

MAIN STREET METAMORPHOSIS: THE IMPACTS OF BASEBALL TOURISM IN COOPERSTOWN, NEW YORK

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ABSTRACT: *Niche tourism destinations are a familiar and growing element of the American landscape. Scholarly attention has focused more on their profile and impacts than on their evolution. The village of Cooperstown, New York, is no exception. The goal of the present research was to explore the transition of Main Street Cooperstown from one typical of New York's small towns to a morphology redolent of baseball tourism. In many upstate New York communities, the development of the United States economy from manufacturing to service based during the greater part of the 1970s and 1980s negatively affected the prosperity of the region. Fortunately, it was during this time that Cooperstown's economy began to shift towards an emphasis on tourism, with numerous commercial baseball ventures opening to augment the already existing Baseball Hall of Fame. Analysis of successive directory and photographic sources, along with an examination of past research done on the composition of business types on Cooperstown's Main Street, reveals a gradual accretion of exploitative baseball endeavors. This was consequently combined with a diminution of basic Main Street services. Despite these facts, historic preservation and architectural stewardship in the village have maintained the visual integrity of the town's Victorian streetscape. In the new millennium, the nearly complete transition towards a baseball based economy has slowed owing perhaps to the dilution and dispersion of the visitor market to outside the village proper.*

Keywords: *Cooperstown, tourism, baseball, Main Street*

BACKGROUND

Baseball, one of the most popular sports in the United States and often called the American pastime, has an interesting home in the small village of Cooperstown, New York. In the most unexpected of places, Cooperstown is considered to be the birthplace of the game and is now home to the Baseball Hall of Fame. It is hard to deny the influence baseball has over Cooperstown, and where this influence is most noticeable is on Main Street. Upon taking a walk down the street, a fan would delight in shops catering to every desire from baseball souvenirs to peanuts and Cracker Jacks, but for the average town resident the supply of basic necessities and luxuries is minimal. Of course, Cooperstown was not always like this and for two major reasons. First because before the automobile, village residents could not have relied on a predominantly baseball economy to get their necessary provisions. Second, a baseball economy could not have existed without the tourists supplying the business. Before fast and easy transportation, the creation of an economy based on tourism would have been impossible because of Cooperstown's isolation. Therefore, if the baseball stores were not always there, when did they start appearing and what were the buildings used for prior to baseball's arrival? Some of the buildings themselves provide clues to what they used to be but in most cases on Main Street, its history must be put together piece by piece, until presenting a clear present day image.

INTRODUCTION AND APPROACH

By small town standards, Cooperstown's Main Street is well preserved. Most of the building facades have not fallen victim to major alterations and have generally remained the same as when they were first built 150 years ago (Hollis, 1976). Although the buildings themselves have not changed much, building use and storefronts have gone through repeated conversion throughout the village's history, as is often the case in any town or city (Otte, 1990). The anomaly of Cooperstown's Main Street is the entire street as a whole underwent a transformation.

By analyzing past business directories and old photographs beginning around the start of the 20th century, it was possible to get an idea of what types of businesses used to be on Main Street and *when* the transition began to take place. Where these resources were unavailable, information from a small collection of past research on the subject provided vital data to fill in the gaps, along with interviews of past town residents.

BRIEF HISTORY OF COOPERSTOWN

The first seed of baseball tourism was planted in 1839 when Abner Doubleday, who later served as a Union General during the Civil War, supposedly invented the modern day version of the game in the village (Birdsall, 1925). This fact has never been proven and acts more as an accepted myth than a true statement. It is true though that during the Civil War, Doubleday is known to have given baseballs and bats to his soldiers for morale and diversion, incidentally diffusing the game by example (New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, 2010). It was also during the 1860s that Cooperstown underwent its first major transformation, when in 1862 a large fire destroyed much of Main Street. It was quickly rebuilt and many of those buildings are still standing (Otte, 1990). Between 1880 and 1890 the village population grew at its fastest rate of nearly 21%, to reach a total population of 2,650 residents. This growth would continue until in 1930, Cooperstown reached its highest population of approximately 2,900 people (United States Census Bureau, 2016). The next seed of baseball tourism was planted in 1928 with the construction of Doubleday Field, a baseball stadium, and then a decade later in 1939, the Baseball Hall of Fame. This year was significant, marking the supposed 100-year anniversary of the game's invention (Hollis, 1976). These were the initial catalysts that launched the town into becoming a baseball attraction. Recently, the addition of the Cooperstown Dreams Park in 1996, which serves as the setting for a large scale little league baseball tournament, brings in over 20,000 participants each summer not including the players' families. Whether this latest attraction is actually beneficial to Cooperstown will be examined later.

TRANSITIONAL PHASES

Cooperstown's Main Street has undergone two transitional phases, with a third transitional phase in progress. The first transitional phase took place during the first half of the 20th century. During this time, Main Street began to modernize, shedding many of its 19th century storefronts and adding cosmetic substitutes. The second transitional phase began during the 1950s and ended around the beginning of the 21st century, when the third transitional phase subsequently started. During the last 60 years, strict Main Street preservation and zoning laws have been imposed, preserving architectural integrity even if baseball has taken over as the main business.

Transitional Phase 1

After the incorporation of telephone and telegraph lines in 1886, the next big addition to Main Street came in 1904, when 25,000 square feet of cement sidewalks were put in. This was the first of many alterations to follow in making the street more consumer friendly. In 1917, the street was paved and trees and streetlights put in place to line it. Cooperstown's signature flagpole was erected at the center of the street as well. A result of increased automobile usage was the introduction of the village's sole spotlight on Main Street in 1948 (Otte, 1990).

The change of store types between 1897 and 1928 was typified by adaptation and innovation. Businesses like grocers, tailors, jewelers, printers, hardware suppliers, clothing shops, and toy stores were present in both years due to their consistent demand. Notable additions in 1929 compared to 1897 included car shops and services like those offered by mechanics and taxis, radios and radio services, and stores specializing in consumer items like personal cameras, all a result of improved technology. Other new store additions were simply the result of an increased population and demand for things like guns and ammunition, medicine, sporting goods, and musical instruments. A sharp rise in service industries like insurance, real estate, and dental care also took place due to population growth (Manning, 1928). Less than ten years after the completion of the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1939, the first baseball souvenir store was established at 93 Main Street in 1947, just 100 yards away from the museum. The name of the store was F. R. Woods and its opening would be the first of many to come, thus marking the beginning of Cooperstown's next foremost transitional phase.

Transitional Phase 2

The baseball theme shop at this time was an isolated incident, as it would be nearly 30 years before more baseball store types appeared on Main Street. It is important to note that between 1950 and 1980, the number of visitors to the Baseball Hall of Fame was increasing. Figures for Hall of Fame attendance show that in 1950 there was approximately 94,000 visitors while in 1970, that number rose to nearly 200,000 visitors (Otte, 1990). This increase in tourism jump-started the shift to more baseball stores, beginning close to the Hall of Fame and then sporadically emerging all along the street. The next baseball store after F.R. Woods was the National Pastime Gallery opened in

1983, located directly across the street. The founder of the National Pastime Gallery, Doug Walker, was quoted in 2004 as saying “I was surrounded by hardware stores and pharmacies, now it’s baseball, wall-to-wall”. He was referring to the fact that when he first opened his store, it was one of a kind, with the exception of F.R. Woods (Singer, 2004). The opening of these few stores, along with the increase in attendance to the Baseball Hall of Fame, marked the beginning of a 20-year period on Main Street characterized by a rapid increase in the number of baseball stores added. Research done in 2003 by the Oneonta Center for Social Science Research illustrates this diffusion of baseball stores onto Main Street from 1979 to 1999 and into the 21st century.

The Center for Social Science Research began by collecting data, marking all Main Street business types, starting in 1979, and classifying them into 6 categories. These categories were “food service”, “specialty baseball”, “specialty non-baseball”, “general”, “local service”, and “other”. “Food service” included businesses whose primary purpose was the preparation and service of food for consumption. The “specialty baseball” category included stores focused specifically on selling baseball related items like souvenirs, hats, jerseys, bats, etc. “Specialty non-baseball” entailed businesses that specialized in selling predominantly one particular product such as books, arts and crafts, or toys. That said, it does not mean they did not sell baseball items at all. The “general” category encompassed any store that sold goods used by the general population on a regular basis. “Local service” included dental care, law firms, real estate, printing businesses, etc., and the “other” category contained things like art galleries or businesses that did not fit entirely into one category or any category at all (Thomas, 2003). As a point of reference, assume that for all years surveyed, there were approximately 80 stores in total on Main Street.

The results of their research showed that in 1979, the share of “specialty baseball” stores was only 4%. This included F.R. Woods and then one or two other smaller souvenir shops; notice less than four stores made up that 4% figure, due to the fact the total number of stores was 80 businesses. What this 4% means is that in 1979, the share of baseball businesses on Main Street was very small. The category containing the most businesses at 38% was “general”, then “food service” and “local service” coming in at about 20% each (Figure 1.A). In 1979, much of the Main Street was catered toward people living in Cooperstown, not those visiting. For the most part, it was the town’s residents supplying the majority of year round business.

The next 20 years after 1979 marked a major transition to the Main Street. During this time, Baseball Hall of Fame attendance increased from 200,000 visitors per year to 380,000 in 1999, a 90% increase. The result was the street went from catering town residents, to catering tourists. The data for 1999 showed that the number of “specialty baseball stores” increased to a total of 18%, but more noteworthy was the decline of the “general” category by 25% to just 13% of the total Main Street business composition. Taking place of this market share was “specialty non-baseball”, which increased 10% and “specialty baseball” which also increased in total percentage (Figure 1.B). These being two categories that get a large portion of their sales from tourists. Again, assuming that Main Street has a total of 80 business. The trend of increasing baseball store domination continued into the 21st century, but has recently slowed as visitors to the Baseball Hall of Fame have been in decline during the past 10 years. Estimated attendance in the year 1999 was 380,000 visitors, while in 2015 that number had shrunk to 275,000, a decrease of nearly 28% (Caple, 2013).

Data for 2007 showed that since 1999, the share of “specialty baseball” stores had increased to 25%, making up the single largest store type on Main Street. The “general” category continued to decline and there was a dip in “local service” and “specialty non-baseball” stores. A reason for the decline in “specialty non-baseball” stores being they simply switched to specializing in baseball products (Thomas and Smith, 2008). The considerable decline in local services is a bit more complex. Looking at census reports for Cooperstown, the village population has been steadily decreasing since the 1960s, with the sharpest declines coming between 1990 and 2010 (United States Census Bureau, 2016). The migration of people out of Cooperstown, at least to its urban fringe, could be a factor in the decline of local service industries on the street (Figure 1.C).

Transitional Phase 3

Copying the methods used by the Center for Social Science Research, independent research was conducted to show the present day situation on Main Street as of 2015. First the total number of stores on Main Street were counted, totaling approximately 80 businesses. Then the business types were categorized, copying the approach used by the Oneonta Center for Social Science Research as closely as possible. Acknowledging the fact that slight statistical discrepancies may have occurred, the data for 2015 showed a differing trend compared to what has generally been happening the past 40 years. While the figures for “specialty non-baseball”, “local service”, “general”, and the “other” categories have not changed significantly since 2007, “food service”, and “specialty baseball” have altered. Since 2007 there has been a nearly 10% rise in “food service” establishments on Main Street (Figure 1.D).

One would think that with the decline of Cooperstown’s population, that would hurt the food industry, but it has not been so. A common trend the past 30 was to open baseball shops because they were profitable business

ventures, but as the number of baseball stores increased so did the competition and eventually operating that kind of store was less lucrative. Rent on Main Street is also very high, forcing many businesses to close. Joan Clark, a long time resident of Main Street has been witness to this fact saying, “you see someone come in who thinks they are going to make money on baseball, but by the end of the season they can’t afford to pay the rent”. The result was an expansion in food services such as restaurants, ice cream shops, and quick food establishments like pizzerias and delicatessens. The advantages of these businesses is they have longer daily operating hours, a business season not just confined to the summer months when there are most tourists, and potential for higher price mark ups compared to baseball stores (Otte, 1990).

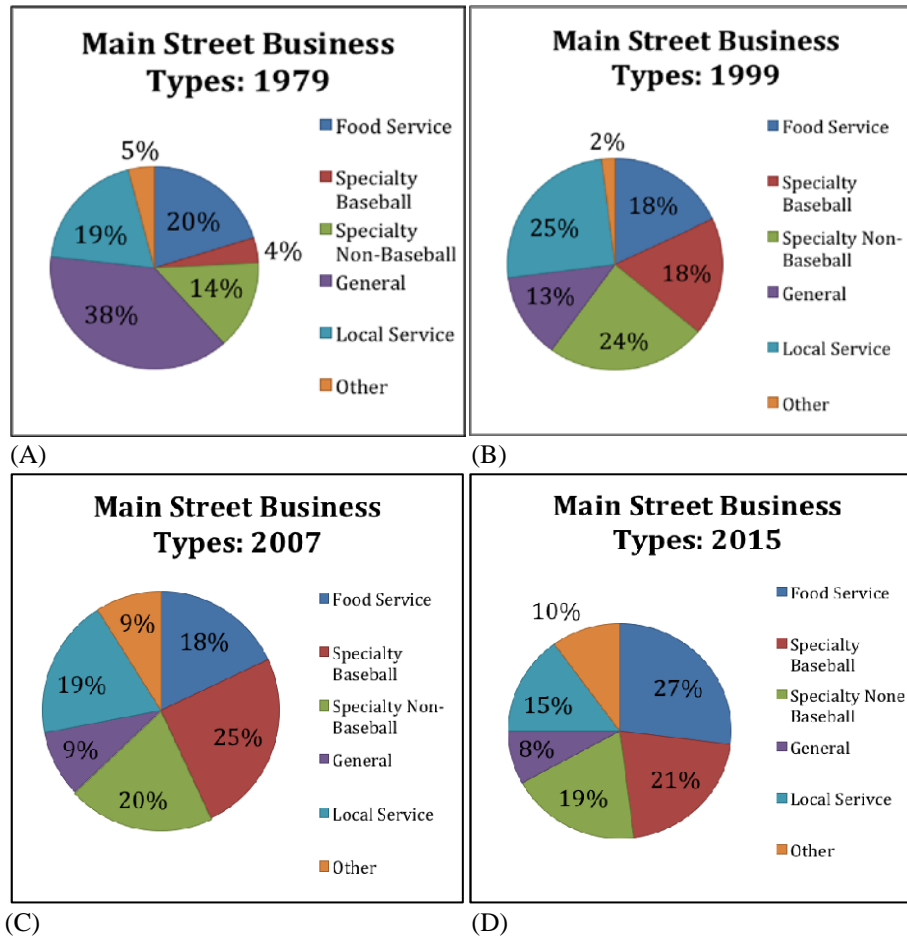


Figure 1: Percent distributions of Main Street business types.

These factors led to a noticeable increase in the “food service” category and a slight decrease in the amount of “specialty baseball” stores by almost 5%. The decrease is small, but considering it is the first time the number of “specialty baseball” stores has declined since at least 1979, it is something that should not be overlooked. Whether or not the decline in baseball stores is a trend destined to continue is yet to be determined, but there are other factors which could make the decline a more forthcoming disposition. As mentioned before, the introduction of the Cooperstown Dreams Park brought in many new baseball tourists, in addition to the ones already coming for the Baseball Hall of Fame. The problem is the Dreams Park is not actually located near the village but 5 miles out of town, and beginning around 2011, there was a massive expansion of the park’s facilities. This could be a major factor contributing ironically to the decline in visitors to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Among other things, what this expansion entailed was a large increase in food services and baseball stores in the park itself, which decreased the amount of people wanting and/or needing to go into the village. Would be visitors to the town are busy watching a family member compete in the tournament for a week. After the competition is finished, they may have no need or desire to go into a congested town to shop for souvenirs and other items they could get at the park, or visit a museum they may have

already gone to in the past. Another problem is the families of the tournament participants remain for as long as their child's team is still competing. This leads to many people staying for extended periods of time, taking up accommodation space that would have otherwise been used for new waves of tourists who have not yet been to the village. In summation, visitor turnover has drastically decreased as a result of the Dreams Park (Caple, 2013). But while one cannot tell what the future holds for Cooperstown's Main Street, by taking a closer look at the street in the present day, it is possible to get a hold of some of its past.

PAST AND PRESENT COMPARISONS AND OBSERVATIONS

The historical integrity of Cooperstown's Main Street is virtually unmatched in all of New York State. While in many villages, buildings change to compensate a new business function, in Cooperstown's case the buildings have not changed for 150 years, therefore new business functions have had to adapt to the structures that house them (Otte, 1990). For the most part, stores in specific buildings on Main Street have come and gone, along with the specific types of businesses those buildings held. A few structures though have been home to a particular kind of business for much of their history, the most common instance being with restaurants. Looking at Figure 2, one can see in both images, restaurants are operating in the past and present in the same location and building (Telfer, 1935). Most buildings on the street have not had the same fate as these; the majority now host to something much different than their original function.



Figure 2: Mike's Lunch Room in 1935 (left) and the Cooperstown Diner in 2016 (right).

The building which houses Mickey's Place, a store which sells baseball apparel, in the past for many years served as a hardware store, evidenced by Figure 3 showing the building labeled as H.M. Hooker Hardware (Smith, 1871). The location of the previously mentioned National Pastime Gallery, opened by Doug Walker, was situated to the right of this location; further confirmation of its past based on what Walker said about his business being next to places like hardware stores. Figure 4 shows the First National Bank of Cooperstown, now a baseball wax museum. Evidence of it being a bank is obvious as high up on the building, an inscription reads "First National Bank Building" (Telfer, 1920). Some final examples with Smalley's Theatre, opened in 1933 shown in Figure 5. The theatre's marquee is still part of the façade and an old advertisement is visible on the rear of the building. The theatre eventually closed in 1987 and is now comprised of a baseball, a cigar, and an ice cream shop (Telfer, 1933). Smalley's Theatre is a good example of how sometimes a building itself can reveal what types of business it previously held.

Impacts of Baseball Tourism on Main Street, Cooperstown



Figure 3: H.M. Hooker & Company in 1871 (left) and Mickey's Place in 2016 (right).



Figure 4: First National Bank of Cooperstown in 1920 (left) and the Heroes of Baseball Wax Museum in 2016 (right).



Figure 5: Smalley's Theatre in 1933 (left), an old advertisement for the theatre on the back of the building as of 2016 (middle) and the theatre in 2016, now containing multiple businesses (right).

CONCLUSIONS

The baseball trend in Cooperstown seems to be slowing, based on the declining number of specialty baseball stores on Main Street and the decrease in attendance to the Baseball Hall of Fame, but it is unlikely that the theme will ever disappear. Changes to the early landscape of Main Street with the addition of a paved road, sidewalks, street and stoplights, and the planting of more trees made the street a consumer friendly one. The creation of early baseball attractions such as Doubleday Field baseball stadium and especially the Baseball Hall of Fame brought in tourists. In 1947, F.R. Woods baseball store was the first of its kind on Main Street and 30 years later this one baseball store began to be joined by many others. In 2007, nearly one quarter of the street's businesses were catered towards baseball tourists by specializing in the sale of baseball related items. Recently though, there is evidence to suggest that the development of baseball stores on Main Street is slowing as a result of high rents cutting into profits and competition from too many other baseball businesses. The out of town Cooperstown Dreams Park, once thought to be a catalyst for bringing more tourists into the village, has also turned out to have the opposite effect.

Observations of the Main Street show that many of the buildings reveal what their previous functions were with clues from either advertisements, labels, or in their architecture. Old photo albums and interviews helped shed light on particular trends that emerged on Main Street such as the long continuation of buildings functioning for one purpose, an uncommon fate as most shifted to completely different uses. What can be said about Main Street Cooperstown is that while the lack of diversity due to the comprehensive theme of baseball can be overbearing, it is thanks to baseball that the village has prospered and continues to do so. Baseball has prevented Cooperstown from meeting the same stagnation that so many other small upstate New York villages have suffered. Another quote by long time Cooperstown resident Joan Clark reiterates this point, "Everyone complains about baseball. If it wasn't for baseball, we would be like every little town that is boarded up". Baseball tourism is what keeps the village alive and without it, the town would surely not have been what it currently is; the Main Street dead ceasing to exist only as a barren street, not the attraction it is today.

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