

Baltimore Find Makes 'Moonlight' Graham Of 'Field Of Dreams' Fame Real

Long untouched University of Maryland medical school files reveal Dr. Archibald Graham's "real life was more wholesome than the character."



[Beth Dalbey](#), Patch Staff

Posted Thu, Jul 14, 2022 at 5:29 pm ET|Updated Thu, Jul 14, 2022 at 9:58 pm ET



Archibald "Moonlight" Graham played two innings of Major League Baseball in 1905, before being sent down to the minor league Scranton Miners, where he fell just short of a batting title. His career would have been forgettable if not for "Field of Dreams." (Unknown Author/Public Domain)

BOSTON, MA — Fancy this: From a cornfield in Iowa, the ghost of Dr. Archibald "Moonlight" Graham nudged, pushed and prodded Larry Pitrof into finally opening the file cabinet in the attic of an academic building at Graham's alma mater, the University of Maryland medical school.

It would fit nicely into America's still evolving romance with "Field of Dreams," the enduring 1989 Kevin Costner movie about an Iowa farmer who rips out his corn to build a ball field after one of the ghost players, who include the obscure big league player Moonlight Graham, whispers, "If you build it, he will come."

The files were exactly like that, "impeccably laid out, crying for someone to open and read them," Pitrof, who heads the medical school's alumni association, told Patch. Someone built them, he likes to think, so that he would come take a peek.

Pitrof, 62, is a fan of baseball and of "Field of Dreams," and of all the rich characters in the movie based on W.P. Kinsella's novel, Moonlight Graham is an easy favorite.

"I had a real tingling sensation," Pitrof said. "I'm a baseball fan, and have always been intrigued by the movie, after learning Dr. Graham was a graduate of our medical school. It made Dr. Graham very real.

Find out what's happening in Pikesville with free, real-time updates from Patch.

"It was enormously exciting," he said. "It was perfect."

Knowing Graham was a 1905 graduate of the medical school made the alumni association gig ultimately more alluring to Pitrof. He had passed by the filing cabinets in the Gray Hall attic multiple times over the past 28 years, amusing himself with what secrets they might contain about Graham's time at the medical school, and promising himself he'd circle back for a thorough investigation when he had the time.

- **Related:** ['Field Of Dreams' America's Hope For A Diamond In Rough Times](#)

"It wasn't until after the [first MLB game in Iowa](#) that I finally opened up the cabinet and looked in the file," said Pitrof, adding that given what he found, he swallowed a "dose of embarrassment" for not having investigated sooner.

'More Wholesome Than The Character'

Inside was a treasure trove of artifacts about Moonlight Graham's real life. W.P. Kinsella, whose book "Shoeless Joe" was the inspiration for "Field of Dreams," had done his research well and thoroughly, Pitrof decided.

"It made Dr. Graham very real," he said. "His real life was more wholesome than the character's."

The "Field of Dreams" character brought Graham's unremarkable baseball career out of the shadows. In real life, the right-fielder played only two innings of big league baseball in 1905. He never stepped up at-bat.

Oh, how we cheer him to the plate, though.

"Fifty years ago, for five minutes you came within ... you came this close. It would kill some men to get so close to their dream and not touch it," Ray Kinsella, Costner's character, said in the movie. "God, they'd consider it a tragedy."

"Son, if I'd only gotten to be a doctor for five minutes ... now that would have been a tragedy," the fictionalized Graham replied.

The movie character got the chance the real-life Graham never did, [hitting a sacrifice fly](#) — even if that doesn't count as an official at-bat in MLB.

"This is why we root for Ted Lasso," Pitrof said, drawing a comparison with the character in the sports comedy-drama television series of the same name who always does the right thing, inspiring those around him to become better people.

'Champion Of The Oppressed'

The movie does miss on a couple of points about Graham, including that he quit baseball because he couldn't bear being sent down to the Minor Leagues. In real life, he played for the Scranton Miners, and fell just short of a batting title before calling it quits in 1908.

The rest rings true, though.

An August 1965 obituary, which a Minnesota congressman [inserted in the Congressional Record](#), called Graham a "[champion of the oppressed](#)," especially children.

"And there were times when children could not afford eyeglasses or milk or clothing," the editor of the Chisholm (Minnesota) Free Press & Tribune reflected. "Yet no child was ever denied these essentials because in the background there was always Dr. Graham.

"Without any fanfare or publicity, the glasses or the milk or the ticket to the ballgame found their way into the child's pocket."

Notably, Graham's [1945 case study](#) informed pediatricians on the importance of regularly monitoring blood pressure in children.

A Commoner, But Uncommon

Graham was as beloved as fiction depicts him.

After the death of his best friend, also a doctor, Graham and his wife, Alicia, became parents to his 8-year-old son. Although they never had children, "they showered their affection on every child in town," the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported in a 2005 look back at Graham's life.

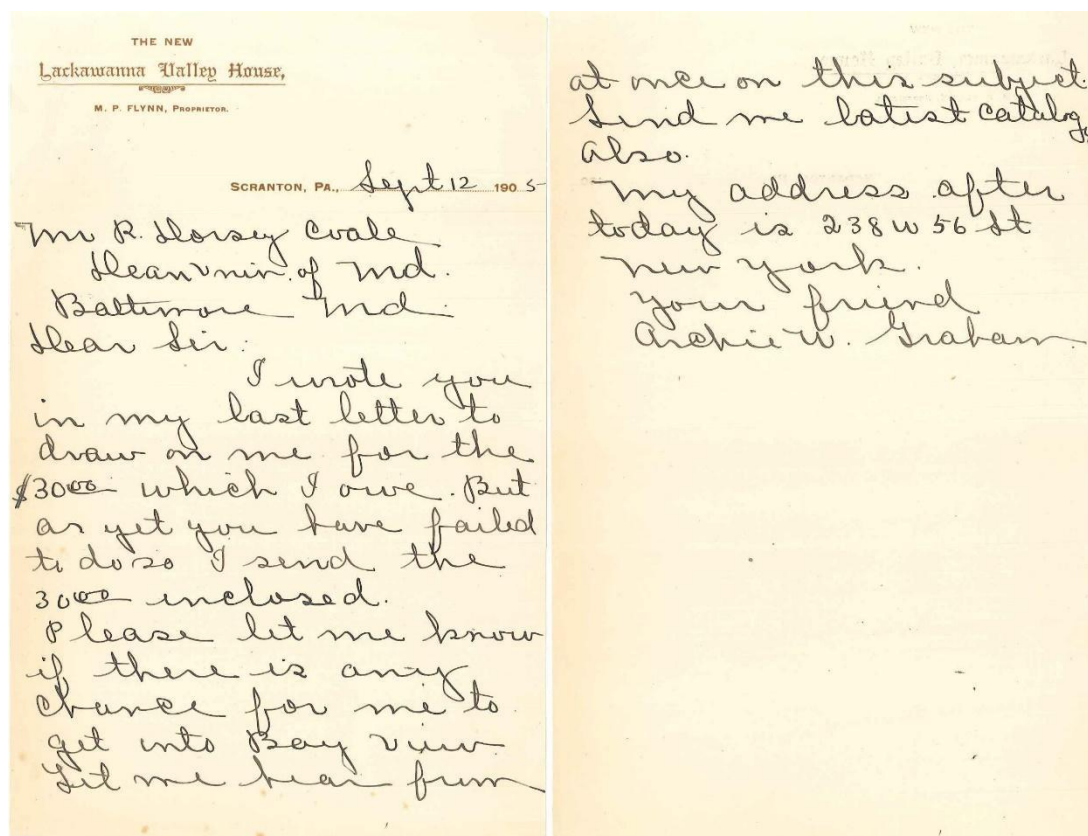
The Grahams lived in an area of Chisholm known as Pig Town, so named because the immigrant miner families who lived there kept livestock as part of their hardscrabble existence.

"That was Doc," Bob McDonald, who grew up in Chisholm and was a longtime high school basketball coach there, told the Star-Tribune. "He and Alicia could have lived up with the high and mighty on Windy Hill, but they chose to be among the common people."

Graham was an uncommon person, though.

Among the treasures Pitrof unlocked was Graham's correspondence with the medical school, insisting that he pay off his medical school debt. In a Sept. 12, 1905, letter to the medical school's dean, Graham wrote:

"I wrote you in my last letter to draw on me for the \$30.00 which I owe. But as yet you have failed to do so. I send the \$30 enclosed."



At a time when neither professional baseball nor medicine were lucrative professions, Dr. Archibald "Moonlight" Graham insisted on paying his medical school debt. (Photo courtesy of University of Maryland)

"Think about it," Pitrof said. "In 1905, neither medicine nor the MLB were lucrative. Most ballplayers had to find work in the off-season. Physicians, whether they were working in Iowa or south of the Canadian border in Chisholm, Minnesota, weren't making a lot of money and a lot of times were paid in eggs and bacon.

"He's three months out of medical school, insisting he pay his debt, which they obviously had deferred," Pitrof said. "It speaks to his character, his true integrity. This just brings out his personality."

Pwr III.

☞ Students will please fill this card before applying for Matriculation.

WRITE WITH INK AND DISTINCTLY.

Date Sept 20, 1903

Full Name, Archibald Wright Graham

Scientific or Literary Degrees, A.B.

Age, 25

What Medical Courses have you taken and at what college?

Two years at Univ. of N.C.

Post Office, Charlotte, N.C.

County and State, Richlenburg Co. N.C.

Name of Preceptor, R. H. Whitehead

P. O. " " Chapel Hill N.C.

Parent or Guardian, Alex Graham

Post Office, Charlotte, N.C.

TO BE FILLED BY THE DEAN.

Matriculation Fee, - - - \$ 5

Tuition Fee, \$ Laboratory Fee, \$

Practical Anatomy Fee, - - - \$

Archibald Wright Graham finished two years of medical school at the University of North Carolina before transferring to the University of Maryland medical school in Baltimore. (Photo courtesy of University of Maryland)

To many Americans, "Field of Dreams" is one of the all-time greatest baseball movies.

It's not really about baseball, though.

"It's about the pursuit of one's dreams, redemption, just being able to persevere past all of the trials and tribulations people face throughout their lives," Roman Weinberg, the director of operations for Go The Distance Baseball, which owns the [Field of Dreams Movie Site](#), told Patch in 2020.

"It gives them hope," he said. "It's so simple yet so powerful, because the movie presents it in such a simple way."

Moonlight Graham, who would have been but a postscript in MLB history if not for the blockbuster success of "Field of Dreams," appeals to anyone whose dreams ever fell short, Pitrof said.

"Dr. Graham, who had all the talent and skills to become a Major League player, didn't top the mountain," he said. "We can all identify with being so close to something we wanted too badly."

Field Of Dreams Game Returns

Moonlight Graham and the other ghost players will be remembered again on Aug. 11 at the "[MLB at Field of Dreams Game](#)" in Dyersville, Iowa. The Chicago Cubs and Cincinnati Reds will play in a regulation-size, temporary MLB ballpark built adjacent to the movie site, which remains as it was after the film crew left Dyersville.

It's the second [MLB Field of Dreams Game](#). The first, held last year, was [postponed from 2020](#), when the COVID-19 pandemic upended MLB's regular season. Last year, nearly [6 million viewers watched](#) the game by FOX, which again has broadcast rights. And as he did last year, Pitrof will be watching, and, as with last year, wishing he was there in person.



The New York Yankees play the Chicago White Sox on Aug. 12, 2021, in Dyersville, Iowa, at a temporary stadium in the middle of a cornfield at the Field of Dreams Movie Site, the first Major League Baseball game held in Iowa. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

Thousands of people have made pilgrimages to Dyersville in the years since the movie was filmed, some out of curiosity and affection for the movie, and many for more cathartic reasons.

A real-life dad estranged from his sons invited them to the movie site, hoping the symbolism would jump-start a reconciliation, said Don Lansing, who leased his home and farmland for the movie.

"Before the day ended, they were friends and talking to each other, playing ball and treating each other like they should've been," Lansing told Patch in 2020.



Fathers and sons, along with other fans of the "Field of Dreams" movie, have made pilgrimages to the site where the 1989 movie was filmed to play catch. In 2020, Jeremiah Bronson and his son, Ben, made the trip from Ames. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

Pitrof said he would like to throw a few balls with his own son and grandson, or attend a big league baseball game there someday.

And who knows?

The diehard baseball fan — who cried real tears when his hometown, Milwaukee, fell short of its own dream to [hold on to the Braves](#) MLB franchise before the team's exit to Atlanta in the 1960s — could find his own "Field of Dreams" magic.



Chicago White Sox first baseman Andrew Vaughn walked through a cornfield before the 2021 "MLB at Field of Dreams" baseball game against the New York Yankees in Dyersville, Iowa. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)
