

Thomas Henry “T.H.” Hayes, Jr. and the Birmingham Black Barons

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Sports history has begun to direct some attention to and embrace the abilities, achievements and contributions of black baseball players of the past. Equally important for consideration are black professional team owners. One black owner who is practically unmentioned in any history of baseball is Thomas Henry “T.H.” Hayes, Jr. of the Birmingham Black Barons.

Between 1870 and 1947, a period of seventy-seven years, a gentlemen’ agreement between the white professional baseball establishment and white players refused to permit their black counterparts to partake in the game.

When hardships, Anti-Negro violence, and discrimination increased as America moved through the Reconstruction Era, Industrial Revolution, and World War I, the economic and social attraction of Harlem, New York caused Negroes to congregate there and launch a movement for self-reliance and recognition.

That movement (1920-1930), has been variously called the Harlem Renaissance, the Negro Renaissance, the New Negro movement which *Time* magazine has described as Harlem’s “Golden Age.” Negroes communicated to the entire world that they wanted to be full participants in American Nationalism.

During the Harlem Renaissance, against overwhelming odds, blacks attained some outstanding successes in various aspects of business, education, the professions, the arts, entertainment, military, politics, religion, and among others, sports.

During this period a black, Andrew “Rube” Foster, gave birth to the idea of a professional baseball league for negroes, the Negro National League (NNL).

Twenty five years later, 1945, Branch Wesley Rickey's commencement of integrating organized baseball was using diversionary tactics to seize the Negro League. In 1946, Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to a contract to play with the Brooklyn Dodgers' farm club in Canada, the Montreal Royals (1946). The next year, April 10, 1947, Jackie Robinson integrated organized professional baseball by signing a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Thereafter, Brooklyn continued, now along with other organized baseball teams, to ravage the black professional league causing its final demise with the conclusion of the 1963 season.

In the twelve years that Tom Henry "T.H." Hayes, Jr. was owner of the Birmingham Black Barons (1939-1951), it has been publically stated that, considering the number of black players he helped to get into organized baseball (among them Willie Mays, Artie Wilson, and Dan Bankhead), his success at winning, his ability to promote and boost attendance, and the increased salaries paid to the Baron's ball players, that Hayes did more for baseball than Jackie Robinson.

Unlike other Negro owners, Hayes' background reflects the appearance of upholding the main ingredient Foster envisioned for the league, and that was character.