
LOCAL HISTORY & GENEALOGY DEPARTMENT
THE BERKSHIRE ATHENAEUM
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Background information concerning the original 1791 document containing the bylaw prohibiting baseball, and other games played with balls.

Berkshire Athenaeum document designated as:

XVIII. A #10 of the Town of Pittsfield, Original Papers

Dated September 5, 1791. Bylaw to prevent damage to new meeting house windows: no ball games within eighty yards of the building.

History of the Document

The document was written in September of 1791 by Woodbridge Little, the first lawyer in Pittsfield and long-time town selectman. This is the original document presented for a vote at the town meeting of September 5, 1791 for the purpose of creating a bylaw that would insure the protection of the windows of the new meeting house, soon to be built. (This would have been the Congregational Church, designed by renowned architect Charles Bulfinch in 1789 and completed in 1793.)

The original document shows evidence of having been folded, with the word "Recorded" written on the back. Normal procedure would have been to store the original in some type of a docket envelope and record the new bylaw in the town record book. This is precisely the procedure followed in this case, as is confirmed by consulting Book 2 of the Pittsfield Town Books, where a "true copy" was entered under the date of September 5, 1791 by town clerk Joshua Danforth. This town book remains in the possession of the Pittsfield City Clerk to this day.

At some point in time, the original document, along with close to 1000 others with dates ranging from 1739 - 1843 were affixed into a large ledger volume using a form of tape (this is not scotch tape) or small metal strait pins. Many other documents in this collection bear the same tape residue seen on the right hand side of this document. At some point during the first half of the twentieth century, this book of original documents was transferred from the Pittsfield City Clerk to the Berkshire Athenaeum, where Local History Librarian Fanny Clark (who retired in 1956) compiled a partial index to the documents. In 1988 Athenaeum staff, in a first step toward archival preservation, removed these documents from the ledger book, carefully maintaining the original order, and re-housed them in archival folders and document storage boxes.

In the fall of 1998, Athenaeum librarians created an item level annotated guide to the collection, with each document being assigned a unique number for identification purposes. (The document under consideration carries the number XVIII. A #10). In the process of creating this guide, each document was examined and read to determine general content, and a synopsis given in the annotated guide.

In the spring of 1999, with funding provided through an LSTA Grant administered by the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, the Athenaeum commissioned the microfilming of this entire collection, as well as two other major collections of 18th century documents, to assure the permanent preservation and protection of the original documents while simultaneously facilitating future public access to the wealth of information they contain. As can be seen from this particular item, there still remains a great deal of expensive and labor-intensive conservation work to be completed on these documents. There are literally thousands of such items in the collections of the Berkshire Athenaeum.

Publication History of the Document:

It is certain that Joseph E. A. Smith quoted from this document in the first volume of the History of Pittsfield, published in 1869 (p.447). Whether he consulted the original documents, the Record Books, or both in his research is unknown, but he definitely used at least one of these sources.

In 1972, Edward R. Knurow, during the course of his research into the Record Books at City Hall, copied this document along with several others outlining the construction of the Meeting House. Knurow's manuscript books are now in the possession of the Berkshire Athenaeum where this record can be found in Volume # 33, p.573-574.

During 1999, while the collection of Original Pittsfield Papers was being prepared for microfilming, the Berkshire Family History Association was also indexing this volume of Knurow's materials. The material concerning the Meeting House having been noted in both of these sources, the reference was published in the Winter 2000 edition of the Berkshire Genealogist (Vol.21, No. 1, p.36) with the following editorial comment included:

“[According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, ‘It was in Cooperstown, New York, in the summer of 1839, that Abner Doubleday was alleged to have laid out the first baseball field and conducted the first game of baseball ever played.’ Could Pittsfield have jumped the historical gun by over 48 years?]”

Since the publication of the document in 2000, the library has received several requests for information concerning its existence and has supplied copies from the microfilm to interested researchers.

This synopsis prepared by:
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