

Respect for baseball legend Sol White

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Ryan Whirty/For the Staten Island Advance

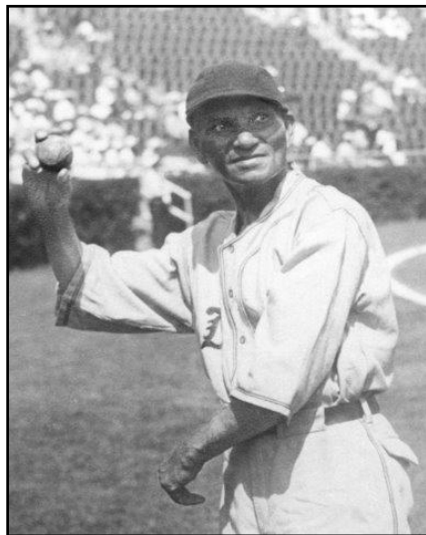
Over several decades in the 20th century, hundreds of penniless African-Americans from other portions of New York were shipped to Staten Island to be buried in pauper's graves in **Frederick Douglass Memorial Park** in Oakwood. They were virtually nameless and faceless, both in life and death.

But in 2006, one of them did get a face and a name. That's when Bellaire, Ohio, native, Harlem resident and hardball legend **King Solomon "Sol" White** was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. A man who had excelled as a player, manager, team owner, author and journalist for more than a half-century spanning the 1880s to the 1930s was at last recognized with a plaque in Cooperstown.

PIVOTAL FIGURE

"Sol White was what you might call a five-tool historical figure," says Society for American Baseball Research member **Gary Ashwill**, who is writing an introduction to a new e-book edition of White's seminal 1907 tome, "History of Colored Base Ball."

"As a pioneer, executive, manager, sportswriter and player there aren't too many who can match his legacy," Ashwill said. "You've got **A.G. Spalding**, **Rube Foster** and **Sol White** -- and I can't think of too many others who'd fit into that group."



Sol White was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2006. He is buried in an unmarked grave in the Frederick Douglass Memorial Park in Oakwood. On Saturday, through the efforts of the **Negro Leagues Baseball Grave Marker Project** (NLBGMP) and the Friends of Frederick Douglass Memorial Park, Inc., the grave will receive a marker. National Baseball Hall of Fame

However, while his bronzed image hung in Cooperstown's hallowed halls, White's grave remained unmarked and anonymous in Douglass Park. He died at **Central Islip State Hospital**, a psychiatric facility on Long Island, in 1955 after spending nearly six years there. (It remains unknown why White was committed to the hospital or exactly how he died.)

However, at long last, two philanthropic organizations have stepped forward to place a simple marker at White's grave, giving him dignity in death. On Saturday, representatives from the Negro Leagues Baseball Grave Marker Project and the as well as government officials and members of the clergy, will gather at Douglass to formally dedicate the marker, which is the product of donations to the NLBGMP.

"This is a hard one for me," grave marker project founder **Jeremy Krock**. "As we search for players' graves, it is a somber mystery as to why there are so many unmarked. While their contributions to baseball were huge, they certainly did not receive payback of a similar magnitude.

"We will never understand why these players are in unmarked graves," he adds. "Perhaps because of cost, life circumstances, no family or distant family. One family member of a player said they couldn't afford a marker at the time: 'We needed money to eat.' The family didn't need a marker to show respect to their deceased loved one."

In this case, the effort to mark White's grave is tied crucially to the work of the Friends of Frederick Douglass organization, whose goal, says group president and **CEO Patricia Willis**, is to help clean up the park and restore its fiscal stability. By 2008, when the roots of the organization were laid, Douglass had fallen into a desperate state of disarray and red ink.

But with the identification and marking of baseball great White's burial spot, the mission of Friends of Frederick Douglass will get a promotion boost and needed public exposure. In that way, the work of the two organizations has dovetailed. For Willis, White represents the working-class, African-Americans of mid-century New York City who toiled in obscurity at a myriad of jobs to take care of their loved ones and who died literally without a penny to their name.

RESTORING THE PARK

That's why its important for Willis and the organization to rehab Douglass park -- to help piece together and restore the city's, and Staten Island's, black history.

"There are a lot of people of color who lived very interesting lives," says Willis, who has family buried in the park. "These were people who were striving in the community to support their families. We have to tell their stories. Every single gravestone has a story."

In fact, Sol White isn't the only famous figure buried in an unmarked grave in Douglass. Groundbreaking singer **Mamie Smith**, known as "**the Queen of the Blues**," is also buried there.

In addition, while researching White's situation, Krock and Willis discovered that another black baseball great, **Elias "Country Brown" Bryant**, is interred in an anonymous burial spot in Douglass Park. Efforts have already started to fund the placement of markers at such celebrities graves, as well as the countless other people who never achieved such fame.

But on Saturday from noon to 2 p.m., it's White who will take front and center.

"It's hard to express how terrible (White's unmarked grave) is," Ashwill says. "He deserved much more than that. We don't know exactly what his last years were like. One hopes that he was lucid enough to take satisfaction in **Jackie Robinson** and **Larry Doby** and the rest finally breaking the color line in 1947 and beyond.

During his retirement in Harlem, White remained active in the Negro League baseball scene, attending **New York Black Yankee** games and other contests, as well as taking part in old timers' events.

He earned a living as a struggling salesman of clothes and other products; in 1936, for example, he filed for bankruptcy as a "novelty salesman." He was committed to Central Islip hospital in 1949 under unclear circumstances.

He also wrote columns for various newspapers, including the *New York Amsterdam News*, in which he compared contemporary teams and players with those of yesteryear. In his March 6, 1929, entry, White penned a paragraph that, in many ways, served as a metaphor for his own life and death.

"No lively balls nor palatial dressing rooms with showers," he wrote. "Rocky diamonds for infielders to play on and umpires who would deliberately take games from them if there was the least possible chance. The original old-timers played in the days when baseball was more of a sport than a business, and they loved the game and loved to play it."

(Freelance journalist **Ryan Whirty** specializes in the Negro Leagues and other African-American baseball subjects and has written extensively for the Society for American Baseball Research. Read more from Whirty at the blog Homeplatedontmove.wordpress.com.)