

Take me out to the ballgame!

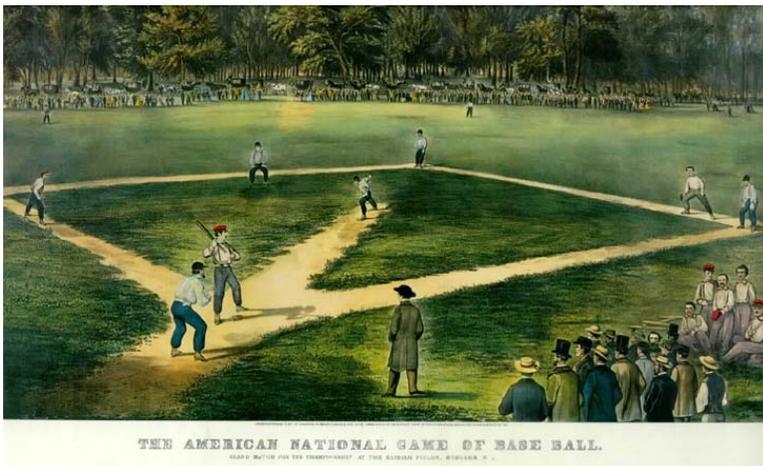
Part I

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Baseball in New Jersey

Nearly a century before the Hudson River was spanned by bridge or tunnel, a fast, reliable ferry service carried New Yorkers to Hoboken in droves. To attract riders, the ferry service owners turned the waterfront into a semi-public park. The promoters created paths, pavilions, and breath-



taking views, and called the place “Elysian Fields,” after the paradise of ancient mythology. It opened with fanfare on July 11, 1831. The park stretched from the Hoboken site to Weehawken Cove. Sports games, rides, and outdoor events gave visitors reasons to return. Soon, tens of thousands crowded the park everyday during the summer months.

Baseball at Elysian Fields in Hoboken, NJ.

Then came baseball. On 19 June 1846, the first officially recorded, organized baseball match was played under Alexander Joy Cartwright's rules at Elysian Fields — with the New York Base Ball Club defeating the Knickerbockers, 23-1. Cartwright umpired. It is generally recognized that, until this time, baseball was not regarded as a serious sport. To commemorate this signal event, markers have been placed to indicate where home plate, first, second, and third bases originally stood. Visitors to Hoboken can still see them today.

With baseball rapidly gaining popularity, the *Harper's Weekly* magazine of 15 October 1859 featured a spread devoted to two games being contested on Hoboken's Elysian Fields. Indicative

of the inferior role baseball still held as a national sport, images of a cricket match were displayed predominantly at the top of the page while baseball was relegated to the bottom.

Almost 20 years after the Elysian Fields' first official baseball game, 20,000 people thronged to the park for a rain-shortened, five-inning championship game between the Mutual Club of Manhattan and the Atlantic Club of Brooklyn on the same spot. The Atlantics won 13-12.

Baseball at Fort Monmouth

On Tuesday 6 June 1944 — as Allied forces invaded Normandy — the Eastern Signal Corps All-stars played their first major league opponent, the Boston Braves, at the Charles Wood Area of Fort Monmouth. The Braves won 5-4 in five innings. This was the first of many games played against major league opponents by the soldiers here. Fort Monmouth also hosted the Brooklyn Dodgers in the Charles Wood Area in July of that year.



Whitey Ford throws the first pitch in his Army uniform.

In some cases, the Fort Monmouth soldiers were themselves major leaguers. Consider Hall of Fame pitcher Edward Charles “Whitey” Ford (1928-). His .690 winning percentage was among the best for pitchers in the twentieth century. He set the record for most World Series wins. And he chalked up more career franchise victories than anyone in New York Yankees history.

But prior to the bulk of his major league career, Whitey Ford served in the United States Army as a Private in the Signal Corps right here at Fort Monmouth. On April 17, 1951, he was granted leave to toss out the first pitch of a Red Sox-Yanks game at Yankee Stadium, dressed not in pinstripes — but in his Army uniform.

He then spent the next two seasons in the service during the Korean War. A number of his fellow major leaguers also donned military uniforms during that conflict. Ted Williams of the

Red Sox, Jerry Coleman of the Yankees, Don Newcombe of the Dodgers, Willie Mays of the Giants, and Curt Simmons of the Phillies were among those to answer Uncle Sam's call.



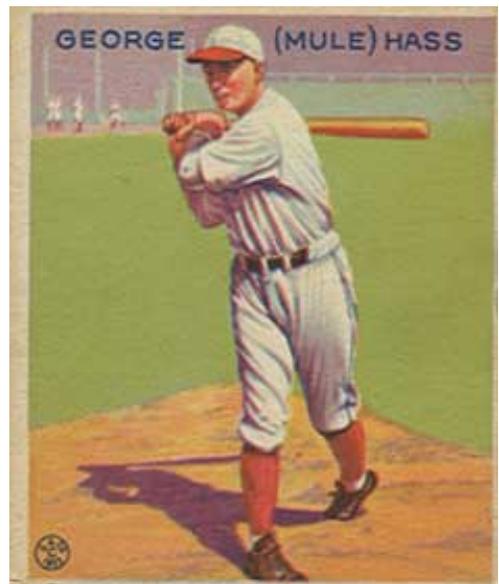
Whitey Ford is the blond man sticking his head out of the bus window. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Communications-Electronics Museum.

the Fort Monmouth Army Baseball team. Whitey Ford was one of his pitchers.

Connie Mack of the Philadelphia Athletics bought Haas from the Pittsburg Pirates in 1928, where he then had to break into an established outfield of Ty Cobb and Tris Speaker, two Hall of Famers. Haas holds the Major League record for most years leading the league in sacrifice hits (six: 1930-1934 & 1936). His lifetime fielding average of .983 was better than baseball legends Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Tris Speaker, Joe DiMaggio, Shoeless Joe Jackson, Al Simmons, and Ted Williams.

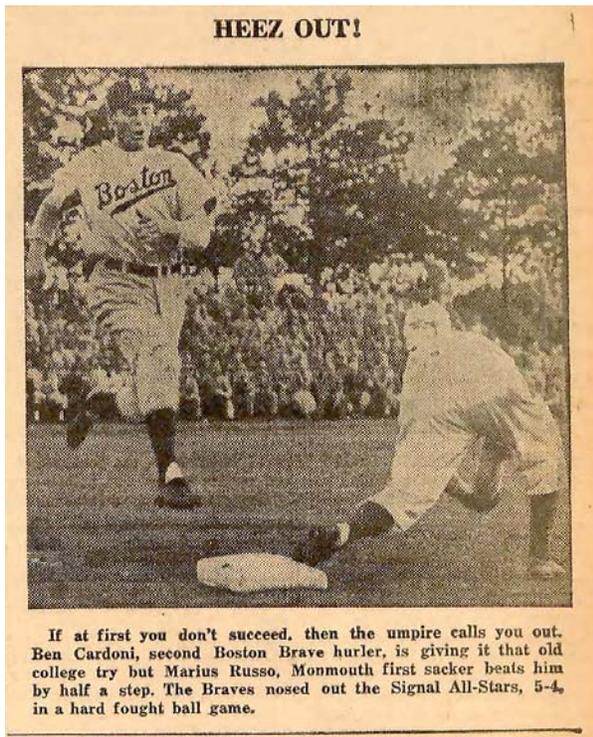
Baseball historian John Liegl had the opportunity to meet Haas in 1959. Liegl was not even a teenager at

Professional baseball players even managed at Fort Monmouth. George "Mule" Haas (1903-1974) was a major leaguer with the Pittsburgh Pirates (1925), the Philadelphia Athletics (1928-32, 1938) and the Chicago White Sox (1933-37). During this time he played in three World Series: 1929, 1930, and 1931. After his playing career, he was a coach for the Chicago White Sox, and a manager in the minor leagues. Then in 1951, Haas signed on as Athletic Consultant at Fort Monmouth where he was the manager of



George "Mule" Haas' baseball card from the 1933 Philadelphia Athletics.

the time, but recalled Haas fondly: “In my mind, if there was any justification for hero worship, that was it. I remember getting his autograph on index cards and I still prize them.” Liegl said, “When he was the coach of the Fort Monmouth baseball team, my father took me to the Fort to watch one of the practices. Again, he was just as attentive and nice, and I remember leaving with a bag of about twenty used baseballs he had given me from that practice. I wish now that I had enough maturity to ask really good questions and really get to know this gentle giant of a man who must have had so many stories to tell of a time long gone in baseball history.”



Fort Monmouth battles the Boston Braves. Major Leaguer Marius Russo tags Braves pitcher Ben Cordoni out at the bag.

Stadium because right-handers couldn't get the ball in the air off him.” And Ted Williams had a .344 career batting average.

Baseball in the Signal Corps, at home and abroad

Another famous Fort Monmouth and Major League All-Star was Marius Russo. On June 6, 1939, Russo debuted with the New York Yankees. He played four years with the Bronx Bombers, and was their best pitcher in 1941. Beside this, he made two post-season starts in the 1941 and 1943 World Series, and both were complete game wins. He joined the Army in 1944, where he played for Signal Corps teams, then returned to the Yankees and pitched again briefly in 1946.

Ted Williams spoke of Russo in his book *My Turn at Bat - The Story of My Life*: “I remember going to New York early that year (1941)... Marius Russo was pitching, a left-hander with a sidearm fastball that sank. He was good in the

SGT John Paul Redmond from Company A, 49th Signal Corps was stationed in the Pacific Theater during World War II. Even in a coral-covered place like Guam, the great American pastime was enjoyed. The Company built their own ballpark, with a coral infield, and built a backstop of chicken wire and even erected seats along the sides for players and spectators. Lights were installed for night baseball as a finishing touch, and this allowed the men to compete against other outfits stationed in Guam other than just Sunday afternoons. SGT Redmond said, "This Company was building a reputation for themselves on Guam due to... the ballpark, and everyone could enjoy good, clean fun and relieve the monotony of overseas duty."

Joe DiMaggio's final home run did not mean the end of his impact on baseball. In July 1951, the Yankee outfielder signed autographs and coached a short hitting clinic for the youth league to commemorate the opening of Colin Kelly Field in the Charles Wood Area. He spent the evening signing baseballs and gloves for admiring young fans.