

## A Canadian Distinction of Note London, Ontario's Labatt Memorial Park, Baseball History's Oldest, Continuously-Operating Baseball Precinct

Robert K. Barney et Riley Nowokowski

Volume 113, numéro 2, fall 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081110ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081110ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

### ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Barney, R. K. & Nowokowski, R. (2021). A Canadian Distinction of Note: London, Ontario's Labatt Memorial Park, Baseball History's Oldest, Continuously-Operating Baseball Precinct. *Ontario History*, 113(2), 127–150. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081110ar>

### Résumé de l'article

*On soutient que Tecumseh Park à London (rebaptisé John Labatt Memorial Park en 1937) est le plus vieux terrain de baseball opérationnel de la longue histoire de ce sport. Ceci est contesté par des chercheurs tel que A.J. Bastarache – au nom de la ville de Clinton, Massachusetts - qui affirme que les inondations désastreuses de l'histoire de London ont déplacé le losange de Tecumseh originel vers un site entièrement nouveau, annulant ainsi son record d'opération continue dans un endroit spécifique. Nous allons examiner des articles de journaux et de revues liés aux inondations et au parc pour démontrer que Tecumseh Park en 1883 et John Labatt Memorial Park en 1937 ont été rapidement rénovés et que la localisation physique du parc n'a pas changé. De telles découvertes fournissent une preuve supplémentaire qui sous-tend la distinction patrimoniale du parc en tant que le plus ancien terrain de baseball opérationnel.*

# A Canadian Distinction of Note

London, Ontario's Labatt Memorial Park,  
Baseball History's Oldest, Continuously-  
Operating Baseball Precinct

by Robert K. Barney and Riley Nowokowski\*

There resides in London, Ontario, across Queen's Avenue from the old nineteenth-century courthouse located above the confluence of the north and south branches of the Thames River (locally referred to as "the forks"), one of baseball history's grandest historical legacies, the fabled Labatt Memorial Park, the oldest, continuously-operated baseball grounds found anywhere in the world. There it sits in all its contemporary luster, a luxuriant jewel in the "Forest City's" urban landscape.

We initially became interested in the historical lineage of Labatt Park in the face of an American challenge to its "being the oldest" distinction. Hence, we

resolved to carry out two missions: (1) pursue a detailed history of Labatt Park's origin and examine its credibility relative to its "continuously-operating" claim, and (2) investigate the claim made by its American challenger. We execute the latter in a sidebar at the end of this article. We present the former in more detailed consequence below.

The record of baseball play in London predates the opening of Tecumseh Park/Labatt Park by two decades. In the *City of London Directory* for 1856 comes the first notation of a baseball club established in London.<sup>1</sup> One game of baseball

---

\* Special thanks Devin Lindsay, Stephen Harding, and the entire London Room staff of the London Public Library.

<sup>1</sup> City directories are housed in the London Room, London Public Library, London, Ontario, Canada.

## *Abstract*

*It has been argued that London's Tecumseh Park (renamed John Labatt Memorial Park in 1937) is the oldest, still functioning ball grounds in baseball's lengthy history. This has been challenged persistently by scholars such as A.J. Bastarache on behalf of Clinton, Massachusetts, who argue that disastrous floods in London's history "removed" the storied Tecumseh diamond from its original location to a completely new site, thus negating its record of continuous operation in one specific place. This paper examines newspaper and magazine articles related to the flood and the park to show that Tecumseh Park in 1883 and John Labatt Memorial Park in 1937 were renovated in timely fashion following floods and that the park did not change its physical location. Such findings provide further evidence undergirding the park's bona fide heritage distinction as the oldest still operating ball ground in history.*

**Résumé:** *On soutient que Tecumseh Park à London (rebaptisé John Labatt Memorial Park en 1937) est le plus vieux terrain de baseball opérationnel de la longue histoire de ce sport. Ceci est contesté par des chercheurs tel que A.J. Bastarache – au nom de la ville de Clinton, Massachusetts - qui affirme que les inondations désastreuses de l'histoire de London ont déplacé le losange de Tecumseh originel vers un site entièrement nouveau, annulant ainsi son record d'opération continue dans un endroit spécifique. Nous allons examiner des articles de journaux et de revues liés aux inondations et au parc pour démontrer que Tecumseh Park en 1883 et John Labatt Memorial Park en 1937 ont été rapidement rénovés et que la localisation physique du parc n'a pas changé. De telles découvertes fournissent une preuve supplémentaire qui sous-tend la distinction patrimoniale du parc en tant que le plus ancien terrain de baseball opérationnel.*

appears to have been played in that year, a two-inning affair in which London edged a team from the nearby village of Delaware by a score of 34 to 33.<sup>2</sup> Over the following two decades, 1856-1876, baseball play in London expanded rapidly, creating competition with cricket

for players, fan followers, and, even more critically, for suitable practice and playing space. In general, cricket experienced a steady decline in the face of an ever-rising passion of public interest in baseball. By 1900 the sport of cricket hardly existed in the sporting landscape of London.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> We are indebted to Martin Lacoste for his penetrating compilations of baseball history's earliest published record of games played in Ontario. Lacoste has documented that in the 1860s some eighty games were played, most carried out under New York rules, between teams established in the Toronto/Hamilton/Woodstock/London corridor by 1865. "Table of Baseball Games Played in Ontario, 1856-1865," email Martin Lacoste to Robert K. Barney, 27 July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed examination of cricket play in London in the nineteenth century and its travails with baseball for public following and playing space, see Tony Joyce, "At Close of Play: The Evolution of Cricket in London, Ontario, 1836-1902," unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1988.



Figure 1. The 1877 London Tecumsehs

Guide containing the “Constitution and Championship Code of the International Association,” the “Playing Rules of the League,” and “other valuable information connected with the Game.”<sup>4</sup> There is little doubt that the prospect of

London Tecumsehs and the need for an exclusive playing venue arose out of that baseball passion. Hence, Tecumseh Park.

To recount the Park’s historical origin authenticity, we turn to the pages of the *London Daily Advertiser* of the spring months, March, April, and May 1877. With knowledge that London’s premier professional baseball aggregation, the Tecumsehs, had been accepted as a charter member of the new International Association, a genuine “major league” competitor to the equally new (1876) National Association of Professional Baseball Clubs (today, Major League Baseball’s National League) for urban franchises and baseball’s best players, the *London Daily Advertiser* of 31 March sought to educate its readers on the forthcoming 1877 season’s prospectus by offering for sale at 10 cents per copy the *Canadian Baseball*

the Tecumsehs playing in the new International Association sparked great interest among London’s sporting public.

Two weeks and two days later, on 16 April, in a column headed “The Ball Field,” the *Advertiser* provided its readers with the “inside scoop” on reasons why a new baseball park was needed. Such a need was associated with limited Tecumseh practice and playing time on London’s only viable field-sports venue, today’s greater Victoria Park area, which, in 1877, served chiefly as the expansive parade and drill field for the Crown’s military garrison. Consequently, a new playing venue had to be secured, one with total Tecumseh control over its availability. Stated the *Advertiser*:

The vexatious delays in getting possession of part of the Park property, and the threatening attitude of certain parties who appear

<sup>4</sup> See “Ready,” *London Daily Advertiser* (hereafter, simply *Advertiser*), 31 March 1877.

determined to have the ball ground at their own disposal, so as to benefit by the custom which large crowds invariably draw to people in their line of business, compelled the abandonment of the idea of utilizing the waste lands of the city for a ball field. The conditions imposed by the Park Committee, one of which limited the size of the field to such narrow dimensions that it would be too small for either baseball, cricket or lacrosse, added another reason why it would be folly for the club to go to the expense of enclosing and preparing the portion of the Artillery Block set apart for its use. After visiting London East, the northern suburbs of the city and the Petersville and Kensington Flats, the most convenient plot, taking everything into consideration, that could be secured, was a piece of meadow land adjoining the west end of Kensington Bridge, on the north side of the road, and an agreement has been effected by the owners of it for its lease or purchase. Work will be commenced on it at once, and the expectation is that it will be ready in ten days, or a fortnight at the furthest. It is nearer to the business centre of the city than the exhibition grounds, and when the Street Car Company extend their track to the brow of the Court House hill, which would be to their interest to do, it can be reached from all parts of the city readily and comfortably.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of that same week, on Friday, 20 April, the *Advertiser* was once again prompted to comment on developments at the new ballpark site:

The rain of the past two days has retarded the work of preparing the new grounds for

the Tecumsehs, but an extra force is at work to-day endeavoring to make up for lost time. The contract for two thousand yards of sodding has been let to Mr. Murdoch. The fencing and stands for the accommodation of spectators will be rushed rapidly forward. There is a brisk competition for the lease of the refreshment stands on the grounds. Everything is expected to be in readiness by the first of May.<sup>6</sup>

As the historic events unfolded establishing new Tecumseh ball grounds, named appropriately Tecumseh Park, the professional Tecumsehs played a practice contest on the old Military Park grounds. The result, an 8-2 victory over the Atlantics, “an amateur team of this city,” was played out before “a large attendance of spectators.”<sup>7</sup> Baseball fever-related activities surrounding the new Tecumseh Park under development continued to appear in the *Advertiser*, particularly with regard to the games planned for the gala inauguration of the facility:

The Great Western Railway have ordered reduced rates at all stations on their main line and branches for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of May, to give people an opportunity of witnessing the base ball games between the Hartfords and Tecumsehs. Proposals are invited for leases of the refreshment stands on the Tecumseh’s new grounds; also for the privilege of decorating the fences with advertising announcements.<sup>8</sup>

On the last day of April, as the series

<sup>5</sup> “The Ball Field,” *Advertiser*, 16 April 1877.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 April 1877.

<sup>7</sup> “Out-Door Sports,” *Advertiser*, 23 April 1877. The Atlantics, though a team composed of amateur players, were a formidable aggregation. By 1877 they deserved the distinction of being known as one of the top amateur baseball teams in the Dominion.

<sup>8</sup> “Base Ball,” *Advertiser*, 24 April 1877. The Hartfords, a seasoned professional team from New York



against the Hartfords drew ever nearer, the *Advertiser* updated its readers on the new Park's condition:

The Tecumseh's ball grounds are beginning to look as pretty as a picture. The diamond is beautifully sodded and the clay paths around the bases serve to bring out the rich green surrounding them with double effect. The grandstand is a fine commanding building, and comfortably suited. The reporters and scorers, and telegraph operators are also well provided for. A large tier of open seats is being erected in the southeast angle. Though the grounds will be ready for playing on next Saturday, when the Hartfords open the season with the Tecumsehs, they will not be in their best condition for some weeks to come. The progress made during the past two weeks is something wonderful.<sup>9</sup>

And then, a critical moment in Tecumseh Park history—its first documented competition—a practice game with London's amateur Atlantics on the afternoon of Thursday, 3 May 1877. The outcome, a 5-1 victory for the Tecumsehs, is inconsequential to our study here, but the *Advertiser's* commentary on Tecumseh Park itself is enlightening. On the eve of the "official" opening of the season against the Hartfords, one gets a full picture of the now classic baseball venue:

The new grounds are nearly complete in every respect of any of the kind in Canada, and but few American cities have such a convenient playing field. The place has been lev-

elled under the management of Mr. Kitchen, who has worked hard in getting things into shape. The diamond and several feet around the borders are nicely sodded, while the base lines have been formed of clay, and are as hard as a rock. Mr. Murdock deserves a great deal of credit for the way he has done the sodding. A pipe well has been sunk, and a full supply of cool water is thus always in the ground; the well will also be useful in watering the grounds. A grandstand capable of seating 600 persons has been erected in the northeast corner of the field. This is for the use of members of the club and the seats have already been reserved for the entire season. At the southeast corner is the general stand, open to the general public in payment of a fee. To the south of the grandstand, which by the way is covered in a Directors' Pavillion, erected at the expense of the President, Mr. J. L. (Jacob Lewis) Englehart, who with Mr. Plummer, has given a good deal of attention to overseeing the fitting up of the grounds and buildings. Directly behind the catcher is a booth to be used for a dressing and store room by the players, and above this is a point of observation for scorers, telegraph operators and reporters. It is hoped that they will be left alone by outsiders, as persons who have work to do and don't care to be bothered by people shouting, applauding, or criticising the play.<sup>10</sup>

On the afternoon of Saturday, 5 May 1877 the Tecumsehs met and were defeated by the Hartfords by a score of 6-2. The *Advertiser* reported that "fully two thousand persons" attended.<sup>11</sup> Two days later, on the afternoon of Monday, 7 May

---

City's Brooklyn borough, were not members of the International Association. They visited London after playing games in Chicago and Detroit.

<sup>9</sup> "Summer Pastimes," *Advertiser*, 30 April 1877.

<sup>10</sup> "The Ball Field," *Advertiser*, 4 May 1877. Parentheses ours.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ibid.*, 7 May 1877.

1877 the second game of the two-game series unfolded, an 8-4 series sweep victory for the Hartfords. The *Advertiser*, while reporting a crowd of “probably fifteen hundred,” extolled the visitors as “a fine body of men, quiet and gentlemanly in their manner, and never once in their two games did they question a decision or make a remark to which any exception could be taken.”<sup>12</sup> There followed in London a two-game series against the Stars of Syracuse (New York) played in Tecumseh Park on the afternoons of 11-12 May. The Tecumsehs won both games, 7-2 and 9-8.<sup>13</sup> And thus closed the first and earliest chapter in the history of what we know today as Labatt Park. Less than a week later, on Tuesday afternoon, 15 May, “at 3:00,” Tecumseh Park spectators, among them “a large number of Maple Leafs” from Guelph,” witnessed a 2-0 Tecumseh defeat at the hands of the Pittsburgh Alleghenys (Pennsylvania), in “the first game of base-ball in this city in the international series.”<sup>14</sup> And thus closed the first and earliest chapter in the

history of what we know today as Labatt Park.

## Floods, Cycling, and Baseball Fever: Tecumseh/Labatt Park, 1877-2000

From the pages of the *London Advertiser* of the latter part of the nineteenth century<sup>15</sup> and the *London Free Press* for much of the twentieth century<sup>16</sup> comes the primary record that supports beyond all argument the record that preserves the distinction “continuously-operating” which the hallowed Park has rightfully earned. A thorough examination of two floods in question prove beyond a shadow of doubt that in both cases, the “one and the same” Tecumseh Park (1883) and John Labatt Memorial Park (1937) were in timely fashion renovated following the destructive inundations that in both cases interrupted scheduled activities. This study puts to rest the argument that the storied baseball park changed physical location.<sup>17</sup> Such findings provide further

<sup>12</sup> See *Ibid.*, 8 May 1877.

<sup>13</sup> See *Ibid.*, 12 and 14 May 1877.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 May 1877. The reference to “Maple Leafs from Guelph” refers to players and officials of the Guelph Maple Leafs Baseball Club, the London Tecumseh’s chief Canadian baseball rival, as well as fellow member of the new International Association.

<sup>15</sup> The *London Daily Advertiser*, established by John Cameron in October 1863, was an evening newspaper, in contrast to the morning *London Free Press*. The *Advertiser*, an almost immediate success, proved an able competitor to the *Free Press* right up to its eventual demise in the fall of 1936. It was born in the midst of the American Civil War which captivated the attention of London citizens, particularly as hundred-upon-hundreds of fugitive Southern slaves sought freedom in Canada, particularly in southwestern Ontario. See Fred Landon, *Western Ontario and the American Frontier* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967 -- Carleton Edition, original publication 1941), 215.

<sup>16</sup> The *London Free Press*, an extension of the *London Canadian Free Press* (1849-1852), was established in 1856.

<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, the position of home plate within the Park grounds did indeed change, it would seem on at least four occasions over time, to its present position here in 2020



Figure 2: A late 1870s artist rendition of Tecumseh Park. Note the iconic landmark site, the Middlesex County Courthouse in the upper center of the photograph. This is the earliest pictorial rendition of Tecumseh Park after its opening in May 1877. The illustration is a “composite photograph” by Edy Brothers of a sketch from an unknown artist. It depicts an 1878 Tecumseh Park contest between the Tecumseh Club of London and the Stars of Syracuse (N.Y.). See: Library and Archives of Canada, Collections and Fonds – 3261769, Accession Number 1966-094 NPC. See also: <<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/CollectionSearch/Pages/record.aspx?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=3261769&new=-8586265606769476636>>.

evidence undergirding the bonafide heritage distinction the Park enjoys.

For the first five years of its existence (1877-1882), Tecumseh Park was the hub of London’s sporting activity. During that period, not only was it the most active and prestigious venue for baseball, it also hosted the central activities of two other prominent sporting pursuits and their supporting constituencies, the “bicycle and lacrosse crowds.” London,

like much of North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, embraced the period’s cycling craze. The cycling pastime experienced phenomenal growth in the city and its surrounding areas during much of the 1880s and 1890s, in fact, few recreational sporting activities rivalled cycling in terms of numbers of participants, individual club organization, and investment in facilities.<sup>18</sup> London’s Forest City Bicycle Club head-

<sup>18</sup> For the importance of the safety bicycle in London, see, in particular, Robert S. Kossuth and Kevin Wamsley, “Cycles of Manhood: Pedaling Respectability in Ontario’s Forest City,” *Sport History Review*, 34:2, 170. For more, see Glen Norcliffe, *The Ride to Modernity: The Bicycle in Canada, 1869-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Here, Norcliffe argues that “the bicycle carrier wave formed a small part of an even larger cultural movement in Canada known as modernity” (p. 31). Further, in



quarters, located in a large three floor warehouse on Dundas Street, formerly a wholesale dry goods establishment, was the envy of most of the city's sporting aggregations. Referred to as "elegant and spacious,"<sup>19</sup> the top floor was fitted out as a club room, the lower two floors for riding activities.<sup>20</sup> Part of the Club's activities focused on track racing, much of which was presented in Tecumseh Park before enthusiastic crowds.

Lacrosse, riding the pinnacle of its success in mustering Canadian sporting attention over that of other national sport "claimants" in the 1860s and 1870s, also focused squarely on Tecumseh Park for its main competitive attractions.<sup>21</sup> Members of the London Lacrosse Club, meeting on 10 April 1883, reported the *Enterprise*, "crowded into meeting rooms, showing that the national game has

taken a strong hold on the lovers of sport in this city."<sup>22</sup> Club secretary Wylkie reported that the Management Committee had "secured the entire [exaggerated] control of Tecumseh Park for the coming season..."<sup>23</sup> At a subsequent meeting held some two weeks later, the London Lacrosse Club announced an effort to "put Tecumseh Park in order, and have the stands moved and grounds scraped, so as to commence practice as soon as possible."<sup>24</sup> On 3 May the *Advertiser* reported that "the newly organized lacrosse club yesterday received a consignment of three dozen sticks from Brantford, where they are manufactured by the Indians. The sticks are pronounced in every respect first class. The first practice of the club will take place tomorrow morning on Tecumseh Park, and again on Saturday."<sup>25</sup> And on 12 May... "The costume

---

his "National Identity, Club Citizenship, and the Formation of the Canadian Wheelman's Association," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 51:2 (January 2018), Norcliffe argues that the *Canadian Wheelman*, an early magazine published in southwestern Ontario, played a major role in the growth of the late-nineteenth-century Canadian bicycle craze (p. 468). See also, Nancy Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game: Amateur Sports in Small-Town Ontario, 1838-1895* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> "Sporting," *Advertiser*, 11 April 1883.

<sup>20</sup> For more on this elaborate facility, see *Wheelman* issues of December 1882 (Vol. 1, No. 4) and November 1883 (Vol. 1, No. 3).

<sup>21</sup> The term "national sport" associated with lacrosse" dates to an 1867 attempt by the Montreal dentist, William George Beers to convince parliament in Ottawa to legislate the sport as Canada's official "national game." His attempt failed, but many in Canada, oblivious to Beers' failure, then and now, think that lacrosse is Canada's de facto national game. Beers himself was a noted lacrosse player in Montreal in the 1850s and 1860's. Further he published the first standardized rules for lacrosse in 1860, was instrumental in expanding the number of lacrosse clubs in Ontario and Quebec in the decade following, formulated the National Lacrosse Association and its first annual convention, and helped organize the first international lacrosse tours to England in the 1870s. For this and more, he enters the annals of Canadian sport history as the "Father of Lacrosse." For more, see Donald M. Fisher, *Lacrosse: A History of the Game* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> "Sporting," *Advertiser*, 11 April 1883.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Brackets ours.

<sup>24</sup> "Sporting," *Advertiser*, 28 April 1883.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 May 1883.

selected by the club consists of navy blue knickerbocker, blue and white striped shirt, blue stockings and polo dips...<sup>26</sup> Learning of plans for a spectacular opening of the Lacrosse Club's 1883 competitive season, the 14 May issue of the *Enterprise* reported the following:

Between thirty and forty members assembled for practice Saturday afternoon on Tecumseh Park. After practice, the President, J.B. Vining called the members together for the purpose of electing a captain, which resulted in the choice of Mr. P.J. Edmonds, who is in every way qualified for the position, and a zealous lacrosse player.<sup>27</sup>

The "Grand Opening" occurred on 24 May against the "Brants" of Brantford, an affair that drew a reported crowd of about 2,500 to "the Tecumseh grounds."<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, as Tecumseh Park played host to bicycle and lacrosse activity, it also accommodated the activities of London's foremost baseball nines. The city's 1882 champions, the Mutuals, determined to "retain the laurels won last year" [were hoping] "to commence practice as soon as the state of weather permits" [while declaring an intent] to "secure, if possible, the Tecumseh Park."<sup>29</sup> During the month of May 1883 Tecumseh Park was the center of London's busy baseball activity. A number of local baseball aggre-

gations featured the play of both young adherents to the game, for instance on teams such as the Young Athletes and Young Tecumsehs, and, as well, older experienced players on such baseball clubs as the Eurekas, Alerts, Atlantics and, of course, London's "diamond pride," the senior Tecumsehs.

What appeared to be a rosy and active athletics life for Tecumseh Park for the season of 1883 was torn asunder by events occurring on the evening and early morning of 10-11 July. In what the *Advertiser* proclaimed a catastrophe "altogether unknown at this season of the year," an "uninterrupted torrent of rain fell throughout the night, lasting until mid-morning the next day."<sup>30</sup> London West, and with it, Tecumseh Park, were hardest hit; the water was said to have reached the highest point ever known: "The whole of Tecumseh Park, fences, stands, and houses, together with Massie's boat house, all went down the river."<sup>31</sup> And, it was not solely baseball that suffered the consequences of the disaster. As the *Advertiser* reported: "All the effects of the London Lacrosse Club were swept away by the flood, including sticks, clubs, balls, etc. They were stored at Tecumseh Park, and were carried away with the buildings."<sup>32</sup> Tecumseh Park, for the

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 May 1883.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 May 1883.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 May 1883.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 April 1883. Brackets ours.

<sup>30</sup> "The Latest," *Advertiser*, 11 July 1883. A prolonged sub-headline told the tale: "Terrible Destruction by Water – London West and Low Points of the City Submerged – Immense Loss of Life Feared – Moving Tales of the flood – The Damage to property Incalculable."

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> "Sporting," *Advertiser*, 18 July 1883. The July 1883 flood proved a disaster for the sport of lacrosse

moment, ceased to function. The remainder of the 1883 outdoor sports season in Tecumseh Park was suspended. London newspapers during that time were replete with reports of elite athletic contests, normally contested in Tecumseh Park, occurring instead on the grounds of rival teams.

Almost four months following the July 1883 flood, London city officials met on 1 November to decide on tax rates and priority expenditures, of which flood-related damage issues were prominent. The *Advertiser* reported that one subject of discussion was the plight of Tecumseh Park: "The baseball grounds should be looked after. The want of fence along the street renders walking after dark on the sidewalk a very dangerous matter."<sup>33</sup> A week later the London West Council met for further civic allocation purposes. No funds were allotted for Tecumseh Park, only a motion, unanimously passed, "that the Tecumseh Base Ball Club be notified to fence their property on Dundas Street, as it was in a dangerous condition."<sup>34</sup> As winter set in, thought and action towards rehabilitation of Tecumseh Park from the ravages of the great flood of July 1883 were put on hold until the following spring

(1884).

A decade following the 1883 flood, London's foremost baseball venue underwent significant change--a geographical alteration in the location of the Park's baseball diamond home-plate and infield. More than half a century later, in mid-December 1936, as the City rejoiced over the John Labatt family donation of Tecumseh Park to the City of London, the *Free Press* was moved to recall aspects of the Park's history. Accordingly, the following notation appeared: "Originally the home plate was at the eastern section of the park and the players batted towards the west. In 1893 the diamond was rearranged and the home plate was close to Dundas Street, with the teams batting towards the north. Later the home plate was placed within a few feet of where it is now."<sup>35</sup>

Further documentation for this change from the Park's original 1877 infield location has yet to surface, but if the *Free Press* revelation is true, then the diamond's infield position within the Park property's confines changed from its original northeast location to a southwestern location in 1893. As seen in Figure 3, Dundas Street would have run somewhat parallel to the diamond's right

---

in London, especially lacrosse activity in Tecumseh Park. Shorn of its sticks, balls and other equipment, carried away in the flood, the Lacrosse Club membership dwindled, especially in the face of ever-increasing interest in cycling and baseball. In early August 1883 the London Lacrosse Club, now referred to as "The City Club," made a "last moment" arrangement for a game against London East, to be played on the Queen's Park grounds. The City Club "failed to muster a full team and were in consequence obliged to call upon London East for an additional supply." See "Sporting," *Advertiser*, 3 August 1883. We could not find a record of lacrosse activity in Tecumseh Park following the 1883 flood.

<sup>33</sup> "London West," *Advertiser*, 2 November 1883.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 November 1883.

<sup>35</sup> "City is Given Tecumseh Park, \$10,000," *London Free Press*, 15 December 1936.

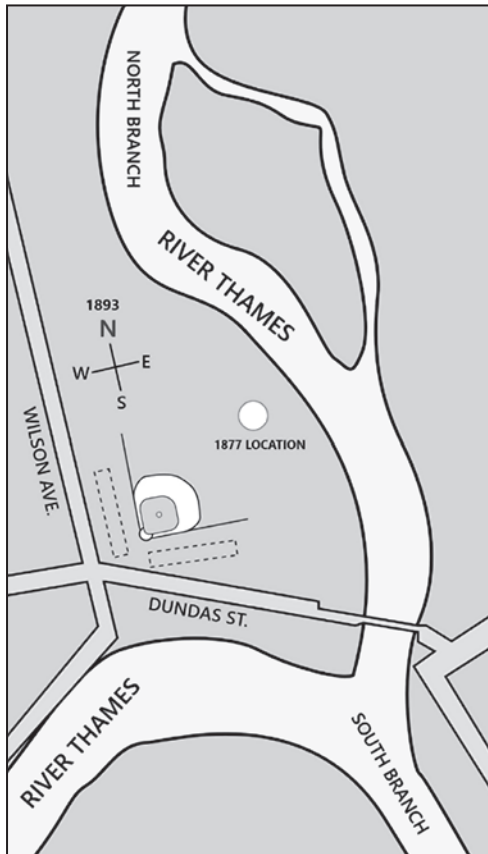


Figure 3: Approximate 1893 location of Tecumseh Park's home plate, infield and grandstands.

field foul line; Wilson Avenue (in 1893, Central Avenue) ran parallel to the left field foul line. Moving home-plate away from the consistently menacing overflow of the Thames River might have been

the motivation for such action, as well as placing the setting sun in the west in the eyes of the outfielders rather than the batters.<sup>36</sup>

Probably the single-most critical development in the Park's diamond sport history evolved not from the impetus of baseball, but rather from the widely popular late nineteenth century sport of bicycling. We have previously noted the prominence of cycling affairs in London.<sup>37</sup> In late May 1895 the *London Advertiser* reported on the opening of the ball season, grumbling:

With decidedly uncomfortable weather, and a somewhat one-sided exhibition of baseball, the season of 1895 was opened at Tecumseh Park Saturday afternoon. Though the temperature was chilly and rain threatened to fall every minute the same old grandstand and the same old bleachers held about the usual number of cranks, who, however, owing to the tameness of the match, had little opportunity to whoop 'er up.<sup>38</sup>

And then, scarcely five days later, a startling *Advertiser* announcement: "It is A Go: The Much Talked of Bicycle Track Will be Built at Once."<sup>39</sup> An auspicious facility, "one of the best athletic parks in Canada" was projected to be finished in Tecumseh Park by late July.<sup>40</sup> "Auspicious" indeed, "...a third of a mile brick-

<sup>36</sup> The logic here being that far fewer "sun affected" plays by outfielders occurred in comparison with "each pitch" experienced by batters in the course of the game.

<sup>37</sup> We originally became interested in the orientation of a bicycle track in Tecumseh Park introduced in 1895 due to a reference made to us by Stephen Harding, for which we are grateful. Furthermore, there is a notation regarding the bicycle track in Daniel Brock's *Fragments from the Forks: London, Ontario's Legacy* (London, Ontario: London and Middlesex Historical Society, 2011), 147.

<sup>38</sup> "The Green Diamond," *Advertiser*, 20 May 1895.

<sup>39</sup> "It is A Go," *Advertiser*, 25 May 1895.

<sup>40</sup> Discussions on building a bicycle racing track occurred as early as 1894, as noted in the *Canadian*

dust and cement track, complete with proper banking on the turns, and a baseball diamond mapped out, the infield arranged inside the perimeter of the track itself, together with a grandstand seating 2,500 folks, all at a cost of \$3,000.”<sup>41</sup>

There was more! Specific enhancements render a graphic picture of the Park’s new arrangement.<sup>42</sup> Representatives of the London Bicycle Club, among them W.J. Reid, the owner of Tecumseh Park, were the conceptual architects and exclusive financiers of the entire endeavor. Throughout June and July, well into August, London newspapers, particularly the *Advertiser*, reported the progress of the grand project,<sup>43</sup> carried on without the need to curtail the Park’s baseball activities. And then, finally, the grand opening of Tecumseh Park’s “new look.” On Saturday afternoon, 17 August, a procession of townsfolk and dignitaries led by the Musical Society Band formed at Richmond and Dundas Streets and marched to Tecumseh Park, arriving in pouring rain. A crowd of some 800 souls, considerably short of the several thousand expected, braved the weather to attend.<sup>44</sup> London mayor J.W. Little opened the formal ceremonies by orating on the

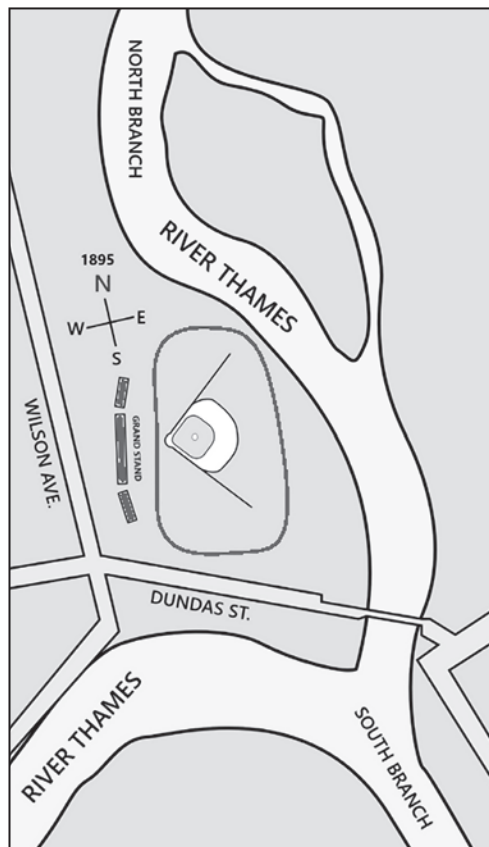


Figure 4: Approximate 1895 relocation of Tecumseh Park’s home plate and infield, together with the “a third of a mile” bicycle racing track with its “homestretch” in front of the central spectator grandstand.

prospective value of the cycling development to London youth and the debt

*Wheelman Magazine*. “For example: “The Meteor club has a membership now of about 70, and we are receiving applications for every meeting. We are growing fast, and, ‘to put a flea in your readers’ ears,’ it is our intention to make a strong bid for the C.W.A. meeting of 1895. By that time we expect to have one of the best athletic grounds in the Dominion, including an up-to-date bicycle track. We are in the swim to stay.” “London Meteors,” *The Canadian Wheelman*, 6 August 1894.

<sup>41</sup> “It’s a Go,” *Advertiser*, 25 May 1895.

<sup>42</sup> “Work Begun,” *Advertiser*, 27 May 1895: “The track has been staked out. The home stretch is to be west of the baseball diamond and 30 feet wide. The course will gradually narrow, until on the east side, or near the breakwater, it will only measure 16 feet.”

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, daily copies of the *Advertiser*, 25 May to 16 August 1895.

<sup>44</sup> For an enlarged description of the entire grand opening, see “Wheelmen Happy,” *Advertiser*, 19 August 1895.





Figure 5: Tecumseh Park, 1920. Courtesy Western University Archives. Photograph is digitized by Western University Library and Archives, London, Ontario: See: <[http://minweb.lib.uwo.minisisinc.com/scripts/mwimain.dll/337/1/57/59465?RECORD&DATABASE=PUB\\_DESCRIPTION](http://minweb.lib.uwo.minisisinc.com/scripts/mwimain.dll/337/1/57/59465?RECORD&DATABASE=PUB_DESCRIPTION)>.

owed to the facility's initiators: "The cultivation of these qualities and their application to our regular duties should certainly under ordinary circumstances, lead to success in any calling (applause). We are, therefore, under obligation to those who furnish facilities for the development of young people in this way."<sup>45</sup> Then, Reid spoke to the spectators and explained,

I trust... this is only the start of an era of bicycle riding in the city, and I will gladly do anything in my power to further the sport. We will have in the near future, so Mr. Human has told me, a cricket club laying out their crease here. We already have a baseball diamond, and with a cricket crease and bicycle track we will have as good an athletic grounds as there is in the country."<sup>46</sup>

Despite the 17 August attendance disappointment, subsequent bicycle race events held at Tecumseh Park's new cycling track generated robust spectator crowds witnessing races for prizes, often

bestowed in the form of ornate rings set with diamonds.<sup>47</sup>

And so ended yet another chapter in the transformation of Tecumseh Park, one that brought the historic grounds closer to the perspective in which the Park resides in these times. In closing this discussion of the bicycle club's installation of its racing track and subsequent relocation of the Park's baseball diamond to the track's elongated oval infield in 1895, it should be noted that possibly by 1916, cycling activity, along with the celebrated racing track had disappeared from the Park's scheduled activities and physical landscape, probably the victim of a rapidly emerging preoccupation of Americans and Canadians alike with a relatively new technological fascination, the soon-to-be ubiquitous automobile.

Sometime prior to 1922, possibly dating to 1916, Tecumseh Park noted a reconfiguration of the Park's expansive grounds, the installation of a new facility to accommodate the play of the Western University Mustang football team. As

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> "The Diamond Meet," *Advertiser*, 29 August 1895.



Figure 6: Tecumseh Park, 1922, with its football field arranged over the baseball infield. For this unique aerial photograph, see <[https://www.lib.uwo.ca/madgic/google\\_index\\_1922.html](https://www.lib.uwo.ca/madgic/google_index_1922.html)>. It is unknown what accommodation for football might have been made with regard to the elevated pitching mound on the baseball infield. The elevated pitching mound first appeared as a baseball diamond fixture as early as the late 1880s, coincident with the introduction of “overarm” pitching.

the 1922 aerial photograph of Tecumseh Park (Figure 6) demonstrates,<sup>48</sup> the football facility was laid out across the base-

ball diamond, directly in front of the spectator grandstand.

In the late 1920s the Western Mustangs abandoned Tecumseh Park to instead play their contests in the university’s newly constructed J.W. Little Stadium, built on the campus proper and inaugurated in the autumn of 1929.<sup>49</sup> By the mid-1920s the football arrangement in Tecumseh Park had disappeared, and for all intents and purposes the Park

stood as a facility almost totally focused on London’s ever expanding baseball scene. Nevertheless, it remains ironic

<sup>48</sup>As far as can be determined, this 1922 aerial photograph was among the first of its genre taken in London. The age of flight commencing in the early part of the twentieth century imperiled a firmly established but severely limited endeavor—photography from balloon flights.

<sup>49</sup>In the autumn of 1914 Western commenced its rugby football history by playing in the so-called ranks of “junior university competition.” In its 1914 debut season Western won the Dominion’s Junior Intercollegiate Championship by beating the Guelph Agricultural College, 23-9. By the late 1920s, despite the fact that Western fielded rugby football teams at both the Junior and Intermediate levels of competition, it was repeatedly spurned by Canada’s “Big Three” universities (Toronto, Queen’s, McGill) for entry into their exclusive Senior level of university football competition. Among the “Big Three’s” demands imposed on new members was the dictum: “must have established a record of superior sport competition levels, especially in rugby football, the kingpin of intercollegiate sport; [and] own a stadium of such proportions that it approached the stadium standards displayed by the Big Three.” Western’s J.W. Little Stadium was inaugurated in the fall of 1929. Subsequently, Tecumseh Park, as its home field venue, was abandoned. See Robert K. Barney, *Mustangs 100: A Century of Western Athletics* (Straffordville, Ontario: Sportwood Printing, 2013), 12 and 17.

that one of the most significant “change agents” in the arrangement of the Park’s modern baseball playing field location was the sport of cycling and its spectacular racing track, which disappeared completely from the sporting scene.

The most long-standing baseball tenant of Tecumseh/Labatt Park has been the London representative in the Intercounty Baseball League. Though the Intercounty League was established in 1919 the first London team to become a member was the London Braves of 1925. Depending on its sponsor, a Local team under various names (London Winery, Silverwoods, Army Team, Majors, Diamonds, Pontiacs, and Avcos) competed in the league from 1925 to 1974, when the London El-Morocco Majors, popularly referred to as simply the Majors, became Labatt Park’s permanent tenant.<sup>50</sup>

The most devastating disaster in London’s now two-century community history was the great flood of April 1937, an event that had repercussions for the city’s premier baseball precinct. The catastrophic late April flood was preceded by an event occurring scarcely five months previous, the donation of the Park property to the City of London by a recent purchaser, the John Labatt family. In mid-December 1936 the *London*

*Free Press* blared the good news: “City is Given Tecumseh Park, \$10,000: Famous Playground Donated By Labatt Family to Citizens.”<sup>51</sup> Officially renamed the John Labatt Memorial Park it became known by most folks as simply, Labatt Park. The Labatt family gift of \$10,000 came in the form of an endowment sum to be used for capital improvements. Little did London City fathers know at the time that the endowment sum would be pressed into needed service within a few months.

The December announcement and local celebration of the Labatt bequeath had hardly subsided, when, once again, as was annually anticipated, the city began to brace itself for the fallout from melting snow and ice and the onset of heavy spring rainfalls. In early January 1937 omens of approaching disaster were placed before London newspaper readers: “Nearly Five Inches of Rain in 15 Days,” reported the *Free Press*.<sup>52</sup> And, approaching mid-February, continuing alarm: “Heavy Rains Flood River Flats.”<sup>53</sup> And finally, the late April 1937 catastrophe: “the swollen waters of the Thames River overflowed its banks in a wild rampage today.”<sup>54</sup> The preliminary flood damage cost rested at three million dollars; newspaper descriptions under-

<sup>50</sup> See London Majors web site: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London\\_Majors#Team\\_history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_Majors#Team_history)>.

<sup>51</sup> “City is Given Tecumseh Park, \$10,000: Famous Playground Donated by Labatt Family to Citizens,” *London Free Press*, 15 December 1936.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 January 1937: “Last night streets ran deep with water and small floods were reported at one or two city parks.”

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 February 1937: “Old Man River went on a rampage in London following heavy rains . . .”

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 April 1937: “Scores of homes were menaced, streets were submerged, at least four district bridges were closed to traffic . . .”

*Figure 7: Looking westward "into" Labatt Park from the east bank of the flooded Thames River, April 1937. Though the Park's central grandstand (barely visible in centre-top of photo) remained in place, the disastrous flood demolished and swept away the two flanking grandstands. For photo source, see Box #129, London Public Room, London Public Library, London, Ontario, Canada.*



scoring the flood's consequences detailed a great city-wide tragedy,<sup>55</sup> from which Labatt Park was not exempt: "Flood Plays Havoc to Ancient Grandstand... John Labatt Memorial Park now completely covered by water... grandstand has been cracked and temporary bleachers have been washed away."<sup>56</sup>

Unlike the July 1883 flood, which nullified any further sports activity at Tecumseh Park until the spring of 1884, the early April 1937 disaster did not have such sustained consequence for the newly christened Labatt Park. On the eve of the flood the Free Press reported on an inspection of Labatt Park by Frank Dark, construction superintendent of the P.U.C. (Public Utilities Commission) and William Farquarson, London playgrounds supervisor. The property is "in bad condition. Fences need immediate attention, the roof of the grandstand leaks, fungus is growing on the grand-

stand seats."<sup>57</sup> Restoring and upgrading the facility became urgent. Ultimately, the Park remained completely inactive for a little over a month. During that period alternative arrangements were made for previously scheduled contests. The Free Press, for instance, noted that the London Senior baseball team (the Silverwoods) would "play [their] first six games away from home;"<sup>58</sup> their first home game was to occur on 19 June 1937. From then on the Silverwoods played the remainder of the 1937 season at Labatt Park.

Following the flood, certainly by 1940, as Figure 8 demonstrates, Labatt Park was once again transformed. The two spectator stands that had extended from both sides of the central main grandstand (placed there originally to accommodate the homestretch of the bicycle racing track), were destroyed in the 1937 flood and not resurrected in their

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 April 1937: "mounting menace of disease, one man drowned, 6,000 without homes, South London completely isolated to motor traffic."

<sup>56</sup> "Labatt Park Is a Young Lake," *London Free Press*, 28 April 1937.

<sup>57</sup> "Labatt Park in Bad Condition," *London Free Press*, 6 April 1937.

<sup>58</sup> Howard Broughton, "On The Sport Trail With Howard Broughton," *The London Free Press*, 14 May 1937.





*Figure 8: Labatt Park, 1940.*

original place. Instead, extended spectator stands were arranged contiguous to and behind the first base-right field and third base-left field foul lines. Home plate remained in roughly the same position as it did prior to the flood. As the photograph also demonstrates, a softball diamond was installed on the northern end of Labatt Park's grounds, due particularly to the explosion of ladies' softball in London and vicinity in the 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>59</sup>

Since the location of home-plate in the Park remains somewhat controversial, our research on the subject inclines us to argue that the home-plate's location and its accompanying infield changed at least four times in its now almost century and a half of history (see Figure 9).

Over the years, following the 1937 flood, Labatt Park's baseball diamond remained generally as it had been in 1895, that is, with Wilson Avenue located directly behind home plate, and batsmen

<sup>59</sup> For a full treatment of this phenomenon and Labatt Park's role in the development, see Carly Adams, "Communities of Their Own: Women's Sport and Recreation in London, Ontario, 1920-1951," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 2007.



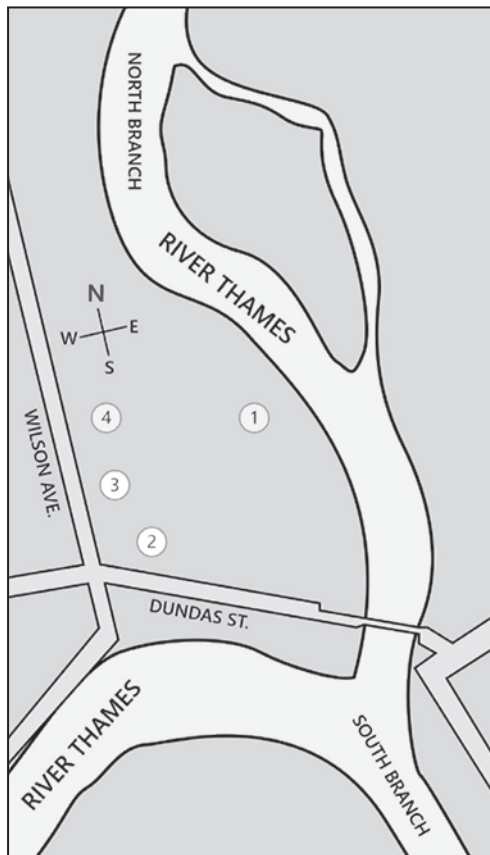


Figure 9: Changes in Tecumseh Park/Labatt Park home plate location: 1=1877, 2=1893, 3=1895, 4=post-1937.

was relocated to a slightly more northerly location.

In 1989, coincident with the re-emergence of professional baseball in Labatt Park, London completed an important civic development that affected the historic facility, as Figures 10 (1971) and 11 (1989) reveal. Queen's Avenue was extended with its own bridge westward over the Thames River to intersect with Dundas Street running parallel to it, thus forming a junction from which Riverside Drive extends through London West. This necessitated the removal of the small cluster of houses in the deep right-field corner, which in turn modified the dimensions of the right-field portion of the playing field. By 1989, too, the houses bordering Labatt Park on the east side of Wilson Ave. had been removed, greatly enlarging the Park's main entry precinct. Other developments between 1971 and 1989 were the construction of extended bleachers along both foul lines, a warning track around the perimeter of the outfield, and much landscaping beautification.

Late in the twentieth century, professional baseball returned to Labatt Park. In 1989 the London Tigers, a Double AA Eastern League affiliate of the Major League Detroit Tigers, took up residence

hitting eastward. By 1940 the Park was close to its present layout. In 1937 the storied "tongue-and-groove clapboard" Labatt Park players' clubhouse was built. On 1 August 1996 it was officially named the Roy McKay Clubhouse, and designated a historical landmark site under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act.<sup>60</sup> In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s spectator seating and dugout accommodation for players were enlarged and home plate

<sup>60</sup> As cited on the London Majors web-site: "The one-storey, cottage-style building is owned by the City of London and is one of the few remaining clubhouses of its kind remaining in North America." Roy McKay was a longtime London Majors batboy, pitcher, coach, and manager, having an association with the team from 1945 until his death in 1995.

in a much improved and beautified Labatt Park. Improvements made for the arrival of the Tigers cost in the vicinity of one million dollars. They included new lighting, concession booth enhancements, a 40 x 19-foot electronic scoreboard (partially sponsored by Labatt Breweries), new dressing rooms, and new dugouts. The Tigers in London were short-lived. The franchise moved to Trenton New Jersey for the 1994 season. In 1999 the London Werewolves of the fledgling Frontier League arrived in London. Its tenure in Labatt Park ended in 2001, victim of limited attendance and skyrocketing operating costs. And, in 2003, Labatt Park became the home of the London Monarchs of the short-lived Canadian Baseball League which folded in mid-season due to financial difficulties.<sup>61</sup>

### Epilogue

Finally, what is in store for the storied Park and its illustrious historic distinction? How might it be protected from the ravages of urban expansion and



Figure 10 (above): Labatt Park, 1971.

Figure 11 (below): Labatt Park, 1989



<sup>61</sup> Source: Wikipedia-Labatt Park. We are grateful to Walter Zimmerman, Western University Reference Librarian Emeritus, for his advice and counsel on the latest history of professional baseball in Labatt Park.

corporate development? One answer, of course, is heritage distinction reinforced by authority. “Reinforced authority” is bestowed at three levels: municipal, provincial, and national. Labatt Park connotes much more than simply a venue for baseball activity.<sup>62</sup> It is a beautified, charismatic public space for the gathering of London’s citizenry, indeed Ontarians and greater Canadians, to experience and celebrate a national cultural pastime approaching two centuries in duration. The City of London, Ontario realizes this fact. Since its ownership of the park commenced in 1937, it has poured millions of dollars into it and its immediate surroundings. London fully realizes its value to the urban life of its citizens. On 30 May 1994 the City of London, under part IV of the *Ontario Heritage Act*, named Labatt Park as an Ontario Heritage Landmark Site. One month later, on 1 July 1994, a plaque was unveiled at Canada Day ceremonies presided over by Mayor Tom Gosnell. Bob Barney was present at those proceedings and rendered the keynote commemorative address. Though the Park’s municipal and

provincial heritage landmark distinctions are important barriers standing in the way of urban growth/reconfiguration and corporate development, the addition of Canadian National Historic Landmark distinction could add towards insuring a final measure for lasting preservation.<sup>63</sup> If Lord George Gordon Byron, the inimitable English baron/poet, was on the mark when he asserted that “the best prophet of the future is the past,” then perhaps Labatt Park has before it a glorious future in its service to London citizenry.<sup>64</sup>

### *Appendix:* *The Clinton Challenge*

There has been but one serious challenge mustered against Labatt Park’s distinction as “baseball history’s oldest, continuously-operating ball grounds.” That challenger is Fuller Field in the town of Clinton, Massachusetts. Clinton, nestled in bucolic surroundings some forty miles west of

---

<sup>62</sup> Better known, but similar circumstances, are associated with many original historic sporting precincts, for instance, the Kentucky Derby and Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky; the Boston Red Sox and Fenway Park in Massachusetts; the Indianapolis Speedway in Indianapolis, Indiana.

<sup>63</sup> Despite this thought, the Middlesex County Courthouse, referred to and pictured in Figure 2, constructed in 1827-29 at 399 Ridout St. above “the forks” of the Thames River, declared a National Landmark Historic Site in 1955 by the Government of Canada, was part of a greater surrounding property sale by the City of London to a commercial developer (York Developments) in November 2019. A public remonstration of concern followed. York Developers have stated that they plan “to maintain the historical appeal of 399 Ridout St., a plan for which most Londoners would embrace. Stay tuned. See <<https://globalnews.ca/news/6222960/middlesex-county-king-ridout-street/>>.

<sup>64</sup> Lord George Gordon Byron’s notable reflection, made in Greece, the country of his residence for the last three decades of his life, came three years before his death at age 36. It appeared in a letter composed by him on 28 January 1821. For the letter’s transcription, see: <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16609/16609-h/16609-h.htm>>.



Boston, nevertheless, suffers from a long-embedded “tiredness.” Once a bustling nineteenth century town of world fame, much of its business landscape renders the impression of being in recession. Many of the town’s streets and sidewalks are in disrepair; a fatigue-like mist appears to envelop its business and residential areas. But, in its heyday in the nineteenth century Clinton was a dynamic community, featuring some of America’s best known manufacturing firms, most especially those linked to a booming textile industry. In fact, Clintonian Erastus B. Bigelow rose to become one of the world’s most important and best-known inventors/entrepreneurs with his invention and development of the power-loom, including his subsequent scientific application of the power-loom to what we know today as the process by which screening for windows, doors, and porches are manufactured. Think about the importance of that invention in world health and comfort context. Then, too, Clinton was an enviable center of cultural flamboyance. Appearing in Clinton’s civic halls and private salons for over a half century were many of America’s most celebrated writers, entertainers, cause-conscious lecturers, sports stars, even Presidents of the United States, a legion of men and women that included such historical luminaries as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglas, Mark Twain, Carrie Nation, John L. Sullivan, Agnes Moorehead, and two Roosevelts, Franklin and Theodore. [For more on this see A.J. Bastarache, “Introduction,” *An Extraor-*

*dinary Town: How One of America’s Smallest Towns Shaped the World* (Clinton, Massachusetts: Angus MacGregor Publishing, 2005), p. 1. We are grateful to the librarians of the Bigelow Free Public Library in Clinton during a research visit there in August 2018 for providing us with historical documents appropriate to Clinton’s challenge to the Labatt Park distinction.]

Baseball has been a fixture in Clinton for nearly as long as some of the earliest historical records of the sport attest. One can certainly pinpoint an 1865 Clinton

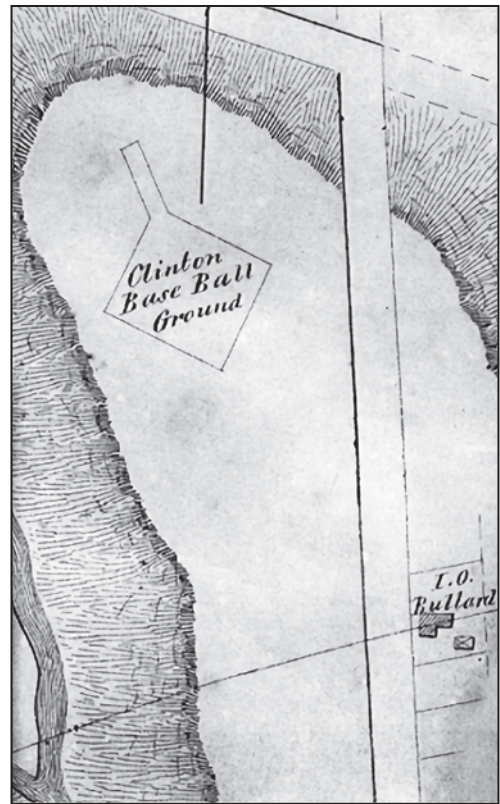


Figure 12: Clinton baseball ground. The image is an inset from the noted “darkened and dog-eared by age” city map of 1878

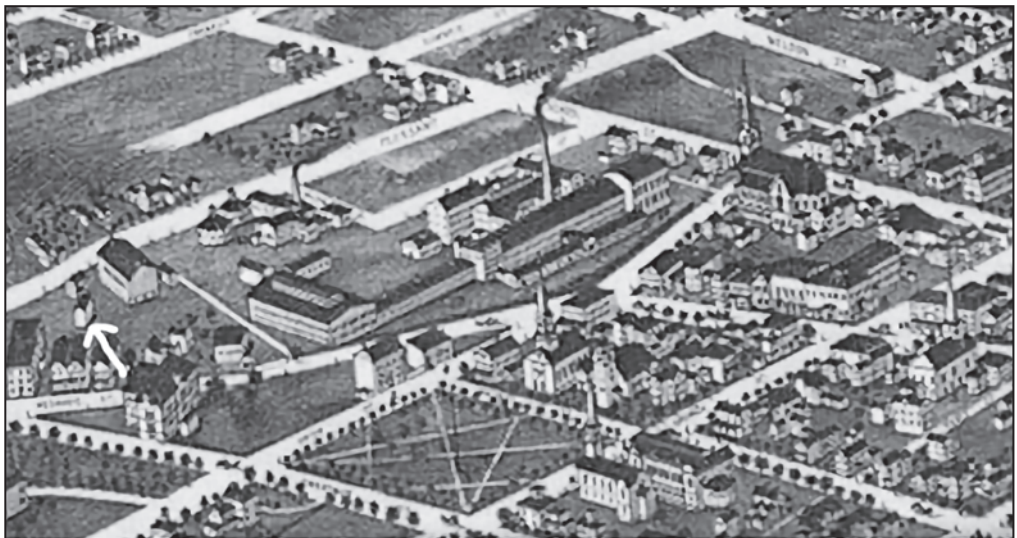
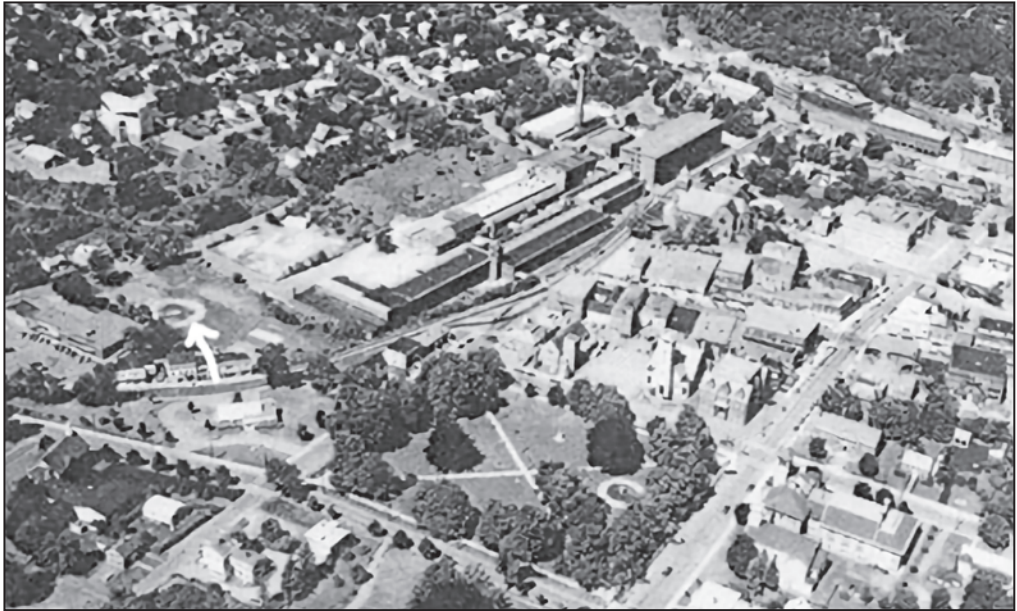
newspaper notice offered by one of the local baseball aggregations, the “We’ll Try Baseball Club,” inviting ladies and gentlemen to attend its annual “baseball-sponsored ball.” [See Bastarache, “Making Sports History,” p. 95.] Discovered by the officials of the Clinton Historical Society in 2004, a “darkened and dog-eared by age” four by five foot oilcloth survey map of Clinton, dated 1878, depicts a baseball infield diamond on property bounded by High and Allen Streets. (Figure 12). [The phrase, “darkened and dog-eared by age,” is from Peter Schworn (*Globe* staff writer), “Fielding Dreams: A Central Massachusetts Town Hopes an 1878 Map Will Bring Visitors and Bragging Rights to a Spot in Baseball History,” *Boston Sunday Globe*, 14 August 2005. The phrase, in fact, may have been spoken directly to Schworn by his interviewee, A.J. Bastarache.] Clinton’s argument proposes that the infield diamond presently in place on Fuller Field, a “multi-purpose” facility operated by the town’s Parks and Recreation authority, is situated in exactly the same place as the baseball diamond depicted on the 1878 “oilcloth survey map.”

Researching into the antiquity of baseball parks and diamonds, local Clinton historian Bastarache found no other claim equal to or offering an older date of baseball diamond origin and continuous use, except the case pertaining to a Canadian baseball facility, Labatt Memorial Park in London, Ontario. Upon inquiry to London’s Labatt Park historians (in this case, Barry Wells, as told to the authors by Wells himself during a tour

of Labatt Park on 10 November 2018), Bastarache learned that Labatt Park, though predating Clinton’s 1878 “origin claim” by one year (1877), was devastated by a flood in April 1937, causing it to cease function for an interim, not to reappear until 1938 as Labatt Memorial Park, and, in Bastarache’s incorrect conclusion, “moved” to a completely different location. To Bastarache, then, Labatt Park’s “continuous use” claim could not be defended after the season of 1936. But, obviously unknown to Bastarache was the fact that Tecumseh Park/Labatt Park was never moved. In the wake of the devastating 1937 flood, Kensington Flats, including Tecumseh Park, was inundated, its playing surface and ballpark infrastructure severely damaged. Operations at the ball grounds ceased entirely. Over time, the flood waters receded; the Flats returned to normalcy. But the ground’s ballfield and supporting infrastructure were ruined. Nevertheless, as this article points out, the John Labatt Brewing Company purchased the former Kensington Tecumseh Park ballfield land and promptly deeded it to the City of London in perpetuity. Further, the Labatt family gifted \$10,000 to the City for the restoration of the baseball park in the identical spot of its origin. Tecumseh Park rose in all its original splendor, renamed Labatt Memorial Park.

But Bastarache was on a mission. Hence, to *Guinness World Records* and the National Park Service, he proceeded to launch a quest to have Clinton’s Fuller Field ordained as the oldest continuously used baseball field in the World, dating to





*Figure 13 (top): Post World War I aerial view of Clinton's industrial center, showing the original location of the baseball field (white arrow highlights location).*

*Figure 14: An 1876 Map of Clinton showing identical industrial neighborhood as map above. No ball field is evident, only buildings are present at the location of the ball field, indicated by the white arrow.*

1878. In fact, Bastarache's went further, claiming that the Fuller Field baseball site "may actually date back to 1865 when

baseball began in Clinton." If Bastarache had seen fit to consult an 1876 Clinton illustrated map (Figures 13 and 14), he

would have found that the Fuller Field baseball site was clearly not in place prior to 1878.

Whereas *Guinness* certified Bastarache's claim, and hence, in its 2007 annual edition, proclaimed Fuller Field's unique baseball antiquity authenticity, certification of the "Clinton distinction" failed in the halls of decision making in the National Park Services' National Registry of Historical Landmarks. [For the earliest notation of the National Park Service Submission, and actual Guinness submission, see Schworn, "Fielding Dreams."] We suspect that the National Park Service's Registry of Historical Landmarks was and is decidedly more rigorous in its survey of "origin evidence," to say nothing of the proof of "continuous use," than a commercial press such as *Guinness*. The silence from government authority, the custodian of historical landmark claims, is a deafen-

ing commentary on the legitimacy of Clinton's claim. On *Guinness's* website notation (Waymarking.com) appears the following: "The claim (Clinton) is based on maps of the town that date as far back as 1878, and box scores from games played every year." This is the only occasion where a reference to evidence of "continuous use" ("box scores") is offered, but only a "reference to," not one shred or example of such evidence. If such evidence exists, Bastarache would surely have brought forth such a corpus to support his "continuous use" argument. We believe no such evidence exists, but if it does indeed exist, it has never been examined relative to the Clinton claim. Disastrous to Clinton's claim was the removal of Fuller Field from *Guinness World Records*, replaced in its 2009 edition by Labatt Memorial Park in London. [See *Guinness World Records*, 2009, p. 191.]

---