

HISTORIC ROOTS

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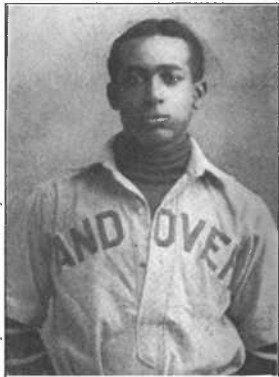
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W. C. Matthews
CAPTAIN

Matthews' yearbook picture when he was captain of the Andover baseball team.

Baseball gear is very different today, especially the gloves.



McClure's Magazine, June 1905

Photograph by Pach
WILLIAM C. MATTHEWS
Harvard's best baseball player

WILLIAM CLARENCE MATTHEWS, A BASEBALL PIONEER

By KARL LINDHOLM

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The Fourth of July in 1905 was a special day for Burlington baseball fans. It was the first time they would get a look at their new short-stop, William Clarence Matthews.

They had already had a chance to see him play for Harvard against the University of Vermont, but this was his first game as a professional. He had been the best player on the Harvard team, and Harvard was the best college baseball team in the country. Now he would play for Burlington in the Northern League against teams from Montpelier-Barre, Rutland, and Plattsburgh. The Northern League was one of dozens of professional leagues around the country below the level of the major leagues.

Matthews was special. He was small, strong, and quick. He was a good hitter, a daring base runner, and a fine fielder. He was

also special because he was black.

On July 4, 1905 Matthews was the only “colored” man on the field in the doubleheader against Rutland. He was the only black player in the Northern League. He was probably the only black professional playing with whites in the United States. That day more than 2,000 fans saw Matthews get three hits and play well in the field. *The Burlington Free Press* said that the fans had cheered Matthews and that when the ball was hit to him, he “fairly ate it up.”

Many blacks were playing professional baseball at this time, but until the end of World War II they all played on black teams in black leagues. The great white players of this period, like Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb, made good money and played before big crowds. Great black players like Josh Gibson and Cool Papa Bell struggled to make a living.

Matthews may have been the first black ballplayer in Vermont. Not many blacks attended white colleges then. The very first black college graduate in America, however, was Alexander Twilight, a Vermonter who went to Middlebury College in the 1820s.

Matthews was good enough to play baseball in the big leagues, and he wanted to. At Harvard, he had led his team in hitting all four years, batting .400 in his senior year. During his years there Harvard won 75 games and lost only 18.

MATTHEWS DISRUPTS LEAGUE



VERMONT LEAGUE PLAYERS DRAW COLOR LINE AND OBJECT TO PLAYING IN SAME GAME WITH HARVARD MAN.

The Boston Transfer, July 10, 1905

In these early days of baseball many players went right from college to the major leagues. There was a rumor later in the 1905 season that the Boston Nationals wanted to sign Matthews. National League officials would not allow it.

Matthews was disappointed. He told *The Burlington Free Press* that “Negroes should not be shut out because their skin is black.” He said he would spend his life trying to get blacks into the major leagues.

The 1905 season was the only summer Matthews played professional baseball. His Burlington team were defending league champions. They played their games at Athletic Park on Riverside Avenue, where Charlebois Garage is now. It cost a dime to get in; season tickets were six dollars.

The world that Matthews faced in the Northern League was an intolerant one. Although life was harder for blacks in the South, even in Vermont there were people who believed that the races should not mix. To make things even harder, some of the players in the league came from the South.

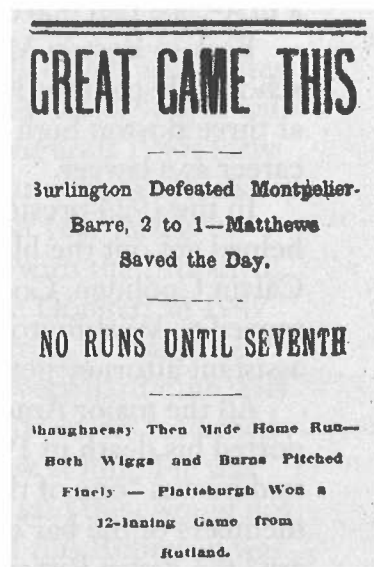
One of these, Sam Apperious, played for Montpelier-Barre. He was from the same town in Alabama as Matthews and had refused to play against Harvard when he was in college because Matthews was on the team. He still refused to play against him in Vermont. This caused a lot of trouble.

Most newspapers sided with Matthews. One said, "Vermonters...are not fussy as to the color of the player who can deliver the right quality." The Montpelier paper, on the other hand, said that Apperious "absolutely cannot take any other stand." To play with blacks, even if he wanted to, it said, would turn white people in the South against him and his family. The story made the papers all over the country. The *Boston Journal* said that Apperious was "very

much out of place in the state of Vermont...and should be given his release." Most people saw the trouble as proof that blacks and whites should not play together.

Matthews played well, even though his hitting fell off near the end of the season. A headline on the July 29th sports page of the *Free Press* read, "Matthews Saved the Day" as he batted in the winning run against Montpelier-Barre. In another game, the *Free Press* reported on the "excellent base running by Matthews and Dowd." It also said that Matthews "was spiked in three places in the last steal."¹

Matthews was often spiked. Near the end of the season, manager G.E. Whitney played him in the outfield for three games to keep him away from base runners who wanted to injure him. Burlington teammates and fans supported him. When it was suggested that he get rid of Matthews for the good of the league, Whitney said, "No, sir, this Negro is going to



The Burlington Free Press, July 29, 1905

¹ Players' shoes had metal cleats, called spikes, on the soles. Runners sliding into base might hit fielders with their spikes, cutting them. Sometimes they did it on purpose.

play ball as long as Burlington stays in the league. If Matthews goes, I go.”

Burlington finished the season in second place, two games behind Montpelier-Barre. Many of Matthews’ teammates went off to play on teams in other leagues with longer seasons. Matthews, however, went back to Boston and a new life. He was through with baseball, but he had earned respect for his play. Many agreed with pitcher Rube Vickers, when he said, “he is a first-class ball player and a fine man.”

Back in Boston Matthews went to law school. He paid for his education by coaching at three Boston high schools. He had a fine career as a lawyer.

In the 1924 presidential election, Matthews helped get out the black vote for President Calvin Coolidge. Coolidge won. Matthews moved to Washington, DC and became an assistant attorney general.²

All the major American newspapers reported his death in 1928. The *New York Times* said he was “one of the most prominent Negro members of the bar in America.”³ In its obituary,⁴ the *Boston Post* said Matthews was “no

² The Attorney General of the United States is the head of the Justice Department. He is also a member of the president’s cabinet and one of his official advisors. Matthews’ job was an important one.

³ “Member of the bar” is a very formal way of saying “lawyer.”

⁴ An obituary is an article about someone who has died.

MONTREAL SIGNS NEGRO SHORTSTOP

Robinson Joins Dodger Farm
From Kansas City Monarchs
to Establish a Precedent

4-SPORT STAR AT U. C. L. A.

Brooklyn Organization Set to
Combat Criticism as Rickey
Scouts Other Negroes

The New York Times, October 24, 1945

The signing of Jackie Robinson made headlines in The New York Times.

doubt the greatest colored athlete of all time,” “the best infielder Harvard ever had,” and “[its] greatest big league prospect.”

Matthews never saw blacks and whites play major league ball

together. That didn’t happen until 1945, forty years after his season in Vermont, seventeen years after his death. In that year Jackie Robinson signed a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He came up to the Dodgers in 1947 after playing a year in Montreal. Though he was a great player, he had a very hard time. His life was threatened. Fans and players screamed insults at him. Pitchers threw at him. He was often spiked. Some players said they would not play if he did. Despite all of this Robinson was named Rookie of the Year in 1947. He played for eleven years and is now in the Hall of Fame.

Times have changed, even since Jackie Robinson’s day. In Vermont blacks and hispanics as well as whites play pro ball each summer at Centennial Field in Burlington, home of the Vermont Expos. Nearly a third of



Who's Who in Colored America, 1928

Matthews as a lawyer.

the major league players, and many of the game's greatest stars, now come from racial minorities. The National League's Most Valuable Player in 1995 was Cincinnati's Barry Larkin, a black man who played for the Vermont Reds in 1985.

William Clarence Matthews played only that one season of professional baseball. Not many people know about him, but he was a

pioneer and a hero. A writer in the *Boston Globe* in the 1960s called him "the Jackie Robinson of his age."

Rooting Around

Baseball is a nine-part history of baseball on video tape. It shows wonderful pictures of all the old heroes and ballparks. It also shows how hard it was for blacks to make it into the major leagues. The series was written and produced by Ken Burns, who also made a film series about the Civil War. Many public libraries have copies of the tapes for members to borrow. Your librarian can help you find them.