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William Clarence Matthews: "The Jackie Robinson of His Day"

Karl Lindholm

It is very probable that [William Clarence Matthews] will become a member of the Boston Nationals very soon. — Boston Traveler, July 15, 1905

A negro is just as good as a white man and has just as much right to play ball.... I think it is an outrage that colored men are discriminated against in the big leagues. What a shame it is that black men are barred forever from participating in the national game. I should think Americans should rise up in revolt against such a condition.... If the magnates forget their prejudices and let me into the big leagues, I will show them that a colored boy can play better than lots of white men, and he will be orderly on the field. — William Clarence Matthews, 1905

[Matthews] was the Jackie Robinson of his age. — Harold Kaese, Boston Globe, January 17, 1965

Harold Kaese was a sports columnist for the *Boston Globe* from 1945 to 1973. At least twice in the 1960s, he explicitly compared Jackie Robinson to William Clarence Matthews, a sports hero at Harvard decades before Robinson made his historic entry into Major League baseball.

Kaese's first column, on January 17, 1965, appeared under the headline, "Harvard Nine Defied South 60 Years Ago." It was inspired by the refusal of 21 "Negro" football players to play in the American Football League's All Star game in New Orleans that year as a "stand against racial prejudice." For Kaese, this action was reminiscent of the decision made sixty years earlier by the Harvard baseball team in support of their black

shortstop, Matthews, to call off their spring trip. "Appreciating that the popular colored player could not make the trip without suffering humiliation from Southern prejudices," he wrote, "the Harvard team stayed in the North." In introducing Matthews at the beginning of this column, Kaese declares: "He was the Jackie Robinson of his age."¹

Three years later, Kaese also cited Matthews in another column while relating anecdotes about the Harvard-Yale football rivalry. This time, Kaese reflected on Matthews gridiron exploits for Harvard in 1904. One of Matthews' teammates explained his prep background before entering Harvard and celebrated his athletic versatility: "Matthews was the first Negro to captain the Andover football team. He was a ten-letter man, the Jackie Robinson of his day."²

In both articles, Kaese made particular note of Matthews' character and integrity. In the '65 piece, he quoted a teammate of Matthews' on the Harvard baseball team, who said "he was a damn good player and a very decent fellow." A classmate added: "We held him in the greatest respect and admired the way he undertook his duties, his athletic prowess, and his stand on social matters."³

So just who was this William Clarence Matthews? And how does his life justify comparisons to the impeccable Jackie Robinson, the hero of baseball's integration, whom we celebrate on this fiftieth anniversary of his dramatic breakthrough, the man that filmmaker Ken Burns asserts belongs with Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln in the forefront of American heroes?

Washington, DuBois, Garvey — and Matthews

The life of William Clarence Matthews, taken whole, is a fascinating story of American accomplishment set against bigotry and its constraints. Before we even consider his extraordinary baseball career, we encounter a man in Matthews whose life intersects with the archetypal responses of African-Americans to the realities of post-Civil War America. In fact, he was immediately connected to the great figures, the archetypes themselves, who embodied these responses.

As a young man, who was born in 1877 in Selma, Alabama, and raised in Montgomery, Matthews lived the up-from-slavery values of Booker T. Washington. He attended Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute and trained there under Washington. He showed such promise that he was sent North to continue his education, first at Phillips Andover Academy and then at the Harvard of W.E.B. DuBois, a bastion of progressive thinking

at that time and home to the intellectual activism of William Munroe Trotter and other young black intellectuals who demanded that America address its deplorable racial record and values. In 1903, while Matthews was at Harvard, DuBois published his classic text on race, *The Souls of Black Folk*, attacking Washington's appeasement and archly forecasting: "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."⁴

Later in his life, as a lawyer, Matthews joined forces with the black nationalist movement of the charismatic Jamaican, Marcus Garvey, and served in the early 1920s as his legal adviser. After Garvey was incarcerated for mail fraud, Matthews turned to mainstream Republican politics, serving as Chair in the negro community of the Coolidge campaign for the Presidency in 1924. The million black votes he helped turn out were crucial to the election of the taciturn Vermonter to the Presidency.

At the time of his premature death at the age of 51 in 1928, Matthews was established in the U.S. Attorney General's Office, working on an "important water adjudication matter"⁵ in San Francisco. His death was reported in all the major East Coast newspapers. In the black press, it drew page one headlines. *The Pittsburgh Courier* ran a banner headline on its front page which proclaimed: "William Clarence Matthews Dies Suddenly at Capital/Political Leader's Death a Shock."⁶

The above, however, does not explain Kaese's references to Jackie Robinson, except to note their affinity as prominent African-Americans. The fact is that Matthews, in addition to his prominence in politics and law in the latter half of his life, was an extraordinary athlete as a young man, one of the very best college baseball players in America in the first decade of the century and a talented all-round athlete. Furthermore, he was rumored to be headed to the major leagues in 1905 in defiance of baseball's color ban. The unfolding of this unlikely drama brought Matthews national attention.

It is this rumor that has heretofore introduced Matthews to fans of baseball's history. Sol White in his classic *History of Colored Baseball*, published in 1907, wrote this of Matthews:

It is said on good authority that one of the leading players and managers of the National League is advocating the entrance of colored players in the National League with a view of signing "Matthew (sic)," the colored man, late of Harvard.⁷

Baseball historians, mining this crucial documentary source, have essentially repeated White's conjecture. Robert Peterson, in his seminal *Only the Ball was White* (1970), introduced Matthews to many, myself included, adding this information to White's claim: "(Matthews) had left Harvard that

spring (1905) to play for Burlington of the Vermont League, which was not a recognized minor league."⁸

While Matthews was in Vermont in 1905, the rumor of his breakthrough surfaced in Boston newspapers. Baseball historians have long speculated that it was John McGraw, the greatest manager of that time and an acknowledged opponent of the color barrier, who was pursuing Matthews. In reality, it was Fred Tenney, then player-manager of the Boston National League nine, who was casting a longing eye at Harvard's great shortstop. Matthews, of course, was not signed; it would be another forty years before a black man was signed to a professional contract by a white major league team.

So the Jackie Robinson reference applies to Matthews' extraordinary athletic skills, his attack on baseball's "color line," his demonstrated strength and perseverance, his achievement on and off the playing field, and the respect he earned in his lifetime from peers and the public. In this time of heightened awareness of the talents and heroism of black baseball pioneers, as we approach the millennium, it is especially appropriate to acknowledge William Clarence Matthews, as a forebear of Jackie Robinson in the long march to achieve equality of opportunity in the national pastime in America.

Opportunities to Help Himself

Jackie Robinson and William Clarence Matthews share the experience of being black baseball stars toiling on the white man's playing field. Filling in the above outline of Matthews' life and accomplishment reveals the extent of their shared heritage. Matthews lived in an era quite different from that of Robinson: his abortive breakthrough was in the century's first decade; Robinson's heroic achievement was at mid-century. When Matthews died, Robinson was only nine years old, living in Pasadena, learning the shifting rules and values of an American society confounded by race. Both men died prematurely in their early 50s when they still had much to offer their country.

William Clarence Matthews' early life was spent in the Deep South in the years immediately following Reconstruction. His father, William, was a tailor and "repairer" with a shop at the rear of a drug store in Selma. His mother, Elizabeth, according to documents from the period, was occupied "keeping house."⁹ He had two siblings, Fannie E., thirteen years his senior, and Buddy (Walter), nine years older. By the 1890s, his father had died and he was living in Montgomery with his mother, and his sister and her

family.¹⁰ From 1893–97, Matthews attended Tuskegee Institute, only about 25 miles from Montgomery, where he trained to become a tailor, like his father, and organized the first football team, captained the baseball team, and graduated Salutatorian of his class.¹¹ While he was at Tuskegee in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court gave segregation of the races legal standing in their *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. Later in his life, Matthews contended that he learned from Booker T. Washington "that the best help a man can get is an opportunity to help himself."¹²

One such "opportunity" certainly was his preparation for college at Phillips Andover Academy in Massachusetts, which he attended from 1896 to 1901. He was introduced to Andover by Washington himself, who hoped that Matthews would return to teach at Tuskegee after being educated in the North.¹³ Imagine the challenges he faced, a young man of no means or status, 20 years old, the only Black in his class of 97 boys, and one of two students from below the Mason-Dixon Line. Yet, here at the training ground of the scions of the Eastern elite, Matthews thrived, using sports as the medium of his acceptance, and moving beyond to genuine school leadership.

At Andover, Matthews played football, track, and baseball, again captaining the baseball team, and in general "fitted himself" for Harvard. In his last year, he excelled in football at the position of "end rush" (team record: 5–1–2), was one of very few schoolboys to compete in the open Boston Athletic Association (B.A.A.) track meet in the winter, and presided over "the best (baseball team) we have ever had."¹⁴ His performance at the end of the 1901 season was truly heroic, as he moved from his customary shortstop position to catcher and played with a badly broken thumb. In the season's climactic game against arch-rival Exeter, before one of the largest crowds ever to witness a baseball game at Andover, he led his team to a decisive 9–2 win and earned these plaudits from the school newspaper:

Captain Matthews behind the bat gave an exhibition of sand that would have inspired any team to win.... *The Phillippian* wishes to thank heartily Captain Matthews for all he has done for Andover in athletics, not only baseball but in football and track, and especially for his heroic devotion to the honor of his school in playing the two decisive games with a disabled thumb.¹⁵

He emerged at Andover as more than an athletic curiosity. In his senior year, he was one of twelve members of the Athletic Advisory Council, an Associate Editor of *The Phillippian* (the school newspaper), a member of Inquiry, a religious debate society, and vice-president of the Republican Club. In addition to being voted the "best athlete" in his class, he was also

the "most versatile." At the Senior Dinner at the Young Hotel in Boston, he was one of five students chosen to offer toasts, and at Class Day, he was Class Historian. At Graduation, he was presented with a silver loving cup by his fellow students.¹⁶

Of the twelve players on the Phillips Andover baseball team in 1901, two others in addition to Matthews headed to Harvard, seven went off to Yale, and one attended Princeton. According to an article on Matthews in the *New York Tribune* in 1904, Matthews chose Harvard because he believed the racial climate was better there than at Yale, where there were "more Southern students."¹⁷ A teammate from Andover who had refused to sit at the training table with Matthews had chosen Yale the year before. Matthews' athletic ability was of great appeal to Harvard. The Principal of Phillips Andover, Cecil Bancroft, recommended the young African-American to Harvard officials as "an extremely good athlete."¹⁸

An Example and a Moral

At this time, baseball was singular among American sports in its organization and following, a powerful force in American life. The best of intercollegiate college sports was played in the Northeast, with Harvard and Yale preeminent. These fierce rivals played before thousands of fans in their two game series at the end of the baseball season each spring. In 1902, Matthews' first season at Harvard, 140 candidates tried out for the baseball team.¹⁹ The team's pitchers were coached that year by Denton "Cy" Young of the Boston Americans, the game's greatest pitcher, and their batters were instructed by Brooklyn's W.H. "Wee Willie" Keeler, the era's most scientific batsman, famous for his "hit where they ain't" approach.²⁰ Harvard's record in Matthews' four years was a combined 75 wins against only 18 losses.

In these days, before the minor leagues were organized, colleges were a fertile breeding ground for major league talent. The great Christy Mathewson came to the New York Giants in 1900 from Bucknell University and the next year, his American League counterpart, Eddie Plank, graduated from Gettysburg and joined the Philadelphia A's. In 1905, Big Ed Reulbach left the University of Vermont (after attending Notre Dame as well) and that summer won 18 games for the Chicago Nationals, including 18 and 20 inning victories — and in 1908 became the only man ever to pitch a doubleheader shutout. Colby Jack Coombs played 14 years in the major leagues with Philadelphia and Brooklyn. Even Harvard men chose baseball as a career. The captain of Matthews' 1903 Harvard team, Walter

Clarkson, played five years for the Highlanders and Cleveland from 1904 to 1908. Matthews' keystone partner, second baseman "Harvard Eddie" Grant, played in the Majors from 1905 until 1915 for four teams.

Matthews fulfilled his athletic promise at Harvard from 1901 to 1905. He was a brilliant shortstop for the Crimson nine and played football as well. On the diamond, he was sound defensively, good with the bat, and fast on the bases. He was a genuine talent, attracting attention well beyond Cambridge and the Eastern intercollegiate world. *The Sporting Life*, a national weekly covering baseball at this time, took note of his play in college, describing Matthews as "Harvard's best shortstop since the days of 'Dud' Dean."²¹ *The Boston Post*, a major daily in the first decade of this century, waxed hyperbolic, anointing Matthews as "no doubt the greatest colored athlete of all time," "the best infielder Harvard ever had," and "(Harvard's) greatest big league prospect."²²

Most notable about Matthews, according to the newspaper accounts of the day, and later accounts by his Harvard mates, was the strength of his character. In a day when baseball was a boisterous affair, with rules and authority often winked at or flouted, Matthews was celebrated for "the sedulous manner in which he kept his record clean."²³ In a two part exposé on the "College Athlete" in the June 1905 issue of *McClure's Magazine*, Henry Beach Needham singled out Matthews for special praise. Under the heading "An Example and a Moral," Needham included a long encomium from the *Boston Globe*, celebrating the "little colored chap at Harvard":

For seven years Matthews could have earned much money by playing for semi-professional teams but this he has refused to do.

...Here is a man who to maintain his amateur standing has repeatedly refused offers of \$40 a week and board to play semi-pro baseball in the summer. He had the example of many contemporaneous college ballplayers who were accepting 'indirect' compensation in an underhanded way but he has kept his record clean, and his, it is sad to say, is an exceptional case.²⁴

As a black man, Matthews would have had a harder time than others avoiding even the skimpy enforcement of amateur rules at the time. Throughout his years at Harvard, he had always "earned his way," taking jobs during the school year and working summers in Pullman cars and hotels and teaching in a North Cambridge's night school. His election to the prestigious Class-Day Committee, "the first colored man the seniors of the university have chosen,"²⁵ is evidence of the respect with which he was held at Harvard.

His life at Harvard was anything but easy. In an atmosphere of great privilege, Matthews had little. Both his parents had died by 1902 and he

was left to his own resources to raise the \$150 tuition and the additional \$200 or so in annual expenses. His circumstances were summarized by Principal Bancroft simply: "Is very poor."²⁶ Matthews depended entirely upon his summer earnings for his survival and he struggled. Clearly, he was held to a different standard from his white schoolmates. Even in this liberal racial environment, his staunchest supporters regarded him as a black man first, a ball player next, and a Harvard man and individual in that order. His classmate Barrett Wendell, Jr., described Matthews as "one of the whitest men (I have) ever known."²⁷ It was a compliment. Andover's Vice-Principal Alfred E. Stearns averred: "(He) is one of the very few colored fellows in whom I have placed a great deal of confidence.... and I have found him unusually reliable and straightforward, something rather rare in his race."²⁸ Another Andover teacher, Charles H. Forbes, was only slightly less equivocal in his endorsement of Matthews to Harvard:

W. C. Matthews represents the best there is in a negro. He is a sensible fellow of good mental make-up. He has a rare sense of the necessity to do more than mediocre work, and lays no claim to special indulgence. There is much manhood in this boy.²⁹

Harvard's Best Player

In his very first game for Harvard, against the University of Maine at Boston's Soldier's Field, Matthews demonstrated his extraordinary skill: he played short, had two hits, scored two runs, and stole a base. And in the final game of that first year, against Yale, he turned in his best performance of the year, scoring the winning run before 9000 fans. The headline in the *New York Times* read:

Harvard Defeats Yale
In Deciding Game of the Championship Series
Big Crowd at Polo Grounds

Matthews, Right-Fielder for Crimson Team, Brought
in Winning Run in Ninth Inning³⁰

He also played football that year at Harvard and was the subject of a feature story in the *Crimson* under the headline, "Colored Boy from Andover Playing Wonderful Football." In the piece itself, the reporter was all enthusiasm: "Harvard has a great find in Matthews.... He weighs only 144 pounds but more than makes up for that by his wonderful quickness, pertinacity, and sand."³¹

Matthews was a regular for the next three years on the Harvard nine.

His play was hardly without incident, however. In his first year, he was held out of games played in the South at Virginia and Navy. In his second year, Harvard called off their Southern trip altogether. Later that year, the Georgetown team refused to play if Harvard insisted on Matthews' presence in the line-up. The Harvard team said Matthews would play or there would be no game. Georgetown backed down, but the incident was reported in the Washington papers. The *Star* had this account:

Sam Apperious, Georgetown's captain and catcher, was not in the contest Saturday. He declined to go into the game because the Harvard men played Matthews, the colored shortstop, who comes from the same town in Alabama from which Apperious hails. Matthews displayed the abilities of a first-class ballplayer and conducted himself in a gentlemanly manner. Notwithstanding, there were hisses every time he stepped up to bat and derisive cheers when he failed to connect with the ball. The little shortstop took no notice of these demonstrations occasioned by the prejudice of a number of spectators.³²

In his three years as Harvard's shortstop (he injured his knee in his first year, missing over half the season), Matthews led his team in hitting each year. He batted .333 in 1903, had four homers, and stole 12 bases; the next year, he batted .343 with 3 homers and 8 steals; and in 1905, his last year, he batted .400 and stole 22 bases, playing in all 25 of Harvard's games. As Ocania Chalk says in *Black College Sport*, "had he been white, the majors would have been fighting to sign up this awesome talent."³³

The Northern League — 1905

Of course, he's right, and this issue of race and segregation is what makes Matthews' life more compelling than just the story of a fine college player at the turn of the century. At the end of his career at Harvard, Matthews decided it was time to earn some money for his skills on the diamond and he joined the Burlington team of the "outlaw" white Northern League ("outlaw" because it was outside the authority of the National Agreement³⁴). The "Southern prejudices" which infected Matthews' baseball experience at Harvard would hardly disappear in the Northern League. In fact, Sam Apperious, the Georgetown star, the white boy from Matthews' home town of Selma, would reappear as Matthews' nemesis, playing for the Montpelier-Barre team. He continued his boycott in Vermont, bringing unwanted national attention to Matthews' attempt to find a place in the national game.

So Matthews, in the spring of 1905, left the protective embrace of

Harvard and headed north to Burlington, Vermont. Vermont was perhaps an appropriate place for a black ballplayer hoping to make his mark in a white league at the turn of the century. In the Civil War, Vermont had seen more of its sons slain (on a per capita basis) than any other Northern state and was an important stop on the Underground Railroad. The University of Vermont itself had two black players on its baseball team in 1905. The first black college graduate, Alexander Lucious Twilight, graduated from Middlebury College in 1823. While Matthews would spend only that one year in Vermont, he would later help elect one of its native sons, "Silent Cal" Coolidge, to the Presidency in 1924.

In 1905, Burlington, Vermont was a lively city of about 20,000 which counted among its baseball fans "just about every man, woman, and child" in the area.³⁵ The Northern League, in its fifth season in 1905, was the pride and joy of Vermont sports fans. The three largest towns in Vermont were represented in the league: Burlington (The Queen City), Rutland (the Marble City) and Montpelier-Barre (the Hyphens). A fourth team from Plattsburgh, New York, just a boat ride from Burlington across Lake Champlain, rounded out the league. Fans were carried from city to city to games by special trains and across the lake to Plattsburgh on the steamer, Chateaugay, for 50 cents.

Team leaders had met throughout the winter and spring of 1905 at the elegant Van Ness House in Burlington to lay the ground rules for the season. They would play 60 games from June 24 to September 4; each team agreed to abide by the salary limit and stay until the end of the season — or risk losing their \$150 deposit. In Burlington, ticket prices were established at six dollars for a season's pass, 10 cents a game for seats in the grandstand, and two bits for a seat behind home plate with a cushion. League bosses also agreed upon a double-umpiring system involving pitchers and catchers not in the game, a concept which broke down almost immediately. By the third game of the season the *Burlington Free Press* was reporting:

The experiment of using player-umpires proved very unsatisfactory. It caused bad feeling among the players and culminated in a fistic encounter between Cosgrove and McMahon in which blood flowed freely.³⁶

The league also took steps to improve behavior at games:

The Directors of the Burlington baseball association have voted that betting at Athletic Park this year shall be forbidden. No more excited excursionists with large rolls of filthy lucre prominently displayed will be permitted to shove their tainted money in the faces of inoffensive fans. Profanity and objectionable language will also be eliminated.³⁷

The Northern League was a "fast" league, combining the talents of some veteran pros (including a number of former and future major leaguers) and numerous college boys playing illegally under assumed names to protect their amateur status. Despite the good intentions of all in the preseason, the 1905 season was one of controversy from beginning to end. The rivalries were fierce and the newspapers in each city adopted the local prejudices, reporting in the colorful style of the day. The Burlington team that Matthews joined was the defending champ and the scourge of the league. Burlington invited controversy by bringing in Matthews to play short, becoming in the process probably the only league team in the country playing a black man.³⁸ The team was also constantly in trouble for violating the salary limit, hiring players from National Agreement nines, and influencing the umpiring in their favor. Wealthy Senator G.E. Whitney, the Burlington manager, was generally regarded as a cheater with an unlimited bankroll. When Montpelier-Barre took the league crown from Burlington in the second to last day of the season, the glee of almost everyone outside Burlington was obvious.

Matthews' arrival in Burlington was delayed by his college obligations. Throughout the spring, the Burlington team had kept the identity of their regular shortstop a secret. On June 28, however, the story broke in Boston that Matthews was headed to the Northern League and was repeated in Vermont newspapers. He missed the first five games and then appeared on July 2 in a game against Plattsburgh. He "showed up fast" in the pregame practice and "was liberally applauded" by Burlington fans. Once the game started, the very first Plattsburgh hitter "upbounced the ball" to Matthews and "he fairly ate it up."³⁹

This first game proved anticlimactic, called on account of rain with the score tied 0-0. Burlington fans would have to endure an off-day before catching Matthews again in a spectacular home and home doubleheader with "deadly rival"⁴⁰ Rutland on the Fourth of July. In those games, played in a festive atmosphere before thousands of fans traveling by train the 70 miles between cities, he would live up to his billing. Playing flawlessly at short and batting third, he rapped out three hits in eight chances as Burlington won the morning game, 5-1 before losing the nightcap, 5-3.

Harvard Negro Disrupting Vermont League

As it turned out, Matthews' summer in the Northern League was anything but anti-climactic. Sam Apperious, in his second year in the league, had become a popular player for Montpelier-Barre, and immediately

announced his intention to boycott games with Burlington. "Smith," a pitcher from a Southern college, left the Burlington team because of the signing of Matthews.⁴¹ Even more controversial than Matthews, however, was his teammate "Rube" Vickers, a talented pitcher with major league experience, who played the summer under contract to both Holyoke (MA) of a National Agreement nine and Burlington, and then left at the end of the season to join Brooklyn of the National League. Matthews had his defenders outside Burlington; Vickers did not and was nicknamed "kangaroo" for his (contract) jumping and was a constant target of fans and the press. The baseball reporter for the Montpelier paper observed after a Montpelier-Barre vs. Burlington contest in July: "Vickers came in for his usual share of attention from the bleachers and grandstand and even 'Uncle Tom' Matthew (sic) was not neglected."⁴²

Just a week after his first appearance in a game, Matthews found himself the subject of a piece in the national sports authority, *The Sporting Life*, which reported under the headline "Row Over Black Player": "The advent of William C. Matthews, the Negro shortstop from Harvard, into the Vermont League, threatens to disrupt that organization."⁴³ The Boston newspapers, having a natural interest in Matthews, the Harvard man, also showed an interest in the Matthews-Apperious controversy. The headline, over a picture of Matthews, in the *Traveler* from August 9, 1905, read "Harvard Negro Disrupting Vermont League."

The boycott by Apperious unleashed a torrent of editorial commentary in the newspapers around the state of Vermont. For the most part, Vermonters were offended by his action. The following excerpts are typical:

There is a chap called Apperious in Vermont — came here to play ball. Hails from a state where the "best citizens" burn people alive at the stake.... Scat! Vermont has no use for him. Better wash and go South. May get there in time to help burn the next "nigger." Move!—(*Poultney Journal*, July 29, 1905)

...up here in Vermont race prejudice has few supporters. Vermonters like to see good clean ball, and they are not fussy as to the color of the player who can deliver the right quality.—(*Wilmington Times*, July 18, 1905)

Apperious displays his Southern prejudices, also his long fuzzy ears, by refusing to play in the same game as the Harvard alumnus of slightly darker, if not quite so thin skin. Apperious may be honest in this contention, but his action leads to the suspicion that way down in Dixie somewhere his ancient family must have been closely allied with the typical Alabama mule. Appy, you have strayed. You have no business pasturing in Vermont.—(*St. Johnsbury Republican*, July 22, 1905)

Matthews found support in Burlington and on his own club. Manager Whitney declared: "Vermont is not a Jim Crow state.... A white man who

would not play ball with (Matthews), or even eat or sleep with him, is a cad. If Matthews goes, I go."⁴⁴ Praise from the press, both for Matthews' deportment on the field and for his actual play, was frequent. Typical is this observation from the *Burlington Free Press* on July 9, 1905: "Matthews received the glad hand from the bleachers and grandstand when he first went to bat, showing that race prejudices did not blind the eyes of the spectators so they could not distinguish a good ballplayer and a gentleman."⁴⁵

Some newspapers, mostly in the Montpelier area, defended Apperious, saying that he was only representing the values of the South. "Apperious would be false to the traditions, sentiments, and interests of southern whites if he should in any way recognize the negro as equal," a *Montpelier Argus* editorial said. "We can do it in the North. It cannot safely be done in the South. It is rank foolishness to expect every one to bend to our ideas."⁴⁶

At the end of the 1905 season, the *Rutland Herald* interviewed Rube Vickers on the Apperious-Matthews matter. Vickers said that Apperious "was the loser as far as favor with the crowds was concerned." As for Matthews specifically, Vickers called him a "first-class player" and "a brilliant young man, one who never causes trouble with any player."⁴⁷

On the field, Matthews play was often celebrated because he was skilled at so many aspects of the game. The quality of his all-round play was often cited as in this account of a Burlington victory over Plattsburgh in the *Rutland Herald* on July 13: "the feature play of the day was made by Matthews who got first on a hit, stole second and third and then stole home."⁴⁸ Or this from the *Burlington Free Press* report of a doubleheader split before 1500 fans in Montpelier: "Matthews hit the first ball pitched to him in the first inning over the fence and into the river and trotted around the bases for a home run."⁴⁹

At the plate, Matthews got off to a fast start before tailing off severely near the end of the season. After 13 games, he had 16 hits in 51 at-bats for a .314 average. On August 1, he was batting .283 but by the final Labor Day game, his averaged had dipped to .248. His late-season slump may be accounted for by the crude play of his opponents—or he may have simply been worn down by constant struggle of playing as the center of attention and controversy. Near the end of the season, the *Boston Globe* reported:

...some few players on all of the other teams have been "laying" for Matthews, with the result being that he has been spiked several times, and finally had to be put in the outfield from shortstop so that his chances for being hurt would be lessened.⁵⁰

Challenging the Color Line

The *Boston Traveler* broke the story on July 15, 1905 — and then it was picked up by newspapers around the country. The *Traveler* cited “a person on the inside” who indicated that it was “probable” that Matthews would be joining the Boston National League team “very soon.” The Boston team was languishing only a half game from last place and its keystone work was sadly lacking. The source discussed Tenney’s need for infield help, his knowledge of Matthews’ “remarkable ability” demonstrated at Harvard, and opined that “William C. is just the laddybuck he needs.” Then, he added, “Of course, Captain Tenney will have to consult with the magnates but there is little fear of objection on their part.” That Matthews was accepted at Harvard and was a “well-educated, gentlemanly fellow” enhanced his chances for success.⁵¹

In the same article in the *Traveler*, Matthews was heard from, offering this powerful statement to “a Vermont newspaper man”:

I think it is an outrage that colored men are discriminated against in the big leagues. What a shame it is that black men are barred forever from participating in the national game. I should think that Americans should rise up in revolt against such a condition.

Many Negroes are brilliant players and should not be shut out because their skin is black. As a Harvard man, I shall devote my life to bettering the condition of the black man, and especially to secure his admittance into organized base ball.

If the magnates forget their prejudices and let me into the big leagues, I will show them that a colored boy can play better than lots of white men, and he will be orderly on the field.⁵²

In August, Matthews was quoted again in the *Traveler* on the issue of baseball’s integration:

A negro is just as good as a white man and has just as much right to play ball.... This negro question on the diamond might as well be settled now as any time. If Burlington sticks to her guns as Harvard did, men of my race will soon be playing in the big leagues.⁵³

A few days after Tenney’s interest in Matthews was announced, the response to this rumor was addressed in the *Traveler*. “What shall we do with Matthews?” inquired the reporter. “This question is echoing and reechoing around the baseball world.” This article focused at some length on the response of Southern fans to Matthews’ “queer notions about the equality of the negro,” and charged that Matthews was “using his immense prestige as an educated and petted Harvard man in a mission” to open up baseball to “Negroes.” This *Traveler* piece went on to excerpt commentary

from two national newspapers, the *Atlanta Constitution* (“the most influential baseball newspaper of the South”) and the *Chicago Daily News*.

The *Constitution* was contemptuous, referring to Matthews as a “dusky athlete” and the “human chocolate drop” and made reference to his “kinky dome.” It acknowledged that as a player Matthews was plenty “fast enough,” “one of the stars of the league,” but asserted that he would never survive in baseball outside Harvard “where a dark brown epidermis isn’t any drawback.” The Chicago paper took a more reasonable approach, discussing the challenges Tenney faced in gaining the consent of the other “magnates” in the league and concluded with this observation:

There have been and are Negro players with as much ability as any white player can develop, but the prejudice against playing with them is too strong and the probabilities are that Tenney will find no way to get around the unwritten law which stands against them.⁵⁴

The *Daily News* was right. The unwritten law, the “color line,” was upheld. The magnates did not go along with Tenney’s experiment, despite Matthews’ worth as a baseball player and man. One such magnate, President Hart of the Chicago Cubs, revealed his position, and the “real objection,” to the Boston press shortly after the Matthews’ rumor was floated:

Personally, I have no objections to a Negro playing baseball, but I do not think it is right to inflict him on others who have objections or forcing white players to sleep in the same car with him and associate as intimately as they would have to under such conditions. That is the real objection to a negro in baseball.⁵⁵

Hart adds that the President of the National League, Harry Pulliam, would “resign in a minute” if Tenney signed Matthews: “his good Southern blood would never stand for it.”⁵⁶

Thus, Matthews, like so many great Negro players in the next four decades, came to understand the power of the racial divide in America. Matthews resembled his legatees who toiled in the Negro Leagues in the first half of this century who knew all the while that their skills and courage were sufficient to compete successfully at the highest levels of the game. Just as they proved themselves in off-season contests with the great players of the white Major Leagues, Matthews had amply proven himself against white competition in his four years at Harvard.

A Prominent Negro Member of the Bar

Unlike many of the great black players in baseball’s long segregated era, however, Matthews had options outside baseball. So when the Northern

League's 1905 season ended shortly after Labor Day, Matthews chose not to hook up with another team. Instead, now 28 years old and Harvard-educated, he headed back to Boston to get on with his life.

In his fourth year at Harvard, Matthews had taken a number of courses in the law school, so it was logical that he would consider law as a career. He never went back to the South to teach at Tuskegee as Washington had hoped. He did return in 1907 to marry Penelope Belle Lloyd in Haynesworth, Alabama, a young woman he had met at Tuskegee.⁵⁷ He enrolled in the fall of 1905 in Boston University Law School and supported himself by coaching at three different high schools in Boston (Boston Latin School, Dorchester High School, and Noble and Greenough School). Matthews' Harvard file contains correspondence from this period that highlights his dire financial circumstances. He struggled, persevered, and succeeded in passing the bar in 1908 and established a practice in Boston with William H. Lewis. He continued as an athletic coach until 1913, when his legal duties precluded further involvement in the high schools.

Lewis, his partner, was a supporter of Booker T. Washington and Matthews soon became a member of the Tuskegee political machine.⁵⁸ In 1912, Washington was helpful in procuring for Matthews an appointment as a Special Assistant to the U.S. District Attorney in Boston. After the war, Matthews became a supporter of Marcus Garvey and served as his legal counsel in the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) from 1920 until 1923. Even while associated with Garvey, he continued to be involved with the Republican Party politics and received an appointment in the U.S. Attorney General's Office as a reward for his crucial effort on behalf of Coolidge in the 1924 election. As an Assistant U.S. Attorney General, he was posted in Washington, D.C., Lincoln, Nebraska, and San Francisco.

William Clarence Matthews died unexpectedly on April 11, 1928, on a visit to Washington from San Francisco. The cause of death was a perforated ulcer. In its obituary, the *Boston Globe* described Matthews as "one of the most prominent negro members of the bar in America."⁵⁹ The *Boston Evening Transcript* lamented the passing of a "leader of the colored race."⁶⁰ The *Pittsburgh Courier* carried an account of the funeral, indicating that over 1500 were in attendance and "scores of telegrams" were received, including one from President Coolidge and U.S. Attorney General Sargent. In the *New York Age*, the headline on Page One announced Matthews' death—and just underneath was a picture with the caption "Matty is Dead."⁶¹

Clearly, Matthews was a man of extraordinary achievement as well as physical skills. For all his talent, determination, and achievement, it is fair to place him in the company of the greatest white player of his era, Christy

Matthewson. Like Matthewson, William Clarence Matthews was also "Matty" to his teammates and the public: he was "the Black Matty."

It is fair also to place him in the company of Jackie Robinson, the man who finished the job that Matthews, and so many others started. Despite their generational difference, William Clarence Matthews and Jackie Robinson were brothers in the struggle to integrate baseball. When Matthews made his forceful statements on the abilities and dignity of black men in the baseball microcosm, he was speaking for Josh and Satchel and Judy and Piper and John Henry and Cool Papa and so many, many others. Their lives were given additional meaning and poignancy by the great achievement of Jackie Robinson, whose life documents the words of William Clarence Matthews, uttered in 1905: "A negro is just as good as a white man and has just as much right to play ball."

Notes

1. *Boston Globe*, January 17, 1965.
2. *Boston Globe*, November 20, 1968.
3. *Boston Globe*, January 17, 1965.
4. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. J. Saunders Redding (New York: Fawcett, 1961), p. vii.
5. *Who's Who in Colored America*, 1927, pp. 139, 140.
6. *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 28, 1928.
7. Sol White, *The History of Colored Baseball* (1907) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 78.
8. Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball was White* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 57.
9. 1880 Census, City of Selma, Dallas County, Alabama.
10. U.S. Census, 1900, Montgomery City, Alabama.
11. *Who's Who in Colored America*, 1927.
12. *Boston Globe*, quoted by Henry Beach Needham, "The College Athlete: His Amateur Code—Its Evasion and Administration," *McClure's Magazine*, June 1905, p. 128.
13. Letter from Washington to Dean Byron Hurlbut, Matthews' File, Harvard Archives.
14. *The Phillipian*, June 22, 1901.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Who's Who in Colored America*, 1927.
17. *New York Tribune*, undated, Andover Archives.
18. Matthews' file, Harvard Archives.
19. *Harvard Graduates Magazine*, 1901–1905.
20. After 1902, pitchers were coached by Happy Jack Chesbro of New York (AL), winner of 41 games in 1904 and a future Hall of Famer. College teams were organized quite differently in this era from later periods. They did not have a "coach" in the contemporary sense, but rather hired instructors for the preseason preparation and then during the season had a "manager," who scheduled games and undertook other logistical demands, and a student "captain" who made strategic decisions. There was little