



Charles W. Somers

Baseball's Silent Partner

by

S. Derby Gisclair

Member, Society for American Baseball Research



Without the financial backing of Charles Somers, the American League might never have become the successful organization it is today.

Born in 1868 to Joseph and Philenia Somers in Newark, Ohio, Charles Somers would accompany his parents to Cleveland in 1884. There he would receive an excellent education, attending business school and entering his father's bituminous coal business, J.H. Somers Company. He would strike out on his own, building a small empire of coal, iron and shipping interests that he eventually sold at the end of the 19th century. The 31-year old Somers returned to the family business as a millionaire. Bear in mind that being a millionaire in 1900 would be the equivalent of having more than \$23,650,000 today.



Somers was an avid baseball fan, having seen his hometown Cleveland Spiders playing in the National League in the 1890s. Members of that club included Jesse Burkett and Cy Young.

S. DERBY GISCLAIR

**404 Notre Dame Street – PH1
New Orleans, LA 70130**



In 1899, the National League collapsed and Western League Commissioner Ban Johnson contacted Somers about picking up the Cleveland franchise to be part of his new league.

Johnson planned to change the name of the Western League to the American League. He also planned to challenge the National League as a second major league.

Somers purchased the Grand Rapids club in 1900 and relocated the team to Cleveland. But the new league faced a series of challenges, mostly financial. Johnson was again rescued by the mild-mannered Somers. Armed with his personal fortune, Somers bankrolled the fledgling American League and its owners, allowing them to construct facilities and attract ball players.

When the revamped American League debuted in 1901, Somers was the owner or co-owner of three of the eight original teams. He and partner John Kilfoyle owned the Cleveland franchise. Somers also backed Connie Mack and Ben Shibe and became their partner in the Philadelphia club. And when no local backer could be found in Boston for that franchise, Somers stepped up and became the sole owner of the Boston club. He also made it possible for John McGraw and Hugh Duffy to field a club in Baltimore, although he had no stake in the team.



Somers purchased League Park (left) in Cleveland from Frank DeHaas Robison, former owner of the Cleveland Spiders in the National League. Cy Young pitched the first game in this park in 1891 as a member of the Cleveland Spiders.

Somers would renovate and modernize the park in 1909, constructing grandstands of steel and concrete instead of fire-prone wood. The team would play in this park until 1931 when they were moved to the “mistake by the lake,” otherwise known as Municipal Field.



His Cleveland Blues would play the very first and only Opening Day game in the American League on April 24, 1901 in Chicago as all other games across the circuit being rained out that day.

In Boston he purchased the vacant plot of land at the corner of Massachusetts and Huntington Avenues and erected *The Huntington Grounds* (right), with the Boston Warehouse and opera house behind left field.



This was an unusual venue. It was built on the site of a former circus lot and had large patches of sand in the outfield where grass would not grow. It had the deepest center field in the league at 635 feet where a tool shed located there was in play.

The Huntington Grounds would be the site of the first American League – National League World Series in 1903. Cy Young pitched the first perfect game in modern baseball here on May 5, 1904. The property is now part of Northwestern University.



Somers' largesse extended to fellow-owner Charles Comiskey in Chicago, to whom Somers loaned funds to erect his ballpark, originally called the *South Side Grounds* (left), which was located on the old cricket fields at the corner of 37th Street and South Princeton Avenue. The White

Stockings would remain there until 1910 when they moved to the first Comiskey Park.

As Vice-President of the American League (1901 – 1906), Somers was a member of the Circuit Committee. Along with League President Ban Johnson, Somers traveled the east coast extensively, arranging for teams from the old Western League to find new homes and new owners. Grand Rapids moved to Cleveland and St. Paul moved to Chicago. Buffalo, Indianapolis, Kansas City and Minneapolis were replaced by Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington.



All of this caught the attention of the owners and management of the National League, who engaged in all out war with Johnson and Somers, both in the press and behind the scenes. Players who were considering *jumping* to the upstart American League were told that they would be banned for life from playing in the National League. Nonetheless, of the forty-six players offered positions in the American League, only one player – Honus Wagner – refused to change teams.

In order to cultivate fan interest in Cleveland, Somers paid lavishly to acquire the new league's best-known player, second baseman Napoleon (Nap) Lajoie of the Philadelphia Athletics. Along with twenty-five cent admission in Cleveland, Boston, and Philadelphia and the outstanding talent now playing in the new league, the fan-base across the American League grew to the point that by 1903 the National League sued for peace. The result was the *American League – National League Peace Agreement*. Representatives from each league met at the St. Nicholas Hotel in Cincinnati, Ohio on January 9, 1903 to determine how the two leagues would operate and cooperate, finally reaching the agreement that was signed on January 10th. The National League was represented by Harry C. Pulliam, August Herrmann, James A. Hart and Frank D. Robison while the American League was represented by Ban Johnson, Charles Comiskey, Henry J. Killilea and Charles Somers.

Somers generally left the day-to-day management to his partners. However, during spring training in Macon, GA in 1907, Somers was entertaining reporters in his hotel room when he received a telephone call from Hughie Jennings, the new Detroit manager. Jennings offered to trade Detroit's 21-year old outfielder Ty Cobb even up for Cleveland's 31-year old Elmer Flick. Somers considered the offer for a moment and replied, "I think we'll hang on to Flick for now."



S. DERBY GISCLAIR
404 Notre Dame Street – PH1
New Orleans, LA 70130



As if this wasn't enough, Somers also created the first farm system in professional baseball, owning minor league clubs in Toledo (OH) in 1910, Portland (OR) and Ironton (OH) in 1911, Waterbury (CT) and New Orleans (LA) in 1913.

Having observed the success of the American League, other businessmen felt that there might be room for a third professional league and in 1914 the Federal League was launched. Following the blueprint established by Johnson and Somers, a bidding war began for the premier players from both the American and National Leagues.

To discourage the Federal League from invading Cleveland, Somers moved his Toledo club to Cleveland where they played as the Cleveland Bearcats in 1914 and as the Cleveland Spiders in 1915. His tactic worked and the club returned to Toledo in 1916.

But the impact of the Federal League hit Somers hard. The increased costs of running his team, combined with a sharp decline in his coal and real estate holdings, left Somers with over \$2 million in debt to local bankers.

Somers sold off his best players – Nap Lajoie in 1914 and Joe Jackson in 1915 – but it wasn't enough. The banks continued to pressure Somers to settle his debts. Ban Johnson attempted to intercede with the other team owners, reminding them of Somers' earlier loans, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. They had problems of their own, they replied.

Somers sold the Portland and Waterbury clubs in 1914, but it wasn't enough. He sold Ironton and Toledo in 1915, but it wasn't enough. The banks eventually forced Somers to liquidate his shares in the Cleveland Indians to a syndicate headed by James C. "Jack" Dunn in 1916.

The only club that Somers would not part with was the New Orleans Pelicans, his top farm team and most successful investment. Somers purchased the New Orleans team outright from George C. Bennett in 1913 and, in typical Somers fashion, named the relatively unknown club secretary, A.J. Heinemann, to be the club's president. The Pelicans thrived under Heinemann's management, capturing five Southern Association pennants in 1915, 1918, 1923, 1926 and 1927.

Somers also owned the land on the corner of Tulane and South Carrollton Avenues where the Pelicans' new ballpark was built in 1915 in partnership with Heinemann. The facility was known as Heinemann Park until 1936.



However, financial losses resulting from the stock market crash in October of 1929 caused Heinemann to commit suicide in January of 1930, and Somers, by now having rebuilt much of his fortune, exercised his option to purchase Heinemann's shares in the ballpark. Ever true to form, Somers gave the nod to Larry Gilbert to run the club. Former Pelicans' second baseman Jake Atz was brought in from the Texas League to manage the club while Gilbert settled the team's affairs in the front office during the 1932 season. The team finished uncharacteristically in 5th place, so Gilbert returned as manager in 1933.

The Pelicans won the 1933 Southern Association pennant and went on to defeat the San Antonio Missions in the Dixie Series. They were well on their way to taking their tenth league title in 1934 when Somers died at the age of 65 on June 28th at his summer home on Lake Erie on the island of Put-In Bay just north of Sandusky, Ohio.

Charles Somers has largely been forgotten by baseball, but his contributions to the game have survived for over a hundred years.

