

A Look at Rochester's Ballparks by Paul Bielewicz



In 2011 the Red Wings celebrated their fifteenth season at Frontier Field, the only home many young fans know for Rochester Red Wings baseball. Generations of fans have known two ballparks – Frontier Field, and Silver Stadium, the Wings’ home until 1996. But Frontier Field is actually the eighth ballpark that has been home to professional baseball in Rochester! This article explores the ballparks that have been home to professional baseball in Rochester since its debut in 1877.

Early Baseball in Rochester

Prior to the formation of a professional team, baseball (or “Base Ball” as it was known at the time) was played by amateurs. There were no official playing fields or stadiums, but rather the games were generally played in public squares. In 1877, corresponding with the formation of Rochester’s first professional team, the “*Rochesters*,” the first permanent ballpark was erected on North Union Street not far from the current site of the Rochester Public Market.

Union Street Base Ball Grounds (1877-1885)

Although illustrations and maps from the period yield somewhat conflicting results about the exact whereabouts of the ballpark, it was likely between North Union and Scio Streets at or near Weld Street. Detail from an 1880 illustration of the city of Rochester shows the ballpark as being “L”-shaped, and featuring a primary grandstand as well as an adjacent bleacher.



1879 map of the city of Rochester – detail of N. Union / Scio area



Hop Bitters Base Ball Ground – detail of 1880 illustration of the city of Rochester

When first opened in 1877 the ballpark was generally referred to as the “Union Street Base Ball Grounds”, but it was later renamed “Hop Bitters Base Ball Grounds” after the team nickname from the time. It remained Rochester’s primary professional baseball stadium through the 1885 season.

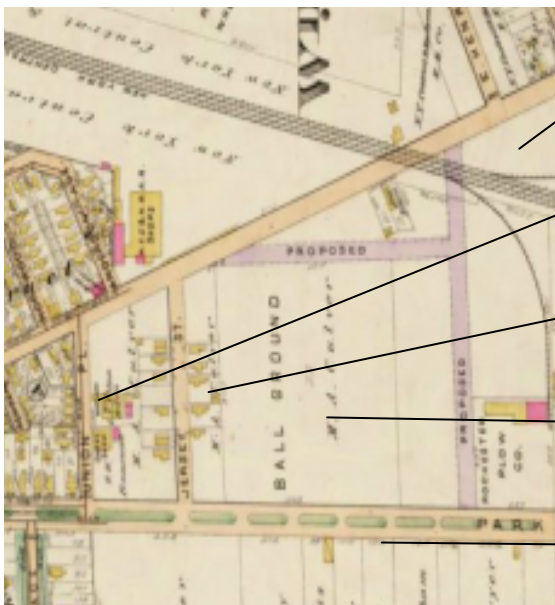
Culver Park Grounds (1886 – 1892)

The Culver Park Grounds, located on University Avenue at the current location of the Gleason Works, opened in 1886. Although it remained in use through the 1893 season, it was supplemented by the Windsor Beach Base Ball Grounds for Sunday games from 1888 – 1892.



The new Culver Park Grounds, as depicted in the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle, May 9, 1886

The ball park was rectangular in shape and the playing field was situated in the north/south manner. There was a main grandstand, situated at the southern end of the park, along Culver Park (now University Avenue) and two bleachers, one along each base line. A grove of trees in the southeast corner of the park (behind the first base bleachers) made for a serene atmosphere.



University Avenue (now Atlantic Avenue)

Union Place (now Elton Street)

Jersey Street (now Russell Street)

Location of the Culver Park Grounds (1886 – 1893)

Culver Park (now University Avenue)

Detail of Rochester city map, 1888

Professional baseball was played at the Culver Park Grounds through the 1892 season. Amateur teams played there in 1893. A fire destroyed the primary grandstand in October 1893, spelling the end for the Culver Park Grounds.

Windsor Beach Ball Grounds (1888 – 1892)

At the time the Culver Park Grounds were in use as Rochester's primary baseball facility, the city of Rochester and surrounding towns had blue laws on the books prohibiting the playing of baseball games in public areas on Sundays. One way to temporarily circumvent these laws was to play games on private property. In a move that was mutually financially beneficial, the 1888 Rochester team, together with the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg Railroad Company, announced that a series of Sunday baseball games would be played at the railroad company's new ball grounds at Windsor Beach, near Summerville. Spectators were encouraged to take the company's trains to the beach and spend the day watching baseball and enjoying a leisurely afternoon at the beach's many attractions.

The Windsor Beach Base Ball Grounds were directly on a train line – advertisements boasted that passengers would be dropped off “twenty feet from the ball grounds.” The ballpark featured a main grandstand which was supplemented by bleachers. The total capacity of the grandstand was about 3,000, but the grounds were touted as being able to accommodate as many as 20,000 spectators within the fenced area.

Although Sunday games were played at the Windsor Beach Grounds for five seasons, this arrangement did not offer a permanent solution to the Sunday blue laws, as determined Irondequoit and city residents soon took up the fight to ban Sunday baseball. By the early 1890s the controversy hit a fever pitch and culminated in the disruption of several ballgames on Sundays.



Composite image of Windsor Beach area



Illustration of Windsor Beach ballpark, 1888

Riverside Park (1895 – 1897)

Rochester had no professional team in 1893 or 1894. In late 1894 Rochester won a bid to join the Eastern League and was awarded a franchise for the 1895 season. After the Culver Park Grounds' grandstand burned in 1893 a new ball park was needed. Property was purchased on North St. Paul Street and plans were drawn up for a new ball park which would be called Riverside Park.

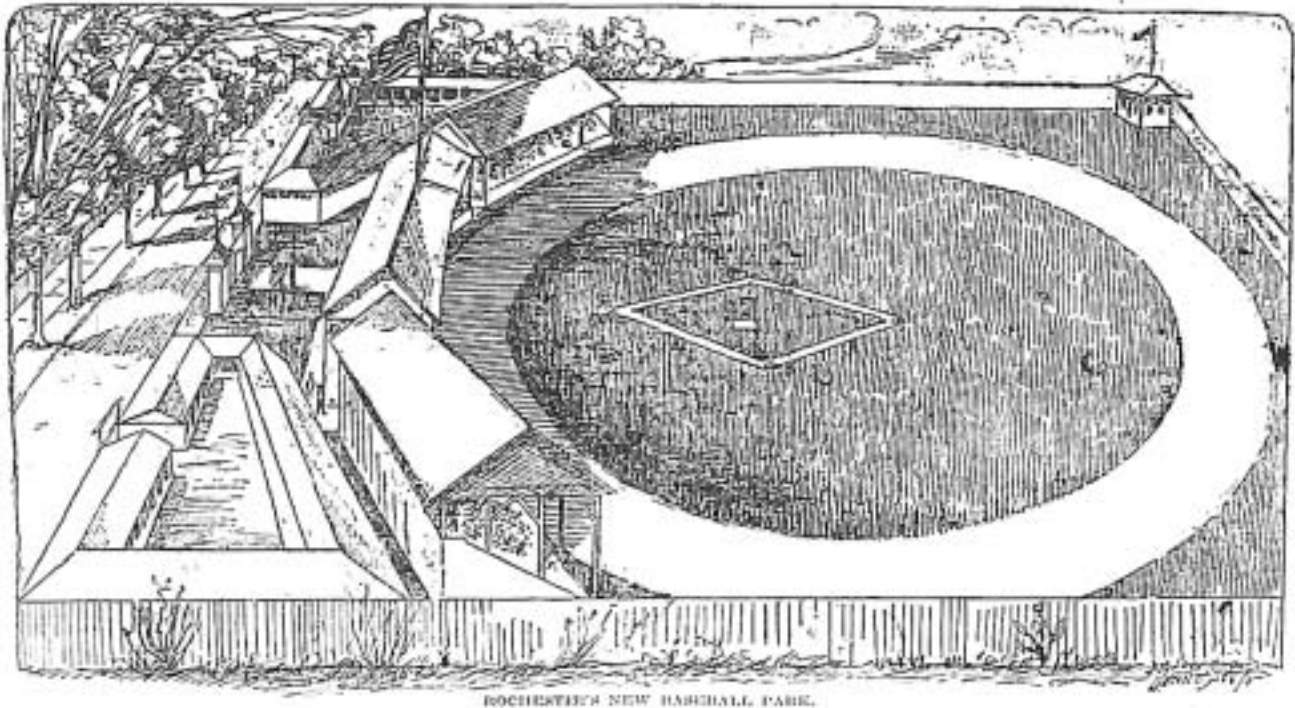


Illustration of the planned Riverside Park (Rochester Union and Advertiser, March 13, 1895)

In an attempt to make the park more versatile than its predecessors, it was designed to include a bicycle track as well as the baseball diamond. The circular quarter-mile track was 20 feet wide and constructed of solid concrete. The baseball diamond was situated inside the track. Three grandstands were situated on the east end of the park, behind which were horse stables and a large bicycle enclosure.

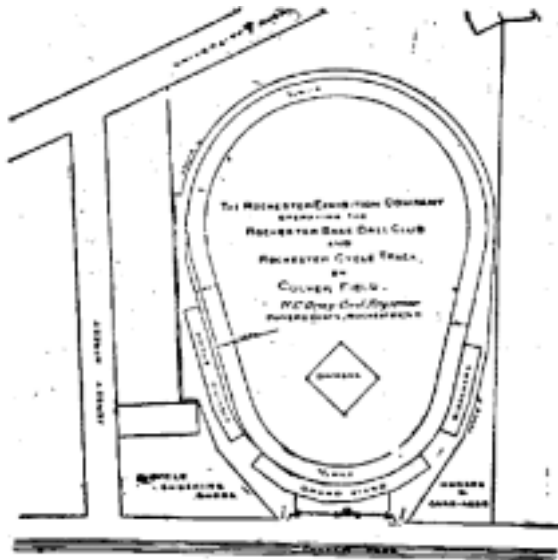


Probable location
of Riverside Park

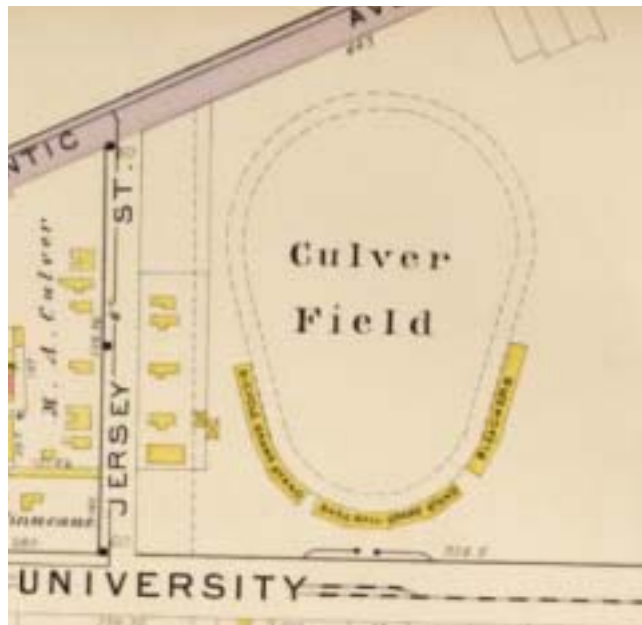
Detail of Rochester city map, 1895

Culver Field (1898 – 1907)

A new baseball field at the former location of the Culver Park Grounds, now called Culver Field, was ready for the 1898 season. It hosted Rochester's professional baseball team from 1898 through the 1907 season. Like Riverside Park, Culver Field also had a bicycle track, this one slightly larger at 1/3 mile. Unlike the concrete track at Riverside Park, the new bicycle track was wooden, constructed in a butcher block-like manner. There was a primary grandstand directly behind home plate, a bicycle grand stand on the third base side of the baseball field, and bleachers on the first base side.



Plans for Culver Field, 1898



Detail of Rochester city map, 1900



Culver Field on opening day, May 14, 1906 (Rochester Herald, May 20, 1906)

Sadly, tragedy struck again – while it was a fire that led to the ultimate demise of the first Culver Park Grounds, Culver Field suffered from a collapse of the first base side bleachers during a game in May of 1906, resulting in over three hundred injuries and a number of lawsuits.

Baseball Park at Bay Street (1908 – 1928)

Opened for the 1908 season, Baseball Park at Bay Street, or Bay Street Park as it was sometimes known, was host to Rochester's professional team for 21 seasons, through the 1928 season. Baseball Park at Bay Street was located on Bay Street between Webster Avenue and McKinster Street.



Bay Street

The Ballpark at Bay Street, Rochester city map, 1910. Bay Street runs east-west across the top. Webster Avenue runs diagonally and joins Bay Street in the upper left corner of the image.

Although the seating capacity of the ballpark was approximately 8,000, overflow crowds often significantly exceeded that, especially on opening day - packing as many as 17,000 fans into the fenced area surrounding the field. Fans (and even automobiles) packed the farthest reaches of the outfield grass on these overflow occasions.



An overflow crowd of approximately 13,000 packs Bay Street Baseball Park on opening day, 1909. From the Albert R. Stone negative collection, Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester, NY



Overhead shot of the playing field of Bay Street Baseball Park ca. 1910. From the Albert R. Stone negative collection, Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester, NY



Overhead shot of the first base side grandstand of Bay Street Baseball Park ca. 1918. From the Albert R. Stone negative collection, Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester, NY

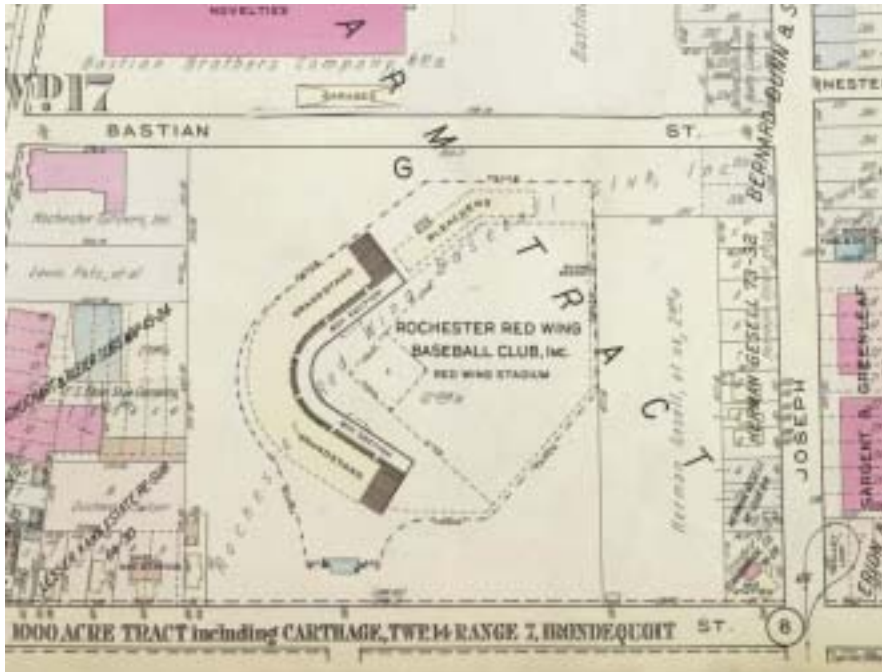
Over the 21 seasons played at the park various changes and improvements were made. Within the first few years of the ballpark a press box was added on the grandstand roof and the first base-side bleachers were significantly expanded. In 1910 set-in benches replaced the simple benches along the edge of the grandstand. Later in 1922, these set-in benches were again replaced, this time with dugouts.

In 1928 the Rochester baseball team signed on to become an affiliate of the St. Louis Cardinals, becoming one of the first teams in a fledgling farm system. Although Baseball Park

at Bay Street served the team well for 21 seasons, the 1928 arrangement spelled the beginning of the end for the Bay Street stadium. One of the parent Cardinals' first acts of business was to build the Rochester team, newly christened the Rochester Red Wings, a grand new ballpark for the 1929 season.

Red Wing (Silver) Stadium (1929 – 1996)

Built at a cost of \$415,000 and opened for the 1929 season, Red Wing Stadium at 500 Norton Street was considered by many to be the "Taj Mahal of the minor leagues". Rivaling many major league ballparks of the time, Red Wing Stadium had a capacity of approximately 16,000.



Red Wing Stadium, Rochester city map, 1936



Aerial photo of Red Wing Stadium, ca. 1930s (Rochester Public Library, Local History Division)



Additional bleachers were temporarily added in right field to accommodate an overflow crowd (ca. 1948-1950)

In 1968 the stadium was renamed Silver Stadium in honor of Morrie Silver, President of Rochester Community Baseball and considered by many to be the savior of baseball in Rochester.

By the 1980s the aging stadium was lacking many of the amenities enjoyed by other teams; the clubhouses were sub-par, there were no luxury boxes, and the infrastructure of the stadium itself was in disrepair. Calls for a new stadium began.

As a stopgap, a major refurbishing took place in the 1986-87 offseason which gutted the stadium down to the bare steel girders. The crumbling concrete was replaced, as well as the seats, clubhouses, and restrooms and a significant percentage of the original structure.



Silver Stadium during the refurbishing, 1986 (photo by John Walter, RochesterAreaBallparks.com)



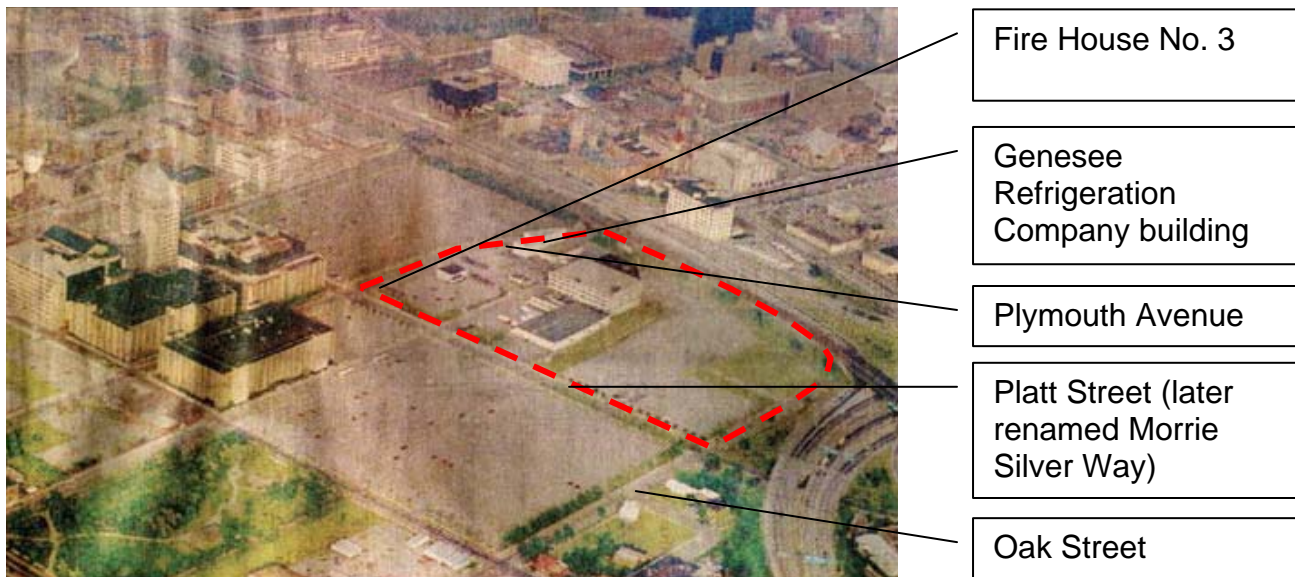
Silver Stadium after the refurbishing, 1992 (photo by John Walter, RochesterAreaBallparks.com)

Ultimately the extensive refurbishing only proved to be a temporary stopgap as the pressures to build a new stadium eventually won out. Frontier Field, originally planned to open for the 1996 season, opened for the 1997 season, rendering the 1996 season the 68th and final season played at the venerable Norton Street ballpark.

Frontier Field (1997 – present)

When plans began surfacing for a new Rochester ballpark in the early 1990s, many sites were proposed including Franklin Street (Franklin at Pleasant), West Main Street (across I-490 from the current location of Frontier Field), Avon (near the intersection of I-390 and Routes 5 & 20), and High Falls (the eventual winner).

Construction began for Frontier Field in 1994 in a lot of land formerly owned by Kodak. A handful of buildings needed to be demolished, and construction soon got underway. The stadium was designed by Ellerbe Beckett and built by Christa Construction firm at a cost of \$35.8 Million.

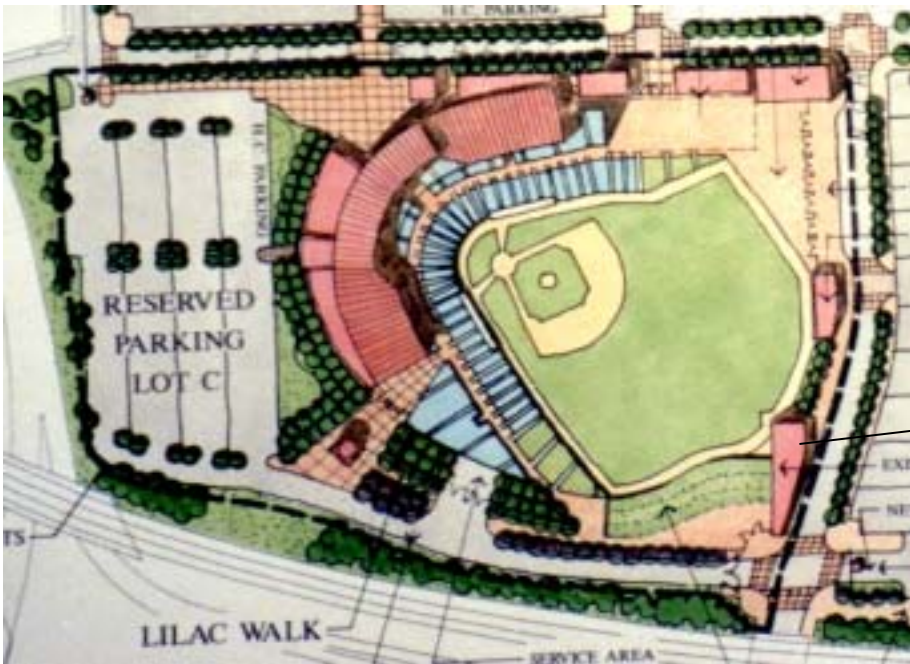


A 1993 aerial view of the eventual Frontier Field location (Democrat and Chronicle). Current Frontier Field boundaries are shown in red.

It was important to the designers to keep the look of the stadium true to the historic Brown's Race neighborhood. To that end, not only were visual cues for the stadium influenced by the surrounding environment, but two Plymouth Avenue buildings were intended to be kept in place and incorporated into the stadium itself. The Rochester Fire House No. 3 building still stands at the corner of Plymouth and Morrie Silver Way, but another building, the Genesee Refrigeration Company, also on Plymouth Avenue, was intended to be incorporated into the stadium extents.



Rochester Fire Company Fire House #3 as seen in 1956 (Image courtesy of Rochester Public Library Rochester Municipal Archives modern collection)



Early Frontier Field design, July, 1994

Sadly, before construction of the stadium, a fire destroyed the Genesee Refrigeration building and it became structurally unsound, forcing it to be demolished.

Another version of the design called for sand volleyball courts to be included in the right field concourse, in the area where the picnic pavilion now stands.



Genesee
refrigeration
building

Volleyball courts

Concourse view, Early Frontier Field design, July, 1994



Frontier Field under construction, 1995 (Photo courtesy of Brian Bennett)

Once the stadium was built, it took on the look we know today, with a few exceptions – most notably, the Hardball Café addition and large roof overhanging the first-base side grandstand, which were not built until the 1999-2000 offseason.



Frontier Field grand opening Beach Boys concert, July, 1996. Image courtesy Christa Construction (Christa.com)

Many improvements have taken place during the 15 seasons in which Red Wings baseball has been played at Frontier. The addition of a picnic pavilion beyond right field, improvements to the public address system and scoreboards, and even a total field resurfacing in the 2007 offseason have highlighted the many enhancements to the stadium throughout the years.

Eight stadiums have been host to Rochester professional baseball teams since 1877. From the small humble wood-constructed ballparks of yesteryear to the family-friendly environment of Frontier Field, all were unique and all have helped shape the landscape of professional baseball in the Rochester area.

About the Author

Paul Bielewicz lives in Rochester, is an Industrial Engineer and process improvement specialist at a local company, and Red Wings history enthusiast. Paul's articles in past Red Wings yearbooks include "A Look in our Closet" (2010) about the Red Wings' uniforms, and "Collecting Red Wings Memories: Remembrances and Stories from Red Wings Collectors" (2011). Paul is an avid Red Wings memorabilia collector, specializing in game-worn uniforms and has amassed an extensive research library of photos and related information.

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Paul welcomes your feedback and comments, please contact him at pbielewicz@yahoo.com.