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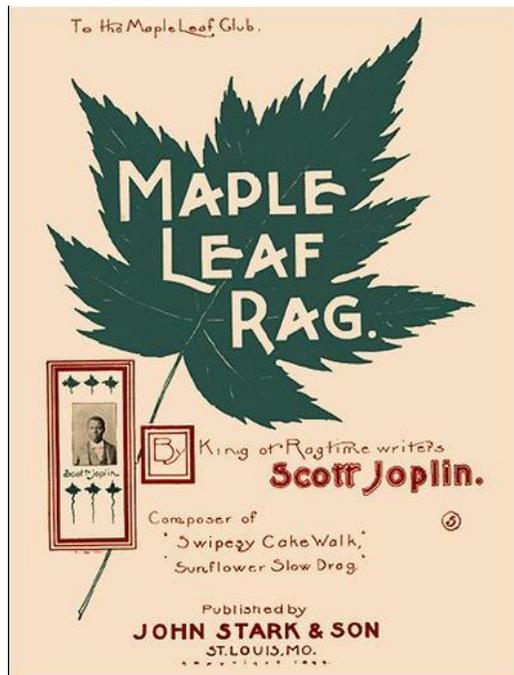
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“The game is afoot!”

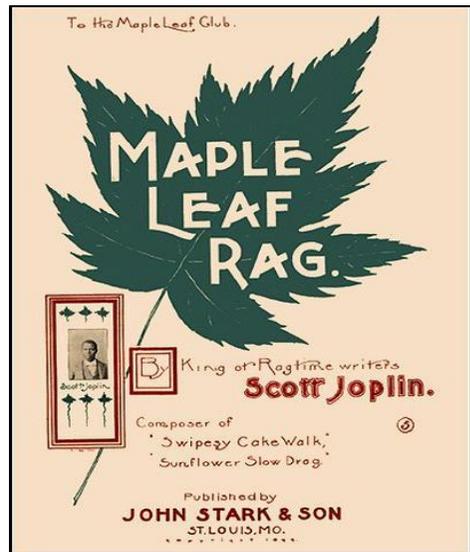
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle penned those words for Sherlock Holmes in the opening of *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange*.^{*} In the present context, the “game” is baseball, and the team of interest was organized by composer Scott Joplin and fellow musician Henry Jackson in Sedalia, Missouri. The game was scheduled for August 1900, less than a year after Joplin’s *Maple Leaf Rag* was first published and his reputation began to grow.

While exploring a mystery, whether real or fictional, the investigator can experience a sense of pleasure during the process and gratification when the mystery is solved. Yet some mysteries cannot be solved with certainty because critical information is unavailable. In these instances, all that remains are hypotheses, however credible they may be. The mystery surrounding the case of Scott Joplin’s baseball club is one such challenge. A baseball mystery. The game is afoot.

Scott Joplin was born in northeastern Texas, although the specific location is unknown, as is the date, likely sometime between July 1867 and January 1868. In his youth, he studied music in Texarkana, and he might have attended high school in Sedalia. The first known mention of Joplin in newspapers listed him as a member of the Texarkana Minstrels in 1891. His travels apparently led him to Sedalia in the autumn of 1894.¹

Joplin continued to travel, but his time in Sedalia lasted until 1901. After moving to St. Louis to pursue his musical career, he returned to Sedalia briefly in 1904, following his marriage to Freddie Alexander in Little Rock, Arkansas. Sadly, she died of pneumonia only 10 weeks later, and Joplin returned to St. Louis.²

While living in Sedalia, Scott Joplin composed, performed, and taught music. His best-known composition, *Maple Leaf Rag*, was first published there in August or September 1899. *Maple Leaf* was also the name of a local African American social club on East Main Street incorporated in December 1898 (the site is commemorated



^{*} The phrase was first used by William Shakespeare in *King Henry IV Part I* (Act 1, Scene 3) and *King Henry V* (Act 3, Scene 1).

as Maple Leaf Park). Scott Joplin was a charter member of the club, which was open less than two years. It is unknown if he named the song after the club, as suggested on the cover of an early edition of the sheet music (“To the Maple Leaf Club”). Perhaps the club adopted the unpublished song’s name. Perhaps neither connection is true.³

One of Joplin’s collaborators in Sedalia was Henry Jackson, who worked as a porter for the Missouri–Kansas–Texas or MK&T (Katy) Railroad. Jackson also played piano at Hunter’s bagnio (brothel) on West Main Street.⁴

As the *Maple Leaf Rag* was growing in popularity, “Scott Joplin and Henry Jackson’s Rag Time Musicale” was scheduled for 27 June 1900 in Sedalia’s Forest Park. The event was publicized daily in the *Sedalia Democrat* in a two-column ad for a week. In contrast, the full report of the program in the *Democrat* was brief. “Scott Joplin and other colored musicians gave a rag-time musicale at Forest park last night. There was a large attendance and the entertainment was creditable.”⁵

Despite this less than glowing review, the production was repeated on July 11 “by request.” The *Democrat* published a longer report the next day. The performance “under the direction of Scott Joplin, Sedalia’s well known musician and composer, and Henry Jackson” consisted of 14 “up-to-date” songs and was attended by several hundred people. “Messrs. Joplin and Jackson deserve much credit for their entertainment.”⁶

Five days later, on July 17, it was announced that a new baseball club had been organized in Sedalia the previous night. The next day, a few additional details (very few) were published in the *Sedalia Democrat*.⁷

Colored Baseball Team.

Messrs. Joplin and Jackson, colored, last night organized a baseball club and named it Robb and Shortridge. The first game will be played here with a team from Kansas City on August 4.

Kansas City Club Coming.

The Shortridge-Robb baseball club, colored, will play the J. W. Jenkins club, of Kansas City, on August 4 at Liberty park.

Sedalia Democrat, 17 July 1900, p 5 and
18 July 1900, p 1.

These two announcements include all the information known to have been published in contemporary newspapers about the ballclub. Unfortunately, copies of the city’s weekly black-owned newspaper, the *Sedalia Times*, edited by W.H. Carter from 1894 to 1905, are missing for 1900.

At the time, baseball, like the rest of society, was typically segregated, and Sedalia was periodically represented by black ballclubs of various names, such as Reds, Blues, and Browns, though none was mentioned in 1900. The black ballplayer from Sedalia who enjoyed the most success on the diamond was William “Plunk” Drake, born in 1895. Following his start on the local sandlots and with the city’s organized black ballclubs, Drake would pitch for teams such as J.L. Wilkinson’s integrated All Nations barnstorming club before the First World War. While serving in France in 1919, he played for the 805th Pioneer Infantry team. After the war, Drake played for and managed Negro National League clubs, including the St. Louis Giants and Kansas City Monarchs.⁸

One question that arises about the baseball club organized by Joplin and Jackson is the choice of its name. Why was it named for Shortridge and Robb? Why not the Maple Leaf Base Ball Club? There had been a Sedalia baseball team with that name in 1899, just as the *Maple Leaf Rag* was about to be published. The only known report of the team came in July, when it lost to the Eclipse baseball club, 28–10. There was no mention of either team being black (the Eclipses were also active in other years).⁹

Biographer Edward Berlin attributed the name of the Shortridge-Robb ballclub to recognition of white officials in Sedalia who were friendly to the local black community. A.L. Shortridge was an attorney who had recommended approval of the petition for the incorporation of the Maple Leaf Club (the social club). James “J.A.” Robb had been a railroad baggage handler (where he perhaps knew Jackson). In November 1898, Robb was elected constable in Sedalia, and he appointed two deputy constables—his brother Thomas Robb and Vest Witcher, a black man who had served as a “special officer” in Sedalia in 1896.¹⁰

Naming the black baseball club for white officials was not the only such instance of recognition at the time. On 10 July 1900, seven days before the baseball club was announced, Scott Joplin and Henry Jackson were among 27 people who signed an invitation to black voters to attend a meeting at which the P.D. Hastain Republican Club was organized. Hastain was a former mayor of Sedalia who had included black men on the local police force and supported other activities in the black community. A black vocal quartet was also named for Hastain and performed at his political rallies. One of their musical numbers was a campaign song composed by Henry Jackson.¹¹

The Kansas City opponent mentioned for Sedalia’s Shortridge-Robb ballclub was a team sponsored by the J.W. Jenkins’ Sons Music Company, perhaps a fitting club to play against a team organized by Scott Joplin. The Jenkins’ Sons was first organized in 1899 as the Lincoln High Schools by four students who graduated from the school. J.W. Jenkins’ Sons sponsored the team from 1900 to 1907. In 1908 and 1909, the team played as the original Kansas City Monarchs, a semipro team with no connection beyond a shared name to the better-known professional club organized by J.L. Wilkinson in 1920.¹²

Though available information published about the ballclub organized by Joplin and Jackson is limited, one aspect of the mystery surrounding the team can be determined with reasonable certainty. The Shortridge-Robb baseball club did not host the Jenkins’ Sons on Saturday, August 4. Evidence for this conclusion comes from newspaper stories published in Kansas City and Sedalia.

The only game mentioned in the *Kansas City Star* for the Jenkins’ Sons that weekend was Sunday afternoon, August 5, in which they “defeated the Lexington [Missouri] Tigers ... in a finely contested game.” The game was played at Kerr Park in Kansas City, Kansas. The features of the game for the Jenkins’ Sons were Thomas McCampbell’s pitching, Tom Sterman’s fielding, and Chick Pullam’s base running. The teams played for \$25 a side, which meant the Jenkins’ Sons doubled their money that weekend without leaving Kansas City.¹³

Additional support for the conclusion that the Jenkins’ Sons did not play in Sedalia on August 4 comes from the *Sedalia Democrat*. There was, indeed, a baseball game between two black teams in Sedalia that Saturday afternoon. As was common at the time, baseball was

part of the annual Emancipation Day celebrations, held either on or near August 1 or September 22. The first date marked the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies in 1834. The second was the date in 1862 on which President Abraham Lincoln announced his Emancipation Proclamation.¹⁴

Other than booths offering food and drink, activities at Sedalia's celebration in 1900 included the baseball game, dancing, and "Paul Foster's game of chance." The crowd was composed primarily of Sedalia residents, with few visitors from other counties. The players in the baseball game were all "home talent." Other than that single observation, no details of the game were reported in the *Sedalia Democrat*. There was no mention of the Shortridge-Robb team, Scott Joplin, or Henry Jackson. It is possible one of the teams was the Shortridge-Robb club. On the other hand, given that no opponent from another city was present, it is possible the two teams were simply picked from among the people attending the celebration.¹⁵

The Emancipation Day celebration in Sedalia "was not the success the management had hoped for," due in large part to an unspecified disagreement that split the black community into two groups. One group stayed in Sedalia to celebrate on August 4, and the other group, including Sedalia's Queen City Cornet Band, "ran an excursion to Moberly," about 65 miles to the northeast, where special trains carried about 3,000 visitors from across northern Missouri to their Emancipation Day celebration. Back in Sedalia, two of the city's black ministers publicly disavowed any support from their churches for the local celebration. The motive for their statement is unknown, and another black pastor had served on the organizing committee earlier in the summer.¹⁶ Potentially helpful newspaper articles regarding the dispute that might have been published in the *Sedalia Times* have not survived.

As in Sedalia, activities at the celebration in Moberly included a baseball game for which no details are known. However, on July 29, it had been announced in the *Sedalia Democrat* that another black baseball club, the Proper Capers, had been organized in Sedalia, with J.H. Brown as manager. The team's first game was scheduled for Moberly on August 4, presumably during the Emancipation Day celebration.¹⁷ Organization of the Proper Capers came only 12 days after the Shortridge-Robb team was organized. This suggests that the organization of the Proper Capers might have been just one more aspect of the division in the community regarding participation in the two Emancipation Day celebrations.

There was no subsequent mention of the Shortridge-Robb baseball club, but the Proper Capers announced an additional game to be played at Sedalia's Liberty Park on August 24 against an unnamed opponent from Kansas City. The annual Grand Lodge meeting of the black Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Missouri was held in Sedalia August 20–24. On the final day, with excursion trains coming from Kansas City, St. Louis, and elsewhere, there were several recreational activities, including a baseball game. Once again, there was no report describing the game.¹⁸ However, the fact that the Proper Capers were only mentioned twice for games on August 4 and 24 suggests the team was organized solely for games played during the special gatherings on these dates. It seems likely the same was true for the Shortridge-Robb team, whose only announced game was the same day as the Emancipation Day celebration in Sedalia.

So, did the Shortridge-Robb baseball club ever play a game? Maybe, but it is unlikely they played any teams from other towns. The club was almost certainly organized specifically to play during Sedalia's Emancipation Day celebration. It was not a team intending to play on other weekends that season. Even if the team did not play on August 4, some of its members might have participated in the game. It is also possible some of the team's players traveled with the Proper Capers to Moberly, given the division within the community. On the other hand, the team might have existed only in conversations, possibly held at the Maple Leaf or Black 400 Clubs on Main Street prior to the announcement of its organization in a local newspaper. In the end, the available evidence does not allow us to reach a definite conclusion as to whether the Shortridge-Robb baseball club ever took the field, even to practice. Perhaps the team's legacy in baseball lore rests solely on the fact that it was organized by Scott Joplin, a famous composer and musician living in Sedalia. Perhaps that is enough.

Acknowledgements

Newspapers were accessed online through Newspapers.com. I was introduced to Scott Joplin by my father when I was young. He played Joshua Rifkin's recordings of Joplin's piano rags on a portable turntable. With age, my tastes in music broadened enough that the same recordings became part of my personal library. I have also visited sites in Sedalia associated with Scott Joplin and historic Liberty Park Stadium. In addition, I have visited Scott Joplin House State Historic Site in St. Louis, where I listened to his music as I pumped the player piano with my feet.

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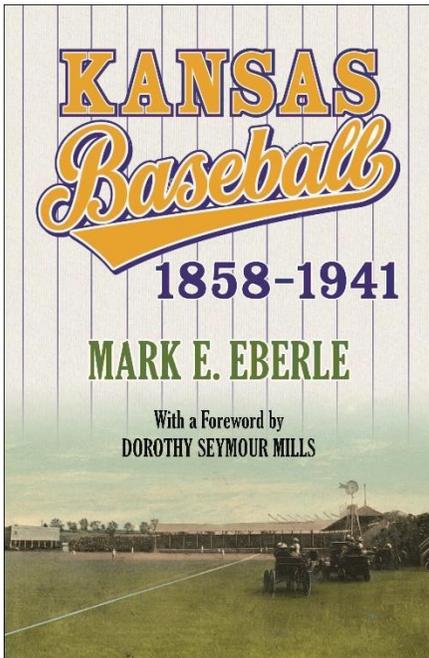
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¹ The second edition of the Scott Joplin biography by Edward Berlin (2016) is an excellent chronicle of the composer's life and music.

² Berlin (2016).

³ Berlin (2016).

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- ⁴ *Sedalia Democrat*, 27 January 1899, p 4; 10 September 1900, p 1; 17 October 1900, p 5; 24 October 1900, p 5. • Berlin (2016).
- ⁵ *Sedalia Democrat*, 21 June 1900, p 4; 22 June 1900, p 7; 24 June 1900, p 7; 25 June 1900, p 7; 26 June 1900, p 6; 27 June 1900, p 6; 28 June 1900, p 3.
- ⁶ *Sedalia Democrat*, 4 July 1900, p 4; 8 July 1900, p 2; 11 July 1900, p 8; 12 July 1900, p 1.
- ⁷ *Sedalia Democrat*, 17 July 1900, p 5; 18 July 1900, p 1.
- ⁸ *Sedalia Democrat*, 30 July 1901, p 4; 18 September 1900, p 8; 22 September 1901, p 9; 23 September 1901, p 4; 18 August 1902, p 8. • Eberle (2017b).
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- ¹⁰ *Sedalia Democrat*, 8 July 1896, p 5; 14 January 1897, p 4; 3 May 1898, p 1; 21 June 1898, p 3; 24 August 1898, p 4; 1 November 1898, p 7; 13 November 1898, p 1; 14 November 1898, p 8. • Berlin (2016, pages 24, 91–93).
- ¹¹ Berlin (2016, pages 91–93).
- ¹² Eberle (2019). • Lester and Miller (2000).
- ¹³ *Kansas City Star*, 5 August 1900, p 8; 6 August 1900, p 3.
- ¹⁴ *Sedalia Democrat*, 5 August 1900, p 1. • Eberle (2017a, pages 71–73).
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- ¹⁶ *Moberly Democrat*, 3 August 1900, p 3; 5 August 1900, p 3. • *Moberly Weekly Monitor*, 2 August 1900, p 4. • *Sedalia Democrat*, 3 July 1900, p 4; 3 August 1900, p 1; 5 August 1900, p 1.
- ¹⁷ *Moberly Democrat*, 5 August 1900, p 3. • *Sedalia Democrat*, 29 July 1900, p 3.
- ¹⁸ *Sedalia Democrat*, 20 August 1900, p 2, 4; 22 August 1900, p 8.



You can learn more about the early history of baseball played by early teams in the book *Kansas Baseball, 1858–1941*, published in 2017 by the University Press of Kansas and available in paperback or e-book through bookstores and online retailers.

The book explores the early game played by hundreds of town teams composed of white males, as well as teams of women, African Americans, American Indians, and Mexican Americans. Also described are the regional minor leagues and major league tours, along with the histories of towns still playing baseball in the state's oldest ballparks constructed between 1924 and 1940.