

NEWS AND TOPICS

Taking a Swing at Reviving Camden

Next Up: Minor League Team and Ballpark

By ROBERT STRAUSS

CAMDEN

It was the summer of '59, and the word out of the Philadelphia Phillies training camp in Clearwater, Fla., was that a local 19-year-old phenom from Camden was going to make the pitching staff.

His name was Ed Keegan. Unfortunately, Mr. Keegan lasted only nine innings for the Phillies, giving up 19 hits and 18 runs and losing all three games he pitched.

Camden's baseball legacy hasn't improved much since then. No other Camden resident has made it to the Major Leagues since Mr. Keegan, and the city has turned primarily to its perennially top-ranked high school basketball teams for sporting solace.

But now, rising on the banks of the Delaware River where a Campbell Soup Company plant once stood is Campbell's Field, soon to be home to the Camden Riversharks of the Atlantic League, an independent baseball minor league.

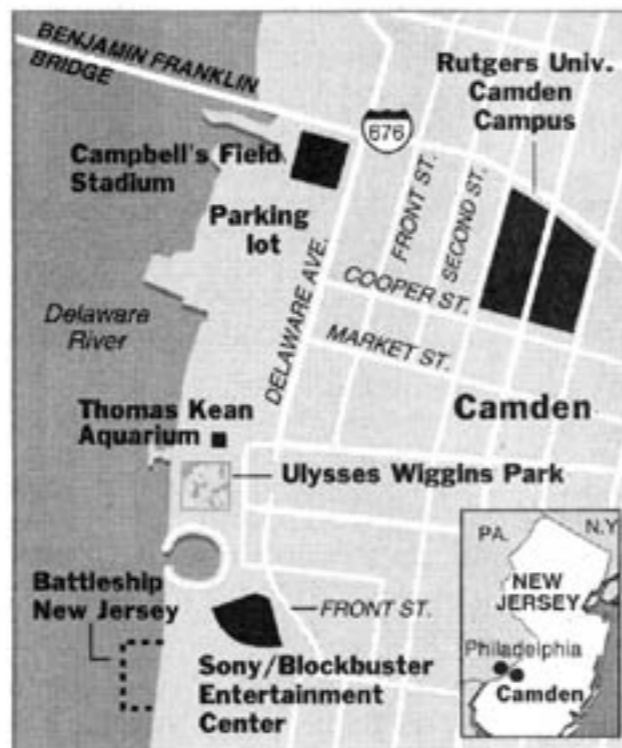
The stadium and the Riversharks are the realization of a dream for Stephen R. Shilling, a builder who developed such upscale communities as Short Hills in Cherry Hill and Eagle Acre in Harrison Township. Just a few years ago, Mr. Shilling saw opportunity on the waterfront where most people saw only dashed hopes.

The two main attractions on the Delaware River, the Thomas Kean Aquarium and the Sony Blockbuster E-Center, were not living up to hopes of reviving this city. Attendance at the aquarium was languishing, and few concerts were being produced at the entertainment center.

Mr. Shilling, president and chief executive of the Quaker Group, had been building some low-income housing here and was looking for a redevelopment project.

"It was June 1998 and one of our attorneys finally convinced us the stadium and ball team were the right project," Mr. Shilling said in a telephone interview from his office in Voorhees.

Mr. Shilling soon discovered that any team affiliated with a Major League club would have to get permission to operate from the Phillies, who play just across the



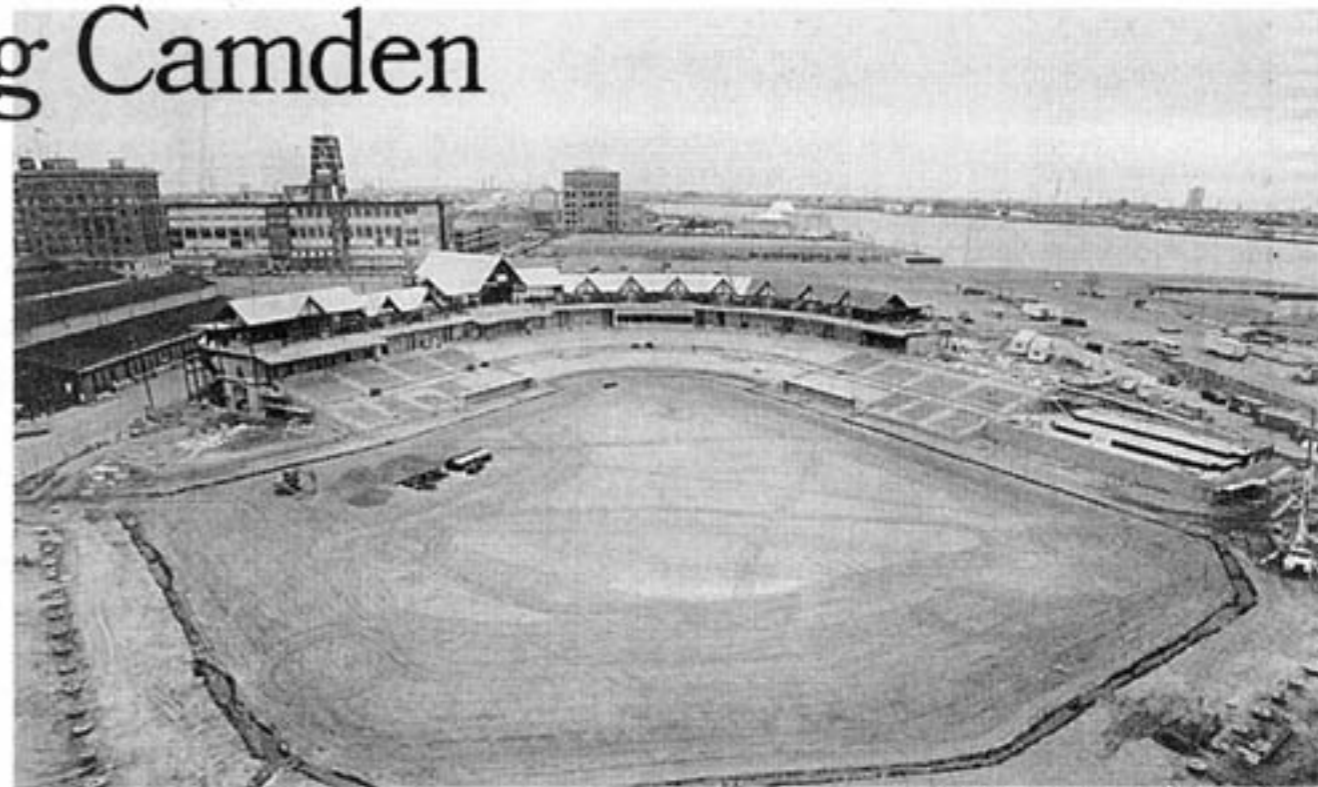
Delaware. Instead, he went to the owners of the Atlantic League, which has teams from New Hampshire to Pennsylvania, three of which are already in New Jersey — in Somerset, Atlantic City and Newark.

"They were all successful businessmen," he said. "The league was structured correctly. You were required to play in a new ballpark, which required an investment for the long term."

For a model, he looked toward the riverfront stadium in Trenton, where the Thunder has been drawing good crowds for several years.

"I stared at the Camden waterfront, where I would take my kids to the aquarium," said Mr. Shilling, who lives in Medford. "We'd spend an hour there, 15 minutes in the gift shop and go home. I knew it needed more down there."

With that, he began dealing. In the end the arrangement was essentially that the Quaker Group would build a 6,425-seat stadium for which Campbell paid an unspecified amount for naming rights. The ownership of the stadium itself will be passed along to Rutgers-Camden, which will use it for athletics. The Riversharks will lease it back for 40 years and pay Camden 50 cents for each fan in lieu of taxes.



David Hunsinger for The New York Times

A home builder from South Jersey is putting up the 6,425-seat Rivershark Stadium, which will be used by a new minor league team and by Rutgers-Camden athletic teams.

"We're going to be successful, so everyone will win," said Mr. Shilling.

Last week, the grandstand seats were being installed, and that work was expected to be completed by this week. All that is needed is for a first pitch to be thrown, and that will take place on May 11. Most games will begin at 6:35 p.m. to allow families to avoid getting home too late. So far, the team said, it had sold 100,000 tickets and hopes for an average of 4,500 fans at each of its 70 home games.

The original hope was that people in the stands could look out across the river to the Philadelphia skyline, but the sun would have blinded the batters during late afternoon games, so the seating was designed to look out toward the Benjamin Franklin Bridge linking New Jersey with South Philadelphia — not unlike the angles of the East River bridges in Woody Allen's movie "Manhattan." So far, no one is confusing Camden with Manhattan.

"There is a lot of greed going on right now in downtown Camden," said Kevin Burns of Markeim-Chalmers Real Estate in Cherry Hill, who has several listings a few blocks from the field. "Rutgers has been expanding, and everyone thinks it will buy their building, so they are raising sales prices. But it's going to take some time."

For now, Mr. Burns said the key to Camden's redevelopment was the proposed conversion of the Nipper Building, from the old RCA complex, into luxury apartments by a

Philadelphia developer, Carl Dranoff.

"But it can't just be built," said Mr. Burns. "It has to be built and be successful. People have to come. If they do, then the dynamics change in Camden. People will come to work and commercial real estate will start to thrive. Then it won't just be entertainment on the waterfront."

In the meantime, the waterfront sports and entertainment district continues to grow. The battleship New Jersey is expected to become a floating seafaring museum just south of the E-Center in two years, and an expansion of the aquarium is planned. In addition, Rutgers is gaining some new tennis courts and athletic fields, which are being built by Quaker in conjunction with the construction of Campbell's Field.

"We're also excited about a project to put better signage and enhanced lighting and streetscapes," said Judi London, executive director of the Camden Waterfront Marketing Bureau. "Rutgers is expanding. More students are coming there. And hopefully there will be more housing for them, too."

Mr. Shilling said he would like to build that housing as well as some commercial building if things blossom — as he expects — in the next few years.

"I am a businessman first and a team owner second," he said. "I see the team doing well, and that will be good for Camden and for our business as well. Some may think it a risky investment. I am not one of them."