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Home Sweet Hank: Aaron home headed for 'prominent' location after BayBears depart Mobile

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Gallery: Hank Aaron Childhood Home and Museum

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Mobile's baseball lore grabbed the national spotlight on Tuesday thanks to "Hammer'n" Hank Aaron's [appearance in the ESPN broadcast booth](#) during an Atlanta Braves-New York Mets game.

Mobile stories about crawfish and Saturday night baseball games flowed when fellow Hall of Famer and Mobile native Billy Williams called into the booth during the fifth inning.

"You really have to know how to play baseball coming from Mobile, Alabama," said Williams. "If you come from Mobile, you have to play the game of baseball and play it right."

Replied Aaron: "He's right."

While the city's rich baseball past isn't in doubt, its baseball future is an open question.

The Class AA-BayBears team, which has made its home at Hank Aaron Stadium near Interstate 65 since 1997, is soon exiting for a shiny new \$46 million stadium in Madison.

Left behind will be Aaron's childhood home, which was relocated to the Mobile stadium in 2008 and repurposed into a museum in 2010.

The city, which owns both, faces vexing challenges in finding new uses for the 21-year-old stadium, but views the Aaron home as a tourism opportunity.

The home could also be moved again, according to George Talbot, spokesman for Mayor Sandy Stimpson.

"Our goal is to appropriately honor Mr. Aaron as a great Mobilian and ensure his story is preserved for generations to come," Talbot said, explaining that the city would seek a "prominent" location for the home.

"Prominent" was also a word chosen by City Councilman John Williams, whose District 4 takes in the ballpark. "If I ever have anything to do with it, or the authority to be one of those who makes that decision, the house will stay in a prominent place hopefully at Hank Aaron Stadium. If not, then at a place that the Aaron family agrees is the best place for that house."

'Preserved, glorified'

Aaron's home could even become a cornerstone for the city in telling of its remarkable professional baseball history.

Talbot said that the city has been in talks about erecting statues of the [five Mobile natives who are in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York](#). All five names are known to even casual baseball fans: Aaron, Williams, Leroy "Satchel" Paige, Willie McCovey and Ozzie Smith.

The likely location for the statues, Talbot said, would be within a median along Water Street once the city moves forward with a planned redesign for the downtown thoroughfare.

Only New York and Los Angeles can claim more native-born sons in the Hall of Fame than Mobile. Birmingham, by contrast, has only one: Willie Mays, who comes from Westfield community near Fairfield. Thirteen states can claim no natives in the Hall of Fame.

"This is a unique history that few other cities can brag on," said Joe Cuhaj, co-author of the 2004 book "Baseball in Mobile."

He added, "I believe that it's a history that needs to be preserved and glorified. Baseball in Mobile is as important as Mardi Gras or dropping a giant Moon Pie on New Year's Eve."

No locations have been discussed for relocating the Aaron home.

Councilman Fred Richardson, whose District 1 covers the Toulminville neighborhood where the home originally stood, said he thinks it should be moved to downtown, to become part of the History Museum of Mobile near Fort Conde. At that spot, he said, "There is plenty of foot traffic of history-seekers."

District 2 Councilman Levon Manzie, who represents the downtown area, said he wasn't aware of any talks to bring the home closer to the city's core. And Chris Morgan, general manager of the BayBears since the 2014 season, said he isn't certain what the long-term future holds for the home.

Mobile 'pilgrimage'

Inside the home-turned-museum at Hank Aaron Stadium is a treasure-trove of artifacts from the Aaron family. Key moments during Aaron's illustrious baseball career are on display, dating back to the days in which he played semi-professional baseball in Mobile and during a brief stint with the Indianapolis Clowns of the Negro American League.

The voice of broadcast legend Milo Hamilton echoes throughout the home with the call of Aaron's 715th home run to break Babe Ruth's record. Aaron, himself, is interviewed during an introductory video in which he discusses the "challenge" of growing up in segregated Mobile during the 1940s and '50s.

On Tuesday, during the ESPN broadcast, Aaron said, "I was either going to be a school teacher or play baseball. It was tough growing up back then in Alabama. There were very few things a black kid could do and I learned how to play baseball well."

Ray Doswell, vice president of curatorial services with the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, suggested that the home ought not be taken far from a baseball setting. "I'd be concerned if there wasn't a connection with baseball," Doswell said.

Similar childhood homes repurposed into museums experience their biggest successes near a baseball stadium.

In Baltimore, for instance, Ruth's birthplace was repurposed into a museum and is located a few blocks from Oriole Park at Camden Yards. When the stadium opened in 1992 as home to Major League Baseball's Baltimore Orioles, attendance at the museum skyrocketed.

Meanwhile, Van Meter, Iowa, just west of Des Moines, was the childhood hometown for Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Feller. He opened a museum there in 1995, and it became a draw for autograph seekers. After Feller died in 2010, the museum closed.

Other Major League Baseball icons have museums in their native towns. A museum dedicated to "Shoeless" Joe Jackson is located inside the brick home where he lived and died in Greenville, South Carolina. Ty Cobb, the "Georgia Peach," is remembered with a small museum in Royston, Georgia.

Doswell, though, said that the House of Aaron could stand out in a major way.

"Aaron's story, by itself, could be worthy of a very large treatment," he said. "If it's not tied directly to a baseball (team), then maybe it's tied to other aspects of the city's history that can be a draw to other things in the community for tourists and locals."

He added, "To me, Aaron is significant enough for a lot of fans to make that pilgrimage if they are in Mobile and doing other things."

Cuhaj, the Mobile baseball author, said he thinks that professional baseball still has a future in Mobile, even with the BayBears leaving.

"Many say that Mobile can't be considered a baseball town because its minor league teams come and go, like the Bay Bears are getting ready to do now," he said. "It's true that attendance has dropped, but that's part of the cyclical history of baseball in Mobile, isn't it?"

He said, "It's happened before, it will be back, bigger and better and more history will be written. But the history of the past, that can't be erased and I feel it needs to be shouted to the world."