

A Case Study On The Environmental History of Tigers Stadium

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HST 302

I chose to do my case study on Tigers Stadium because I am a Detroit Tigers fan, and have been most of my life, but also because I remember going to games there as a child. The Detroit Tigers and Tiger Stadium both have long and extensive histories which I will explore in this study.

Baseball had been played at the corner of Michigan and Trumbull in Detroit for 104 years, from 1896-1999¹. Over the years the stadium has gone through a number of changes, much like the city of Detroit. Before Detroit was founded in 1701, the land surrounding the site of Tiger Stadium was a large primeval forest filled with ash, birch, hickory, oak, and cedar and pine trees. Native Americans roamed these lands and hunted elk, turkey, moose, bear, and deer. They also picked strawberries, cranberries and raspberries.

Detroit was founded in 1701 when French officer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac and 51 other men landed on the banks of the Detroit River and established a settlement known as Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit. In 1734 a well-educated Frenchman named John Navarre would come to Detroit. He would assist Cadillac by running the civic affairs of Fort Pontchartrain. In return for his service in 1747 Navarre would be awarded one of the many narrow ribbon farms on the Detroit River. The area of Navarre's farm would extend several miles inland. When Navarre died in 1791 his widow took the property he owned and divided it amongst his two oldest sons. His son Francois would receive a 103 acre plot of land that would include the future site of Tiger Stadium.

In 1797 Francois would sell the land to his cousin Joseph Beaubien a farmer and militiamen. In 1805 a large fire broke out and destroyed almost all of Detroit. Five years later in

¹ Cohen, Irwin. Tiger Stadium. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.

1810 Joseph Beaubien would sell the land he purchased from Francois Navarre to Englishman James May. The land that included the future stadium site would change hands again in 1819 when May would sell it to a friend of Territorial Governor Lewis Cass named William Woodbridge. Woodbridge was an Ohio native but would become Michigan's first congressional Representative. He would also go on to become a state Senator, Governor, and U.S. Senator after Michigan became a state in 1837. Before the Erie Canal was completed in 1825 Detroit was not much more than a small trading post. In the coming years the population of the city would increase dramatically. In 1830 the population of Detroit was 2222. By 1850 over 21,000 people called Detroit home. In the 1840's waves of German and Irish immigrants began to settle in Detroit. Many Irish immigrants began to settle in an area on the western part of Detroit. This neighborhood would eventually become known as Corktown and is Detroit's oldest neighborhood. Tiger Stadium would eventually be built in this neighborhood.

In 1836 the rough dirt road that formed the eastern boundary of Woodbridge's farm would become the western city limits of Detroit. This dirt road would become the main north south road in Detroit. Woodbridge would name this road Trumbull Avenue after his father in law John Trumbull. Trumbull Avenue intersected with an old Indian footpath the Sauk trail this trail eventually became known as Michigan Avenue. Michigan Avenue began as a log packed dirt road that stretched through wilderness all the way to Fort Dearborn and eventually to Chicago which was 300 miles west. Michigan Avenue would become a major route for merchants, trappers, traders, and travelers. It was originally called Michigan Grand Avenue in 1807. Outside of Detroit it was known as the Chicago road. Woodbridge would oversee the expansion

of this road during the 1820's. In 1837 when Michigan became a state it became known as Michigan Avenue.

In 1855 William Woodbridge Deeded the property to his 9 year old granddaughter Juliana Philinda Abbott. On August 15, 1857 the first recorded baseball game was played in Detroit. It was played at a park on the corner of Adams and Beaubien Street. In October 1858 several local baseball players joined the National Association of Baseball players. Many of Detroit's prominent citizens were on this team called the Detroit's and would play other teams from around the country. The team would suspend operations during the civil war, but would be replaced other citizens in the city and they would organize the Northwest Association of Baseball players. Before his death in 1860 William Woodbridge gave consent to have the wooded northwest portion of the property be used for public picnic grounds as it was a very popular gathering place. In 1862 his granddaughter Juliana was committed and Woodbridge's son would take over the management of the property. In 1875 Woodbridge's son would lease most of the property to the city of Detroit for use as a hay market, and dog pound.²

Detroit would field a baseball team in the new National League from 1881-1888. The team would be managed from the Mayor's office. They played at Recreation Park at the current intersection of Brush and Brady. However the team would move to Cleveland in 1888. In 1889-1890 Detroit fielded a small minor league team in the International Association. The new team however lacked fan support and would fold by 1891. Detroiters would be without a baseball team from 1891-1894. For the 1894 season Ban Johnson the President of the newly re-organized Western League awarded Detroit a team. The Western League would eventually become known

² Bak, Richard. A Place for the Summer: A Narrative History of Tiger Stadium. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998.

as the American League. The team would play its games at Boulevard Park at Lafayette and Helen street, near the Bell Isle Bridge.³ By 1895 the corner of Michigan and Trumbull was abandoned and the city moved its hay market east to the current Eastern Market District of Detroit.⁴ George Vanderbeck the owner of the new baseball franchise the Detroit Tigers would become the primary tenant of the land.⁵

In 1895 due to economic and social growth of the city George Vanderbeck decided his team needed a field to play at that could accommodate more people. Thus he decided to build a new stadium that would be called Bennett Park a wooden structure that would seat approximately 5000 people. Before the construction on Bennett Park began the land was covered with 28 large elm and oak trees that date back to the revolutionary war. Some were about 8 feet in circumference. According to local legend Ottawa Chief Pontiac held councils of war under these trees during the uprising in 1763. George Vanderbeck was aware of the sites history, despite this he had the mill across from the site cut down many of the trees to be used for lumber. Vanderbeck agreed to save 8 of the trees however. He saved 3 that would be located between the left field foul line and the fence that separated the park from Michigan Avenue, in an area set aside for carriages. The other 5 would be in the field of play in deep left field. The

³ The Detroit News. Home Sweet Home. Edited by Mark Silverman and Jenniffer Carroll. Sports Publishing Inc., 2000.

⁴ Bak, Richard. A Place for the Summer: A Narrative History of Tiger Stadium. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998.

⁵ Bak, Richard. A Place for the Summer: A Narrative History of Tiger Stadium. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998.

location of the trees would not affect the fielders that much, as deep drives to the outfield at this time were uncommon. The Trees would survive on the property until 1900.⁶

The outfield was paved with cobblestones Owner George Vanderbeck decided to leave them but he covered them with several inches of loam which is a mix of clay, silt and sand. This made the outfield very marshy days after rainfall and some stones would eventually make their way to the playing surface. Bennett Park was named after former catcher Charlie Bennett who lost his legs in a train accident.⁷ Nearby residents and business owners would build what would become known as the wildcat stands, they would be built on top of barns and other buildings. The owners would discount admission and these stands would hold about 75 people at a time.⁸ Up until 1900 there was a lot of uncertainty and instability surrounding professional baseball in Detroit. In 1900 they would flood and freeze the field for a winter carnival.⁹ By 1901 many thought the franchise would not last.¹⁰

The Detroit Tigers would play their first game as part of the newly organized American League on April 25, 1901.¹¹ In 1903 the American and National Leagues reached the World

⁶ Bak, Richard. *A Place for the Summer: A Narrative History of Tiger Stadium*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998.

⁷ Cohen, Irwin. *Tiger Stadium*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.

⁸ *The Detroit News*. *Home Sweet Home*. Edited by Mark Silverman and Jenniffer Carroll. Sports Publishing Inc., 2000.

⁹ Bak, Richard, and Charlie Vincent. *The Corner: A Century of Memories at Michigan and Trumbull*. Chicago: Triumph Books, 1999.

¹⁰ J. Moss, Richard. *Tiger Stadium*. Michigan Department of State, John M. Munson Michigan History Fund. Michigan History Division, Michigan Department of State, 1976.

¹¹ J. Moss, Richard. *Tiger Stadium*. Michigan Department of State, John M. Munson Michigan History Fund. Michigan History Division, Michigan Department of State, 1976.

Series agreement. The terms of this agreement were that the National League champion the Pittsburgh Pirates would play the American League championship team the Boston Pilgrims in a World Series to determine baseball superiority. Despite their on-field success the Pittsburgh franchise was struggling financially and ownership was considering moving the team. The World Series would end up being a huge success financially and allowed the Pirates to stay in Pittsburgh. The 1903 agreement would also keep the Tigers in Detroit as George Vanderbeck was considering moving the team to Pittsburgh to replace the Pirates.¹² By 1908 baseball was becoming very popular and there was a need for more seats so Bennett Park was expanded. George Vanderbeck would expand the main grandstand and added a new 2000 seat bleacher section. This would expand the capacity of Bennett Park to over 10,000.¹³ In 1910 3000 more seats were added to Bennett Park expanding the capacity to 13,000.

By 1912 compared to other cities in the American League Detroit had poor attendance due to the fact that their stadium was much smaller than other stadiums in the American League. After the 1911 season instead of continuing to add on to Bennett Park new Owner Frank Navin decided to tear down Bennett Park and rebuild a new field that he would name after himself.¹⁴ The new field would be significantly different from Bennett Park. The new stadium named Navin Field held 23,000 people, and would be 3 times the size of the original Bennett Park. In the new stadium the wooden stands were replaced by stands made out of concrete and steel. Home plate was moved to where the right field corner was in Bennett Park. This was done so

¹² The Detroit News. Home Sweet Home. Edited by Mark Silverman and Jenniffer Carroll. Sports Publishing Inc., 2000.

¹³ Cohen, Irwin. Tiger Stadium. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.

¹⁴ Cohen, Irwin. Tiger Stadium. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.

that the batters would no longer face the afternoon sun and the right fielder did. It would be one of the worst fields of any Major League ballpark for afternoon sun in the outfield. They would move the start time to afternoon games from 4 to 3 pm so people could get home for dinner.¹⁵ For the opening day game of the 1912 season on April 21, 1912, 26,000 people would be on hand for the dedication of Navin Field.¹⁶ There would be a number of other expansions over the years as well as the game and its popularity continued to grow.

The next expansion would be in 1923 the team would build a second deck on top of the infield stands and put a press box on the roof.¹⁷ This would expand the capacity of the stadium to almost 30,000.¹⁸ By the start of the 1936 season a second deck had been built on top of the right field pavilion and the bleachers section. The right field fence would be moved in as well to make room for more seats. This would expand the capacity to 36,000 people. In 1938 two story stands were erected in left field and center field. This was made possible when the team got the city to agree to close Cherry Street which was the northern boundary of the park. This would expand the capacity of the stadium to 53,000. The team would also add electric scoreboards and move the bullpen to centerfield. In 1938 the stadium was also renamed Briggs Stadium after Co-Owner Walter Briggs assumed control of the team's operations. In 1938 the Detroit Lions professional football team would play there for the first time. From 1934-1937 the Lions played at the University of Detroit's stadium they would play there again during the 1940 season.

¹⁵ J. Moss, Richard. Tiger Stadium. Michigan Department of State, John M. Munson Michigan History Fund. Michigan History Division, Michigan Department of State, 1976.

¹⁶ The Detroit Free Press. "Immense Throng See Tigers Win Opening Battle." April 21, 1912.

¹⁷ J. Moss, Richard. Tiger Stadium. Michigan Department of State, John M. Munson Michigan History Fund. Michigan History Division, Michigan Department of State, 1976.

¹⁸ Cohen, Irwin. Tiger Stadium. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2003.

Lights were added to the stadium in 1948. After this there would be no more major modifications to the structure of the park. In 1961 the stadium would be renamed Tigers Stadium. As time passed the city of Detroit grew and many highways were built as people began to move out to the suburbs and the stadium became somewhat isolated from the rest of the city. The Lodge freeway would cut off the stadium from downtown, and the I-96 Fisher freeway was a barrier between the stadium and the stadium and northern neighborhoods.¹⁹

Over the years over 6000 games would be played at Tiger Stadium the last one would be played on September 27, 1999 as the team moved to a new downtown stadium in 2000 despite outrage from some fans. The team felt that the structure of the stadium was crumbling and that it was simply too costly to refurbish and renovate the stadium. There would be many efforts by civic groups and others to try and save the stadium. A fight that would go on until 2008. In July 2008 the demolition of the stadium commenced. The only parts of the stadium that were saved were the flag pole which was left standing and the foul poles which were taken down and put into storage. The company doing the demolition claimed that they would be recycling many of the materials in the stadium like the plastic, steel, copper, and even the rebar from the concrete. A group called the Tigers Stadium Conservancy tried to raise enough money to save the dugouts and have them serve as a museum and community center. The group was led by former Detroit Tigers broadcaster Ernie Harwell. Their efforts though would ultimately fail.²⁰

Since the demolition there have been many proposals for what to do with the site of the old stadium. In 2011 Chevrolet offered to use volunteer employees to maintain a baseball

¹⁹ J. Moss, Richard. Tiger Stadium. Michigan Department of State, John M. Munson Michigan History Fund. Michigan History Division, Michigan Department of State, 1976.

²⁰ McGraw, Bill. "Goodbye, Tiger Stadium." The Detroit Free Press, July 10, 2008.

diamond there and let the city use it as a youth baseball field. The Detroit Economic Growth Corporation though rejected this proposal hoping that a retailer would purchase and develop the land.²¹ On April 21 2012 what would have been the 100 year anniversary of the stadium a number of people started up a pick-up game on the old field. Tom Derry a Redford native recruited a bunch of friends to help keep up the 9 acre patch of land, which has been left in neglect by the city. They come to work on the site every Sunday.²² In July of this year the city began talks with the non-profit parade company which runs the city's annual Thanksgiving Day parade. The parade company is proposing to build a new headquarters, warehouse and operations center on the site. The parade company has said it would only plan to use a portion of the 9 acre site. They would maintain the infield and part of the outfield for youth baseball.²³ However there has been no movement on this proposal since. The picture on the top left of the following page is all that remains of the old ballpark today.



Aerial view of Tiger Stadium in



²¹ Gallagher, John. "DECG Says No To Chevy Offer to Groom Tiger Stadium Site." The Detroit Free Press, September 15, 2011, sec. A8.

²² Fenech, Anthony. "Marking 100 years at Michigan and Trumbull." The Detroit Free Press, April 21, 2012, sec. B4.

²³ Gallagher, John. "Plan Pitched for Former Tiger Stadium Site." Detroit Free Press, July 26, 2012.

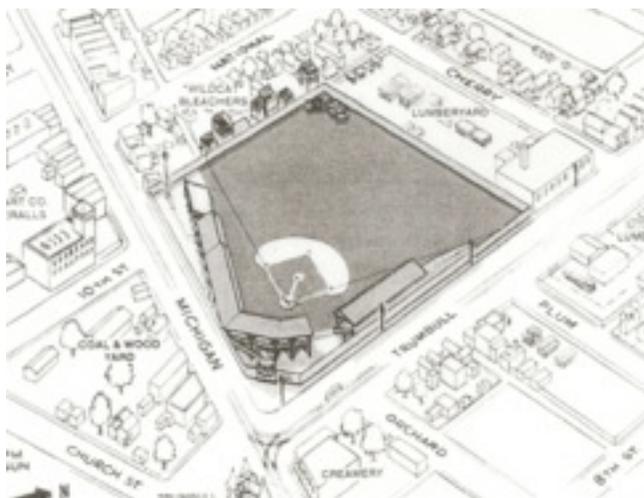
Aerial view of Briggs Stadium in

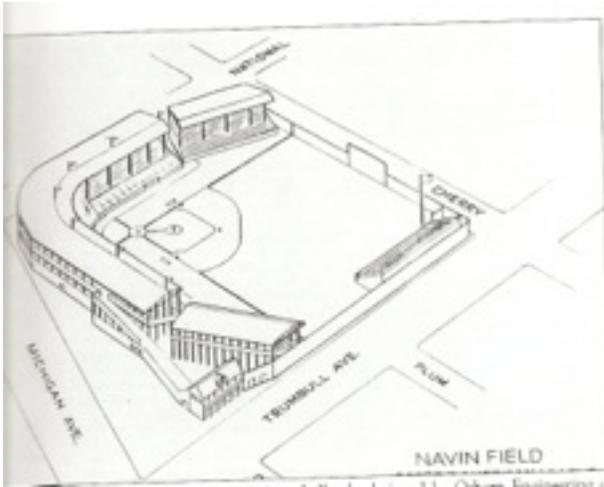


Bennett Park

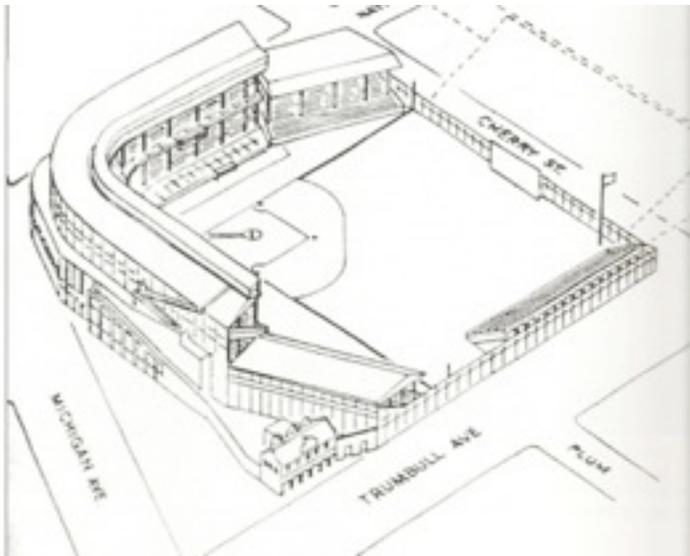


Bennett Park after 1908 expansion

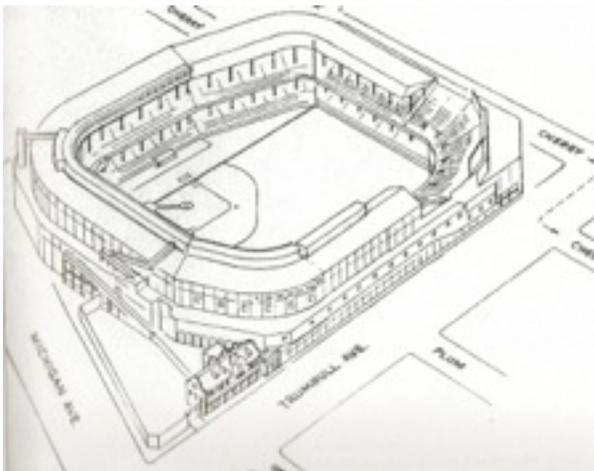




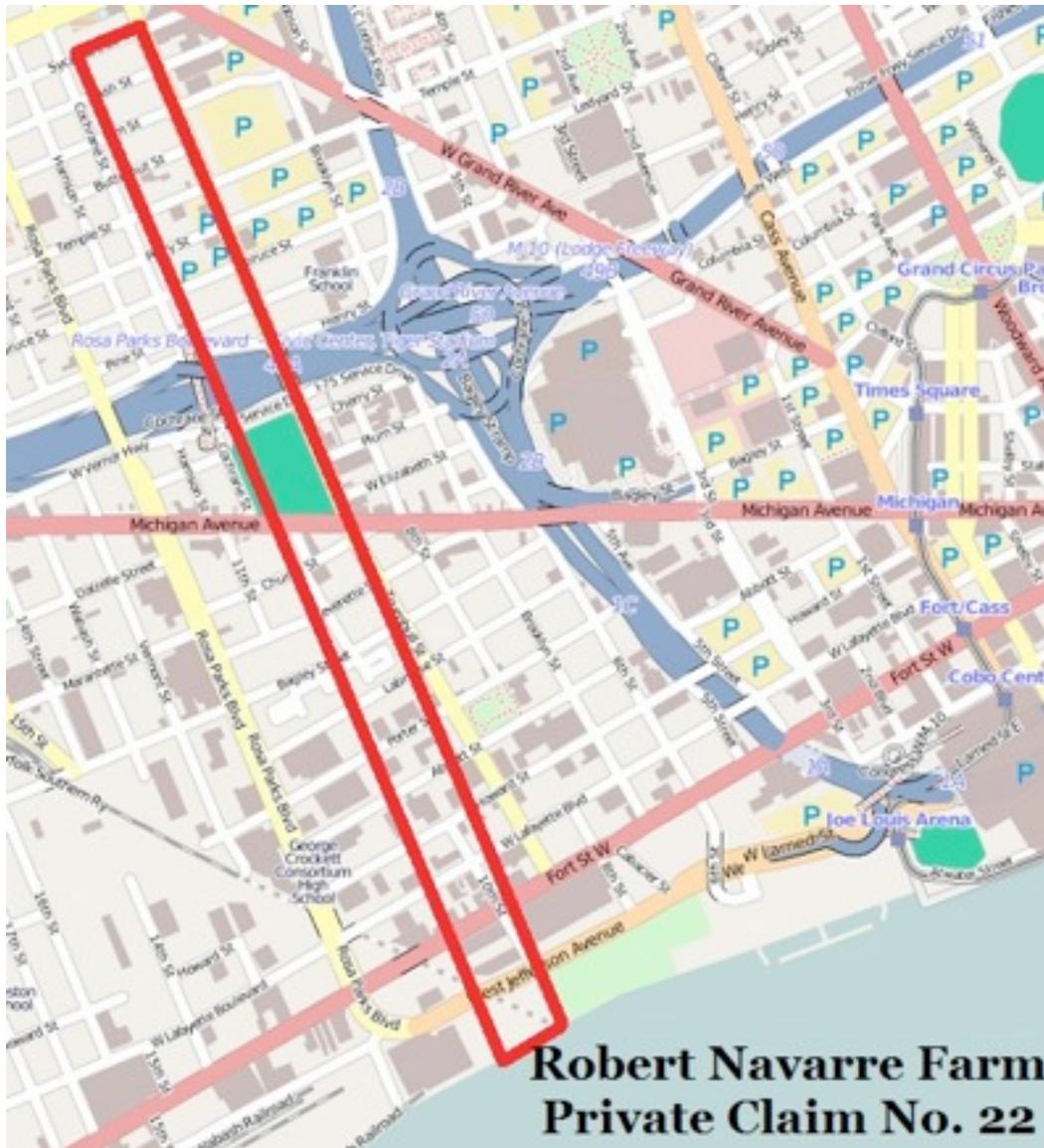
Navin Field circa 1912



Navin Field circa 1923



Briggs Stadium



**Robert Navarre Farm
Private Claim No. 22**