

FINDING MUMFORD'S MEADOW

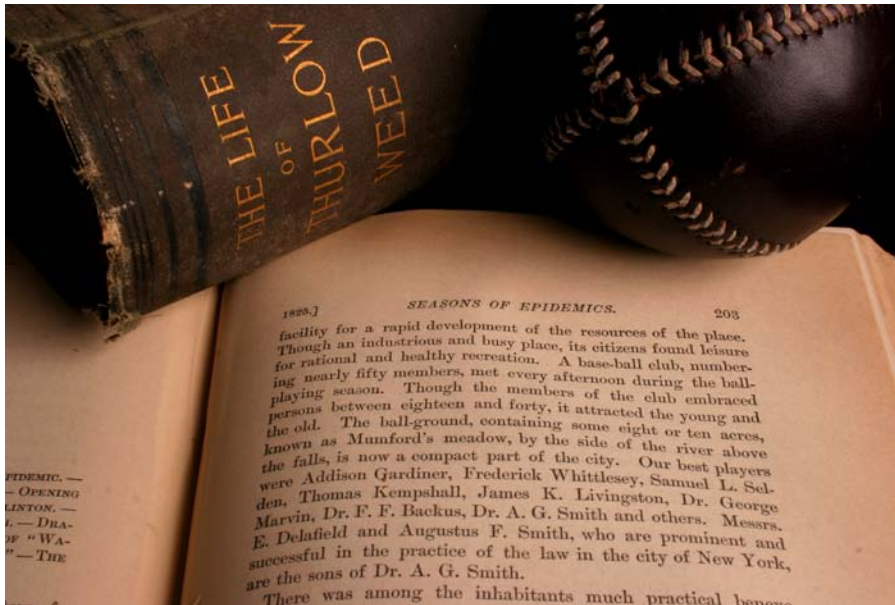


By Joe Territo

“By the side of the river above the falls.” That’s where Thurlow Weed told me it was.

Although Mr. Weed has been dead for over 125 years, he spoke to me about a place called Mumford’s Meadow, the site of some of the earliest documented base ball matches in American history. A site that holds a very prominent and significant place on the baseball history time-line. He told me about this special ball field through his 19th century autobiography. I purchased an original copy at an antique shop because I had heard about Mr. Weed’s accounts of our American past time in its infancy and I wanted to read it with my own eyes. He talks about those early base ball games as taking place in 1825 – fourteen years before Abner Doubleday supposedly invented the game in Cooperstown during the summer of 1839.

Published documentation of base ball during the first part of the 19th century is rare but there it was on page 203 of this musty, old book. *“By the side of the river”* – what river? *“Above the falls”*- what falls? The river described happens to be our own Genesee and the falls, High Falls, just a few blocks south-east of Rochester’s current home for baseball, Frontier Field.



Thurlow Weed was one of Rochester's early residents as well as the publisher of a weekly newspaper called the Rochester Telegraph. He was also very involved in local and state politics. In addition to his brief description of Mumford's Meadow, he also tells us that a Rochester base ball club, numbering nearly 50 members, met every afternoon during the ball-playing season. Was Rochester, New York the home of one of baseball's very earliest field of dreams?

Like a Civil War history buff in search of a significant battlefield, I needed to know the exact location of Mumford's Meadow. This site, after all, could be baseballs equivalent of Bull Run. I enlisted the help and guidance of well-known Rochester baseball historian and author Priscilla Astifan. Together we began to speculate on exactly where this important baseball field could have been.

I mentioned to Priscilla that after reading Thurlow Weed's words, "*by the side of the river above the falls,*" over and over again, I began to focus on a site where the Federal

Building is today on State Street. I imagined that directly above the falls, at Browns Race, would have been far too busy of an area for base ball matches due to the activity of the mills at that time so slightly south of the falls seemed to make more sense. Priscilla told me that she had always had the same hunch of a similar location on the west side of the river but exactly where, had still eluded her too.

Two maps at the Rundell Library seemed to reveal important information. On a map from 1820, my eyes immediately went to where the Federal Building would eventually be. There, amongst an early tract of homes, sat a home on a small plot owned by William Mumford, one of Rochester's early settlers. Directly north east of Mr. Mumford's home, within a short walk, sat a large, flat, empty property "by the side of the river." Perfect for base ball! I felt I was zeroing in.

In 1827, yet another map of this area detailed a new street that ran directly through this land from east to west. This new street was named Mumford Street - in all likelihood to recognize Mr. Mumford's Meadow. Mumford Street is now the small section of Andrews Street that runs from State Street to the Andrews Street Bridge.

Once I felt as though we had identified this special place, the romance of what might have taken place there began to find its way into my imagination. I could almost visualize the members of Rochester's pioneer base ball club enjoying a summer afternoon out on the meadow. Although Thurlow Weed, upon reflection, specifically refers to the games at Mumford's Meadow as base ball, and indeed we would probably recognize their activity

as baseball, baseball scholars tell us that the game was in the midst of evolution in 1825. With that being said, it is likely that what was being played there on the meadow was an early form of base ball known as town ball.

It is also worth noting an intriguing connection between William Mumford's wife, Mary Bissett, and what baseball historians recognize as "the" earliest published evidence of baseball playing in America. In 2004 an original manuscript was discovered in Mrs. Mumford's hometown of Pittsfield Massachusetts. The document, uncovered by baseball historian John Thorn, is the minutes of a town meeting, dating to 1791. It seems that base ball was becoming a nuisance in Pittsfield as airborne base balls threatened the windows of a newly built meeting house. So the town legislature passed a law banning base ball within 80 yards of the meeting house.

It's interesting to think that Mary Mumford could have recommended her husband's meadow as a suitable place for base ball matches because it was free of development and due to her recollection of the trouble the game caused back in her home town.

So the next time you turn down Andrews Street from State Street, turn back in time to the mid 1820's and imagine the excitement that once took place there - the excitement of a brand new past time in our country. A game, taking root along with the wildflowers, growing in a very special meadow, evolving by the side of the Genesee River and above High Falls, in Rochester, New York.

WEED'S 1825 MUMFORD'S MEADOW ROSTER



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Joe Territo, is a member of the Society for American Baseball Research and a member of the Rochesters Base Ball Club - a 19th century vintage base ball team.

He is also a collector of baseball artifacts. Much of his collection is featured on his website – www.bullpenartifacts.com