

Why Canton?

By Don Smith

Almost everyone knows that the Baseball Hall of Fame is located in Cooperstown, NY, because of the long-standing, but now-disputed legend that Abner Doubleday invented the game in that picturesque Catskill village in 1839. Yet comparatively few sports fans understand why the big-city sport of pro football would select this northeastern Ohio city (Canton), which has not fielded an NFL team since 1926, as the home for its hall of fame.

The “Why Canton?” story is now told in an attractive new display created during a \$250,000 refurbishing project that produced a genuine “new look” throughout both levels of the domed, circular first building that has become a famous landmark to sports travellers around the nation. The exhibition near the Thorpe statue in the entrance lobby touches on the historical reasons for locating the Hall here and then explains how the citizens of the city actually made the “improbable dream” come true.

Three important historical considerations give Canton one of the richest pro football heritages of any city, large or small. First, the NFL was organized in a Canton automobile showroom on September 17, 1920. Originally named the American Professional Football Association, the name was changed to the National Football League in 1922. Secondly, the Canton Bulldogs were one of the early powers of pro football both before and after 1920. An NFL charter member, the Bulldogs became the new league’s first two-time champions with undefeated seasons in 1922 and 1923. A third factor is that Jim Thorpe, the first big-name athlete to play pro football, began his pro tenure with the 1915 Canton Bulldogs.

All of this would have meant little, however, had not the people of Canton responded enthusiastically to a Canton Repository editorial in late 1959 that pointed out why a Hall of Fame should be here. The Timken Company provided major backing as industry, foundations and individuals banded together to first win site designation from the NFL and then raise \$378,026 to actually build a hall of fame on wooded parkland donated by the city. Ground-breaking was held in August, 1962, and the Hall was opened on September 7, 1963. The Hall was first expanded in 1971 and then again to its four-building, 51,000 square foot dimensions in 1978.