

The Historic Dimension Series

A student publication series by the UNCG Department of Interior Architecture



Black baseball players of the time were refused a seat at the table, so they built their own table with talent, dedication, and hard work.

Remembering America's Pastime: Preserving Negro League Stadiums & Ballparks

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Fall 2020

In the United States today, there are ballparks and stadiums that served as homes for Negro League Baseball (NLB) teams that still stand. This brief will discuss the renovations or plans made to renovate five of those stadiums and ballparks. Those five stadiums and ballparks are: Rickwood Field, League Park, Hamtramck Stadium, Hinchliffe Stadium, and J.P. Small Memorial Stadium. All those ballparks and stadiums have been restored or rehabilitated in some way, except for Hamtramck and Hinchliffe Stadiums. This brief will make a case that both Hamtramck and Hinchliffe Stadiums are historically and culturally valuable, and in desperate need of restoration and should be preserved for future generations.

These stadiums should be renovated, rehabilitated, and preserved because they stand as an open challenge to the racist system known as Jim Crow (1870s to 1960s) where Black athletes were barred from playing professional sports amongst other forms of discrimination. These stadiums and ballparks were home to teams of Black athletes who came together and formed their own professional baseball teams to combat the racial injustice and segregation they faced from Major League Baseball that would not let them in at the time.

A Brief History of the Negro Leagues

The Negro Leagues got their start when the National Association of Amateur Baseball Players barred African American

membership in 1867 and in 1876 owners of the professional National League entered a Gentleman's Agreement to keep Black athletes out. It would not be until 1920 that the Black athletes were able to play professionally through the Negro Leagues. There were three main Negro Leagues: The Negro National League, the Eastern Colored League, and the Negro American League formed in 1920, 1923, and 1937, respectively. Northern cities like Chicago and New York City were home to teams like the Chicago American Giants (See Figure 2) and the New York Black Yankees (See Figure 3). While Northern cities were the main places where the Negro Leagues really began to take shape, these teams and leagues formed anywhere there were large enough populations of African Americans. The deep South was also home to several teams and leagues, such as the Memphis Red Sox and the Birmingham Black Barons. The term Negro League Baseball itself specifically describes the larger big-league, Black teams during American segregation. The term was created as way to differentiate between the Negro major leagues from White major league and minor league teams.

Negro League Baseball quickly became a favorite pastime for African Americans. During its inaugural year and beyond it was completely normal for Sunday games to have 5,000 in attendance. By the 1930s, Yankee Stadium hosted doubleheaders with crowds of 20,000 African Americans in attendance. In the following decade, the East-West Classic, which was the all-star game for the Negro Leagues, drew a crowd of



Fig. 2: Chicago American Giants, ca. 1930s

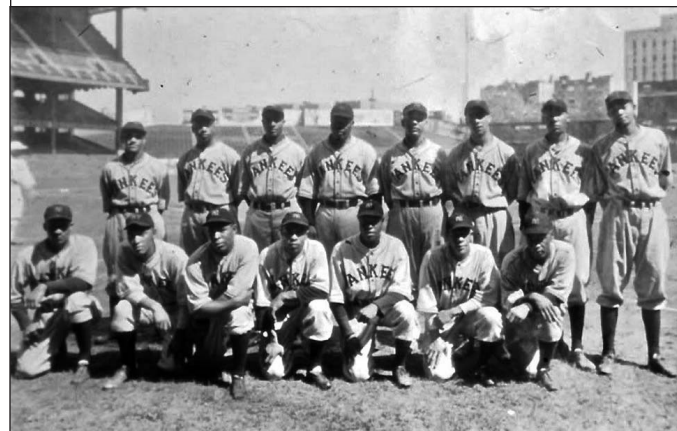


Fig. 3: New York Black Yankees, 1934



Fig. 4: Detroit Cubs at Hamtramck Stadium, 1935

over 35,000 Black people. Historian Donn Rogosin notes that the large crowds that were drawn meant that business for the Negro Leagues was booming, the Leagues were one of the largest Black business in the country before desegregation. At the height of their popularity they were a multi-million-dollar operation. In addition, the Negro Leagues also created jobs for people in their communities. The Negro Leagues brought business to the neighborhoods that surrounded the stadiums and ballparks through the crowds that were drawn because people needed lodging and food.

The Negro Leagues were successful businesses that brought commerce to the cities in which they were located. The Leagues were organized, and they were home to great players like Willie Mays, Jackie Robinson, and Satchell Paige. Although the records are incomplete, Rogosin notes that Negro teams won 60% of their encounters with white major league teams. Despite all the popularity and success that the Negro Leagues gained amongst African Americans, the Leagues themselves were largely ignored by White society and were not recognized by White professional teams. A Black athlete had not played in the major since the late 19th century and it would remain that way until 1947 when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier. Larry Doby followed three months after that. As more and more traditionally White major league teams began to desegregate, the Negro leagues began to lose fans. Eventually, the Negro National League disbanded in 1948 and the Negro American League disbanded in the 1950s. By 1989 all the Negro Leagues and teams had disbanded. After effectively ending Negro League Baseball, the Negro Leagues never received recognition from the major leagues simply because the players were Black, but that did not stop them from playing. The stadiums and ballparks that remain represent the willingness of Black athletes to stand in the face of adversity and create something that was truly extraordinary.

it was constructed in 1930 and is in what is now Veterans Memorial Park. The Stadium was home to the Negro League Baseball teams the Detroit Stars and the Detroit Cubs which (See Figure 4). On July 31, 2012, Hamtramck Stadium was placed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Although Hamtramck Stadium was once an important hub for the community and an invaluable part of Negro League Baseball history, it has been sitting vacant since the 1990s. Hamtramck Stadium is an example of neglect, as it has not been used since the 1990s. The only things that remain are the pitcher's mound and flagpole. The community is very limited in its interactions with the stadium as the seating and other amenities have been overrun with vegetation and fallen into a state of disrepair due to neglect (See Figure 5). Hamtramck hosted Negro League championships as well as local church leagues, concerts, school sporting events, and, during World War II, war bond rallies. Based on the events that it has hosted throughout the years; it is clear for all to see that the Hamtramck Stadium served an integral part of the surrounding community. The Friends of Historic Hamtramck Stadium (FHHS) was founded in 2012, and the group has been leading the charge for restoration and rehabilitation of the Stadium, and they have laid out a timeline for restoring the stadium.

The timeline begins with restoring the playing field in September 2020, integrating the site itself into the New Hamtramck Park Conservancy by Fall 2020, restoring

Case Study: Hamtramck Stadium

Hamtramck Stadium is one of those remaining stadiums,
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Fig. 5: Hamtramck Seating Overrun with Weeds, 2020

the grandstand by Summer 2021, and making parking lot and infrastructure improvements by Fall 2021. The FHHS can do the work that they do through supporter donations and even through government support. In April of 2020, Hamtramck Stadium was awarded \$490,729 by the National Park Service's African American Civil Rights Historic Preservation Fund which is the largest amount of money the FHHS has received to begin restoring the stadium. The FHHS is committed to saving the stadium because they realize the value that a facility like that can bring to a community. While the FHHS has a renovation timeline which they would like to see fulfilled, they lack the funding to carry out their timeline. Hopefully the FHHS will receive the funding needed to restore the Stadium. If Hamtramck Stadium is restored, then it can be used the way it was used all those years ago. It can begin to host baseball games, soccer games, wrestling events, concerts, and other events that are central to the community.

Case Study: Hinchliffe Stadium

In Patterson, New Jersey, Hinchliffe Stadium is another example of a cultural gem and historic place that has been left to ruin by time. Hinchliffe Stadium was built by the city of Patterson between the years of 1932 and 1933. Ownership of Hinchliffe was transferred over to Patterson Public Schools in 1963. Hinchliffe has been closed since 1996 and has been left to deteriorate (See Figures 6 and 7). In March of 2013, the stadium was designated a National Historic Landmark. After realizing that Hinchliffe had fallen into a state of disrepair, several groups partnered together with hopes of rehabilitating the structure including Patterson Public Schools, the City of Patterson, and Friends of Hinchliffe Stadium.

Hinchliffe Stadium has been home to two different Negro league teams, the Newark Eagles (figure 8) and the New York Black Yankees for 12 seasons. The New York Cubans also occasionally played there. The stadium was also the site of the 1933 silk worker protest, which attracted 15,000 people. Hinchliffe was the site of what was known as the "Colored Championship of the Nation," in which the Philadelphia Stars defeated the New York Black Yankees. Hinchliffe Stadium itself has



Fig. 6: Hinchliffe Stadium Infield, 2020

hosted Negro League baseball games, football games, high school sporting events, auto racing, and concerts. Hinchliffe has a rich and storied history that should be preserved and cherished for its special place in Patterson's history, baseball history, and African American history.

In October of 2019, Patterson's City Council approved developers' \$76 million renovation project that aims to turn Hinchliffe into a new facility for the community. The stadium will become a 7,800-seat athletic facility, with a 314-space parking garage, a restaurant with a museum. The museum will feature exhibits dedicated to the stadium's Negro league baseball history the project will also include a 75-unit apartment building for seniors and a 5,800 square-foot childcare center. This project was able to come to fruition through Mayor André Saygeh's dedication to Hinchliffe Stadium. In order to attain the necessary funding for the property, Saygeh and the City Council must secure \$49.9 million in tax credits from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. Saygeh's plan was initially rejected by the City Council; however, through numerous changes made and an agreement between developers, the project was approved. As mentioned earlier, the Patterson School System owns Hinchliffe. Part of the changes and agreements, the school system reserves the right to reserve use of the stadium for school events for 180 days a year.

The city of Patterson has been working to shore up interest among the community by unveiling a new mural (See Figure 9) and welcome sign on the outer walls of the stadium. The mural honors Larry Doby, the second player to break the color line just three months after Jackie Robinson. Doby also played at Hinchliffe Stadium. This is a great way to draw the public's attention and care towards the stadium and its history.



Fig. 7: Hinchliffe Stadium Scoreboard, 2020

As with most projects of this magnitude, there are those against its renovation. Council Michael Jackson is one of the most notable critics of the plan. Jackson argues that the plan will not create jobs that the community desperately needs, and that the plan is not the best way to use tax credits intended to stimulate the economy. Jackson has acknowledged the history of Hinchliffe and its importance, but he believes the project is a fool's errand—even calling it stealing. Jackson does not see any economic value in the project at all, and he argues that very few jobs would be created from the project. The developers working to restore Hinchliffe stadium were given two years (starting in 2020) to complete the project in order to receive their tax credits. So, the developers have until July 1, 2022, to complete the project and receive tax credits. The mayor and developers were hoping to break ground in mid 2020. Hinchliffe now has a plan of action and funding but has not been able to begin work due to COVID-19.

Restored Stadiums and Ballparks

In Birmingham, Alabama, Rickwood Field (See Figure 10) is one of the ballparks that has been renovated and still hosts baseball games today. Once home to the Birmingham Black Barons, Rickwood Field is now owned by the City of Birmingham. League Park, seen in Figure 11 during its prime, is yet another example of a ballpark that has been restored. League Park was initially built in 1891 with parts of it demolished and rebuilt throughout the years. The park still has few structures that are original, such as a ticket house and one of the grandstand walls. The most recent renovation was a \$6.3 million-dollar project that was completed in 2019. That project included new turf for the field and new fencing.



Fig. 8: Newark Eagles, 1930s



Fig. 9: Hinchliffe Stadium Mural, 2020

In Jacksonville, Florida, J.P. Small Memorial Stadium is another stadium in which the community saw value. It was restored in 2006 and was originally named Joseph E. Durkee Athletic Field. The stadium was home to the Jacksonville Redcaps seen in Figure 12, the only Negro league team in the city. This made them an essential part of the African American community in Jacksonville and the surrounding cities. All three of those facilities were able to be renovated through funding and public interest.

Conclusion

The Negro League ballparks and stadiums that stand today have stood the test of time. They represent a time in American history in which Black athletes were barred from playing in the major leagues, and stand as a direct response to systemic racism. Black baseball players of the time were refused a seat at the table; therefore, they built their own table with talent, dedication, and hard work.

These stadiums must be preserved for the tremendous amount of history they hold. They were integral parts of their community through creating commerce and jobs for their cities. Hinchliffe and Hamtramck stadiums are both in desperate need of repair, which can be seen in Figures 13 and 14. They have been left to ruin by local governments and communities. As the preservation movement has become more prominent, governments and communities alike have begun to come to the realization that community spaces are vital to the life of the community. In their primes, Hamtramck and Hinchliffe



Fig. 10: Rickwood Field, 2010s



Fig. 11: Aerial View of League Park, 1910s

Stadiums were two very integral parts of their community and since the 1930s hosted many kinds of community events. These stadiums were also economically important to their communities as they provided jobs and fueled commerce in their cities. Given the proper funding, Hamtramck and Hinchliffe Stadiums can be restored to their former glory or repurposed to meet the needs of their communities.



Fig. 12: Jacksonville Redcaps, 1930s

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Fig. 13: Close up of Hinchcliffe Stadium Seating, 2020

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Fig. 14: Graffiti under Hamtramck Stadium Seating, 2020

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