

INTRODUCTION

This is a story that was eighty years in the making and took me twenty years to tell.

In the fall of 2002, I was a young community college professor coming up for tenure review. While getting my file in order, I taught a full course load of five classes, prepared my PhD thesis for publication, and helped manage a busy household with three rambunctious children under the age of nine. In the meantime, my wife was finishing up her master's degree in urban planning at Hunter College, where she was running a perfect 4.0 GPA. One of her classes that semester was called "Cases in NYC Planning," taught by a Staten Island architect and planner named Pablo Vengoechea. Professor Pablo lived in a neighborhood called St. George, where he had previously headed the Staten Island Office of the NYC Department of City Planning. Although he'd left that position several years earlier, he maintained an active interest in the biggest construction project to hit St. George in decades: the construction of a fabulously expensive minor league baseball stadium along the waterfront. In his class at Hunter College Graduate School he provided his students with access to a wealth of municipal paperwork and local sources about the ballpark. My wife wrote a term paper using the St. George stadium as her case study and eventually received a grade of A- for the class, the only imperfect grade she ever got at Hunter. She was furious. I was fascinated.

When she brought home newsletters, documents, and reports with exotic initials like FEIS or ULURP, I hauled them to my workplace to make surreptitious copies for myself. They raised all sorts of questions that I could not answer. Was the soil beneath the stadium really filled with toxins from its days as an abandoned railyard? How had the site been chosen for the ballpark? Why would the mighty New York Yankees

situate a minor league team in their home city, a huge market already crowded with over a half-dozen professional sports franchises? And the most baffling question of all to me was, why in the world did this stadium cost \$80 million to build? Several months later I belatedly realized that Staten Island's Richmond County Bank Ballpark was just one of a matched set of brand-new stadiums in the five boroughs. The other was Keyspan Park in Coney Island, located less than three miles from Kingsborough Community College where I was about to be granted tenure. In fact, my college's radio station broadcast Brooklyn Cyclones games, and our logo was emblazoned on an outfield sign at the stadium. Together the two facilities had cost New York City taxpayers like me approximately \$120 million, at that time the most expensive minor league stadiums ever built. Yet I could not remember ever voting to allocate that money, and I had been unaware of any public discussion of plans to construct them.

I sensed that I might be on to something and decided that my next project would focus on minor league baseball. I spent the next several years assembling background information about many disparate subjects. I pored over books and articles and microfiches about the structure and history of minor league baseball, the economics of sports stadiums, and the political era of the 1990s and early 2000s. After filing a slew of FOIA requests I spent several months cloistered in a cubicle at the offices of the New York City Economic Development Corporation, combing through files marked "classified" that I extracted from boxes labeled "Weekly Baseball Meetings." In the year 2006, I spent the most glorious summer of my life immersed in New York-Penn League baseball. I traveled to stadiums and libraries all over New York, Massachusetts, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Canada, printing up detailed Google maps because I didn't yet own a GPS or a smartphone. I interviewed team owners, league commissioners, general managers, baseball lifers, and the finance minister of Ontario, and then stayed afterward to enjoy live baseball games in their company. I was treated with warmth and courtesy by every member of the minor league baseball community, which I came to see as an extended family of individuals who truly loved their sport. Over the next four years I constructed a plan for a book and completed three and a half chapters. Then I put the manuscript down in 2010 and did not pick it up again for the next ten years.

I spent much of the next decade alternating between being too busy to think about my baseball project and berating myself for my lack of progress on my baseball project. I served on college committees, wrote memos and task force reports, got deeply involved in departmental and

college governance, and taught history classes to thousands of students. Every so often I would take the time to wonder why I could not simply finish writing a story that I found so engaging even when I was deep into procrastination mode. And then in March 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic hit, lockdowns began, and all external activities outside my basement ceased for the foreseeable future. Seven long months later my phone pinged with a news alert that Major League Baseball had made the unilateral decision to dissolve the New York-Penn League as part of a massive minor league consolidation plan. And in that instant I finally realized that what my baseball project had lacked all along was an ending. Now that it had been provided to me, it was time to get back to work.

Most of this book has been written or reedited over the past eighteen months since the axe fell on the Staten Island Yankees along with most of the New York-Penn League (but not the Brooklyn Cyclones, as we shall see presently). It has been bittersweet to review and revisit the research and interviews I conducted during the golden summer of 2006. Several of the people I spoke with have passed away and some moved on from baseball, but the majority have remained active in the sport in some capacity. As I navigated my way through warm memories while focusing on the task of assembling an objective historical narrative, I identified the core theme of this book. Professional baseball exists at the intersection of cultural nostalgia and the business of sports. The inherent tensions between these two qualities suffuse the history of the sport, local and national marketing campaigns, and the loyalty that fans and communities feel toward their teams. This has been especially true in the borough of Brooklyn and at Steeplechase Park in Coney Island where the Cyclones team makes its home. It proved to be less impactful in Staten Island, where the lack of a nostalgic past combined with many challenging real-world limitations ultimately doomed a once-promising franchise.

The story's starting point is the tiny hamlet of Batavia, New York, where the original iteration of the New York-Penn League was created back in 1939. The league always portrayed that historic moment through a haze of nostalgia, fondly looking back at an era of community-minded small-town baseball that emphasized the homespun appeal of America's pastime. Nobody dwelled on the fact that the entire enterprise was originated by a bottom-line businessman seeking to build a competitive advantage for his employers in Major League Baseball. They also preferred to overlook the financial instability and near bankruptcy of the league's early years, when teams winked in and out of existence on an almost annual basis.

This book tells a multifaceted story of the relationship between nostalgia and business, from Batavia to Brooklyn and many places in between. It examines the slow transformation of a hardscrabble, low-level, short-season league into a profitable commercial enterprise replete with millionaire team owners and expensive stadium deals. It shows how the confluence of that growth with the development plans of New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani would expand the league into the biggest sports market in the nation and unprecedented popularity. It offers insight into the memorable individuals who helped their league flourish and thrive, as well as the avaricious outsiders who euthanized it. And it tells the story of two franchises that went in opposite directions, one achieving astronomical success while the other sank under the weight of debts, failure, and recriminations.

One of the truisms of baseball is that it is a sport with no game clock, and the players play out nine innings for however long that may take. The New York-Penn League's nine innings took eighty years to play out before their game was called, and although the ending was fairly abrupt there were quite a number of memorable highlights along the way.