

# Baseball Remembers Sol White

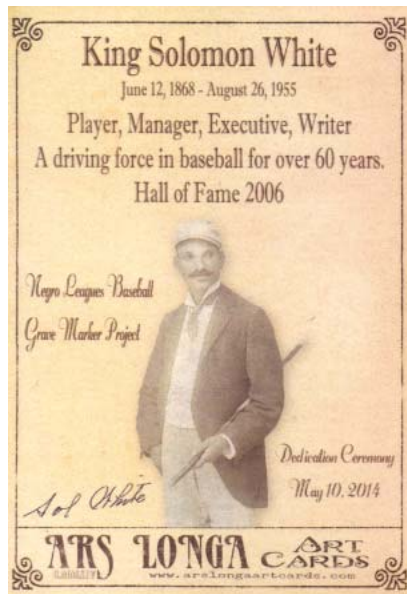
Sol White's new headstone

*On Saturday, May 10, at Frederick Douglass Memorial Park on Staten Island, Sol White's gravesite, unmarked since his death in 1955, received a new headstone. The effort was funded by SABR's Negro Leagues Baseball Grave Marker Project, led by Dr. Jeremy Krock since 2003, when it placed a monument above the final resting place of the great Jimmie Crutchfield. To date, this noble effort has produced thirty markers, including one other member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, Frank Grant. Today it can be said that no member of the Baseball Hall of Fame lies in an unmarked grave.*



*In a ceremony that ran for two hours or so, Sol's place in baseball history was noted by several speakers and celebrated with song, instrumental accompaniment, and a drum corps from St. Philips Baptist Church. Patricia Willis, CEO of Friends of Frederick Douglass, presided over the ceremony; state and city government officials offered their remarks and support.*

*I attended on behalf of Major League Baseball and Commissioner Selig, for whom history matters. Below is my brief declamation, followed by a biography prepared by Peter Mancuso and Ralph Carhart of the Society for American Baseball Research, and recited by the latter.*



Sol White card, 1/50 by Ars Longa

I am pleased to be here in my official role as historian for Major League Baseball, tending the respects of the Commissioner and all those who work and play in this great game. In no other sport does the past matter the way it does in baseball—linked by its players, its teams, its statistics, its unending stories ... enriching generation after generation. Baseball provides a family album filled with snapshots of fervently remembered players, an extended family that connects the living with the long bygone.

Sol White had seemed to be on the outside looking in, a faintly recalled figure of such antiquity that his footprints were no longer visible on baseball's long road. Bud Fowler had been another such figure, but his memory was recently revived in Cooperstown with a special day and a special way named in

his honor. Fowler did not enter the Baseball Hall of Fame with the great Class of 2006, but Sol White did, alongside fellow forgotten luminary and teammate Frank Grant, by all accounts the greatest black player of the nineteenth century.

Born in Massachusetts, Grant died in New York City in 1937, but for reasons hard to reconstruct he was buried in a pauper's grave in Clifton, New Jersey. One of Grant's pallbearers was Sol White, who would last another eighteen years only to have his remains, like those of Frank Grant, interred in an unmarked grave in a place in which he had never lived.



Sol White card, 1/50 by Ars Longa

When Sol White wrote his *History of Colored Baseball*, it was later said of him, “his object in telling his story is to let some of the younger fellows know something of what is behind them—something of the struggles that have made possible the improved conditions of the present.” White’s invaluable history, like the efforts of those here today to erect a lasting memorial to him, commits us to understand the past on its own terms, and to preserve it as a useful living heritage.

Like Lady Liberty, baseball lifts a lamp to the entire world. It is a meritocracy more nearly perfect than the nation whose pastime it is, and as such can be both inspiration and scold. “Second only to death as a leveler,” wrote Alan Sangree of baseball in 1907, the year of Sol White’s book.

Twenty years ago I wrote: “America, independent and separate, is a lonely nation in which culture, class, ideology, and creed fail to unite us; baseball is the tie that binds. While the imperative for Americans has always been to forge ahead, in search of the new, baseball has always been about the past. In this land of opportunity, a man must venture forth to make his own way. Baseball is about coming home.”

Today Sol White is at last safe at home.

*His biography, as offered at the ceremony:*

King Solomon White – better known as Sol White – was born in Bellaire, Ohio, very near West Virginia, on June 12, 1868, three years and two months after Lee surrendered to Grant to end the Civil War. His mother, Judith, was born in Virginia, as were four older siblings, all before or during the War. With Emancipation, Judith took the children to Ohio and Sol became the first member of his family to be born on free soil.

According to Jay Hurd, who wrote White’s biographical profile for SABR’s Bioproject:

“Bellaire, Ohio, had three white teams, the Lilies, the Browns, and the Globes. As a boy Sol hung around the Globes and then in 1883 when they had an engagement with the Marietta, Ohio team one of the Globe players got his finger smashed, and since they all knew Sol, the captain pushed him into the game.” [quotation from a newspaper piece in the *Pittsburgh Courier* of March 12, 1927 by Floyd J. Calvin; see: <http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/2f9d1227>]

Just to enhance the storybook quality of fifteen-year-old Sol's entrance into baseball, the captain of the Marietta team was Ban Johnson, who would later become founder and president of the American League. As an older man, Sol took pride in telling the tale of having played against Johnson when Ban was an obscure captain of a small town club.

### 1887 Wheeling with Sol White



Sol White's professional career began in 1886 after three years barnstorming with the Globes. After a season with the York Monarchs of Pennsylvania, White joined the Wheeling Green Stockings, an integrated team in West Virginia, the same season that baseball first started to institute the tragic color line. White would manage to play on integrated teams for five years, during which he never hit lower than .324; in 159 minor league games he hit .356, scored 174 runs, and stole 54 bases.

Although primarily an infielder, at 5'9", 170 pounds, White could play nearly any position. During the twenty-four years he played the game he traveled across this country hundreds of times, playing for more teams than this speech can contain, so we've provided you a chronology to help you understand just how many miles on the train Sol traveled for his beloved game. [e.g. see: <http://ourgame.mlblogs.com/2012/12/28/sol-white-recalls-baseballs-greatest-days/>]

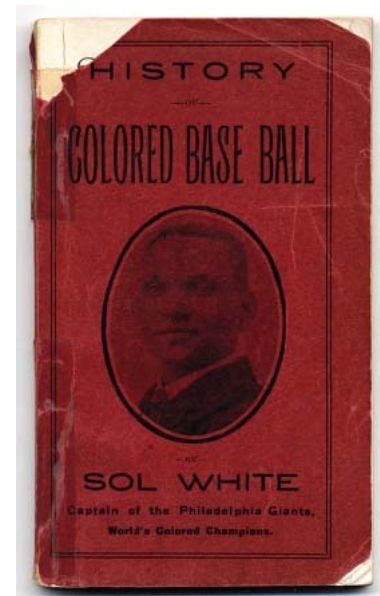
But Sol was more than just a player. As Major League Baseball's Official Historian, John Thorn has noted, "Sol White wasn't just a sure-handed, line-drive-hitting infielder in black baseball of the nineteenth century; he was one of its founding fathers, and its historian."

White also stood apart from many of his contemporaries for another reason. As biographer Jay Hurd states, "Sol White was known to be an intelligent and insightful man, using his mental acuity as well as his physical ability."

From 1896-1900 Sol White split time between classes at Wilberforce College (now Wilberforce University) in Xenia, Ohio, as a theology major while playing for the Cuban X Giants. He received high grades while he was there and it's this academic side to Sol that perhaps contributes to his greatest legacy.

1907 History of Colored Baseball, a.k.a. Official Base Ball Guide.

It was in the early twentieth century, while with the Philadelphia Giants as player/manager and executive, that White published his





“*Sol White’s Official Base Ball Guide.*” The Guide was copyrighted in 1907 by Sol and H. Walter Schlichter, White’s Philadelphia Giants business partner. It is the first record of the black game before 1900 and White’s first-person accounts have been invaluable to our understanding of that world. It is this publication which helps to define Sol White, the ball player, the historian, and the man.

In his *Guide*, Sol states, “Base ball is a legitimate profession. As much so as any other vocation, and should be fostered by owners and players alike. It is immune from attacks from all critics. From a scientific standpoint, it outclasses all other American games. It should be taken seriously by the colored player, as honest efforts with his great ability will open an avenue in the near future wherein he may walk hand-in-hand with the opposite race in the greatest of all American games – base ball.”

In 1927, when no longer directly involved in playing or managing the game, White moved to Manhattan’s Harlem community during its famous Renaissance, and remained there through the Great Depression, World War II, and beyond while maintaining his connection to baseball by writing columns for the local *Amsterdam News* and the *Philadelphia Item*. He lived at 145 West 132nd Street until 1952 when his advancing age and illness required him to be hospitalized.

As highly regarded historians and SABR members Frank Ceresi (recently deceased) and Carol McMains note in their May 2006 Baseball Almanac article “Renaissance Man: Sol White”: “What quiet pride Sol must have felt when, as an old man living alone in Harlem, he saw Jackie Robinson break down the blight on the game we now, quite antiseptically, refer to simply as the ‘color barrier.’”



Sol White, old-timers’ game

White died at the age of 87 on August 26, 1955 at the New York State Hospital in Central Islip, Long Island, penniless. He was buried here at Frederick Douglass Memorial Park on September 1. He is, to date, the only Baseball Hall of Famer buried on Staten Island.

Sol was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 2006. His plaque in the Hall identifies him as an “outstanding player and manager” of the “Pre-Negro Leagues, 1887-1912” and the “Negro Leagues, 1920-1926”. The plaque also recognizes “*Sol White’s Official Base Ball Guide* of early black baseball teams, players, and playing conditions.”

Prior to his election, the name of Sol White was known to only a few. Even now, he is not one of the more famous names to have played the game. But you here today, you now know a little about the man, if you didn’t before. And I hope that what you’ve learned inspires you to go home and learn even more. Because Sol White, with Rube Foster and others, in the words of writer John Holway, “held black baseball together throughout 60 years of apartheid, making Jackie

Robinson's debut possible." We honor him today not just for what he represented to the game, but for what he did for his race and for the advancement of mankind. Thank you, Sol.

A	King Solomon White	Carter + Carter	13252	9/1/55
B	Louise Chisholm	1 <sup>st</sup> Timothy Jun. N.	13253	9/2/55
C	John Snake	Griffin - Peter J. H.	13254	9/3/55
D	Sarah Small	Mickey Jun. Lev.	13259	9/3/55
E	Elizabeth Kause	Trumbull Jun. Home	13269	9/6/55

Sol White's burial record: one of five buried on this site in September 1955.

*Now that Sol has been rescued from unmerited obscurity, the public-spirited might turn to the cemetery in which he resides. Frederick Douglass Memorial Park fell on hard times several years ago, overwhelmed by debt, financial scandal, and declining burials. It has been a struggle for its slim staff—one office worker and two groundskeepers—to maintain the grounds and the records. Solvency seems a distant prospect.*

*In a disquieting note, cemetery ledgers (there is no computer, let alone computerized records) revealed that Sol White was not the only pauper buried in this particular grave. He was the first, but eight other unrelated indigents followed, piling upon him in turn to form a vertical nine in the deep communal plot. Four poor souls were buried within days of White in 1955, and four others followed in December 1988.*



Sol White's resting place at Frederick Douglass Memorial Park

*While no family came to Sol's aid in his last years, his death certificate listed his marital state as "separated" ... so further research may yet reveal whether he was survived at death by his wife or any children.*