

The Boys of S

19th Century Base Ball Comes to Fort DuPont State Park

The muckle stepped to the plate, and the bench hollered for the scouts to back up. As the bowler let go a dewdrop, the striker swung the willow and slammed a stinger to the far reaches of the garden. His nine cheered him on while one boodler on the sidelines groaned. The onion flew well out of reach of the rover, but the cloud hunter popped into the hands of one scout. “Player dead!” shouted the tally keeper.



photo courtesy DMBKphoto.com

SOUND LIKE A FOREIGN LANGUAGE? A crime scene? No, it's 19th century base ball, which has arrived at Fort DuPont State Park with a bang (or perhaps a crack of the bat). The Diamond State Base Ball Club, a collection of amateur ball players, brings its unique brand of entertainment to Fort DuPont State Park in Delaware City. The boys of summer deliver an actual athletic competition based upon the rules and customs of mid-19th century base ball (yes, the term was two words then). Diamond State strives to re-create the historic setting of

our national pastime's earliest days, when the sport was first organized by amateur ball clubs.

The modern Diamond State team, founded in 2009, is a revitalization of the original club that was started more than 135 years ago by a group of prominent attorneys and businessmen in Wilmington. The sport evolved through the 1850s, from being almost exclusively a children's game to one that became a recreational pastime of Civil War soldiers and prisoners in military camps. After the war's end, the game grew to become

Summers Past:

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PETER MORRILL

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universally popular. The Diamond State club of yesteryear quickly became a force in the state, challenging Delaware's two other more established clubs, the Atlas BBC of Delaware City and the Lenapi BBC of New Castle.

Today's team is a founding member of the Mid-Atlantic Vintage Base Ball league, an affiliation of 19th century ball clubs extending all the way from Brooklyn, New York to Williamsburg, Virginia. It's a collection of amateur ball players, volunteer members seeking an outlet for physical fitness and a little fun.

John Medkeff, Newark resident and team founder, discovered vintage base ball purely by accident. While researching for a book he is writing, he learned there was a vintage club right down the road from his home, in Elkton, Mary-

the game did elements of deception and trickery become part of the pitcher's repertoire. Three balls to the batter result in a walk, not four, but other than that and a few rule nuances, the vintage game is very similar to modern baseball. The ball is slightly larger but softer, and because it is used for the entire game it tends to soften as the game is played.

The team

Diamond State's roster is made up of "the greatest cast of characters" according to Medkeff, who "could moonlight as comedians if they wanted." Indeed, with player nicknames like Swampy, One Finger, Buzzsaw, Stones and Farmer, you had better have a good sense of humor. Spectators need to have that as well, because all balls entering the spectator's gallery are considered live and in play. The game harkens back to the days of chivalry and gentlemanly sport; it's common to hear an opposing player compliment his adversary for a good hit or skillful catch. The umpire's role is a bit different from modern ball - if unsure of a call, he may ask the spectator gallery for their thoughts on the play.

The club plays an impressive schedule from April to October, with home games at Ft. DuPont as well as away matches in Havre de Grace, Elkton, Philadelphia, and Gettysburg among others. All home matches are at 1pm, and a modest fee of \$2 per person helps to fund maintenance of the field and other associated expenses. A full schedule including the rules and history of the game can be found at www.diamondstatebaseball.org. Spectators are encouraged to bring a blanket or lawn chair for seating - come out and see "base ball, as it was intended to be played." **OD**

The Port Penn Historical Society is holding a vintage base ball game at the Port Penn Interpretive Center on Sunday, Oct. 17, as part of a fundraiser. The event will feature hot dogs, cracker jack, the game, of course, as well as a silent auction. Port Penn hosted its own team in the early 1900s called the Port Penn Peaches.



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139th Company Coast Artillery Corps, circa 1914. This image was taken outside of the mail soldier barracks at Fort DuPont. The building burned down in 1936 but was rebuilt and stands today as the Governor Bacon main hospital building.

land. "I attended a couple of Elkton's games," Medkeff said, "and since Delaware was one of the last East Coast states without its own vintage club, I decided to start Diamond State." A ball player through high school, Medkeff also keeps in touch with the modern-day game as a manager of his son's Little League teams.

His first struggle was to find a home field for the club. While scouting locations one day, he happened to drive past Fort DuPont State Park. Though he had been to Delaware City many times in his life and even had family in the town, he had never visited the park. On a whim, he decided to turn into the park to take a look. "I was absolutely floored by the beauty of the place and knew immediately that this is where the vintage club should be located," he said. Only later did he discover that one of the very first baseball clubs formed in Delaware played in Delaware City in the 1860s.

Fort DuPont State Park staff was thrilled to partner with the Diamond State Club and bring the unique brand of entertainment to Delaware City as



Curtis Saunders (right) talks with a player on the opposing team in June 2009. The "War Department Theater," built in 1933, is in the background.

well. The mix of history and sport was a perfect match for the little-known park, which also hosts scenic river trails, a fishing point, basketball and tennis courts, and a boat dock. Historic buildings such as the original post guardhouse, noncommissioned officers quarters and theatre beckon to the days when Fort DuPont

stood guard over the Delaware River.

In fact, the team plays on an original base ball field used by the Army during the park's time as a military post. The uniforms are based on those worn by the team's namesake during the 1866 season, their first full season of play. While no photographs or drawings of the original club are known to exist, a written description of the uniforms has survived. Donning a blue skull cap, a blue and white checkered shirt and black trousers, the Diamond States are true to the style of their original team, with a slight exception of blue instead of black checkering in the shirt.

The game: then and now

One of the most obvious differences between today's game and the vintage game is the spartan use of equipment. Fielders wear no gloves; catchers wear no gear. According to John, early base ball was designed to be a hitter's game, so a pitcher's main role was to deliver the ball so that it could be hit. Thus, pitchers deliver an underhanded ball. Only later in