



# The New Town Crier

Official Newsletter of the Historical Society of Bloomfield



BLOOMFIELD, NEW JERSEY 07003

March 2022

## Can you Identify?

This beautiful house was demolished in the late 1940s. For what purpose? Where in Bloomfield are we? If you think you know, email your answer to: [info@HSOB.org](mailto:info@HSOB.org) and write "Can you Identify?" in the subject line; or call (973) 743-8844 and leave a message. Look for the answer in the May issue.



## Morris Canal Greenway Hike in Bloomfield to resume!

Hike a section of the Morris Canal Greenway in Bloomfield Sat., April 23 (hike only; no bus ride). The hike will be approximately 3 miles, starting at 10:00AM at the Oakeside Bloomfield Cultural Center parking lot at 240 Belleville Ave. (parking available). Follow the path of the Morris Canal to Wrights Field, then return to Oakeside. Most of the walking will be on paved sidewalks, with some on gravel and a possibility of muddy areas; most will be fairly level. A 20-page booklet with historical photos and colored canal maps available for \$5. Waiver signing required. Rain date: Sun. April 24. Hike guides are long-time Canal Society of NJ member & Morris Canal enthusiast Ron Rice and Bloomfield Councilman Rich Rockwell. More info and registration: Email [MorrisCanal@gmail.com](mailto:MorrisCanal@gmail.com).

## BLOOMFIELD'S SPRAGUE FIELD A.K.A GENERAL ELECTRIC FIELD: PART ONE



By Bill Lamb

Bloomfield has a rich athletic tradition. To continue this heritage, the municipality maintains more than a dozen greenswards suitable for the play of outdoor sports. One of these is Felton Field, a small, tidy playground wedged into a densely-populated neighborhood not far from the town borders with Newark and East Orange. Few, if any, president-day Bloomfield residents likely appreciate that the playground's undersized diamonds (used only for Little League and softball games) sit on the site of a vanished ballpark that once hosted amateur, semi-pro, minor

league and Negro Leagues baseball. This long-demolished and now-forgotten venue was called Sprague Field.<sup>i</sup>

A century ago, Bloomfield was home to several large industrial plants, including the works of the Sprague Electric Co., a subsidiary of General Electric.<sup>ii</sup> In early 1919, the company purchased open space near its plant and began the construction of an athletic field for the off-hours recreation of its 2,000 employees. A feature of the grounds was a baseball diamond intended for use by the Sprague Electric Co.<sup>iii</sup>

Ready for game action by mid-Spring, the playing field dimensions were constrained by surrounding residences and commercial buildings but were adequate, if somewhat on the small side—LF: 330; CF: 385; RF: 325. Those dimensions were defined by later-erected fencing that ranged from 5-foot high in left field to a 35-foot scoreboard in left center to 10-foot in center and right field. Outside the fences, the ballpark was bounded by Bloomfield (first base line), LaFrance (third base line), Floyd (left field) and Arlington (center and right field) Avenues.<sup>iv</sup> Initially, the seating capacity of Sprague Field was limited, but by September 1920, up to 3,000 spectators could be accommodated following the addition of a wooden grandstand and bleacher sections.<sup>v</sup>

On May 3, 1919, the Sprague Electric nine inaugurated the new ballpark with a game against the Orange (NJ) Athletic Association.<sup>vi</sup> The company team then went on to capture the 1919 championship of the amateur North Jersey Industrial League and repeated as league champs in 1920.<sup>vii</sup> Meanwhile, the grounds also served as home field for the top-notch Sprague Electric soccer team. In 1922, the competitive level of Sprague Field baseball was upgraded when the Bloomfield Elks secured a lease for Sunday games. Comprised almost entirely of local talent, the nine sponsored by the Elks was one of the best semi-pro clubs on the East Coast and played all-comers, including elite professional Black teams like the Bacharach Giants, Homestead Grays and New York Cuban Stars.

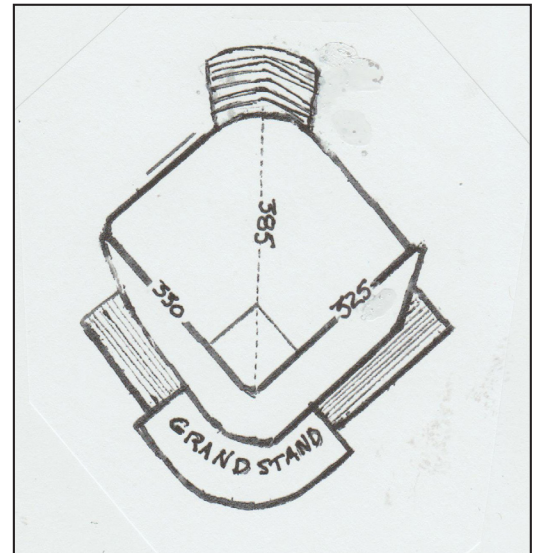
In anticipation of the throngs expected to attend their games, the Elks embarked upon a ballpark enlargement program, funding improvements via off-season dinner dances, raffles and other fund-raising events that ultimately yielded \$7,000 (about \$118,215 in 2022). By the time the season commenced, permanent fencing had been erected and the seating capacity of Sprague Field doubled to approximately 6,000.<sup>viii</sup> Facing top-flight opposition, the Elks, with future Philadelphia A's standout Mule Haas in center field, held their own, posting a 15-14 log for the 1922 season.

With his sights set on bolstering the club's roster, Elks field boss Jim Finnerty undertook a pre-1923 season recruiting tour. Among the newcomers signed to play for the Elks (at \$3 a game) was a strapping Columbia University first baseman who played under the alias *Babe Long*. However, after several games at Sprague Field, Long was deemed a bust—"He couldn't hit," lamented Finnerty—and dropped from the club.<sup>ix</sup> Later, *Babe Long* had somewhat more success, forging a Cooperstown-bound playing career under his birth name: **Lou Gehrig**.

This disappointing performance notwithstanding, the Elks turned in an outstanding 26-10-1 record that concluded with a season-ending shutout victory pitched by Bloomfield native Alex Ferguson, just home after completing a 9-13 campaign with the Boston Red Sox.<sup>x</sup>

The ensuing seasons saw the Bloomfield Elks at their zenith, drawing large crowds for Sunday and holiday double-headers against the likes of the Heinie Zimmerman Bronx All-Stars and the cream of Black pro nines. Capacity crowds of 6,000 were the norm, but a reported 8,500 spectators swamped Sprague Field (with another 500 watching the action perched atop railroad cars parked nearby) for an Elks contest against a post-season barnstorming team of Detroit Tigers led by future Hall-of-Famer Heinie Manush.<sup>xi</sup> By the end of that season, the four-season cumulative record of the Elks stood at an excellent 95-52-3 (.647),<sup>xii</sup> with even brighter days seemingly ahead.

However, turmoil to the town's immediate south soon brought an end to the Bloomfield Elks as an elite semi-pro baseball club. Events also propelled Sprague Field—albeit only very briefly—into the ranks of minor league ballparks. For decades, the City of Newark had been the scene of top-notch minor league baseball, including the Newark Bears.



**Sprague Field, aka General Electric Field**  
**Constructed: April 1919**  
**Demolished: Circa 1940**

However, the Newark club had recently been plagued by financial instability and ballpark problems. Two playing sites, Wiedenmayer's Park in the Newark Ironbound and Harrison Field in nearby Harrison, NJ, had recently been destroyed by fire, leaving the Bears to play in Meadowbrook Oval, a bandbox unsuitable for high-level baseball.

In June 1924, the Bears had been dispossessed there as well, evicted on short notice by the Newark Board of Education, titleholder of the premises.<sup>xiii</sup> The Bears had an option upon use of Sprague Field in nearby Bloomfield, but chose instead to move into Newark School Stadium, an oval-shaped facility designed for football, not baseball. By May 1925, however, the ballpark situation had become untenable, forcing relocation of the franchise to Providence, where the club finished the season and then disbanded.

During the off-season, Long Island entrepreneur Charles Davids acquired International League rights to the Newark territory and began preparations to invest in an entirely new Newark Bears franchise in the city. To remedy the playing field problem, Davids purchased the site of burned-down Wiedenmayer's Park and commenced construction of Davids (later Rupert) Stadium. However, as the 1926 season approached, it became obvious that the Bears' new ballpark would not be ready for Opening Day. In near-desperation, Davids approached Elks manager Finnerty and Bloomfield lodge directors about gaining temporary access to Sprague Field. Notwithstanding the imposition on its own schedule, the Elks agreed, a magnanimous gesture that earned the organization "the wholehearted thanks of Newark fandom."<sup>xiv</sup> A grateful Davids then quickly set about enlarging the seating capacity of Sprague Field via expansion of the grandstand and erection of a new center field bleachers section. Within weeks, the ballpark could accommodate 9,000 fans.<sup>xv</sup>

On April 4, 1926, Sprague Field hosted its first contest between two clubs in "Organized Baseball," an 8-4 Newark Bears pre-season exhibition game loss to the American League Philadelphia A's. A week later, the just-enlarged grounds filled to capacity to witness the Bears top the Philadelphia Phillies, 9-7.<sup>xvi</sup> On April 14, the Bears initiated the International League season with a home victory against the Buffalo Bisons. Before the day was out, however, calamity struck as a carelessly discarded cigarette started a fire that caused extensive damage to Sprague Field, with large portions of the wooden grandstand and bleacher sections destroyed.

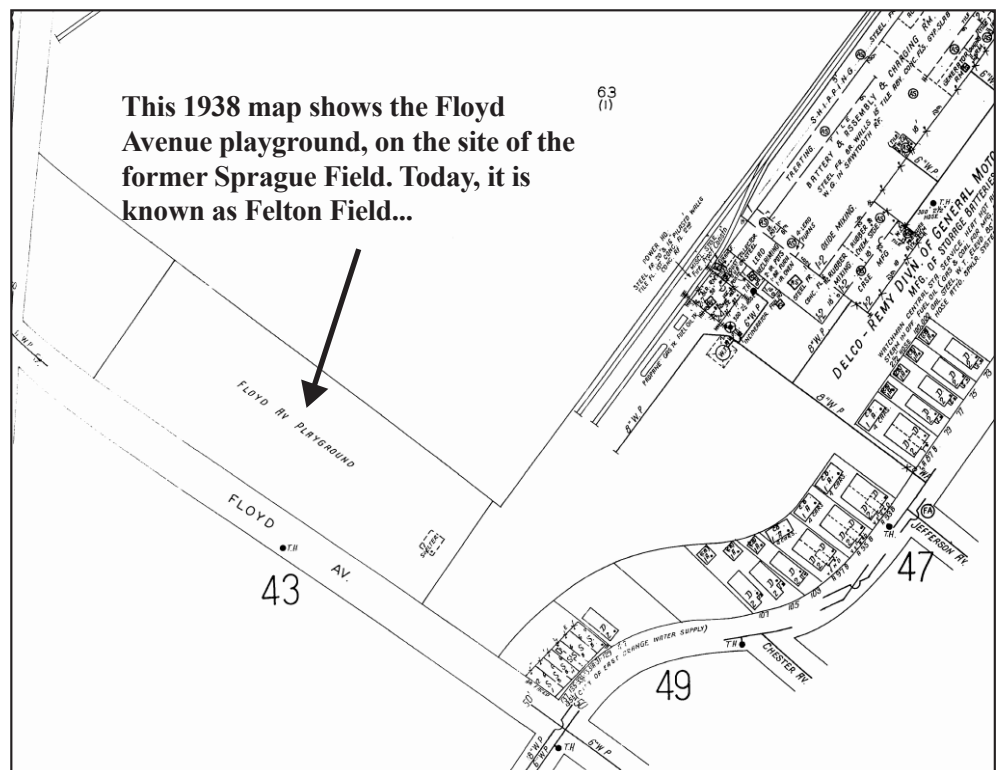
With the grounds at least temporarily unusable, club boss Davids secured Newark Board of Education permission to return the Bears to Newark Schools Stadium for a few games<sup>xvii</sup> and by mid-May, the club was able to move into a still-uncompleted, but usable, Davids Stadium.

*Meanwhile, the Bloomfield Elks were left with a wrecked ballpark...*

## END OF PART 1

Look for **PART 2** in the May issue of *The New Town Crier*.

Source Notes & End Notes can be found on p.5.



*Bill Lamb is a Bloomfield native and played ball on the Sprague Field site in his youth. Now retired, he lives in Meredith, NH and serves as editor of The Inside Game, the newsletter of SABR's Deadball Era Committee.*





*General Joseph Bloomfield*

### **THE NEW TOWN CRIER**

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF  
THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
OF BLOOMFIELD

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Walter Nacnodovitz, *Vice President/Program*  
Mary Shoffner, *Corresponding Secretary/Hospitality*  
Anne Carlino, *Recording Secretary*  
John Debold, *Membership*  
Cindi Debold†, *Treasurer (2014–2021)*  
Dorothy Johnson, *Museum Curator*  
Ava Caridad, *Publicity & Promotion*

#### **TRUSTEES**

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Tina Caridad  
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Mark Scurman

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Ina Campbell†

#### **WEBMASTER**

Richard Rockwell

#### **NEWSLETTER STAFF**

Ava Caridad, *Editor*  
Nicholas D'Angelo, *Layout*

*Doris! Please tell me you renewed our HSOB membership!*



## **REMINDER!**

If you haven't already done so, please be sure to renew your 2022 membership. Renewal forms, as well as secure online payment options, are available at [www.hsob.org](http://www.hsob.org) or can be picked up at the museum or any HSOB meeting. The HSOB is a non-profit organization, therefore all dues and donations are considered a tax-free contribution. Please help keep the Historical Society of Bloomfield strong with your continuing membership!

## **PLEASE VOTE!**

HSOB Members are asked to vote on three (3) issues. Please vote via:

- **Mail:** PO Box 1074, Bloomfield, NJ 07003
- **E-mail:** [info@hsob.org](mailto:info@hsob.org) • **Phone:** 973-743-8844

Your questions will be answered by the same means. No contact will be interpreted as a "YES" vote on each issue. **Deadline** for voting is April 25, 2022.

1) Members of the Historical Society Bloomfield are asked to vote on the proposed budget of \$7,920, which includes these outstanding lines of expenditure:

- Rent: \$1,000
- Insurance: \$920
- Programs: \$300
- Museum Supplies for Preservation Projects: \$400
- Scholarships: \$1,000
- Newsletter: \$668.60
- Telephone/Internet: \$2,650

2) The following slate has been put forth by the Nominating Committee to serve on the Board for the next term. All elected Board Members and Volunteers donate their time, talent, skills and energy to benefit the HSOB.

#### **OFFICERS**

**President:** Jean Kuras  
**Vice President/Program:** Mark Scurman  
**Treasurer/Membership:** John Debold  
**Recording Secretary:** Tina Caridad  
**Corresponding Secretary/Hospitality:** Mary Shoffner  
**Newsletter Editor:** Ava Caridad

#### **TRUSTEES**

- Joseph Barry
- Richard Rockwell
- Dean Cole
- Mark Szep

3) **Proposed Amendment to the By-laws: To change Article IV, Section I**  
Proposed change to read: "(Additionally Newsletter Editor)"

## SOURCES

The primary sources for the narrative above are contemporaneous reportage in *The (Bloomfield, NJ) Independent Press* and *Pittsburgh Courier*, and Sam C. Pierson, *Thumbing the Pages of Baseball History in Bloomfield* (Bloomfield, NJ: The Independent Press, 1939). Unless otherwise noted, information pertaining to Negro Leagues baseball has been taken from *The Negro Leagues Book*, Dick Clark and Larry Lester, eds. (Cleveland: SABR, 1994).

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Sprague Field profiled herein is not to be confused with the later-built Sprague Field that serves as home grounds for Montclair (NJ) University athletic teams.
- 2 Named for electrical engineer-inventor Frank J. Sprague (1857-1934), Sprague Electric Company designed and manufactured railway switches and other apparatus crucial to the development of urban mass transit, and had been a presence in Bloomfield since 1884. Later, the plant segued into the production of radio components and other electrical devices. Acquired by General Electric in 1902, the company retained the name Sprague Electric into the 1920s.
- 3 As per "Sprague Electric Base Ball Team," *The (Bloomfield, NJ) Independent Press*, April 4, 1919. The cost of fixing up the diamond was subsequently estimated at \$2,000.
- 4 Per Philip J. Lowry, *Green Cathedrals: The Ultimate Celebration of Major League and Negro League Ballparks* (New York: Walker & Company, 2d ed., 2006), 21. The smallish Sprague Field dimensions were the rough equivalent of other contemporary ballparks, including Redland (later Crosley) Field – LF: 328; CF: 387; RF: 366 in 1938. Or today, Oriole Park at Camden Yards – LF: 333; CF: 400; RF: 318.
- 5 See "Sprague Works Field Day Was a Great Success," *The Independent Press*, September 17, 1920.
- 6 Per "Sprague Team Opens Baseball Season Here," *The Independent Press*, May 1, 1919.
- 7 According to Sam C. Pierson, *Thumbing the Pages of Baseball History in Bloomfield* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: The Independent Press, 1939), 78. For decades, Pierson was the hometown weekly's sports reporter.
- 8 Per "Bloomfield Was Stronghold of Baseball in Early Days," *The Independent Press*, April 12, 1954. See also, Pierson, 70.
- 9 *Ibid.* See also, Pierson, 71.
- 10 Ferguson posted a 61-85 (.418) record in a 10-season major league career that ended in 1929.
- 11 Per *The Independent Press*, April 12, 1954.
- 12 Per Pierson, 74-75. The 1954 retrospective cited in endnote 8 placed the Bloomfield Elks club record for the 1921-1926 seasons at an even better 124-53 (.701).
- 13 See "Newark School Board To Oust Bears from Oval," *Jersey (Jersey City) Journal*, June 6, 1924.
- 14 Newark Evening News editorial re-printed in *The Independent Press*, March 26, 1926.
- 15 "Newark Bears to Play on Sprague Field," *The Independent Press*, March 26, 1926, and Edward H. Foegel, "Newark Fans Go Limit to Get Their Baseball," *The Sporting News*, April 8, 1926.
- 16 See "9,000 See Bears Beat Phillies, 9-7," *New York Times*, April 11, 1926.
- 17 Per Howard Freedman, "Evening Muse," *Newark Evening News*, April 15, 1926.
- 18 After the fire, the Elks occasionally used Sprague Field for matches against non-draws like the Newark Hebrew Club. See "Hebrew Club Finds Antlers Easy," (Newark) *Jewish Chronicle*, June 4, 1926.
- 19 As recollected in *The Independent Press*, April 12, 1954. See also, Pierson, 74-75.
- 20 As elsewhere in the North, 1920s New Jersey was an apartheid-like state, with few racially-mixed neighborhoods. Bloomfield and the adjoining neighborhoods of East Orange and north ward Newark had hardly any black residents, but Sprague Field was within short walking distance of a stop of a Bloomfield Avenue trolley line that originated in the African American precincts of downtown Newark.
- 21 Per "NJ Browns To Be Classy," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 1927.
- 22 Contemporary Negro Leagues websites like *Seamheads.com* list the home grounds of the 1932 Newark Browns (and 1934 Newark Dodgers) as General Electric Field. That name, however, never gained much local traction. To Bloomfield natives, the name of the ballpark was always Sprague Field.
- 23 *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 19, 1927.
- 24 Per "Newark Defeats Hilldale," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 15, 1931.
- 25 See "Black Sox Top Newark in Twin Bill," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 1, 1931.
- 26 As per the *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 3, 1931. The Browns won the series against the San Juan Stars. The outcome of the Newark city championship was undiscovered by the writer.
- 27 The other clubs admitted to the EWL were the Homestead Grays, Hilldale (Philadelphia) Giants, Baltimore Black Sox, (New York) Cuban Stars East, Detroit Wolves, Cleveland Hornets, and Washington Pilots.
- 28 See e.g., *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 30, 1932, and (Los Angeles) *California Eagle*, May 6, 1932.
- 29 According to sports columnist Louis E. Dial in the *New York Age*, March 12, 1932.
- 30 Sportswriter W. Rollo Wilson found such fielding ineptitude "almost impossible" to comprehend. *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 28, 1932.
- 31 Per "May Cut to 6 Clubs," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 25, 1932.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Per "Forgotten Heroes: John Beckwith," Dr. Leyton Revel and Luis Munoz, Center for Negro League Baseball Research, 2014, 14.
- 34 See endnote 4 for full title and publication data.
- 35 The first discovered report of activity at the Floyd Avenue playground appeared in "Bloomfield Playgrounds Now at Height of Summer Activity," *The Independent Press*, July 21, 1933.
- 36 The last discovered press mention of Sprague Field states that the site of the former ballpark was acquired by Westinghouse for conversion into an employee parking lot. See "Town Parking," *The Independent Press*, August 8, 1957. But the article's unidentified author misapprehended where Sprague Field was located (some distance to the south of the Westinghouse parking lot), and by 1957, the old Sprague Field grounds had long been converted into a neighborhood playground then called Floyd Field.
- 37 Per Deed dated August 10, 1928. Forty years later, Bloomfield acquired formal title to the remainder of the property. Many thanks to Andrea Schneider, confidential assistant to the Bloomfield Town Administrator, for supplying copies of the now-Felton Field property deeds.