For more than fifty years North Carolina celebrated the day after Easter—Easter Monday—as a state holiday. For Tar Heel baby boomers and Gen Xers the holiday meant a long weekend. And, perhaps, it raised some questions as to why they alone among the nation's school children had the day off. But to earlier generations of North Carolinians, Easter Monday may well have occasioned a trip to Raleigh to watch the annual baseball match between the boys of Wake Forest College and North Carolina State College followed by an evening celebrating or drowning one's sorrows—depending on the team you supported—at the PiKA Ball. It's the history of this long-running baseball matchup and the annual dance that Tim Peeler documents in his well-researched work.

North Carolina Agricultural and Mechanical College (as North Carolina State University was first known) was ten years old in 1899 when its men's baseball team played the first Easter Monday ball game—on this occasion against Bingham Institute of Mebane. The contest drew 700 fans and was the first one played on N.C. A&M's new field. Over the ensuing seven years, the N.C. A&M team continued its tradition of games on Easter Monday, taking on at various times Wake Forest (then a Baptist college in Wake County), Trinity College (the pre-cursor to Duke University), and the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. The exclusive pairing of N.C. A&M and Wake Forest was established in 1908 with a game attended by 2,500 fans that drew front-page coverage from the Raleigh News & Observer. With just a few exceptions (the primary one being the years of World War II), the two teams continued their annual contest on Easter Monday through 1955. A matchup was scheduled in 1956, but rain cancelled the meeting and the game was never played.

The Easter Monday contest reached the zenith of its popularity in the 1920s, with the 1925 and 1926 contests drawing more than 8,000 spectators and fans traveling by train from other parts of the state to witness the game. Peeler suggests that some may have attended less for the action had on the field and more for the sights in the stands. After World War I the annual contest had become a Raleigh social event, with the women of Meredith, Peace, and St. Mary’s colleges “a heavy presence at the baseball games” in their colorful Easter bonnets and their white dresses. And the festive air didn’t stop with the ballgame’s conclusion. By the 1920s the tradition of the PiKA Ball following the game was also well established. The evening dance began in 1906 as an Easter cotillion held by the North Carolina State College chapter of Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity. Over the years men from other fraternities attended, bringing as their dates women from the Raleigh colleges and beyond. By 1928 ball organizers were sending out 2,000 invitations to the event and the invitee list would remain at that number until the annual dance ended in 1961.
Such was the status of the ball that nationally known bands such as Gen Krupa’s and Johnny Long’s performed and three North Carolina governors served as honorary chaperones.

Oral tradition holds that the popularity of the Easter Monday ballgame sparked legislators to adopt the day as state holiday in 1935. Peeler echoes this story. But the veracity of such a claim is in dispute since no documents have been found to show a clear relationship between the law’s introduction and the ballgame. With the exception of this one disputable fact, Peeler’s work is a rich record of two mostly forgotten annual events on the state calendar. In fact, Peeler’s account is so chock full of detail—he quotes liberally from news accounts of the events—that, at times, his narrative voice is lost. Peeler has included an appendix with statistics on Wake Forest and N.C. State players who had pro careers, along with a bibliography, and an index that allows readers to locate specific players in the text. This book would be a valuable resource for state and local history collections in public and academic libraries.

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