

[In death, baseball pioneer receives his due](#)

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Sol White with Philadelphia Giants, 1904 (courtesy of Negro League Baseball Museum, Inc.)

He was a baseball pioneer, a turn-of-the-century star and a player, manager, executive and writer. A half-century after his death, he was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. When it was subsequently discovered that his eternal resting place was an unmarked grave, a group of dedicated baseball fans rallied to the cause and placed a stone on his burial plot.

Is this the tale of Waterbury's Hall of Fame home run king, Roger Connor?

It is not.

This eerily similar story belongs to a man named King Solomon White, a pivotal figure in baseball history whose place of rest has at last returned from obscurity. Saturday, members of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) gathered around White's grave at Fredrick Douglass Cemetery on Staten Island, N.Y., for the dedication of a headstone.

The Connor story is familiar to area baseball fans. Baseball's first home run king, Connor was inducted in the Hall of Fame in 1976, nearly 50 years after his death. He died in 1931, during the Depression. With his family's fortune lost, Connor was placed in an unmarked grave in St. Joseph's Cemetery. A group of citizens, led by Bob Dorr and the late Mike DeLeo, formed the Waterbury Monument Committee, raised more than \$5,000 and placed a stone in 2001.

The story attracted national media attention and secured for all time Connor's legacy.

The Sol White story may not reach that far. White was not an early baseball legend, like Connor. He holds no records, like Connor's early home run mark. He never played in the big leagues. White, born in 1868 in Bellaire, Ohio, played his entire career in the Negro Leagues.

The Project

The man who finally brought a stone to White's grave is Dr. Jeremy Krock, an anesthesiologist from Peoria, Ill. Krock has placed tombstones on 30 unmarked graves of Negro League players, three of them Hall of Fame inductees.

"It is gratifying and rewarding to bring notice to these men," Krock said. "They played in anonymity, and I don't like to see them spend eternity in anonymity."



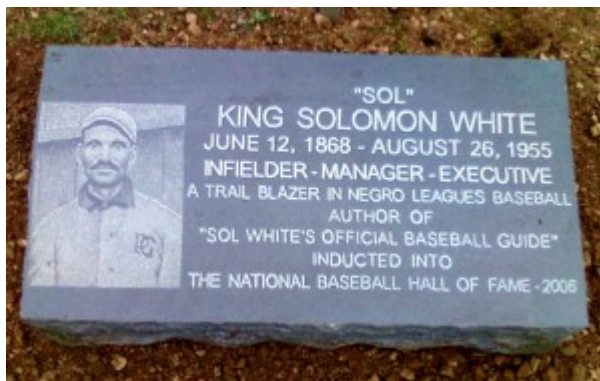
In 2004 Krock formed the Negro Leagues Baseball Grave Marker Project. Aided by dedicated SABR members, it is an organization of one. It is funded by private donations. It costs about \$1,000 to place each stone. Krock hopes to place three stones this year. There are 13 more players who now wait.

“Most,” Krock said, “are forgotten men.”

This is not a hobby, he said. “It is what I do in the evening, when I am off work and the family is asleep. We go to cemeteries on vacation.”

Jimmie Crutchfield

Krock’s work began when he researched the life of a Negro League star named Jimmie Crutchfield. Krock and Crutchfield share the same hometown, Ardmore, Mo. Krock said family members often talked of Crutchfield’s climb out of the coal mines to play in the Negro Leagues.



Krock’s research led him to Crutchfield’s burial place in Alsip, Ill. He was stunned to see that Crutchfield, a Negro League all-star who died in 1993, was buried with his wife in an unmarked grave. With help of Larry Lester and Jerry Malloy of SABR’s Negro League Committee, two other players were found in the same cemetery, also in unmarked graves.

In 2003, markers were placed on the graves of Crutchfield, Candy Jim Taylor and John Donaldson. Krock now had his life mission: to research the burial sites of Negro League players. If the grave is without a marker, he gets to work. He said there are as many as 6,000 players to find.

“We love to go in and find a marker on the grave,” he said, “but more often than not, it is unmarked. We will never find out where most of these players are buried, or for some even when they died.”

All markers make reference to the man’s baseball career.

“It is one way to keep the memory of Negro League baseball alive,” Krock said, “and maybe bring that time alive for someone who never knew about it.”

King Solomon

Sol White’s professional career wove through every phase of Negro League baseball. In 1887, while a student at Wilberforce University in Ohio, he joined the Pittsburgh Keystones of the National Colored Base Ball League, the first league of its kind.

The league lasted one week.

White played for 14 teams, batted .356 for his career and helped form one of the league's greatest franchises, the Philadelphia Giants. His greatest legacy may be his little book. In 1907, White wrote what is still the definitive history of the Negro Leagues and black players to that time, called, "Sol White's History of Colored Baseball."

Jackie Robinson and Brooklyn Dodgers executive Branch Rickey are credited with breaking baseball's color barrier more than 60 years ago, but a SABR bio project notes that Robinson does not happen without Sol White. John B. Holway, in his book, "Blackball Stars: Negro League Pioneers," said that White and others "held black baseball together through 60 years of apartheid, making Robinson's debut possible."

White was one of 17 Negro League stars inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2006.

When the stone was placed on Connor's grave here in 2001, it was agreed that he was the last Hall of Famer with an unknown resting place. That changed in 2006, and SABR members got to work.

"There are very few people in white baseball who can claim a resume like Sol White," said Ralph Cathart, a New York SABR member who organized the Staten Island event. "He played, was an executive, a writer and a manager. He filled so many roles."

The man who knew that White was in Frederick Douglass Cemetery was SABR's Stew Thornley, a Minnesota man who has documented through photographs the burial places of all deceased Hall of Famers.

"At the time Connor's marker went up, I think all Hall of Famers had markers," Thornley said. "But when 17 Negro League or pre-Negro Leaguers were elected in 2006, a few didn't."

The task at Douglass Cemetery — Frederick Douglass is not buried there — was to find White's plot. The African-American cemetery was in deep debt, poorly maintained, nearly abandoned, and recently placed in receivership. Hundreds were buried in community or pauper's graves. Permission to place a stone for White was denied because, as Carhart explained, "No one knew his exact location."

But a small index card in a dusty filing cabinet was found, the grave located and in 2012 a stone placed. The damage and cleanup that followed Hurricane Sandy delayed formal dedication until Saturday.

American Tragedy

Researchers have found the graves of other Hall inductees from the class of 2006, like Ray Brown and Pete Hill, and stones have been placed or will be placed soon.

Does that close the book on lost Hall of Fame grave sites? Strangely enough, no. The only unknown Hall of Fame gravesite now is that of Lee MacPhail. No one knows where MacPhail, who was part of a baseball dynasty and once the president and general manager of the New York Yankees, is buried.

“Obviously, it can’t be too big a mystery,” Thornley said. “The family would know.”

But the baseball world does not.

“Other than Pete Hill, and Jeremy confirmed his location in a cemetery south of Chicago a couple of years ago, White was the only Hall of Famer left without a marker,” Thornley said.

“In the big picture it is a small event,” Carhart said, “but these men helped shape America’s greatest game. Jeremy has brought recognition and awareness to their lives. They played the game in obscurity, but then to die in obscurity, too, would be a classic American tragedy.”