

# The Geography and Economics of Professional Ball Parks 1871- 1930

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Professional baseball parks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exhibited a great deal of geographic mobility. However this pattern was drastically changed after the rise of the expensive modern fire resistant ball parks. The purpose of this paper is to examine the factors that determined the site selection of ball parks, and to describe the economic impact these structures had on their surrounding area.

The early baseball parks were cheap wooden structures, costing up to \$60,000. In cities like Atlanta, Chicago, and New York there was a great deal of geographic mobility for the local baseball franchises. Teams frequently moved for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they were forced to move because of community opposition, because they had alienated powerful political leaders, or because the rent was too expensive. Other times the move was voluntary, encouraged by a declining neighborhood, financial support from an interested street car company, or the availability of a cheaper site in a nicer locality. Since the edifices were so cheap, there was little to hold a club in an unfavorable location.

The biggest cities rapidly shifted away from the cheap wooden parks beginning in 1908 with Shibe Park in Philadelphia. Between 1908 and 1915 virtually every major league team either built a new modern fire resistant park or refurbished their old ones. These new edifices symbolized the fact that baseball had become a mature, stable, and legitimate business. Owners took advantage of the unprecedented boom in baseball, the prevailing cheap labor and material costs, and the already available advanced technology to put up expensive new structures. These parks eliminated the great danger of fires which were quite common occurrences, and gave owners a chance to increase the number of seats and raise ticket prices.

The choice of a suitable site for the \$500,000 fireproof parks was a serious and crucial matter. Unlike the early parks, these could not be readily dismantled and rebuilt elsewhere. Owners needed access to the most complete information available about the various factors that might impinge upon their selection, such as traction routes, property values, land uses, neighborhood compositions and the plans of local governments towards the properties under consideration. The magnates also needed protection for their investment against nearby property owners who might be frightened about the park's impact on land values, land uses, and the quality of life; and against political opponents who could use their influence to harass the team and compel it to grant them favors. The club owners secured the necessary information and protection from their political associates.

The sites selected were normally in middle class residential areas where there were good mass transit facilities and cheap land. Often the new park was built at the same site as the prior wooden structure (e.g., N.Y.'s Polo Grounds), or just a few blocks away (e.g., Comiskey Park). In other cases, the team might move to an entirely new site. The Cubs moved from the West Side to the North Side, going from a declining neighborhood to a new thriving middle class area. The Dodgers moved from an industrial location to a vacant lot in Flatbush because they were attracted by its future potential.

The park building boom culminated with Yankee Stadium, which opened in the Bronx in 1923. The Yankees had been playing at the Polo Grounds as renters, a wise financial arrangement, but left because of jealousies among the owners. The name of this new

structure was very important because it was the first playing site identified with an urban title rather than the terms “park,” “field,” or “grounds.”

What kind of an impact did the baseball parks have on their surrounding neighborhoods? Today boosters in cities like New Orleans and Seattle encourage the building of expensive new stadiums because they believe it will have a great beneficial impact on their cities, both financially and psychologically. Early in the century, land owners of underdeveloped sites welcomed the construction of ball parks nearby because they expected that their presence would attract potential residents and businesses and lead to the development of that area. On the other hand, owners of built up localities opposed the presence of the ball clubs because they felt it would hurt their community by bringing in a lot of cheap, low quality shops and businesses. What normally happened was that adjacent to the park there would be lots of businesses catering to the needs of fans, e.g., fast food restaurants, saloons, souvenir shops, etc. which did not improve the area. But the influence of the park seldom extended more than a couple of blocks. The course of land values was rarely affected by the presence of a field. In vacant spots, the park’s presence did have a slight psychological effect in promoting the area. Yet even in the case of Yankee Stadium, it was the subway system and its stations that really led to the development of the Bronx. Other urban institutions which were used all the time like hospitals, made a much greater impact on the neighborhood than baseball grounds.