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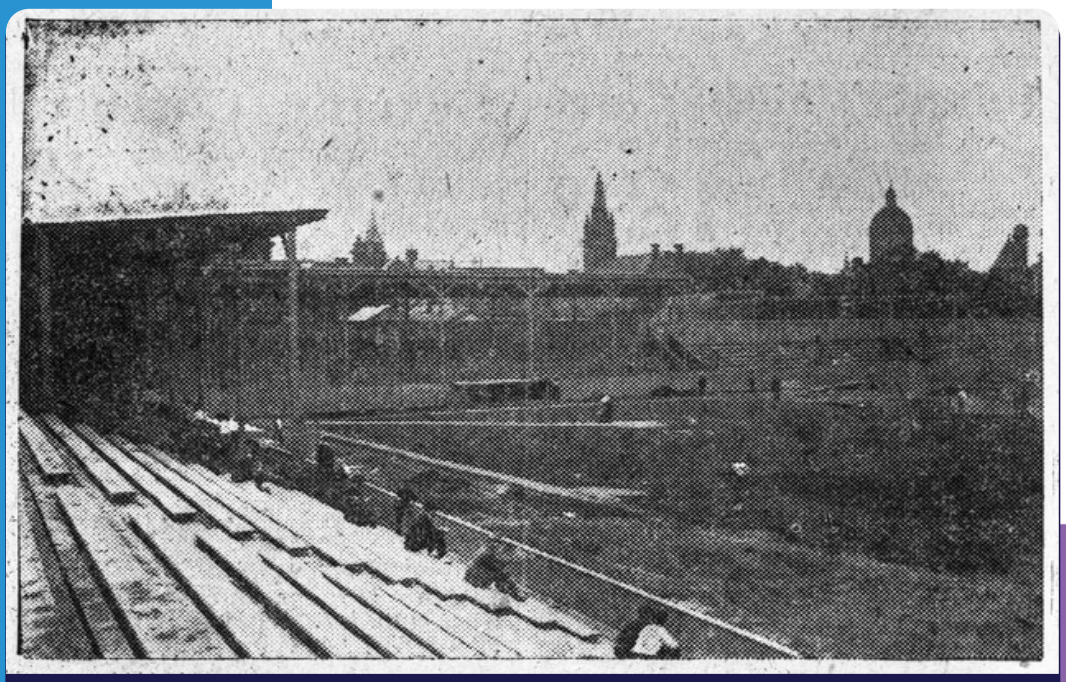

DOWNTOWN BASE BALL PARK

Research Report

Prepared for the Capital Area Architectural and Planning Board

June 2025

Revised July 2025

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RESEARCH REPORT ON THE HISTORY AND LOCATION OF THE DOWNTOWN BASEBALL PARK

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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Cover Image: "Downtown Ball Park," 1903. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

In December of 2024 the Capital Area Architectural and Planning Board (CAAPB) received an application to add New Commemorative Works at the State Capitol Grounds to honor the history of the Downtown Baseball Park, a ballpark that was one of the ballparks used by the St. Paul Saints and the St. Paul Colored Gophers between 1903 and 1910. As part of the CAAPB's application review process, a "verification of [the] historical facts stated in the application" is required. To complete the verification, the CAAPB hired Pigeon Consulting, a historic consulting firm located in Saint Paul, Minnesota, to prepare this report.

HISTORY OF THE DOWNTOWN BASEBALL PARK

In 2015, when the St. Paul Saints moved to CHS Field, Tad Vezner wrote an article for the *Pioneer Press* that looked back at "St. Paul ballparks through history." In the article Vezner notes that "since the 1850s, St. Paul's team has had…a half-dozen ballparks."[1] One of those ballparks, alternatively known as the "St. Paul Base Ball Park," "the Downtown Ball Park," the "Downtown Baseball Park," and "the pillbox park" was located at the site now occupied by a laboratory building that serves the Minnesota Department of Health and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

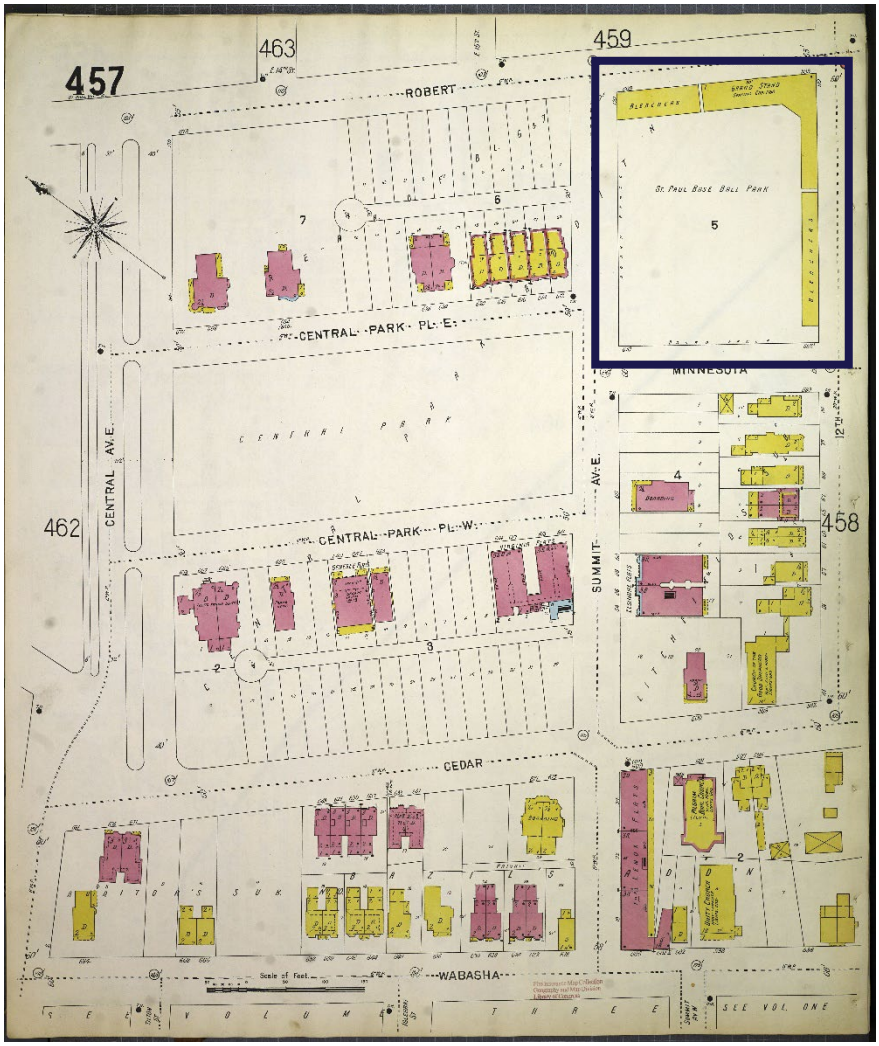

Figure 1. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1903. The Downtown Baseball Park is outlined at the top of the map. Map courtesy of the University of Minnesota.

The park was bounded by Summit Avenue (now East Columbus Avenue), Twelfth Street, Minnesota Street, and Robert Street. **The park was used by the St. Paul Saints between 1903 and 1908 and the St. Paul Colored Gophers from their founding in 1907 until the land was sold in 1910.**

[1] Tad Vezner, "A look at St. Paul ballparks through history," *Pioneer Press*, May 16, 2015. https://web.archive.org/web/20170422125311/https://www.twincities.com/2015/05/16/a-look-at-st-paul-ballparks-through-history/

The St. Paul Saints and the Search for a Ballpark

The history of early baseball teams can be challenging to trace – teams change names, change owners, and change cities. The first iteration of the team known as the St. Paul Saints was founded in 1894 in South Dakota as the Sioux City Cornhuskers.[2] The team was part of the Western League, a minor league baseball league, and in 1895 it moved to St. Paul and was renamed the "St. Paul Saints."

The team's owner, Charles Comiskey, constructed a small baseball park at the "southwest corner of Dale and University" so that the Saints could have a permanent home. The park, called St. Albans Field, could hold 1,500 spectators.[3] During the winter, the park was used as a skating rink (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Ice skating at St. Alban's Field, undated. Courtesy of the St. Paul Pioneer Press.

[2] There have been three iterations of the team known as the "St. Paul Saints" -a team that played from 1894 to 1899 before moving to Chicago and becoming the Chicago White Sox; a minor league team that existed from 1901 to 1960 and which played at the Downtown Baseball Park and the Lexington Athletic Park; and the current St. Paul Saints, a Triple-A affiliate of the Minnesota Twins, which was founded in 1993.
[3] Vezner, "A look at St. Paul ballparks through history."

Comiskey quickly commissioned a new, much larger, park at the southwest corner of Lexington and University Avenues. The new ballpark, called the Lexington Athletic Park, or Lexington Park, opened on April 30, 1897.[4] In late 1899 the "Western League" became the "American League" and gained major league status and at the start of the 1900 season Comiskey took his team to Chicago, where it became one of the charter franchises in the American League under the name the "Chicago White Stockings," now the Chicago White Sox.[5] Comiskey retained ownership of the Lexington Athletic Park. With Comiskey's move to Chicago, St. Paul was left without a baseball franchise.

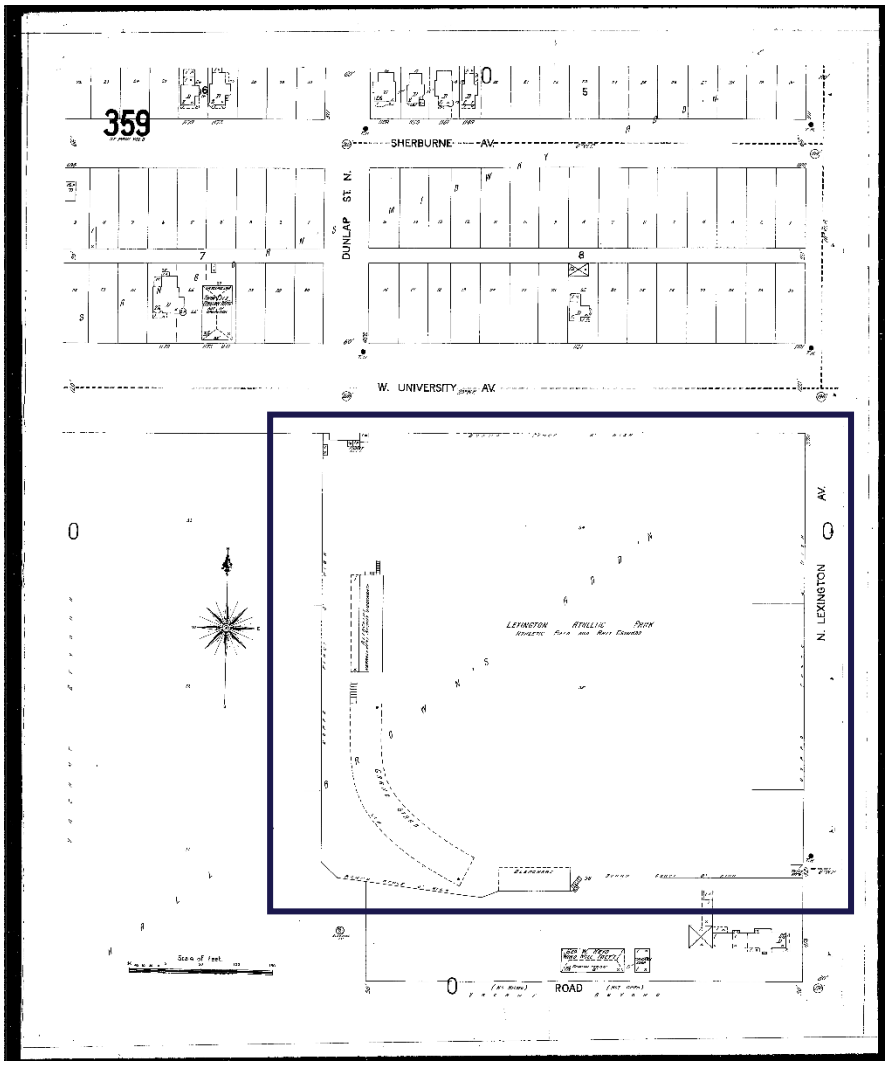

Figure 3. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map showing the Lexington Athletic Park, 1903. Courtesy of Hennepin County Library.

In 1900 George Lennon, a St. Paul businessman, traveled to Chicago with the hopes of securing the right to a franchise for St. Paul. Lennon controlled the Lexington Athletic Park under a lease agreement with Comiskey and had hoped that this would secure him the right to a franchise in the minor league American Association. According to an article in *The Saint Paul Globe*, Lennon left Chicago with the franchise question unresolved. The article stated, "It was reported that Lennon had asked too much in

[4] Dave Riehle, "Say it ain't so, Charlie!," Saint Paul Historical, https://saintpaulhistorical.com/items/show/179
[5] Chicago White Sox, "All-time Owners," https://www.mlb.com/whitesox/history/owners

the way of concessions and was turned down. It is regarded as certain, however, that Lennon will have a team in St. Paul."[6]

Lennon did secure the right to a franchise and re-established a team called the St. Paul Saints in 1901. The Saints played at the Lexington Athletic Park for their first two seasons. However, Lennon wanted to build a new baseball park closer to the central business district and spent a year looking for a site. Lennon felt that Lexington Park "which was four miles away from the central city…[was] so far out that businessman could not attend the weekday games."[7] Lexington Park was served by the Twin City Rapid Transit Company's streetcar – but Lennon argued that the distance was great enough that he was losing money holding games at Lexington Park.[8]

Lennon was also facing pressure from other American Association teams. According to Dennis Pajot's *Baseball's Heartland War, 1902-1903: The Western League and American Association Vie for Turf, Players and Profits*, "after the 1902 playing season, the other American Association clubs had decided Lennon must secure more accessible grounds than Lexington Park or transfer his club."[9] Lennon received a letter from club president T.J. Hickey informing him that "attendance in your city the past season was unsatisfactory to members of this association" and that "by a unanimous vote it was decided you must either build a park closer to the city of St. Paul or move your club to another city."[10]

Articles in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* from 1902 tracked Lennon's attempts to secure land and political support for a downtown baseball park. Lennon proposed constructing the park a "block just west of Central park."[11] Business leaders were initially in favor of Lennon's proposal – likely believing that a downtown park would keep businessman in the central business district for games while drawing new customers who came downtown to watch the Saints play.[12] While business leaders were in favor of the park, local residents and religious leaders were not. "Ministers and other interested parties believed that Sunday ball was to be played

[6] "Lennon's Chicago Trip," *The Saint Paul Globe*, Dec. 30, 1900, 11.
[7] Dennis Pajot, *Baseball's Heartland War, 1902-1903: The Western League and American Association Vie for Turf, Players and Profits* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 117.
[8] Pajot, *Baseball's Heartland War,* 117.
[9] Ibid, 118; "St. Paul May Lose Baseball Team Despite Protest of George Lennon," *The Saint Paul Globe*, November 25, 1902.
[10] "St. Paul May Lose Baseball Team Despite Protest of George Lennon," *The Saint Paul Globe*, November 25, 1902.
[11] "No Down Town Park: George Lennon Withdraws His Application for One Near Central Park, "*The Saint Paul Globe*, February 7, 1902.
[12] Various articles in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 1902, on file at the Minnesota Historical Society.

at the downtown park [and] that a number of saloon men had rented buildings near the proposed site…"[13] Lennon proposed a compromise – weekday games would be played downtown, and Sunday games would be played at Lexington Park.[14]

In December of 1902 the Committee on Streets of the Board of Alderman of the City of St. Paul turned down Lennon's proposal for a downtown park. As a result, the American Association announced that the St. Paul club would be transferred to Chicago. However, in February of 1903, Lennon announced that he had "secured an option on a downtown site in St. Paul where his team would play."[15] The new site was near Rice Street and Como Avenue and, once again, Lennon's optimism about the likelihood of a ballpark being approved was misplaced as neighboring property owners objected to the park.[16] The 1903 season opened at Lexington Park while Lennon continued to search for a downtown site.

Lennon finally secured a site in 1903. The City's common council approved an ordinance for the construction of a baseball park near "Robert, Minnesota, 12th and 13th streets." Construction was slated to start in June and be completed by July 7th. Once again, neighbors objected to the construction of a baseball park and filed an injunction claiming that the "players and spectators will, at frequent intervals, indulge in loud and deafening shouts, cheering, rings of bells, blowing of horns, whistling, catcalls, and other noises, which will disturb the plaintiffs and their families and seriously injure their health."[17] This time a judge denied the injunction and Lennon was allowed to proceed with the park that was a block away from Central Park, as Lennon had originally proposed in 1902 (Figure 4).

Upon opening on July 20, 1903, the Downtown Base Ball Park (Figure 5) was the weekday home of the St. Paul Saints. In 1907 it also became the weekday home to the St. Paul Colored Gophers.

[13] Pajot, *Baseball's Heartland War,* 117.
[14] Ibid, 118.
[15]Ibid*,* 125.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid, 126.

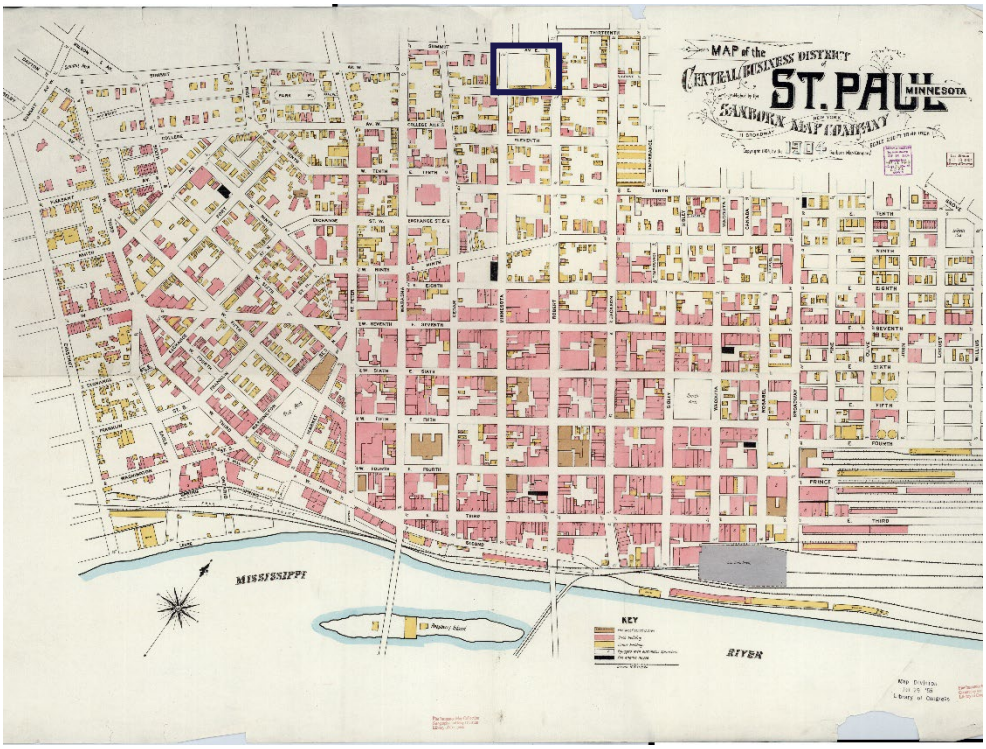

Figure 4. Map of the Central Business District of St. Paul, 1904. The Downtown Baseball Park is outlined at the top of the map. Map courtesy of the University of Minnesota.

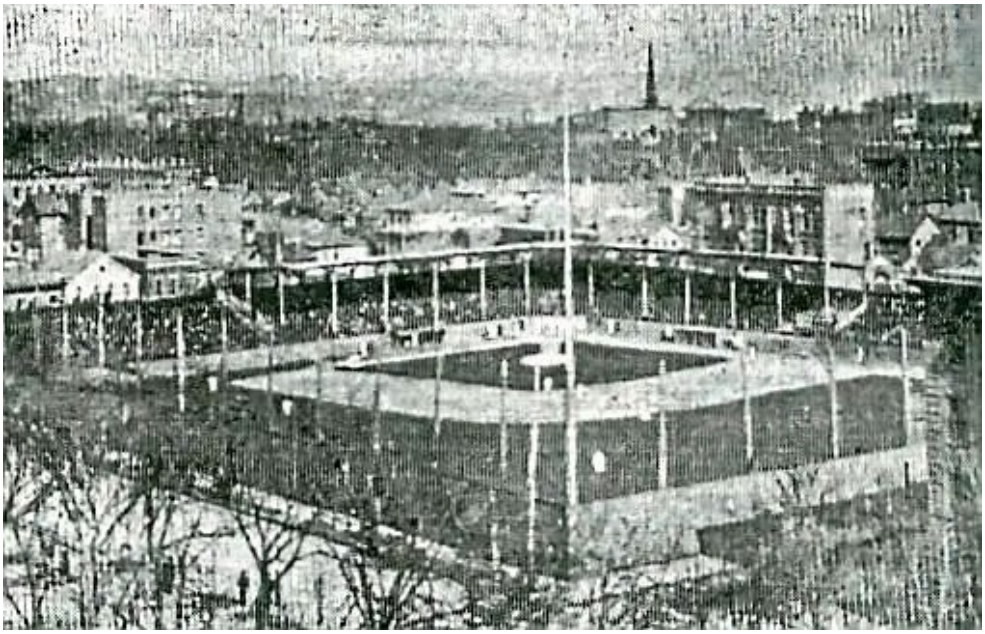

Figure 5. An undated photograph of the Downtown Baseball Park. Courtesy of the St. Paul Pioneer Press.

The St. Paul Colored Gophers

The St. Paul Colored Gophers were organized in 1907 by Phil "Daddy" Reid and John J. Hirschfield, with Reid serving as the team's manager. In *They Played for the Love of the Game*: *Untold Stories of Black Baseball in Minnesota*, historian Frank M. White writes that Reid and Hirschfield set out to "bring in players who had a 'national reputation' – at least within the world of black baseball,"[18] with the "'intentions on building the best ball club that money could buy.'"[19]

Within a decade of its formation in 1857, the National Association of Base Ball Players "ban[ned] any club which may be composed of one or more colored persons," effectively segregating organized baseball for the next 80 years.[20]

According to White, in the early decades of the twentieth century "more African Americans were seeking to play baseball and to start teams in Minnesota," with nine teams organized in the Twin Cites between 1905 and 1916.[21]

On May 4, 1907, the "St. Paul Gophers…[made] their first appearance on the St. Paul diamond at the downtown park." In their first year, the St. Paul Colored Gophers played 81 games – and won 75 of them.

Reid and Hirschfield set out to build "the best ball club that money could buy" and in 1909 they proved that they had, when the St. Paul Colored Gophers beat Chicago's Leland Giants in "the five game series for the world's championship,"[22] which was held at the Downtown Baseball Park in St. Paul. Reid led the Gophers until 1910, when the team disbanded. A new team, the Twin Cities Gophers, launched in Minneapolis the following year.[23]

[18] Frank M. White, *They Played for the Love of the Game*: *Untold Stories of Black Baseball in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), Loc 507, Kindle.
[19] Todd Peterson as quoted in White, *They Played for the Love of the Game*, Loc 505, Kindle.
[20] For more on the history of black baseball, see Kyle McNary, *Black Baseball*: *A History of African-Americans & the National Game* (London: PRC, 2003); Todd Peterson, *Early Black Baseball in Minnesota*: *The St. Paul Gophers, Minneapolis Keystones and other Barnstorming Teams of the Deadball Era* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010); Todd Peterson, Ed. *The Negro Leagues Were Major Leagues*: *Historians Reappraise Black Baseball* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019); Frank M. White, *They Played for the Love of the Game*: *Untold Stories of Black Baseball in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016); Sol White, *Sol White's History of Colored Base Ball, with Other Documents on the Early Black Game, 1886-1936* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995);
[21] Frank M. White, *They Played for the Love of the Game*, Loc 487-489, Kindle.
[22] "Big Base Ball Battle," *The Appeal* July 3, 1909
[23] *The New York Age*, April 13, 1911.

Bandbox, Cigarbox, and Pillbox Parks

Small baseball parks were often colloquially referred to as "bandboxes," "cigar boxes," and "pillboxes" to emphasize their diminutive size - as was the case for the "little old bandbox grounds in the rear of the West hotel…when organized baseball really got its first start in Minneapolis" and the "little bandbox park" in Toledo, Ohio.[24] The small parks fit on tight urban sites, but they were not without challenges for the players. When a new baseball park opened in Sioux City, Iowa in April of 1910, an article in *The Minneapolis Journal* noted

> Sioux City yesterday introduced the tourists to another pillbox park…The park is unlike the St. Paul pillbox in that the diamond is laid out differently and longer hits can be made in it. The right and left fielders, though, need to be expert billiard players or they are in trouble every time the ball is hit.[25]

The small scale of these parks made hitting homeruns difficult, there was "little room for catching pop-ups in foul territory…[and] right fielders…routinely played with their backs to the fence."[26] A 1910 newspaper article about the sale of St. Paul's downtown park stated "the march of time brings many changes, and the pillbox park had long outlived its usefulness. It was amply large to hold the crowds that St. Paul usually turned out to ballgames, but it was too small for the playing of a real game of baseball."[27]

For these reasons, the park may not have been popular with players and coaches. After two players had been thrown out at first base, Saints coach Mike Kelley "remarked that he wished to Moses that the ball park would burn down and that he'd give anybody $50 to touch it off."[28] Later that night one of his players, who the article relaying the story describes as "pifflicated" (intoxicated), called him and offered to burn the park down – first for $50, then for $25, and finally for free to show Kelley that "I'm y'r friend."[29] The next morning Kelley had to tell the team that he "didn't want the park burned down as any token of personal esteem."[30]

[24] Smith B. Hall, "Far Cry, Declares a Veteran Fan, From the Old West Hotel Bandbox Park to the New Nicollet Steel and Concrete Plant With a Seating Capacity for 15,000 People," *The Minneapolis Journal*, May 5, 1912; "Toledo's Troubles," *The Minneapolis Journal*, June 21, 1915; "Diamond Dope," *The Lincoln Evening News*, August 11, 1910; "Back on the Map," *The Minneapolis Journal*, March 3, 1912.
[25] "Another Pillbox," *The Minneapolis Journal*, April 11, 1910.
[26] Larry Millett, *Lost Twin Cities*, (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1992), 220.
[27] "Entirely Appropriate," *The Minneapolis Journal*, November 6, 1910.
[28] J.J. Ritchie, "The Sport Periscope," *The Minneapolis Journal*, November 30, 1915.
[29] J.J. Ritchie, "The Sport Periscope," *The Minneapolis Journal*, November 30, 1915.
[30] Ibid.

The St. Paul Saints and the St. Paul Colored Gophers played teams from Minnesota, the Midwest, and beyond. The Downtown Baseball Park hosted teams from Minneapolis, Chaska, Hibbing, Eau Claire, Sioux City, Chicago, and New York, among others.

Much like its predecessors, the Downtown Baseball Park was used for activities other than baseball, most notably as a speedskating rink during the winter months.

Figure 6. Championship speed skating races at downtown ballpark rink, 1910. Photograph courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The Saints returned to Lexington Park full-time following a fire in the grandstand at the Downtown Baseball Park in October of 1908. In 1909 Comiskey sold Lexington to a consortium that included George Lennon, and in 1910 Lennon sold the Downtown Baseball Park to the St. Paul Bread Company.

The St. Paul Bread Company

When Lennon sold the downtown park site in 1910, an article in *The Minneapolis Journal* announced the sale with a clever play on words:

> It was entirely appropriate that George E. Lennon should sell that old pillbox park at St. Paul for a bakery site. There used to be a lot of buns in the stand every time a visiting team trotted into the park and started to play.[31]

The park was sold to the St. Paul Bread Company, which constructed a large terracotta clad factory to produce and distribute its "Purity Bread." The factory stood on the site until the early 1990s, when the present-day laboratory building was constructed.[32]

NEW PLANT OF ST. PAUL BREAD COMPANY

Figure 7. "New Plant of St. Paul Bread Company," from Heny Castle's History of St. Paul and Vicinity, 1912.

[31] "Entirely Appropriate," *The Minneapolis Journal*, November 6, 1910.
[32] Millett, *Lost Twin Cities*, 221.

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