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## A CASE FOR THE NEGRO SOUTHERN LEAGUE

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From the moment there was organized black baseball, southern black baseball followed this example. The first southern league, the Southern League of Colored Base Ballists, formed in 1886 in New Orleans, the first attempt at league organization for African American baseball teams.<sup>1</sup> Black baseball did not disappear from the south after this early attempt but became an accepted part of life in 1920 with the creation of the Negro Southern League. This article attempts to introduce the reader to a bit of the history of this important league.

The Southern League of Colored Base Ballists was created by John Menard. John Willis Menard was from Illinois, a free black who worked for the Department of the Interior during the Civil War. When the fighting stopped, Menard moved to New Orleans to participate in Reconstruction, and in 1868 he was elected to the US House of Representatives—the first African American to win such an election—during a special vote to replace a Louisiana delegate who died in office. White Louisiana was near apoplectic at the result, and his white opponent challenged the legitimacy of the vote. When the House convened to decide whose claim was valid, the body decided to seat neither man. But the inquiry allowed Menard to address the chamber, making him the first African American to do that, as well.<sup>2</sup>

Frustrated by the intransigence of white New Orleans, Menard moved in the early 1870s to Jacksonville, Florida, where he served in the Florida House of Representatives in 1873 but lost the subsequent election. He also acted as justice of the peace for Jacksonville's Duval County. Not simply a politician, Menard added to his resume in 1879, publishing a book of poetry before moving to Key West at the urging of the Florida Republican Party where he went to work as a customs inspector. Working as a customs inspector had its rewards, but it was hardly fulfilling

for a man of Menard's gifts and experiences, and in 1882 he broadened his horizons by taking majority control of the *Key West News*. He renamed his weekly paper the *Florida News* and made it a powerful force in state politics, railing against white Redeemers and racist politicians. "Menard was the most influential black editor [in Florida] speaking for and to blacks in the 1880s," argues historian Jerrell H. Shofner, "and his vigorous editorials were aimed at the political, economic, moral, and educational improvement of his race."<sup>3</sup>

In 1885, the customs job had lost its appeal, and Menard relocated with his paper back to Jacksonville, where he renamed it the *Southern Leader*.<sup>4</sup> Still, while Menard was undeniably influential, he had moved his paper to a much larger circulation area. In Jacksonville there was competition. The *People's Journal*, established in 1883, had a substantial head start on the *Southern Leader*, and Menard needed a mechanism to compete.<sup>5</sup> His mechanism was the Southern League of Colored Base Ballists. The League would provide him with a larger name in the community and beyond.

Membership in the league consisted of three Jacksonville teams, two from Memphis and Savannah, and one apiece from Charleston, Atlanta, and Menard's first southern home, New Orleans. The aggregation only lasted one season (the *Leader* didn't last much longer, closing operations in 1888; its competitor would remain until the onset of Jim Crow in the 1890s), but black baseball's original attempt at organization would establish a precedent.<sup>6</sup> The following season (1887), the National Colored Base Ball League made a similar attempt with teams from Pittsburgh, Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia, and Boston.<sup>7</sup>

As the small number of league cities demonstrates, though the South housed the vast majority of black Americans it simply did not have the middle class infrastructure fostered by Gilded Age mechanized industrialization and urban residential segregation to make such an



organization financially viable. And in a sport driven by newspaper coverage and money, a league founded by a black southern newspaper in an effort to compete with a rival, established press seemed particularly quixotic.

Southern black baseball did not disappear after the death of the Southern League of Colored Base Ballists, but it carried on without any substantial league organization over the next three decades. Mainly what developed were local amateur and semi pro clubs that barnstormed through the south. Traveling was limited and profits even more so. Baseball remained a local entity in much of the south until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The onset of Jim Crow in the 1890s pushed what would eventually become millions into northern urban industrial hubs. But the majority of African Americans still remained in the South, a phenomenon supported by a number of factors, ranging from family connections to simple fear of the unknown. One of those factors would ultimately breathe life back into organized southern black baseball: many discontented travelers migrated to cities within the South. Southern cities offered work outside the bounds of sharecropping, they offered close proximity to other urban black families, and they offered at least a marginal cosmopolitanism that promised a small possibility of reduced racial tensions.

And so the black populations of southern cities grew, and as more and more black businesses developed to cater to the new populations, the southern black middle class—though still far smaller and less powerful than similar groups in the north—brought the possibility of sustainability to larger African American enterprises. Black weekly newspapers, for example, were far more numerous and stable in the era following World War I than they were when Menard's *Southern Leader* began operation. *The Louisiana Weekly*, founded in New Orleans by C. C. Dejoie in 1925, would survive Jim Crow, Depression and Civil Rights and remains in print

today. The *Atlanta Daily World*, founded as the *Atlanta World* in 1928 by William Alexander Scott, is also still in publication.

Of course, there were numerous papers in the north, as well. And the black middle class was far stronger. It was in February 1920 that the Negro National League was founded in Kansas City, spearheaded by President Andrew "Rube" Foster. Building off that northern and western economic viability, the National League would be the first incarnation of what would be considered the core of major league black baseball over the next three decades. But only two weeks later, on March 2, 1920, a similar group of entrepreneurs led by Birmingham businessman Frank M. Perdue met in Atlanta to found the Negro Southern League. Perdue's Birmingham Stars entered the new group, along with teams from Nashville and Knoxville, Jacksonville and Pensacola, New Orleans, Atlanta, and fellow Alabama representative Montgomery. The "Stars", however, would be a temporary appellation. The team's name changed early to the Birmingham Black Barons, playing off the name of the white minor league team in the city. (Atlanta's Black Crackers would do much the same.)<sup>8</sup>

The league would survive through the first half of the 1920s, but would suffer fits and starts after that. Teams cycled through the league depending on their ability to survive the season. Many times teams combined to stay afloat. For example, a number of teams in Jacksonville gradually joined together to form the Jacksonville Red Caps in the 1930s. Other league entrants included the Black Barons, the Chattanooga Black Lookouts, the Nashville Elite Giants, the Memphis Red Sox and the Knoxville Black Giants. The Montgomery Grey Sox moved in and out of the league. In 1923, Perdue sold the Barons to Joe Rush, a local hotel owner who took the team to associate membership in the Negro National League that season, then to full membership in 1925. Associate membership meant they paid a lesser fee and did not

get counted in the final standings for the league. Memphis, only loosely associated with the original Southern League, spent most of its time with the National League, as well.<sup>9</sup>

But all was not well with the National League. Player contract disputes and other disagreements between owners forced Foster to crack down in 1925 and 1926, before failing mental health left him severely debilitated. The resulting controversy and confusion led to the creation of a new Negro Southern League in 1926, one which carried defecting National League teams Memphis and Birmingham, along with stalwarts like Montgomery, Atlanta, and Thomas Wilson's Nashville Elite Giants. At the same time, the smaller Texas-Louisiana League began just to the west of the Mississippi River.<sup>10</sup>

The Southern, however, was the show in the South, and its success in 1926 gave it a new clout, even though its two best teams moved back to the National League in 1927. That year, Indiana judge William C. Hueston took Foster's place as head of the National and signed an agreement with the Southern League for scheduling preferences during southern barnstorming tours by National League teams.<sup>11</sup>

The National's problems, however, did not go away, and were, in fact, only exacerbated by both the Depression and the death of Rube Foster in December 1930. The 1931 season was incomplete at best, calamitous at worst, with Birmingham, Memphis, and Nashville (a recent addition to the National) leaving again for the Southern League.<sup>12</sup> That season would be the National's last, at least in its original incarnation, which left the door open for the Negro Southern League to take many National League players and become a legitimate major league for the first (and what would turn out to be the only) time, since there were no alternatives.

And so, in the depths of the economically devastating year of 1932, the poorest region in the country took the mantle of major Negro League baseball. The effort was spearheaded by



Reuben Bartholomew Jackson, a Nashville doctor and business partner of the Elite Giants' Tom Wilson. Elected to the league presidency in 1931, Jackson realized that in troubled economic times, he needed star power to help his league survive. He courted the membership of the Chicago American Giants, Foster's former team now under the ownership of funeral home owner Robert A. Cole. Indianapolis and Louisville also fielded teams. Eventually, Cleveland joined as well.

There was, however, one other newcomer that major league season of 1932. The Monroe, Louisiana Monarchs did not fit the look of the Southern League's other high-profile team acquisitions. It was a local team in a small town that was known for racial violence more than anything else, but owner Fred Stovall managed to secure a franchise nonetheless.

With the league entrants set, the Southern League began its 1932 season but found themselves competing for attention with a new league, the East-West Colored League, created by Homestead owner Cumberland Posey. Posey wanted to fill the void on the east coast left by the National League's demise. Controversy and low gate receipts, however, would fella the attempt before July.

Controversy would have its way in the Southern, as well. Monroe won the season's first half pennant, but Jackson decided to give the pennant to Chicago, the league's most famous team, hoping that would bolster attendance in the second half. The plan backfired, as the furor that ensued amongst the black newspapers of the South only made completing a season that much more difficult. As a result, the season's second half was far more convoluted. Most teams abandoned the league schedule. Jackson declared Nashville the second half champion, even though all of their victories were the result of league-mandated forfeits, and the Southern's championship series between the American and Elite Giants was vastly overshadowed in the

national press by what most, outside the cities of Chicago and Nashville, considered to be the season's true championship—a "World Series" between the Southern League's Monroe Monarchs and the unaffiliated Pittsburgh Crawfords, playing that season as a virtual all-star team with Hall of Famers at almost every position. Oscar Charleston managed and played for the Pittsburgh team that included Ted Page, Jud Wilson, Josh Gibson, Judy Johnson, Sam Streeter, Ted Radcliffe, Satchel Paige and Cool Papa Bell.

The collusion that Jackson, Nashville's Wilson, and Chicago's Cole undertook to swing the first half pennant, however, would have far broader resonance for Negro Leagues baseball than the simple theft of a championship. It created the relationship between Wilson and Cole, who also worked with Pittsburgh's Gus Greenlee through the Crawfords' association with the Southern that season. That group would use its new familiarity with one another to create a new Negro National League and the East-West All Star Game the following season (1933), ushering in the most stable period in the history of organized black baseball.

But just as the Southern League seemed to continually benefit from National League failings, so too did they falter when the National succeeded. 1933 was the worst year of the Depression, the worst financial year in American history, and the Negro Southern League, stripped of its major league status and many of its best players by the revival of organized black baseball in the North, was fraught with confusion. Still, though organizations like Monroe dropped out early to barnstorm, teams muddled through.<sup>13</sup>

In the years to come, the Southern would also continue to struggle through each season. Montgomery remained a stalwart, as did several Tennessee and Florida teams and various manifestations of the Atlanta Black Crackers. Birmingham stayed for a few more seasons before moving to greater success in the Negro American League, beginning in 1937. Memphis, too,



would be a charter member of the Negro National League's rival. Tom Wilson would move his team temporarily north before settling the Elite Giants in Washington, D.C.<sup>14</sup>

Along with supporting prominent teams that moved on to better leagues, however, the Southern League also showcased the brief but powerful lights of small-town teams like Monroe. The most successful baseball team in Arkansas history, for example, was nurtured by the Negro Southern League. Once located twenty miles southwest of Memphis, Claybrook was a town built around the logging industry of John C. Claybrook, a black entrepreneur and landowner. To keep his workers (and their families) happy, Claybrook formed a company baseball team in 1929 that turned into one of the premier Negro Leagues teams of the 1930s. Claybrook began by playing other semi-pro company teams such as the Dubisson Tigers (a Little Rock club sponsored by mortician Daniel J. Dubisson).<sup>15</sup> But by 1935, Claybrook was facing the Cuban Stars, the Pittsburgh Crawfords, and the Chicago American Giants, among other teams, in regularly scheduled contests. In 1935 the Tigers also joined the Negro Southern League and won the pennant. The following year, John Claybrook, hungry for wins, lured Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe to his lumber town. And again Claybrook won the pennant. But when Radcliffe left, success followed him, and by 1938 the team was gone.<sup>16</sup>

The Southern's role as a barnstorming trail for northern teams, or as a feeder system for teams and players to join the Negro major leagues, are the paradigms by which it is traditionally understood. But while the success of Memphis, Birmingham, and the Elite Giants deserve attention, the Negro Southern League merits far more concern from researchers than that. Organized black baseball started in the South with Menard's Southern League of Colored Baseballists. The second incarnation of the Negro National League was made possible by the machinations of the Southern in 1932. Furthermore, teams like Monroe and Claybrook give

researchers an opportunity to gauge the effects of small-town Jim Crow race relations on the functionality of baseball teams in the region where the majority of black Americans lived. Studying this league also helps complete the picture of black baseball history because so many got their start on these southern teams.

And that, more than anything, is reason enough for further research and study. The black South had two wide-ranging successful enterprises during the era before *Brown v. Board of Education* ushered in the first-wave Civil Rights Movement: historically black colleges and universities and Negro Leagues baseball. It is true that the records are harder to come by, and that the newspapers were not saved as they were in many cities up north. But black southern weeklies exist. Many cannot be loaned, and most are incomplete. But they exist. And during the centennial of Birmingham's Rickwood Field, home for so many years to the founding members of the Negro Southern League, we should reflect on the importance of black southern baseball. Not just because of the players but because of the community support. The South is where the majority of black Americans lived. It was where they experienced the most poverty and the harshest dictates of Jim Crow. It was, in other words, where people needed baseball the most.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Plott, "The Southern League of Colored Base Ballists," *Baseball Research Journal* (1974), <http://research.sabr.org/journals/southern-league> (find better citation).

<sup>2</sup> Larry E. Rivers and Canter Brown, Jr., "African Americans in South Florida: A Home and a Haven for Reconstruction-Era Leaders," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of South Florida* 1 (Number 56 1996), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Rivers and Brown, "African Americans in South Florida," 12; David Shedden, *Florida Newspaper Chronology, 1783-2000* (St. Petersburg, FL: Poynter Institute, Eugene Patterson Library, University of Florida, 2001), 29, 31; and Jerrell H. Shofner, "Florida," in *The Black Press in the South, 1865-1979*, ed. Henry Lewis Suggs (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 92-94.

<sup>4</sup> Rivers and Brown, "African Americans in South Florida," 12; and Shedden, *Florida Newspaper Chronology*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> "African American Newspapers," *Florida Journalism History Project*, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/jour/fljhist/full/africanamericanpapers.pdf>.

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<sup>6</sup> Plott, "The Southern League of Colored Base Ballists"; and "African American Newspapers."

<sup>7</sup> Merl F. Kleinknecht, "The Negro Leagues: A Brief History," in *The Negro Leagues Book*, eds. Dick Clark and Larry Lester (Cleveland: Society for American Baseball Research, 1994), 16; and Ashe, *A Hard Road to Glory*, 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Hauser, *The Negro Leagues Chronology: Events in Organized Black Baseball, 1920-1948* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 5-6; Larry Powell, "Birmingham Black Barons," in *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, Auburn University, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/ArticlePrintable.jsp?id=h-1665>; and Larry Powell, *Black Barons of Birmingham: The South's Greatest Negro League Team and Its Players* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Powell, *Black Barons of Birmingham*, 10; and James Riley, *Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues* (finish citation), 85, 544-545.

<sup>10</sup> Riley, *Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues*, 85, 544-545, 577; and Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory: The African-American Athlete in Baseball* (New York: Amistad, 1993), 26.

<sup>11</sup> Hauser, *The Negro Leagues Chronology*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Hauser, *The Negro Leagues Chronology*, 70.

<sup>13</sup> For more on Monroe, Louisiana and the Negro Southern League in 1932, see Thomas Aiello, *The Kings of Casino Park: Race and Race Baseball in the Lost Season of 1932, Monroe, Louisiana* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), forthcoming.

<sup>14</sup> Riley, *Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues*, 40-41, 85, 544-545, 562, 577.

<sup>15</sup> In 1932, Dubisson actually served as an administrator for the Little Rock Greys of the Negro Southern League. *Atlanta World*, March 20, 1932, 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Chicago Defender*, June 25, 1932, 8; *Shreveport Sun*, August 22, 1936, 5, October 10, 1936, 5; *Louisiana Weekly*, April 11, 1936, 8, April 18, 1936, 8, April 25, 1936, 8; *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, July 4, 2002, 1C, 8C; and *Swingin' Timber: The Story of the Claybrook Tigers*, produced and directed by David D. Dawson, 29 min, Lemke Department of Journalism, University of Arkansas, 2001, videocassette.