

The **BASEBALL RELIQUARY** Inc.

THE STORY OF LOUIS SOCKALEXIS



Louis Sockalexis
(Click to view larger image.)

Although it was discovered in the 1960s that the first Native American in the major leagues was James Madison Toy, who played in the American Association in 1887 and 1890, the first man known and treated as an American Indian was Louis Sockalexis. Born on October 24, 1871 on the Penobscot Indian reservation outside of Old Town, Maine, Sockalexis displayed incredible athletic talent in his youth. Tales abounded of his great throwing arm, with descriptions of him hurling a baseball over 600 feet across the Penobscot River. He went on to become a star pitcher and outfielder at both Holy Cross and Notre Dame, where life and legend continued to intertwine. One of his colossal home runs was estimated at 600 feet, while another reportedly broke a fourth-story window in the Brown University chapel. He stole six bases in one game; pitched three no-hitters; and one of his outfield throws, measured by two Harvard professors, traveled 414 feet on the fly.

Sockalexis was signed to a professional contract in 1897 by the Cleveland Spiders baseball club of the National League and was an immediate success, hitting an impressive .338 with eight triples and 16 stolen bases in his first 60 games. He appeared to be on target to fulfill the enormous promise predicted for him by New York Giants manager John McGraw, who described Sockalexis as the greatest natural talent he had ever encountered in the game. But his rookie season and his professional baseball career were soon ground to a halt. A drinking problem that had begun in his college days resurfaced, and on July 4, 1897, during a party, an inebriated Sockalexis jumped from the second-story window of a brothel, severely injuring his ankle. He played only sporadically during the next two years, and his last game in the major leagues came in 1899 at the age of 27.

The challenges faced by an athlete breaking racial barriers in any sport are intimidating, and it is difficult to comprehend the sense of loneliness that would be part of such an athlete's experience. Jackie Robinson's travails as the first African American major league ballplayer are well documented. Although Native Americans were accepted in professional baseball a half century before African Americans were, they were still subjected to racism. In his brief major league career, Sockalexis was a sideshow attraction. Tapping into a public consciousness that still remembered the Indian Wars of the 1870s, spectators for opposing teams were reported to have showered racial slurs and invectives on the Penobscot Indian when he stepped to the plate. Fans imitated war whoops and war dances when Sockalexis came to town. He was exploited by those who had a business interest in baseball (i.e., the club owners and the press) and who, aware of the public's great curiosity in Sockalexis, cultivated his Indian image for the purpose of

selling tickets and newspapers. Sportswriters later attributed his rapid decline to an inherent "Indian weakness," the abuse of alcohol, which continued to perpetuate one of the most dominant and enduring Native American stereotypes, that of the drunken and lazy Indian.

Sockalexis spent his final years on the Penobscot Indian reservation, teaching Native American boys how to play baseball. It was reported that when he died of heart failure at the age of 42 on October 24, 1913, his yellowed press clippings were found inside his shirt pocket. Sockalexis was buried at the Old Town cemetery, with his name burned on a wood cross. In 1934, the State of Maine erected a stone marker on his grave.

In 1915, two years after the death of Sockalexis, the Cleveland ballclub (then nicknamed the "Naps," after their long-time player-manager Napoleon Lajoie) changed its nickname to the "Indians." Over the years, the club and major league baseball have claimed the name was changed to honor the memory of Sockalexis. In recent years, however, some researchers have called into question this long-believed story, much as an earlier generation of historians debunked the myth that Abner Doubleday invented the game of baseball. In an essay published in 1998 in the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, entitled "An Act of Honor or Exploitation?: The Cleveland Indians' Use of the Louis Francis Sockalexis Story," author Ellen J. Staurowsky argued that the name "Indians," and its attendant logos, were more likely chosen for exploitative purposes. This was a period in American history when Native American images were frequently used as distinguishing marks for products and when Native Americans were often equated with animals, as seen in a common expression of the day, "No Dogs. No Indians." A *Cleveland Plain Dealer* cartoonist at that time hinted that the nickname was bestowed on the club by sportswriters who hoped the team would emulate the Boston Braves. The sensation of the baseball world in 1914, the Miracle Braves, as they were called, rose from last place on July 4 to win 60 of their final 76 games and capture the National League pennant. One Cleveland writer reported, "We'll have the Indians on the warpath all the time, eager for scalps to dangle at their belts."

In recent years, the story of Louis Sockalexis has usually been brought up in connection with protests by many citizens who have argued that the Cleveland Indians nickname, and the club's smiling Chief Wahoo mascot, are manifestations of racism. These protesters charge that spectators today, just as they did a century earlier in Sockalexis' time, don headdresses, wear "war paint" and sing "war chants," and chop tomahawks in a display of behavior that is demeaning to Native Americans. The very things that are sacred to Native Americans -- the wearing of eagle feathers and religious chanting and dancing -- are made comical or quaint in the confines of the ballpark.

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Your friend,

L. F. Bookalips
1806
1900.

The **BASEBALL RELIQUARY** Inc.

SHRINE TO LOUIS SOCKALEXIS

October 7 & 8, 2000

Hahamongna Watershed Park

Pasadena, California

On October 7 and 8, 2000, NewTown, a consortium of Southern California-based artists, presented "Art InTents," a series of outdoor, site-specific installations by many of the region's most fascinating visual, sonic, and conceptual artists. The two-day event took place at Hahamongna Watershed Park in Pasadena, California, where the waters of the Arroyo Seco flow from the San Gabriel Mountains into the Los Angeles basin. The area was originally occupied by the Hahamongna village of the Tongva people, which the Spanish, and later American, invaders called the Gabrielino Indians.



Detail of shrine to Louis Sockalexis. (Click to view larger image.)

In response to the Native American heritage of the area, the Baseball Reliquary created a shrine to [Louis Sockalexis](#) on the baseball field at Hahamongna Watershed Park. Born on October 24, 1871 on the Penobscot Indian reservation in Maine, Sockalexis played college and major league baseball just prior to the turn of the 20th century. His story is one of the great, yet typical, tragedies of America's tarnished relationships with Native Americans. With much justification, author Harry Grayson, in his book *They Played the Game: The Story of Baseball Greats* (1944), called

• Sockalexis "the most tragic figure in baseball history."

The Baseball Reliquary provided both the foundation for the shrine, a three-foot long by four-foot wide wooden pallet, as well as its centerpiece, a vintage photograph of Sockalexis suspended from an upright home plate. The Reliquary also provided materials such as native herbs, plants, animal parts, and feathers so that people visiting the shrine could create their own offering. In addition, the Reliquary encouraged individuals to bring their own related materials to add to the shrine.



*Centerpiece of shrine to Louis Sockalexis featured dream catcher with photo of the Native American baseball immortal suspended from upright home plate.
(Click to view larger image.)*



Boulder used in place of second base, with red rocks and detritus representing southern direction of the Penobscot Nation. (Click to view larger image.)

Eighty pounds of white and yellow corn meal went into making the medicine wheel that surrounded the shrine. River boulders taken from the Hahamongna Watershed were used in place of home plate and the bases to represent the four cardinal directions of the Penobscot Nation: white for north, red for south, yellow for east, and blue for west. During the course of the shrine's construction, several people went around Hahamongna Watershed Park and picked up rocks and detritus, which, based on their color, were added to the shrine's four directions.

At the conclusion of the two-day event, the shrine to Louis Sockalexis was carefully dismantled for future traveling exhibitions. The Baseball Reliquary is indebted to NewTown, sponsor of "Art InTents," and to Albert Kilchesty, Kevin Cloud Brechner, and Nancy Hotaling for their assistance and expertise in the conception and implementation of this project.

(Photos courtesy of Larry Goren and Nancy Hotaling.)