

## [The Columbia Daily Tribune](#)

# A legacy written in stone

**Negro Leagues star Gatewood receives overdue recognition.**

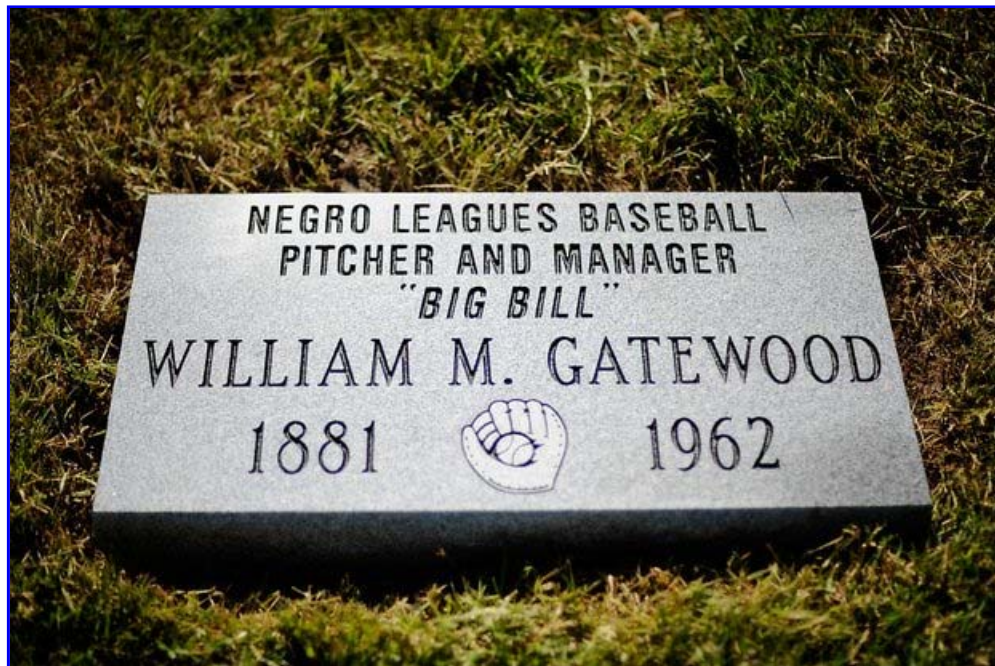


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William "Big Bill" Gatewood, a former Negro Leagues pitcher and manager, lived his final 37 years in Columbia and was buried in an unmarked grave. Tuesday, a gravestone honoring his baseball career was unveiled at Memorial Cemetery.

By [Steve Walentik](#)

[Wednesday, June 30, 2010](#)

He was a pioneer of the Negro National League, the thrower of its first no-hitter and a mentor to some of its biggest stars, including Cool Papa Bell and the great Satchel Paige.



But that part of William Gatewood's life had been all but forgotten by the time he reached the end of his 37 years living in Columbia. The Tribune's obituary announcing his death on Dec. 8, 1962, makes no mention of his pitching exploits, his connection to the would-be Hall of Famers

or even a baseball career of any kind. They were all secrets he took with him to his eternal resting place in the Calvary section of what is now Memorial Cemetery.

Big Bill, as he was known, kept them close as he lay beneath the grass in an unmarked grave for almost 50 years. But as the sun beat down there yesterday afternoon, he and his story finally came out of hiding when members of the Negro Leagues Committee of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) placed a headstone above his remains.

The smooth gray granite reads: "Negro Leagues Baseball Pitcher and Manager 'Big Bill' William M. Gatewood." The stone also lists the years of his birth (1881) and death (1962).

"In these markers, we get a date of birth and a date of death, and in the hyphen is the person's life," said Jeremy Krock, the director of the Negro Leagues Grave Marker Project, speaking to a crowd of 12, including a reporter from The New York Times. "We put a baseball and a baseball glove in his hyphen, because there's a lot of baseball there that was neglected in his obit."

Larry Lester, the co-chairman of the Negro Leagues Committee, discovered some of the details little by little for more than 20 years. An author and historian who helped found the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Lester, who also attended yesterday's ceremony, first heard the name Bill Gatewood during a conversation with Bell in the 1980s.

Gatewood was Bell's first manager with the St. Louis Stars in their maiden season of 1922, and the Hall of Famer credited Gatewood with giving him his nickname. The story goes that Bell, at the time a left-handed pitching prospect whose given name was James, showed an unusual amount of poise striking out Oscar Charleston in a pressure-packed situation, so Gatewood gave him the nickname "Cool" and added the "Papa" to make it sound better. It remained with him the rest of his life.

"That's Cool's story," Lester said.

Gatewood also is credited with moving Bell to the outfield so he could play every day and getting him to bat left-handed to take advantage of his speed.

Gatewood later helped develop Paige as a young pitcher while serving as the manager of the Birmingham Black Barons.

He was an accomplished pitcher in his own right, though he rarely put together a winning season while playing for 15 teams during a 24-year career.

Because much of that time came before the formation of the Negro National League in 1920, it's sometimes difficult to detail his achievements because of a lack of newspaper coverage, particularly in the white press. But he could be overpowering, thanks in part to his unusual size at 6-foot-7 and 250 pounds. He was unafraid to pitch inside and, like many of his contemporaries, had no qualms of doctoring the baseball with spit or scuffing it up with bottle caps to gain an advantage.

Lester said he was really past his prime when he joined the Detroit Stars in 1920 for that first Negro League season, but that didn't stop him from tossing a pair of no-hitters in the next six years. The first came in a 4-0 victory over the Cuban Stars on June 6, 1921, and is said to be the first in Negro League history. Gatewood homered in that game.

His second Negro League no-hitter came in 1926 while pitching for the Albany Giants against the Black Barons.

"There may be some others before 1920 that we haven't found yet," Lester said.

He came to Mid-Missouri at the end of the 1920s and continued to play semi-professionally for the Moberly Eagles and Gatewood Browns, also based in Moberly, throughout the 1930s.

He might not have put up statistics worthy of the Hall of Fame, but Krock, Lester and others at SABR still believed his career was one worth remembering. When it was learned he was buried in an unmarked grave for all these years, they took the steps necessary to change that, soliciting donations and purchasing the headstone.

"It's the proper thing to do, to recognize somebody who spent their heyday in black baseball," Lester said. "They retired without a pension, and the family just couldn't afford to put a headstone."

Krock, an anesthesiologist in Peoria, Ill., has helped place 18 other headstones through the Negro Leagues Grave Marker Project.

The project traces its origins to 2003, when Krock, on a trip to Chicago to see an exhibit called "Baseball in America" at the Field Museum, picked up a book about black baseball players in the city and noticed that Jimmie Crutchfield had been buried there. Crutchfield — whom Gatewood coincidentally helped get his start in the Negro Leagues — was the pride of Ardmore, a mining town less than 30 miles north of Moberly, where Krock's grandparents lived. Krock grew up hearing tales of the player, who spent 16 years with Negro League teams.

Krock paid a visit to the Burr Oak Cemetery in Alsip to see his grave, only to discover it unmarked. With the help of SABR members, including Lester, he initiated a fundraising campaign to mark the grave, along with those of John Donaldson and "Candy Jim" Taylor, who are also buried in Burr Oak.

There are roughly 20 more known Negro Leaguers lying in unmarked graves, and Krock and Lester are continuing to raise money to purchase headstones. Donations can be made through the SABR store on the organization's website ([www.sabr.org](http://www.sabr.org)).

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