazette*) led to 5 unearned Olympic runs and a 12-12 score. In the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup>, with Stires and Anson on base and two out, Bird tripled, then scored on a throwing error, and FC won 15-12. The Olympics protested the game because Hastings played, but that protest would not be handled until months later. Whatever that outcome would be, FC won the game fairly on the field.

On May 15, two days before the Olympics game, Stires signed his contract and was now committed for the season. We know, from various sources, the wages of some FC players. Surviving contracts at Rockford Public Library show that Stires received \$100/month (\$600/season); Addy, \$80/month (\$480/season); Haskins \$66.67/month (\$400/season); Ryan \$66.67/month/\$400 season); and Sager \$50/month/\$300 season). From other sources we know Hastings received \$100/month (\$600/season) and Anson \$66.67/month (\$400/season). Haskins and Ryan, of course, left the team before the season started—in fact, they never appear in any game records despite having signed contracts and appearing in the team picture. It is not known how much Fisher was paid, but it must have been at least as much as Stires and Hastings, probably more. It should be recalled that in January, when negotiations with George

Zettlein were under way, FC officers were "instructed to close a contract...at a price named by [Zettlein]," which was probably the case with Fisher as well. We don't know the wages of Mack, Ham, Bird, and Barker, but they were probably paid at the same rate as the rookies Sager or Anson. By way of comparison, former FC players Al Spalding and Ross Barnes were each drawing \$300/month/(\$1800 season) in Boston, while the substitutes on the Red Stockings club were paid as much as Stires and Hastings.

On May 22 FC left Rockford for a long eastern tour; it would be six weeks before they returned home. With the hard work of the season before them the team now had four experienced players (Addy, Fisher, Hastings, and Stires), two of whom had been added at the last moment. Al Barker, substitute, had plenty of experience: he was the only FC charter member still on the squad. The other five regulars (Mack, Sager, Ham, Bird, and Anson) were rookies untried at the high level of professional play. The club was certainly weaker than it had been, but it was still much stronger than the amateur clubs it would encounter and could face other professional clubs without embarrassment. It should be noted, too, that, unlike several other National Association clubs, FC judged its finances well and completed its season. The forfeiture decision would make this team look particularly bad in the future record books, yet it had created itself out of virtually nothing, discharged itself well on the field, and met all its obligations. It was a worthy final edition of one of the country's most famous teams.

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