

Play Ball, Hagerstown!

THE FLYING BOXCARS JOIN THE ATLANTIC LEAGUE OF PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL — HAGERSTOWN, MARYLAND

Written by: **Sara Mullins**

Attention, Hagerstown area baseball fans! The wait is over! Clear your calendars for Friday, May 17, 2024, when professional baseball returns to the Hub City. The Flying Boxcars will make its debut in the brand new Meritus Park, billed by promoters as “America’s Newest and Most Innovative Ballpark.” Join the fun and don’t forget the peanuts and Cracker Jack!

The creation of the new team was announced on September 1, 2021, with plans to start playing ball in 2023 but was deferred to 2024 to allow completion of the new stadium. The new team joins 10 other teams active in the Atlantic League of Professional Baseball, and will operate as an independent, minor league roster of former professional players with big league experience.

“Baseball is back to fill a 5-year void,” says David Blenckstone, general manager and the team’s first employee. Before then, baseball’s Hagerstown Suns thrived in Hagerstown for 39 years. “The entire community is excited. This is their home. It’s an amazing location in an urban setting, and has a unique feel. It’s the nicest minor league location.”

Blenckstone became the first employee of the Flying Boxcars in April 2023 when named the team’s general manager. Previously he was the athletic director at St. Maria Goretti Catholic High School. In 1996 he became the general manager of the Hagerstown Suns, a team his father owned from 1986 to 2001. In 2024, the Boxcars announced a partnership with Meritus Health that allowed the company to become the team’s sports medicine provider and included a provision allowing Meritus to acquire the naming rights for the stadium—hence the name Meritus Park.

In November 2023, the team’s management invited fans to participate in a Downtown Baseball team-naming contest that garnered more than 1,700 entries. Other imaginative finalists include the Battle Swans, Diezel Dogs, Haymakers and Tin Lizards.



The Flying Boxcars name prevailed, paying tribute to Hagerstown’s aviation history as the home of Fairchild Aircraft. At one time the largest employer in Washington County, with 10,000 workers, Fairchild produced C-82 and C-119 cargo planes at the Hagerstown Municipal Airport during the 1940s and ’50s.

The relocation of the C-119’s cockpit from the top of the fuselage to the front of the plane allowed for more space in the cargo hold. The aircraft’s resemblance to a railroad boxcar inspired the unofficial nickname of the Flying Boxcar. In September 2023, The Flying Boxcars unveiled team logos featuring a pilot sporting an aviator hat and baseball uniform astride a C-119.

This past February, the mascot was unveiled as a fictitious character named Stryker with the following fictitious story: His parents were technicians at Fairchild Aircraft, where the Boxcars namesake C-119 aircraft were manufactured. Stryker also served as a test pilot before leaving to join the Air Force. In the late 1960s, he took off on a mission and returned more than a half-century later to Hagerstown Regional Airport with a new mission: to tell the story of Fairchild Aircraft — and to bring baseball back to Hagerstown.

On March 24, 2022, the Hagerstown City Council voted unanimously to demolish the city’s aging Municipal Stadium that hosted ballgames since its first home game on May 8, 1930. For more than 90 years, the stadium was at the heart of the local baseball scene and home to the former Hagerstown Suns. Baseball superstars who launched their careers include Willie Mays, who played his first game at the park as a minor league rookie. In 1990, then President George H. W. Bush came to Hagerstown to enjoy the Hagerstown Suns game at Municipal Stadium.

Given the Hagerstown area’s long-standing devotion to baseball, community leaders agreed that a new ballpark was needed, and along with a state elected official made



Stadium construction aerial view mid-March 2024.

PHOTO BY SCOTT CANTNER

this happen. Like Ray Kinsella (played by Kevin Costner) in the iconic 1989 film “Field of Dreams,” they believed the film’s premise that “If you build it, they will come.”

Dan Spedden, president of Visit Hagerstown, has been one of the most prominent proponents of a new ballpark in Hagerstown. Since 1999, Dan has been a strong advocate for the new ballpark project that finally garnered sufficient support to move ahead in 2020. He says the delay has been worth the wait, resulting in a better location plus more and better amenities. “The ballpark is not just about baseball,” he says. “This is a once-in-a-generation project.”

Dan is a strong proponent of the community leaders’ decision to locate the ballpark in a persistently poverty stricken part of town, viewing the ballpark as an anchor to spark a revitalization of the city’s core that will attract more customers. In essence, the ballpark can serve as an urban renewal strategy.

“Hagerstown has become a ‘donut city’ defined by out-migration,” he says, “with the city center losing residents and businesses to the suburbs. “Hagerstown is not unique. This phenomenon has been a growing problem for cities, post-pandemic.” He cites an article in *Fortune Magazine* by Mark Davidson, professor of geography at Clarkson University, in which Davidson writes, “The widespread

adoption of remote and hybrid work schedules has drained commercial offices and caused tenants to terminate leases.” The result is urban flight to the suburbs.

The possibility of locating the ballpark near the intersections of I-81 and I-70 was considered, but community leaders concluded that this location wouldn’t adequately address core issues downtown, in the center of the “donut.” Locating the Flying Boxcars ballpark downtown as an anchor project in a negative hole would, in their view, better achieve the goal of transforming downtown Hagerstown into an attractive place to live and work, thereby attracting the people who can spark a renaissance to revive downtown Hagerstown.

“People are still questioning the project. It’s hard to get the message across to naysayers,” he adds. Dan points to Fort Wayne, Indiana’s, successful downtown revitalization efforts to address the blight of urban decay that often arises from the ‘donut hole’ phenomenon.

“Businesses will follow and bring hundreds of people,” Dan says. “We’ll see more demand for restaurants and other businesses that will create more jobs and revitalize the city. These will be career positions. We’ll create a walkable community where people can work in their neighborhoods.”



**Construction progress at press-time (May 1, 2024).
Opening day is scheduled for May 17, 2024.**

PHOTO COURTESY VISIT HAGERSTOWN

The new Meritus Park's final design reflects Hagerstown's history as a thriving railroad transportation hub during the 19th and 20th centuries, giving Hagerstown the often used nickname "Hub City."

Jonathan Cole, the new ballpark's architect, has been involved in the design of 29 minor league ballparks. "We know the city has a long history in brick masonry. That's one of the important pieces of the design," Jonathan says. Capturing Hagerstown's essence and history is the goal. "You don't just take a ballpark from somewhere else and drop it off," he says. "We want to respond to the context of the cities that they're in. There are opportunities to take advantage of the pedestrian experience. It's an urban ballpark. The downtown location influenced the design."

Meritus Park also serves as a multipurpose venue with a capacity of 5,000 for ballgames and 9,000 for concerts. It can be converted to a rectangular field for football and lacrosse and can also be used as a conference center. Planners created space for mingling and relaxing, with easy access to a beer garden, picnic area and kid zone, plus 3D animation.

The ballpark is designed to enhance easy access and the entire fan experience. Along with many seating options, the stadium features eight 15' by 20' private suites, each with 12 seats overlooking the field. The ballpark will feature multiple "neighborhoods" throughout the concourse, with a beer garden in right-center field, a bar in the left-field corner and a picnic area behind the left-field wall. At the new stadium, towering metal poles have been inserted for better lighting and to give the locals an immersive game-day experience.

This summer, the Boxcars plan to organize events like Throwback Tuesdays, Double Dog Days on Wednesdays, Thirsty Thursdays, and Fireworks Fridays. Over the weekend, the team will sponsor giveaways and other events.

Visitors will have easy access to Hagerstown's landmark Cultural Trail alongside the ballpark. A half-mile walkway connects attractions that include historic sites, shopping, fine dining at area restaurants located in the downtown Arts & Entertainment District, City Park and the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts.

Chuck Domino, president of Domino Management and Consulting LLC, a minor league consulting firm, believes attractions adjacent to the ballpark will be the key for non-baseball fans. "Baseball fans are great and you need them as your core, but we really want to build the stadium to attract casual fans who may not watch any of the game," he said.

Although the ballpark is expected to draw mostly from Washington County, and surrounding counties in Maryland, West Virginia and Pennsylvania, Chuck believes that fans will show up to support the team and learn about Hagerstown's history from its design. Hagerstown's location alongside I-81 and I-70, and relative proximity to Baltimore and Washington, DC, plus the inaugural season itself is an attraction that may persuade people to visit Hagerstown.

"This is a once-in-a-generation, multi-purpose and impactful project," Dan says. "It's a whole new ballgame."