

# *That Other Baseball Team: The Atlanta Black Crackers and the World of Southern African American Baseball*

David Harmon  
Montgomery, AL

The origin of professional baseball coincided with the establishment of segregation as an American institution. While a handful of African Americans were members of professional teams during the 1870s and 1880s, the various leagues gradually forced African Americans out of organized baseball by the end of the 1890s. The establishment of this color line did not douse the enthusiasm and love of African Americans for the game of baseball. While a prejudiced society and baseball establishment prohibited African Americans from playing alongside whites, they could not stop blacks from playing baseball.

African American businessmen in Atlanta, Georgia sponsored a black baseball team, the Atlanta Deppens, at the end of the nineteenth century. This team barnstormed the South playing teams from New Orleans, Birmingham, Macon, and Chattanooga. Due to financial difficulties, the Deppens disbanded in the early 1900s. In the summer of 1918, African American businessmen attempted a second time to establish a professional black baseball team in Atlanta. Recruiting heavily from the four African American colleges, these businessmen organized the Atlanta Cubs. In 1921 this team changed its name from the "Cubs" to the "Black Crackers" in homage to the Atlanta Crackers, the city's white Southern League team. The Atlanta Crackers gave their old uniforms to the African American team. When the white Crackers were out of town, the Black Crackers played at Atlanta's Ponce de Leon Park. Unable to

afford the rental fee for the white park for every contest, the Black Crackers also played at Morehouse or Morris Brown, two local African American colleges. Most of the time, the Black Crackers toured the South playing teams from New Orleans, Hattiesburg, Birmingham, Macon, Augusta, and Gainesville.

In many ways, the Black Crackers reflected life in a segregated society. African American players faced discrimination at home and on the road. Finances were unsteady, scheduling and transportation uncertain, pay low, and equipment inferior to that of white professional teams. Due to financial difficulties, the Black Crackers, a team independent of the Negro leagues, had to travel to survive. Most major hotels were segregated requiring players to stay at private African American homes or sleep on the team bus. A more serious problem was in obtaining food. The Black Crackers sometimes hired a white bus driver to bring food to the players. Following local southern custom, players were forced to go to the back door of restaurants or cafes to receive food. On several occasions, players purchased food in grocery stores. They would buy cold cuts and other foods that would not spoil quickly and make their meals on the team bus.

Despite these hardships and humiliations, the Black Cracker players expressed their love for the game. Many players felt that they were keeping alive the hope for the integration of major league baseball. Some wanted to destroy the negative stereotypes about the ability of African Americans to compete on the athletic field against whites. In a period when the vast majority of Americans, particularly African Americans, rarely travelled great distances, black baseball players were rare men of the world. Travel outside the South exposed many of the baseball players to new ideas and ways of living. As a result, many black players chose to leave the South.

Ironically, the integration of baseball would lead to the demise of the Black Crackers and Southern African American baseball. The integration of the Major Leagues robbed African American baseball of its essential function - the sole opportunity for African Americans to play professional baseball. After Jackie Robinson integrated the professional leagues in 1947, the demand for African American baseball began to dwindle. While some independent African American teams were able to survive until the mid-1960s, the Black Crackers disbanded in 1949.

This paper uses the Atlanta Black Crackers as a case study to illustrate how baseball mirrored societal norms. It also details how one southern African American community recruited, established, and supported a black baseball team. It focuses on the unique relationship between the Atlanta Crackers and the Black Crackers, and uses published oral histories as well as published and unpublished secondary sources. With continued scholarship and the aid of oral histories, the story of Southern African American baseball will eventually be told.