

African American Baseball in Orange County 1940s

From an article in the *Orange County Historical Society Record*:

***African-American Baseball in Orange County* by Walter Ware**

“Baseball, America’s favorite past-time, is for Black America too. Before the major leagues accepted African American players in the all-white leagues, the Black baseball players established their own all-Black league. It was set up very much like the majors, with a National and American league system. Teams competed on the east coast from New York to Florida and west to Kansas City, Missouri. They traveled almost all of the time, rarely being in the same city for more than a day and sometimes playing three games in a day because a portion of the gate receipts would keep them traveling from game to game. Many times they slept on the bus because of the laws, especially in the South, that prevented them from staying in hotels.

“Pitchers would pitch both ends of a double header. Winter was too cold in the U.S., so they went south to Cuba, South and Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean. The first team was called the Cuban Giants mainly because they could play against the white teams in America. Although they were all Black Americans, they pretended to speak Spanish while in the field and it seemed to work for them. This kind of traveling was called barnstorming.

“My story begins with our local Black teams in Orange and surrounding counties. The Orange Tigers established themselves in the early forties playing teams from Madison, Barboursville, Stafford, and Culpeper. Culpeper was their biggest rival. The skipper for the Culpeper Dragons was Charlie Lane and for the Orange Tigers it was Louis ‘Flip’ Robinson, a projectionist working at the Pitts-Madison walk-in and drive-in theaters. When they met, you could count on a four to five hour game. They would start arguing about any and everything before the game started and every other play after.

“The players for the Tigers worked locally at Kentucky Flooring, Rapidan Milling Company, Orange-Madison Cooperative, Preddy’s Funeral Home, Orange Creamery, and on the farms in the county. Home field was the old horse show grounds on Route 612, two miles out of town on the Ware-Ellis property. The diamond was very rough and the right field sloped down into a ravine. I can remember my dad, Billy Ware, playing right field when a fly was hit his way, but he couldn’t see it coming over the horizon. He was accused of losing the game. Dad got mad and quit the team.

“Very soon after that Porterfield Park became available and the Tigers would play off of their home games there. It was considered one of the best ball parks in the state. The roster of players in the Tigers teams included John Robinson Sr., Brandy Derricks, Zeke Walker Sr., Flip

Robinson, Sonny Blakey, Clarence Snead, Gus Ellis, Ike Howard, Alfonso Hill, Bootney Alexander, James Washington, Gerald Starke, and many more.

“As youngsters we would pick up teams and play in the City Service gas station field at the corner of Byrd and Church streets and on the grounds of the Orange Livestock Market on Mill Street on Sunday evenings after church. Joe Thurston, a local barber, saw us play and persuaded us to get a team together and play teams around the county. Morton Terrill’s team and Mrs. Brown’s team at Flat Run come to mind. Playing games in corn fields, cow pastures and anywhere else there was a clearing, Joe managed for a year. The following year, Henry Alexander, proprietor of Mary’s lunch eatery on Church Street, organized us as a baseball team named the Orange Youngsters. James Scott, son of Horace Scott, a local cabbie working for D.C. Mathews Taxi, gave us the name. After two seasons Henry left and went to the city and became a mixologist, to use today’s term.

“James Washington, a local taxi owner/operator and pool room proprietor, took over the controls as skipper and reorganized the team as the Orange Nats. James financed the team, and we paid him back with receipts from the gate and concession stand. We petitioned the local merchants to purchase our uniforms and in exchange, we would advertise their business on the back of our uniforms. Duff Green, the sports editor for the *Orange Review*, would come to the park, take pictures of the team, and publish the box scores in the paper. He was always there for us and interested in how we were doing. We used a field on Route 629 near the Orange County Lake, owned by Skeeter Johnson, and later Prospect Heights to play our home games. Soon after, Porterfield became available and we were able to play all home games there. Our teenage group was very good and fared well against any opponent. I remember going to Ashland to play a semi-pro or college team, I don’t know which. We took the field for warm-ups and after a little while, the opposing manager said, ‘Alright, we are getting ready to start now and get the kids off the field and put your team on there.’ James replied, ‘This is my team.’ The manager found out later we were the real deal. We thrashed them pretty good.

“Another thing that I remember as a player was that a team from D.C., the Washington Monarchs, came to play us often and we would schedule a Saturday night and Sunday double-header. We would win all three games. We went to D.C. to return a favor. At this particular game, they were up by eight or nine runs by the third inning, and they started laughing, joking, and said we got this one. They never played us anymore. I also remember the saddest day at the park. D.C. Mathews, taxi owner and a big fan of the Nats, came to the game on a hot July Sunday and sat on the hill right behind home plate on his stool. He keeled over from a heat stroke or a heart attack. The rescue squad or Preddy’s Ambulance Service came and transported him to the hospital where he later passed away.

“The Nats’ roster consisted of names like Isaiah ‘Zeke’ Walker, Mettrr Murrill, Charles Humes, Walter Rucker, Roger Jackson, James Monroe, William Carter, Gilbert Robinson, Charlie Robinson, Bobby Robinson, Charles Robinson, Randolph Howard, Edward Scott, Red Terrill, Clarence Hues, Powhatan Nelson, Warren Nelson, James Bannister, Henry Long, Ray Long,

Moses Humes, Robbie Robinson, Junior Watkins, Andrew Johnson, Charles Humes, and Freddie Braxton.

“The Shen Valley League of Harrisonburg, Virginia, consisted of teams from Orange, Barboursville, Madison, Elkton, Harrisonburg, North and South Garden, Avon, Sperryville, Greenwood, Massie Mills, Covesville, Lynhurst, Ivy, Shipman, and Charlottesville. One game that really stands out in my mind was in Avon, at the top of Afton Mountain. My brother, ‘Butter’ Ware, being small in stature, was very fast, bunted a lot, and singled often. Leading off the game he got the fat part of the bat on the ball and took it out of the park. The ball landed under a porch in a neighboring yard. The outfield retrieved the ball and threw it back in. They put the ball in play and appealed the call at second saying that he did not touch second base. I thought we would have to fight our way off the mountain. The rest of the game was played under protest to no avail. They furnished their own umpires and always called the action in favor of the home team. In other words, they cheated a lot, especially on key plays. By the end of the late sixties or early seventies, the Nats could not field a team. I continued to play a couple of years with the Barboursville Giants. In 1971 I received a letter from a Sam Douglas of Brooklyn, New York, a scout wanting me to travel North Carolina to play with them. Being 31 years old and rearing a family, I didn’t answer the letter. Later I joined the Grassland Sluggers, who had a decent team and we had a few good years.

“My career ended when we had a scheduled game in Harrisonburg. Most of the young players went through a motorcycle craze and rode their bikes to the game. Our pitcher got on the mound for his warm-up and couldn’t throw the ball to the plate. We had to forfeit the game because we didn’t have another pitcher. I said to myself that this is it, no more, and hung up my spikes.

“James ‘The Skipper’ Washington passed away last year. The Nats honored him about four years ago and thanked him for caring and carrying us through a time when we were vulnerable and keeping us off the streets and at the ball park on Saturday nights. He taught us many things, including how to grow up to become responsible citizens. Most of us have retired from good jobs and some of us have worked in the church as preachers, deacons, trustees, treasurers, and other roles. God blessed us with a role model like James.

“We thank Walter Ware for permission to condense this from a talk he gave at our November 2011 membership meeting.”¹

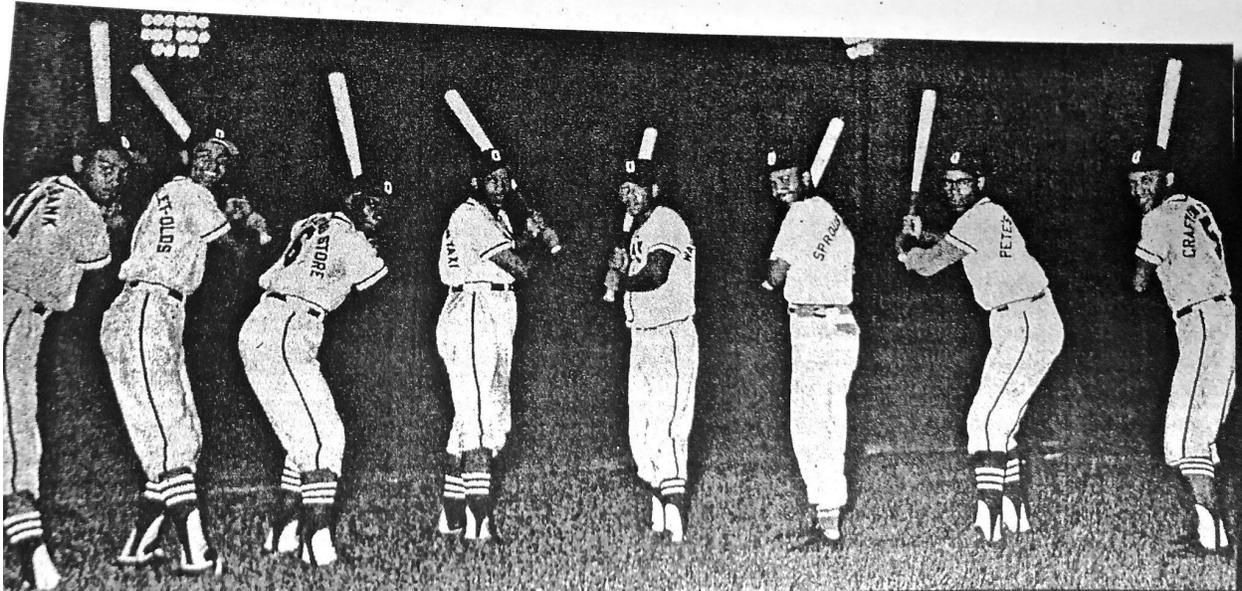
¹ Walter Ware. “African-American Baseball in Orange County.” *Orange County Historical Society Newsletter* (Fall 2012), 6.

From the Files of Duff Green:

It happened, but not recently

FROM THE FILES OF THE ORANGE COUNTY REVIEW

August 28, 1963

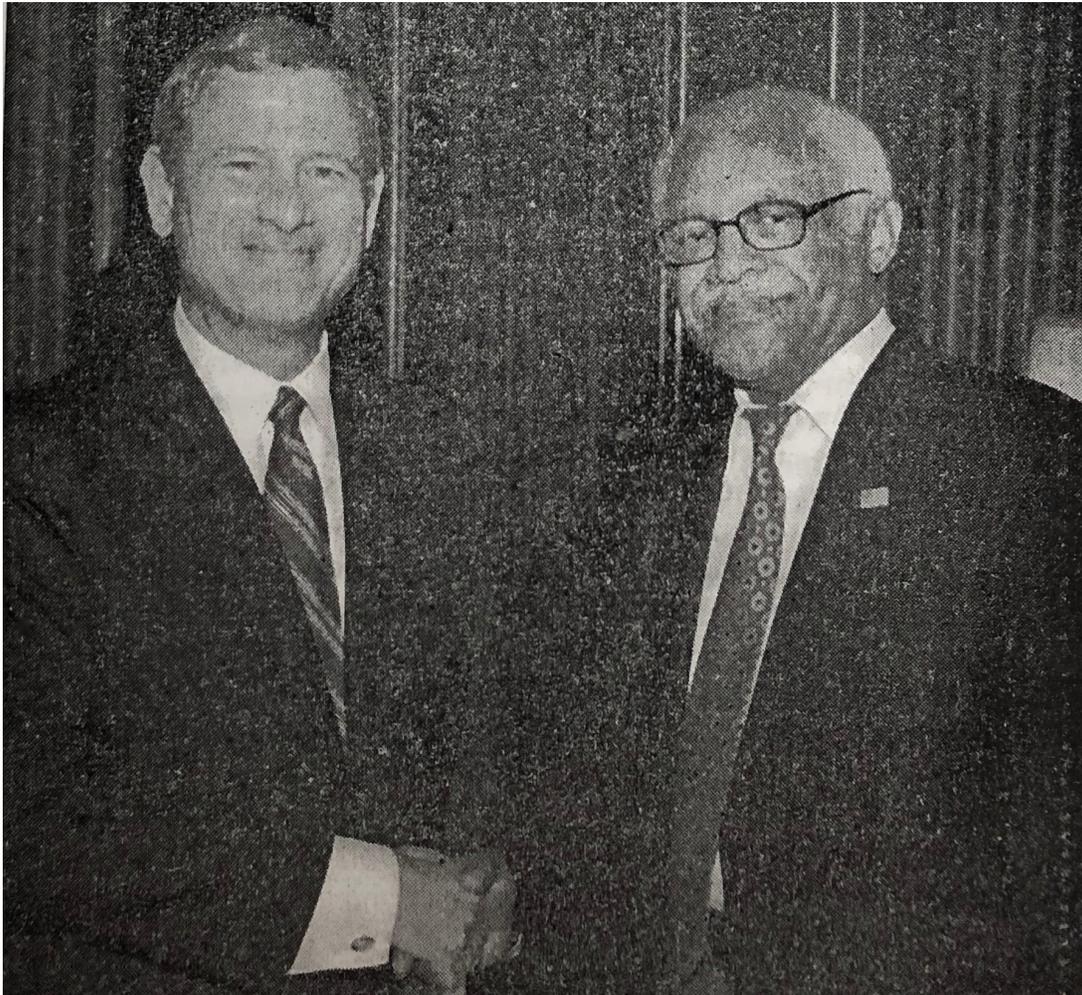


--Photograph is courtesy of the *Orange Review*

"Two historical events happened 50 years ago this week that had Orange County connections. The first, and much smaller in scale and impact, was the Orange 'Nats,' a local African American baseball team, won their 1963 league championship with a 12-5 victory over the Elkton 'Elks.' I took the photo above of the Nats' best hitters following the big game. At far right is Moses Humes, who was an outstanding fielder in addition to being a very good hitter.

"This story is about Moses and his participation in the second historic event. The day after the baseball victory, Moses and his sister Marilyn caught a bus to Washington, D.C. where they joined an estimated 250,000 others in the March on Washington. They arrived early and took a spot close to the speakers stand at the Lincoln Memorial. It was a warm day and they put their feet in the reflection pool between the memorial and the Washington Monument. The crowd kept swelling until the arrival of Dr. Martin Luther King's entourage. Moses and Marilyn were there and witnessed firsthand Dr. King's famous, 'I have a dream' speech. Moses was so moved with the events of the day he returned to Orange and immediately joined the U.S. Air Force to serve his country. After 30 years in the military, Moses returned to Washington and got a job with the security department of the U.S. Supreme Court.

“In June 2013, he was recognized with a ‘certificate of supreme performance’ from the high court. I asked Moses why he, at age 67, doesn’t retire. ‘I love my job so much,’ he replied. ‘Although the work is exacting and at times difficult, everyone at the court is so friendly and Chief Justice John Roberts is my boss. We are all on a first-name basis. I say, ‘Good morning Mr. Chief Justice,’ and he says, ‘How are you, Moses?’ The photo shows Moses with the chief justice as the Orange native received his commendation from the high court. Among other words, the citation says, ‘In testimony whereof, I, John G. Roberts, Jr. Chief Justice of the



United States, have hereunto set my hand and affixed the Seal of the Supreme Court of the United States, at the city of Washington, this 10th day of June, in the year of our Lord 2013/
Signed: John G. Roberts, Jr., Chief Justice of the United States.”²

² Green Duff, “It happened, but not recently.” *Orange County Review*, August 29, 2013, page unknown.

It happened, but not recently

FROM THE FILES OF THE ORANGE COUNTY REVIEW



Orange Tigers

“The Orange Tigers, a predecessor of The Orange Nats, were organized shortly after John Porterfield Park was built and opened to the public in the early 1940s. They played mostly teams from central Virginia with a couple of games against squads which drove down from Washington, D.C. ‘Zigger’ Sherman sits in front and was the team’s scorekeeper. From left on front row, the players are Clarence Snead, Harry Humes, Lomas Terrill, Andrew Snead, Bob Johnson, Bootney Alexander, Robert Jones and Joe Maddox. From left on back row, the players are Gus Ellis, Joe Westley, Gerald Stark, Ned Snead, Linwood Snead, Otis Ashton and ‘Flip’ Robinson. Of all these players, ‘Flip’ is probably the most remembered. He ran the movie projector for about two decades at the Pitts Madison Theater on West Main Street in Orange. In those days, the film often would break and the silver screen would become blank...when the film was not repaired immediately, the crowd would shout Flip, Flip, Flip! Sunday movies were not allowed in the early days, so ‘Flip’ took his days off playing baseball for the ‘Orange Tigers.’ The ‘Orange Nats’ didn’t take the field until about 20 years later and many of the ‘Nats’ were sons of the ‘Tigers.’”³

³ Green, Duff. “It happened but not recently.” *Orange County Review*, March 24, 2016, page unknown.