

A Museum of Their Own



World Almanac for Kids

Willie Mays and Roy Campanella started out in the Negro Leagues and followed Jackie Robinson into the majors.

When the baseball that Leroy "Satchel" Paige and Josh Gibson autographed went up for sale several years ago, the staff at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum wanted to get their mitts on it.

And why wouldn't they? On the ball were the signatures of two of the greatest players in Negro Leagues history—in all of baseball history, for that matter.

But the small museum, devoted to telling the story of the Negro Leagues, struck out. The round

relic¹ fetched \$30,000, more than the museum's yearly budget to buy such items.

Now, though, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum is about to hit a home run. Officials have unveiled an ambitious \$15 million project to expand the organization's collection and exhibition space.

The museum plans to buy an old building up the street from the current museum and to turn it into a library and research center. The vacant building is an old YMCA where the first Negro League was born. The building served the black community of Kansas City, Missouri, for decades.

"It was a place where people could go and get something to eat and not worry about **segregation**²," Ray Doswell, the museum's curator, told *Weekly Reader Senior Edition*. "It's also where the Negro National League was founded."

¹ **relic**: an object that is considered interesting because of its age or its connection with the past

² **segregation**: the separation or isolation of a race, class, or group

First Negro League

Why did African Americans need a league of their own? They had to form their own leagues because they weren't allowed to play with white ballplayers.

The first Negro League got its start in 1920. That's when Andrew Rube Foster, a pitcher with the 1902 Cuban X-Giants and the Chicago Union Giants, decided that black players needed a baseball league.

Foster met with a group of African Americans at the YMCA in Kansas City. There they formed the Negro National League. The league flourished for a decade. "It is your league," Foster told fellow African Americans. "Nurse it! Help it! Keep it!"

African Americans soon began playing in other Negro Leagues around the country. Traveling from town to town was a hard life for many. Because hotels in many cities did not allow blacks inside, the players slept on buses, in stadiums and along the sides of roads.

More often than not, the players had to face **ethnic slurs**³ and taunts. "Out on the field, there'd be some white folks in the stands," Satchel Paige wrote in his autobiography. "Some of them'd call you [hateful names], but most would cheer you."

In 1947, black players finally got their shot in the majors. That's when Jackie Robinson, a veteran of the Negro Leagues, **integrated**⁴ baseball by playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers.



Library of Congress

Jackie Robinson integrated baseball by playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

³ **ethnic slur**: unkind remark based on race or cultural group

⁴ **integrate**: to end the segregation of

Great Ballplayers

Many Negro League players became baseball's best. Henry Aaron, who played for several major-league teams, including the Atlanta Braves, began his career slugging home runs for the Indianapolis Clowns of the Negro American League. In 1974, he broke "Babe" Ruth's all-time home-run mark.

James "Cool Papa" Bell was one of the fastest men in baseball. During his career, he stole 173 bases. Paige used to say Bell was so quick that he could flip off a light switch in the bedroom and be across the room under the covers before the light went out.

Then there was Paige himself. After two decades in the Negro Leagues, Paige helped the Cleveland Indians win the American League pennant in 1948. At the time, Paige was a 42-year-old major-league "rookie" pitcher.

Unique History

The new research center at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum will give the public a chance to learn more about those players and hundreds of others who **toiled**⁵ in baseball **obscurity**⁶.

There will be interactive exhibits and computers as well as memorabilia. The museum is already home to dozens of bats, balls, and uniforms and hundreds of photographs.

"There's a connection between baseball and African American history," Doswell told *Weekly Reader Senior Edition*. "We want to show young people what these guys went through just to play baseball. Many of these guys worked in the iron mills or on railroads until game time."

ish

⁵ **toil**: work hard and long

⁶ **obscurity**: state of not being widely known