Photographs of nineteenth-century Twin Cities ballparks are few in number. Although they appear regularly in decorative and nostalgic contexts at places like Target Field and Butler Square in Minneapolis, these images have never been rigorously analyzed. Early ballpark photos are rare resources, valuable tools for understanding the history of baseball facilities, their design and use. Digital enlargements of four such pictures—one from St. Paul and three from Minneapolis—allow us to date each image more precisely, recover details about the facility and its surroundings, and, in one case, solve a mystery.

The earliest ballpark in the group is St. Paul’s Athletic Park, designed by Cass Gilbert and James Knox Taylor and built in 1888. St. Paul’s professional minor league teams called Athletic Park home from 1888 until 1892. Charles Comiskey used the park for Sunday games in 1895 and 1896, when playing at his regular grounds near Dale Street and University Avenue caused legal difficulties. During the 1890s and well beyond, Athletic Park was home to semi-pro, amateur, and school teams, both baseball and football, fulfilling its builders’ desire to create a multi-purpose sports facility for the city. The only known photograph of the ballpark is part of a panoramic image dated “circa 1890” in the Minnesota Historical Society’s photo catalog and now broken into three parts. St. Paul’s Athletic Park is the earliest Twin Cities ballpark for which there is a surviving photograph, although, as it turns out, this image is not the oldest Twin Cities ballpark picture.¹

Above: The mystery photo, long thought to be Nicollet Park circa 1900

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The Mysterious “Base Ball Park Minneapolis” and Other Photos

Reading the Visual Evidence

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These grounds were located on the west-side flats, an area south of downtown St. Paul that was at—and sometimes below—the level of the Mississippi River. The picture seems to have been taken to show the massive flooding in the river valley. Floods were fairly common in this low-lying part of St. Paul, and the vantage point on the bluffs above the ballpark gives a panoramic view of both banks, looking northeast. The unknown photographer anchored the image by placing this familiar landmark—at least to nineteenth-century St. Paul eyes—in the foreground.

In this picture of the baseball park, there is no baseball game. Enlarging the photo shows, instead, a few gawkers climbing on the empty stands to survey the flood scene. Little about the ballpark’s appearance provides clues to pinpoint the date of the photo. The original Gilbert and Taylor design, published in the *St. Paul Daily Globe*, included a covered grandstand and bleacher sections to seat about 3,000 people. This photograph shows that nothing had changed from that 1888 configuration. Athletic Park remained a simple wooden ballpark, enclosed by its seating structures and 12-foot-high outfield fences.²

While the ballpark was not altered much in its early years, the surroundings began to evolve shortly after Athletic Park was built, and some of these changes help date the photograph. For instance, the foreground includes many train tracks, present at the site before the ballpark was built and increasing in number through the next few decades. (Although fewer, tracks are still present at the site today.) The rail cars provide a few clues about the picture’s date, too. These tracks were owned by the railroad known for many years as the Chicago Great Western. Founded by St. Paul tycoon A. B. Stickney in 1885, the line was first called the Minnesota and Northwestern. In 1887 it became the Chicago, St. Paul and Kansas

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*St. Paul Athletic Park (center foreground) in a panorama of the flooded Mississippi River valley, 1893. The State Street bridge bisects this information-rich image, visually separating the rail cars from the ice house, its roof and cupola visible here. The vinegar works is at the terminus of the State Street bridge. Ruins of the Eisenmenger mansion loom on the bluff across from the flooded ballpark. More rail cars, some houses, and the Crescent Creamery, partly under water, are at the far right.*
City, and then, in July 1892, the Chicago Great Western. Unlike changes in name and corporate identity today, this business evolution did not necessitate repainting the rolling stock. As late as 1901, all three company names could be seen on various rail cars.³

There are a number of buildings around the ballpark. Some, like the vinegar works to the left and the houses on the bluff at the far right, predate Athletic Park. This is also true for the Crescent Creamery’s dairy-farming operation to the right of the ballpark and below the bluffs. More helpful in dating the photo is the ice house near the ballpark’s right-field corner, built during February 1892. Set along the tracks—

Gilbert and Taylor’s grandstand, “a model of comfort”
according to the St. Paul Daily Globe

tracks that went to the nearby South St. Paul Union Stockyards—the ice house belonged to the railroad and probably served the refrigerated rail cars, some of which are visible in the foreground.⁴

The most interesting building is in the distance, straight across the Mississippi from the ballpark. By aligning the large building silhouetted against the skyline in the background with the ballpark in the foreground, it is possible to identify the precise spot it occupied: It stood near the site of numerous Indian mounds on top of the bluffs, an area that would become a city park. In the 1890s, however, this district was dotted with a few large houses, and this one belonged to real estate speculator and sometime meat merchant John F. Eisenmenger. Designed by St. Paul architect Walter Ife, this huge home was noted for its fine materials and details; its construction lasted from July 1890 through the following summer. Unfortunately, the new mansion burned on August 14, 1892, just a year after it was occupied. The photo, when enlarged, shows that even though the home’s peaked copper-and-slate roof was gone and the sky was visible through many parts of the building, most of the walls and one of the four chimneys remained standing. Photographs from the mid-1890s show that the building later suffered additional damage. It was left as a disintegrating ruin for a decade until everything but the porte-cochere was dismantled in February 1902. That remnant became a decorative element in the newly created Indian Mounds Park, and the remainder of the brick and stone was taken across the city to Como Park, where the materials were used to construct buildings and decorative walls.⁵
Given the evidence extracted from the ballpark’s surroundings, it is likely that the panorama was taken to document the late spring flood in 1893 when, according to a newspaper account, “on the section where the old ball park is located, nothing can be seen but a vast stretch of muddy fluid, dotted here and there by a stunted tree, a fence, or a shanty.” The river had been rising rapidly in the preceding week, up three-and-a-half feet in four days. Worse flooding occurred in 1897, but the relatively intact condition of the Eisenmenger house and the absence of any rail cars labeled Chicago Great Western would indicate that this was the earlier flood. As a result, we propose a date around May 1, 1893, for this image.6

The three Minneapolis images tell a more complicated story. There are two very interesting and appealing crowd shots taken at Minneapolis Athletic Park, built in 1889: the bleachers circa 1890 and the grandstand circa 1892, according to the Minnesota Historical Society. There is also a cyanotype (so called because the image is blue) labeled “Base Ball Park Minneapolis” and identified as Nicollet Park circa 1900. Careful examination of each, and of the group, reveals some fascinating details about 1890s baseball and creates a clearer view of the city’s baseball ownership and facilities chronology.7

Designed by Minneapolis architects Fremont Orff and George Orff, Athletic Park included a wooden grandstand and two large sections of bleachers. The bleachers photo was taken from the upper end of the grandstand along the first base line and looked toward the park’s right-field corner at First Avenue North and Fifth Street in downtown Minneapolis. The park’s small size—less than a city block—necessitated not only 12-foot-high fences but also wire mesh extending another 25 feet or so above that wooden wall. Through this mesh and beyond the fences across Fifth Street, the ballpark’s neighborhood is visible, including nearby businesses and houses (and at least one spectator—maybe two—in the windows). Details of the park’s structure and operations are also visible. Fans accessed the bleachers from the back, walking under the grandstand, out a doorway, and up a set of stairs to the walkway along the fence. This arrangement can be seen in a drawing of the ballpark published in the Minneapolis Journal in May 1889, when the park opened. Some trash has collected in the open space between the grandstand and the bleachers. It seems that the accumulated garbage includes many scorecards like the ones held by some of the fans. The litter was likely left from an earlier game that day for which clean-up had not yet occurred.8

The image also provides wonderful information about the crowd and its behavior. A fair amount of informality is visible—like cigar smoking and nose-picking—along with spectators not only in the bleachers but also on the ground, on walls, and on fences. The fans wear clothing more formal than we expect to see at today’s ball games, even in the best seats, and some have brought...
had owned a one-third interest in the team since 1889, and in October 1890 he and his new partner, Griffin, bought the team and a sporting-goods store operated by the previous co-owner, Sam Morton. After this purchase, Hach and Griffin evidently undertook a major change in the park’s advertising schemes. They painted over ads on the fence for the Minneapolis Journal and a photographer, among others, and made sure that their businesses were represented with prominent ads in the scoreboard’s immediate vicinity, where fans would be looking regularly. Their cross-promotion included not only the sporting-goods store but also a bicycle school in the

As it turns out, the photograph can be dated precisely, based on the signs and other writing clustered in its right corner. Surrounding the scoreboard are advertisements for the various businesses of Henry L. Hach and Andrew H. Griffin. Hach

sun protection: in addition to the ubiquitous headgear, umbrellas and neck scarves are seen throughout the crowd. Not present, however, are any women. While representing a variety of ages, the field-level and bleachers fans are all male.

Crowded bleachers at Minneapolis’s two-year-old Athletic Park, 1891
The afternoon high was 80 degrees. Seen among the bleachers crowd and other sunny-weather apparel to encourage the scarves, umbrellas, and other sunny-weather apparel seen among the bleachers crowd. The afternoon high was 80 degrees.

Other historical and visual information dates the photograph even more precisely. The scoreboard shows several games: while Minneapolis was trouncing Sioux City 9 to 0 in the bottom of the sixth inning, other Western Association matches between Kansas City and Denver, St. Paul and Milwaukee, and Omaha and Lincoln are also listed on the scoreboard. The association’s 1891 schedule between Kansas City and Denver, St. Paul and Milwaukee, and Omaha and Lincoln are also listed in the schedule. The game’s crowd was large, estimated variously as being between 3,000 and 5,000 spectators, accounting for the fans on the field. The scoreboard tally matches the newspaper’s box scores, and we learn that Minneapolis won the game 19 to 3. The Kansas City-Denver score also matches the newspaper’s box scores.

Knowing the date of the game, it is even possible to check the weather, which was summery enough to encourage the scarves, umbrellas, and other sunny-weather apparel seen among the bleachers crowd. The afternoon high was 80 degrees.

While the players are barely visible, there are wonderful views of the well-dressed crowd and its activities.

The photograph was a few sections out from the grandstand’s center, along the third base line, looking in toward home plate. The structure and crowd look much like any other of the era, but this image can be identified as Athletic Park because of the gigantic West Hotel looming in the background. The hotel was located on the neighboring block, at the corner of Hennepin Avenue and Fifth Street.

This view allows a good look at the construction of the grandstand, with its center entrance, backed benches, steps, box seats along the front, wire screen to protect the spectators, and sun shades covering the openings at the stand’s back. Unfortunately, there is only a hint of the game and the teams—just three blurred forms on the field. But while the players are barely visible, there are wonderful views of the well-dressed crowd and its activities. Four women sit in the foreground. Perhaps this is a ladies section, one of the common admission and attendance gimmicks of nineteenth-century baseball. In the middle of the crowd are two African American fans taking in the game with everyone else. One of these men and a number of the other spectators are holding scorecards, and the shells of peanuts eaten during the game are easily visible in the foreground.

So here we have two views of the park, showing its bleachers in May 1891 and the grandstand, date unknown. But what of the third picture? An early owner of this cyanotype inscribed it with “Base Ball Park Minneapolis,” and the Minnesota Historical Society has identified it as Nicollet Park circa 1900, perhaps because it does not look like the clearly identified Athletic Park grandstand. This mystery structure is taller, the seating is steeper, and it is topped with boxes on the roof.

If the photograph does not show Nicollet Park, which succeeded Athletic Park, perhaps it shows an earlier facility, Minneapolis’s South Side Grounds, used from 1886 until 1888. Although there was mention of a roof deck in its initial plans, another detail in the cyanotype eliminates the South Side Grounds as a possibility: the writing on the dugout awning. Awnings sometimes carried advertising, and this one, when enhanced, reveals the name of the awning company itself: “H. J. Saunders, Mfr Awnings & Tents.” In May 1889 Henry Saunders had a window-shade business, but by April 1890 he had taken over and renamed Twin City Tent and Awnings. Since Saunders was not in the awning business until after the South Side Grounds had been abandoned for Athletic Park, this cannot be the South Side Grounds.
If it is neither the preceding nor the succeeding ballpark, could this be the Athletic Park grandstand? Athletic Park opened in May 1889 with unrealized plans for rooftop seating; however, early success and large crowds led the club to erect those roof boxes almost immediately—within a month of the park's debut. Constructed to accommodate the larger-than-expected crowds, these boxes came to be used as the ladies section because, in the words of one reporter, "Ladies . . . prefer to be out of the excitement and ruckus which characterizes the grandstand crank."15

Another detail pushes the photograph's date past the park's first season: the white grandstand wall. The Daily Globe reported that in preparation for the park's second season in 1890, the front of the grandstand was painted white, providing not only "a neat appearance" but also helping players better judge ground balls. Therefore, the earliest date for the photograph is Spring 1890.15

But if Athletic Park had roof boxes in 1890, where are those boxes in the undated grandstand photo (above)? As it turns out, the years after Athletic Park's opening were tough for Minneapolis baseball. The league teams failed to complete the season in 1891 and 1892, and Henry Hach sold the then-empty Athletic Park to James "Ed" Whitcomb in the fall of 1892. In turn, Whitcomb arranged for some non-league baseball the following spring. On May 30, 1893, the papers reported on two games featuring the University of Minnesota baseball team, for which respectable crowds of at least 500 people showed up.16

That success did not last, however. On the evening of June 1, 1893, the fire alarms near the ballpark were pulled. A large crowd gathered rather quickly, having seen the flames and thinking that the West Hotel was on
fire. Instead, it was the ballpark that was burning. Talk of arson and insurance payments soon appeared in the newspapers, and suspicions were further aroused when owner Whitcomb could not be located and made no repairs to the ruined facility.17

Ironically, it was a St. Paul manager, John Barnes, who stepped forward in the late fall to engineer the rescue of Minneapolis baseball. Barnes had played on and managed St. Paul baseball teams starting in the mid-1880s and then spent three seasons in the Pacific Northwest, where he organized baseball teams and a league at the behest of the Northern Pacific Railroad. He returned to the Twin Cities in early 1893, and that fall he became a part-owner and the secretary of the Minneapolis Base Ball Association. In January 1894 he pulled a permit and hired a contractor to completely rebuild the Athletic Park stands in order to provide a home for the city’s new Western League team. Descriptions of the new structure presented it as superior to its predecessor: the central grandstand access would be easier, the boxes at the stand’s front would be better than the rooftop boxes, the seats and their backs would be more comfortable than the old “circus seats”
of the 1889 grandstand. In every way, Barnes's new park would be an improvement over the old one.  

Our chronology, then, puts the bleachers photograph at May 30, 1891, around 4:30 p.m., the grandstand shot after the beginning of the 1894 season but no later than May 23, 1896, when the team played its last game at Athletic Park, and the cyanotype some time between 1890 and the partial 1892 season. The vantage point for the bleachers image and the cyanotype leads to a tantalizing possibility: with the photographer in the same area of the grandstand, and with a shadow-casting crowd on the field and a number of umbrella-wielding spectators, is it possible that these two photos were taken on the same day in May 1891? While this question may never be answered, the study of these four photographs creates more accurate dates, clarifies the architectural chronology of the Athletic Parks of Minneapolis, and clears up the persistent misidentification of the cyanotype, that mysterious picture of the “Base Ball Park Minneapolis.”

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**Notes**


7. The photos are cataloged as: “Predominantly male spectators watch game at baseball park in back of the West Hotel, Minneapolis, ca. 1890,” “Spectators at a baseball game at the ballpark on Fifth Street North and First Avenue North, Minneapolis, ca. 1892,” and “Spectators crowd the stands for a baseball game at Nicollet Park, ca. 1900.”


14. *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 26, 1889, p. 10; *St. Paul Daily Globe*, May 23, 1889, p. 5, May 27, 1889, p. 1. Frank Pezolt’s 1891 bird’s-eye-view map of Minneapolis shows roof boxes at Athletic Park, albeit only on one side of the grandstand; in fact, they were on both. While useful, Pezolt’s rendition is inaccurate in several additional important respects, including the setback from the street and the lack of bleachers.


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The photo on p. 22 is from the Library of Congress. All other illustrations are in MHS collections, including the St. Paul Daily Globe, *June 3, 1888,* and the Minneapolis Journal, *May 14, 1889.*
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