

It's Baseball Season!

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For many, summertime means baseball. The Copyright Office honored this tradition on August 6 when a group of Office fans and their families watched the Washington Nationals prevail over the Arizona Diamondbacks at Nationals Park.

For more than a century, the origins of America's national pastime have been much debated. But many agree that the American game started in towns and cities of New England, New York, and the Mid-Atlantic, with rules of play varying by region. The Knickerbocker Club, formed in New York in 1845, was among the first organized baseball clubs. It instituted the so-called New York rules, considered to be the basis for the modern game. On June 19, 1846, the Knickerbockers played under the rules for the first time at Elysian Fields in Hoboken, New Jersey. The local press championed the sport, including poet Walt Whitman, who as an editor of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* proclaimed, "The game of ball is glorious." An avid player himself, Whitman associated baseball with vigor, masculinity, and health.

Baseball "has the snap, go, fling, of the American atmosphere—belongs as much to our institutions, fits into them as significantly, as our constitutions [and] laws."

Walt Whitman

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The Civil War boosted the popularity of the game, which was often played by soldiers in camp. After the war, they took it home with them, and it spread to every region of the country. “The postwar era marked baseball’s first golden age,” the authors of *Baseball Americana* write. “Laborers could beat gentlemen, mechanics best attorneys, Southerners defeat Northerners, or Baptists battle Methodists on the field with no hard feelings.”

As the game increasingly captured the American imagination, baseball-inspired visual works—and copyright registrations—proliferated, a trend continued to this day. This issue of Copyright Lore highlights four copyright deposits from the Civil War period.

(1) “Champions of America” is a portrait of the Brooklyn Atlantics. Photographer Charles Williamson registered the photograph in 1865 in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York. Mounted on a card, the photo was passed out as a souvenir to fans and is considered an early prototype for baseball cards, which first became popular in the 1880s. The Brooklyn Atlantics won championships in 1861, 1864, and 1865. Their season continued throughout the winter, when the team donned skates and played on frozen ponds, writes Vincent Virga in *Eyes of the Nation: A Visual History of the United States*.

(2) “On the Fly,” a tobacco label, shows an outfielder preparing to catch a ball in the days before baseball gloves. R. J. White and Company registered the label in 1867 in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. Inexpensive machine-produced paper and cheap color lithography gave rise to colorful packaging of consumer goods in the mid-

19th century, writes Renata Shaw in the April 1971 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*. Following the Civil War, labels featuring sports, from billiards to baseball, became common.

(3) No other American sport has inspired as many songs as baseball, write the authors of *Baseball Americana*. Early on, baseball songs were disseminated around the country through sales of piano sheet music, and music covers offer some of the earliest images of American adults playing the sport. Often, they featured elaborate and colorful illustrations to entice potential buyers. Composer Jas. M. Goodman wrote “Base Ball Polka,” and C. F. Escher of Philadelphia, the song’s publisher, registered it in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania on January 8, 1867.

(4) “Home Run Polka” was composed by Mrs. Bodell of Washington, D.C., and “respectfully dedicated to the National Baseball Club of Washington.” She registered the composition in 1867 in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. Composed of government workers, clerks, lawyers, and some war veterans, the Washington Nationals departed in 1867 for baseball’s first “tour of the west,” traveling to Illinois, Missouri, and Ohio. Their games met with great fanfare, according to *Baseball Americana*, and they won all but one of their games. ©



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Sources: Katz, Harry, Frank Ceresi, Phil Michel, Wilson McBee, and Susan Reyburn. *Baseball Americana*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. Folsom, Lowell Edwin. “America’s ‘Hurrah Game’: Baseball and Walt Whitman.” *Iowa Review* 2/3 (1980): 68–80. Shaw, Renata V. “19th Century Tobacco Label Art.” *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 28, no. 2 (1971): 76–102. Virga, Vincent. *Eyes of the Nation: A Visual History of the United States*. Piermont, N.H.: Bunker Hill Publishing, 1997.