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FLASHBACK



A detail from artist Terry Rogers' mural outside Dawson's Market in Rockville honors Black baseball players in Montgomery County.

## HIDDEN DIAMONDS

*For Montgomery County's Black communities, sandlot baseball was a big hit*

BY BRUCE ADAMS

**THERE ARE NO HINTS** at the Cabin John Village shopping center in Potomac or at the Walgreens on Hungerford Drive in Rockville that crowds used to watch baseball games on the land now occupied by those buildings. Growing up in Montgomery County in the 1950s as a baseball-crazy kid, I didn't have a clue that some of the country's finest ballplayers were playing at ballfields just miles from my house in Potomac.

In the second half of the 19th century, when four of every 10 Montgomery

County residents were Black, formerly enslaved people founded more than three dozen communities throughout the county. These historic Black communities were isolated and often denied public services. Over the years, some were ignored, others were bulldozed. For many of them, "history is buried with the people," says the Rev. Tim Warner of Emory Grove United Methodist Church in Gaithersburg.

Along with churches and schools, baseball became the center of civic life in these communities from the 1940s through the 1960s. Many of them—from Emory Grove to Lyttonsville and Scotland to Sandy Spring—organized sandlot teams, according to my research for "In Search of the Ballfields of Montgomery's Black Communities," a 2021 presentation for the nonprofit Montgomery History.

"Baseball was the entertainment. It started out of necessity," former Sandy Spring player Jim Offord, who died in 2019, said in a County Cable

Montgomery documentary that aired in 2000. "It was one of the few places we could go. It didn't take much to get us excited because we didn't have much anyway."

Local baseball historian Billy Gordon, who grew up in Rockville watching the Black sandlot stars play, recalls that the "entire African American community" would turn out. "It was quite a scene," says Gordon, who participated in the Montgomery History presentation. "The preacher would be at the game, and the bootlegger would be there dispensing beverages."

The center of the county's Black sandlot teams was Johnson's Park in Emory Grove. Roughly 1,000 people would show up on Memorial Day for food, fellowship and a two-night doubleheader. Barnstorming Negro Leagues teams came to the Emory Grove ballpark to take on the county's top sandlot teams: Rockville American Legion Post 151, the Maryland Wildcats and the Sandy Spring All-Stars, according to Gordon.

The ballparks provided entertainment and a place to gather for Black residents, who were blocked from other options because of Jim Crow laws.

Some of Montgomery's best players competed in the Negro Leagues before returning home to join their local sandlot teams and raise their families. Segregation denied them the opportunity to match their skills against the very best, according to Gordon, who lists Russell Awkard, Bill Williams and brothers Clarence "Pint" Isreal and Elbert Isreal as top players.

Black business entrepreneurs and county residents Edward Johnson, Joe Davis, William Wims, Charlie Harris and Buck Bailey saw the success of the Negro Leagues and built ballparks that attracted hundreds of fans. The ballparks provided entertainment and a place to gather for Black residents, who were blocked from other options because of Jim Crow laws.

Johnson's Park and a ballfield in Norbeck with two names—Bailey's and Page's—hosted night games under the lights. Joe Davis' Oak Haven in Boyds had a dance hall and served a full dinner after Sunday games. Wims Meadow in Clarksburg and Harris Meadow in Stewartown drew top crowds on weekends from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

"When you played at night at Johnson's Park, you felt like you were a pro," Eddie Dove, a former Scotland Eagles third baseman, told me. Built in 1947, Johnson's Park is now owned by Montgomery Parks.

As entertainment opportunities for Black residents widened in the 1960s and early '70s, the Black sandlot teams faded away. ■

*Bruce Adams lives in Bethesda. His Montgomery History presentation can be viewed at [tinyurl.com/Moco-black-baseball](https://tinyurl.com/Moco-black-baseball).*

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