

HAMTRAMCK STADIUM, VETERANS PARK  
(Roesink Stadium)  
3128 Goodsin Street  
Hamtramck  
Wayne County  
Michigan

HALS MI-4  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### HAMTRAMCK STADIUM (Roesink Stadium)

HALS NO. MI-4

- Location:** 3128 Goodsin Street, Hamtramck, Wayne County, Michigan  
In Veteran's Park, on the corner of Dan St. and Joseph Campau St. in downtown Hamtramck. The park and stadium are bounded by Goodson St. to the northwest, Joseph Campau St. to the southwest, Dan St. to the southeast, and both the Detroit Amtrak and Grand Trunk Railroad to the East.  
Lat: 42.390041 Long: -83.050559 (Home Plate, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84).
- Significance:** Whether it is the sterling ball clubs that appeared there, the spectacular games played on the field, the introduction of night baseball, or the reputation of the players who graced the bases, Hamtramck Stadium is a major site for both baseball and black culture in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Michigan.

This ballpark was the home field for many incarnations of the Detroit Stars, and fans were never disappointed by the baseball battles waged at Hamtramck Stadium. This historic landscape hosted many thrilling ballgames between Negro League giants. The teams ranged from barnstorming and local clubs to Negro National League (NNL) icons such as the Kansas City Monarchs, the Chicago American Giants, and many more clubs on the NNL circuit.<sup>1</sup>

The players who passed through Hamtramck Stadium were of a caliber that placed them on the same level as their white counterparts. The Detroit Stars alone had a roster that included five future Hall of Famers.<sup>2</sup> This is significant because, to date only 35 people associated with the Negro Leagues have been enshrined in Cooperstown.<sup>3</sup> Norman "Turkey" Stearnes was one of the best Negro Leaguers of all times. He signed with the Stars in 1923 and played a record 9 seasons with them. He had a lifetime batting average of .352 against black teams, .313 against white teams, .474 in playoff games, and holds the record for hitting the most home runs of anyone who played Negro League Baseball. He was enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2000.<sup>4</sup> Playing alongside Stearnes was talent such as Ray Dandridge (the 10<sup>th</sup> Negro Leaguer to be inducted – 1987), Andy Cooper, Pete Hill, and Cristobal Torriente (all inducted in 2006).<sup>5</sup>

In 1932, the Detroit Stars did not have a team, so the city fielded a club comprised of mostly St. Louis Stars.<sup>6</sup> Dubbed the Detroit Wolves, this power-packed group of players included five more future Hall of Famers: James "Cool Papa" Bell (1974 inductee), Willie "The Devil" Wells (1997 inductee), "Smokey" Joe Williams (1999 inductee), George "Mule" Suttles (2006

inductee), and Raymond Brown (2006 inductee).<sup>7</sup> Such a tremendous group of players adds great significance to Hamtramck Stadium.

Also playing at Hamtramck Stadium, as members of the visiting teams, were other Hall of Famers such as Leroy “Satchel” Paige with the Pittsburgh Crawfords, Oscar Charleston and Raleigh “Biz” Mackey with the Indianapolis ABCs, Josh Gibson with the Homestead Grays, and Martin Dihigo with the traveling Cuban Stars.<sup>8</sup> At least 18 Hall of Famers played Negro League baseball at Hamtramck Stadium.

A number of significant games were played at Hamtramck Stadium, but the series that stands apart from the rest was the 1930 Negro National League Championship Series between the Detroit Stars and the St. Louis Stars. Out of the 7-game series, games 5, 6, and the championship game 7 were decided at Hamtramck Stadium. In the end, the Stars lost, but it was the closest they ever came to a championship pennant through all their seasons.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Hamtramck Stadium is a significant American landscape because it was the site of the first night baseball game played in Detroit and possibly Michigan. The game was played on June 28, 1930, against the Kansas City Monarchs, who traveled with a portable light system. They attached telescoping 50-foot towers to the back of trucks parked around the perimeter of the park and placed more lights on top of the grandstand to flood the field in artificial light.<sup>10</sup> This changed the game of baseball, allowing players and fans to enjoy games at virtually any time of the day, opening up more playing time and more games to the financially distraught teams of the period. This historic game occurred 5 years before the Cincinnati Reds installed lights in their stadium, and 18 years before the Tigers did the same, placing Hamtramck Stadium and the games played there far ahead of Major League Baseball.<sup>11</sup>

Description: Name--This baseball landscape is officially called Hamtramck Stadium, but it has also been dubbed Roesink Stadium after its original owner, John Roesink. It is located within Veteran’s Memorial Park.

Construction Date--1930. Opening day was May 11 of the same year.<sup>12</sup>

Demolition Date--The central portion of the grandstand behind home plate is still standing; however the two flanking portions were demolished in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

Cost--The stadium was built for \$100,000.<sup>14</sup>

Materials--Reinforced concrete, steel I-beams, treated wood, concrete masonry, metal piping, and corrugated steel.

Seating Capacity--10,000 people; 7,000 in the stands and 3,000 in supplemental

seating.

Location-- This historic landscape was surrounded by homes, railroads, and concrete paved areas. It was bordered to the west by dense neighborhoods, to the northeast by the Calvert Coal Company, and to the east by the Grand Trunk Railroad. The stadium itself was a rectangular shape set parallel to the streets of Hamtramck. The grandstand was set into the southern portion of the rectangular landscape and opened north. The stadium's entrance was by switchback ramp leading up into bleacher-style seating. The ramps were located at regular intervals along both sides of the grandstands. Outlining the field and the rest of the rectangle was a fence of corrugated steel, standing about 10' high. Home plate was located 55' away from the grandstand backstop, and the bases were set the standard 90 foot square. Finally, the scoreboard was placed in the far outfield corner of the stadium. When this historic landscape was redesigned in 1940, the wall was removed and concession facilities were added underneath the grandstands on the western side, while a garage for grounds keeping equipment was added under the eastern stands.<sup>15</sup>

Dimensions--Left field 315 feet, center field 407 feet, right field 528 feet.

Adjacent Land Use--Hamtramck Stadium was located about 6 blocks north of the massive Dodge Main automotive factory located downtown. The stadium itself was built on an old Detroit Lumber Company yard. Directly north of the right field wall was the Calvert Coal Company factory, and directly east of the right field wall were the Grand Trunk Railroad lines. Today, Hamtramck Stadium resides in the center of Veteran's Memorial Park in the heart of downtown Hamtramck. It is directly bordered by a small parking lot and a concrete skating rink 185' long and 85' wide. While the Calvert Coal Company facility is gone, the railroad tracks are still in place and still in use today.<sup>16</sup>

Teams-- Negro National League: Detroit Stars; East-West League: Detroit Wolves; Negro American League: Detroit Stars.

History: During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Detroit was one of the most important markets for Negro League Baseball.<sup>17</sup> Due in part to the Great Migration, when over a million African Americans traveled north in search of factory jobs, and the beginning of the lucrative automobile industry, Detroit's black population was expanding daily. In 1910 Detroit had a black population of less than 6,000, but a decade later this number had grown to 41,000, a sevenfold increase.<sup>18</sup> While the number of African Americans grew drastically, the landscape of black neighborhoods expanded much slower.

The territory that the African Americans claimed was originally dubbed Black Bottom because of its rich, dark topsoil, yet it took on another meaning as more black migrants from the south streamed in.<sup>19</sup> This area of the city was wedged

between Jefferson St. and the Detroit River, where lots were mostly taken up by warehouses and brothels, but the inhabitants found ways to fit “tumbledown shacks” in between.<sup>20</sup> Over time, this area became a major cultural hub for Detroit’s black community and all of Michigan.

While the automobile was quickly turning Detroit into “The Motor City,” African Americans still had difficulty finding jobs that paid living wages. The automotive barons at Dodge Brothers, Hudson Automotive, Chevrolet, Cadillac, and other manufacturers refused to hire blacks onto their workforce. Those who were hired were assigned the most dangerous jobs for little pay. The major exception to the rule was Henry Ford, who hired tens of thousands of African Americans to fill the vacant positions in his gargantuan Ford Rouge plant in nearby Dearborn, MI.<sup>21</sup> The African Americans who moved to Detroit were finding somewhat stable jobs, allowing them to establish their families there and create a solid black community in the Black Bottom district of Detroit.

From this Black Bottom neighborhood grew many black ballplayers. Proud of what their race could accomplish, Detroit’s growing fan base fueled the creation of the first Negro National League (NNL). As the NNL was being established, Andrew “Rube” Foster was also piecing together the first incarnation of the Detroit Stars. In 1919 it was mainly a barnstorming club, but became one of eight teams in the NNL in 1920.<sup>22</sup> At this time the Stars called Mack Park their home and were lucky because they did not have to share the stadium with white major or minor league teams as many other NNL teams did. Mack Park was located at the southeast corner of Fairview and Mack Avenues, and the Stars played there for 8 consecutive seasons until a disastrous fire destroyed the ballpark on July 7, 1929.<sup>23</sup> Detroit finished out its season at nearby Dequindre Park. The Stars opened their 1930 season to significant fanfare on May 11, in their new home -- Hamtramck Stadium.<sup>24</sup> They ended that spectacular season in their new stadium losing the deciding game 7 of the NNL Championship Series against the St. Louis Stars. The crowds overflowed Hamtramck Stadium. The Detroit Stars played 11 consecutive seasons on the NNL circuit until 1931 when the Great Depression struck Detroit and the all-important Black Bottom fan base could no longer afford to see them play.<sup>25</sup> The team, along with the NNL itself, was disbanded at the end of the 1931 season.

However, this was not the end of professional black baseball in Detroit. In January 1932 the East-West League was established, and Detroit fielded the Detroit Wolves. Also calling Hamtramck Stadium their home, the Wolves played an exceptional season until the league collapsed in July. They posted the best win-loss record and if allowed to continue competing, would have possibly captured Detroit’s first Negro League championship pennant. However, the collapse of the East-West League also brought the end of the Wolves.

Detroit was without a Negro League baseball club until 1937 when the Stars

were reborn in the Negro American League.<sup>26</sup> They returned to their home field of Hamtramck Stadium and played a mediocre season, once again disbanding after the season concluded.

Hamtramck Stadium was home to many phenomenal players throughout the 1920s and 1930s and received a new look in 1940. As the largest agency of the New Deal, the Works Progress Administration gave money to communities to construct or fix existing infrastructure. The Wayne County Road Commission was responsible for utilizing Detroit's WPA money. One of the major works they undertook was redesigning and renovating historic Hamtramck Stadium.<sup>27</sup>

Even though Hamtramck Stadium did not have a resident professional team, it did not sit empty. Starting in 1954, after the last of the Detroit Stars teams collapsed for the final time, the Hamtramck Recreation Department began hosting a number of recreation leagues for the city's kids.<sup>28</sup> These city leagues played countless games on the field in the 11 years they played there. Along with the city leagues, the local high schools also used the baseball field. The best team among the schools was the St. Ladislaw Greyhounds, winning a total of 13 east bracket Catholic League Championships, including the first State Championship awarded to a Class C baseball team.<sup>29</sup>

In 1953, the city of Hamtramck approved plans to buy the land surrounding the stadium to develop Veterans Memorial Park.<sup>30</sup> They began by adding two baseball fields and a softball stadium, and by 1955 a concrete skating rink was added. Finally, in the mid to late 1970's, the city of Hamtramck began tearing down parts of the grandstand until only the piece behind what used to be home plate remained. Over the years, tennis courts and children's playground equipment have been added, while what was left of Hamtramck Stadium was deteriorating. Today it sits, unkempt and falling apart with floorboards breaking away and graffiti disgracing its façade. With an unknown future, it sits in this sad state, waiting for a decision that will call for renovating and restoring this historic landscape, or the wrecking ball that will end the existence of this culturally significant ballpark from the era of Negro League baseball.

Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Richard Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars: The Negro Leagues in Detroit, 1919 – 1933* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 68.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Gillette, *Detroit Stars History draft* (unpublished, 2011), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Gillette, *Negro Leagues History draft* (unpublished, 2011), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 12, 96.

<sup>5</sup> Gillette, *Detroit Stars History draft*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 200-201.

<sup>7</sup> Gillette, *Detroit Stars History draft*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 154-156.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Gillette, e-mail correspondence with author, June 17, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 189-191.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Gillette, e-mail correspondence with author, June 17, 2011.

- <sup>13</sup> Photoset from Michigan State University Image Archives  
<sup>14</sup> Gary Gillette, e-mail correspondence with author, June 17, 2011.  
<sup>15</sup> Photoset from Michigan State University Image Archives  
<sup>16</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 188-189.  
<sup>17</sup> Gillette, *Detroit Stars History draft*, 1.  
<sup>18</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 36.  
<sup>19</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 28.  
<sup>20</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>21</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 37.  
<sup>22</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 42, 55.  
<sup>23</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 187.  
<sup>24</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 189.  
<sup>25</sup> Gillette, *Detroit Stars History draft*, 1.  
<sup>26</sup> Bak, *Turkey Stearnes and the Detroit Stars*, 207.  
<sup>27</sup> Gillette, e-mail correspondence with author, June 17, 2011.  
<sup>28</sup> Rebecca Savage, *Hamtramck Stadium History draft* (unpublished, 2011), 1.  
<sup>29</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

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Hamtramck Stadium details (David K. James, 2011).