

**BLACK BASEBALL
IN NEW YORK CITY:
AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY,
1885-1959**

By Larry Lester

*2017, McFarland
[ISBN: 978-1476670461, 244
pp. \$39.95 USD. Hardcover]*

Reviewed by
Terrie Aamodt
terrie.aamodt@wallawalla.edu

It's hard to tell the story of any Negro League city and its teams. Fast-changing ownership, mergers, moves, and contract-jumping defy coherence. Nowhere is the scene more chaotic than in greater New York City. That is why it has taken until now to assemble the disparate facts and images of New York Negro League baseball between two covers and why it has taken the lifetime of Negro League study, experience, and contacts of author Larry Lester to achieve

this feat. He carries the story from the opening of baseball's Jim Crow era in the mid-1880s until its close — 1959, when the last major league team was integrated. Lester wisely chose the venue of an illustrated history to frame these disparate parts. A generously-sized book format enables him to include extensive captions as well as text introductions to each chronological section.

Early on, the Cuban Giants were displaced by the Cuban X-Giants, then supplanted by the short-lived Lincoln Stars. New York was such an important baseball and cultural destination, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance, that many top Negro League stars, including Oscar Charleston and Satchel Paige, played there at least briefly.

Reflecting its polyglot population, New York drew baseball players from many parts of Latin America as well as the U.S. The Eastern Colored League era of the 1910s and 1920s brought many top players to New York. The Cuban Stars added Cuban Armando Marsans into their ranks after his career in the major leagues ended. Black journalists hoped his presence would pave the way for players "a few shades darker" to enter the major leagues. Lester noted, however, that "the [Cincinnati] Reds quickly countered that Marsans and Almeida [a fellow player] were 'genuine Caucasians,' and the artificial, but very authentic,

color barrier was firmly entrenched" [46].

Lester ably recounts the transition from the Eastern Colored League to the powerhouse Negro National League teams of the 1930s and 1940s. Many top Negro League teams from elsewhere were drawn to New York for four-team round-robin tournaments in Yankee Stadium. Josh Gibson blasted the venue's longest home run ever, 580 feet. Chicago may have owned the East-West All-Star game, but New York pitted the Negro National and American Leagues in Colored All-Star contests. Fans of black baseball in New York likely did not realize how lucky they were. The unfolding saga would finally pit neighborhoods against each other. Brooklyn, whose Eagles would soon fly to Newark, also housed the Brown Dodgers, Branch Rickey's contribution to a purported but short-lived black minor league.

Once the Negro League context is established, Lester makes an interesting rhetorical move. Integration of the major leagues has often been discussed from a white standpoint, depicting white owners plucking a few black stars from the Negro Leagues, but Lester describes Rickey's Brooklyn Dodgers morphing into an extension of the Negro Leagues. He emphasizes how quickly they selected multiple players until, by July 17, 1954, they fielded a starting nine with more black players than

white, while absorbing most of the area's Negro League fans. Lester echoes this approach when he moves across town to Sugar Hill, the upscale black neighborhood that had stoked the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and that encompassed both the Polo Grounds and Yankee Stadium, which had nourished black culture in the early twentieth century. Now these white bastions changed their makeup, with the Giants fielding an all-Negro outfield against the Yankees in the 1951 World Series, and the Yankees saying goodbye to all-white Series triumphs after 1953. Lester discusses these changes as if they grew organically out of the presence of black baseball in the city.

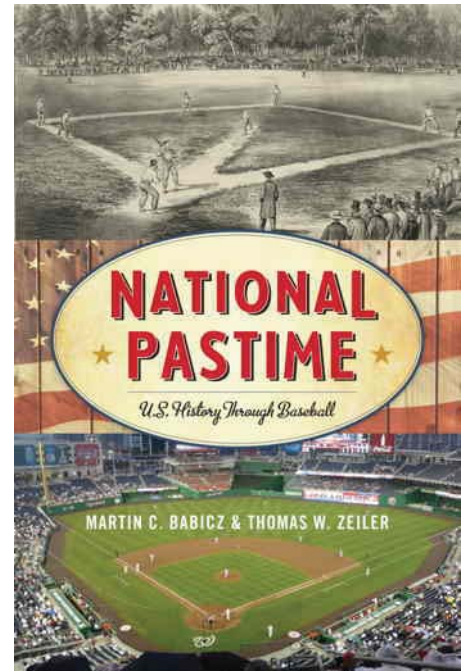
Lester's prose runs from frequently poignant (the New York Black Yankees Willie "The Devil" Wells played in Mexico for two seasons, "where he said that he experienced democracy, acceptance and freedom for the first time in his life" [81]) to occasionally purple (Dave "Impo" Barnhill had "a procrastinating curve, sympathy card slider and a funny bone fastball; batters found him harder to solve than a Walter Mosley mystery" [105]). In general, however, he lets the 300 photographs, supplied by an All-Star array of Negro Leagues researchers, shape the book. Its whole constitutes more than a

jangle of disjointed parts; it creates a flow, a movement, from Jim Crow to integration. Although our story-making inclinations tend to seek a linear narrative, here it would distort the complex truth. A map pinpointing the ballparks and visualizing the various baseball neighborhoods and outlying locations would have been helpful. Careful editing would have smoothed out infelicities and erratic style variations, but this is a powerful story, powerfully told. Perhaps the most haunting image appears near the end, on page 193: 19-year-old Willie Mays, just days away from his debut with the Giants, sits next to Ray Dandridge's cubicle in the Minneapolis Millers locker room. Mays got his chance; future Hall of Famer Dandridge, then 37, was deemed too old to occupy a major league slot for even a few games, although he had been his league's MVP the year before. Only a few of the superbly talented players we meet on these pages got their chance to compete in the big leagues. Their loss is ours.

Terrie Aamodt has been a SABR member since 2003 and is a professor of History and English at Walla Walla University in College Place, Washington. She is interested in interracial barnstorming in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the Red Sox and Mariners.



George McManus 1902



**NATIONAL PASTIME:
U.S. HISTORY THROUGH
BASEBALL**

**By Martin C. Babicz and
Thomas W. Zeiler**

*2017, Rowman & Littlefield
[ISBN: 978-1442235847, 292
pp. \$36.00 USD. Hardcover]*

Reviewed by
Steve Savage
steve.savage@eku.edu

Martin C. Babicz and Thomas W. Zeiler, two history professors, have written *National Pastime: U.S. History Through Baseball*, a story of how economic and social trends and technological change have affected baseball as a business and on the field, all without footnotes or references. The authors have designed this book as a short text or supplementary text and express the hope that their fifteen individual chapters will