

False Intentions: The Relationship Between Clark Griffith and the Homestead Grays

by Nicola Brady

The Homestead Grays were one of the most popular teams in the Negro Leagues. They were also a unique team because in the 1940s they split their home games between Forbes Field, Pittsburg, and Griffith Stadium in Washington D.C. in order to boost attendance. While taking advantage of the large African American community of D.C, the Homestead Grays also captured the attention of Clark Griffith, the owner of the Washington Senators and Griffith Stadium. Having such a popular and talented black baseball team in his own back yard caused many people to pressure him about breaking the color barrier in the Major Leagues by integrating his team. The importance and popularity of the Homestead Grays within the African American community of Washington D.C. lead Clark Griffith to publicly flirt with the idea of integrating his team when really he had no intention of doing so.

Griffith received so much pressure to integrate the Washington Senators because of the immense popularity the Grays received among the large African American population in D.C. The Homestead Grays had great importance and popularity among the African American community in Washington D.C. because they contributed to racial pride. The Homestead Grays often drew crowds larger than the major league Washington Senators in Griffith Stadium where they arguably played a better game than the Senators. The team also symbolized a successful black institution owned and operated by African Americans.¹ In a city that barred African Americans from most professional positions, people enjoyed seeing black owners and players earning lots of money.² The Grays gave Washingtonians a chance to see extremely talented black athletes such as Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard. Even white newspapers recognized these athletes as having the skills to play in the Major Leagues. Shirley Povich wrote in the *Washington Post* that Josh Gibson proved a better catcher than Bill Dickey, a legendary catcher for the New York Yankees.³ The fact that white newspapers even covered the Negro Leagues was a point of racial pride because, for once, white society recognized the success of the African American community instead of the crime and poverty.⁴

The Homestead Grays also helped bring the African American community together in order to support black institutions. As Jules Tygiel stated in his book *Past Time*, "Within the African American community, the officials, players, and teams of black baseball symbolized pride and achievement while creating a sphere of style and excitement that overlapped with the worlds of black business, politics, religion, and entertainment."⁵ Black baseball provided business to restaurants, cafes, bars, night clubs, and rooming houses within the African American community. The owner of the Black Barons, Tom Hayes, commented on the importance of black baseball stating

that, "thousands of dollars we spend in Negro Cafes, hotels, newspapers, and similar enterprises."⁵ In support of African American charities, churches, hospitals, and civil rights groups, the teams would hold benefit games. Some of the money from the Negro Leagues would come back to the neighborhoods that helped support them.⁶

In general, the Homestead Grays helped to build a sense of community in Washington. Games were a festive occasion in the African American community where people would come to games wearing their Sunday best. The clubs often gave ministers free passes to the games, so whole congregations often went straight from church to the ball game on Sundays. After the Great Migration brought many southern blacks to Washington, Griffith Stadium helped reunite families and friends who moved to different parts of the city.⁷ A Negro Leaguer family member commented after she moved to Washington that, "You would see everybody from home when you went to the ball game."⁸ Because the baseball games became such a social environment often promoted by churches, they attracted the entire family.⁹ Former Homestead Grays player Wilmer Fields remembered that, "Most of our fans came as families, which made our games a family affair."¹⁰ Whole families attended the games creating a socially acceptable place where all generations could come together.

Grays games not only provided an arena for intergenerational interaction but for interracial mixing as well. Griffith Stadium provided one of the few places for interracial interaction in this Jim Crow town. While Washington D.C. might have been the capital for the "land of the free," racism still prevailed. There stood a law on the books making discriminatory practices in sales punishable by a fine and a temporary forfeit of licensure to operate. Regardless, Jim Crow remained socially acceptable.¹¹ Even in 1948, African Americans were barred from hotels, restaurants, and department stores in the downtown area. This created a large problem for dark skinned foreign dignitaries who were also refused service. While public transportation was integrated, blacks and whites were almost completely segregated into different neighborhoods. The vast majority of businesses that would provide services to African Americans were in the segregated part of the city.¹² Even though Washington is considered a southern city because it lies below the Mason Dixon Line, other cities farther south did not have as an extensive segregation of housing between races as D.C.¹³ Although Griffith Stadium had segregated seating, this was one of the few public places where both blacks and whites could go. Game day gave white Washingtonians a unique chance to venture into the heart of the African American neighborhood where the stadium resided.¹⁴

Baseball in D.C. provided one of the few recreational escapes for African Americans adding to their immense popularity. In this very racist city, there were very few recreational outlets not barred from African Americans. While federally run recreation centers and parks were available to everyone, community centers and school playgrounds under the city's jurisdiction maintained segregation.¹⁵ No playgrounds in D.C. permitted access to black children and African American schools did not have enough space for designated play space. The District of Columbia Recreation Board not only barred black children from the only playground in the African American neighborhood, but it also made it illegal for black and white children to play together.¹⁶ Due to the unsafe and crowded conditions of the ghettos

and Jim Crow practices, there were few safe places African American children could play outside during the 1940s. Grays' games gave both African American adults and children a place where they could enjoy themselves outside.

While Griffith Stadium might have provided a unique recreational escape for African American and a place for interracial mingling, the Homestead Grays actually brought them there during the 1940s. The Homestead Grays were one of the only black professional baseball teams to make it in D.C. Prior to the Gray's move to D.C., Major League games were the only type of baseball local African American seemed to enjoy. The community remained quite loyal to the Senators and, as a result, they spent all their money attending Major League games. Not only were they uninterested in attending any of the local black professional baseball teams, but they could not afford to attend both. Teams such as the Black Sox, the Braves, the Washington Potomacs and the Washington Pilots went under or had to relocate due to lack of support.¹⁷ If African American baseball fans did not attend Senators' games, they went to see Babe Ruth, a hugely popular player among black Washingtonians.¹⁸ It seems that prior to the 1940s, African Americans believed the white Major Leagues provided a superior game to that of black baseball.¹⁹ Of course the Homestead Grays disproved this when they came to D.C. The fact that they outdrew the Senators provided strong evidence toward the Grays' superior game.

Eventually, even the white community began to recognize the skill of these black baseball players. Some individual Grays players received public recognition from whites for having equal or greater talent than some major league players. The legendary Black Babe Ruth, Josh Gibson, received the most public recognition. Walter Johnson, a pitcher for the Washington Senators stated:

There is a catcher that any big league club would like to buy for \$200,000. His name is Gibson ... he can do everything. He hits the ball a mile. And he catches so easy he might as well be in a rocking chair. Throws like a rifle. Bill Dickey isn't as good a catcher. Too bad this Gibson is a colored fellow.

Even one of Clark Griffith's own players would admit to the fact that race remained the only factor keeping Gibson out of the Major Leagues. Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard of the Grays looked so good that the owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates, William Benswagner, openly considered signing them to his major league team.²⁰ Even Clark Griffith took notice of these skilled athletes playing in his own backyard. One Gray's player, Ted Radcliffe, remembers Griffith saying to him, "Double Duty, if you were a white boy I'd pay you \$1000 a month to pitch, \$1000 to catch, and \$1000 to pinch hit."²¹ Griffith also commented that Josh Gibson was a \$250,000 catcher and only the color of his skin kept him from making big money in the majors.²² No longer could the Major Leagues hide behind their lie that no black players were good enough to make their teams.

With such a skilled team on his own field and for making comments like these, Clark Griffith began to receive public criticism for not integrating the Senators, especially from black newspapers. This was further driven by the fact that the

Senators were doing so poorly during the 1940s. An open letter to Griffith in the *Washington Afro-American* reads:

Dear Mr. Griffith

We see by the daily paper that you are lamenting the woeful lack of capable material in the Nationals' spring training camp, and begging the mercy of the Washington fans for support.

Yet, no where have we seen any mention of you, or your scouts, making any overtures to give tryouts to worthy players of the Negro National or Negro American Leagues.²³

The letter goes on to say that the black fans Griffith depended on to make money would no longer support his club if he refused to give African American players opportunities. Pressure was beginning to mount from both the black press and African American fans.

Previously the African American community saw Clark Griffith as their ally for his supportive statements, so they expected him to break the color barrier in the Major Leagues. In 1939 he famously stated "There are few big league magnates who are not aware of the fact that the time is not far off when colored players will take their places beside those of the other races in the major leagues."²⁴ Not only did Griffith acknowledge the skill of these African American players, but he suggested that the integration on the Major Leagues was inevitable. This provided a hopeful sign that the gentleman's agreement would not last forever. But with these encouraging statements came a double edged sword. He rejected immediate integration of the Major Leagues, but encouraged building up a separate black league instead with such high professionalism, their skill could no longer be denied. He also believed that African Americans' economic situation made them inferior to white athletes:

The economic stress through which the American Negro race has been forced to grow has so hindered their athletes that the group itself is not to be blamed for their shortcomings in certain phases of athletic life.

On these grounds he argued, "It is unreasonable to demand of the colored baseball player the consistent peak performance that is requisite of the game as it is played in the big leagues."²⁵ While appearing to appeal to the African American community, Griffith found a way to maintain the status quo, but at the same time, seem sympathetic to black causes. This strategy worked for a while, but the community would eventually become disappointed when he made no real efforts toward integration.

In order to not alienate the African American community, Clark Griffith needed to recognize the great skill of the Homestead Grays by pretending to consider integrating his team. He needed their money to survive as a club. Griffith would make thirty-five to forty thousand dollars from renting his stadium to the Grays; enough money to keep him afloat.²⁶ In 1939 the African American community seriously considered boycotting Griffith Stadium until he signed black players. A boycott by Griffith's largest fan base proved highly threatening. Sam Lacy, an editor

for the *Washington Afro-American* at the time, encouraged the community not to picket Griffith Stadium. He believed that Clark Griffith was the most likely owner to integrate the major leagues, so they should continue to show their support for him: "It appears that there is a better chance to win the fight here than in any place in the country."²⁷ Some once loyal black Senators' fans began to boycott Griffith Stadium due to Griffith's failure to live up to their racially tolerant expectations. They were disappointed by his "expressed opposition to integration," within his own club and in all baseball organizations.²⁸ In order to keep these sentiments at bay, Griffith needed to appear friendly toward integration. Griffith needed to make them believe that he actively worked toward integrating his team.

Some time in 1942, Griffith made what would seem like the ultimate move to integrate his team. He called Buck Leonard and Josh Gibson into his office to discuss joining the Senators. While on the surface this seemed like a move in the right direction, his proposition stood merely as show, revealed by Griffith's comments and actions. Clark Griffith's statements to Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard strongly suggest that he had no intention of integrating the Senators. Griffith said to them, "Sam Lacey, Ric Roberts, and a lot of the other fellows have been talking about getting you fellows on the Senators' team." Griffith never said to them that he had any interest in integrating his team, suggesting that he had made the proposition only because of the pressure he received. He then went on to say, "If we get you boys, we're going to get the best ones. It's going to break up your league. Now what do you think if that?" He tried to discourage them from wanting to join the Senators. He even asked their opinion as if expecting them to admit to wanting the Negro Leagues to stay together so he could take it to his critics. He could place blame away from himself that way, saying that African American baseball players wanted to maintain segregation. Griffith could pretend to work toward integration without actually doing so.²⁹

In reality, Griffith's resistance to enhancing the Senators' skill and drawing more African American fans to their games suggested personal racism. It seems that the only times he fought for racial equality, he stood to lose money. Griffith found it cheaper to rent out his major league park to black events than investing in the farm system to enhance his team.³⁰ He even hired Cuban players of black descent, who he could pay less, to boost his team. But he refused to publicly draw attention to their race or go a step further by hiring African Americans. Even his son remarked, "There's no question that some of the ballplayers Mr. Griffith signed had black blood. But nobody said anything about it."³¹ One writer in the *Pittsburg Courier* wrote, "Mr. Griffith would give Washington fans dark players from other lands, but never an American Negro!"³² The fact that Griffith hired these black Cuban players shows that he saw the economic benefits of hiring black players and he knew that baseball could be integrated. Yet, he continued to regard these players as exceptions to the rules and forfeit possible support from the African American community. Griffith was willing to push the envelope to make a profit but would not go the extra step to admit that African Americans were equal to whites in baseball.

When Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers without recognizing his contract to the Kansas City Monarchs, Griffith publicly attacked Rickey. He argued that the Negro Leagues were an organized professional team and therefore, Rickey had an obligation to uphold their contracts. Rickey responded by

saying, "whenever someone does anything to interfere with his making of a dollar, that fellow gets all upset."³³ Of course, only when Griffith's profitable Gray stood to go under did he call the Negro Leagues professional. Former Grays' player Buck Leonard remembers Griffith previously calling the league unorganized.³⁴ Griffith did truly stand to lose a considerable profit if the Grays disbanded because their best players signed with major league teams. Even still, Griffith did not take Robinson's breaking of the color barrier as a chance to sign on some black players himself. The Washington Senators did not integrate until 1954.³⁵

Griffith exposed his personal racism not only on his team, but also on his field. Griffith Stadium maintained segregated seating where he partitioned off blacks in the right-field pavilion. An African American reporter called Griffith out on his segregation practices stating that, "The crazy-quilt pattern of racial prejudice is well illustrated at Griffith Stadium." Griffith also banned interracial baseball games in his stadium after a violent incident during an interracial exhibition game in 1920.³⁶ While white business owners often maintained segregation as a social custom, no laws required private businesses to uphold it.³⁷ Therefore, businesses policies on segregation were upheld by the owners individually. Due to threats of boycotts and Griffith's reliance on black fans to support his business, one would assume Griffith might have at least integrated the stadium seating to encourage more fans to attend.

With D.C.'s large African American population and Clark Griffith's seemingly encouraging outlook on the integration on baseball, it seemed very likely that the Washington Senators would break the color barrier in the Major Leagues. While in D.C., the Homestead Grays proved to the black community and the media that African Americans could play baseball on the same level as whites. Even though Griffith recognized the Grays skills, he could not bring himself above his own racism to integrate his team. He found ways to maintain segregation on his team without alienating his black fans by pretending to work toward integration. While the strong support and popularity of the Homestead Grays by the African American community of D.C. provided an encouraging environment for integration, Clark Griffith prevented this from happening.

Works Cited

- "An Open Letter: Griffs Could Use Colored Players." *The Washington Afro-American*, 13 March 1948. Microfilm.
- Aptheker, Herbert, ed. *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States: 1945-1954*. Vol. 5, *Pauli Murray's Career*, by Pauli Murray. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990.
- Brashler, William. *Josh Gibson: A Life in the Negro Leagues*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987. Reprint, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000.
- Carter, Art. "Joltin' Josh Helps Grays Hit the Jackpot: NNL Champions Breaking Attendance Marks in Boomtown Washington." *The Washington Afro-American*, 24 July 1943. Microfilm.
- Fields, Wilmer. *My Life in the Negro Leagues*. With a forward by John B. Holway. Westport: Meckler Publishing, 1992.

- Green, Constance McLaughlin. *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.
- Holway, John. *Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues*. Dodd, Mead, 1975. Reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1992.
- Lanctot, Neil. *Negro League Baseball: The Rise of a Black Institution*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Landis, Kenesaw M. *Segregation in Washington: A Report of The National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capital*. Chicago: National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capital, 1948. Microfilm.
- McNary, Kyle P. *Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe: 36 Years of Pitching & Catching in Baseball's Negro Leagues*. Minneapolis: McNary Publishing, 1994.
- Reisler, Jim. *Black Writers/Black Baseball: An Anthology of Articles from Black Sportswriters Who Covered the Negro Leagues*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1994.
- Snyder, Brad Mitchell. *Beyond the Shadow of the Senators: The Untold Story of the Homestead Grays and the Integration of Baseball*. Chicago: McGraw Hill Companies, 2003.
- Tygiel, Jules. *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Tygiel, Jules. *Past Time: Baseball as History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- "'Why No Negro Players?' Dailies in Three Cities Ask." *Pittsburg Courier*, 29 August 1953. Microfilm.

Endnotes

- ¹ Art Carter, "Joltin' Josh Helps Grays Hit the Jackpot: NNL Champions Breaking Attendance Marks in Boomtown Washington," *The Washington Afro-American*, 24 July 1943, microfilm, p. 26.
- ² Kenesaw M. Landis, *Segregation in Washington: A Report of the National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capital* (Chicago: National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capital, 1948), microfilm, p. 54-55; Carter, "Joltin' Josh," 26.
- ³ William Brashler, *Josh Gibson: A Life in the Negro Leagues* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987; reprint, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 117.
- ⁴ Jules Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 126.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 118-120; Neil Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise of a Black Institution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 342-343.
- ⁶ Tygiel, *Past Time*, 118-120.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 123-125.

- ⁸ Brad Mitchell Snyder, *Beyond the Shadow of the Senators: The Untold Story of the Homestead Grays and the Integration of Baseball* (Chicago: McGraw Hill Companies, 2003), 102.
- ⁹ Tygiel, *Past Time*, 123-125.
- ¹⁰ Wilmer Fields, *My Life in the Negro Leagues*, with a forward by John B. Holway (Westport: Meckler Publishing, 1992), 15.
- ¹¹ Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States: 1945-1951*, vol. 5, *Pauli Murray's Career*, by Pauli Murray (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990), 16.
- ¹² Landis, *Segregation in Washington*, 1-17.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 21-22.
- ¹⁴ Snyder, *Beyond the Shadow*, 5.
- ¹⁵ Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 262.
- ¹⁶ Landis, *Segregation in Washington*, 82-84.
- ¹⁷ Snyder, *Beyond the Shadow*, 12-14.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ²⁰ Brashler, *Josh Gibson*, 117.
- ²¹ Kyle P. McNary, *Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe: 36 Years of Pitching & Catching in Baseball's Negro Leagues* (Minneapolis: McNary Publishing, 1994), 203.
- ²² Carter, "Joltin' Josh," 26.
- ²³ "An Open Letter: Griffs Could Use Colored Players," *The Washington Afro-American*, 13 March 1948, microfilm, p. 29.
- ²⁴ Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 32.
- ²⁵ Snyder, *Beyond the Shadow*, 75.
- ²⁶ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 249.
- ²⁷ Snyder, *Beyond the Shadow*, 94.
- ²⁸ Jim Reisler, *Black Writers/Black Baseball: An Anthology of Articles from Black Sportswriters Who Covered the Negro Leagues* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1994), 22-23.
- ²⁹ John Holway, *Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues* (Dodd, Mead, 1975; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 252.
- ³⁰ Snyder, *Beyond the Shadow*, 57.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 70-72.

- ³² "Why No Negro Players?" Dailies in Three Cities Ask," *Pittsburg Courier*, 29 August 1953, microfilm, p. 15.
- ³³ Lanctot, *Negro League*, 267, 281.
- ³⁴ Holway, *Voices from*, 260.
- ³⁵ Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 292.
- ³⁶ Snyder, *Beyond the Shadow*, 2, 266, 13.
- ³⁷ Landis, *Segregation in Washington*, 19.