

Introduction

Welcome to the world of baseball parks. You see, unlike any other arena, the diamond can be as much a part of the game as the teams themselves. Where the game is played is often as important as how it is played, as each ballpark plays a vital role in creating the atmosphere and mystique of baseball.

—David Pietrusza, *Baseball's Canadian-American League*

Baseball: A (Very Quick) Historical Overview

During the second quarter of the 19th century, the American game of baseball was born. Throughout the United States of that time (which was primarily centered in the Northeast), various versions of what was to become “the national pastime” began to be played. Setting aside the folklore of Doubleday and Cooperstown (although not diminishing in the least the Baseball Hall of Fame, a place that every fan of the game should regularly visit), according to current scholarship, the amateur game was actively germinating in many parts of the new republic. In the greater New York City area, the sport of cricket, associated with England (against whom the United States had just fought two wars), was gradually giving way to the very American game of baseball. Likewise, the open fields where cricket was pursued were usurped as the initial homes for the game of “ball.” Albany appears to have had an “organized” baseball club by 1856, Troy in 1859, and Schenectady, Saratoga Springs, and Scotia by 1860, when the first “National Association” was formed.

According to early baseball historian Richard Hershberger:

Upstate New York was the first hotbed of modern baseball, the “New York Game,” as it emerged from the incubation ground of Manhattan and its immediate environs. . . . The game spread quickly up the Hudson River to Albany, and from there westward along the Erie Canal corridor.¹

By the time of the lead up to the Civil War, the New York game or “New York Rules” had come to dominate the nascent sport. Touring by professional teams, amateur in name only, spread the New York City structure and led to the emergence after the conflict for the first leagues of paid players. These excursions included trips by New York City based squads to other metropolitan areas throughout the state.

After 1865, baseball’s growth continued unencumbered. Seeds for the first professional major baseball league, the National Association, were sown in Troy in 1871. The National League followed in 1876.

What’s a Ballpark, Anyway?

Noun: A park or stadium in which ball games (such as baseball) are played.

—Merriam-Webster online

The coming of salaried players, of course, led to the original baseball “grounds” or fields (which were just that, without any of the amenities we’ve come to expect from our modern facilities) giving way to the ballparks and (eventually) stadiums of today. How do owners maintain facilities and teams pay their players? Charge admission! How are the spectators who bought tickets kept separate from nonpaying enthusiasts? By building walls and gates around the diamond. How do you keep the fans occupied during the lulls in the on-field action? Sell food and drink, along with scorecards and other swag. Hence, the promulgation, in the later part of the 1800s, of the enclosed ballpark.

With a few notable earlier exceptions, during the last two decades of the 19th century, the first of the facilities with seating and other conveniences opened. The largest of these wooden structures included the Polo

1. Richard Hershberger, “Upstate New York” introduction, in Morris et al., *Base Ball Pioneers, 1850–1870*.

Grounds, Washington Park, and Eastern Park in New York City; Buffalo's Olympic and Riverside Parks; Celoron Park in Celoron; Rochester's Culver and Riverside Parks; Star Park in Syracuse; Albany's Riverside Park; Donovan Field in Kingston; and Driving Park in Schenectady, among others. The original structures were almost designed to be disposable. They were built quickly, and often dismantled after a season or two. Sometimes, the buildings, stands, and fences were recycled, and moved to a different location. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that collapsing seating and fires were a common occurrence in the nascent "good old days" of baseball. Between the world wars of the 20th century, "modern" stadiums of steel and concrete replaced these wooden edifices. Author and baseball aficionado Stew Thornley labels 1909 through the Depression as "the classic period of ballparks."²

New York's Great Lost Ballparks covers all baseball venues (1) that have hosted (my very loose definition of) "professional" organizations that no longer exist and (2) have passed from use by teams that paid their players and charged admission. I've stretched this characterization somewhat to include those facilities utilized by the sport since it became a public spectacle. Included are the "grounds" of baseball's earliest version around the Civil War, the first wooden enclosed "fields" of major and minor league baseball during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the steel and concrete "stadiums" mostly erected through World War II. I've even thrown in a few modern spectacles costing millions of dollars to construct that have come and gone in New York's metropolitan centers.

Both the first grounds and enclosed fields generally sat on privately owned lots. Sometimes, they already included features such as grandstand seating used for the spectators of other sports, like horse and bicycle racing. Franchise holders would lease the land and bear the costs of any improvements needed to yield a functional ballpark. As baseball facilities became more complicated, owners spent larger and larger amounts on fields. The original Yankee Stadium of 1923 signaled the peak in owner-financed sporting palaces.

Eventually, as the budgets for stadium construction ran into the millions of dollars, the proprietors of baseball clubs looked to local municipalities to provide the means for them to play the game. Franchisees and city officials justified these taxpayer costs through the perceived direct and indirect

2. Thornley, *The Polo Grounds*.

economic benefits games would create for area businesses and tax bases alike.

My own enjoyment stems equally from the competition between the players, the food, team merchandise for sale, interactions with the other fans, and, importantly, the comfort, design, and construction of the ballpark. I'll freely admit a bias toward classic, old-style facilities. Give me a covered grandstand, mechanical scoreboard, and a misshapen field, and I'll be happy.

One primary function for the older ballparks is approximating a pastoral experience within an urban setting. Life slows down, the food evokes (as it often is) picnic fare, and everything is about observing, dissecting, and interpreting the play and the umpire's decisions. The grass is green, the sky is blue, or, for a night game, star filled or really black outside the reach of the lights.

New York's Great Lost Ballparks tells the story of how baseball shaped the history of the state, an area that was one of the most important incubators toward the development of the modern game. Within this volume, you'll find the playing grounds, ballparks, and stadiums of yesteryear. Laid out in a guidebook format, each listing includes, wherever possible, a photographic illustration of the field, along with data such as the name and geographic location of each park, size of the diamond, the years built and in operation (when dissimilar, separated by a /), seating and capacity (again, divided if different by a /), the names of the professional clubs and leagues that called it their home, and a "Fun Fact" or two that distinguished each locale from other fields. For the more famous ballparks, there is an expanded history, encompassing the architects and engineers responsible for their design and construction, select visiting squads that played there, and the importance of the field in the annals of the game. I've also indicated if the park still exists and, if not, what currently sits on the site. Each listing additionally includes various sources and weblinks for more information. Entries are arranged by region (the New York City area, the Southern Tier, Western New York State, the Northern Tier, and Eastern New York State) and therein alphabetically by city, with the stadiums inventoried chronologically by construction date. In some cases, where one team utilized a succession of fields at the same locale, I've grouped those parks together. Along with the many minor league and professional clubs that flourished over the decades, I've also made a special effort to highlight facilities that hosted Negro Leagues and all-women's teams.

Methodology and Acknowledgments

In researching this work on New York's baseball fields pre-2020, I have endeavored to be as thorough as possible. However, I often had to contend with contradictory conclusions and incongruities inside the cannon of baseball scholarship. Therefore, within these pages, I have either used my best judgment, supported by additional research in primary sources, or, in the most difficult cases that I simply couldn't unravel, presented the conflicting information for readers to make their own determinations.

To help those enthusiasts who would like to visit historic ballpark sites, we've included ten maps within major metropolitan areas. As some street names have changed or moved and some addresses are ambiguous, ballpark locations are only approximate. Unfortunately, due to space limitations or a lack of specific coordinates, we've been unable to map all listed fields.

To help right prior societal wrongs, one of my goals has been to include underrepresented African-American and women's teams wherever possible. This has meant featuring semiprofessional clubs whose skills were equivalent to (or above) area pro players. However, because the focus of this book is on residential squads, opportunities were limited to present the touring professional organizations that existed outside of major and minor league (i.e., white, male) baseball.

Once I began discovering New York's Black squads, questions were raised in my own mind about how to identify these teams. Not all readers would recognize organizations that weren't a member of an officially labeled "Negro League." The history of baseball and the media that described and promoted the sport, and, likewise, the society around it, has not always been kind in the terminology used for describing teams of non-white players. Nor, in fact, would the names used by the professional leagues and teams pass current tests of sensitivity and correctness. Therefore, I've utilized Negro Leagues (without the quotation marks) as a generic label for segregated groups of Black players. This term appears to be in current usage among baseball scholars and cultural institutions presenting the stories of these baseballers. For the few instances where I've mentioned Black and Native Americans organizations (such as the National Colored League), as well as the use of (sometimes offensive) baseball descriptors (for example, the Syracuse Chiefs) in the names for white players, I've kept those original historically correct terms.

Due to the limitations placed by the COVID pandemic, I was unable to physically travel to local archives and historical collections. Therefore, instead of my going to the library, the libraries had to come to me. By assembling a small collection of volumes on New York State baseball history here at home, I've consulted as many works by the real baseball authorities as I could. Additionally, I've taken advantage of the wealth of baseball websites and blogs, along with primary source materials from digitized period newspapers, available on the internet.

I'm not "the" expert (or even an expert) on any aspect of baseball, in New York State or elsewhere. Fortunately, I've had access to the research of many authorities on the sport. With the risk of leaving someone out, thanks goes to Priscilla Astifan at rochesterbaseballhistory.org; Gary Ashwill of agatetype.typepad.com and seamheads.com; Thomas Barthel; Michael Benson; Dick Beverage; Thomas M. Blair; William H. Brewster; Marietta Carr of Schenectady County Historical Society; Jerrold Casway; Gregory Christiano; Marvin A. Cohen; L. Robert Davids; James Delaney, Jr.; Mike Disotelle of Ilion Free Public Library; Rachel Dworkin, archivist for Chemung County Historical Society; David Dyte of brooklynballparks.com/covehurst.net; Dennis Evanosky; Scott Fiesthumel; Thomas W. Gilbert; Mike Hauser; Paul Healey of projectballpark.org; Brock Helander; Richard Hershberger; Miriam Hoffman of the Historical Society of the Nyacks; Chris Hunter of the Museum of Innovation and Science; Jerry Jackson; W. Lloyd Johnson; David Karpinski of the Parkhurst Field Foundation; Frank M. Keetz; Norm King; Tony Kissel of tonykisselbaseball.com; Eric J. Kos; Jeffrey Michael Laing; Bill Lamb; Paul Langendorfer; Roger L. Luther of Broome County Historical Society; Bob LeMoine; Dick Leyden; Stephen Loughman and Jennifer Lemak of the New York State Museum; Vern Luse; Rich MacAlpine; Jim Maggiore; Jim Mandelaro; Bob Mayer; Michael J. McCann; Bill McCarthy; Larry McCray of proteball.org; Jim McGreal; Brian Merzbach of ballparkreviews.com; Aaron W. Miller; Collin Miller of Mountain Athletic Club; Peter Morris; Timothy P. Murphy; Charlie O'Reilly of charliesballparks.com; Kim Reis of Imagn; James H. Overfield; Joseph Overfield; Jim Overmyer; John Pardon; John Pastier; Eric and Wendy Pastore of digitalballparks.com; David Pietrusza; Scott Pitoniak; Richard A. Puff; William J. Ryczek at SABR (Society for American Baseball Research); Samantha Saladino, Fulton County Historian; Ron Selter; David B. Stinson of deadballbaseball.com; John Thorn of ourgame.mlblogs.com; Stew Thornley; Anthony Violanti; Bernard G. Walsh; Dave Walsh; Steve West; Bob Whittemore; Richard Worth; John G. Zinn; and others

too numerous to mention here. Specific sources are available in the For More Information section for each ballpark listing, with full bibliographic information contained in the References section after the listings. Although I don't mention them in the FMI sections, I've also made extensive use of Wikipedia, newspapers.com, nyshistoricnewspapers.org, ancestry.com, <http://www.brooklynballparks.com>, and digitalballparks.com. Because the FMI is meant as informational and not as a comprehensive listing of sources, I've also chosen to omit websites and links that have changed and are no longer functional.

I'll additionally give a shout out to my editor (who is also my brother), Richard Carlin, and all the others at Excelsior Editions/State University of New York Press including copy editor Gordon Marce and my production and design manager Ryan Morris for structural and grammatical guidance throughout the process of bringing this book to completion. Thanks, as well, to my "buds in baseball" Wil Scotten, John W. Miller, Elizabeth Loring, Tony Klassen, my late mother-in-law Jean Smith, Bill Evans, Gary Davidson, Bill Nowlin, Mark Simos, Jim Bollman, Alan Munde, Marc Fields, Wayne Rogers, Henry Sapoznik, Roy Bookbinder, and Wayne Henderson. Attending games as an adult all started with my son, Benjamin, who always loved the souvenirs and a good playground.

This book is dedicated to my grandfather, Morris Carlin, who played and loved the game. My father's father gave me my first major league experience by taking my brother and I to Yankee Stadium around 1960.

A note on terminology: before the current one-word term "baseball" came into usage, the game was labeled "base ball," broken into two words. Unless I'm directly quoting a source, I've standardized the term throughout as "baseball." I've taken the same approach to "ball park" and "ballpark."