

MILLER STADIUM

5808 JACKSON ST
WEST NEW YORK, NJ



MILLER STADIUM: 100 YEARS OF RECREATION

For over 100 years, the grounds at Miller Stadium have been an important place of recreation and gathering for West New York and the New York metropolitan area at large. What is now known as Miller Stadium includes the playing field opened in 1914, a reinforced concrete grandstand built in 1930, a secondary service building from the 1960s, and two dugout/shelter structures built in 2009-2010. Read on to learn more about the people, events, and changes that make Miller Stadium such an important part of West New York's history.

1914-1930

Miller Stadium was first established as West New York's Public Playgrounds. The impetus for the establishment of the Playgrounds was to provide the first public recreational facility for the growing town. It was completed under the administration of mayor Richard J. Miller, who served as Mayor from 1910 to 1913. The creation of the playgrounds was part of an early-20th century national reform movement that aimed to establish public recreational facilities for densely-populated urban areas.

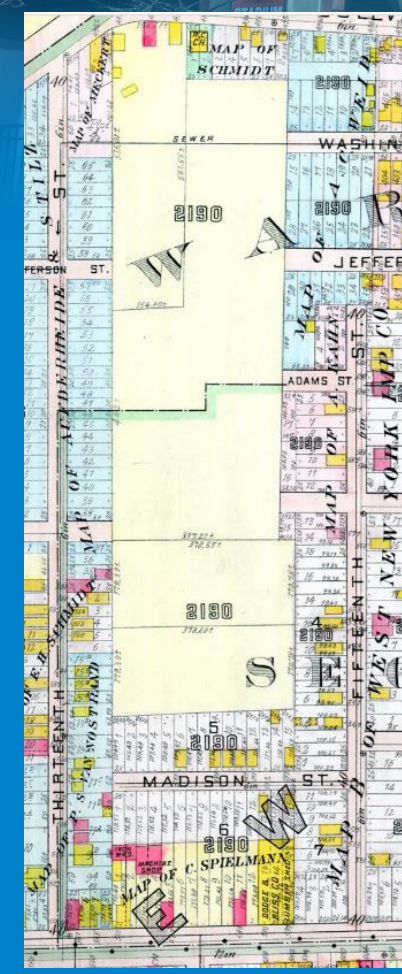
The playgrounds were first opened on July 4th, 1914. Former mayor Miller subsequently served as director of the West New York Recreation Commission. The stadium itself was named in his honor by the late 1930s.

A fire insurance map from 1910 indicates that the area around the Playgrounds was relatively sparsely developed and the land later developed as the Playgrounds/Miller Stadium was open land prior to the opening of the playgrounds in 1914.

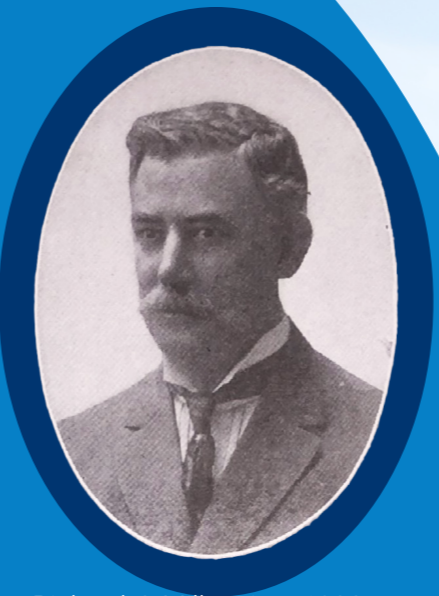
Prior to the completion of the 1930 concrete grandstand, a lower grandstand was constructed northeast of the present stadium along Jackson Street. Historic images show that the property was used for baseball games before the construction of the 1930 grandstand. According to the city's historian, the original Playgrounds grandstand seated 2,000, and Lou Gehrig played at the grounds under pseudonyms on at least two occasions while enrolled at Columbia University from 1921-23.

The stadium property was also used for a variety of athletic activities from the time the playgrounds were opened. For example, in 1915, a meet held on a cinder track on the property at the close of the town of West New York's week-long "Prosperity celebration," included races with amateur athletic club members from as far away as Boston. Track and field events continued to be held thereafter. Uses of the playgrounds continued to expand in the 1910s and 20s, and the grounds were used to host a number of community activities including public concerts and, in 1924, a reenactment of the battle of Little Bighorn and "Custer's last stand" by two local fraternal organizations.

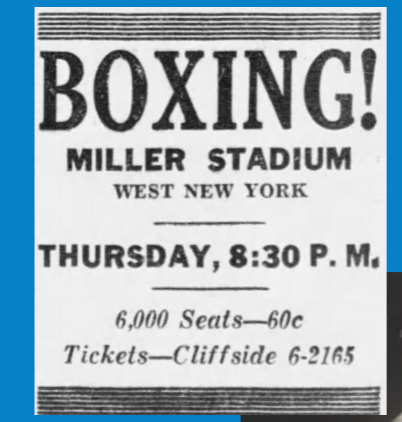
The grounds also served as a venue for boxing matches between well-known combatants of the day. Boxing matches at the playgrounds drew large crowds from the New York metropolitan area that came to watch matches between popular fighters of the region. In August, 1923, Mike McTigue, the world light-heavyweight champion at the time, fought Philadelphia native and challenger Tommy Loughran. Weekly boxing matches were held in the summer of 1924. On July 3, 1924, Henry Catena fought world champion flyweight Pancho Villa at the stadium.



Map detailing the area of Miller Stadium and Miller Park in 1909, 1909 Hopkins Atlas of Hudson County



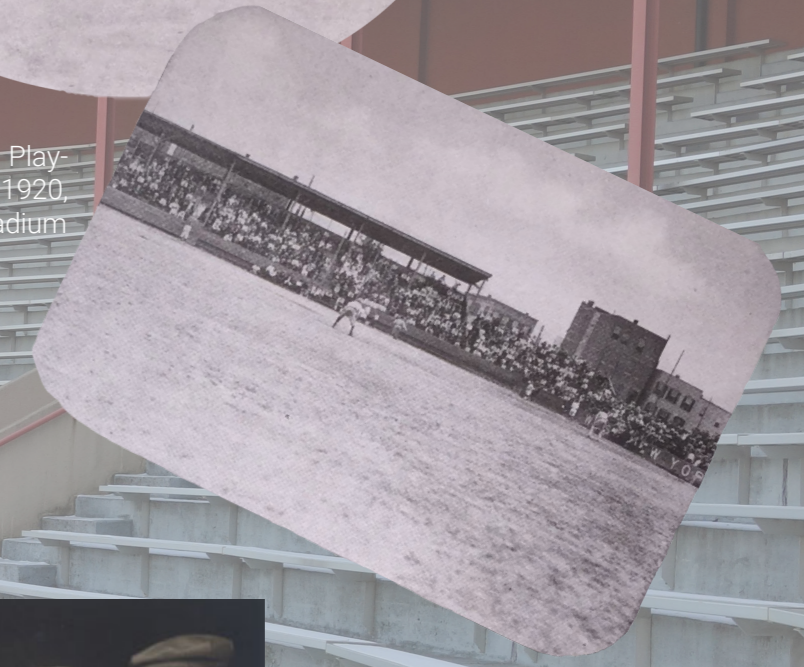
Richard J. Miller circa 1920



Tommy Loughran and Mike McTigue in 1923, fighttoys.com



West New York Playgrounds circa 1920, prior to Miller Stadium



After the opening of the playgrounds in 1914 and before 1930, the West New York city council expanded the city's holdings to the northwest on the other side of Jackson Street to establish a public park, now known as Miller Park.

1930-2020

The current concrete grandstand of Miller Stadium was built in 1930 under the supervision of Frank J. Oleri, C.E. Historic aerial photographs from 1930 of the property show both the earlier grandstand and the present grandstand in place, as well as newly laid-out paths and immature plantings in Miller Park to the northwest.

After the construction of the present grandstand, the use of the grounds, which was named in honor of the former mayor some time before 1938, continued to be as diverse as they had been before the construction of the grandstand.

Between 1930 and World War II, the grounds continued to serve as a venue for semi-pro baseball games. At these, the West New York team played in the Metropolitan Association League with other semi-pro teams from the Manhattan suburbs. These matches famously include an October, 1931 three-game series between the Lou Gehrig as first-baseman for Fort Lee Athletic Club and Babe Ruth as first-baseman for the West New York Nines. The series concluded with a 7-4 victory for West New York, with crowds of fans who were turned away from the full stadium watching "from the rear windows or roofs of the one-and two-family shingle homes and red-brick apartment houses still behind the outfield fences."



Miller Stadium Circa 1935, baseballthinkfactory.org

Outdoor boxing matches continued to be held at the stadium in both winter and summer months. Popular spectator activities included motorcycle races between teams of the Italian-American Eastern Partido League and college football games.

A popular rodeo event made repeat appearances at the stadium. In 1939, a Fourth of July fireworks event at the stadium drew a crowd of some 15,000 people, which was estimated to be the equivalent of approximately one-third of the city's population at the time. Tennis matches and track-and-field events were held at the stadium earlier in the same day. The following year, the Independence Day festivities included music and gymnastics as well as fireworks. During the war, the stadium served as the venue for games of the American Girls Softball League (a professional women's league), with the West New York Traders as the home team. In the same period, the city's Memorial High School and St. Joseph's School used the property as their football stadium.

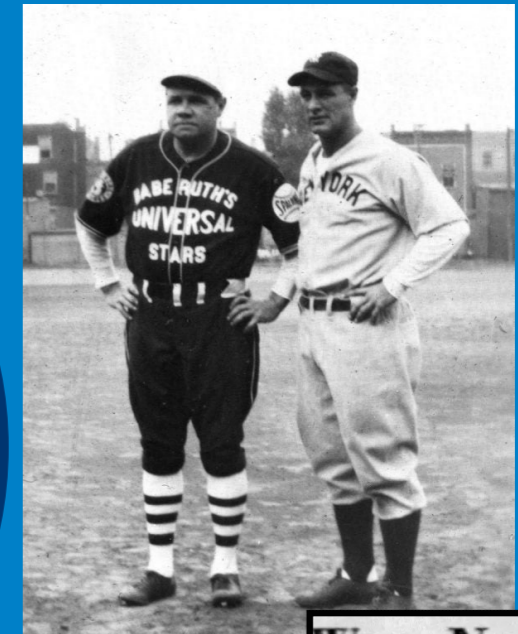
Since World War II, the Miller Stadium property has continued to serve as the venue for amateur, scholastic, and semi-professional athletic events and community events. Such events include the gathering of 5,000 members of the city's Cuban-American population in 1980 for a rally in support of Cubans trapped in the Peruvian embassy in Havana. In 1993, a local resident recalled May Day celebrations in the Stadium grounds. An important point of local pride is the 1985 selection of the stadium for Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days" music video.



Fred Toscani, Captain of the West New York Lions Motorcycle Trio, cyclenews.com

"ONE OF THE GREATEST CROWDS EVER TO ATTEND A SEMI-PRO BASEBALL GAME IN THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY..."

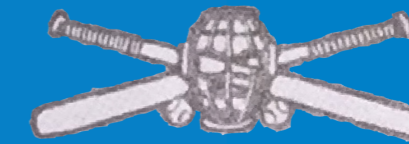
The Record, Oct., 2 1931



Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig at Miller Stadium in 1931, Fort Lee Historical Society

West New York Ball Park Scene Of Homer Battle

The homerun battle of 1931 between Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig is not settled yet. For the first time in the history of baseball a contest that has been waged throughout 154 major league games will be continued, after the close of the season, when Babe and Lou meet at the ball park, at West New York, New Jersey, tomorrow.



Babe Ruth with the Fort Lee Universal Stars at Miller Stadium in 1931, Fort Lee Historical Society



FRANK J. OLERI, ENGINEER

Frank John Oleri was born in New York City in 1891, the son of Italian immigrants. He enrolled as a freshman in Columbia University's School of Mines, Engineering and Chemistry as a special student in New York University's School of Applied Science in 1912. He was awarded a Bachelor of Science degree by NYU in 1915 and found professional employment that same year as a Junior Assistant Engineer in the New York Public Service Commission, joining the American Society of Civil Engineers and the Society of Municipal Engineers.

The following year, he was given a degree as a Civil Engineer by NYU. His thesis studied the design of sections of the New York Subway system. As this suggests, at the time of his professional degree Oleri was a Junior Assistant Engineer for the Public Service Commission of New York City. Oleri worked as a naval draftsman in 1917-18 in the Brooklyn Naval Yard as part of the World War I effort.

Around 1920, Oleri moved to West New York and established a practice as a civil engineer and surveyor that year.

The 1930 U. S. Census indicates that he had been named the city engineer for West New York by that date, and thus by the time of the design and construction of the current grandstand on the Miller Stadium property. Oleri also served as the town engineer for Guttenberg.

By 1940, Oleri was a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and its directory listed him as a consulting engineer in West New York. It is not certain whether he continued in his role as city engineer.

Oleri and was still active in 1950, when he served as consulting engineer for construction of a sewage treatment plant and interceptor sewer system for West New York.

Oleri died in Closter, New Jersey in 1979.



CHANGES OVER TIME

In 1937, the seating capacity of Miller Stadium was reported to have been enlarged by 6,000 using WPA assistance. Given that there is no visible change in the plan of the building when comparing 1930 and 1953 historic aerial photographs, it is unknown how this might have been accomplished. The relatively low resolution of the 1930 aerial may not allow for a completely accurate understanding of its extent.

Historic aerial photographs do make clear, however, that the 1914 grandstand was removed from the property between 1930 and 1953.

The next major change to the Stadium property took place in the period between 1966 and 1979, when the secondary building was constructed to the southwest of the present grandstand. This project included the construction of the raised, paved area to the northwest of the building.

Historic aerial photographs indicate a campaign of rehabilitation in 2009-2010. In this project, the small, shed-roofed dugouts were added on the infield side of the grandstand, and the roofing of the grandstand was replaced. Visual evidence suggests this campaign included the insertion of the additional concrete block partitions under the seating for vendors, as well as the replacement of roof cladding and the installation of metal seating surfaces.



SOURCES

American Association for the Advancement of Science.
1940 Brief History of the Association, its Present Organization and Operation, Summarized Proceedings, and a Directory of its Members. Washington, D.C.

American Society of Civil Engineers
1917 Year Book.
1921 Year Book.

Playground and Recreation Association of America.
1918 The Year Book of the Playground and Recreation Association of America. New York.

State of New York
1916 Thirty-Third Annual Report of the State Civil Service Commission.

This report was completed as part of the ongoing renovations to Miller Stadium. For further information about this project, see:

Emily T. Cooperman, Matthew S. Tomaso and Kristian Eshelman
2018 Intensive-Level Survey, Miller Stadium, West New York, New Jersey. Prepared by PS&S. Sponsored by West New York Town.

