

Completed in 1951, FirstEnergy Stadium is now the oldest home in the Eastern League. It assumed that distinction after Toronto's Double-A affiliate departed from Yale Field (1927) in New Haven, Connecticut, following the 2003 season. The home of the Reading Phillies is 36 years the senior of any other park in the EL. Harrisburg's Commerce Bank Park (formerly RiverSide Stadium), built in 1987, is the league's second oldest park.

While the facility has undergone a series of renovations over the years, the original seating bowl, dugouts and exterior brick wall have all remained and continue to provide tangible links to the past.

THE EARLY YEARS - In its infancy, Reading's Municipal Memorial Stadium was used for much more than just Minor League Baseball. High school football games, circuses and concerts changed the scenery at the stadium several times per year. Despite the variety of events, the physical makeup of the ballpark changed little from 1951 until the mid-1980s.

On March 28, 1945, Reading City Council voted unanimously to purchase 27 acres of ground known as Cathedral Heights at a cost of \$64,491 for the purpose of building a municipal stadium. In 1947 the grading of the land began and by 1949 the initial stages of construction could be seen. With a final price tag of \$656,674, the stadium was completed on April 15, 1951. Named in honor of the service men and women who gave their lives for our country, Reading Municipal Memorial Stadium was dedicated on July 15 that same year.

While it was also slated to be used for various civic and athletic events, the stadium needed to lure a professional sports organization to ensure financial success. Fortunately, the Cleveland Indians signed a lease and moved in for the 1952 season. They would call Municipal Stadium home for the next ten years.

The Indians pulled out of Reading following the 1961 campaign and the stadium was absent a Minor League team for the next year. The Boston Red Sox moved in for 1963 and 1964, after which the Indians came back for a second, but brief, stay which lasted only the 1965 season. Following another year without a team, the Philadelphia Phillies agreed to affiliate with Reading. The relationship remains to this day and is third longest between a Major League franchise and a farm team.

While the Minor League tenants rotated somewhat frequently in the stadium's first two decades, the look of the ballpark remained virtually unchanged. Even into the mid-1980s, the only noticeable upgrades from the original stadium were an electronic scoreboard and advertisements on the outfield fence.

THE ERA OF UPGRADES (1988-present)- From 1988 through 2008, over \$6 million worth of improvements have been made to this classic ballpark. And even with all of its modern conveniences and luxuries, FirstEnergy Stadium retains the old-time ballpark feel that baseball fans cherish.

In 1987, Craig Stein purchased the team and almost immediately began renovating the ballpark. From October of that year until January of 1989, Municipal Stadium experienced its first significant improvement in its then 36-year history. The wooden bench seating in the main grandstand was

replaced by individual seats and a roof was erected to cover 1,500 of those seats. The press box was also expanded in the project, which totaled more than \$500,000.

The renovations would not stop any time soon. In October 1989, construction began on the third base picnic area. That project was finished in time for the 1990 season at a cost of \$125,000. Turning attention to the other side of the stadium, the right field food court was started and completed in the 1991-92 off-season at a cost of \$45,000.

After the 1992 season, the left field bleachers were razed and a new grandstand was erected, doubling that area's capacity to 1,600 seats. The project was completed in time for the 1993 season, costing \$275,000.

The stadium's exterior was the next area that received a facelift. Starting in October 1992, a project was undertaken to enhance the appearance of the park's front façade. As part of this improvement, the team offices were expanded and renovated and a souvenir shop was added. This was completed in March 1993 with a price tag of \$850,000.

Following the 1993 season, a series of upgrades took place. For the first time the playing surface was targeted for improvement and a field irrigation system was installed at a cost of \$150,000. At the same time a batting tunnel was built behind the third base bleachers for \$35,000. The left field deck was also constructed that off-season, providing the stadium with its first "home run" seats and first bar that overlooked the field. In 1996, 483 individual seats and eight private boxes were added to the deck. The cost of the entire addition was \$500,000.

Further improvements to the playing field came about in the fall of 1994. A new drainage system was implemented at a cost of \$40,000. The number of rainouts per season dropped from an average of ten before the drainage system to just three after its installation.

After a slight break from major renovations, the wheels of expansion began turning again in October 1997. The "Boardwalk" was added to the left field deck area at an expense of \$40,000. This added standing room for about 150 between the existing deck and the left field fence. The headliner for the fall of 1997, though, was a \$675,000 video scoreboard. Along with two new video cameras, the state-of-the-art board gave the Phillies the capability of showing color video during games.

The advancements in technology led to another electronic addition for the 1999 season. A radar system and speed of pitch indicator were added so all fans could play amateur scout and gauge just how hard pitchers throw at this level.

While no renovations took place in the fall of 1999, a major transformation did affect the ballpark that November.

In the fall of 1999 Reading Municipal Memorial Stadium was renamed GPU Stadium. In March the following year, a statue in the form of giant dog tags was placed outside the main entrance in a special rededication ceremony to honor the county's veterans.

The organization undertook its largest and most expensive endeavor in the renovation process in September 2000. With help from the state, the R-Phils assembled a \$1.4 million pool pavilion beyond the right field fence. The centerpiece was the 1,000 square foot heated pool, but the pavilion also provided some functional purposes. Another picnic buffet area for fans, umpires' locker rooms, a weight room and much needed storage space was all included in the undertaking. In a separate project, the Power Alley Pub was built for \$25,000 in March 2001. The pub became an extension of the left field deck.

Before the 2002 season, GPU Stadium was renamed FirstEnergy Stadium, giving the ballpark its third title in 53 years. In the fall and winter of 2002-2003, the individual seats in the left field deck were replaced by a four-tiered picnic area and the Classic Café was constructed beneath the first base bleachers.

During the 2003-2004 offseason four more projects came to fruition.

The centerpiece of the 2003-2004 renovations was the new video board. Like its predecessor, the new screen is a Daktronics ProStar. However, the new model is three times the size of the original with a sharper resolution.

Reading's first video screen, which was replaced an estimated four years before it needed to be, measured 15' W x 11' H. Within each square foot of its 165 sq. ft. surface area there were about 80 LED's (light emitting diode). At the time it was the first of its kind in the Minor Leagues.

The new screen measures 36' W x 15.5' H (558 sq. ft). With the ability to display 68 billion colors through approximately 185 LED's per square foot, the picture quality of the new screen is more than twice as vibrant as the old.

New video equipment and the Daktronics V-Play Operating System enhances the product on the screen immeasurably.

The marquee on Rt. 61 was also manufactured in South Dakota by Daktronics. It displays announcements of upcoming games, events and promotions to motorists and pedestrians on Centre Avenue.

While most of the capital improvements to FirstEnergy Stadium have been geared towards the fans, ballplayers from T-ball to the pros were the beneficiary of two other projects for 2004.

The home clubhouse was renovated and the players quarters were expanded by 128 sq. ft. The more spacious area allowed for seven more lockers to be installed and eliminated what was a crowded house.

With more comfortable quarters for the players checked off the to-do list, attention turned to player development - for the Phillies and area youth.

Enter a new batting/pitching tunnel - Baseballtown Academy. This state-of-the-art facility benefits Phillies prospects by giving them an indoor, climate-controlled facility complete with video room where they can train anytime.

The Baseballtown Academy also hosts camps, clinics and private lessons year-round for amateur players looking to gain an edge.

During the winter of 2004-2005, two more improvements added to the Baseballtown experience. The first is an exploding train, which resides in right-center field above the fence. Sponsored by National Penn Bank, the train will be a large replica of the black engine depicted in the R-Phils retro logo. When the Phillies have runners in scoring position, the train whistle blows, the railroad crossing lights flash steam will spew from the smoke stack. After a run scores, the train tracks light up and a burst of fireworks are shot from the engine.

The second winter project involved an expansion of the right field food court. In order to alleviate congestion in the concession lines, several new food stands were added. The additional purchase points should reduce the lines and make traffic in the food court area more free flowing. Also, several new items will be available at the extra stands. In order to make room for the expansion of the concessions, the customer service booth was moved to the Classic Harley-Davidson gift shop and the mascot autograph booth will be relocated to the Phunland area.

The team opted to upgrade FirstEnergy Stadium once more in 2010-11 by creating a slew of new areas including the Tompkins VIST Bank Plaza, a climate controlled walk-in team store, brand new office space for front office members, more parking spaces and much more. The renovations kicked off in September 2010 after the team won the Eastern League Championship, and were completed by April 14, 2011- Opening Day.

The main focus on the reconstruction was the Tompkins VIST Bank Plaza, an area where all fans can mingle and eat from the time gates open until they close. Fans will have the opportunity to listen to local music on the new permanent stage, which features a state-of-the-art sound system and video capabilities.

The Food Court jumped four times its original size, increasing from 36 feet to 81 feet. Fans are able to purchase foods from old favorite stands, which used to be located in the main concourse, and from brand-new stands. One thing fans will not have to worry about anymore while eating in the VIST Financial Plaza is being hit by a foul ball. The Fightins took precautionary safety measures by adding protected netting that is 23 feet high and spans the entire concourse. This ensures fans that they can move freely around the Food Court and VIST Financial Plaza without the risk of injury. Expanded bathrooms for men and women were created, and one of two family bathrooms is located in the plaza area-the other can be found in the main concourse closer to the third base side.

The focal point of the Tompkins VIST Bank Plaza is the stage, which is located in the heart of the plaza. Whether fans are just entering the gates or heading to their seats, the music can be heard thanks to the new state-of-the-art sound system. Fans also are able to watch the performance via video capabilities. With the addition of the permanent stage, musical performances aren't limited to just game days. Throughout the offseason, concerts will take place right here in FirstEnergy Stadium.

During the season, the stage showcases the musical talents of the Reading Fightin Phils Mascot Band and local performers, including youth musicians. Select games throughout the season feature a Community Showcase that awards school choruses & orchestras, glee clubs, and youth bands an opportunity to sing or play to a large crowd.

The Fightins Team Store is the first climate controlled walk-in store in the team's history, and allows fans to purchase great gear and memorabilia in one-stop shopping. The store features sports apparel along with classic Reading Fightin Phils' gear such as t-shirts, caps, baseballs, and other collectible items.

The store is accessible from three areas on the ballpark grounds, with the first is outside the Tompkins VIST Bank Plaza. An outside entrance guarantees Fightins fans a chance to purchase team wear both during the season and in the offseason. The final two entrances are located inside the ballpark entrances. Once fans enter the main gates at First Energy Stadium, they are able to enter the team store to their left. Or if they decide during the game to go shopping, they can enter the store via the main concourse. Unlike some stores, the Fightins Team Store is aimed for both adults and kids, offering a wide variety in shirts and ball caps. Kids have their own special entrance—a child-size door.

The Fightins organization took preemptive steps in ensuring that fans spend less time waiting in line to enter the stadium and more time enjoying the pregame and game activities. The organization was able to do this by expanding its ticket plaza located right out the Tompkins VIST Bank Plaza gates. The ticket plaza became four times its original size, and went from having five ticket windows to eight.

The Fightins organization is proud of its classic feel, but felt the need to accommodate the players in their home away from home. The Fightins clubhouse increased in size by 45%, providing a more comfortable atmosphere for our players. One thing that the organization guaranteed wouldn't change during the clubhouse renovations was the entrance to the playing field. Part of the experience at FirstEnergy Stadium is the fans' ability to watch rising stars walk across the concourse. The visitor clubhouse also grew in size, increasing by 80%. Visiting players will also be required to walk across the concourse to the playing field. Another great addition to benefit all players is the padded outfield walls, which will offer protection to athletes.

Fans that come to the ballpark enjoy the luxury of free parking, and with these renovations, more spaces were added. The final few updates to the stadium were the addition of light poles and cement in the main grand stand.

Almost 10 years after installing a new video board, the team decided to improve the video board quality in 2012-13. Though there was nothing wrong with the old video board, it didn't offer fans the best experience. The core improvement was the installation of a 30' x 60' HD10 video board in center field.

The new installation, which would total 1,800 square feet, is the largest video board amongst all Double-A teams and the 4th largest in Minor League Baseball. This video board is just the fifth HD10 board installed by TS Sports, located in Dallas, Texas, and the largest that TS Sports has ever installed. The previous FirstEnergy Stadium video board measured 16.5' x 36'.

A new addition to the stadium is a 6' x 100' ribbon board sits above the Coors Light Left Deck. The left field ribbon board will display the night's line score, out-of-town scoreboard, and cutting edge video capabilities. With this new addition, elements that were previously displayed on the main video board can be relocated to the ribbon board maximizing the space on both boards.

The project that totaled \$1 million also included a 4' x 8' video wall that sits atop of the Weston Center Winning Smiles stage and 25 flat-screen HDTVs that are located throughout FirstEnergy Stadium. With HDTVs all around the stadium, fans will never miss any action of the games. For video production, the team now has replay capabilities, enhanced HD cameras, and improved wireless camera connectivity.

During the 2014 offseason, general admission ticket prices were lowered, making family fun even more affordable. Another new addition for the 2015 season is the swapping of seat colors in the main grandstand. Reserved green seats replace the former red seats, marking the first time in stadium history that the main grandstand is exclusively for reserved seating. The first and third base stands, which now consist of all red seats, offer fans with general admission tickets in hands, a place to sit.