Separate and Unequaled: Black Baseball in the District of Columbia
Cover Image: 1944 Homestead Grays
L-r: Jelly Jackson, Ray Battle, Edward Robinson, Sam Bankhead, Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, Dave Hoskins, Jerry Benjamin, and James "Cool Papa" Bell.

Art Carter Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University
Separate and Unequaled: Black Baseball in the District of Columbia

From Reconstruction to the second half of the 20th century, baseball, the great American pastime, was played in Washington, D.C., on segregated fields. This exhibition looks at the phenomenal popularity and community draw of this sport when played by African Americans. Featured are such personalities as Josh Gibson and Walter “Buck” Leonard, star players of the Homestead Grays. The show also highlights community teams that gave rise to the various amateur, collegiate and semi-pro black baseball teams and leagues.

This exhibition was developed by the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum on the occasion of the 2008 opening of Nationals Park, Washington, D.C. Generously supported by the Washington Nationals Baseball Club.
Beyond the post-industrial age into the information age in which we now live baseball has remained relevant to community life. On playgrounds and ball fields new myths and legends—like Josh Gibson’s Griffith Stadium home runs that defied the laws of physics—are born everyday. The history of baseball in the African American community of the District of Columbia illuminates the larger social history of our nation. From the abolitionism of Frederick Douglass and post-civil war radical reconstruction through the segregationist policies of Jim Crow to the achievement of the Civil Rights Movement, the African American community has supported baseball.

Baseball is a sport full of stories. A grand history studying baseball in the community tells us about the lives of not only the players but also of ordinary citizens. It is especially important to remember neighborhoods where baseball flourished, such as far Southeast and pre-1960s Southwest. This exhibition allows us to rediscover the heroes of the past and to inspire future legends.

Researching and bringing to life the story of black baseball in the nation’s capital has been a labor of love. Accolades go to the repositories and lenders, to our museum partners, to the fine staff of the Anacostia Community Museum, and to Ryan A. Swanson, a young scholar of race and sports, who helped shape the narrative.

Anthony Angelo Gualtieri
Exhibit Curator

Photograph by Steven M. Cummings
Washington, D.C., has a unique baseball history that goes back more than 150 years. Long before the Nationals brought professional baseball back to the city in 2005, baseball played out in District schoolyards and alleyways, as well as on the White House lawn. Washington, D.C., was home to the Senators, known for being “first in war, first in peace, and last in the American League.” In the mid-1900s Josh Gibson and the Homestead Grays also played on the Senators’ home field at Griffith Stadium, winning eight of nine Negro National League (NNL) pennants at one point.

Baseball really boomed in Washington following the Civil War, when thousands of men returned to the area from the battlefield and traded their rifles and canteens for bats and baseballs. According to a September 11, 1866, Daily National Intelligencer story, baseball had become “a perfect mania” in the city. Dozens and dozens of baseball clubs formed here in the 1860s and 1870s, and citizens eagerly participated in the sport. During the 19th century, even District and federal government departments formed teams as well, among them the “Typos” of the Government Printing Office and the “War Dogs” of the War Department.

Over the years Washington, D.C., has had black teams and white teams; professional teams and amateur teams; neighborhood teams and citywide teams. Baseball has long been a part of Washington, D.C.’s social fabric—a sometimes unifying factor in a city struggling not only with its local/federal government identity but also with long-standing segregationist tendencies.
Neighborhood and organized teams played wherever they could. Very few teams had their own fields. Many white clubs held favorable leases for city land on which to build humble ballparks. Yet the District’s black clubs such as the Washington Mutuals and the Alert Base Ball Club were forced to rely on the generosity of other clubs with fields or play on open public spaces. During the 1860s the Mutuals and the Alert played most of their games on the White Lot, the baseball field located on what is known now as the White House Ellipse. In 1874, however, the White Lot was abruptly closed to all clubs but the white Creighton Club (not the best team in the city), in part to keep off “the gangs of lazy negroes and other vagrants infesting the grounds” (Sunday Herald and Weekly National Intelligencer, September 4, 1874).

From 1891 to 1965 Griffith Stadium, at 7th Street and Florida Avenue NW, hosted the games of both black and white ball clubs. White-owned and one of only two segregated major league ballparks (Sportsman’s Park in St. Louis was the other), the stadium sat in one of the District’s most vibrant black neighborhoods. When white clubs played, black spectators sat mostly in the right field seats. Still, black semi-pro ball clubs, such as the Washington Potomacs, the Pilots, and the Elite Giants, frequently rented Griffith Stadium, often drawing capacity crowds more than the hometown Senators did. Hundreds of young black and white boys from the surrounding neighborhoods worked at stadium events handling concessions for black and white patrons. Thus the black clubs came and went until the Homestead Grays came to town formally in 1940.
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WASHINGTON HOMESTEAD GRAYS

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FOLLOW THE GRAYS IN THE LOCAL WEEKLY PAPERS: AFRO-AMERICAN—SAM LACY, HAROLD JACKSON; SENTRY—MIKE CARRICK; WASHINGTON TRIBUNE—AL SWEENEY; PITTSBURGH COURIER—RIC ROBERTS.
As World War II raged in Europe and the Pacific, the Washington Homestead Grays dominated the Negro Leagues. The District, however, had to share its team with Pittsburgh. The Grays, formed in 1910 in Homestead, Pennsylvania, originally brought together a group of black steelworkers to play baseball. The club began splitting its games between Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C., in 1937—playing in Forbes Field when the Pirates were out of town and at Griffith Stadium when the Senators traveled. During the club’s tenure in D.C. (1937–1948), the Washington Homestead Grays won nine straight Negro National League (NNL) pennants (some experts say it was 8 out of 9), and two consecutive Colored World Series.

The U.S. war effort snagged many of the era’s best ballplayers: Joe DiMaggio, and Stan Musial of the Major Leagues, and Larry Doby, Connie Johnson, and Buck O’Neil, among others, of the Negro Leagues. For a time black and white ballplayers shared the same uniform—that of the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marines. The Negro Leagues, however, prospered during the war in part because the leagues’ two most famous players, Satchel Paige of the Kansas City Monarchs and Josh Gibson of the Homestead Grays, were both declared “4-F.” Paige’s flat feet and Gibson’s creaky knees kept them from serving the war effort. Black fans, with more disposable income than ever from increased employment opportunities in war-related industry, flocked to the ballparks to see their heroes play. As the war concluded, the Negro Leagues franchises were bringing in revenues of more than $2 million dollars a year, making them one of the largest black owned and operated businesses in the country.

“I don’t break bats, son. I wear them out.”—Josh Gibson.

In 1943 Gibson hit 10 home runs in Griffith Stadium, a stadium record to date for an individual player in one season and more than all the major American League (white) players who hit that year at that baseball park.

Kadir Nelson
Josh Gibson, 2006
Collection of the Artist

Negro Baseball Pictorial Year Book (1945)
Art Carter Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University
African American sportswriters played a great role in the success of the Washington Homestead Grays amidst the indignities of a segregated city and game. Samuel Harold “Sam” Lacy more than any other journalist prodded and cajoled Clark Griffith, the owner of the hapless Senators, to employ the superior black players that already played in his stadium in Negro Leagues games.

Lacy broke barriers himself, becoming the first black member of the Baseball Writers Association of America. While Griffith dragged his feet, Lacy made known the exploits of the Negro Leaguers. A native Washingtonian and a onetime Howard University student, Lacy covered sports for the Washington Tribune and the Chicago Defender, before taking up a post at the Baltimore Afro-American. There he made stars of Negro League players while also demanding that they not be satisfied with a segregated game. Fittingly, it was Lacy who followed Jackie Robinson on the roads of integration, often sharing a room with the baseball trailblazer. Lacy’s vigorous prose captured the game and challenged racist norms.

Lacy shepherded a cadre of young black like-minded sportswriters. Another Washingtonian, Arthur Mantel “Art” Carter joined Lacy’s staff at the Tribune while he finished his education at Howard. In 1939 Carter became sports editor for the Washington Afro-American. Like many journalists of the day, Carter was far from unbiased. In fact he worked part-time as the public relations man for the Homestead Grays and was instrumental in making the former Pittsburgh team the toast of Washington.
Jackie Robinson integrated the Major Leagues by playing second base for the National League Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. In doing so he shattered once and for all any remaining notion that African Americans could not or would not compete at baseball’s highest level. While wildly successful, Robinson’s journey was far from easy. He faced daily insults and slurs from fans, and opposing ballplayers tried to slide spike-first at Robinson as he attempted to turn double plays. By all accounts, however, Robinson played with remarkable grace and skill, and in doing so opened Major League Baseball to a flood of talented black ballplayers. If there were a negative to be found in Jackie Robinson’s path-breaking career it was that his success spelled the end of the Negro Leagues.

In a strange twist of fate, Clark Griffith, the segregationist owner of the Washington Senators, defended the Negro Leagues in 1945 when Brooklyn had first signed Robinson away from the Negro Leagues’ Kansas City Monarchs. Griffith, probably with less than pure motives, urged Negro Leagues owners to protest Robinson’s signing to Baseball Commissioner Albert B. “Happy” Chandler as a breach of contract. They did so and even pursued a merger of the two leagues, but never with much success.

The Negro Leagues’ biggest stars followed Robinson into the integrated Major Leagues, slowly at first and then in an avalanche of signings. Larry Doby joined the Cleveland Indians in 1947, becoming the first black player in the American League. Some black players such as Don Newcombe and Roy Campanella trained first in the minor leagues before starring with their clubs, while others, most prominently Satchel Paige, were thrust straight into the spotlight.

Washington’s integration came a bit slower. Griffith’s Senators finally signed Carlos Paula in 1954. Perhaps most sadly, the Homestead Grays’ most legendary players, Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard, never had a chance to show their stuff in the Major Leagues. Gibson in particular had clamored for an opportunity to challenge the Major League’s best pitchers, but he suffered a nervous breakdown and died suddenly at age 36 in 1947—physically and mentally worn out by unrelenting racism and baseball’s hard life.
The Negro Leagues did not fold immediately after Jackie Robinson left the Kansas City Monarchs for the Brooklyn Dodgers. While the owners of Negro Leagues teams realized that change was afoot, the clubs had made steady profits throughout the 1940s and there was some optimism that black baseball might remain a part of America’s sporting landscape.

The Homestead Grays made a profit in 1946, the last time they finished a season “in the black.” When Gibson died before the 1947 season, only Buck Leonard was left as a reminder of the Grays’ glorious past. The club refitted itself with eager young players and in 1948 won its last NNL Pennant. Then the Grays defeated the Birmingham Black Barons in the Colored World Series to claim its final Negro Leagues championship. Leonard led the club in batting.

But the fans had stopped coming—usually there were only a few thousand even for the best of match-ups compared to the throngs that showed up to see integrated Major League games. For example, in a 1948 game at Griffith Stadium featuring the hometown Senators versus Satchel Paige and the Cleveland Indians, thousands had to be turned away from a packed house.

One Negro League owner in particular fought for a respectable end to the storied black baseball circuit. Effa Manley, with her husband Abe, had purchased the Newark Eagles in 1935. After Robinson’s signing, Manley—operating in a business environment still largely hostile to female participation—demanded that Major League clubs give compensations to their Negro Leagues counterparts when they signed away players. Thus Manley and the Negro Leagues received compensation for Larry Doby, setting a precedent that at least acknowledged the legitimacy of the Negro Leagues.

Although baseball integrated beginning in 1947, no black player received baseball’s highest honor—enshrinement in the National Baseball Hall of Fame—until 1971. Satchel Paige became the first inductee that year. Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard went in together in 1972. Over the course of the past 30 years, baseball executives and historians have slowly worked their way through the annals of the Negro Leagues to induct, as of 2008, 35 former Negro Leaguers (plus 5 major leaguers who played at least one year in the Negro Leagues) into the Cooperstown, New York, shrine. The process has not been easy.

Effa Manley spent her “retirement” years doggedly writing letters and giving speeches encouraging baseball to honor the best Negro Leaguers. Ted Williams, the famous Boston Red Sox outfielder, used his own 1966 induction speech to urge the inclusion of men such as Paige and Gibson. Then, even when selections of the best black ballplayers to the Hall finally began in the 1970s, word leaked out that the Baseball Hall of Fame planned a separate wing for the busts of the Negro Leaguers, segregating baseball once again. Fortunately Baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn (who, as a young man, ran Griffith Stadium’s hand-operated scoreboard) intervened in response to the public uproar over the plan and insisted that all inducted players be honored together.

Since the best players are typically inducted five years after their playing careers ended (the minimum waiting period to get into the Hall of Fame), selecting only a handful of Negro Leaguers for admission at a time overlooked many deserving players. To remedy this, Major League Baseball organized a committee of Negro Leagues experts to make a slate of recommendations. As a result 17 Negro Leagues players and executives were enshrined at Cooperstown in 2006. Effa Manley joined that class as the first woman, black or white, to be so honored. In addition to the Baseball Hall of Fame, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum was founded in 1990 in Kansas City, Missouri, and dedicated to preserving the memories of black baseball.
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