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Interpreting African Americans in Baseball: A Case Study of the National Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum

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Interpreting African Americans in Baseball: A Case Study of the
National Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum

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By

Carly Washburn

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Abstract

Scholars are increasingly interested in how sports connect with history and cultures, and in how sports museums interpret this history. Baseball, often known as “America’s Pastime,” provides insight into American society, including the role of African Americans. This thesis surveys whether the Museum at the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York challenges the traditional marginalization of African Americans in baseball. To undertake this project, I conducted research on the history of sports museums, marginalized groups, baseball, and the Negro Leagues. My observations in the Hall of Fame’s Museum include an examination of how African Americans in baseball are being interpreted, and of how much exhibit space is devoted to this interpretation. I also interviewed the Museum’s chief curator seeking his opinion on the representation of African Americans and whether the interpretation of this group at the museum has changed. Sports are an important part of cultures and society, and museums are expected to interpret these cultures inclusively.
I. Historical Overview

A. Study of Sports

The study of sports is a relatively new discipline in the historical field and did not receive serious interest from scholars until the late 1960s. The lack of scholarly attention given to sports was due to several factors, namely that scholars felt there were more important subjects to research, “but also intellectual snobbery, career concerns, or a conviction that detailed analysis of sport would not foster new knowledge or explain important historical questions.” In other words, the scholarly study of sports was largely ignored in the past due to a lack of recognition of the historical significance of sports. It was not believed that studying sports would offer any new insights on major historical themes. However, sports have been and continue to be an important part of societal culture, and therefore can provide scholars with a new lens with which to view history. Through sports, scholars can examine historical and social problems, such as urbanization, industrial capitalism, sexism, and racism.

There were numerous circumstances that led to the rise in interest in the 1960s regarding the scholarly study of sports. History as a profession changed as it was affected by outside influences, including other academic fields, the growth of the New Social history, and “the student revolution of the late 1960s that called for more relevant scholarship.” In 1972, the

3 Steven A. Reiss, “The New Sport History.”
4 Steven A. Reiss, “Historiography.”
5 Steven A. Reiss, “Historiography.”
7 Steven A. Reiss, “Historiography.”
8 Steven A. Reiss, “Historiography.”
9 Steven A. Reiss, “The New Sport History.”
North American Society for Sport History was formed, and this generated a community for scholars interested in sport history.\textsuperscript{10}

1. Literature Review

Studying the historical and societal significance of baseball, as well as the traditional marginalization of African Americans in baseball, provided me with a strong base for the observations I conducted at the Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum.

Steven A. Reiss’s article, “The Historiography of American Sport” is a good starting point for researchers interested in studying sport history. The article presents a good overview of the literature available on baseball and other sports. “The New Sport History,” also by Reiss, provides background on the study of sports, the growing interest of scholars in studying sport history, and the value that studying sports adds to the understanding of history. Out of all of the sports, baseball has received the most attention because it is considered to be America’s pastime. Ronald Briley’s article “Baseball and American Cultural Values” and Steven A. Reiss’s book 

*Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* provide a good basis for how studying baseball improves understanding of American history and reveals significant American cultural values. There is a lot of literature available on the history of the Negro Leagues, as well. *When the Game Was Black and White* by Bruce Chadwick, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution* by Neil Lanctot, and *Extra Bases: Reflections on Jackie Robinson, Race, & Baseball History* by Jules Tygiel offer a thorough history on the role of race in America and in baseball. A good resource for studying the history of baseball, its players, and the formation of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York, is *Cooperstown Confidential: Heroes, Rogues, and the Inside Story of*

\textsuperscript{10} Steven A. Reiss, “The New Sport History.”
the Baseball Hall of Fame by Zev Chafets. Sports museums and Halls of fame have received more attention as interest in sports as a scholarly field has grown. “Sport in Museums and Museums of Sport: An Overview” by Kevin Moore discusses the relevance of museums and sports in museums.

B. Study of Baseball

Baseball has the most abundant literature of any sport and is the first sport to receive attention from scholars because it is considered to be the United States’ national pastime. Like other sports, baseball was ignored previously by intellectuals, not only because historians failed to recognize its social and cultural value throughout American history, but also because baseball is an “institution of mass culture” that scholars believed was fully understood by everyone, and therefore would not garner any new insights into history or society. Significantly, baseball’s lasting popularity is due in part to its seeming coherence with American values. Many researchers believe that studying baseball, including the myths, rituals, and symbols related to the game, will reveal these American values and ideals, such as hard work, social mobility, and democracy. As Timothy Breen argued in his essay ‘Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling Among the Gentry of Virginia,’ ‘A specific patterned form of behavior, such as gambling, does not become popular in a society or among the members of a subgroup of that society unless the activity reflects or expresses values indigenous to that

11 Steven A. Reiss, “Historiography.”
13 Steven A. Reiss, “The New Sport History.”
14 Steven A. Reiss, “Introduction.” In Touching Base.
culture.” Baseball fits this description because it has been a popular sport among many different groups of people in America for more than one hundred years. It would not have lasted that long if it did not appeal to these groups’ systems of values and beliefs.

1. Brief History of Baseball

Henry Chadwick, also known as the Father of Baseball, was the first significant baseball journalist. In 1903, he published his view on the origins of baseball, in which he argued that baseball evolved from the new world game called town ball, which had evolved from the English game of rounders. Modern baseball was born in 1845 when a New York City team called the Knickerbockers wrote down a set of rules. The New York Knickerbockers, founded by Alexander Cartwright in the 1840s, were one of the earliest formal baseball teams.

By the late 1850s, baseball was considered by many to be America’s pastime, but that status was not broadly acknowledged until the 1870s and 1880s. Baseball retained that status until the 1960s when it was apparently usurped by football, but only for a little while. There are many factors that contributed to baseball’s status as the national pastime. Baseball appealed to people of all social classes. It was seen as native to America, and as a game that lined up with the values of Americans, not just naturally but deliberately so. Americans saw baseball as their nation’s game, and wanted everyone else to hold that same view. A.G. Spalding, baseball’s first star and “a proud nationalist in the Teddy Roosevelt mold, was offended by Chadwick’s notion

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16 Steven A. Reiss, “Introduction.” In Touching Base.
17 Steven A. Reiss, “Introduction.” In Touching Base.
19 Zev Chafets, Cooperstown Confidential, 24.
21 Zev Chafets, Cooperstown Confidential, 33.
22 Steven A. Reiss, “Introduction.” In Touching Base.
23 Steven A. Reiss, “Introduction.” In Touching Base.
that baseball had evolved from an Old World game.”

Contributing to Spalding’s, and many others’, offense was the fact that this period in time (the late 1800s) saw the largest wave of immigration to the United States. Many Americans, including Theodore Roosevelt, were worried that these immigrants would change their nation’s culture. Roosevelt felt that there was room for citizens of mixed origins, but that these immigrants should learn English and conform to American culture.

Baseball was apparently a tool for integrating Americans into their society because Americans saw their conventional values and beliefs embedded in the game. These values included hard work, social mobility, and democracy. "Youngsters were expected to learn the proper traditional values by playing baseball and by emulating their heroes." Some marginalized groups, such as Native Americans, were forced to assimilate by playing baseball. Additionally, baseball “was seen as a wonderful leveler of people.” In baseball, occupation did not matter, people from many different jobs “mingled together on equal terms.” However, this view fails to acknowledge that the game was not equal in terms of race, as it was a view held by white, middle-class Americans.

C. African Americans in Baseball

Studying class, ethnicity, and race in the context of sports reveals a lot about access to the

25 Zev Chafets, Cooperstown Confidential, 24-25.
26 Zev Chafets, Cooperstown Confidential, 25.
27 Ronald Briley, “Baseball and American Cultural Values.”
29 Erik Strohl. Personal interview. 19 February 2016.
sport and societal roles.\textsuperscript{31} One can analyze the role of African Americans in the United States by studying the way in which they were treated in baseball.\textsuperscript{32}

It was during the Civil War that baseball was first introduced to African Americans. Baseball was one of the main forms of recreation in the Union camps, and both African-American and white soldiers played the game in their spare time. The popularity of baseball increased after the Civil War because soldiers who had played, or watched the game in the camps brought it home with them. Baseball especially thrived in big cities because most of the soldiers came from bigger cities. Freed slaves and African-American soldiers who served together during the war moved to these cities and formed communities of which baseball became a part. Soon, baseball leagues were being formed and teams were traveling across the country to play other teams.\textsuperscript{33}

However, even after the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery, racism was still heavy in the late 1800s. White players did not want to play with African-American players despite their skill. As a result of this, only a few African Americans played on white teams; most played on African-American teams in a league of their own, the Negro Leagues.\textsuperscript{34} It was pressure and resentment, not a formally written rule, that barred African Americans from playing professional baseball. One of the biggest advocates for segregated baseball was Cap Anson, player-manager of the Chicago White Stockings who, in 1883, refused to play the Toledo Blue Stockings if they played their African-American catcher, Moses Fleetwood Walker.\textsuperscript{35} Similar incidents occurred within the next few years until 1887 when every African American in the upper minor leagues

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Steven A. Reiss, “The New Sport History.”
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ronald Briley, “Baseball and American Cultural Values.”
\item \textsuperscript{33} Bruce Chadwick, “Diamonds in the Rough.” In When the Game Was Black and White: The Illustrated History of Baseball’s Negro Leagues, 19-37 (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992).
\item \textsuperscript{34} Bruce Chadwick, “Diamonds in the Rough.” 19-37.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Zev Chafets, Cooperstown Confidential, 56.
\end{itemize}
was informed that there would be no renewal of his contract.\textsuperscript{36} No rule was ever enforced to keep African Americans out of professional baseball, it was merely a “‘gentleman’s agreement.’”\textsuperscript{37} Professional baseball became a white man’s game and African Americans were forced to play in the lower minor leagues and the Negro Leagues.\textsuperscript{38} Negro League players “always remained painfully aware that they had been relegated to a second-rate existence” and their “urge to compete in the white major leagues remained strong.”\textsuperscript{39} This “second rate existence” in baseball parallels the role of African Americans in society, in which they have had to form their own communities and institutions because they were barred from others.

1. **Breaking the Color Line**

Sports on college campuses, in many instances, were integrated before professional sports. Jackie Robinson was a well-rounded athlete who excelled at football, basketball, and baseball at UCLA. His time at this university gave him valuable experience with high-level integrated competition.\textsuperscript{40} After spending some time in the United States army during World War II, Robinson found himself in the same situation as most African Americans during that time. Despite being a young, great athlete, professional opportunities were not available to him. Major league baseball, football, and most of basketball were closed to African-American players. Jackie Robinson’s best option was to join the Negro Leagues, which he did in 1945. Though he excelled during his time in the Negro Leagues and gained valuable playing experience, Robinson was unhappy; he found the entire situation degrading.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{36} Bruce Chadwick, “Diamonds in the Rough.” 19-37.
\textsuperscript{37} Zev Chafets, *Cooperstown Confidential*, 56.
\textsuperscript{38} Bruce Chadwick, “Diamonds in the Rough.” 19-37.
\textsuperscript{40} Jules Tygiel, *Extra Bases*, 4.
\textsuperscript{41} Jules Tygiel, *Extra Bases*, 5.
However, Robinson’s achievements in the Negro Leagues caught the eye of Branch Rickey, president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, who had decided to sign African Americans into major league baseball, starting with Jackie Robinson. Rickey gave several reasons for his significant decision to integrate professional baseball:

At times he spoke of the need to eradicate the memory of a black college player whom he had coached in 1904 who had wept when barred from staying with his teammates at a Midwestern hotel. At others he expressed moral and religious concerns. Almost as frequently, he denied any noble intentions and invoked his desire to field the best possible team...A combination of these factors, and a desire to make a mark in history beyond the boundaries of baseball, motivated Rickey.

Rickey took a lot of risks in signing Robinson. First was the disapproval of most of the important people in major league baseball who felt that the addition of African Americans would decrease the value of the sport. Second, there was the potential violence from white players towards Robinson, and third, both violence and rejection from fans. There was a possibility that fans would refuse to attend games if Robinson played. Then there was the matter of Robinson himself, who was known for his stormy and aggressive personality. This didn’t concern Rickey, however, who noted that Robinson’s “aggressiveness, both on and off the field, would have been ‘praised to the skies’” if he had been white, and “Rickey believed that rather than offend whites, Robinson’s racial pride and combativeness, if consciously curbed, would rally them to his cause.” With that in mind, and before signing Robinson to the team, Rickey made him promise not to react to the discrimination he would face. Robinson agreed, then spent the 1946 season

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in the Dodgers’ top minor league club, proved his skill and right to play, and finally joined professional baseball in 1947.\textsuperscript{47}

\textbf{D. Sports Museums}

There are approximately 580 sports museums and halls of fame (not necessarily accredited) in 46 countries. Significantly, more than 400 of these institutions are in the U.S.A. The first sports museums and halls of fame in America developed in the 1930s, and one such institution was the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York.\textsuperscript{48}

Sports are a significant aspect of people’s culture, and museums are important institutions for displaying and interpreting these cultures. With the growth in academic studies of sport there has been an increasing interest in including sports in museum exhibits to enhance interpretation. Sports museums are a lot like history museums, with a focus on the collection and exhibition of historical artifacts, pictures, and memorabilia.\textsuperscript{49} People frequent sports museums because sports, in particular, evoke feelings of nostalgia in people. Nostalgia is an important emotion because it stimulates people’s memories, allowing visitors of sports museums to have a meaningful experience, which is a major take-away that museums want people to have.\textsuperscript{50} However, nostalgia possibly presents a problem for sports museums when it comes to the history of African Americans and other marginalized groups. Visitors to sports museums are generally there to celebrate the stars of the game, or to remember their own playing days rather than critique the content of the exhibitions. The history of African Americans’ segregation from major league baseball disrupts these feelings of nostalgia, which could cause problems for sports museums.

\textsuperscript{47} Jules Tygiel, \textit{Extra Bases}, 7-9.
\textsuperscript{48} Kevin Moore, “Sport in Museums.”
\textsuperscript{49} Kevin Moore, “Sport in Museums.”
1. Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum

The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum was founded in Cooperstown in 1936, and in 1939 it opened to the public. The Hall of Fame was established in Cooperstown based on the myth that Abner Doubleday, a hero of the Civil War, invented the game there. This myth was created by A.G. Spalding in an effort to successfully challenge Henry Chadwick’s theory on the evolution of baseball. It was important to Spalding, and to many other Americans, that baseball be universally acknowledged as an American sport that reflects American values. In order to authenticate baseball’s origins, Spalding convened a group of professionals to serve as a commission who sought information from the public as to the game’s origins. Then, armed with first-hand knowledge, the commission would resolve the conflict surrounding baseball’s origins. Spalding’s choice for chairman of this commission was Abraham G. Mills, who also held the nationalist view of the origins of baseball. Spalding presented the commission with a letter written by a man named Abner Graves. This letter stated that, in 1839, Abner Doubleday laid out a baseball diamond one day and got the boys of Cooperstown to play baseball. Even back then it was known that baseball was being played before 1839, but that didn’t trouble the commission. On December 30, 1907, Abraham Mills proclaimed that Abner Doubleday had, in fact, invented baseball in Cooperstown in 1839. This declaration was generally accepted despite the fact that Doubleday himself never made this claim, and there were a couple of reasons for this acceptance.

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51 Kevin Moore, “Sport in Museums.”
52 Zev Chafets, Cooperstown Confidential, 26.
53 Zev Chafets, Cooperstown Confidential, 26-27.
54 Martha E. Higgins, “National Baseball Hall of Fame.”
Cooperstown went through some hard times after World War I. Their hops crops suffered from a blight and the town’s young people migrated to the cities. Then, like much of America, Cooperstown didn’t fare well after the Depression and lost a lot of their summer tourists. The people of Cooperstown recognized the financial opportunity for their town that the Doubleday myth presented. In 1919 they raised some money to begin building a “national baseball field”: Doubleday Field. Though the field was not completed that year, the town’s efforts were noticed by Stephen Clark, a prominent man in Cooperstown, who also recognized the financial opportunity of claiming Cooperstown to be the home of baseball. With the help of Alexander Cleland (one of Clark’s executives) and Ford Frick (president of the National League) the plan to celebrate baseball’s greats by constructing the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, and by completing Doubleday Field, was concocted.

However, despite the perpetuation of the Doubleday myth, baseball has existed in Cooperstown for a long time. It cannot be known for sure exactly where the game was first invented, but, as stated on the Hall of Fame’s website: “We do know that some of the earliest forms of organized baseball that we are aware of took place in settings similar to that of Cooperstown. In that sense, the village serves as a fitting representation of the heritage of the game, and a fitting home to the Baseball Hall of Fame.”

II. Methodology

A. Research

I conducted research on the study of sports to get an idea of the opinions of scholars on

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56 Zev Chafets, Cooperstown Confidential, 28.
57 Zev Chafets, Cooperstown Confidential, 28-30.
58 Martha E. Higgins, “National Baseball Hall of Fame.”
59 Zev Chafets, Cooperstown Confidential, 34.
this subject, and on what has been accomplished previously in this field. I chose to focus my research on baseball for several reasons: It is one of my favorite sports, it is considered to be America’s pastime, and more research has been done on baseball than any other sport thus far.

I originally toyed with basing my paper around the representation of marginalized groups in baseball, and using a sports museum as a case study, but I decided that given the length of time that I had to complete this project (one academic school year) that “marginalized groups” was too broad of a category. I made the decision to narrow my focus by picking one marginalized group, African Americans, and focused my research on that group. I chose the museum at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown to be my case study because it is well known, dedicated to preserving the history of baseball in its entirety, and does not focus on any one racial group (in regards to its mission statement).

With that decision made, I researched sports museums to understand their purpose and the draw that these institutions have on people. Additionally, I researched baseball history and the history of the Negro Leagues in order to understand the traditional marginalization of African Americans in baseball, which would aid in my examination of the interpretation of African Americans at the Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum.

**B. Observations in Baseball Hall of Fame**

In preparation of my visit to the Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum I created an observation form that would allow me to record both quantitative and qualitative data. In regards to the quantitative data, I was looking to record how often African Americans were incorporated into the exhibits in relation to how often whites were. Even though African Americans were my focus, I wanted to be aware of the representation of other groups, as well. On the form I set up a chart with observational questions in the boxes on the left, and empty boxes on the right so that I
could tally what I observed. The first observational question in the chart asks for the number of panels in the museum. By panels I am referring to pictures and large text labels because these are the most noticeable content when looking at exhibits. I planned to tally the amount of panels that were used for the interpretation of African Americans, the amount used for the interpretation of whites, and last for the interpretation of other marginalized groups (women, Latin, and Asian players). The second observation I wanted to tally was the number of glass cases in the museum. As I did with the panels, I planned to tally the total number of glass cases first, then the total number used for the interpretation of African Americans, whites, and other marginalized groups. Following the chart, I created a few questions for my qualitative data, leaving spaces for me to write my answers in. The questions I came up with are: How is the history of African Americans in baseball being interpreted? (Whose voices are telling the story? What is the story portraying?), Which African-American baseball players are being exhibited? (Current African-American players? Past? Both? Minor or Major league players?), and Are African-American players being represented in the permanent exhibits? The last page of the form was left blank for additional notes. I designed the form to be flexible and to allow me to apply it to the exhibits easily.

C. Interview with Chief Curator

I thought it would be beneficial to my research if I spoke to an employee, specifically the chief curator of the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, about his opinion on sports museums and the representation of marginalized groups in not only his institution but other museums as well. The questions I wrote for the interview guide are as follows: What do you find to be valuable about sports museums (in education/understanding history)? How has the interpretation, or representation of African Americans in baseball changed at this Museum? Are
there more labels used to interpret their history? Have there been changes in the way their history has been told? How do these ideas relate to the notion of baseball as 'America's Pastime'? Whose stories do you think are not yet being told well? Whose stories would you like to add? These questions are meant to be a guide for the conversation. I left room for other questions to be asked as they occurred to me during the interview.

III. Findings

A. Observations

I visited the Museum on January 10, 2016 and spent three hours onsite. Upon entering the Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum, I began my observations on the second floor of the institution for a couple of reasons: this is where the museum staff suggests visitors begin their tour, and this is also where most of the long-term exhibits are. I also decided to only count panels and glass cases in exhibits in which I saw African Americans. By “African American” I am referring to players who were born in the United States and consider themselves to be African American. It should be noted that racial perceptions and categorizations are overlapping and interrelated. People of color will generally be referred to as African American by people who are unfamiliar with their background. David Ortiz, also known as Big Papi, is a Dominican baseball player who is generally perceived to be African American by people who are unfamiliar with who he is. Moreover, anyone who has African-American ancestry is typically considered to be African American. Roy Campanella, for example, was a half Italian-American, half African-American baseball player, but he was considered to be African American, not Italian. As a fan of baseball I am fairly familiar with most players’ ethnic backgrounds, but when I came across a player in

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60 Jules Tygiel, Extra Bases.
the Museum with whom I was unfamiliar I googled their background in order to accurately fill out my observation form.

The first exhibit in which I saw African American representation was *Today’s Game*. This exhibit features “lockers” (cases) for all 30 major league baseball teams. Within each case there are uniforms and other recent artifacts related to each specific team, including one or two pictures of the team's current players. I focused on the pictures, tallying the number of African Americans, whites, Latinos and Asians that were included. I came up with 8 photos of African Americans, 31 photos of whites, and 18 photos of Latinos and Asians. At first I was disappointed with the numbers, but then I came across an interesting label in a case called *The Changing Face of Baseball* (See Figure 1). The label reads, “Integration of African Americans into the majors reached a peak of 18.7% in 1981, but their participation has dropped since then, sinking below 8% in 2009” (See Figure 2). After learning that fact I concluded that African Americans were accurately represented in numbers in *Today’s Game*.

I then walked through two exhibits, *Taking the Field: The 19th Century* and *Babe Ruth: His Life and Legend*, before reaching the next exhibit that featured African Americans: *Pride and Passion: The African-American Baseball Experience*, which focuses on the history of the Negro Leagues. This exhibit is well done, but since African Americans are given their own exhibit this does, in a sense, segregate them. Women and Latinos also had their own separate exhibits. Visitors that choose not to view these exhibits would miss out on important chunks of baseball history and, thus, would not be getting the whole story. I had hoped to see representation of African Americans in *Taking the Field: The 19th Century*, an exhibit that tells the history of the beginnings of baseball, because “baseball among African Americans developed

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concurrently” with baseball among whites, but, “as in much of American life, they played mostly in segregated settings” (See Figure 3). Including the history of the Negro Leagues in the exhibit about baseball’s beginnings would be a good way to challenge the traditional marginalization of African Americans in baseball.

The Museum exhibits a baseball timeline broken up into three sections, 1900-1930, 1930-1970, and 1970-2000, that stretches across several exhibits. Along this timeline are notable African-American players like Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and Monte Irvin. Since this timeline focuses on major league baseball, African Americans are not represented until the 1940s because the color line was not broken until 1947. Visitors that choose to skip Pride & Passion: The African-American Baseball Experience would not know the extent of African Americans’ history in baseball. These visitors would see Jackie Robinson’s major league debut as the defining moment in the history of African-American baseball, which would serve to marginalize those that played in the Negro and minor leagues before this moment. Jackie Robinson and the integration of major league baseball is certainly an important part of baseball history, but it is not representative of the whole story. The timeline could be expanded to include more African-American history, especially within the minor leagues.

Since I was focusing more on large texts and visuals throughout my observations, I was pleased to see that Robinson’s (See Figure 4), Mays’s and Irvin’s (See Figure 5) photos were large. However, I felt that the representation of African Americans further down along the timeline could have been better, especially in the 1970s and 1980s when the number of African American baseball players peaked. This opinion is likely due to my focus on larger texts and

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images, which I did not see very many of, and so I may have missed some smaller labels interpreting African Americans in baseball.

The final exhibit that I observed was *Hank Aaron Gallery of Records*, which, as the title states, is about the African-American baseball player Hank Aaron. I found this exhibit to be successful in challenging the traditional marginalization of African Americans because not many African American individuals are given a spotlight in history. If an African-American baseball player is given a spotlight, then it is usually Jackie Robinson. It was refreshing to view Hank Aaron’s story.

**B. Interview**

My interview with the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum’s chief curator, Erik Strohl, occurred over the phone on February 19, 2016. I had emailed the questions to the curator before the interview, and this allowed him to read the questions himself as he went along answering them. Meanwhile, I took notes. The interview was about 20 minutes long.

In answer to my first question regarding the value that sports museums add to education and understanding history, Mr. Strohl said that sports museums provide a different angle with which to view history. Moreover, sports museums attract different followers who may not be museum-goers because the history is being delivered in a different way. Essentially, these visitors are learning even if they are only there for baseball.

My second question dealt with the interpretation and representation of African Americans at the Museum, and how it has changed over the years. In 1997, the year before Mr. Strohl began working for the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, it was the 50th anniversary of Jackie Robinson’s major league debut. It was in that year that the Museum started the African-American exhibit and program. Before this point, African-American players were talked about
simply as athletes on the field, and mentioned sporadically in labels (e.g. a statistic here or there).

There may have been smaller things on display at the Museum in the 1970s and 1980s, but the Negro Leagues were not talked about until this exhibit, *Pride & Passion: The African-American Baseball Experience*. Additionally, the Museum looks at African-American players more culturally now, including their connections to Latin players. Latin America was first introduced to baseball in 1866 and there have been Latin-American players ever since. Today, 45% of major league baseball players are Latin, so it is interesting that “nowadays, kids think that baseball is a white man’s game” (See Figure 2). Mr. Strohl also brought up the overlapping perceptions of race. Throughout baseball’s history, dark-skinned Latin players were considered to be African American and were barred from the majors, whereas light-skinned Latin players were allowed to play with whites in the major leagues. The Museum strives to talk about these racial perceptions and all of the changes that occur in baseball.

In response to my question about the relation between the notion of baseball as America’s pastime and the interpretation of African Americans in baseball, Mr. Strohl stated that back then, baseball as America’s pastime meant that it was popular among many groups. Today it means that anyone can play; there is no racial barrier. More generally speaking, baseball has a major connection to many aspects of American culture because baseball and America grew up together. It would be hard to look at some facet of America and not be able to connect it in some way to baseball.

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64 Erik Strohl.

65 Zev Chafets, *Cooperstown Confidential*.

66 Erik Strohl.


68 Erik Strohl.

69 Erik Strohl.
The last two questions of my interview are interrelated in that I asked Mr. Strohl whose stories he felt were not yet being told well, and whose stories he would like to add. He mentioned Native Americans and Deaf players, whose stories, while they are not on display in the Museum yet, can be found online and in magazines, as well as in the Museum’s library. The Museum also has modules for school curriculums on each of the groups. The most popular ones are the African-American and Jackie Robinson modules. Mr. Strohl notes that if you choose to look at any one group in history, they were probably not treated fairly at some point and that would be reflected in the game. So the Museum is always thinking about ways to include these groups and their stories.\(^{70}\)

IV. Recommendations

Anyone wishing to replicate my study should dedicate more time to the project, thoroughly looking at each exhibit and label in the Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum. I did not have time to do that as there was a time limit for my thesis. Moreover, I only conducted observations in the Museum, not the Hall of Fame. The Museum displayed many small labels so I focused on the larger, eye-catching labels and pictures, and on the glass cases as a whole. In other words, my observations were more visual. The smaller labels may have included more interpretations of African Americans in baseball and should be analyzed in future studies. Researchers might also want to look at other marginalized groups, not just African Americans, in both the Baseball Hall of Fame and its Museum. Studies that include other museums and sports museums would be beneficial to this scholarship. Additionally, researchers should take a look at sports other than baseball, as well as the numerous positions that people hold in organized sports. I only focused on African Americans as players. More studies should be done on African Americans in baseball and their stories.

\(^{70}\) Erik Strohl.
Americans as fans, umpires, managers, and owners. Again, these studies should be conducted on other marginalized groups, in other sports, and in other museums. The scholarly study of sports is a new field and there is a lot still to be discovered.

V. Conclusion

The Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum is a great institution that has made excellent progress in including exhibits for the interpretation of marginalized groups in baseball, and has also expressed their desire to include as much as baseball history as they can, especially in regards to marginalized groups. The Museum has challenged the traditional marginalization of African Americans in the sense that this group is more represented in the institution, and more effort was made to tell their story. Another way to challenge this traditional marginalization would be to change the way that their story is being told. Giving this group a separate exhibit, in a sense, segregates them and reinforces the perception of baseball as a white man’s game. The beginnings of African-American baseball are important to the overall history of baseball, and if visitors choose not to view the African-American exhibit then they would not be getting the whole story. Similarly, by focusing solely on major league baseball along the timeline, Jackie Robinson’s debut becomes the defining moment in African-American baseball history and possibly serves to marginalize the African-American players before him. I suppose the argument against the idea of a separate exhibit reinforcing segregation could be that by giving African Americans their own exhibit their history is being given a spotlight that it does not often receive, and their story can be told in more detail. However, it might be more powerful to tell their story in conjunction with other groups’ stories. In this way, visitors would be able to view the entire scope of baseball’s history and see each group’s contributions to the game, side by side, from the beginnings of baseball.
VI. Appendix

A. Observation Form

**Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Observations**

Date________________________________________

**Overview**

Number of Exhibits in the Museum: __________

List the Permanent Exhibits:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observational Questions</th>
<th>Tallies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Panels in Museum? <em>(Includes text labels and pictures)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Panels used for Interpretation of African Americans?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Panels used for Interpretation of Caucasians?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Panels used for Interpretation of Other Marginalized Groups? <em>(Includes Women, Latin, &amp; Asian players)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Glass Cases in Museum?</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation of Baseball Museum’s Interpretation of African Americans in Baseball

How is the history of African Americans in baseball being interpreted? *Whose voices are telling the story? What is the story portraying?*

Which African American baseball players are being exhibited? *Current African American players? Past players? Both? Minor or Major league players?*

Are African American players being represented in the permanent exhibits?
Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Observations

Date 11/9/16

Overview

Number of Exhibits in the Museum: 15
Permanent Exhibits: all but 2 on Third floor and a couple on first floor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observational Questions</th>
<th>Tallies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation of Baseball Museum's Interpretation of African Americans in Baseball

How is the history of African Americans in baseball being interpreted? Whose voices are telling the story? What is the story portraying?

- Segregation is mentioned of course. Segregated at baseball's beginnings & got worse after Civil War.
- Shows early integrated teams
- Cap Anson mentioned for his racism "Separate Leagues, Parallel Lives" AA did what the white/white teams did. Formed teams/leagues, etc. gave awards despite the added hardship of discrimination, etc.

Jackie Robinson "supplies the spark"

Hank Aaron portrayed as a hero
- Quilt a few quotes from him

Which African American baseball players are being exhibited? Current African American players? Past players? Both? Minor or Major league players?

- Whole New Ballgame
- Shows major league players
- Hank Aaron

Are African American players being represented in the permanent exhibits?

- Yes
- But everything is still pretty segregated
- It'd be nice to see a better representation of current AA Ballplayers (And more integrated)
Additional Notes

- First boxed Tallies in glass cases column are from The Cooperstown Room ("lockers for teams")
- 1st boxed tallies in panels column are pictures in these "lockers" (too many small text labels)
- Didn't count taking the field cases or panels → there are many & they're predominantly white (but it's really basic)
- Didn't focus on objects
  → Advent of American League
  → Babe Ruth Life & Legend

- 2nd boxed Tallies from Pride & Passion AA Baseball Experience → focused on past players
- Era of change is predominantly white but has some PCs & texts of Jackie Robinson
  → In interest of time & scope of project I focused on exhibits that had AAs
  → too many PCs & labels to count as women's exhibit

- When I counted glass cases used for interpretation of AAs (in Whole New Ballgame Exhibit) I looked to see if any texts or PCs of AAs (or other many groups) were in those cases → so I've found that there are too many "panels" to count!
- Pride & Passion is really the only exhibit that features glassed just for AAs
- Whole New Ballgame still predominantly white
- Didn't take video/audio into account
- There's a whole exhibit devoted to Hank Aaron
B. Interview Guide

Interview Guide

(Explain Thesis and Goals of this Interview)

1. What do you find to be valuable about sports museums [in education/understanding history]?

2. How has the interpretation, or representation of African Americans in baseball changed at this Museum?
   
a. Are there more labels used to interpret their history?

   b. Have there been changes in the way their history has been told?

   c. How do these ideas relate to the notion of baseball as “America's Pastime?”

3. Whose stories do you think are not yet being told well?

4. Whose stories would you like to add?
Figure 1. Glass case in *The Changing Face of Baseball* exhibition, on view at the National Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum, January 10, 2016, photo by author.
Since the late 1980s, foreign-born players have taken a much larger role in MLB, making it more global and more appealing to an ethnically diverse fan base. At the same time, MLB has promoted diversity—racial, ethnic, and gender inclusion—in an effort to bring the best people into all aspects of baseball. While MLB increases marketing towards women, who are estimated at just under half of big league fans, girls are finding opportunities to play youth baseball.

**Reviving African-American Baseball**

Integration of African-Americans into the majors reached a peak of 18.7% in 1981, but their participation has dropped since then, sinking below 8% in 2009. “Nowadays, kids think that baseball is a white man’s game,” said Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI) founder John Young in 1992. His program to organize youth teams in black communities is an effort to reverse that trend.

**Figure 2.** Panel in *The Changing Face of Baseball* exhibition, on view at the National Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum, January 10, 2016, photo by author. Detail of *Reviving African American Baseball* label (front) and “foreign-born players” label (back).
Almost as soon as the game’s rules were codified, Americans played baseball so passionately that writers of the time called it a mania. African Americans were no different, but in baseball, as in much of American life, they played mostly in segregated settings, including southern plantations as early as the 1850s. On their own sandlots and diamonds, they too developed baseball to its fullest potential. Black communities took pride in these teams and their dynamic brand of the National Pastime. From the earliest times, black baseball was the seedbed for those talented players who paved the way to integrated baseball. The game itself became a testing ground for integrating American life.

Figure 3. Entrance panel to *Pride & Passion: The African American Baseball Experience* exhibition, on view at the National Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum, January 10, 2016, photo by author.
Figure 4. Jackie Robinson panel in *20th Century Baseball Time Line* exhibition, on view at the National Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum, January 10, 2016, photo by author.
Figure 5. Willie Mays and Monte Irvin panel in 20th Century Baseball Time Line exhibition, on view at the National Baseball Hall of Fame’s Museum, January 10, 2016, photo by author.
VII. Bibliography


Strohl, Erik. Personal interview. 19 February 2016.
