

*It was Fred Tenney of the Boston Nationals, not John McGraw, who wanted to sign William Clarence Matthews, "Harvard's famous colored shortstop," to a major league contract in 1905*

# William Clarence Matthews

*Karl Lindholm*

*I think it is an outrage that colored men are discriminated against in the big leagues. What a shame it is that black men are barred forever from participating in the national game.*

*A negro is just as good as a white man and has just as much right to play ball.... This negro question on the diamond might as well be settled now as any time. If Burlington sticks by her guns as Harvard did, men of my race will soon be playing ball in the Big Leagues.*

—William Clarence Matthews, 1905

**T**o baseball historians and their readers, William Clarence Matthews is the black player rumored in 1905 to be heading to a National League team in defiance of the "Gentleman's Agreement" in organized baseball.

Between the symbolic poles of Cap Anson's perfidy in 1887 and Jackie Robinson's breakthrough in 1945, Matthews is a significant figure. He was introduced to modern fans of the game's history by Robert Peterson in his seminal *Only the Ball was White* (1970). Peterson described Matthews as a great college player at Harvard in the first decade of the century and cites his rumored entry into the National League. Subsequent studies of the African-American contribution to the national game repeat this information.

The dissemination of the rumor springs from one crucial documentary source, Sol White's *History of Colored Baseball*, published in 1907. In his history, White wrote:

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It is said on good authority that one of the leading players and a manager of the National League is advocating the entrance of colored players in the National League with a view to signing 'Matthews,' the colored man, late of Harvard.

Readers of White's words have long speculated on the identity of the manager brave enough to confront entrenched values by proposing to add a black player to his team. John McGraw naturally came to mind. White himself, in the paragraphs immediately after his discussion of Matthews, described McGraw's effort in 1901 to sneak Charlie Grant, second baseman of the Columbia Giants of Chicago, a black team, onto his roster as Tokohama, a full-blooded Cherokee Indian.

In *Only the Ball was White*, Peterson suggests "it could have been McGraw...then leading the Giants" who was pursuing Matthews." Negro Leagues historian Jerry Malloy, in his excellent introduction to the University of Nebraska reissue of White's history, indicates that "White most likely was concealing the identity of John J. McGraw, blustery, innovative manager of the New York Giants who is said to have employed two black stars, Rube Foster and Jose Mendez...at various times to coach his pitchers."

**Tenney needs an infielder**—However, an examination of White's own words leads elsewhere. He says ambiguously, "one of the game's players and a manager is" interested in Matthews.

There was only one player-manager in the National League in 1905 and that was Fred Tenney of the Boston

Nationals. Tenney was the slick-fielding first baseman for Boston (he made the 3-6-3 double play a standard part of the infield repertoire) who led them to pennants in 1895 and 1897, and was named player-manager in 1905 and again in 1907. Tenney had every reason in 1905 to be casting a longing eye at Matthews.

The Boston Nationals were in desperate need of a little punch in their infield. By mid-July, 1905, they were mired in seventh place, only a slender half-game from Brooklyn and the cellar. Their second baseman, Billy Raymer, was not much. He hit .211 in 1905 and .218 in his truncated three-year big league career. A player of Matthews' caliber would have solved Tenney's infield problems. In the summer of 1905, Matthews had finished at Harvard and was playing his first and only professional season in the "outlaw" Northern League for Burlington, Vermont.

On July 15, 1905, the Boston *Traveler* announced in a headline on the sports page, MATTHEWS MAY PLAY BALL WITH TENNEY'S TEAM. The article went on to say:

It is very probable that [Matthews] will become a member of the Boston Nationals very soon.

It has been hinted at for the past few days. Now it is rumored that it will transpire.

A person 'on the inside,' one who generally knows whereof he speaks, has this to say: 'Captain Tenney has long been hunting for a lively second baseman to strengthen his infield. On hearing of Matthews' remarkable ability, and after following the career of the young negro collegian-professional while at Harvard and Burlington, (he) decided that William C. was just the laddybuck he needed.'

The source "on the inside" then offers a rationale for Matthews' acceptance where others would fail:

As Matthews is a Harvard man, he should prove a great attraction.... Matthews is a well-educated, gentlemanly fellow, as well as a clever ball player.

If Harvard men do not object to associating with and idolizing the negro, certainly none of the National League players will object to breaking bread with him.

The article concludes with the proviso that, "Of course, Captain Tenney will have to consult with the magnates, but there is little fear of objection on their part."

This same article also offered Matthews' response to the Tenney rumor. In a compelling statement to "a Vermont newspaper man," Matthews asserted:

I think it is an outrage that colored men are discriminated against in the big leagues. What a shame it is that black men are barred forever from participating in the national game. I should think that Americans should rise up in revolt against such a condition.

Many negroes are brilliant players and should not be shut out because their skin is black. As a Harvard man, I shall devote my life to bettering the condition of the black man, and especially to secure his admittance into organized base ball.

If the magnates forget their prejudices and let me into the big leagues, I will show them that a colored boy can play better than lots of white men, and he will be orderly on the field.

**"What shall we do with Matthews?"**—A few days later, on July 19, 1905, a long story on the Matthews signing appeared in the *Traveler* under the headline MATTHEWS DEAL AROUSES IRE OF SOUTHERN FANS. *Traveler* reporter Dan Coakley asks at the outset, "What shall we do with Matthews?" and declares that "this question is now echoing around the baseball world."

Coakley claimed that "hot-headed southerners are so roiled" by the Matthews' case that they will withdraw and form their own outlaw Southern League if Matthews joins a "National Agreement nine":

Men below Mason and Dixon's line look upon the playing of Matthews in the Vermont League as the entering wedge of the negro in big league ball.

Southerners believe that Matthews has queer notions about the equality of the negro, and that he is using his prestige as an educated and petted Harvard man in a mission to pave the way so that negroes can play ball on the same teams as white men.

This article reprinted editorials from two national newspapers. In the *Atlanta Journal*, identified as "the most influential baseball newspaper in the South," Matthews is described as the "Human Chocolate Drop" with a "kinky dome." The editorial claims that the "verdict" of players is "he may be good enough for Harvard (...where a dark brown epidermis isn't any drawback), but he isn't good enough for us." The *Journal* editorial goes on to indicate that the National League would never take on this controversy and hand such an obvious advantage to the fledging American League.

The *Chicago Daily News* is more temperate, offering this realistic appraisal:

There have been and are negro players with

as much ability as any white man can develop, but the prejudice against playing with them is too strong and the probabilities are that Tenney will find no way to get around the unwritten law which stands against them.

**The "real" objection**—Two days later, July 21, another story on Matthews appeared in the *Traveler*, this time an interview with "President Hart" of the Chicago Cubs. Hart indicated that he personally had "no objections to a negro playing baseball" but went on to reveal the "real objection" to integration:

I do not think it is right to inflict (a negro) on others who have objections or forcing white players to sleep in the same car and associate as intimately as they would have to under such conditions.

Hart added that if Tenney succeeded in placing Matthews on his team, "President Pulliam would resign in a minute. His good southern blood would never stand for it." Harry Pulliam was president of the National League and certainly one of the magnates Tenney had to please in order to get Matthews on his club.

The *Traveler* writer couldn't help but add his own postscript to Hart's comments. "Matthews, the Harvard man," he said, "will be grossly insulted at what President Hart says about the negro inflicting himself on others in the sleeping car or at the table."

Matthews was not signed by Tenney. We are left to surmise what actually happened. Presumably the "magnates," Presidents Hart, Pulliam, and others, did not acquiesce. Coakley's story in the *Traveler* described Tenney's posture and predicted his response.

Manager Tenney is maintaining a discreet silence during the controversy. Like all magnates when they are consummating important deals, he tumbles over himself to deny there is anything doing.

Tenney is a fox and would be a fool to show his hand at this stage of the proceedings.... If Tenney is turned down the reporters will rush up to him and he will frantically deny that he has ever heard of Matthews.

Sure enough, in a story in the *Boston Herald* on July 21, a few days after the rumor surfaced, Tenney himself disavowed his interest. The *Herald* reported:

Rumor had it that Matthews was willing to sign, but that the Boston management did not want to put the matter through until the consent of all the other clubs was given.

When Fred Tenney was seen in regard to the story, he laughed at it, and said that it was certainly information to him.... He denied emphatically that he had asked the consent of the other clubs to allow Matthews to play with the Boston Nationals.

The rumor died. Matthews was not signed. He played out the season in Vermont and got on with his life.

**Was Matthews good enough?**—Matthew was legitimate. In the first decade of the century, Harvard was arguably the best college team in the country and Matthews was its best player. Harvard's record in Matthews' four years was a combined 75 wins against only 18 losses. In 1902, Matthews first season at Harvard, 140 candidates tried out for the baseball team. The team's pitchers were coached that year by Cy Young of the Boston Americans and the batters by Brooklyn's Willie Keeler, the era's most "scientific" batsman.

In those days, before the minor leagues were organized, colleges were a fertile breeding ground for major league talent. The incomparable Christy Mathewson graduated from Bucknell University. In 1905, Big Ed Reulbach left the University of Vermont in Burlington just as Matthews was coming to town to play in the Northern League. That summer, Reulbach won 18 games for the Chicago Nationals, including 18- and 20-inning victories. Colby Jack Coombs played for Montpelier-Barre against Matthews in the Northern League in 1905 and then went on to a sterling fourteen-year major league career with Philadelphia and Brooklyn.

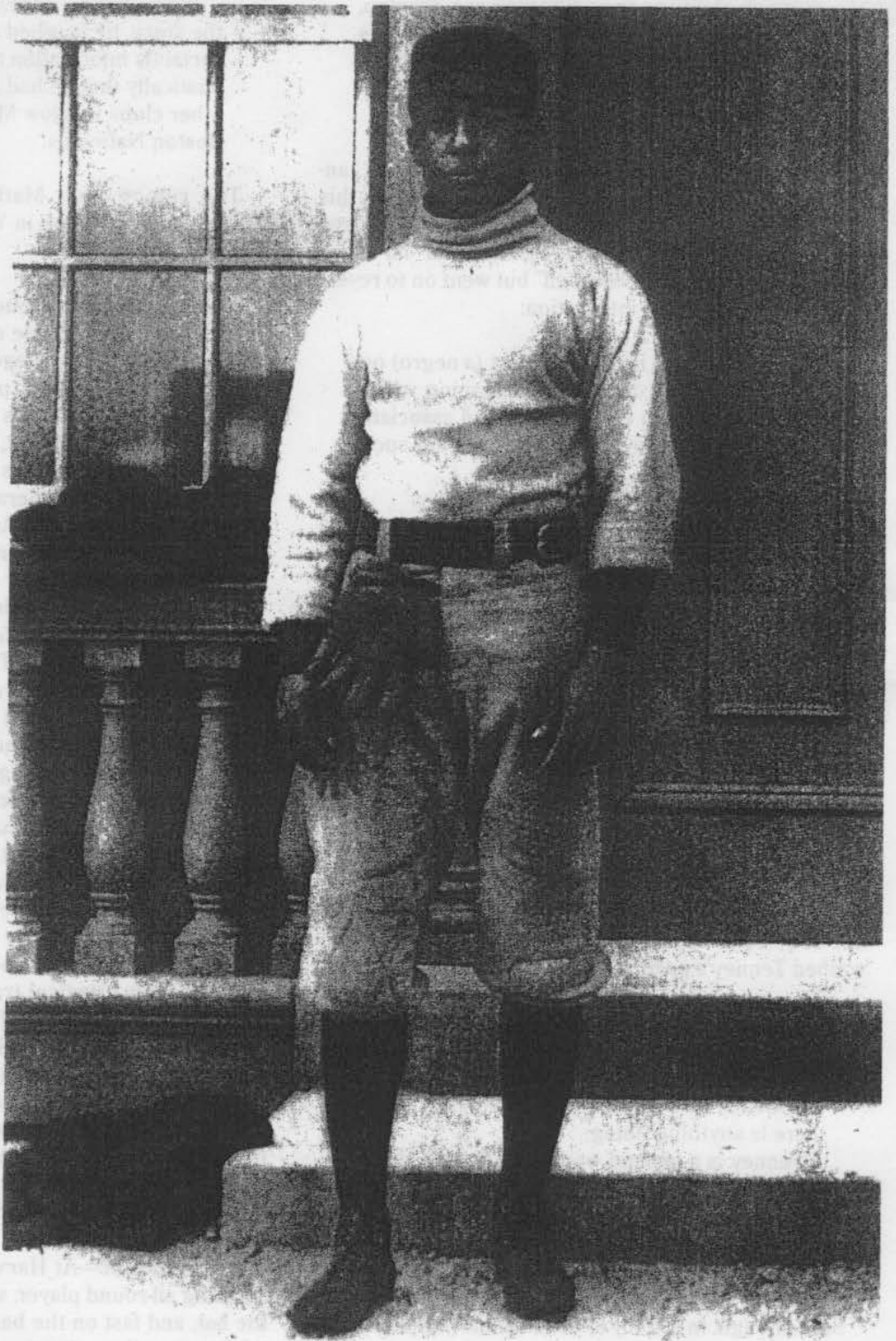
It wasn't particularly good form for Harvard men to go from their classical training in Cambridge to the questionable profession of baseball—but they did. The captain of Matthews' 1903 Harvard team, Walter Clarkson, was declared ineligible for the 1904 season because he had signed a contract with New York (AL). He played five years for the Highlanders and Cleveland from 1904 through 1908. Matthews' keystone partner, second baseman "Harvard Eddie" Grant, played for four major league teams from 1905 through 1915.

**A major talent**—At Harvard, Matthews was an outstanding all-round player, sound defensively, good with the bat, and fast on the bases. Clearly, he was a major talent, attracting attention beyond Cambridge and the Eastern intercollegiate world. In his three years as Harvard's shortstop (he injured his knee in his first year, missing over half the season), Matthews led his team in hitting each year. He batted .333 in 1903, had four homers, and stole 12 bases; the next year, he batted .343 with 3 homers and 8 steals; and in 1905, his

last year, he batted .400 and stole 22 bases, playing in all twenty-five of Harvard's games. As Ocania Chalk says in his historical study, *Black College Sport*, "Had he been white, the majors would have been fighting to sign up this awesome talent."

His play was hardly without incident, however. In his first year, he was held out of games played in the South at Virginia and Navy. In his second year, Harvard called off its Southern trip altogether. Later that year, 1903, the Georgetown team refused to play if Harvard insisted on Matthews' presence in the lineup. Harvard said Matthews would play or there would be no game. Georgetown backed down, but the incident was reported in the Washington papers. The *Star* had this account:

Sam Apperious, Georgetown's captain and catcher, was not in the contest Saturday. He declined to go into the game because the Harvard men played Matthews, the colored shortstop, who comes from the same town in Alabama from which Apperious hails. Matthews displayed the abilities of a first-class ballplayer and conducted himself in a gentlemanly manner. Notwithstanding, there were hisses every time he stepped up to bat and derisive cheers when he failed to connect with the ball.



William Clarence Matthews,  
"Harvard's best ballplayer."

The little shortstop took no notice of these demonstrations occasioned by the prejudice of a number of spectators.

**Matthews in Vermont, 1905**—These difficulties continued in the Northern League where Matthews was applauded for his play by fans and sportswriters, but also faced boycotts and dirty play on the field. Just a few days after finishing at Harvard, he was playing for Burlington in a Fourth of July doubleheader against Rutland, as fierce a rivalry as Harvard-Yale. Just a week after this first appearance, a story appeared in *Sporting Life* under the headline, ROW OVER BLACK PLAYER:

The advent of William C. Matthews, the negro shortstop from Harvard, into the Vermont League, threatens to disrupt that organization. It is the first instance of record of a negro player in a professional league, and the other (sic) white players in the league do not take kindly to the innovation.

It turns out that the same Sam Apperious, the Southerner from Matthews' home town of Selma, Alabama, who captained Georgetown and boycotted Harvard games, was playing outfield and catcher for Montpelier. Apperious's refusal to step on the field with Matthews in Vermont caused an uproar in the Vermont newspapers. Most editorials condemned Apperious. This selection from the Wilmington (VT) *Times* was typical:

...up here in Vermont race prejudice has few supporters. Vermonters like to see good clean ball, and they are not fussy as to the color of the player who can deliver the right quality.

The *Poultney Journal* was more extreme in its criticism:

There is a chap called Apperious in Vermont—came here to play ball. Hails from a state where the 'best citizens' burn people alive at the stake.... Scat! Vermont has no use for him. Better wash and go South. May get there in time to help burn the next 'nigger.' Move!

Some newspapers, mostly in the Montpelier area, defended Apperious, saying that he was only representing the values of the South. "Apperious would be false to the traditions, sentiments, and interests of southern whites if he should in any way recognize the negro as equal," a Montpelier *Argus* editorial said. "We can do it in the North. It cannot safely be done in the South."

The Boston newspapers and *Sporting Life*, also reported on the Matthews-Apperious matter. However, they saw it as evidence that blacks and whites could not play together. The headline in the Boston *Traveler* on August 9, 1905 read: HARVARD NEGRO DISRUPTING VERMONT LEAGUE.

**"If Matthews goes, I go"**—Matthews found support in Burlington and on his own club. His own manager, A.E. Whitney said: "Vermont is not a Jim Crow state.... A white man who would refuse to play ball with [Matthews], or even eat or sleep with him is a cad. If Matthews goes, I go."

Praise from the press, both for Matthews' deportment on the field and for his actual play, was frequent. Typical is this observation from the Burlington *Free Press* on July 9, 1905: "Matthews received the glad hand from the bleachers and grandstand when he first went to bat, showing that race prejudices did not blind the eyes of the spectators so they could not distinguish a good ballplayer and a gentleman."

At the end of the 1905 season, the Rutland *Herald* interviewed Rube Vickers, a veteran pitcher with major league experience who spent the season with Burlington as Matthews' teammate. Of the Apperious-Matthews' matter, Vickers said that Apperious "was the loser as far as favor with the crowds was concerned." As for Matthews specifically, Vickers called him a "first-class player" and "a brilliant young man, one who never causes trouble with any player."

On the field, Matthews' play was often celebrated because he was skilled at so many aspects of the game. The quality of his all-round play was often cited as in this account of a Burlington victory over Plattsburgh in the Rutland *Herald* on July 13: "The feature play of the day was made by Matthews who got first on a hit, stole second and third and then stole home."

Or this from the Burlington *Free Press* report of a doubleheader split before 1,500 fans in Montpelier: "Matthews hit the first ball pitched to him in the first inning over the fence and into the river and trotted around the bases for a home run."

At the plate, he got off to a fast start before tailing off severely near the end of the season. After thirteen games, he had 16 hits in 51 at bats for a .314 average. On August 1, he was batting .283 but by the final Labor Day game his average had dipped to .248.

His late-season slump may be accounted for by the crude play of his opponents, or he may simply have been worn down by the constant struggle of playing as the center of attention and controversy. On August 15 the Boston *Globe* reported:

...some few players on all of the other teams have been 'laying' for Matthews, with the result being that he has been spiked several times, and finally had to be put in the outfield from shortstop so that his chances for being hurt would be lessened.

**Was Matthews strong enough?**—As a baseball player, Matthews gained fame as "Harvard's famous colored shortstop" and as Tenney's would-be second

baseman. His life, taken whole, goes far beyond baseball and bears testimony to his strength and resiliency. It is a fascinating American life, full of accomplishment and challenges confronted and overcome.

Matthews was born in the Deep South in Selma, Alabama in 1877. As a teenager, he attended Tuskegee Institute where he trained under Booker T. Washington. Washington saw promise in Matthews and arranged for him to be educated at the prestigious prep school, Phillips Andover Academy, in Massachusetts. Washington hoped that Matthews would return to teach at Tuskegee after being trained in the North.

In his four years at Andover, 1896-1901, Matthews was a star in three sports: football, track, and baseball, and became a school leader. He was the only black student in his class of ninety-seven young men. When he graduated, he was elected Class Historian and was presented a silver cup by his classmates to show their appreciation of him.

At Harvard as well he earned testimonials to his character and popularity. Charles Mason, a classmate, observed:

He had to work hard for his education for he had to support himself through his college and law school course.... We held him in the greatest respect, and admired the way he undertook his duties, his athletic prowess, and his stand on social issues.

Matthews was held up as an "example and a moral" in a national magazine. In an article on the "College Athlete" in the *McClure's* of June, 1905, Matthews was singled out for his hard work, honesty, and determination.

**The black "Matty"**—At the end of the Northern League season in August of 1905, Matthews returned to Boston and enrolled in law school at Boston University. He was twenty-eight years old, with a Harvard education, and options outside baseball. He married in 1907 and worked as an athletic instructor at high schools in Boston to support himself through law school.

He passed the bar in 1908 and went on to a distinguished legal career. In 1913, he was appointed by President Taft as an Assistant United States Attorney in Massachusetts. In 1924 he was appointed to oversee the national effort to get out the Negro vote on behalf of Calvin Coolidge, a Vermonter. When Coolidge was elected President with the help of a million Negro votes, Matthews was rewarded with a federal position as Assistant to the Attorney General of the United States.

William Clarence Matthews died suddenly and pre-

maturely of a perforated ulcer in 1928 at the age of 51. At the time of his death he was living in San Francisco, representing the government in "an important water adjudication matter."

His death was reported in all the major East Coast newspapers. The *Boston Globe* described him as "one of the most prominent negro members of the bar in America." The *Boston Post*, a major daily in the first decade of this century, cited Matthews as "no doubt the greatest colored athlete of all time...the best infielder Harvard ever had...[Harvard's] greatest big league prospect." In black newspapers throughout the East, his death drew page one headlines.

Like Christy Mathewson, William Clarence Matthews was "Matty" to his teammates and the public. His character, talent, determination, and achievement also linked him in many minds with Mathewson, the most admired white player of his era.

**Baseball and Race**—Baseball is a cultural institution that both reflects and affects American life. Filmmaker and baseball mythologist Ken Burns places Jackie Robinson in the very forefront, with Lincoln and Jefferson, in the pantheon of American heroes, so crucial is the connection of race and sports in American life. Matthews' rumored entry into the major leagues at the turn of the century stimulates the imagination.

What if Matthews had succeeded in finding his way onto a big league roster in 1905? Would he immediately have been forced out of the game like his predecessors in the 1880s—or would he have paved the way for John Henry Lloyd, Bruce Petway, Oscar Charleston, and other early African-American stars to express themselves, however problematically, in baseball? How would a Matthews breakthrough have changed American life in this century?

Of course, the discussion is moot. A Matthews breakthrough in 1905 was immensely implausible, given the dependence of baseball on the South for players and facilities and the racial divide in America—an America made legally segregated by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896. His difficulties in the Northern League dramatize the obstacles he faced.

*Boston Globe* columnist Harold Kaese, many years later in 1965, made the explicit comparison to a more famous legatee: "He was the Jackie Robinson of his age," claimed Kaese. Like Robinson, Matthews was smart, strong, educated, and experienced in the white world. If it had been within the capabilities of one man to challenge the baseball establishment over race in the first decade of this century, Matthews would have been an excellent candidate. He was an extraordinary baseball player and man. This black Matty was, indeed, the Jackie Robinson of his time.