



## PALACES OF THE FANS

The Newsletter of the SABR Ballparks Committee  
December 2018

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**CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS:** Ballpark Committee members are welcome to provide comments on what you have seen and want to see in the newsletter. Please forward on to Richard articles or links to articles on ballparks for inclusion in future newsletters as well as short research articles. Longer research articles can be accommodated via links on the SABR web site. The next issue is scheduled to come out in June of 2019.

**HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2018 CONVENTION:** This year's SABR Convention (SABR 48) was held in Pittsburgh. The following photos of PNC Park were taken at SABR's "A Day at the Ballpark" on June 22, 2018 featuring a game between the Pirates and the Diamondbacks.



**MINOR LEAGUE BALLPARKS DATABASE PROJECT:** Slowly, progress has been made behind the scenes with some data entry tools and an initial database, but more volunteers to research AND enter data will be needed to move this project ahead. If you would like to volunteer, please email Kevin Johnson at [kjokbaseball@yahoo.com](mailto:kjokbaseball@yahoo.com). Ideally, volunteers would work on an entire league, or complete city or state, etc. but that is not required. Even if you previously volunteered, please do so again so we know you are still interested as it's been awhile since we first launched this project.

**SEAMHEADS.COM BALLPARKS DATABASE UPDATED:** The Seamheads.com Ballparks Database has been updated in December 2018 with 2018 season data, plus 1906 and 1907 splits data, thanks to the latest Retrosheet.org release.

<http://www.seamheads.com/ballparks/index.php>

**SABR BALLPARKS COMMITTEE FACEBOOK PAGE:** The SABR Ballparks Committee Facebook group page now has 1,600 members. The page is open to both SABR and non-SABR Facebook users. SABR Members are encouraged to post research items, ballpark news and ballpark photos to the group.

**SABR GREEN CATHEDRALS VERSION V:** An updated version of great Green Cathedrals book will be published as an eBook/on-line resource by SABR very soon. Look for more announcements about the exact release data from SABR home office.

**FUTURE SABR BALLPARKS COMMITTEE PROJECTS:** If you have ideas for group research or projects, please send them to the co-chairmen, Ron Selter ([rselter@att.net](mailto:rselter@att.net)) and Kevin Johnson ([kjokbaseball@yahoo.com](mailto:kjokbaseball@yahoo.com)). Members are always encouraged to do a ballpark 'bio' for the SABR BioProject. Some other ideas would be a committee produced ballparks book of some kind, a joint research effort with other committees (Pictorial Committee for example), etc.

**CORRECTION FROM JUNE ISSUE:** The photo below which was included with Ron Selter's article in the June 2018 issue mistakenly identified this as being Recreation Park in Pittsburgh. It is in fact a photo of Recreation Park in Detroit. Apologies for the error.



Recreation Park in DETROIT

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## **SMOKIE LINKS – FUTURE PARKS**

### **Oakland A's – New Stadium**

The Oakland A's announced plans for the development of a new ballpark at Howard Terminal to be opened in 2023. The plans also call for the redevelopment of the Oakland Coliseum site into a community center.

<http://www.msn.com/en-us/sports/mlb/as-propose-jewel-box-ballpark-for-waterfront-coliseum-redevelopment/ar-BBQc25d?li=BBnb7Kz&ocid=iehp>

<https://www.mlb.com/athletics/news/athletics-plan-new-howard-terminal-ballpark/c-301190062>

<https://www.mlb.com/athletics/oakland-ballpark>

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### **Tampa Bay Rays – New Ballpark Plans Delayed**

While the Tampa Bay Rays had announced plans to build a new ballpark in the Ybor City neighborhood, the project fell through and the site search has been reopened with an opening occurring in 2024 at the earliest.

<http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/rays/2018/07/10/rays-reveal-ybor-city-stadium-details/>

[http://www.espn.com/mlb/story/\\_/id/25510456/tampa-bay-rays-reopen-ballpark-site-search-stadium-opening-delayed-2024](http://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/25510456/tampa-bay-rays-reopen-ballpark-site-search-stadium-opening-delayed-2024)

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### **Portland – Field of Dreams**

A group called the Portland Diamond Project has announced that it has signed an agreement to develop a 45-acre site alongside the Willamette River into a ballpark in hopes of luring an MLB team to Portland.

[http://www.espn.com/mlb/story/\\_/id/25410590/portland-group-seeking-mlb-team-proposes-ballpark-site](http://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/25410590/portland-group-seeking-mlb-team-proposes-ballpark-site)

<https://portlanddiamondproject.com/ballpark-concepts>

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**RECREATION PARK:** Ron Selter contributed the following article on Exposition Park III in Pittsburgh.

## **Exposition Park III – Pittsburgh by Ron Selter**



### **EXPOSITION PARK III - Pittsburgh Players League 1890, National League: 1891-1909, and Federal league 1914-15**

AKA  
New Expo

#### **OCCUPANTS**

PL Pittsburgh Burghers April 19-October 4, 1890; NL Pittsburgh Pirates April 22, 1891-June 29, 1909; FL Pittsburgh Rebels April 14, 1914-October 2, 1915

#### **LOCATION**

Left Field (S) Pennsylvania and Western (later Baltimore and Ohio) Railroad tracks, then Allegheny River; Third Base (E) School St (later Tony Dorsett Dr), First Base (N) South Ave (later W General Robinson St), Right Field (W) Grant St (later Chuck Noll Way) St; on the North Shore; back then the park was in the city of Allegheny but now the site is in the city of Pittsburgh; southeast parking lot for Three Rivers Stadium and overlapped in part the site of Exposition Park I and II

#### **FORMER USE -- Exposition Parks I and II**

Exposition Park III was the third major league ballpark in Pittsburgh built on the same site. This park site was very near the junction of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers (which meet in Pittsburgh to form the Ohio River) in what at the start of the 20th Century was in the city of Allegheny and now is within the city limits of Pittsburgh. The ballpark got its name from the site being previously used by traveling circuses and other expositions. The earlier major league ballparks on this site were Exposition I Lower Field and Exposition II Upper Field. These two ballparks were used by the American Association and the Union

Association teams from 1882 to 1884. The Lower Field (as in lower in elevation) was the diamond closest to the river and was the ballpark that was generally used. The other ballpark, Exposition II Upper Field, was a hastily built ballpark used only for the start of the 1883 season because of flooding on the Lower Field. That ballpark was used for less than two months before games were moved back to the Lower Field. Exposition Park III was built for the 1890 Players League Pittsburgh franchise. The Players League team had the awkward name of Pittsburgh Burghers and the team and the rest of the Players League lasted only one season. The NL Pittsburgh team, called the Pirates starting with the 1891 season, moved into Exposition III and stayed until mid-season 1909. Exposition Park III was located on the north side of the Allegheny River and was across that river from downtown Pittsburgh. The ballpark was separated from the river by only a railroad marshalling yard. Exposition Park's playing field sloped from the grandstand and infield (located in the northeast corner of the site) down to the outfield on the south side. Not too surprising, with this location the park was subject to repeated floods. The Pirates used innovative ground rules to deal with the occasional flooded conditions-On July 4, 1902 the Allegheny River flooded and there was more than a foot of water in the outfield. As there was a double-header scheduled that day and the teams did not wish to miss out on the large crowds anticipated, a special ground rule was adopted. All balls hit into the water in the outfield were good for one base. At the park site the surrounding streets, when above water, were South Ave on the north, School St on the east, and Grant St on the west. The park site was larger than average for pre-Classic major league ballparks and amounted to 6.4 acres. Unlike many other major league ballparks in this era, the dimensions of the park were not limited by the size of the park site or the pattern of the surrounding streets.

When the park opened in 1890 the seating capacity was not great-only 6,500. This made the ballpark the smallest in terms of seating capacity of any of the regular use major league ballparks used in the later part of the 19th Century. The grandstand was made up of three sections: the first base and third base sections extended to about the edge of the infield and the third section was a diagonal between them that formed the backstop. In addition, there were small bleachers down both the first and third base lines. Both the third base and first base bleachers were sharply angled towards the playing field and thus converged with the foul lines. In the outfield, there were shallow wooden bleachers in CF. These CF bleachers reached on the right end from about dead CF to left center. The grandstand and home plate were located in the northeast corner of the park site.

The left field bleachers, built before the 1900 season, extended from left-center, nearly to the LF foul line, creating an 18 foot wide in-play notch in the LF corner. A scoreboard, 18 feet high, was situated in the right field fence about in straightaway right field. Twin spires were behind home plate on the roof of the grandstand.

The only home run to clear on the fly any of the fences in the 20th Century was hit by Tim Jordan of Brooklyn on July 22, 1908 over the right field fence. This titanic home run was first page news in the Pittsburgh newspapers. No home runs were ever hit over the distant LF or CF perimeter fences.

Before the 1900 season, the CF bleachers were removed and replaced with shallow wooden bleachers in LF. However, these LF bleachers did not extend into the LF corner; instead there was a notch, 18-20 feet wide, between the LF foul line and the left end of the LF bleachers. This meant that the LF dimension (400) now gave a misleading impression of the size of the playing field. The large amount of area in the outfield made it possible to accommodate several thousand extra fans as outfield standees. For example, attendance for game seven of the 1903 World Series amounted to 17,038-or nearly three times the ballpark's regular season seating capacity. The ballpark was built entirely of wood, but unlike many of its contemporaries-it never burned. Given the small seating capacity of the ballpark and the problems with recurring flooding, the Pirates were one of the first clubs to build a new Classic steel-and-concrete ballpark-Forbes Field. The Pirates left the old wooden ballpark and moved

into Forbes Field on June 30, 1909.

Exposition Park III had no further major league use until the Federal League Pittsburgh Rebels used the park for the 1914-15 seasons. For its use by the Federal League, the ballpark was substantially renovated. The old wooden grandstand was replaced with a larger steel-and-concrete grandstand. In addition the first base bleachers were replaced by a roofed pavilion. All of the new and rebuilt stands increased the seating capacity of the ballpark to 16,000.

### The Basis of Exposition Park's Configuration and Dimensions

Dimensions are based on a 1906 Sanborn fire insurance map, home run research, and photos from *Baseball Memories 1900-1909*. The park's Opening Day 1890 dimensions in *Green Cathedrals* were listed as LF 400, CF 515, and RF 380 <sup>(1)</sup>. A 1906 Sanborn Fire Insurance Co. map of the ballpark was available <sup>(2)</sup>. The 1906 Sanborn map confirmed the dimensions of the park site, and provided the location and extent of the grandstand, bleachers, and perimeter fences. A diagram of the park was drawn on the Sanborn map. Home plate was located (1) to fit the LF dimension of 400 listed in *Green Cathedrals*, (2) with the LF foul line parallel with the park's RF perimeter fence, and (3) both foul lines were located such that they just cleared the angled first base and third base bleachers (as the bleachers were shown on the Sanborn map and in photos). The RF dimension (380) was determined by calculating the distance from home plate to the RF perimeter wall. This home plate location resulted in an estimated distance of 65 feet from home plate to the backstop that was made up by the diagonal section of the grandstand. The other outfield dimensions to the perimeter fences were calculated from the park diagram.

However, additional research into home runs hit at the ballpark (1890-1909) revealed there had been wooden CF bleachers in place at least as early as the 1893 season (based on a home run into the CF bleachers by the Pirates Mike Smith on 9-8-1893). It is believed that these CF bleachers were in place when the park opened in 1890. Home run research by SABR member Robert Williams showed that in the three season 1890-92 there were no Over-the-Fence (OTF) home runs to LF or CF.

In summary, all of the Exposition Park's dimensions were calculated from the Sanborn map and the resulting park diagrams. As neither the foul lines nor the home plate location were shown on the map, these dimensions contain a small amount of uncertainty. All dimensions were checked against, and are consistent with, the available photographic evidence and the home run data.

Park data and dimensions for Exposition Park III are shown below:

#### DIMENSIONS (Calculated from park diagram)

<i>Years</i>	<i>LF</i>	<i>SLF</i>	<i>LC</i>	<i>CF</i>	<i>RC</i>	<i>SRF</i>	<i>RF</i>
1890-99*	400	414	445	440	439	393	380
1900-09	400	393	475	515	439	393	380
1914-15	400	393	475	515	439	393	380

- \* Assumes CF bleachers were in place in 1890-92

#### FENCES

Left Field: 20 (wood 20 to the right of the LF corner), 4 (wood, front of LF bleachers 1900)

Center Field: 4 (wood front of CF bleachers 1890), 15-20 (wood 1900 -the CF diagonal fence was 20 and the fence in right-center 15)

Right Field: 18 (wood)

## FENCE HEIGHTS

<i>Years</i>	<i>LF</i>	<i>CF</i>	<i>RF</i>
1890-99	20	4-20*	18
1900-09	4-10*	18-20	18
1914-15	4-10*	18-20	18

\* The four foot height was the front of the LF and CF bleachers

## AVERAGE OUTFIELD DISTANCES

<i>Years</i>	<i>LF</i>	<i>CF</i>	<i>RF</i>
1890-99	418	441	400
1900-09	415	486	400
1914-15	415	486	400

CAPACITY: 6,500 (1890-1909), 16,000 (1914-15)

PARK SIZE/COMPOSITE AVERAGE OUTFIELD DISTANCE: 420 (1890-1899), 434 (1900-09 & 1914-15)

PARK SITE AREA: 6.4 ACRES

## The Impact of the Park's Configuration And Dimensions on Batting

In the 19th Century, Exposition Park III was a below average offensive ballpark with an average runs park factor of 94. The very large size of Exposition Park III led the ballpark to have an average home run batting park factor of 71. The home runs hit at this ballpark were nearly all (more than 90 percent) Inside-the-Park-Home-Runs (IPHR)

The first and only home run hit on the fly into the LF bleachers was in the first season the LF bleachers were in place. This home run was by Joe Kelley of Brooklyn on 8-16-1900. No home runs were ever hit over the perimeter LF or CF fences. In 22 seasons of use by three major leagues, only 11 home runs were hit over the RF fence.

Exposition Park III in its Deadball years (1901 to mid-season 1909) was by far the largest park in the NL (by about 30 feet as measured by the composite average outfield distance). However, the ballpark, despite its large size, was actually slightly above average as a hitter's park. Exposition Park III's batting park factor for runs, for the years 1901-09, was 101 or one percent above average as were the park factors for both batting average and on-base percentage. The 1902 Pirates team that won the NL pennant was a good hitting team-leading the NL in batting average, on-base, and slugging. In that 1902 season, the Pirates posted the highest team home park batting average (.305) of any NL team in the 19 seasons of the Deadball Era. As the largest park in the NL with generous dimensions in LF, CF, and RF; Exposition Park was noted as a haven for triples and IPHR. The park factor for triples was 169, or nearly 70% more than the average NL ballpark. When it came to home runs, Exposition Park was below average with a home run park factor of 68. While the number of IPHR hit at the park was higher than the NL average, OTF home runs at this ballpark were very rare. In the eight and a half seasons Exposition Park was used in the Deadball Era, there were only five OTF home runs and four of the five were of the bounce variety. The only home run, in the Deadball Era to clear any of the outfield fences on the fly, was hit by Tim Jordan of Brooklyn (over the RF fence) on July 22, 1908. This rare event was first page news the next day in the Pittsburgh newspapers. An interesting aspect of batting in the Deadball Era can be

seen in the batting park factors for Exposition Park. For the ballpark, the batting average park factor was 101 and the extra-base-hit park factors were a mixed bag: doubles 94, triples 168, and home runs 66. In contemporary times such a combination of park factors would produce a below average park factor for slugging. In the Deadball Era, with far fewer home runs and many more triples, Exposition Park actually had a noticeably higher than average slugging park factor of 105.

For the Federal League seasons of 1914-15 home run data and batting factors are available and are shown below. In the two Federal League seasons, the batting park factors for Exposition II are similar to what they were in the 1901-09 seasons of use by the NL. The exceptions are the Slugging park factors: 106 for 1901-09 vs. 97 for 1914-15 and home runs 66 and 41. There were no configuration changes in the ballpark in the Deadball Era. However, the average Federal League ballpark (1914-15) was noticeable smaller than the NL ballparks in use in 1901-09. Note that in the following tables, all of the home run data for 1890-92 was compiled by ballpark researcher Robert Williams.

#### HOME RUNS BY TYPE AT EXPOSITION PARK III

Years	Total	OTF	Bounce	IPHR
1890-92	106	4	1	102
1893-1900	154	14	5	140
1901-1909	109	5	4	104
1914-15***	35	3	3	32

#### OTF HOME RUNS BY FIELD AT EXPOSITION PARK III (Excludes Bounce)

Years	Total	LF	CF	RF	Unknown
1890-92	3	0	0	3	0
1893-1900	9	1	1	7	0
1901-09	1	0	0	1	0
1914-15	0				

#### INSIDE-THE-PARK HOME RUNS BY FIELD AT EXPOSITION PARK III

<i>Years</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>LF</i>	<i>LC</i>	<i>CF</i>	<i>RC</i>	<i>RF</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
1890-92	102	33	14	28	12	6	9
1893-1900	140	35	8	33	6	6	52
1901-1909	104	26	3	53	10	6	6
1914-15	32	4	2	24	1	1	0

## Batting Park Factors- 19th Century ( NL Except as Noted)

Years	Runs	Home Runs
1890*	82	110
1891	103	70
1892	86	171
1893	110	80
1894	88	58
1895	89	41
1896	84	20
1897	97	52
1898	92	50
1899	96	51
1900	100	76
1890-1900	94	71

\* Players League

## BATTING PARK FACTORS-DEADBALL ERA-20TH CENTURY

<u>Years</u>	<u>BA</u>	<u>OBP</u>	<u>SLUG</u>	<u>2B*</u>	<u>3B*</u>	<u>HR*</u>	<u>BB**</u>
1901-1909	102	101	106	102	187	66	98
1914-15***	101	99	97	64	169	41	97

\* Per AB

\*\* Per Total Plate Appearance (AB+BB+HP)

\*\*\* Federal League

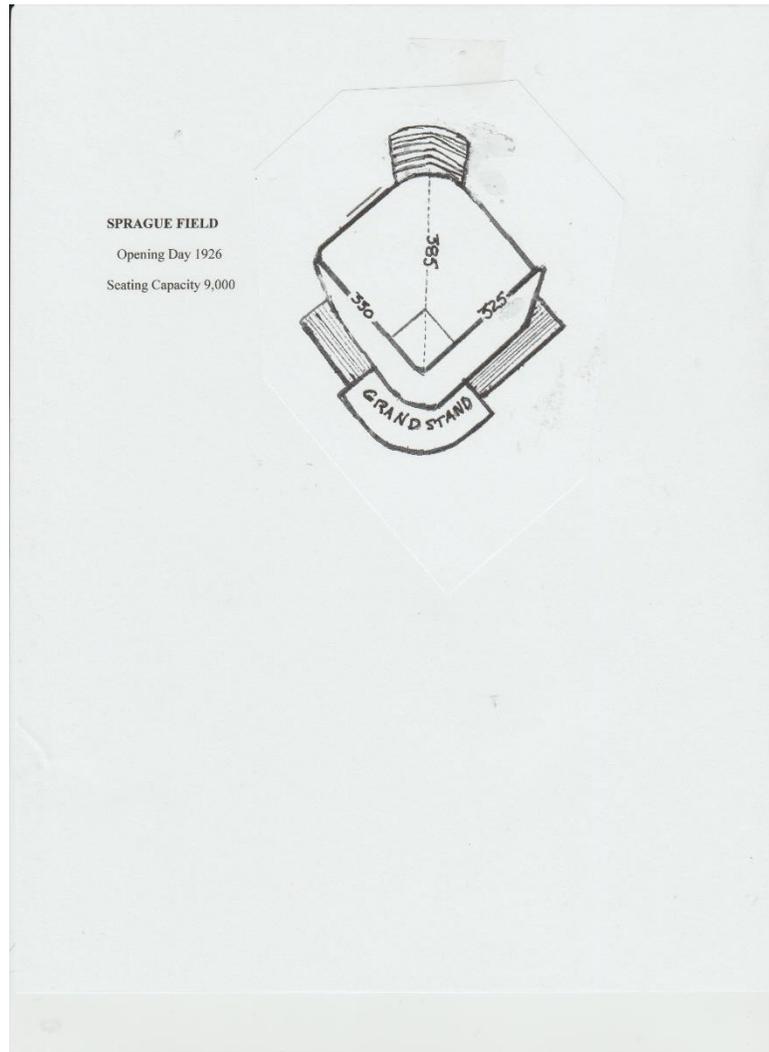
Sources:

1 Philip Lowry, *Green Cathedrals*, (2006 Edition) p. 215;

2 Sanborn Fire Insurance Co. map, Pittsburgh 1906, (map 84).

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**SPRAGUE FIELD:** Bill Lamb contributed the following article and diagram on Sprague Field in Bloomfield, New Jersey.



### **SPRAGUE FIELD (BLOOMFIELD, NJ)**

by Bill Lamb

Sprague Field, aka General Electric Field

Constructed: April 1919 in Bloomfield, New Jersey (US)

Demolished: Around 1940

Located about 15 miles west across the Hudson River from midtown Manhattan, Bloomfield is an older, mostly blue-collar New Jersey town with a rich athletic tradition. To continue this heritage, the municipality maintains more than a dozen greenswards suitable for the play of outdoor sports. One of these is Felton Field, a small, tidy playground wedged into a densely-populated neighborhood not far from the town borders with Newark and East Orange. Few, if any, present-day Bloomfield residents likely appreciate that the playground's undersized diamonds (used only for Little League and softball games) sit on the site of a vanished ballpark that once hosted amateur, semipro, minor league, and Negro Leagues baseball. This long-demolished and now-forgotten venue was called Sprague Field.<sup>i</sup> Its story follows.

A century ago, Bloomfield was home to several large industrial plants, including the works of the Sprague Electric Company, a subsidiary of General Electric.<sup>ii</sup> In early 1919, the company purchased open space near its plant and began the construction of an athletic field for the off-hours recreation of its 2,000 employees. A feature of the grounds was a baseball diamond intended for use by the Sprague Electric company team.<sup>iii</sup>

Ready for game action by mid-Spring, the playing field dimensions were constrained by surrounding residences and commercial buildings but were adequate, if somewhat on the small size – LF: 330; CF: 385; RF: 325. Those dimensions were defined by later-erected fencing that ranged from five feet high in left field, to a 35-foot scoreboard in left center, to ten feet in center and right field. Outside the fences, the ballpark was bounded by Bloomfield (first base line), LaFrance (third base line), Floyd (left field), and Arlington (center and right field) Avenues.<sup>iv</sup> Initially, the seating capacity of Sprague Field was limited. But by September 1920, up to 3,000 spectators could be accommodated following the addition of a wooden grandstand and bleacher sections.<sup>v</sup>

On May 3, 1919, the Sprague Electric nine inaugurated the new ballpark with a game against the Orange (NJ) Athletic Association.<sup>vi</sup> The company team then went on to capture the 1919 championship of the amateur North Jersey Industrial League, and repeated as league champs in 1920.<sup>vii</sup> Meanwhile, the grounds also served as home field for the top-notch Sprague Electric soccer team. In 1922, the competitive level of Sprague Field baseball was upgraded when the Bloomfield Elks secured a lease for Sunday games. Comprised almost entirely of local talent, the nine sponsored by the Elks was one of the best semipro clubs on the East Coast and played all-comers, including elite black professional teams like the Bacharach Giants, Homestead Grays, and New York Cuban Stars.

In anticipation of the throngs expected to attend their games, the Elks embarked upon a ballpark enlargement program, funding improvements via off-season dinner dances, raffles, and other fund-raising events that ultimately yielded \$7,000. By the time that the season commenced, permanent fencing had been erected and the seating capacity of Sprague Field doubled to approximately 6,000.<sup>viii</sup> Facing top-flight opposition, the Elks, with future Philadelphia A's standout Mule Haas in centerfield, held their own, posting a 15-14 log for the 1922 season. Thereafter and with his sights set on bolstering the club's roster, Elks field boss Jim Finnerty undertook a pre-1923 season recruiting tour. Among the newcomers signed to play for the Elks (at \$3 a game) was a strapping Columbia University first baseman who played under the alias *Babe Long*. But after several games at Sprague Field, Long was deemed a bust – "He couldn't hit," lamented Finnerty – and dropped from the club.<sup>ix</sup> Later, the ex-Elk had somewhat more success, forging a Cooperstown-bound playing career under his birth name: Lou Gehrig. The disappointing performance of recruit *Long* notwithstanding, the Elks turned in an outstanding 26-10-1 record that concluded with a season-ending shutout victory pitched by Bloomfield native Alex Ferguson, just home after completing a 9-13 campaign with the Boston Red Sox.<sup>x</sup>

The ensuing seasons saw the Bloomfield Elks at their zenith, drawing large crowds for Sunday and holiday doubleheaders against the likes of the Heinie Zimmerman Bronx All-Stars and the cream of black pro nines. Capacity crowds of 6,000 were the norm, but a reported 8,500 spectators swamped Sprague Field (with another 500 watching the action perched atop railroad cars parked nearby) for an Elks contest against a post-season barnstorming team of Detroit Tigers led by future Hall-of-Famer Heinie Manush.<sup>xi</sup> By the end of that season, the four-season cumulative record of the Elks stood at an excellent 95-52-3 (.647),<sup>xii</sup> with even brighter days seemingly ahead. Turmoil to town's immediate south, however, soon brought an end to the Bloomfield Elks as an elite semipro baseball club. Events also propelled Sprague Field – albeit only very briefly – into the ranks of minor league ballparks.

For decades, the City of Newark had been the scene of top-notch minor league baseball, most recently provided by the Newark Bears of the Class AA International League. But the Newark club had recently been plagued by financial instability and ballpark problems. Two playing sites, Wiedenmayer's Park in the Newark Ironbound and Harrison Field in nearby Harrison, NJ, had recently been destroyed by fire, leaving the Bears to play in Meadowbrook Oval, a bandbox unsuitable for high-level baseball. In June 1924, the Bears had been dispossessed there as well, evicted on short notice by the Newark Board of Education, titleholder of the premises.<sup>xiii</sup> The Bears had an option upon use of Sprague Field in nearby Bloomfield, but chose instead to move into Newark School Stadium, an oval-shaped facility designed for football, not baseball. By May 1925, however, the ballpark situation had become untenable, forcing relocation of the franchise to Providence, where the club finished the season and then disbanded.

During the off-season, Long Island entrepreneur Charles Davids acquired International League rights to the Newark territory, and began preparations for investing an entirely new Newark Bears franchise in the city. To remedy the playing field problem, Davids purchased the site of burned-down Wiedenmayer's Park and

commenced construction of Davids (later Rupert) Stadium. But as the 1926 season approached, it became obvious that the Bears new ballpark would not be ready for Opening Day. In near-desperation, Davids approached Elks manager Finnerty and Bloomfield lodge directors about gaining temporary access to Sprague Field. Notwithstanding the imposition on its own schedule, the Elks agreed, a magnanimous gesture that earned the organization "the wholehearted thanks of Newark fandom."<sup>xiv</sup> A grateful Davids then quickly set about enlarging the seating capacity of Sprague Field via expansion of the grandstand and erection of a new centerfield bleachers section. Within weeks, the ballpark could accommodate 9,000 fans.<sup>xv</sup>

On April 4, 1926, Sprague Field hosted its first contest between two clubs in Organized Baseball, an 8-4 Newark Bears preseason exhibition game loss to the American League Philadelphia A's. A week later, the just-enlarged grounds filled to capacity to witness the Bears top the Philadelphia Phillies, 9-7.<sup>xvi</sup> On April 14, the Bears initiated the International League season with a home victory against the Buffalo Bisons. Before the day was out, however, calamity struck. A carelessly discarded cigarette started a fire that caused extensive damage to Sprague Field, with large portions of the wooden grandstand and bleacher sections destroyed. With the grounds at least temporarily unusable, club boss Davids secured Newark Board of Education permission to return the Bears to Newark Schools Stadium for a few games.<sup>xvii</sup> And by mid-May, the club was able to move into a still-uncompleted but usable Davids Stadium. Meanwhile, the Bloomfield Elks were left with a wrecked ballpark. Reconstruction of the burned grandstand and bleacher sections would take at least a month, and was prohibitively expensive for a fraternal organization like the Elks to undertake in any event. For the remainder of the 1926 season, an unrepaired Sprague Field was usually dormant, as the Elks took to playing largely a road game schedule.<sup>xviii</sup> At year's end, the lodge disbanded its baseball team, bringing the Bloomfield Elks' brief run as a top-flight semipro nine to a close.<sup>xix</sup>

Although the Elks were leaving the competitive baseball scene, Sprague Field was not. Despite the fire damage, the ballpark still had usable seating for about 2,500 spectators, more than sufficient to meet the needs of a fledgling independent black pro team. The Newark Browns were formed in 1926, sponsored by the New Jersey Colored Amusement Company. During its maiden season, the Browns played wherever the team could gain access. But for 1927, Browns management wanted to secure a permanent home field. Although located in virtually all-white Bloomfield, Sprague Field was vacant, serviceable, and only a short trolley ride from the black neighborhoods of central Newark where the Browns hoped to draw their fan base from.<sup>xx</sup> So in April, the club assumed the lease for the ballpark.<sup>xxi</sup> The change in tenants was accompanied by a change in the grounds name – at least in African American newspapers. Because the Sprague Electric Company plant been subsumed by its corporate parent and now operated under the name of General Electric, the Browns home field would be called *General Electric Field* in black press game reportage (although the locals and the Bloomfield press would continue to refer to the ballpark as Sprague Field).<sup>xxii</sup>

A new club needing to cultivate a following, the Browns had the advantage of home field proximity to Newark's substantial African American population, access to ample area playing talent, and a local monopoly on black professional baseball – the Newark Stars of the Eastern Colored League having folded midway in the 1926 season. The black press was also supportive, the *Pittsburgh Courier* heralding Opening Day festivities announced by the Browns: "The management is planning a gala opening day on May 4, with appropriate ceremonies attending the throwing out of the first ball, and a record-breaking throng is expected to crowd old Sprague Field to watch their newest favorites do their stuff."<sup>xxiii</sup> Still, the Browns were handicapped by being an independent club, unaffiliated with either the ECL or the Negro National League. And while the club was able to get games against elite black teams like the Hilldale Daisies, Homestead Grays, and Brooklyn Royal Giants, Newark was almost invariably the opposition in such contests, submitting to a steady diet of away games against black baseball's top nines. For home engagements at Sprague/General Electric Field, the Browns customarily hosted lesser, non-major league colored teams and semipro white clubs.

The Newark Browns remained tenants of Sprague Field for the remainder of the decade and through the 1931 season. Over that time, the club's perseverance, plus the Depression-driven collapse of the Eastern Colored League, persuaded Hilldale, the Baltimore Black Sox, Pittsburgh Crawfords, and other top black clubs to begin paying visits to the Browns home field. Such contests often filled the reduced seating of the grounds to capacity: "... the 2,500 fans that rammed and crammed their way into General Electric Field"

were delighted by the Browns 9-0 whitewash of Hilldale on August 1, 1931,<sup>xxiv</sup> while "the largest crowd that ever packed the stands of General Electric Field" had seen Newark drop a doubleheader to the Baltimore Black Sox two days earlier.<sup>xxv</sup> The Browns finished a generally successful 1931 season by winning a five-game set against the touring San Juan (Puerto Rico) Stars and then playing a seven-game series against the white Newark Independents for the Newark city championship.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In early 1932, the Newark Browns took a big step up in stature, gaining admission to the East-West League, a newly-formed Negro Leagues major formed by Homestead Grays club boss (and Pittsburgh numbers honcho) Cum Posey.<sup>xxvii</sup> An ambitious 132-game split-season schedule was adopted at the circuit's organizational meeting and widely published in the black press.<sup>xxviii</sup> Thereafter, a respectable roster was put together by Browns player-manager John Beckwith, a formidable batsman and reputedly the first player, black or white, to drive a ball over the centerfield fence at Redland Field.<sup>xxix</sup> The Browns opened with a May 1 exhibition game win over the Pennsylvania Red Caps at General Electric Field, but once the regular season started, Newark was snake-bitten. Beginning on the road, the Browns dropped their first four games, committing a staggering 28 fielding errors in the process.<sup>xxx</sup> Once the club got home, incessant rain caused the postponement of their home opener for days. Indeed, the league as a whole was plagued by bad weather throughout the Spring, causing the cancellation of a significant number of EWL games. By mid-June, the Newark Browns had managed to play less than half of the 35 games scheduled. And when they did play, the Browns were lousy, posting a 3-14 (.178) record that left the club solidly in last place. More ominously, Newark also had serious money problems. "With the Newark Browns, things have been going very badly," reported the *Pittsburgh Courier*, "and because of financial trouble it is doubtful if they will be able to continue."<sup>xxxi</sup> If Newark folded, plans were laid for the Pittsburgh Crawfords to assume the Brown's place in the league. Or for the EWL to drop another team at the July 4 mid-point break in the schedule, and then proceed as a six-club circuit.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Within days thereafter, such schemes were overtaken by financial realities and the entire East-West League dissolved. The Newark Browns, however, did not discontinue play. Rather, the club soldiered on as an independent nine that barnstormed the East Coast.<sup>xxxiii</sup> But once the summer of 1932 ended, the Browns time as a professional baseball club was over. Its brief tour of duty as a Negro League venue, however, was sufficient to earn Sprague Field an entry in the ballpark compendium *Green Cathedrals*.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The Newark Browns were the last regular tenant of Sprague Field. Once the Browns disbanded, the ballpark was reduced to hosting the odd game of local amateur and semipro nines. In 1934, the grounds also served as home field for four games of the Newark Dodgers of the newly-formed Negro National League II. But Sprague Field was only a backup facility, as the Dodgers and succeeding Negro League clubs like the Newark Eagles preferred the newer and far-more-commodious Rupert Stadium (which also had the advantage of being located in Newark proper, not an adjacent white suburb like Bloomfield). By 1933, however, the Bloomfield Recreation Commission had begun using the Sprague Field grounds as a Monday-through-Friday summer recreation facility dubbed the Floyd Avenue playground.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Subsequent Sprague Field-related events are shrouded by scant press coverage,<sup>xxxvi</sup> sketchy documentary evidence, and the passage of time. But in August 1928, title to a good portion of the real property on which Sprague Field sat was acquired by the Town of Bloomfield.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The town operated a summer recreation program on the site from that date forward, but in all probability, the field's fencing, grandstand, and bleachers were gone by the 1940, as town fathers were likely ill-disposed toward absorbing the costs of maintaining a little-used wooden ballpark exposed to the elements. Today, the site of long-gone Sprague Field continues to provide the grounds of a Bloomfield playground that fosters the aspirations of the community's youngest ballplayers. And that is not a bad legacy.

December 3, 2018

## SOURCES

The primary sources for the narrative above are contemporaneous reportage in *The* (Bloomfield, NJ) *Independent Press* and *Pittsburgh Courier*, and Sam C. Pierson, *Thumbing the Pages of Baseball History in Bloomfield* (Bloomfield, NJ: The Independent Press, 1939). Unless otherwise noted, information pertaining to Negro Leagues baseball has been taken from *The Negro Leagues Book*, Dick Clark and Larry Lester, eds. (Cleveland: SABR, 1994).

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> The Sprague Field profiled herein is not to be confused with the later-built Sprague Field that serves as home grounds for Montclair (NJ) University athletic teams.

<sup>ii</sup> Named for electrical engineer-inventor Frank J. Sprague (1857-1934), Sprague Electric Company designed and manufactured railway switches and other apparatus crucial to the development of urban mass transit, and had been a presence in Bloomfield since 1884. Later, the plant segued into the production of radio components and other electrical devices. Acquired by General Electric in 1902, the company retained the name Sprague Electric into the 1920s.

<sup>iii</sup> As per "Sprague Electric Base Ball Team," *The* (Bloomfield, NJ) *Independent Press*, April 4, 1919. The cost of fixing up the diamond was subsequently estimated at \$2,000.

<sup>iv</sup> Per Philip J. Lowry, *Green Cathedrals: The Ultimate Celebration of Major League and Negro League Ballparks* (New York: Walker & Company, 2d ed., 2006), 21. The smallish Sprague Field dimensions were the rough equivalent of other contemporary ballparks, including Redland (later Crosley) Field – LF: 328; CF: 387; RF: 366 in 1938. Or today, Oriole Park at Camden Yards – LF: 333; CF: 400; RF: 318.

<sup>v</sup> See "Sprague Works Field Day Was a Great Success," *The Independent Press*, September 17, 1920.

<sup>vi</sup> Per "Sprague Team Opens Baseball Season Here," *The Independent Press*, May 1, 1919.

<sup>vii</sup> According to Sam C. Pierson, *Thumbing the Pages of Baseball History in Bloomfield* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: The Independent Press, 1939), 78. For decades, Pierson was the hometown weekly's sports reporter.

<sup>viii</sup> Per "Bloomfield Was Stronghold of Baseball in Early Days," *The Independent Press*, April 12, 1954. See also, Pierson, 70.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.* See also, Pierson, 71.

<sup>x</sup> Ferguson posted a 61-85 (.418) record in a 10-season major league career that ended in 1929.

<sup>xi</sup> Per *The Independent Press*, April 12, 1954.

<sup>xii</sup> Per Pierson, 74-75. The 1954 retrospective cited in endnote 8 placed the Bloomfield Elks club record for the 1921-1926 seasons at an even better 124-53 (.701).

<sup>xiii</sup> See "Newark School Board To Oust Bears from Oval," *Jersey* (Jersey City) *Journal*, June 6, 1924.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Newark Evening News* editorial re-printed in *The Independent Press*, March 26, 1926.

<sup>xv</sup> "Newark Bears to Play on Sprague Field," *The Independent Press*, March 26, 1926, and Edward H. Foegel, "Newark Fans Go Limit to Get Their Baseball," *The Sporting News*, April 8, 1926.

<sup>xvi</sup> See "9,000 See Bears Beat Phillies, 9-7," *New York Times*, April 11, 1926.

<sup>xvii</sup> Per Howard Freedman, "Evening Muse," *Newark Evening News*, April 15, 1926.

<sup>xviii</sup> After the fire, the Elks occasionally used Sprague Field for matches against non-draws like the Newark Hebrew Club. See "Hebrew Club Finds Antlers Easy," (Newark) *Jewish Chronicle*, June 4, 1926.

<sup>xix</sup> As recollected in *The Independent Press*, April 12, 1954. See also, Pierson, 74-75.

<sup>xx</sup> As elsewhere in the North, 1920s New Jersey was an apartheid-like state, with few racially-mixed neighborhoods. Bloomfield and the adjoining neighborhoods of East Orange and north ward Newark had hardly any black residents, but Sprague Field was within short walking distance of a stop of a Bloomfield Avenue trolley line that originated in the African American precincts of downtown Newark.

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<sup>xxi</sup> Per "NJ Browns To Be Classy," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 1927.

<sup>xxii</sup> Contemporary Negro Leagues websites like Seamheads.com list the home grounds of the 1932 Newark Browns (and 1934 Newark Dodgers) as General Electric Field. That name, however, never gained much local traction. To Bloomfield natives, the name of the ballpark was always Sprague Field.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 19, 1927.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Per "Newark Defeats Hilldale," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 15, 1931.

<sup>xxv</sup> See "Black Sox Top Newark in Twin Bill," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 1, 1931.

<sup>xxvi</sup> As per the *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 3, 1931. The Browns won the series against the San Juan Stars. The outcome of the Newark city championship was undiscovered by the writer.

<sup>xxvii</sup> The other clubs admitted to the EWL were the Homestead Grays, Hilldale (Philadelphia) Giants, Baltimore Black Sox, (New York) Cuban Stars East, Detroit Wolves, Cleveland Hornets, and Washington Pilots.

<sup>xxviii</sup> See e.g., *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 30, 1932, and (Los Angeles) *California Eagle*, May 6, 1932.

<sup>xxix</sup> According to sports columnist Louis E. Dial in the *New York Age*, March 12, 1932.

<sup>xxx</sup> Sportswriter W. Rollo Wilson found such fielding ineptitude "almost impossible" to comprehend. *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 28, 1932.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Per "May Cut to 6 Clubs," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 25, 1932.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Per "Forgotten Heroes: John Beckwith," Dr. Leyton Revel and Luis Munoz, Center for Negro League Baseball Research, 2014, 14.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> See endnote 4 for full title and publication data.

<sup>xxxv</sup> The first discovered report of activity at the Floyd Avenue playground appeared in "Bloomfield Playgrounds Now at Height of Summer Activity," *The Independent Press*, July 21, 1933.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> The last discovered press mention of Sprague Field states that the site of the former ballpark was acquired by Westinghouse for conversion into an employee parking lot. See "Town Parking," *The Independent Press*, August 8, 1957. But the article's unidentified author misapprehended where Sprague Field was located (some distance to the south of the Westinghouse parking lot), and by 1957, the old Sprague Field grounds had long been converted into a neighborhood playground then called Floyd Field.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Per Deed dated August 10, 1928. Forty years later, Bloomfield acquired formal title to the remainder of the property. Many thanks to Andrea Schneider, confidential assistant to the Bloomfield Town Administrator for supplying copies of the now-Felton Field property deeds.

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