

UP FRONT



WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SPORTS MUSEUM

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At Long Last, a Recreation Park Photo Comes to Light

In the late 19th century, Recreation Park stood as Allegheny City's preeminent sporting facility, but the inexplicable lack of photographic evidence was an intriguing mystery among local baseball researchers. Finally, a year ago, a six-by-nine-inch cyanotype surfaced. The image was in the John Brashear time capsule, which was entrusted to the History Center soon after being unearthed in a cornerstone of Brashear's demolished optical shop on Perrysville Avenue on the North Side. It offers the only view of Recreation Park's grandstand amidst its surrounding neighborhood, yet still leaves many unanswered questions.

Recreation Park was located a half-mile north of current-day Heinz Field on Pittsburgh's North Side. The site originated as Union Skating Park, commonly called Union Park, in 1865. Two years later the first baseball games were played there. In 1876, the Allegheny professional baseball team debuted at Union Park and joined the International Association the following year as professionals. A new Alleghenys team in the major league American Association, established in 1882 and led by founding owner Denny McKnight, moved into Union Park in 1884. (Interestingly, the site was once part of his prominent family's holdings.)

The Alleghenys' management changed Union Park's name to Recreation Park in 1885.¹ Two years later the team left the American Association and joined the National League. That same season the Pittsburgh Keystones of the short-lived Colored League debuted in Recreation Park as the first significant local African American baseball team. By 1891, the Alleghenys had moved to Exposition Park on the banks of the Allegheny River (between today's Heinz Field and PNC Park), where the team became known as the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Union/Recreation Park served as much more than a baseball field—the park hosted sporting, religious, theatrical, and civic events. After the Civil War, citizens packed the grandstand and celebrated Emancipation Day in 1867. In 1883, Alleghenians delighted in the spectacles of two iconic traveling shows: P.T. Barnum's Traveling Circus with Jumbo the Elephant and Buffalo Bill's Wild West show

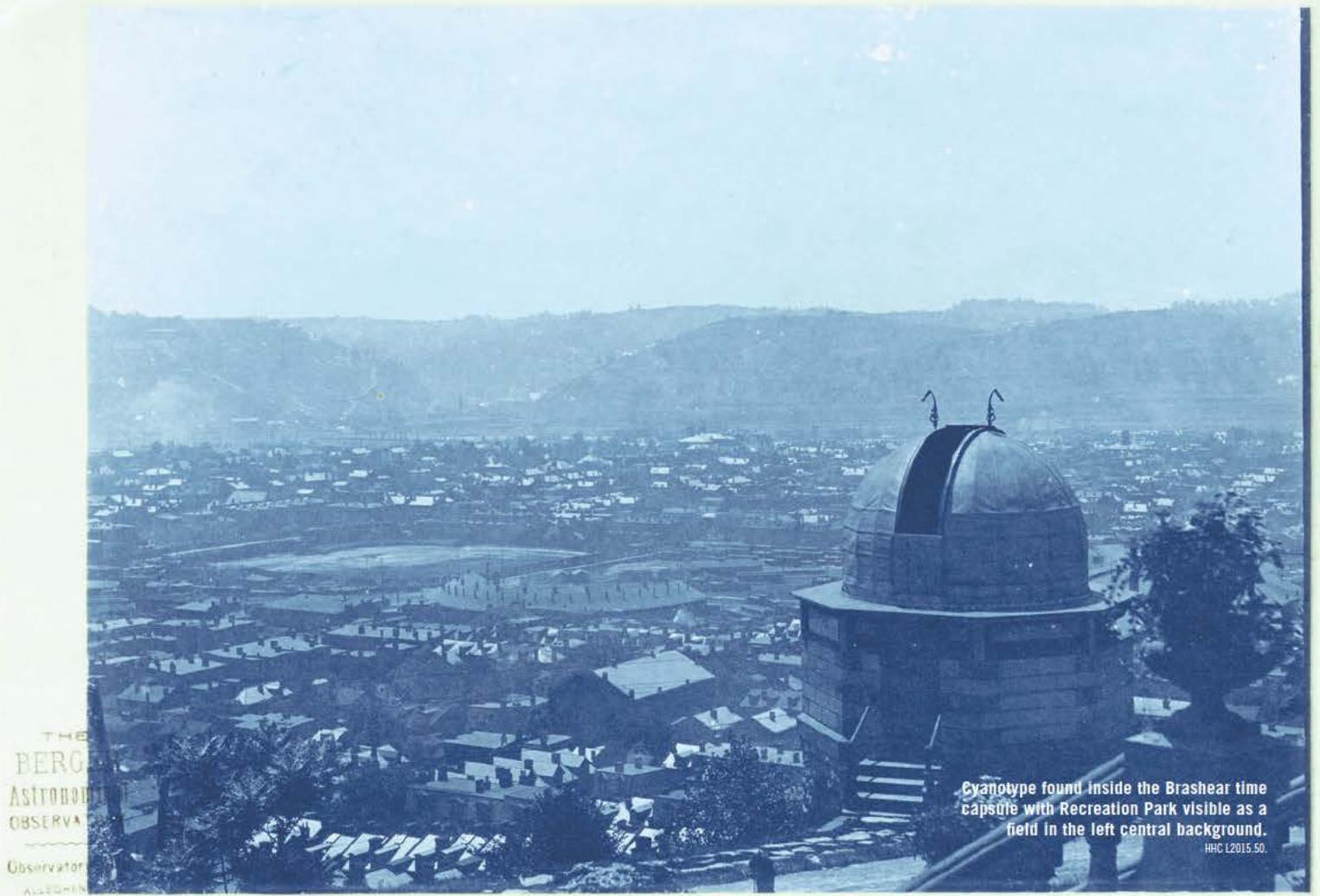
featuring Sitting Bull. From 1892 to 1894, the park was mostly referred to in newsprint as "Three A's Park" after its lessee, the Allegheny Athletic Association. In 1892, the park was the site of the first football game played with a paid player.

While examining a high resolution scan of the magnified Brashear time capsule photo (possibly dating from 1894), ballpark historian Len Martin made an important observation: an apparent gap missing from the grandstand's second tier and roof. The largely wooden two-tiered structure, like all the ballparks of its era, was vulnerable to fire, structural collapse, and the effects of the elements. Supporting thousands of fans in the wooden second tier seems incredibly dangerous by today's safety standards. With wind and weather beating on the park and the architectural integrity compromised, the grandstand's days were numbered. It was dismantled in September



HOW THE INGLORIOUS DEFEAT APPEARED FROM OBSERVATORY HILL—MORE PICTURESQUE THAN PRACTICAL.

Woodcut drawing from the *Pittsburg Dispatch*, which reported a Recreation Park game as seen through a telescope, July 7, 1889.
Pittsburg Dispatch, July 7, 1889, 2, via newspapers.com.



Cyanotype found inside the Brashear time capsule with Recreation Park visible as a field in the left central background.
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1895, a year after the time capsule was sealed.² Thereafter, the grounds are often referred to in print as “old Recreation Park,” where the Western University of Pennsylvania (later the University of Pittsburgh) played football. Pirates owner Barney Dreyfuss operated the last permanent sporting structure on the grounds, the Colosseum (1902-1904), as a bicycle racing and football venue for the Pittsburgh Stars. Use of the grounds diminished by the end of the decade.

John Brashear’s decision to preserve this photograph may indicate that he was a baseball fan himself. His penned caption on the reverse side reads, “View of Allegheny Near Recreation Park Base Ball Grounds.

From Near Henry Burger’s [sic] Obs. [Observatory] H.B. [Henry Berger] Photo.” Indeed—an image appearing in an 1889 *Pittsburg Dispatch* depicted a few people watching a game at Recreation Park through a telescope.³

In Brashear’s posthumous 1924 autobiography, the telescopic lens pioneer recalled his mentor, Smithsonian Secretary Samuel Langley, fondly: “Of an afternoon he would come over to my shop to watch the baseball games, as the park was in sight and a telescopic view of the game very satisfactory. I loved Professor Langley as a friend—aye, as a brother.”⁴

Special thanks to local baseball history experts Len Martin, Andy Terrick, and Dan Bonk for their consultation and assistance in studying the time capsule photo.

Read more about the contents of the Brashear time capsule in the Summer 2016 issue of *Western Pennsylvania History*.

¹ *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, March 5, 1885, 6. First mentioned in *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 4, 1884, 3.
² *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, September 15, 1895, 6.
³ “At Long Range,” *Pittsburg Dispatch*, July 7, 1889, 2.
⁴ John A. Brashear with Lucien W. Scaife, ed., *John A. Brashear: The Autobiography of a Man Who Loved the Stars* (New York: American Society of Mechanical Engineers, 1924), 132.