

The Camden Merritt, New Jersey's Premier Nineteenth-Century Baseball Team

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With the emergence of baseball as America's national sporting pastime, Camden civic and business leaders decided in 1881 to organize a professional team. This article examines the brief but spectacular history of the Albert Merritt Base Ball Club, one of the best minor league teams of the nineteenth century. Examined are the social and economic reasons for organizing a professional team, the unique founding of the club, the construction of a playing facility, and team finances including player salaries. The 1883 Merritt, which advanced every player to the major leagues, was a juggernaut, dominating the inaugural season of the Inter-State Association, one of two officially organized minor leagues. But despite success on the field with a 27-8 (.771) record, the team suddenly disbanded on July 21. The case study of the promise and perils of professional baseball as a civic and community enterprise culminates in a discussion of the club's demise because of internal financial problems and inability to compete with two major league teams across the Delaware River in Philadelphia.

The popularity of baseball greatly expanded following the formation in 1876 of the National League, the first "major league," and civic leaders and businessmen in towns with burgeoning economic and population growth were eager to use professional baseball as community entertainment and promotional signifier of civic identity and pride. Such was the case in Camden, a booming port and industrial city located directly across the Delaware River from Philadelphia. With a population doubling from 20,045 in 1870 to 41,659 in 1880, the state's fourth largest city and its county (62,941) was easily the largest urban area in south Jersey.¹ But founding

¹ *Industries of New Jersey*, vol. V (Newark: Historical Publishing, 1882), 139–144.

a professional team was a daunting task. With no source of revenue other than gate receipts, teams—and leagues—frequently folded. The most dramatic team collapse was the Camden Merritt, New Jersey's best minor league team of the 19th century and one of the finest in baseball history in terms of on-field success and every player advancing to major league baseball.²

The “brilliant” and “fastest baseball aggregation Camden ever put on the diamond” has lived long in memories of local baseball history,³ but the team is ignored in general histories of the minor leagues, and an expansive history of baseball in New Jersey briefly mentions the success and demise of the 1883 Merritt but not the club's history.⁴ Although short-lived (from 1881 to 1883), the Merritt affords an opportunity to examine the operation and finances of a club in the first minor league in New Jersey including player salaries, pioneering sport sponsorship, the promise and perils of baseball as a civic and community enterprise and, with a modern ring, the impact on local sport organizations by proximate “big time” professional franchises.

As “base ball,” two words then, emerged by the 1830s from shadowy origins as a children's bat-and-ball game to regionally varied recreational competitions for adults, the version known as “town ball” became popular in Camden as Philadelphia clubs ferried across the Delaware River to

² Comparing teams from different times and places is highly subjective, but the Merritt surely ranks with the other most heralded teams of the 19th century, the Tecumsehs of London, Ontario, Canada, which won the 1877 International Association championships, and the 1878 International Association champion Buffalo Bisons. Brian Martin, *The Tecumsehs of the International Association: Canada's First Major League Baseball Champions* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015) and Joseph M. Overfield, “The First Great Minor League Club,” *Baseball Research Journal* 6 (1977): 1–6. New Jersey's 1937 Newark Bears, winners of the International League pennant with a 109-43 record, is generally regarded as the best team in minor league history, and the 1932 Bears (109-52) are also worthy of consideration. Ronald A. Mayer, *The 1937 Newark Bears: A Baseball Legend* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994) and Randolph Linthurst, “The Newark Bears,” *Baseball Research Journal* 6 (1977): 10-13.

³ *Camden Daily Courier*, October 5, 1915 and February 7, 1922 and *Camden Courier-Post*, September 22, 1929.

⁴ Robert Obojski, *Bush League: A History of Minor League Baseball* (NY: Macmillan, 1975); Neil J. Sullivan, *The Minors: The Struggle and the Triumph of Baseball's Poor Relation from 1876 to the Present* (NY: St. Martin's, 1990) and Mike Blake, *The Minor Leagues* (NY: Wynwood Press, 1991); James M. DiClerico and Barry J. Pavelec, *The Jersey Game: The History of Modern Baseball from Its Birth to the Big Leagues in the Garden State* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 66–67, 71–72. John T. Cunningham, *Baseball in New Jersey: The Game of History* (Trenton: New Jersey State Museum, 1995) does not mention the Merritt.

play, just as New Yorkers crossed the Hudson River to play “the New York game” in Hoboken’s Elysian Fields.⁵ But it was not until 1857 that Camden organized a formal team with a constitution and elected officers, playing four matches in 1858 against the Olympics of Philadelphia, the first known formally organized ball club (1833) in baseball history. The May 18 contest in Philadelphia was close after 10 innings, but the more experienced Olympics sprinted to a 119 to 81 victory in 19 innings. In subsequent games in New Jersey an improved Camden team won 85-76 on June 3 and 81-71 on June 17 before losing 87-69 on November 11.⁶

With the organization in 1857 of the National Association of Base Ball Players, the “New York game”—modern baseball—spread across New Jersey. It was popular enough in Camden to produce three professionals, Wes Fisler and John Radcliff (who joined the Philadelphia Athletics of the National Association in 1871) and Emanuel “Redleg” Snyder (who debuted in 1876 with the National League’s Cincinnati Red Stockings). But when the Philadelphia Athletics were dropped from the National League in 1876, cricket eclipsed baseball on both sides of the Delaware River. The *Camden Post* reported in 1879 that the game “seems to have entirely died out in this city” save for few pick-up contests.⁷

To fill the void in top-flight baseball in the area, Camden businessmen in 1880 attempted to organize “a first-class base-ball club” to compete with teams in other towns in the region by selling \$10 shares of stock to fund the team and build a fenced field for baseball and cricket.⁸ It was an ambitious undertaking: Irvington had fielded a strong amateur team in 1867 but collapsed

⁵ Richard Hershberger, “A Reconstruction of Philadelphia Town Ball,” *Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game* 1, no. 2, (Fall 2007): 28–43; DiClerico and Pavelec, *Jersey Game*, 6–21; William A. Mann, “The Elysian Fields of Hoboken, New Jersey,” *Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 78–95; Peter Morris, et al., eds. *Base Ball Founders: The Clubs, Players and Cities of the Northeast that Established the Game* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013); and John Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden: The Secret History of the Early Game* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

⁶ *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, May 18 and *New York Clipper*, May 29, June 19, July 3, and November 16, 1858.

⁷ *Camden Post*, March 11, July 10, August 27, September 30, and October 2, 1879.

⁸ *Camden Post*, July 20, September 30, and October 12, 1880. Cited hereafter as *Post*.

in 1868, and in 1873, Elizabeth's Resolutes, the state's first professional club, failed to complete its first season, folding in July with a 2-21 record.⁹ Camden's initial effort to field a team came to naught, but things changed dramatically in 1881.

In late July John K. R. Hewitt, a prominent attorney, headed a group of civic boosters, virtually all of whom were also lawyers, in founding the amateur Jersey Blue Base Ball Club, named in honor of the colonial era Jersey Blues military unit.¹⁰ Two weeks later, baseball and politics in Camden abruptly changed when the Blues reorganized and were rechristened the Albert Merritt Base Ball Club in recognition of funding provided by the junior partner of Warner & Merritt, a large wholesale domestic and international produce firm in Philadelphia. It was the first instance in sports history both of buying naming rights and designating a team after a person. (The next instance of naming rights came in 1912 when the Boston Red Sox, owned by John I. Taylor, proprietor of Fenway Realty Company, began play in Fenway Park, and in 1945 football's Cleveland Browns was named after cofounder and first coach, Paul E. Brown, hence their helmets sans logo.)¹¹

Albert Merritt, born in Quincy, Massachusetts, on January 1, 1814, taught math at Eastman's Business College in Poughkeepsie, New York, before serving as assistant paymaster in the Mississippi Naval Squadron during the Civil War. He then joined a Boston fruit and produce firm as bookkeeper and secretary. After marrying Annie Denton on October 2, 1867, he sought to improve his financial future, going in January 1868 to Philadelphia, where he secured partnership in the Davis & Warner fruit and produce company and subsequently establishing residence that

⁹ DiClerico and Pavelec, *Jersey Game*, 35–38, 46–49.

¹⁰ *Post*, July 28, 1881. Organized in Piscataway in 1673, the first military regiment in America, known as the "Jersey Blues" after their blue coats, fought as the Third New Jersey Regiment in the Continental Army during the American Revolution where they were called the "Jersey Greys" after the color of their uniform.

¹¹ Alan E. Foulds, *Boston's Ballparks & Arenas* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2005), 48; Peter Nash, *Boston's Royal Rooters* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia, 2005), 45; and <https://sportssteamhistory.cleveland-browns>.

same year in Camden.¹² Upon becoming co-owner after Davis retired in 1878, Albert greatly expanded the firm's operations, acquiring 3 steamships and 13 sailing vessels to import tropical fruits and nuts from the West Indies and export flour and manufactured goods to Central and South America.

Whatever Merritt's interest in baseball, sponsorship of the team was clearly an attempt by a political newcomer to generate publicity and curry favor with voters during a heated, mud-slinging intraparty campaign to unseat six-year incumbent Republican Edward Bettle as Camden County's senator in the state legislature. Merritt was well known in the business community, especially after moving the firm's coconut processing operation to Camden, but lacked voter identification and connections with the Republican Party machine. Moreover, the *Camden Post*, one of the city's two daily newspapers, had endorsed the Haddonfield quaker as "more fitted for, and more conversant with the duties of the office" than the political newcomer who, while "a devoted Republican" and "thorough business man," was "not widely known to the citizens of this county," "lacks experience in public life," and "in no sense is superior in the makeup of a man or the indispensable qualifications requisite in a public servant to Mr. Bettle."¹³

How better to gain attention than by tapping the community's enthusiasm for baseball and desire for a competitive town team? The claim that the club was "not a political organization, but composed of young men whose political proclivities are unknown to each other, for the purpose of diversion and recreation," was initially affirmed by the fact that the attorneys elected principal club officers, president John K. R. Hewitt and secretary-treasurer Augustus F. Richter, were

¹² Thomas F. Fitzgerald and Louis C. Gosson, comp., *Manual of the One Hundred and Seventh Session of the Legislature of New Jersey* (Trenton, Murphy: 1883), 69–70.

¹³ *Post*, August 12, 15 and 20, 1881.

Democrats. But within a week political discord erupted, Hewitt defecting to organize a rival “Jersey Blue” club, whose three officers were Democrats.¹⁴

On August 17 the Merritt, smartly attired in new uniforms—dark blue caps, cloth knee breeches, woolen shirts initialed “A. M.” in white accented by cardinal stockings, and white belts and shoes—debuted on the field in Philadelphia. The amateur nine, comprised entirely of local men in their twenties whose occupations allowed taking off work to play afternoon games, was a strong one. Scoring in all but the third inning in defeating the semi-pro Quaker City club 24-4, they returned to New Jersey, downing Haddonfield 12-4 and convincing Woodbury to quit the game when trailing 24-4 after just two innings.¹⁵

Although Albert Merritt may have obtained the “sympathy vote” after a fire destroyed his Philadelphia business on August 22, surely the popularity and success of his team in games throughout the county and metropolitan Philadelphia did much to bolster his campaign. On September 8 in the county convention he bested Bettle 35-19, the nomination tantamount to election in the heavily Republican county. The *Camden Post* predicting “he can only be defeated by a miracle” was prescient; in November Merritt defeated Democrat John H. Dialogue, owner of the River Iron Works shipbuilding firm and veteran member of Camden city council, 6,072 to 4,771.¹⁶

In 1882 Albert Merritt headed to Trenton as a freshman state senator, and his team prepared to meet the challenge for baseball recognition posed by the Philadelphia Athletics, one of six franchises in the new major league circuit, the American Association. It was not known the

¹⁴ Ibid, July 28, August 15 and 26, 1881.

¹⁵ The original lineup: Alcott P; Bates C; Grum 1B; Gilmore 2B; Cook SS; Humphreys 3B; Wilkinson LF; McDougall CF; Walsh RF. *Camden Post*, August 16, 18, 22, and 29. 1881. Since players were well known in town, they were referred to by surname only.

¹⁶ *Post*, September 9 and November 5, 1881; *Manual of the Legislature*, 70 and George Reeser Prowell, *The History of Camden County, New Jersey* (Philadelphia: Richards, 1886), 383–385.

Athletics would be a solid squad, finishing second and leading the league in attendance, including many from Camden drawn by extensive newspaper coverage and professional caliber play, but it was obvious the amateur Merritt, the dominant regional team in 1881, could not compete on the field or at the gate with the major league club across the river. On March 23 the *Philadelphia Times* reported the Merritt, “the crack base ball nine of Camden,” was being reorganized. It was an understatement.

To counter the likely threat from the Athletics, Camden town officials and prominent citizens decided to field a fully professional team. It was a bold move. Small cities, even prosperous ones like Camden, lacked the ready financial wherewithal to hire 11 players—8 regular fielders, 2 pitchers, and 1 utility player—and construct suitable playing grounds with ample comfortable seating for paying spectators. Public tax support and private commercial advertising were then unthinkable, so funding would be derived solely from home gate receipts and revenue shares from away games.

To put the club, which had but \$200 in capital, on a solid financial basis, the “Albert Merritt Base Ball Club of Camden, N. J.” was incorporated on April 6 as a nonprofit corporation authorized to issue 300 shares of stock at \$5 a share.¹⁷ All stock sold in short order, so work to grade, fence, and provide spectator seating commenced on unimproved property located on the south side of the City Hall. As the majority stockholder, Albert Merritt assumed the position of club director. Acquiring players was the responsibility of club operations manager Augustus F. Richter, “Attorney at Law and Master and Solicitor in Chancery,” while Harry M. Shelton of the *Camden Post* was to ensure the team received adequate publicity. Well aware amateur baseball was considered wholesome recreation while the professional game had the reputation of being a

¹⁷ *Corporations of New Jersey. List of Certificates Filed in the Department of State From 1846 to 1891* (Trenton: Naar, Day & Naar, 1892), 4.

low-class enterprise marked by rough play, coarse language, and excessive drinking and gambling, the directors announced: “The management have determined not to allow gambling in any form, profane or indecent language, or rough actions of any kind on the grounds, but propose to make the games attractive to ladies as well as gentlemen. There is a pavilion to which ladies are admitted free, and no one who loves to see a good game of ball need stay away through fear of getting into a rough class.”¹⁸

On April 22 at 3:45, the revamped Merritt, only two players retained from 1881, took the field for the first game on their new grounds resplendent in new uniforms: gray pants and shirts trimmed in cardinal red, cardinal stockings and belts, and caps with gray and cardinal stripes. To the delight of about 1,000 people, including “many of our best citizens,” who paid the 25 cents admission, the home team, led by former major leaguer Fred Warner, defeated Burlington 9-6.¹⁹ Two days later the Merritt took on the Athletics in Philadelphia, leading 6-5 until the major leaguers plated five runs in the bottom of the ninth to win 10-6.

Thereafter the independent club scrambled to put together a makeshift schedule, often at the last minute, with regional amateur and semi-pro teams as well as four American Association teams en route to and from games in Philadelphia. They played almost every day except Sunday, because games on the Christian Sabbath were prohibited by law.²⁰ Highlights included an 11-9 victory over the eventual American Association champion Cincinnati Red Stockings on June 3 and a two-game split, August 11-12, with the touring Canadian champions, the Atlantics of St. Thomas,

¹⁸ *Post*, April 20 and 22, 1882. For player behaviors see David Quentin Voigt, *Baseball: From Gentleman's Sport to the Commissioner System* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966) 172–174, 186–189, and for gambling, Daniel E. Ginsburg, *The Fix Is In: A History of Baseball Gambling and Game Fixing Scandals* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 3–68.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, April 24, 1882. The lineup: Tom Lynch RF, Kelly IB, Fred Warner 3B, Hauge SS, Alcott LF, Barber 2B. Bates CF, Cunliff C, John “Jack” Caperoon P. O Alcott, and Bates played in 1881 but at different positions.

²⁰ On Sabbatarianism, see DiClerico and Pavelec, *Jersey Game*, 49–54 and Charlie Bevis, *Sunday Baseball: The Major Leagues' Struggle to Play Baseball on the Lord's Day, 1876–1934* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).

Ontario. On August 7 a large crowd was on hand for the first game between a New Jersey team and a Black team, the semi-pro Orions, “the championed colored club” of Philadelphia. The Merritt were victorious 8-2, but the *Courier* reported on August 8 “the colored men surprised the spectators by their excellent fielding. They were treated with great courtesy, and even the small boys who infest the ground were ready and willing to applaud their good catches.”²¹

Because of sporadic and incomplete newspaper game reports and no season tabulations, it is impossible to determine the team’s complete won-loss record or player statistics, but it is evident the Merritt, adding skilled players during the season, were most often victorious. After acquiring pitchers Sam Kimber and Bob Emslie, outfielder Frank “Gid” Gardner, and shortstop Frank Fennelly in early September, the Merritt won seven of the last nine games including the 3-2 defeat of the Baltimore Orioles on September 15, Emslie allowing the major leaguers only one hit.

The Merritt directors, heady from the success in 1882, hoped for even greater acclaim the next year as a major league club. In early August it was rumored the American Association would expand to 10 teams, adding the Merritt and New York Metropolitans as eastern teams and Indianapolis and Milwaukee in the west. But in October the circuit admitted only two new regional teams, the Metropolitans and the Columbus Buckeyes. Upon returning disappointed from the Association meeting, Gus Richter, the Merritt’s secretary and treasurer, said “Western clubs favored our candidacy, but some Eastern ones opposed us, but I will not give the names at present.”²² He didn’t need to: Philadelphia and Baltimore did not want another franchise in the immediate area.

²¹ Beginning in 1867 with the Pythians and Excelsiors, semi-pro Black baseball was popular in Philadelphia, and the Orion was the prominent team. In 1885 the Orions and the Keystone Athletics merged to form the famous Cuban Giants of New York City, the first fully-salaried Black team marking the beginning of Black professional baseball. Sol White, *Sol White’s History of Colored Base Ball* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 8, 34 and Jerry Malloy, “The Birth of the Cuban Giants: The Origins of Black Professional Baseball,” in Bill Kirwin, ed., *African American Baseball from the Cuban Giants to Jackie Robinson* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 1–14.

²² *Camden Courier*. October 27, 1882. Cited hereafter as *Courier*.

The attempt to join the American Association stemmed not only from inflated ambition, but also from the vexing problems facing an independent professional team. Continually trying to schedule non-league semi-pro and amateur teams was time-consuming, and away game guarantees and gate receipts for home games did not create a stable financial base. Games against the Association major league teams drew well, but attendance for lesser-known barnstorming clubs was spotty.

Because the major leagues were not an option, the Merritt opted in November for security by joining the Inter-State Association, one of the first two professional minor leagues. The newly formed four-state federation was comprised of seven teams: New Jersey's Camden's Merritts and Trenton's unimaginatively named Trentons; New York's Brooklyn Greys; Delaware's Wilmington Quicksteps; and Pennsylvania's Harrisburg Olympics, Pottsville Anthracites, and Reading Actives. In December the members of the officially named Inter-State Base Ball Alliance agreed to follow the rules of the American Association, charge 25 cents for admission to games, and require each team to appoint a regular umpire for all home games.²³ In January the Inter-State board of directors decided visiting teams would receive \$65 for scheduled games and half the gross receipts for exhibition contests between league teams during the season. A committee of three, including Richter, was appointed to draw up a schedule of games. Approval was given to each team's choice of umpire for home game: Frank Burt, left fielder for the 1882 Merritt, would call games in Camden.²⁴

A critical piece of business for each team's success remained. In December, the Merritt's August Richter, elected league secretary and treasurer as well as a member of the rules and membership committees, and two other club officials headed to New York to represent the interests

²³ *Courier*, December 14 and *Post*, December 16, 1882.

²⁴ *Reading (PA) Times*, January 29, 1883.

of the new circuit at the annual meeting of the American Association, succeeding in getting the Association to recognize Inter-State player contracts as binding as those in the American Association. Then, in March 1883 the National League, American Association, and the new Northwestern League adopted the Tripartite Agreement (also known as the National Agreement) to mitigate interleague warfare by controlling costs using regulated salaries and contracts to bind players to clubs with automatically renewable contracts. Although not included in the compact, the Inter-State clubs agreed to respect each team's reserve list, basically the entire team, but not the \$750 minimum salary set for the Northwestern league.²⁵

For the Merritt, honoring contracts and the "reserve clause" were important as they had already engaged the nucleus of the 1883 team. Immediately after season's end they signed the two key players, pitchers Emslie and Kimber, then in early December resigned Warner, Gardner, and Fennelly and inked five major leaguers: John "Jack" Corcoran of the National League's Philadelphia Quakers and from the American Association Bill Greenwood and Bill Kienzel of the Philadelphia Athletics, Baltimore Orioles first baseman Charlie Householder, and Pittsburgh Allegheny catcher John "Rooney" Sweeney.

Plans for the inaugural season proceeded apace in Camden. Season tickets were sold at team headquarters—C. H. Turner, Fine Cigars, 310 Federal Street—and at the onset of spring, work began on upgrading the City Hall grounds at a cost of \$2,500. Fourteen workmen labored hurriedly to grade and install a new dirt infield, lay sod, erect new fencing, and construct a "commodious grandstand" with a 600-seat pavilion topped by "a small apartment" for scorers and reporters. (There was no dressing room; players changed clothes in the City Hall.) The finest baseball grounds in the area was also the largest and so expansive "it was impossible to bat a fair

²⁵ *Courier*, December 14 and *Post*, December 16, 1882.

ball over the fence.”²⁶ The directors also organized the Young Merritt to train promising young players and to provide replacements for regular players if necessary. The junior club was formidable; its roster included William “Kid” Gleason, who would go on to a 43-year major league career as a player, coach, and manager, in the latter capacity serving (in)famously as skipper of Chicago’s “Black Sox” charged with throwing the 1919 World Series.²⁷

The only remaining problem was finding a capable team manager. Local amateur player James “Bricky” Farrington served as unofficial manager until the hiring on May 1 of Weston “Wes” Fisler. Although Fisler was then working as a clothing salesman at Wanamaker’s department store in Philadelphia, the *Post* proclaimed “No better appointment than this could have been made. There is no question as to the ability of the Merritt’s new manager to make the club achieve greater success than ever.” It was indeed an inspired hiring. He was a native son; his father, Dr. Lorenzo F. Fisler, was a long-time Camden mayor (1840–1844 and 1850–1855). During 11 years as a solid hitting, slick-fielding first baseman, he had developed a baseball reputation as “a man of remarkably good judgment.” After two years with Camden’s top amateur club and five with the Philadelphia Athletics, he turned professional in 1871 when the Athletics joined the National Association and won the championship. His six-year professional playing career, bracketed by the first seasons of the National Association and National League, was most notable for playing in the first major league game on April 22, 1876.²⁸ At a time when team managers typically were “player-managers,” Fisler never took the field; his job was solely player development and game-time personnel and strategy decisions.

²⁶ Recalled in the *Courier*, October 5, 1915.

²⁷ For Gleason’s career, see Dan Lindner, “Kid Gleason,” Society for American Baseball Research, <https://sabr.org/bioproj/person/kid-gleason/>, and for the Black Sox scandal, Gene Carney, *Burying the Black Sox: How Baseball’s Cover-Up of the 1919 World Series Fix Almost Succeeded* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2006).

²⁸ *Reading Times*, April 30, *Post*, May 2, and *Courier*, May 5, 1883. The game account in the *Philadelphia Times*, April 24, 1876, demonstrates the claim that he had scored the first run in Major League history is not true.

Fisler's 1883 Merritt, a blend of veterans and youth, was a juggernaut fielding a major-league-caliber player at every position.²⁹ (By season's end, every Merritt signed with a major league team.)³⁰ Known salary figures for 19th-century players are rare, especially for minor leaguers, but the Merritt's \$1,315 monthly payroll was allocated thusly: the two stars, pitcher Emslie and right fielder Gardner were the highest paid at \$150; catcher Rooney Sweeney, first baseman Charlie Householder, second baseman Bill Greenwood, shortstop Frank Fennelley, and utility player Jack Corcoran each received \$125; third baseman Fred Warner, second pitcher Sam Kimber, and left fielder Frank Berkelbach earned \$100; and center fielder Bill Kienzel got \$90. As typical for managers, Fisler's \$100 was less than most of his players.³¹

In early March, players began arriving in town and by early April were engaged in formal practices. The club then scheduled "spring training" games against regional clubs and atypically took a southern tour to Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Alexandria, Virginia, to fine-tune before the championship season began on May 4. Of the reported preseason exhibition games, the Merritt won nine and lost four, all defeats by Philadelphia's two major leagues teams, one to the National League Quakers and three to the Athletics, eventual American Association champions. But the Merritt proved vastly superior to the other nine opponents, outscoring them 120 to 15, victories highlighted by a 36-0 humiliation of the Alaska club of New York City in Camden on April 15 and a 13-4 victory over Albany in New York on May 1.

With Emslie, the lead pitcher in the box, the Merritt opened the championship season at home on May 4, coasting to a 21-7 defeat of the Pottsville Anthracites. The next day with Kimber

²⁹ *Post*, April 6, 1883, contains biographical sketches. The veterans were Kimber 30 and Berkelbach, Householder, and Warner 29; Greenwood 25; Garner and Sweeney were 24, Corcoran, Emslie, and Kienzel 23; Fennelly 22.

³⁰ Berkelbach, who left the team at the end of May, reached majors in 1884. Nine members of the 1937 Bears who played at least 10 games went to the major leagues the next year, and 16 in all reached the majors.

³¹ *Reading Times* and *Wilmington News Journal*, and *Daily Gazette*, July 23, 1883.

pitching, they suffered their first loss, and the Reading Actives won 4-3. Two days later about 1,500 fans saw Emslie pitch “an elegant game,” yielding four hits in a 6-1 win over Harrisburg. The Merritt then demonstrated their dominance by winning 10 straight games before losing to second-place Harrisburg 13-9 on June 12. Emslie and Kimber were pitching brilliantly, but the hallmark of the club was robust hitting—the .326 team batting average was far higher than any other team.³²

With the team on a roll, good news and bad news greeted Merritt fans in early June. They were pleased to read that the team had avenged an early season loss by beating the Actives 13-3 in Reading but were disconcerted to learn of a rumor circulating that the club was about to disband for financial reasons. Both Camden newspapers termed word of dissolution “all nonsense,” assuring fans that the club was “never in a healthier condition financially or otherwise.”³³ Still, attendance had declined, falling to between 600 and 800 a game. The summer sun was a problem, so to provide comfortable shading the directors rearranged the pavilion and covered the south side of the grandstand. But with talk of disbandment persisting, the anticipated “great crowds” failed to materialize despite the team’s winning ways highlighted by a back-to-back thrashing of the Columbus Buckeyes of the American Association 12-1 and 5-0 whipping of Pottsville. Not even the Merritt’s resounding performance on June 15 when they went across the Delaware and knocked the conceit out of the Athletics 21-10, the fiasco ended by mutual agreement after the seventh inning, quashed the rumors of disbandment. There was now even speculation that after the club folded Emslie and Householder would join the Athletics.

³² In first the 10 games: Corcoran .484, Gardner .476, Warner.355, Sweeney .343, Berklebach .333, Fennelly .304, Greenwood .298, Emslie .296, Kienzel .268, Kimber .263, and Householder .173. If Householder was struggling at the plate, he fielded brilliantly at first base posting a perfect 1.000 mark, remarkable as players then did not wear fielding gloves. *Post*, May 21, 1883.

³³ *Post*, June 2 and *Courier* June 4, 1883.

When interviewed at a game in Trenton on June 21, Senator Merritt, the club's chief financial backer in Trenton, said there was "no truth in the rumor" of the team's dissolution that was probably started by clubs wanting to acquire Merritt players. Specifically, he said the Brooklyn Greys had offered the Merritt \$1,000 to release Corcoran and Kimber, and that the Cincinnati Red Stockings, then contending for the American Association title, had offered Householder \$300 a month to jump the team.³⁴

As the rumors continued to fly, attendance in Camden fluctuated wildly even as the Merritt continued to dominate the competition. Between 1,000 and 1,200 showed up on the July 4 holiday to watch the home team whip the Washington Nationals of the League Alliance 10-2, but on July 6 about 700 were on hand for a league game against Pottsville, and two days later only 400 showed up for an exhibition game against Burlington.³⁵ A mere 200 were at City Hall Park on July 9 to watch the home team defeat Harrisburg, the second place Inter-State team, 11-7; only a few more were there two days later when the Olympics got beaten 16-0, "the worst drubbing" the Merritt had given a league team. The Merritt was so dominant that when on July 16 they suffered a rare defeat, a 5-4 loss to third-place Trenton in the bottom of the 10th inning, the home town fans "rushed onto the field and cheered till they were hoarse, threw up their hats, umbrellas and canes, and made every demonstration of joy they could think of."³⁶ Unfazed by the extra-inning loss, the Merritt resumed their winning ways, beating Brooklyn 6-3 on July 18 for their 27th victory as Emslie pitched "almost perfectly." This time "quite a large crowd" filled City Hall Grounds, many drawn by word it might well be the last home game.³⁷

³⁴ *Post*, June 21, 1883.

³⁵ *Courier*, July 4 and 9; *Post*, July 7, 1883.

³⁶ *Courier*, July 17, 1883.

³⁷ *Post* and *Courier*, July 19, 1883.

After the Brooklyn game, the Merritt, distracted by escalating talk that they would soon disband for financial reasons, headed to Wilmington to meet the Quicksteps. On Thursday, July 19, the 800 fans at Quickstep Park were delighted “almost beyond bounds” when the home team beat the Merritt for the first time 2-1. In the sixth inning, Kimber retired the side on three pitches, each batter flying out, reportedly “the first time in the history of baseball that such a thing has happened.”³⁸ The next day, July 20, when the team was in Reading, Camden newspapers announced the Merritt would indeed fold. Upon hearing confirmation of the dissolution, the club not surprisingly lost to the Actives 11-9, again in front of “a large concourse of people” attracted by the Merritt’s last appearance in town. Both teams of “demoralized players” turned in an uncharacteristically sloppy game, and the Merritt committed 10 errors.³⁹ That same Friday night the club’s management decided to disband the team after Saturday’s game in Wilmington. On July 21 some 1,500 spectators, drawn by the Merritt’s last game, saw the Quicksteps win 5-2 “with apparent ease” as the visitors, knowing they would break up after the game, “played loosely.”⁴⁰

The Camden Merritt, arguably the best nonmajor team of the 19th century, was history. Despite losing their last three games while facing imminent disbandment, they left in first place with a 27-8 record (.771). Prior to the three losses, surely affected by knowledge of dissolution, they were 27-5 (.843). Overall that season, including exhibition games, the Merritt’s record was 51-20 (.718), seven losses coming against major league teams. They had shut out 12 opponents while never being whitewashed. It was, as *Sporting Life*, the nation’s leading baseball publication

³⁸ *Wilmington Daily Commercial*, *Wilmington Morning News*, *Wilmington Daily Republican*, *Post*, and *Courier*, July 20, 1883. There have been almost 200 three-pitch innings in major league history, the first by Washington’s Charles “Duke” Esper, native of Salem, New Jersey, on June 5, 1894, against Cleveland.

³⁹ *Reading Times*, and *Courier*, July 21, 1883.

⁴⁰ *Wilmington Daily Commercial*, *Wilmington Daily Republican* and *Daily Gazette*, July 22; *Courier* and *Wilmington Daily Gazette*, July 23, 1883.

put it, “a record that few clubs can equal, and makes it a matter of regret that the club was not allowed to finish the season.”⁴¹

What had happened? On the one hand, it was a familiar story: financial exigencies caused many professional clubs across the county to fold. However, the Merritt’s demise was different. Unlike the other unsuccessful franchises, it was not an inept club floundering on the field, but instead was an exceptionally successful team that in running away with the Inter-State championship had brought Camden community pride and national baseball recognition. The *Camden Courier* considered losing the club “a matter for sincere regret” since “so much pride was felt by our citizens;” the *Post*, while agreeing the demise was to be “regretted by all lovers of the national game in the city,” admitted “there appears to be no help for it.” The *Post*, which had been the team’s principal advocate, chided Albert Merritt for instead keeping even at “a serious loss” the baseball club he founded as “a wonderous deal of cheap advertising,” now “permitting the disbanding of the club which wrought it.”⁴²

The snarky personal attack was a low blow. The club’s namesake and chief financial backer disliked disbanding the team, but with “his purse heavily drained in trying to keep the nine on its feet,” he decided not to be “the chief loser” any longer. He was willing “to do his share” to keep the club from dissolution if the other stockholders would join in keeping it going, but the shareholders, some of whom had been dissatisfied with the club’s finances since the beginning of the season, were willing only to clear the books by liquidating the debt and paying the players.⁴³ Albert Merritt, who had suffered substantial business losses during the past year, was simply

⁴¹ *Sporting Life*, July 30, 1883.

⁴² *Courier*, July 21 and *Post*, July 20, July 26, 1883.

⁴³ *Courier*, *Post* and *Trenton Times*, July 20, 1883.

unable or unwilling to continue underwriting a baseball team that was not only losing money but also showed no promise of a profitable footing in the future.

The club was financially troubled. The Merritt's total gate receipts for home and away games for the season had been "something over \$6,700," but the club when disbanded was \$2,000 in debt and losing about \$200 a month.⁴⁴ Optimism rather than mismanagement was largely to blame. The directors, bent on acquiring a first-class nine, had signed players at a salary above the going rate. But it was the new playing grounds and constructing a grandstand and bleachers at a cost of some \$2,500 that saddled the club with substantial debt before a game was ever played. Home game receipts and away game guarantees fell short of covering operational expenses—uniforms, equipment, and maintenance of City Hall Field—and the Inter-State schedule was frightfully expensive because single game home stands entailed almost continuous travel.

However, the principal cause of the Merritt's downfall was beyond the management's control. Albert Merritt cited "poor support received from Camden people," and while average attendance had dwindled to less than 500 per game, it was unfair to blame the citizenry for not passing more frequently through City Hall Park turnstiles.⁴⁵ Camden simply did not have a population large enough to support a professional baseball team. Even with dropping game times from 3:30 to 4:30, a relatively small percentage was able to attend frequently given the normal 10-to-12-hour, 6-day work week. Besides, as was the case in other league cities, many nonpaying spectators watched games atop wagons and carriages parked behind the outfield fences.⁴⁶ Most significantly, there was simply no way to compete with two major league teams on the west side of the Delaware River. In particular, the success of the eventual Association champion Athletics,

⁴⁴ *Courier*, July 23, 1883.

⁴⁵ *Post* and *Trenton Times*, July 20.

⁴⁶ *Courier*, May 8 and *Trenton Times*, August 28, 1883. The *Courier* estimated only 500 of the 1,500 who watched the Merritt's game on May 7 were paying customers, the others watching from the outfield atop wagons.

led by first baseman Harry Stovey and pitcher Bobby Mathews, drew the attention and attendance of fans from Camden who had easy access to the Jefferson Street Grounds to see major league games. Merritt managers were ultimately correct in thinking “proximity to Philadelphia makes Camden an undesirable place to locate a club.”⁴⁷ The Merritt simply were eclipsed by the quality of play and publicity of the two major league clubs in the metropolis across the Delaware, and as population grew from 847,170 in 1880 to over a million by decade’s end, the Quaker City would henceforth dominate sporting life in southern New Jersey.

In truth, even if additional financial support had been forthcoming, the club was doomed. Once talk of dissolution became public, the team unraveled. A late-minute effort on Saturday afternoon to pay off the debt by subscription and have the team continue playing under new management—\$500 was subscribed and “much more promised”—failed when the players, upon arriving back from Wilmington, said they had already received better offers from other clubs and wanted to be released from their contracts. Fisler thought if the Merritt had received such support earlier in the week, before confirmation of disbandment became public, the team would have continued, even at “for the old figures;” Emslie, Greenwood, Fennelly, and Warner said they would have been “glad” to stay had circumstances not changed.⁴⁸ But things had changed. With the players knowing they could get more money elsewhere, dissolution was a *fait accompli*.

If folding the club was, as the *Courier* termed it, “a public calamity” for Camden, it was a pecuniary bonanza for the players. As word of impending dissolution spread, representatives of other Inter-State clubs and the two major leagues desirous of strengthening their teams swarmed on Camden like sharks attracted by the scent of blood. Charlie Byrne, president of the Brooklyn Greys, was first on the scene, arriving in town on Friday night to meet with Merritt and the club’s

⁴⁷ *Trenton Times*, July 20, 1883.

⁴⁸ *Wilmington Morning News*, July 20; and *Reading Times and Post*, July 23, 1883.

directors. When Byrne's audacious proposal to transfer the entire Merritt team to Brooklyn failed after several players said "as they were playing for money they proposed to go where they could get the most," he returned to Brooklyn, entrusting his team manager, George Taylor, to sign as many players as he could.⁴⁹

Taylor faced fierce competition. From nine o'clock in the morning until midnight on Saturday, Philadelphia's Bingham House hotel was the scene of lively negotiations between avaricious players and clubs with bulging wallets bidding for their services. By Sunday night, all but 3 on the 10-man Merritt roster—Emslie, Gardner, and Sweeney—had been signed. Five more than doubled their previous monthly salaries by going to Brooklyn: Greenwood got \$350, Kimber and Corcoran got \$300, and Householder and Kienzel got \$250. Fred Warner quadrupled his salary when Al Reach, owner of the National League's Philadelphia Quakers, offered \$425 a month and "other considerations." Shortstop Frank Fennelly signed for an undisclosed sum with the Washington Statemen, also known as the Nationals, of the American Association; he was subsequently sold in August to the Cincinnati Reds for \$1,000. Baltimore's Billy Barnie, desperately in need of an outfielder and battery, was zealous in his pursuit of Gardner, Emslie, and Sweeney, the Merritt's best players. He inked Gardner on Sunday for \$300, but as pitchers and catchers were the most important players on any team, Emslie and Sweeney, having received offers from "a dozen or more" clubs, rejected his "liberal offers" before signing with the Orioles on Monday for \$350.⁵⁰

The demise of the club coincided with Albert Merritt's personal misfortune. After the devastating 1881 fire that entirely destroyed the Merritt & Warner operation in Philadelphia, the

⁴⁹ *Wilmington Daily Gazette*, July 23 and *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 24, 1883.

⁵⁰ *Philadelphia Times*, July 22, 1883. The most extensive coverage of the negotiations are *Courier, Post, Reading Times*, and *Wilmington Daily Gazette*, July 23; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 24 and 26; and *Sporting Life*, July 30, 1883. *Sporting Life* inaccurately reported Fennelly and each of the three Baltimore signees received \$400.

firm by April 1882 finished building a state-of-the-art seven-story facility that was entirely steam heated, save for two refrigerated storage floors, and served by two hydraulic elevators. It plunged the firm deeply into an unpayable debt. With liabilities of about \$400,000, the firm was reorganized in August 1884, and its inventory and fleet sold at public auction. To partially satisfy Merritt's personal debt, three tracts of his land in Camden were also auctioned. Merritt, "almost prostrated" and his mind "affected by the great strain" of his business and personal financial collapse, did not stand for reelection in 1885.⁵¹ Instead, he relocated to New York City, eventually moving in 1895 to Brooklyn where he became a prominent member of several Masonic organizations prior to his death on March 3, 1911.⁵²

With the collapse of the Merritt, the Inter-State Association and Camden faced an uncertain future. The now six-team circuit regrouped but did not survive its inaugural season. In 1884 Pottsville and Reading left organized baseball for financial reasons; Harrisburg, Trenton, and Wilmington became charter members of the Eastern League; and the Brooklyn Greys, renamed the Atlantics and bolstered by former Merritts, joined the American Association. In Camden, the Young Merritt also failed to last through 1883 as did last-ditch efforts to revive interest in fielding a competitive team; in April 1884 the venerable City Hall Grounds were sold for \$43,400 for development. Despite the phenomenal growth and popularity of baseball across the county, expansive local newspaper coverage of the national pastime, and the city's most illustrious resident, poet Walt Whitman, exhorting in 1888 and 1889 "base-ball is our game: the American game" and "the hurrah of the republic," the professional game did not return to Camden until

⁵¹ *Post*, April 6, 1882, and August 21–22; September 9, 12; October 1; and November 8, 24, 1884.

⁵² *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 4, 1911; *The American Tyler. Devoted to Freemasonry* 14, no. 19 (April 15, 1900): 566; *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of New York*, (NY: Little & Ives, 1911), 28–29.

1904.⁵³ Alas, the independent club in the Tri-State League was woeful, languishing in last place at 3-19 (.176) when it disbanded on June 18.⁵⁴ Almost a century would pass before another independent professional team, the Riversharks, joined the Atlantic League in 2001; the club, threatened by three major professional sports teams across the Delaware, enjoyed moderate success until 2015, when it folded for want of a lease agreement with the county for use of Campbell's Field.⁵⁵

During Camden's long hiatus with professional baseball, the Merritt did not fade into local historical oblivion. In 1883 and 1884 the two Camden newspapers with pride reported the exploits of former Merritts on their major league teams.⁵⁶ And when Bob Emslie, who had posted a 14-3 (.824) record with a sparkling 0.82 ERA, turned to umpiring after an arm injury ended his pitching with the Baltimore Orioles in 1885, Camden papers covered his 35-year major league career, noting "Bob always visits old friends when umpiring in Philadelphia."⁵⁷ Through the 1920s Camden sportswriters periodically penned columns about the Merritt and its players,⁵⁸ and as recently as 1975 columnist Doug Frambes recalled how the team "led by star pitcher Bob Emslie proceeded to take the circuit apart."⁵⁹ Because with baseball, like no other sport, the past is part of the present, the fabled Merritt warrant a conspicuous place in Camden and New Jersey baseball history.

⁵³ Horace L. Traubel, comp., *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 2 (NY: Mitchell Kennerley, 1915), 330 and vol. 4 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 508.

⁵⁴ *Camden Post-Telegram*, June 20, 1904.

⁵⁵ *Newark Star Ledger*, October 21, 2015.

⁵⁶ *Post*, July 25 and *Courier*, July 25 and 28 and August 6-7, 1883; *Post*, February 8, 1884.

⁵⁷ For example, *Courier*, August 9, 1898; *Post*, October 6, 1894; *Camden Post-Telegram*, October 7, 1908; December 20, 1910; January 20, and August 17, 1916.

⁵⁸ For example, *Courier*, August 9, 1898; October 5, 1915; February 7, 1922; September 22, 1929.

⁵⁹ *Camden Post-Telegram*, October 7, 1975.

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