

Historic Luther Williams Field

by Ben Sandifer

By the time Luther Williams Field opened in 1929, professional baseball had been played in Macon for parts of 25 seasons. The city's rich baseball history started with Macon's 19-2 victory over Chattanooga on the afternoon of April 16, 1885. Most local historians believe that Macon's baseball teams have always played their home games in the Central City Park area. In the years before baseball's modern era with spring training sites in Florida and Arizona, several major league teams made Macon their pre-season home.

Fires destroyed the wooden grandstands three different times at Macon's old ballparks. After the 1926 fire, the city decided to construct a more modern stadium out of brick and concrete. The following timeline highlights many of the people, teams and events that illustrate the "historic" moniker for Luther Williams Field.

1929

Built at a cost of \$60,000, Luther Williams Field opened its gates for the Macon Peaches season. The park was named for Macon's mayor, who threw out the ceremonial first pitch to open his namesake. Two months later baseball commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis performed this same ritual at the ballpark's official dedication. Paul Richards, a future big league player and Atlanta Braves executive, hit the first home run at Luther Williams on May 6, 1929. This was the only fair ball to leave the spacious park for seven seasons, since the original dimensions were 450 feet to center and 360 feet down the lines.

1930

On the last day of the season, seven different Macon pitchers combined to throw a no-hitter during the second game of a double header. Three of the pitchers in the seven inning game were normally position players, and four regular pitchers played at various other positions. All of the talent wasn't just on the field for the team of 1930. The Peaches showed their singing, dancing and acting talent with the *Peach Follies*, a variety show which raised money for local charities.

1932

The Peaches played an exhibition game against the *House of David*, a barnstorming team sporting long, black beards. One of the traveling troupe's attractions was 45-year old pitching legend Grover Cleveland Alexander. Actors portraying this team in the *Bingo Long* movie would visit Luther Williams Field more than 40 years later. WMAZ radio broadcast several games for the first time this season, with Frank "Red Cross" Crowther handling the play-by-play.

1936

The outfield fences were moved in 20 feet down the lines and 75 feet in dead center to produce more home runs. With the reorganization of the Sally League this year, Sunday afternoon baseball games were played for the first time in Macon, though Georgia's blue laws still prohibited Sunday baseball. Lights were installed at the ballpark during the season, and Macon played its first night game on July 20. Macon's Dee Moore, normally an outfielder, pitched a no-hitter in the second game of a double header.

1938

The first championship flag flew over Luther Williams Field after this season. This South Atlantic League championship team included third baseman Carl Fairly. His son, Ron, was born in Macon and played for many years in the major leagues.

1942

On May 15, Macon pitcher Dick Hearn tossed both games of a double header and recorded two shutouts. The 1942 Peaches brought Macon its second South Atlantic League championship.

1949

Prior to the start of this season, Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier at Luther Williams Field, when the Brooklyn Dodgers played an exhibition game against the Peaches. Duke Snider led the Dodgers offense with a three-run homer, and Luther Williams had its biggest crowd to date – more than 6,400 fans. WNEX radio broadcast all Peaches games this year with announcers Bill Riddle and Bob Savage. Road games were recreated from the studio using information from wire reports. Macon won the '49 Sally League pennant.

1950

Both the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Boston Red Sox made exhibition stops at Luther Williams Field on their trip north from spring training in Florida. Ted Williams, Roy Campanella and Pee Wee Reese all homered in these pre-season games. The Peaches repeated as league champions this season. Football coaching legend Billy Henderson played for this team.

1953

The South Atlantic League lifted its color barrier and the Jacksonville Braves became the first team in the league with an integrated roster. Jacksonville second baseman Hank Aaron was the league's Most Valuable Player in 1953. WETV Channel 47 produced Macon's first televised game on August 21.

1955

The Peaches color barrier was finally broken when infielder Sammy Drake and outfielder Ernie Johnson became the first African-American players for the Macon team. This team was managed for half the season by the fiery Pepper Martin, a member of the St. Louis Cardinals famous “Gas House Gang” in 1934.



Crowd at Luther Williams Field in the mid 1950’s – *courtesy of the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame*

1958

The Macon Dodgers, managed by future major league skipper Danny Ozark, won the Sally league crown. Batting helmets became mandatory equipment in the six-team league this season.

1961

During the off-season, fire badly damaged the ballpark in Memphis, Tennessee. So a group of Macon businessmen convinced the AA-Southern Association to relocate that franchise to Macon. Harley Bowers, sports writer for the *Macon Telegraph*, and Bob Savage sports director for WMAZ-TV, convinced Bob Bonifay to move to Macon from Jacksonville, to serve as general manager. This team included 10 players with previous major league experience. Macon was the only city in the league with a population less than 100,000.



1962 Macon Peaches

First row, l-to-r: Gale Peregrin (P), Larry Himes (C), Pete Rose (2B), Tommy Helms (SS), Art Shamsky (OF), Gus Gil (3B). Second row: John Flavin (P), Dick Kennedy (C), Dick Beall (1B), Marv Fodor (P), Marty DiHigo (OF), Ted Davidson (P), Mickey Mattiace (P). Third row: Joe Carroll (Trainer), Larry Dovel (P), Miles McWilliams (1B), Bill Sheperd (OF), Harvey Alex (P), Jim Sprankle (P), Mal Murphy (P), Dave Bristol (MGR)

Courtesy of the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame

1962

When the Southern Association ceased operation after the '61 season, the Cincinnati Reds moved their Class-A team to Macon. Bob Bonifay remained as general manager, and convinced the Reds to send some of their best prospects to Macon. That group included outfielders Art Shamsky and Mel Queen, shortstop Tommy Helms, and a young second baseman named Pete Rose. The team was managed by Macon-born Dave Bristol, who went on to manage four different teams in the big leagues. This exciting team brought more than 100,000 fans through the Luther Williams turnstiles – more than any other Class-A team. The '62 Peaches brought the ballpark its sixth championship, the city's last professional championship to date.

1963

Bob Bonifay, Dave Bristol and 14 players from the previous season returned to the Peaches. Tony Perez arrived in May to play third base, and ended the season with 11 homers and a .309 batting average. He spent 23 years in the majors and, to date, is the only Luther Williams Field alumni to be inducted into the baseball hall of fame. Al Lopez, who played for the Peaches the year before Luther Williams Field opened is the only other Macon player enshrined at Cooperstown.

1964

On June 11, the largest crowd ever turned out to see local pitching sensation John “Blue Moon” Odom make his professional debut. With more than 7,000 fans in attendance, Odom was the starting pitcher for the Birmingham Barons against the Peaches at Luther Williams Field. The hometown hero had graduated from Ballard Hudson High School just two weeks prior to this event. Odom’s major league career included two All-Star game appearances, and a 6-2 World Series record for the Oakland A’s



Local attorney Roy Miller (L) and radio legend Hamp “King Bee” Swain (R) had roles as a reporter and announcer in *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings*, filmed at Luther Williams Field in 1975. *Courtesy of Universal Pictures*

1975

Though it had not hosted professional baseball since the end of the 1967 season, Luther Williams Field was spruced up for the filming of *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings*. The movie starred Billy Dee Williams, James Earl Jones and Richard Pryor and included more than 600 local people as extras. The movie premiered at the Westgate Theaters the following year.

1980

After a 12-season dry spell, professional baseball returned to Luther Williams Field. Macon was awarded an expansion team in the new Class-A South Atlantic League, formerly the Western Carolinas League. The return of baseball also brought Luther Williams Field its first mascot ever – the Macon Peach, played by Mike Owens.

1981

The South Atlantic League All-Star game was scheduled for July 16 at Luther Williams Field. But two weeks prior, less than 125 advance tickets had been sold. So the team brought in Phil Niekro for a special appearance, and more than 3,300 fans showed up for the All-Star game, breaking the game’s previous attendance record.

1983

Much-needed renovations took place prior to this season, including a coat of bright red paint to the facade to welcome the new tenant – the Macon Redbirds. Macon’s speedy outfielder Vince Coleman set the professional baseball record for stolen bases in a season with 145. This record still stands and Coleman went on to steal 752 bases in the major leagues, placing him 6th on the all-time list.

1991

More than \$500,000 in repairs and renovations by the city finally paid off when the Atlanta Braves moved their Sumter franchise to Macon. First-round draft picks Chipper Jones and Tyler Houston both spent the Macon Braves inaugural season at Luther Williams Field. Over the next 12 seasons, Macon fans would see Marcus Giles, Andruw Jones, Rafael Furcal, Kevin Millwood and many other future stars who helped make Atlanta the team of the ‘90’s.

1994

The flood of ‘94 caused the Ocmulgee River to rise to record levels. When the levee at Central City Park could no longer hold back the flood waters, Luther Williams Field was under water. The flood and the cleanup forced the Braves to play eight of their home games on the road.

2004

Luther Williams Field was added to the National Register of Historical Places, joining such local landmarks as the Hay House, Cannonball House, Fort Hawkins, Sidney Lanier Cottage, Rose Hill Cemetery, Ocmulgee National Monument, Grand Opera House and dozens of other locations in Macon.

2006

The South Coast League of Professional Baseball awarded Macon one of its six teams for the 2007 inaugural season. A new chapter in Luther Williams Field’s rich baseball history begins with the Macon Music.

Professional Baseball Teams in Macon

<u>Year(s)</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Major League Affiliation</u>	<u>Class</u>	<u>League</u>
1885-1886	Macons			Southern League
1892-1893	Macons			Southern League
1894	Hornets			Southern League
1904-1907	Highlanders		C	South Atlantic League
1908-1910	Elbertas		C	South Atlantic League
1911-1913	Peaches		C	South Atlantic League
1914-1917	Tigers		C	South Atlantic League
1923	Hubs/Peaches		B	South Atlantic League
1924-1927	Peaches		B	South Atlantic League
1928-1930	Peaches	Brooklyn Robins	B	South Atlantic League
1932	Peaches		B	Southeastern League
1936-1938	Peaches		B	South Atlantic League
1939-1940	Peaches	Brooklyn Dodgers	B	South Atlantic League
1941-1942	Peaches	Chicago Cubs	B	South Atlantic League
1946	Peaches		A	South Atlantic League
1947-1955	Peaches	Chicago Cubs	A	South Atlantic League
1956	Peaches	Brooklyn Dodgers	A	South Atlantic League
1957	Dodgers	Brooklyn Dodgers	A	South Atlantic League
1958-1960	Dodgers	Los Angeles Dodgers	A	South Atlantic League
1961	Peaches		AA	Southern Association
1962	Peaches	Cincinnati Reds	A	South Atlantic League
1963	Peaches	Cincinnati Reds	AA	South Atlantic League
1964	Peaches	Cincinnati Reds	AA	Southern League
1966	Peaches	Philadelphia Phillies	AA	Southern League
1967	Peaches	Pittsburgh Pirates	AA	Southern League
1980	Peaches		A	South Atlantic League
1981-1982	Peaches	Detroit Tigers	A	South Atlantic League
1983	Redbirds	St. Louis Cardinals	A	South Atlantic League
1984-1987	Pirates	Pittsburgh Pirates	A	South Atlantic League
1991-2002	Braves	Atlanta Braves	A	South Atlantic League
2003	Peaches		Independent	Southeastern League
2007	Music		Independent	South Coast League