

Why Aaron stayed in Atlanta and Cobb didn't go to Cobb County: when baseball statues meet ballpark relocation



The Sporting Statues Project

'The monuments erected by a people... reveal who the people really are.'


Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation.*



The Sporting Statues Project

Project goals and progress

- Documenting statuary: www.sportingstatues.com
 - Statue databases for UK sport, US baseball, world cricket, and world football. Providing context for case studies, a resource for further research collaborations (contact us if interested!), a site for disseminating research – and some entertainment!
- Developing theory around existence and form:
 - Ten papers and book chapters published, collectively assessing genre history, design, process, motivations, and subject selection.



North America's Baseball Statuary

- 258 subject-specific statues or statue groups
- 46 statues with anonymous subjects
- 225 distinct subjects depicted
- 95% of statues erected since 1990, 75% since 2000



Further information on every statue at www.sportingstatues.com




North America's Baseball Statuary





Location types

MLB/MiLB Ballpark? City/Town of birth? School/College? Franchise or National Museum/Hall of Fame Gallery? Graveyard? Commercial?



North America's Baseball Statuary

- With 144 (56%) of subject-specific statues, as well as 17 anonymous statues, MLB ballparks are the most common location. Only the A's, the Mets*, the Marlins and the Rays** don't have at least one ballpark statue!

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FROM FITCH TO PLINTH

North America's Baseball Statuary

- However ballparks are not permanent. In past 30 years, 23 franchises have moved to a new ballpark, some twice! For many this is their third or fourth home in franchise history...






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Moving statues?

- What happens to ballpark statues when a franchise leaves the ballpark?
 - Move with the franchise to its new home - **Moveable**
 - Stay where it is - **Immovable**
 - Move somewhere else - **Removeable**




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Moving statues?

- Decision on what happens to statue when a franchise moves is related to ownership of the statue. Ownership may be contested between...
 - the franchise
 - fans
 - local residents
 - city authorities



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Moving statues?

- As of March 2021, 32 potential statue moves associated with ballpark move
- 28 statues moved with franchise (most recently, Ryan, Vandergriff, fan memorial at Texas Rangers)
- 4 statues didn't move...




Robison Kerr Aaron Cobb

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Atlanta Braves

- Braves moved to Atlanta in 1966
- Atlanta mayor Ivan Allen saw Major League sport as key to progressing racial integration and boosting the city's profile and prosperity
- Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (AFCS) was typical 1960s multi-use concrete bowl stadium - but built in a central location





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Atlanta Braves


- Moved next door to Turner Field (Olympic Stadium) in 1996
- At this time the Braves already had three statues: Ty Cobb (1977), Hank Aaron (1982), Phil Niekro (1986)
- Fourth statue, Warren Spahn added in 2003



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Atlanta Braves

- In 2013 Braves announced move out of city to a new ballpark in Cobb County, for 2017. Why?
 - Traffic problems
 - Mostly white fans, mostly drawn from Northern suburbs as opposed to majority black districts by Turner Field
 - Desire to create ballpark village with retail/hospitality/real estate around ballpark
 - Turner Field surrounded by freeways and districts seen as unsuitable for such development...


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Atlanta Braves Statues

In 2015, the Atlanta media began to report disputes regarding the fate of the Aaron and Cobb statues...



Ty Cobb, 1977 (Felix De Weldon)



Hank Aaron, 1982 (Ed Dwight Jr)


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Atlanta Braves Statues

Ty Cobb, 1977, by Felix de Weldon. One of earliest ballpark statues

- Funded by banker/politician Mills B Lane Jr, who planned a series of statues to celebrate Georgian sporting heroes
- At that time the Braves (and NFL franchise who shared the stadium) were struggling...



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Atlanta Braves Statues

- Cobb never played for Braves or in Atlanta
- Reputation tarnished by (largely fraudulent) biographies
- Franchise at time had no obvious heroes to be bronzed - apart from Hank Aaron
- Braves' owner Ted Turner publically questioned the city's decision to erect a statue of Cobb
- Turner suggested that, if he ran the city, the statue might be replaced with one of Aaron


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Atlanta Braves Statues

Hank Aaron, 1982, by Ed Dwight Jr

- \$85000 cost raised by public donations and fundraising events
- Statue gifted to public body who managed the stadium
- Depicts Aaron hitting his 715th home run at the AFCS



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Atlanta Braves Statues


- In 2014 Braves said they were taking Aaron, Niekro, Spahn statues with them to Cobb County
- City wanted Aaron statue to stay at Turner Field, which was acquired by Georgia State Uni' (GSU)
- Fans divided, but largely embarassed by dispute
- Aaron drawn into row "On one hand, I think the statue should be wherever the baseball park is, wherever the Braves are playing... but on the other, the statue was paid for by fans... so if you had to think about it, it all belongs to Atlanta, to the people of Atlanta"

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Atlanta Braves Statues

- In 2016 city authority claimed to have found documentation proving they owned the statue
- The Braves argued that Aaron should decide statue's fate, but faced with negative publicity in putting a city hero in an impossible position they backed down and commissioned a new Aaron statue for their new ballpark



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Atlanta Braves Statues


- Meanwhile Braves declared that they were not taking Cobb statue with them – because they didn't own it!
- City Authority didn't want it either...
- Nor did GSU...
- In the words of the Atlanta Journal Constitution, ***"Everybody wants The Hammer, nobody wants The Peach"***

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Atlanta Braves Statues

- The Ty Cobb museum in his home town of Royston, GA were very upset by this!
- They asked for the statue to be moved to Royston, and it was re-erected there in 2017



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Conclusions

- Statues act as political symbols, monuments not just of celebrated figures, but to values that society wishes to preserve and celebrate, and, by dint of absence or removal, those they wish to forget or ignore
- The Braves' intentions for their statues upon their move from Turner likewise tell much about which parts of their past they wanted to celebrate at their new ballpark

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Conclusions


- Ty Cobb's statue was removeable, his legacy treated as best forgotten
- Braves did not attempt to claim ownership, unlike with Aaron's statue
- Cobb's statue inherited from a past in which his sullied reputation was possibly less embedded
- Unsurprising that the city of Atlanta/the stadium authority didn't fight to retain the statue either

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Conclusions

- Since erecting Cobb's statue, Atlanta Braves acquired franchise heroes, and no longer needed a tainted home-state legend for reflected glory
- To reinforce this point, after arriving in Cobb County the Braves unveiled a statue of Bobby Cox, their most successful manager





Conclusions

- Cobb's transmutation to 'hometown hero' mirrors non-franchise-funded baseball statues, often found in small towns, where a home-grown sports star is biggest claim to fame (e.g., Christy Matthewson in Factoryville, PA)
- Civic-sited sports statues are less common in big cities, where there will be a wider choice of potential heroes from politics, industry and celebrity - and where political considerations over who is honoured may face greater scrutiny



Conclusions

- Cobb gives Royston an identity, a unique brand, a sense of place and history
- The rehabilitation of Cobb's sculpture forms part of Royston's campaign to rehabilitate Cobb
- Coinciding with Charles Leerhosen's recent research that supports a more generous interpretation of Cobb's life, rescuing his statue a perfect opportunity for further civic boosterism



Conclusions

- Osmond (2007) describes statues as 'hollow icons' – they can simultaneously hold different meanings for different groups - which is part of their appeal to sports organisations
- A sports statue allows different communities that coalesce around a sports organisation to simultaneously perceive ownership of the team's heritage, identity and territory, so moving that statue disrupts multiple claims and assumptions, reopening divisions and conflict



Conclusions

- The arguments over the original Aaron statue at Turner Field cut to the heart of conflicts around who actually owns a sports organisation
- Fans regularly visiting Turner Field, and therefore seeing Aaron's statue, were a largely distinct entity from residents living within walking distance of Turner Field but who rarely visited the ballpark (and, indeed, from out-of-town fans who interact purely through broadcast media)



Conclusions

- Aaron's statement that "the statue was paid for by fans... it all belongs to all Atlanta", so conflating these groups, made little sense when donations were collected in 1982, but even less in 2017
- Ironically neither the Braves nor the stadium authority sought opinions of fans or local residents for or against the statue being removed
- Nor were fans or local residents particularly vocal in terms of organised protests, threads on social media or comments reported in the media



Conclusions

- Given Aaron's status as a black hero and barrier breaker, and the predominantly afro-American ethnicity of Turner Field's neighbouring districts, this might seem surprising
- Yet with the stadium site marooned within freeways, few local residents would encounter the statue unless attending a ball game
- A monument invisible to a community cannot become symbolic



Conclusions

- Civic figures were the most vocal in the statue dispute, notably the mayor and stadium authority
- No economic motivation to keep statue. Artwork was gifted to them. In fact a maintenance cost
- The stadium authority most likely fought to keep the statue for symbolic political reasons
 - Braves deserted Atlanta city for suburbs
 - Aaron's statue became the possession that divorcing couples fight over with far greater venom than its material value merits



Conclusions

- One can never ignore issues of race in Atlanta
- Million dollar sports franchise with predominantly white ownership and fans, were leaving a majority black city for a prosperous suburb - and trying to take the statue of a black hero with them
- This offered the city authority a free hit in terms of being seen to defend black interests. If they were unable to keep baseball in Atlanta, they could at least retain baseball's and Atlanta's black heritage



Conclusions

- The replacement Aaron statue is a more appropriate totem for the Braves new home...
- Aaron's statue at Turner Field, and the plaque that accompanied it, carried multiple messages
 - heroic figure,
 - barrier breaker,
 - specific moment of record-breaking glory – Aaron's 715th home run, an individual feat that could be cast as a Braves' achievement




Conclusions

- New Aaron statue at Truist Park depicts this same scene, carrying this achievement to a new site
- Plaque lists just Aaron's name and sculptor Ross Rossin, neglecting both the site and city of Aaron's monumental homer, and his role in the integration of a populace previously segregated along racial lines




Conclusions

- Truist Park is in outer-suburbia: the precincts surrounding it, whilst built in a retro style, are new
- Other MLB franchises have built retro ballparks, essentially faux-heritage stadiums, within authentic downtown locations
- The Braves built an entire faux-heritage neighbourhood around their ballpark! 
- They control of all aspects of this ersatz locale, most crucially income streams...



Conclusions

- ...but also the suitably sanitized environment, which has none of the edginess, grime, or wear and tear of true urbanity
- The new Aaron statue at Truist Park, similar in style to that left in Atlanta, but cleaner, shinier, on Braves' land and under their ownership, is the perfect fit 



Forthcoming Book Chapter

Stride, C.B. (in press) Movable, removable - or immovable? Baseball statues and ballpark relocation. In Ramshaw, G. & Gammon, S., ed. *Baseball and Heritage: People, Place, and Promotion*. Bloomsbury Academic, London, UK.



The Sporting Statues Project

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Resources and publications:

Articles (academic and populist) and the statues database can be found at www.sportingstatues.com

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