

Negro Professional Baseball Players in the Upper South in the Gilded Age

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Baseball historian Harold Seymour has observed that baseball became the American national game in the late nineteenth century.¹ One of the consequences of this was that many of the ideas and movements that influenced the nation as a whole also had a great impact on this increasingly popular sport. The shifting relationship between black and white Americans was one part of the American lifestyle that baseball unfortunately shared. As the leading historian of racial adjustment in the period observed it was a time in which final patterns of segregation had not been set, but the hostility that would lead to the system of separation was present.² It was in this setting that three black men Fleet Walker, Dick Johnson, and Sol White attempted to earn their living as baseball players in the upper South. Despite demonstrating natural ability all three would find it impossible to continue their participation for more than a short period.

The upper South, while somewhat more flexible on racial matters than the gulfcoast states, was committed to the doctrine of white racial superiority. Lynching as a form of social control was not only widely practiced by whites in this region, but the practice was defended by a number of leading figures.³ The most notorious assertion of white supremacy in the upper South in the Gilded Age took place in Danville, Virginia, in November, 1883. In that city black participation in local government led to a major racial confrontation.⁴ Several blacks were killed in a well planned riot, and whites regained political control of the community and the state government as well.⁵ While the incident was deplored by some, many whites in the South justified the violence as a necessary means to restore white supremacy.

¹Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 345-358.

²C. Vann Woodward, *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North-South Dialogue* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), pp. 214-215.

³Wheeling *Intelligencer*, August 31, September 17, 1889, April 13, 1891, *Chattanooga Times*, February 12, 1894; John B. Brownlow to Oliver P. Temple, January 1, 1894, Oliver Perry Temple Papers (University of Tennessee Library, Knoxville, Tenn.).

⁴"Coalition Rule in Danville," Scrapbook, No. 31, p. 25, William Mohone Papers (Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N. C.).

⁵John T. S. Malzer, "The Danville Riot, November 3, 1883" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Virginia, 1963), *passim*.

Less than six months after the Danville riot, the first black baseball player in major league history played his first game. The setting was the upper South city of Louisville, Kentucky, in the presidential election year of 1884. The relatively large black voting population and the start of the political campaign made Louisville a most inauspicious place to begin an experiment in racial integration. In addition the city was the home of one of the most vigorously partisan Democratic newspapers in the country, the *Courier-Journal* under the editorship of Henry Watterson. Watterson was a brilliant journalist, but one who felt that attacks on blacks were legitimate for political advantage. Several articles published in the weeks before the game only brought increasing tension to an already explosive situation.⁶

The black player was no less critical an element in the game of May 1, 1884. When Branch Rickey introduced Jackie Robinson into professional baseball after World War II, he made sure that he had an exceptional man in every way. Moses Fleetwood "Fleet" Walker, on the other hand, seems to have been chosen without much screening for his assignment as the first black major leaguer. In 1884 there were three major leagues — National League, American Association, and Union Association — and thirty-four teams. Teams in all three leagues were searching for anyone capable of playing near major league standards. Walker was signed by Toledo of the American Association, and was introduced to local fans as a fine fielder.⁷

This assessment seemed completely unwarranted by Walker's performance in the first game. The black catcher committed all five of his team's errors and helped Louisville score several unearned runs.⁸ The *Courier-Journal* assured its readers that the explanation was that Walker could not take the pressure of major league baseball. This seemed to be confirmed when he had four passed balls in a game two days later in Louisville.⁹ The Toledo paper provided the real explanation, however, when it reported: "It is said that in the two games in which Walker played in Louisville, the spectators hissed him and otherwise insulted him because he was colored."¹⁰ The Louisville management was criticized for its failure to control the crowd and protect Walker. The black catcher may have been a sensitive person — he had attended college which was most unusual among

⁶Louisville *Courier-Journal*, March 12, April 3, 1884.

⁷Toledo *Blade*, April 15, 1884.

⁸Louisville *Courier-Journal*, May 2, 1884.

⁹Toledo *Blade*, May 5, 1884.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

professional baseball players in this period — but the crowd's reaction would have made it difficult for all but the most experienced player to perform well.¹¹

This incident would follow Fleet Walker all season long. Two weeks after the opening game Louisville played a series of games in Toledo. The home town fans apparently harassed the visiting team so severely that the local paper reprimanded the spectators and reminded them that the Louisville team itself had not mistreated Walker.¹² Further incidents were prevented by the simple expedient of not having the black catcher play any more games in Louisville. In fact in one instance he was forced to leave the player's bench because of the hostility directed toward him.¹³

The problems raised by the racial confrontations meant that Walker would have survived in the American Association only if he proved to be a superior player. He proved to be an adequate hitter with a .263 batting average which was quite acceptable for someone playing his position.¹⁴ Although not a heavy hitter, Walker was apparently one of Toledo's power hitters usually batting fifth in the batting order.¹⁵ The problem was with Walker's fielding. Walker seems to have had good baseball intelligence and saved at least one game with his quick thinking in the field.¹⁶ A major rule change introduced in 1884 seems to have been the source of Walker's fielding weakness. In that year pitchers were permitted to throw overhand for the first time, and since they were only fifty feet away from the catcher — as opposed to sixty feet six inches at present — the people behind the plate had a difficult position to field. When one also realizes that most of the protective equipment that modern-day catchers employ was either not developed or poorly made in 1884, it is easy to understand why Walker made thirty-seven errors in forty-two games.¹⁷ It is even easier to understand since Walker caught most of the time when fastball star Tony Mullane was pitching. Walker struggled through the year with split fingers, sore hands, a sore arm, and a broken collarbone.¹⁸ As a result the Toledo team let him go just before the end of the season and gave his physical condition as justification

¹¹Seymour, *Baseball*, p. 334.

¹²Toledo *Blade*, May 15, 1884.

¹³Seymour, *Baseball*, p. 334.

¹⁴*The Baseball Encyclopedia: The Complete and Official Record of Major League Baseball* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1969), p. 1607.

¹⁵New York Times, July 11, 1884.

¹⁶Toledo *Blade*, July 11, 1884.

¹⁷*Baseball Encyclopedia*, p. 1607.

¹⁸*ibid.*; Toledo *Blade*, May 16, 22, July 22, 1884.

for its decision.¹⁹ Thus the career of the first black major leaguer had come to an end. Racial prejudice was not the only reason for his failure, but the hostility of the crowd in Louisville on opening day certainly did not make Fleet Walker's pioneering role an easy one.

Three years after Fleet Walker's ill-fated attempt to break baseball's "color line" in the upper South, two minor league professional players tried again. Dick Johnson and Sol White both played in the Tri-State league in 1887. The league was composed of teams from Michigan, Ohio, and West Virginia. While certainly not the most outstanding of the then existing minor leagues, the Tri-State teams did send such future stars as Ed Delahanty and Cy Young directly into the major leagues. Apparently in 1887 the league was still in something of a formative stage, and the teams picked up their players from local sources. Zanesville, Ohio, hired Johnson as a catcher and centerfielder, and White was the third baseman for the Wheeling, West Virginia, team.

The fact that Wheeling had a black player indicated that the situation in Wheeling was somewhat different than that in Louisville. Wheeling had a very small black population for an upper South city and the political climate was far more favorable for blacks. The city had a large white Republican population that on the surface was more sympathetic toward the efforts of blacks to exercise their civil rights.²⁰ The leading newspaper in the city was the *Intelligencer* which was, in contrast to the *Courier-Journal*, a strongly Republican paper and which often defended blacks against Southern whites.²¹ Johnson and White were from the beginning under less pressure than Fleet Walker and were generally treated like any other players.

The atmosphere in organized baseball, however, was becoming more hostile. One incident that illustrated the problem occurred with the Syracuse team of the International League. In June, 1887, Syracuse pitcher Dug Crothers refused to sit for a team picture with the team's new black pitcher by the name of Higgins.²² Crothers was apparently upset not only by Higgins's race, but by the fact that the black hurler was replacing him as

¹⁹Toledo Blade, September 24, 1884.

²⁰Approximately 47 per cent of the white voters were Republicans. Compiled from voting statistics provided by the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research at the University of Michigan and social statistics in U. S. Bureau of the Census. *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890, Population* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892), p. 514.

²¹Wheeling *Intelligencer*, July 15, 1887; April 24, May 2, 3, 1888.

²²The *Sporting News*, June 11, 1887.

the team's leading pitcher. When the team manager demanded that Crothers join the team for the picture, the irate pitcher attacked the team leader physically.²³ Crothers was fined fifty dollars and was suspended for a month for his violence and not for his racial snub.²⁴ Crothers' attitude, unfortunately, was finding increasing support in all of professional baseball.

White, perhaps aware of the increasing racial hostility to be found in professional baseball, started the 1887 season with an all black team the Pittsburgh Keystones.²⁵ Early in the season, however, both he and Johnson were mainstays of their teams in the Tri-State league. White proved to be an agile fielder who was quite adept at cutting off line drives headed for the outfield.²⁶ He also proved to be a punishing hitter. 1887 was a year of highly unflated batting averages because bases on balls counted as hits, but even then White's final average of .381 was most impressive.²⁷ In one game he hit two doubles — one over the right field fence on the fly and one over the left field fence on the fly — and drove in four runs.²⁸ Despite scoring rules that counted what we would consider home runs as doubles, White compiled a slugging percentage of .508 which was unusually high for that deadball era.²⁹ White did have one serious weakness as a player; he could not control his throws to first base. One performance forced the normally very complimentary *Intelligencer* reporter to speak of White's "vile" throw, and for the season White made forty-one errors in forty-five games.³⁰

Johnson's impact on the league as a player was more limited than that of Wheeling's third baseman. Johnson hit .296 which was one of the lowest averages in the league but usually batted first in the Zanesville lineup indicating that he was probably quite fast.³¹ Another indication of Johnson's speed was the fact that he sometimes played centerfield and played it well." For most of the games Johnson was the Zanesville catcher and at that position he demonstrated what was probably his most impressive physical ability. Johnson possessed a powerful

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*, June 18, 1887.

²⁵*Wheeling Intelligencer*, April 20, 1887.

²⁶*Ibid.*, September 3, 1884.

²⁷*Zanesville Signal*, November 19, 1887.

²⁸*Wheeling Intelligencer*, August 27, 1887.

²⁹Compiled from records in the *Wheeling Intelligencer and Zanesville Signal*.

³⁰*Wheeling Intelligencer*, August 8, 1887; *Zanesville Signal*, November 19, 1887.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Wheeling Intelligencer*, September 6, 1887.

throwing arm having 101 assists in only fifty-three games, a record which no one else in the league approached.³³

The winter meetings of the Tri-State League indicated, that although there was little overt hostility directed toward White and Johnson during the season, that the presence of blacks in the league was disturbing many people. In October, 1887, the league prohibited teams from signing black players. When former major leaguer Weldy Walker — Fleet Walker's brother — protested and demanded the right to play, the league reversed itself and repealed the rule.³⁴ The league then declined to ratify the Zanesville contract with Dick Johnson for 1888 saying he was "viscious" (sic) and "quarrelsome."³⁵ Zanesville protested this action and threatened to withdraw its team from the league unless Johnson was allowed to play. The league must have reversed itself again because Johnson started the season as Zanesville's regular catcher.

The attitude of the Wheeling team in this entire matter is not clear. It does not appear that they were leaders in the effort to remove black players from the league, and yet they did not try to play Sol White in 1888 either. The rather ambivalent attitude toward White seemed to be shared by the Wheeling fans as well. On April 19, 1888, White played an exhibition game against Wheeling in that West Virginia city as the third baseman for a black team the Pittsburgh Keystones. When White came to bat for the first time he was given an ovation and presented with flowers by his admirers.³⁶ As the game progressed the attitude of the crowd reflected other feelings. The Keystones were apparently an early exponent of entertainment oriented athletic teams like the Harlem Globe Trotters, and the Wheeling crowd was apparently greatly amused by the actions of the black team. Unlike the Globe Trotters, however, the Keystones seemed to have played to racial prejudices of the audience and made no attempt to win. The willing acceptance of this role by the Wheeling fans indicates that they accepted White conditionally and his obvious ability was the only thing that saved him from the fate suffered by Fleet Walker.

Dick Johnson continued to play the entire 1888 season in the Tri-State League. Obviously under tremendous pressure John-

³³Zanesville *Signal*, November 19, 1887. (For comparison John Bench of the Cincinnati Reds is generally considered to be the contemporary catcher with the strongest and most accurate throwing arm and in 1969 he had 76 assists in 146 games.)

³⁴*The Sporting News*, March 31, 1888.

³⁵*Ibid.*, March 10, 1888.

³⁶*Wheeling Intelligencer*, April 19, 20, 1888.

son responded with an outstanding season. His timely hitting and daring base running helped Zanesville make a strong run for the league pennant.³⁷ In June Johnson caught in an exhibition game against the Pittsburgh major league team without incident. Soon thereafter an incident took place in Wheeling that showed the difficulties Johnson was operating under. When Johnson shouted a protest from the bench about an umpire's decision, he was fined although the white players who virtually assaulted the umpire either totally escaped punishment or were fined no heavier than Johnson was.³⁸ Obviously displays of discrimination like this must have been difficult to accept for a man like Johnson who seemingly possessed deep personal pride. He responded in the best way he could by hitting .321 which made him one of the league leaders in hitting.³⁹ Despite the playing success that both White and Johnson had in the Tri-State League it appears that no blacks played in the League after 1888. The growing segregation in baseball and the nation as a whole made the use of black players increasingly difficult for American professional baseball teams.

The two men pursued their baseball careers in divergent ways after leaving the Tri-State League. Dick Johnson continued to try to make it in a white man's world. After his successful season with Zanesville, he was signed by the Springfield, Illinois, team of the Interstate League.⁴⁰ The Interstate teams were generally regarded as more advanced than those in the Tri-State League so that it appeared that Johnson had a good future. Johnson and his new teammates played an exhibition game against Wheeling in Wheeling, and Johnson's four hits including a double and home run once again demonstrated his prowess.⁴¹ The bright promise never developed and in 1890 Johnson was traded to Peoria of the same league and for whom he played out the season. He would never advance beyond this level and like all blacks after 1890, he would find that the major leagues were for white men only.

Sol White continued to play in the black leagues and probably took part in the first black world series in baseball history. In August, 1888, black teams representing Pittsburgh — probably the Keystones with White playing — Norfolk, New York, and

³⁷For examples see: *Canton Repository*, June 14, 1888; *Toledo Blade*, July 26, 1888.

³⁸*Wheeling Intelligencer*, July 3, 1888.

³⁹Compiled from records in *The Sporting News*, *Wheeling Intelligencer*, *Canton Repository*, and *Toledo Blade*

⁴⁰*Wheeling Intelligencer*, April 10, 1889.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, April 10, 1889.

Cuba played a tournament near New York,⁴² Pittsburgh finished second to the Cuban Giants who the reporter said were easily the equal of the New York league team of the same name. Once again the tragedy of the black baseball player becomes obvious. Although as talented as their white counterparts, the black players were segregated from the financial rewards and public acclaim of the major leagues. And as my research has shown they were also increasingly segregated from public view and played in a shadow world that has nearly obscured them from historical investigation.

The careers of Fleet Walker, Dick Johnson, and Sol White tell us a great deal about racism in baseball and the upper South. The hostility of the spectators in Louisville to Walker, and the reaction of the Wheeling fans to the Keystones show the underlying racist feelings of the whites in these two cities. Even though a favorable political atmosphere prevented any ugly incidents in Wheeling, this basic fact cannot be denied. It is also clear that not all the bigotry was confined to the stands. Opposition from players and owners was in the process of closing professional baseball to black players all over the country. Thus these three players were fighting a battle they could not hope to win. The fact that they played at all is testimony to the relatively undeveloped system of segregation then in existence and to the courage of each of these remarkable men.

⁴²The Sporting News, September 1, 1888.