

Scenes from the Past...

Few Washington residents of today debating potential sites for a major league baseball stadium may know that Washington had such a stadium for over 50 years, located between the residential neighborhoods of Le Droit Park, Greater U Street, and Shaw. Businessman and former Chicago Cubs hero Clark Griffith built a large baseball stadium in 1914 on the site of what is today Howard University Hospital, near the intersection of 7th and V Streets. At the time, the area was one of the oldest established residential communities in the city, and the stadium literally abutted the surrounding homes. Its towering lights could be seen for 15 blocks.

The site of Griffith Stadium was first a large open park where the old National League's Washington team played as early as 1886. Beginning in 1905, the park became home to Washington's new American League team, before Clark Griffith built his partly covered stadium in 1914—it was named for him in 1924 following that year's World Series win.

Before Griffith moved to Washington to take over the baseball team, it was apparently routinely expected for the city's team to land in last place, with a standing joke around the country being "Washington, First in War, First in Peace, but Last in the American League." Despite that mockery, as early as 1868, 4,000 Washington baseball fans were gathering for Saturday games on the White House lawn. In 1870, local baseball rule expert Mike Scanlon built the first baseball park in the city at 17th and S Streets, with 500 seats and an admission price of just 25 cents!

Incidentally, the desire to prove ball-playing superiority by actually catching a ball thrown from the top of the Washington Monument had begun to be attempted in 1894; it was finally accomplished on August 21, 1908 by Gabby Street, during his 13th try. The catch was caught at such a force that it knocked Street to the ground, although he was able to retain the ball in his mitt to the delight of the watching crowd.

The Washington team, by then known as the Senators, called Griffith Stadium home, and went on to beat the New York Giants there to capture the World Series title in 1924; it was the first World Series to be opened and attended by a U.S. President. Griffith was also used by African-American teams, including the Washington Elite Giants, the Le Droit Tigers, the Washington Pilots, and the Homestead Grays. Josh Gibson, considered by many to be the best Negro League player of all time, won nine home run titles in his 13 seasons for the Homestead Grays.

As a neighborhood institution, Griffith Stadium was a celebrated venue, host to all cultures and a variety of sporting and non-sporting events. It was one of the very few public places in Washington that was never segregated, although most of its teams were. Fans at Griffith may have attended major league or Howard University baseball, National Negro League baseball, religious revivals, Howard University football, high school drill competitions, or even the first games of the Redskins, who played there from 1937 until they moved to RFK Stadium in 1961. Local schools often used the stadium for sports and recreation, such as a "Dance for Health" gathering of 5,000 African-American school children from all across the city on May 17, 1946, demonstrating physical fitness around dozens of huge Maypoles.

In a tradition that still stands, President Roosevelt threw the first ceremonial pitch to open the 1940 baseball season at Griffith Stadium. Clark Griffith's son Calvin received American League permission to move the Senators to Minneapolis-St. Paul in October of 1960, where they became the Minnesota Twins. With the completion of DC Stadium (later renamed RFK Memorial Stadium) on the outskirts of Capitol Hill in 1961, Washington's Redskins moved their games to the more spacious facility, spelling the demise of the aging Griffith Stadium. It was purchased by Howard University in 1965, when demolition began. Shortly thereafter, it became the site of the Howard University Hospital, an institution that remains on the site to this day.

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The enormity of Griffith Stadium can be seen in this 1966 aerial photograph, taken after the stadium was torn down. The view is toward the south, with the intersection of 7th Street and Florida Avenue, NW, shown in the upper right corner.



Fans enjoy a baseball game at Griffith Stadium on July 8, 1933.



President Roosevelt threw the first ceremonial pitch to open the 1940 baseball season at Griffith Stadium. To the President's left is Postmaster General Farley, and at right are Joe Cronin and Bucky Harris, managers of opening day's two opposing teams. This Washington Star photograph ran in the April 16, 1940 edition.



Griffith Stadium was a celebrated arena, host to all cultures. This photograph depicts the unusual meeting of the Howard University baseball team and the Mainichi of Japan at the American League in 1927.



This mixed crowd at Griffith Stadium awaits tickets to an event in 1947. The stadium was one of the few public places never racially segregated.



Josh Gibson, shown here at bat, was considered by many to be the best Negro League player of all time.

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