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Black Baseball's First Rivalry: The Cuban Giants and the Gorhams of New York and the Birth of the Colored Championship

During the 1980s and 1990s, baseball historians gave increased attention to the black experience in the national pastime, focusing their attention on its relationship to white society and race relations, the trials and triumphs of black ballplayers, and their competency in confronting racist America. Their research has pointed to the connection between black baseball and black community, particularly emphasizing how the game served as a unifying element to communities in transition and how it bridged class distinctions. While these efforts have dramatically expanded our knowledge, the approaches taken to black baseball have been problematic. A major deficiency is the overwhelming emphasis on the experience of players and the game on the field, and the neglect of black independent clubs. Part and parcel of these deficiencies is the failure to examine the ways in which African Americans facilitated entrepreneurship in the national game.

Both the Cuban Giants and the Gorhams of New York provide excellent case studies of the early African American baseball clubs. The Gorhams, the first known African American club to be black owned and operated, was the Cuban Giants' chief rival. This rivalry evolved into a series of games known as the 'Colored Championship.' Tracing the origins of the colored championship series reveals the impact of changing business attitudes towards baseball, illustrates how the old black middle class shaped the African American game, and examines how the black theatrical profession affected the evolution of black clubs. This paper analyzes the rivalry that emerged between the Cuban Giants and the Gorhams of New York by exploring four themes: the rise of the mulatto elite after emancipation, the impact of business on the formation of both the Cuban Giants and the Gorhams of New York, the creation of the colored championship series, and the impact of the black theatrical profession on the black game on the field.

The primary sources for baseball in this period are the African American and white press. Data from these sources show the types of professional and semi-professional teams black clubs played and permit identification of the barnstorming patterns of the Cuban Giants who served as a model for the early African American clubs to emulate. These sources also illustrate that a symbiotic business relationship existed between the club owners of black and white clubs.