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The League That Never Was: Politicians, Local Boosters and the Rise and Fall of the Continental League

The changing demographic dimensions of American cities after World War II have had an enormous impact on the recent history of professional sports. Prior to 1950, top-level professional franchises were located primarily in the urban Northeast and Midwest and connected to each other by the railways. But the emergence of sprawling metropolises after 1950 in other regions, which could be reached quickly by air travel, encouraged established teams to relocate, leagues to expand, and new ones to organize. This was a radical change for baseball and hockey - whose franchises had remained stable for decades - but not for professional basketball and football - whose teams historically had moved frequently.

As a means of luring an existing or new franchise to their growing metropolis, civic leaders and local boosters persuaded taxpayers to build new stadiums. They argued that these new grounds and facilities served to promote the city's image, stimulate commerce, and promote local development. The geographic mobility of franchises had a major impact on profitability, land use patterns, community psychology, and local politics.

The formation of the Continental League (CL) challenged the existing monopoly in Major League Baseball (MLB) and was instrumental in expanding the league's structure. The proposed new league was in response to Congress's threats of lifting MLB's antitrust exemption due to franchise relocation. It was also in response to MLB's declining attendance in the 1950s. Research relative to the rise and fall of the CL has been minimal. In several baseball histories only a page or two is devoted to the CL. This paper explores the forces that led to the creation of the CL and analyzes its demise. Three questions guide the narrative: what were the forces that led to the formation of the CL; how did

these forces lead to the CL's demise; and how did they result in expanding MLB's league structure.

The efforts to form a third major league illustrated the complex interplay that emerged between MLB and the post-World War II urban city. On the one hand, local civic leaders and politicians saw baseball as a means of bringing the national spotlight upon their growing city. This exposure was a means of promoting and sustaining economic growth and expansion, and provided their city with a sense of "big league" status. At the same time, MLB owners were slow to begin the process of expansion, although several magnates recognized the need to tap into these growing markets. This reluctance was due primarily to a threat to lift MLB's exemption from antitrust laws brought on by a challenge to baseball's overall business practices. CL officials threatened to challenge the reserve clause in the courts. In addition, several members of Congress introduced legislation designed to loosen the owners' hegemony over their player force, in an effort to stockpile the league with quality player talent. This external pressure resulted in MLB owners recognizing the need to come to grips with expansion. However, MLB owners played upon Congress's reluctance to lift baseball's antitrust exemption, enabling the magnates to control the process of expansion, excluding several of the CL cities from consideration.

The primary sources for this paper are newspapers, periodicals, Congressional hearings, and sporting periodicals. These sources indicate which political leaders used congressional pressure to force MLB to expand its league structure and they aid the identification of the principal actors at the local level that led campaigns to raise taxes to build municipal stadiums. They also reflect the responses from both the Major League owners and League officials to the outside forces that called for expansion and identify the congressional members who attempted to bring professional baseball under antitrust laws.