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Rumors and Facts

William Clarence Matthews's 1905 Challenge to Major League Baseball's Color Barrier

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Rumors sometimes have a basis in fact, and sometimes rumors are pure fiction, made up, irresponsible, serving commercial, political, or personal ends. In 1905, one of baseball's most compelling rumors involved the imminent entry into the major leagues of William Clarence Matthews, "Harvard's famous colored shortstop."¹ This rumor, reported in the *Boston Traveler* in July 1905, was repeated in Sol White's *History of Colored Baseball* (1907) and passed on to contemporary audiences by Robert Peterson in his seminal *Only the Ball was White* (1970).

There are inevitable questions about the rumor's veracity. Is it possible that forty years before Jackie Robinson signed a contract with Brooklyn, someone in organized baseball was seriously considering adding a black man to a major league roster?

This essay addresses that question by examining the major players—the Boston Nationals' player-manager Fred Tenney in particular—as well as the primary documents associated with the rumor of Matthews's breakthrough, demonstrating the reasons Matthews might plausibly be considered for this role, while also raising the possibility that the *Traveler* conjured a patently false story in Boston's overheated journalistic environment during the first decade of the twentieth century.

Regardless of his race, Matthews was certainly worthy of the major leagues. He was a terrific player, in the topmost rank of collegiate baseball players in the country at a time when skilled collegians were walking off their campuses onto major league nines.² As a freshman at Harvard, he scored the winning run in the decisive game of the Yale series at the Polo Grounds before ten thousand fans. He never looked back, leading Harvard in hitting the next three years, batting .400 in his senior year and stealing 25 bases. The Harvard nine, preeminent among collegiate programs, won 76 games and lost 18 in Matthews's four years on the team. At the time of the rumor, he was play-

ing professionally for Burlington in the Northern League of Vermont, a fast independent or "outlaw" league, which in its six-year existence claimed over one hundred major league players.

After his season in Burlington, Matthews went back to Boston and got on with his life, the rumor proving to be just that and no more. He enrolled in Boston University Law School and passed the bar in 1907, the same year he married Pamela Belle Lloyd of Hayneworth, Alabama. To make ends meet, he coached at a number of Boston-area high schools. Following the lead of his mentor, William Henry Lewis, Matthews worked for the government as special assistant to the U.S. district attorney in Boston, succeeding Lewis.³ After World War I, Matthews served as the chief legal counsel for Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) from 1920 to 1923. When Matthews died in 1928 at just fifty-one years of age, he was serving as an assistant attorney general in the Coolidge administration, based in San Francisco. His death was reported in all the major East Coast newspapers. The black press noted his death in banner headlines; the *Pittsburgh Courier* announced "Matty is dead" under the headline "William Clarence Matthews Dies Suddenly at Capitol/Political Leader's Death a Shock."⁴

THE RUMORED BREAKTHROUGH: TENNEY'S GAMBIT

Right in the middle of the summer of 1905, two weeks after he had arrived in Burlington, Matthews became national news for more than being the lone black in pro ball who played in an outlaw league in northern New England and confronted the enmity of some opposing players. The headline in the *Boston Traveler* sports page on July 15 revealed that "Matthews May Play Ball with Tenney's Team." Underneath the headline was this provocative lead:

Will Matthews, the negro ballplayer, whose antics at Harvard, and later while on the Burlington team of the Vermont League, wear a Tenney Tribe uniform?

That is the question of the hour.

Matthews's signing with the major league Boston Nationals had been "hinted at" for days, according to the *Traveler*; but "now it is *rumored* that it will transpire" (italics mine). The article cited "a person on the inside" who indicated that Matthews was headed to the majors. The source said that it was "probable" that Matthews would be joining the Boston National League team "very soon."

Led by player-manager Fred Tenney, Boston was languishing a half game from last place, and the play of its middle infielders was sadly lacking. This "inside" source discussed Tenney's need for infield help ("Captain Tenney

has long been looking for a lively second baseman”), confirmed his knowledge of Matthews’s “remarkable ability” demonstrated at nearby Harvard, and opined that “William C. is just the laddybuck he needs.” As a Harvard man, the *Traveler* surmised, Matthews would “prove a great attraction and a big drawing card, both to the South End fans and the Cambridge patrons.”

The article 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 as well as a clever ball player” enhanced his chances for success: “If Harvard men do not object to associating with and idolizing the negro, certainly none of the National League players will object to breaking bread with him.”⁵ In this same piece from the *Traveler*, Matthews confirmed his readiness to take on the role of trailblazer, making this 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.⁶

Later in the summer, 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.⁷

Newspapers in Vermont and around the country repeated the story from the *Traveler*. Just a few days after Tenney’s interest in Matthews was reported, the response to this rumor was addressed in the *Traveler*: “Matthews Deal Arouses Ire of Southern Fans,” read the headline. “What shall we do with Matthews?” inquired the *Traveler* reporter, identified as Dan Coakley in a byline. “This question is echoing and reechoing around the baseball world.” Remember that name: Dan Coakley.

This July 19 article referred to the hostility in Vermont toward Matthews among those “who believe that baseball is a white man’s game,” contending that it was nothing compared to “the row that is brewing over his playing with the Boston Nationals.” The idea of Matthews in the big leagues was so

disagreeable to "hot-headed Southerners" that they threatened to withdraw the Southern League into "outlaw" status if Matthews were "allowed to play on a National Agreement nine."⁸

Coakley reported that "these men below Mason and Dixon's line" were offended by Matthews's "queer notions about the equality of the negro," and alleged he 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 Journal* ("the most influential baseball newspaper of the South") and the *Chicago Daily News*.

The *Journal* was contemptuous, repeating in overtly racist terms the claim that Matthews was destroying the Northern League: "as a matter of fact, the debut of the human chocolate drop is about to break up this league." It treated his acceptance at Harvard as a Northern anomaly, hardly transferable, and made fun of "Harvard's no-color-line traditions": "The kinky dome of thought bobbed at an equal elevation in the Crimson clan, but it wasn't deuce high in league ranks."⁹ The *Journal* acknowledged that Matthews was plenty "fast enough" as a player, "one of the stars of the league," but asserted that players in the Northern League have "higher social aspirations" than they do at Harvard, "where a dark brown epidermis isn't any drawback."¹⁰

The *Chicago Daily News* took a more reasonable approach, acknowledging the obstacles Tenney faced in gaining the consent of the other "magnates" in the league, concluding:

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.¹¹

Of course, the Chicago paper was right. The unwritten "color line" was upheld. The magnates did not go along with Tenney's experiment despite Matthews's worth. Both newspapers acknowledged Matthews's ability as a player: it was exclusively his race that rendered his signing with Tenney impossible.

One magnate, President James E. Hart of the Chicago Cubs, made clear his position and the "real objection," which the *Traveler* passed along shortly after the Matthews's 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.¹²

Hart added 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."¹³

In Boston, most other newspapers ignored the story. The exception was the *Herald*, which on July 16, a day after the *Traveler* story, discussed the rumor under the headline, "Matthews For Boston Team?" The *Herald* dismissed "the report about town yesterday that the Boston National League people were trying to get Matthews, the colored shortstop of the Harvard varsity team." Fred Tenney, according to the *Herald*, "denied emphatically" the story; "he laughed at it," and said that it was "certainly information to him."¹⁴

It's difficult to evaluate this response by Tenney. One can take it a face value: the suggestion that Matthews, a black man, might enter the big leagues was a radical notion, even absurd, given the racial climate of the time. On the other hand, it is unlikely that Tenney would acknowledge to the press any seriousness of purpose, if such existed, if he found no support among the "magnates." For all we know, there may have been considerable behind-the-scenes drama. Tenney's interest in acquiring players to replace those not performing was a constant theme throughout the summer in press reports.

Coakley, in his July 19 *Traveler* article, anticipated Tenney's public posture:

Manager Tenney is maintaining a discreet silence during the controversy. Like all magnates when they are consummating important deals, he tumbles over himself to deny that there is anything doing.

Tenney is a fox and would be a fool to show his hand at this stage of the proceedings. . . . If Tenney is turned down the reporters will rush up to him and he will frantically deny that he has even ever heard of Matthews.¹⁵

FRED TENNEY: AGENT OF RADICAL CHANGE?

Tenney is an interesting character in this integration drama—a reasonable candidate for original thinking and progressive action. As player-manager, Tenney had considerable authority, making all the personnel decisions for his Boston club. The team, not yet called the Braves, was often referred to as the Tenneymen in headlines. He evaluated his team and its prospects during the 1905 season: "We seem to be a little shy of having a first-class team. It would not take much to make our present team a strong one."¹⁶

Tenney's assertion that his 1905 team was "a little shy of . . . first class" was a generous assessment: it was an unequivocally bad team. In 1897 and 1898, the Boston Nationals were champions of the twelve-team National League, but they lost their best players (Chick Stahl, Jimmy Collins, Bill Dineen,

Buck Freeman) to the upstart American League a few years later. Tenney alone remained loyal to the senior circuit. For fourteen years, from 1899 to 1913, Boston found itself out of pennant contention. In 1905, the thirty-three-year-old Tenney was without question Boston's best player. A solid batter, he hit .288 in 1905 and had a lifetime .294 average in seventeen big league seasons, playing mostly for Boston.

Tenney was best known for his slick fielding. He was one of the first players to play wide of the bag at first base and innovated the 3-6-3 double play. In his first twelve years in the majors, he spent every spring coaching collegians (as Jack Chesbro and Willie Keeler did at Harvard): four years at Brown (1895-98), two at Dartmouth (1899-90), and six at Tufts (1901-06). He had a keen awareness of the college baseball scene and undoubtedly knew Harvard's "famous colored shortstop" well.

Throughout the summer of 1905, the Boston Nationals were mired in last or next-to-last place. When the Matthews rumor was published in the *Traveler*, the Tenneymen were in seventh place (among eight teams), losing over 70 percent of their games. Tenney's middle infield of Billy Raymer at second and Ed Abbaticchio at short reminded no one of their contemporaries, Joe Tinker and Johnny Evers of Chicago. At midseason, Raymer was batting just .251 and had 18 errors in the field. Abbaticchio was a better hitter—he batted .279 in 1905 (a career high)—but was an atrocious fielder. By mid-July, "Batty" had already committed 50 errors! One can certainly understand if Tenney were casting a longing eye across the Charles River at Harvard's slick-fielding shortstop.

Nothing in Tenney's ample file in Cooperstown indicates a passion for fairness that might result in the bold stroke of signing Matthews. There's nothing whatever about race in his file, nor in his biographical material at Brown University, his alma mater. Yet Tenney's history does suggest that he might have been more open than others in his position to such an experiment. He had grown up in Georgetown, Massachusetts, just north of Boston, in a small-town atmosphere largely free of racial animosity. He was known as a man of intelligence, an Ivy Leaguer like Matthews, having graduated from Brown in 1894. He consistently celebrated baseball as an "honorable" profession for college men to enter, even if the remuneration were less than other fields. "I look back upon the day I graduated from Brown," he wrote in an essay for the *Boston Post* in 1909, "and can say with all honesty that I am glad I adopted baseball."¹⁷

By temperament, Tenney was the opposite of his contemporary John McGraw. He liked players who were gentlemen and expected all ballplayers to behave in a sportsmanlike fashion. In an *Illustrated Sporting News* piece

that appeared in the summer of 1905, he asserted that "a wonderful change has come over the professional ballplayer in the past few years. In the old days many of the players were hard drinkers," he wrote. "Today the drinking ballplayer is the exception." He went on to extol the virtues of the game for the college man:

College men need not fear the company they join. . . . [Ballplayers are] a clean-cut crowd of young men, dressed in the height of fashion and in the best of health. Many are highly educated men. Many were denied an education in their youth, but in their spare time can be found reading only the best of books. Morally, the professional baseball player has few equals.¹⁸

Tenney finished this essay by reminding a "college man of small means" that a summer of baseball can net two thousand dollars for "six months work." It would be easy, he said, to save fourteen hundred of that amount, "enough money to spend the winter at a professional school." This advertisement for professional baseball, of course, clearly ignored the Giants' "Turkey" Mike Donlin and his rowdy pals.

Race notwithstanding, Matthews would appear to be just the kind of ballplayer Tenney admired. He was a college man on his way to professional school. Beyond his obvious skills, Matthews's behavior on and off the field was impeccable, and it was often celebrated publicly as such. As an Alabaman by birth and a graduate of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, Matthews readily acknowledged Booker T. Washington's influence and, concerned always for his reputation, was conscious of the impact of his behavior. In an exposé on the "College Athlete" in *McClure's Magazine* in June 1905, he was quoted as saying, "that the best help a man can get is an opportunity to help himself."¹⁹ Keenly aware of Washington's admonition to black people to prove their worth as free citizens through responsibility and industry, he did his best to imbue his life with this purpose. He was quoted at the time of his rumored entry into the National League: "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 more orderly on the field."²⁰ At Harvard and in the Northern League, he demonstrated himself to be capable and "orderly," despite provocation. There are no reports, or even hints, of inappropriate or unsportsmanlike play, even in the newspaper of Burlington's fiercest rival in 1905, Montpelier-Barre, which would have been quick to cite it. His Burlington teammates testified that he was above the fray. Unlike the contract jumpers ("kangaroos") he played with, Matthews lived up to his commitment to the Burlington team: he was one of only four Burlington players to play the whole season, despite the team leadership's

juggling of the roster to gain advantage whenever they could as players came and went. Once he joined the team, Matthews played every inning of every game thereafter, despite the hostility and physical play of his opponents.

THE SOURCE: *THE BOSTON TRAVELER*

In evaluating the Matthews rumor, attention must be paid to its source, the *Boston Traveler*. Of the nine Boston dailies, only the *Traveler* showed any significant interest in the story. The *Herald*, as noted, cited the rumor only to discount it. The *Traveler*, on the other hand, focused on Matthews throughout the spring and early summer of 1905, even discussing well after the fact the proposition that he was a "pro" while playing for Harvard and not the shining example of purity that he was made out to be in the press. The fact that the *Traveler* was an evening paper with no Sunday edition meant that it did not report on the big Saturday sporting events, assuming that Boston sports fans would have read accounts of games in the *Herald* and other morning newspapers with Sunday editions. The *Traveler* followed issues and people more than scores and game accounts. It preferred sports news that commented on games already played and well-known personalities or brief articles on upcoming contests.

The *Traveler* was a well-established evening newspaper in Boston in 1905, with a history of independence. It had begun in 1825 as a bulletin for stagecoach listings. But in 1845 a number of struggling dailies were consolidated under the *Traveler* imprimatur, and in 1912 it was absorbed by the *Herald* and became its evening newspaper. The other major dailies in 1905 were easily identified by their political leanings: the *Transcript* was Republican in its orientation with a small but very influential Brahmin constituency accounting for a circulation of 37,000. The *Globe*, with a circulation of 198,000, had emerged as a strong Democratic voice in Boston. William Randolph Hearst had established the *American* the previous year and was already making inroads into the base of the more longstanding dailies. The staunchly Democratic *Post*, under the vigorous leadership of Edward Grozier, Joseph Pulitzer's protégé in New York, had the largest circulation in Boston at 209,000.²¹ Always in the mix, but never a primary organ, the *Traveler* was politically independent, with its circulation in 1905 a respectable 80,000 in this city of 611,000.

At the turn of the century, Addison Archer, a Boston advertising man, published a 150-page brochure evaluating Boston newspapers "regarding [their] character, circulation, and advertising value."²² Archer's sources considered the *Globe* "the great popular newspaper of New England" and called

the *Herald* and *Globe* together Boston's "leading newspapers," though the staid *Transcript* was the city's "best newspaper, . . . remarkably complete."²³ Archer's advertisers described the *Journal* (with a circulation of 72,000) as "highly regarded, the leading Republican newspaper," and the *Record* (with a circulation of 109,000) as "sprightly, crisp, and popular." The *Traveler* had come down from two cents to one and had made "notable gains." Of the *Traveler*, Archer wrote further:

One advertiser said that the *Traveler* "is a resurrected newspaper advancing on sensational and aggressive lines"; another described it as a "racy newspaper" with "a similar constituency in the evening to the *Post* in the morning but the *Post* is a better paper."²⁴

MYRON TOWNSEND'S "SPORT-O-GRAPHS"

Nearly every day in the spring and summer of 1905, this "racy newspaper" featured Myron Townsend's "Sport-O-Graphs" column. Townsend clearly liked to keep the water roiled, asserting that his policy was to "print all the news, regardless of who it hits or hurts."²⁵ Harvard was a convenient target because of its prominence and proximity. The controversy that preoccupied Townsend in the 1905 baseball season was the debate about the professionalism of college athletes. He responded at length, in a number of columns, to the suggestion that Harvard was above the cheating that was rife in college, charging that Harvard had been treated too gently in the local and national press. In an extended two-part *McClure's* article by muckraker Henry Beach Needham on the "College Athlete," Matthews was held up as "an example and a moral" for not taking pay to play in the summers, unlike many of his contemporaries.²⁶ Townsend took issue with Needham's characterization of Matthews and his exemption of Harvard from cheating allegations. He accused Harvard of playing pro players, taking the absolute position that "summer ballplaying is *prima facie* proof of professionalism."²⁷ Whether or not actual compensation was involved was, to Townsend, beside the point.

By this definition, of course, Matthews would be considered a pro for the games he played while working summers at the Hotel Champlain in upstate New York. Just a day before the report that Tenney and the Boston Nationals were interested in signing Matthews, Townsend revealed the story of Matthews's summer activities under the headline "Matthews Admits to Playing Summer Ball":

William C. Matthews, Harvard's darkey player, swears up hill and down that he never received a penny for playing baseball in his life, . . . but he admits he played ball on two summer hotel nines in the Adirondacks. This alone is enough to establish his guilt.²⁸

Earlier in the spring, Harvard's Athletic Committee had suspended Mahar (a "clever left-handed outfielder"²⁹) for his summer play and absolved Randall, the team captain, of the same. When Harvard attempted to relax the very strict and unenforceable standards of amateurism and then got Yale to go along, proposing that a "trivial or technical violation of these rules be judged on its merits," Townsend and the *Traveler* had a field day. "[Harvard's] attitude toward summer players has been notoriously lax," he wrote. "At Harvard there is an unmistakable air of self-satisfaction or smug self-righteousness—a 'holier than thou' contentment."³⁰ Townsend was not above a bit of "smug self-righteousness" himself, pronouncing, "The *Traveler* will continue to fight tooth and nail professionalism on the Harvard nine."³¹

Townsend was the dramatic protagonist of one of his own June columns. It seems he had shown up at the Harvard revels before the big baseball game with Yale—and had unceremoniously been thrown out of the tent where the party was being held. Harvard rooters took issue with Townsend's apparent anti-Crimson bias. Townsend, naturally, made much of this violence against his person. "If in America," he sniffed,

a land of a free press and free thought, an independent critic forfeits all rights and privileges by writing what he thinks is right what is this country coming to? I despise any writer who is owned or controlled in the slightest degree by any man or institution. Boston newspapers have been too easy on the Harvard athletic authorities. . . . Editors pandering to the personal interests of the athletic authorities have rested on your oars until Crimson athletics have reached such a low ebb that they are the laughing stock of the whole world.³²

So Harvard was good copy, a bottomless source of material for Townsend and, with its lofty reputation, a convenient target for *Traveler's* readers who held resentments based on class or race. Without question, attacking Harvard sold newspapers. It was natural that Matthews, as Harvard's most skilled and popular player, would be the focus of Townsend's daily harping.

COAKLEY: "THE KNAVE OF BOSTON"

Townsend was not alone on the *Traveler's* sports beat. In his June 16 column, he identified his associates in sports: the boxing editor, the "horse" editor, and the baseball editor. His baseball colleague was "the humorist, Dan Coakley."

Dan Coakley, whose "Before his Honor" sketches in the *Traveler* have made a genuine hit, is an experienced baseball man, and can be depended upon to give *Traveler* readers the very latest news and gossip of the diamond in fetching style.³³

It's conceivable that the Matthews rumor was Coakley's story. His byline adorned the follow-up article. Forty years old in 1905, Coakley was well-known in Boston and no model of probity. Just the opposite: he was in truth a crook, a character, a rogue in the grand Boston political tradition. Historian Leon Harris described him thus:

"Dan" Coakley, as he was known to all of Boston, was a small handsome man, with wavy blue-black hair, a mobile and expressive face, and a melodious, mellifluous voice with more stops than the organ in the Cardinal's cathedral.³⁴

Doris Kearns Goodwin, in her voluminous *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, called Coakley "a feisty Irishman, . . . flamboyant and glib."³⁵

He started out as a horse car conductor for the Cambridge Street Railway Company in 1883 at age eighteen, but was fired from that job for pocketing fares. He turned to sports reporting for the *New York Sun* and the *Boston Herald*, did some prizefight refereeing, and served in the legislature from 1892 to 1894 before setting his sights on a higher calling and greater profits. His older brother Timothy was a lawyer, and Coakley studied law under his tutelage. He was admitted to the bar in 1897 and joined his brother's practice, becoming "known for winning large settlements in personal injury cases." According to Jack Beatty, biographer of James Michael Curley, Coakley's specialty was blackmail.³⁶

In this rough-and-tumble time in Boston politics, when the protestant Brahmins were losing ground to the upstart Irish Catholics, Coakley first threw his lot in with powerful Boston politician John Fitzgerald. Later, he turned on Honey Fitz and became an intimate associate of Fitzgerald's rival, the notorious James Michael Curley.³⁷ Curley was the most powerful Boston political figure in the first half of the twentieth century, serving four terms as Boston's mayor, two terms in Congress, one term as governor of Massachusetts, and two terms in jail.³⁸ Beatty concluded that Coakley "came to fill the role of Curley's Mephisto: a wicked man who brought Curley close to real criminality": "For over thirty years, Coakley had been Curley's alter ego, his shadow self, his evil twin, . . . always on the far side of legality."³⁹ Coakley, then, was no stranger to controversy and corruption. In 1921, he was disbarred by the Massachusetts Bar Association for operating a sexual entanglement and extortion scheme. His political career came to an end in 1941 when he was thrown off the Governor's Council, an elected position; he was impeached by the Massachusetts House and convicted by the Senate in a 28-10 vote for "using his office to obtain pardons for criminals."⁴⁰ In his obituary in the *Herald* in 1952, Coakley was described in a page-one headline as the "stormy petrel" of Boston politics, "the principal figure in a score of legal and political incidents that caused sensations in the community."⁴¹

Francis Russell, in *The Knave of Boston, and Other Ambiguous Massachusetts Characters*, tells the stories of Boston's most powerful political leaders, "those vivid and venal characters who for half a century up to World War II moved with insouciant restlessness across the spotted fields of Boston politics."⁴² The "Knave" of the title is Coakley himself, whose exploits Russell chronicles in wonderful detail in his first chapter. Of these various rogues, "only one," Russell asserts, "emerges in consistently dark shades, though he was the cleverest—Daniel Coakley. If others could have reached their goals the straight way they might even have preferred it. Coakley found the devious route more interesting, varied, exciting, better suited for his reckless, malicious temperament. Clever enough to have made an honest fortune, he preferred trickery, the double-deal, turning the tables."⁴³

This is not a great recommendation. It is fair to say that Townsend and Coakley, the purveyors, and perhaps the sources, of the Matthews rumor, would not be candidates to win awards for the highest standards of public conduct and personal integrity. Sadly, it is not unreasonable to speculate that these were men capable of collaborating on a chimera.

Matthews was a consistent source of news on the *Traveler's* sports page. He represented the integration of sports in the East, or at least the mixing of the races. Just a few days after the *Traveler* announced Tenney's interest in Matthews, the picture of another black ballplayer in baseball uniform appeared on its sports page under the headline "Noted Winchester Athlete Will Enter Colby in the Fall." John R. Russell was a schoolboy athlete for whom the *Traveler* predicted "a career [at Colby] equal to that of Matthews, his prototype at Harvard."⁴⁴

Shortly thereafter, the *Traveler* featured Matthews as prototype. The headline read "Negro Coach at Dorchester Causes Rumpus," and the story concerned the controversy at Dorchester High about the possible hiring of Dartmouth's great black football player, Matthew Bullock, who was being considered to coach football at the Boston high school. The very first line of the article read: "Shall Dorchester High be Matthews-ized?"

All Dorchester is holding its breath while the decision is being made. If the negro gets the job it will be a victory for the principles which Matthews has espoused at Harvard and in the Vermont League. If prejudice wins, the southern ideas of social equality will prevail and the black athletes get a severe setback in this section.⁴⁵

In the summer of 1905, even when the explicit subject of the story wasn't Matthews himself, he was an important symbol and an influential figure on the Boston sports scene. For the *Traveler*, a "racy" newspaper on the rise, Matthews was news.

It is difficult to identify the editorial bias of these *Traveler* stories about Matthews in 1905—that is, whether the *Traveler* considered Matthews worthy of a place in organized baseball and supported this effort or found him an overreaching black man, unmindful of his proper place. The evidence on their sports pages supports both positions. The July 15 article announcing Matthews's imminent breakthrough into the majors is complimentary in the extreme. However, the charges of professionalism and hypocrisy place Matthews and his ambition in a negative light. On August 10, Townsend penned a harsh retrospective of Matthews's experience at Harvard in his "Sport-o-Graph" column. "Harvard does not desire any more Matthews," he wrote. "It will be a good long time before another negro will make a Crimson team. Harvard men have grown sick and tired of the notoriety which the colored boy has brought to the university and will hereafter draw the color line in baseball and football."⁴⁶

Townsend asserted that this discrimination "will not be done openly," but rather will be accomplished "like at Yale," where black players were allowed to try out but never made the cut.⁴⁷

Matthews's greatest sin, according to Townsend, was that he "cheated the nine out of their southern trip last spring." He charged that Matthews leveled an ultimatum to the team—take him along or he would not play the season: "As he was the best player in college, the [athletics] committee gave in and took him along," Townsend wrote. "This offended the Southern schools and they canceled games with the Crimson right and left."

Harvard has lost an immense lot of prestige by persisting in playing Matthews. . . . As a quiet unassuming fellow, he was immensely popular, but Harvard men do not relish his recent actions in stirring up trouble in the Vermont League and his firm stand which practically caused the abandonment of the southern trip.

Mark this prediction. It will be just as difficult for negroes to make the Harvard teams as it is white boys without pull.⁴⁸

Townsend's broadside ran counter to the overwhelmingly positive press that Matthews had received in the Boston papers during his Harvard career, especially in his final year. Matthews's greatest sin, his only sin, was that he was black. The sentiments to which Townsend gave voice in this column undoubtedly reflected the views of some at Harvard, and who knows how many readers of the *Traveler*.

CONCLUSION

We cannot know what actually transpired. Perhaps Tenney, with other kindred spirits in the Boston brain trust, introduced the matter to National

League owners, where he received a predictable response. It's possible that Tenney actually thought that Matthews's Harvard education would sufficiently offset the fixed beliefs that underscored the color ban. Matthews was certainly a familiar and widely praised figure, well-known to the baseball public. College baseball was modestly integrated with a few exceptional "negroes"; perhaps, he reasoned, why not also the pro game? Tenney, like Branch Rickey later, may have thought he had located the singular black man who might succeed in such an experiment. After World War II, Rickey was looking for a trailblazer; Tenney may just have been looking for a middle infielder, and the best one around happened to be black.

We do know that Matthews, like so many great black players in the next four decades, came to understand the absolute power of the racial divide in America. In his relationship to organized baseball, Matthews fundamentally resembled his legatees, who toiled in the Negro Leagues in the first half of the twentieth century: they 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 proven himself against white competition in his four years at Harvard.

So questions linger: why, for example, did other Boston papers ignore the Matthews story that the *Traveler* featured so prominently? It is surprising that the *Globe*, in particular, did not find the Matthews rumor newsworthy. Louis Lyons wrote in *Newspaper Story*, his history of the *Boston Globe*, that "the *Globe* sports department was practically an adjunct of the Harvard coaching staff, or maybe vice versa."⁴⁹ It would seem natural for the *Globe* to report on the rumor of this Harvard stalwart's breakthrough. For its part, the *Herald* had published a lengthy piece in its Sunday edition on Matthews and his African-American classmates only a few weeks before the *Traveler* broke its story. Matthews's challenge to the color barrier would seem an appropriate follow-up for the *Herald*.

With the interloper Hearst in town battling with the *Post*'s Grozier, Boston newspapers had significantly "yellowed" in 1905. So there is always the possibility that the "sensational and aggressive" *Traveler* made up from whole cloth the story of Matthews's breakthrough in order to sell papers in the overzealous environment of Newspaper Row in Boston, an environment Kenny called "the most competitive arena in America."⁵⁰ Coakley, remember, was on hand at the *Traveler* to provide all the baseball "news and gossip" in a "fetching style." Fabricating a story about the entry into the major leagues of Boston's most celebrated collegiate baseball player—a black man—would hardly be out of character and among the least of his many crimes.

Amid all this speculation, one thing remains beyond doubt: there's no question that, based on his ability and performance, Matthews deserved this consideration for a place at the highest level of the game and the woe-ful Boston Nationals would have been lucky to get him. So even if the rumor had no basis in fact, it was on some level at least plausible that Matthews, this extraordinary black man, so "immensely popular," "quiet," "gentlemanly," and "well-educated," might be the exceptional "negro" who could play in the big leagues with the white boys. Because of his unique circumstances and accommodating nature, Matthews was familiar with the role of challenging preconceptions and making the unthinkable thinkable.

The inevitable conclusion is that there is reason to doubt the truth of the Matthews rumor. The indisputable benefit of the rumor, however, is that it has helped bring to light the remarkable life and career of William Clarence Matthews.⁵¹

NOTES

1. "Matthews May Play Ball with Tenney's Team," *Boston Traveler*, July 15, 1905.
2. Christy Mathewson (Bucknell), Eddie Plank (Gettysburg), Ed Reulbach (Notre Dame, University of Vermont), "Colby Jack" Coombs (Colby College), to name a few.
3. Lewis was a great football player at Amherst and later a Walter Camp All-American at Harvard Law School. He coached Matthews in football at Harvard and later brought him into his practice. Lewis initially rebelled at Booker T. Washington's brand of accommodation but later allied himself with Washington and his political machine.
4. "William Clarence Matthews Dies Suddenly at Capitol/Political Leader's Death a Shock," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 28, 1928.
5. "Matthews May Play Ball with Tenney's Team," *Boston Traveler*, July 15, 1905.
6. "Matthews May Play Ball with Tenney's Team," *Boston Traveler*, July 15, 1905.
7. *Boston Traveler*, August 9, 1905
8. Dan Coakley, "Matthews Deal Arouses Ire of Southern Fans," *Boston Traveler*, July 19, 1905.
9. *Boston Traveler*, July 19, 1905
10. *Boston Traveler*, July 19, 1905. "Deuce high" is a poker term. If a "deuce," or two card, is your high card, you have a bad hand indeed.
11. Quoted in *Boston Traveler*, July 19, 1905.
12. *Boston Traveler*, July 31, 1905
13. *Boston Traveler*, July 31, 1905. Pulliam, who was a journalist from Louisville, Kentucky, before becoming a baseball executive, wasn't forced to resign over this incident, but he did suffer mightily from his inability to handle the controversies of

the game. Four summers later, in July 1909, he shot himself in his room at the New York Athletic Club.

14. "Matthews for Boston Team?" *Boston Herald*, July 16, 1905.
15. Dan Coakley, "Matthews Deal Arouses Ire of Southern Fans" *Boston Traveler*, July 19, 1905.
16. *Boston American*, July 15, 1905
17. Fred Tenney, *Boston Post*, n.d., 1909, from the Tenney file at the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library.
18. *Illustrated Sporting News*, June 10, 1905
19. Henry Beach Needham, "The College Athlete: The Amateur Code—Its Evasions and Administration," *McClure's Magazine*, June 1905, 128.
20. *Boston Traveler*, July 15, 1905
21. Grozier's tenure at the *Post* was remarkable. When he bought the paper in 1891, its circulation was twenty thousand. By 1919, it was six hundred thousand. When Grozier died in 1924, it ran on "momentum," and according to Kenny, "the peak of circulation came in 1928 on the day Herbert Hoover defeated Alfred E. Smith for the presidency; that day the *Post* printed 674,490 papers" (Herbert A. Kenny, *Newspaper Row* [Chester, CT: Globe Pequot, 1987], 30).
22. Louis M. Lyons, *Newspaper Story: One Hundred Years of the Boston Globe* (Cambridge, MA : Belknap, 1971), 133.
23. Lyons, *Newspaper Story*, 135.
24. Lyons, *Newspaper Story*, 135.
25. *Boston Traveler*, June 13, 1905
26. Needham, "The College Athlete," 128. Needham is an interesting fellow—a well-known magazine journalist at this time. This piece on college athletics in *McClure's* brought Needham to the attention of President Teddy Roosevelt, whose interest in addressing the ills in collegiate sports, especially football, would be expressed the following year in widespread reforms. Needham became a confidant of Roosevelt. His life was cut short when he died at age forty-four in a plane crash while covering World War I in France in 1915. Needham also wrote baseball fiction; his novel, *Double Squeeze* (1914), was particularly popular.
27. *Boston Traveler*, June 15, 1905.
28. *Boston Traveler*, July 14, 1905.
29. *Boston Traveler*, May 5, 1905.
30. *Boston Traveler*, May 25, 1905.
31. *Boston Traveler*, May 29, 1905.
32. *Boston Traveler*, June 23, 1905.
33. *Boston Traveler*, June 16, 1905.
34. Leon Harris, *Only to God: The Extraordinary Life of Godfrey Lowell Cabot* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 243.

35. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 146, 161.
36. Jack Beatty, *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley, 1974–1958* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992), 100.
37. Honey Fitz was John Fitzgerald Kennedy's maternal grandfather.
38. Curley is a kingfish in Boston politics and the model for Edwin O'Connor's protagonist in the 1956 best-selling political novel *The Last Hurrah*—a movie based off the novel starring Spencer Tracy appeared in 1958 under the same name. Curley was adept at using the politics of class and ethnicity and was famous for once being elected to city office from jail.
39. Beatty, *The Rascal King*, 100, 432.
40. Beatty, *The Rascal King*, 433; Obituary of Dan Coakley, *New York Times*, September 20, 1952.
41. Obituary of Dan Coakley, *Boston Herald*, September 19, 1952. A storm petrel is a sea bird; a stormy petrel is "one fond of strife; a harbinger of trouble" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed.).
42. Francis Russell, *The Knave of Boston and Other Ambiguous Massachusetts Characters* (Boston: Quinlan, 1987), 1.
43. Russell, *The Knave of Boston*, 2.
44. *Boston Traveler*, July 21, 1905.
45. *Boston Traveler*, August 12, 1905.
46. *Boston Traveler*, August 10, 1905.
47. *Boston Traveler*, August 10, 1905.
48. *Boston Traveler*, August 10, 1905.
49. Lyons, *Newspaper Story*, 126.
50. Kenny, *Newspaper Row*, 16.
51. For example, the Ivy League now crowns its annual baseball champions with the William Clarence Matthews Trophy.