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# Saving Hamtramck Stadium Negro League ballpark, a char community and a fight to rec history

By [Cody Stavenhagen \(/author/cody-stavenhagen/\)](#) 84 

It was after 2 a.m., and Gary Gillette could not sleep. He was sitting up, scrolling around on Google Earth, scratching the sort of intellectual itch only a historian can understand. *Zoom, scroll, zoom, scroll.* An aerial view of Hamtramck, Michigan — the suburb surrounded by the city of Detroit — sat burned in his monitor. In Gillette’s world, there is a subdued thrill in this process of discovery, and on this night, he was searching for a relic.

Gillette is a respected baseball historian, a co-editor of ESPN’s “Baseball Encyclopedia,” a member of the Society for American Baseball Research since 1983. As such, his job is to research, record and correct the long history of

America's most storied game. "SABR people are special," Gillette says. "But I don't live in my mom's basement."

Gillette's indoctrination into the world of baseball research came in the late 1970s, when — long story short — a foray into baseball board-game testing led to rubbing elbows with Bill James, the godfather of baseball's analytics movement. Now in 2008, late at night, Gillette was looking for a forgotten structure, a link to baseball history and the larger tale of this country, too. He had recently moved to the Detroit area, and he hoped to visit the sites of all the historic ballparks nearby. That list included Hamtramck Stadium, the former home of the Detroit Stars, mainstays in the old Negro National League. The stadium was home to Turkey Stearnes, the Hall of Fame power hitter. The whole pantheon of Negro League legends — Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell and many others — played there, too.

Yet multiple standard reference books (good ones, even, Gillette points out) provided odd information. They indicated Hamtramck Stadium sat at the site of what is now Keyworth Stadium, first a high school football field and now home to Detroit's professional soccer club. Gillette knew Hamtramck Stadium (<http://www.hamtramckstadium.org/?cat=1>) was built in 1930, and he knew Keyworth Stadium was built in 1936, part of FDR's Works Progress Administration project. So if all this were correct, it would mean Hamtramck Stadium was torn down only six years after it opened, a great ballpark demolished in favor of a high-school football field. As a result, it would have meant another piece of the past faded into oblivion.



(<https://theathletic.com/1123314/2019/08/08/saving-ham>

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nd / The Athletic)

Gillette knows more about Negro League ballparks than almost anyone alive, and he defines them as such: To be considered a true Negro League park, a venue must have served as the home field for a major Negro League team between the years of 1920 and 1950. If Hamtramck Stadium were gone, that would mean only four of these great parks were left in the entire country.

Gillette finally found one source that listed a different street grid for the old ballpark. He found evidence Hamtramck Stadium actually might have been more than a quarter-mile to the southwest, right off Dan Street. And on this night more than a decade ago, during this bout of insomnia, scrolling through satellite imagery, Gillette found what he was looking for: an overhead view of an old grandstand. He saw wood and steel, a wretched place overrun by grass and weeds and the harsh elements of time.

“It was rusty and old and looked abandoned,” Gillette says now. “It looked like 1930 to me.”

The first time Gillette went out to the site, he took in the shoddy chain-link fences, the overgrown grass and shrubs. If you go there now (though it’s technically trespassing on city property), you’ll see weeds in the cracks of the concrete, holes and loose nails in the creaky old boards that make up the grandstand. Yet when Gillette looked around the place, he knew: *This has got to be it.*

At Hamtramck Stadium, the outfield wall is gone, and so are the basepaths, and so are many of the memories. But Gillette's detective work has slowly sparked interest and an ambitious desire to preserve the old ballpark. There's a mural now painted on one of the buildings off to the side, a testament to overlooked Negro League great Turkey Stearnes, and by proxy, the legacies of all the other courageous men who were consigned to play in a segregated baseball league. Out in the grass, there is a bump where an old pitcher's mound once stood, and if you turn your head and squint your eyes, you can see the faintest hints of what used to be, and maybe, what can be again.

*"Something of a shock or surprise awaits the one who travels Jos. Campau a few blocks north of East Grand boulevard and turns left a block on Dan street," the Detroit News wrote on May 12, 1930. Hamtramck Stadium held its opening ceremony on May 11 of that year, and owner John Roesink got Detroit Tigers star Ty Cobb to throw out the first pitch. Nine thousand people were said to attend the ballgame that day, impressed by the shiny steel and sturdy concrete. The stadium was comparable to the best minor-league ballparks at the time, designed to fit almost 8,000 people on wooden benches in the grandstand, plus box seats separated by iron railing. There were bleachers down the left-field line, designed to hold a thousand more spectators. The fences were positioned 315 feet to left field, 515 feet to center and 407 feet to right. Hamtramck itself was home to more than 56,000 people of Polish descent, and all of the Detroit area was booming. Black workers were flocking to jobs in the auto industry, and the Negro Leagues generated plenty of fanfare despite their segregated status in society. Upon the stadium's opening, the Detroit News called the park "new, substantial and pretentious," noting its superiority to the old Bennett Park, once home to the Detroit Tigers.*



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In April of 2010, a headline ran in the Hamtramck Review newspaper: “Begin Veterans Park fix-up by razing grandstands.”

“We doubt baseball will ever make a comeback in this town again,” the editorial read, “and even if it did or another sport took its place, the grandstands are too far deteriorated to justify spending money to fix them up. The grandstands are long past any historical or emotional connection to the city and really only represent decay and neglect.”

Hamtramck Stadium sits on the larger site of Veterans Park, and for almost 20 years, it has stood there in an empty field, a glaring eyesore. The town didn’t have enough money to restore the stadium, and it also didn’t have the money to tear it down. Even in Hamtramck, few residents realized what the grandstand used to be. The mayor, for example, knew it was once a popular sports complex but didn’t know about its Negro League history. After the Negro Leagues, Hamtramck Stadium served as a home to semipro baseball, championship Little League teams and a range of other community events. The city even expanded the park grounds and built an ice skating rink. It was used that way for most of the mid-20th century. But the landmark Dodge motor plant just to the south closed in 1980, a devastating blow to the city. And by 1990, Hamtramck Stadium sat fenced off, unused and abandoned. Apart from a few older residents and those who truly knew their community and its history best, almost no one was aware of the treasure in their backyards.

Gillette, through a connection with his wife, reached out to Hamtramck mayor Karen Majewski. He told Majewski he didn't live in Hamtramck, he did not pay taxes there, and he had no business telling her what to do. But if you choose to tear this down, he noted, you should at least know its history. Majewski invited Gillette to speak at the next city council meeting.

About the same time, Ian Perrotta — who then worked for the Hamtramck Review — got a call about the grandstand from a concerned reader. Perrotta began writing about the structure and its history, and the next thing he knew, he was hosting a meeting for citizens interested in saving it.

"I was just going to do a quick, guerrilla thing where we just went in and fixed it up," Perrotta said. "You could use it enough as it is if you wanted to have a public venue. I just thought something could be done, something should be done."

When the city council meeting came on July 13, 2010, Gillette arrived in Hamtramck with old plans and documents, determined to prove this was indeed the site of the old Negro Leagues ballpark. Gradually, the puzzle began coming together. Gillette spent countless unpaid hours digging through microfilm. He found an old photo, showing the grandstand in its original state. He found old plans, showing the dimensions of the original outfield wall.

"I uncovered a lot of stuff in the historical record that was either unknown or, in a lot of cases, aggravatingly, was incorrect," he said.



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Also at that first council meeting, Gillette said this: “I guarantee that if you preserve this stadium, it will be a national story.” He said that because Hamtramck Stadium had been forgotten in the same way the Negro Leagues themselves remain an overlooked part of baseball history.

“The appreciation is only a tiny fraction — 10, 20 percent — of what it should be,” Gillette says.

In Detroit, Walter Briggs Sr. owned the Detroit Tigers from 1919 to 1935 and did not allow black players on his team. The saying, “No jigs for Briggs,” was thought to be a common slogan, and the Tigers were the second-to-last Major League club to integrate, not fielding an African-American player until Larry Doby in 1959.

“There’s a lack of recognition for things like Negro League baseball,” Perrotta said. “I think people, as a culture, we’re trying to rectify some of the wrongs that were done in the past, and one of those is: Things should have been integrated long before, and because they weren’t, there was a stratification of what was deemed to be important. A lot of the history from the Negro League era was lost, because there just wasn’t a focus on paying attention to it and recognizing it.”

*“He was as good as Josh Gibson,” Satchel Paige once said of Norman “Turkey” Stearnes (<https://baseballhall.org/hall-of-famers/stearnes-turkey>), the greatest Negro Leaguer in the history of Detroit. “He was as good as anybody who ever played ball.” Raised in Tennessee, Stearnes played for Negro League teams in Detroit from 1923–1931, then again in 1937. Negro League stats compiled in the 2000s — part of a massive project to restore the lost history of the Negro Leagues — list Stearnes with 202 career home runs, the most of any Negro League player in official league games. He was a speedy center fielder, known for his awkward batting stance and running style, arms flapping down the first-base line. “That man could hit the ball as far as anybody,” Cool Papa Bell once said, “but they don’t say too much about him.”*



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and Rosilyn Stearnes-Brown (Allison Farrand / The Athletic)

Joyce Stearnes Thompson and Rosilyn Stearnes-Brown remember their father singing on the porch. He would sit outside and bellow, “Give me that ooold-time religion.” Turkey Stearnes was a notoriously quiet man, but music was one of two things that would make his deep eyes brighten, that could get him to stand and smile and open up.

“He had a voice sort of like Sam Cooke,” Rosilyn says, sitting in her home just south of Detroit’s 8 Mile Road. “It was sort of that mellow sound.”

Stearnes loved to sing, walking around the house, sitting on the porch. Sometimes he would sing at church, but he didn’t usually like getting up in front of a crowd. Baseball, then, was the one way people could get Turkey Stearnes to start talking. He’d go down to the barbershop on Linwood Street and swap stories about how it used to be, all the times his teammates beat white teams in exhibition games, all the classic stories that make up the oral history of the Negro Leagues. So much of that history has slipped through the cracks. Rosilyn Stearnes-Brown remembers the times Satchel Paige would stop by the family’s house, and Paige and Stearnes would sit on that porch and swap stories.

“We didn’t know we were listening to history,” she says now. “I should have recorded it.”

When they were children, Joyce and Rosilyn would make the neighborhood boys play house before they all went outside to play baseball. Everyone knew the Stearnes girls were the ones with the bats and balls and gloves, but over the years, their father gave all the equipment away. That’s why there’s almost no memorabilia left.

The girls were too young to see their father play, and it was only later that they began to understand who he was and what he meant to people in Detroit and beyond.

“Not until I was grown,” Rosilyn says, shaking her head.

When Joyce was a single mother trying to pay her way through college, she drove a Good Humor ice-cream truck, stuck on an early-morning route that circled through Royal Oak, north of Detroit.

“Who wants to buy ice cream at 11 a.m.?” Joyce said.

One morning, two black men, maybe in their 60s, came up to the truck. They were telling an old story.

“He hit that ball 500 feet out at Mack Park. That Turkey Stearnes, wasn’t he great?”

“Turkey Stearnes?” Joyce said.

“You know him?”

“That’s my father.”

Joyce sat there with the two men for almost an hour, learning more about her father’s baseball career, telling them more about the man who helped raise her. Soon, word spread. “The woman driving around that ice cream truck? It’s Turkey Stearnes’ daughter.” So each day near the end of her route, Joyce would drive south, near Quincy and Carter. She’d drive four blocks through the inner city, and she says people would flock to the truck and buy ice cream.

“That,” she says, “is when I learned the magnitude and the impact his name had.”

*The Detroit Stars (<https://www.hamtramckstadium.org/?p=36>) were a charter member of the Negro National League in 1920. Through the 1929 season, they played home games at Mack Park, which was demolished in the 1930s in favor of another ballpark, which was then torn down in the 1960s. Beginning in 1930, the Stars played at Hamtramck Stadium, where the team lost the deciding game of the 1930 Negro National League Championship Series to the St. Louis Stars. The Great Depression rocked the Negro Leagues in 1931, when the National League folded after half a season. The Detroit Wolves, a franchise in the new East-West League, played at Hamtramck in 1932 but lasted only one season. New incarnations of the Detroit Stars played in 1933 and 1937. Those clubs folded, too, and Detroit wouldn’t have a hometown Negro League team again until 1954, in a league clinging to survival. But even in just a few years, at least 18 eventual members of the National Baseball Hall of Fame played or managed at Hamtramck Stadium, and baseball history lived and breathed and unfolded in summers of glory.*



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Hamtramck is a small, changing town, constantly grappling with its complex American identity. There is a sign that stands at its border, not far from the old stadium. “HAMTRAMCK WELCOMES YOU,” it says, along with a city slogan: “THE WORLD IN TWO SQUARE MILES.”

In its earliest days, the Dodge brothers opened a big automotive plant, and Hamtramck (pronounced ham-TRAM-ick) became a bastion for Polish immigrants, a community that became known for its sausage shops and neighborhood bars and lively festivals. There are many theories as to why Hamtramck Stadium was built here as opposed to another location in Detroit, and one is this: Polish-Americans were considered to occupy a spot on the social ladder only slightly above African-Americans at the time. Race relations were far from perfect, but the schools were integrated, and Hamtramck’s reputation as a diverse and inclusive place started early.

But in terms of the population, present-day Hamtramck is a very different place. The Polish population dropped from 90 percent in 1970 to 11 percent or lower today. There’s a new influx of immigrant families, most from Yemen and Bangladesh and Bosnia. It gradually became a safe haven for the Muslim religion, and in 2013, Hamtramck (total population 22,423) became the first Muslim-majority city in the United States

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/for-the-first-majority-muslim-us-city-residents-tense-about-its-future/2015/11/21/45d0ea96-8a24-11e5-be39->

0034bb576eee\_story.html). When Gillette, the baseball historian, made his first presentation to the city council, the worries in the back of his mind had little to do with race or religion, but centered more on a byproduct of all the culture change: Hamtramck is no longer a community with a thriving interest in baseball.

But after that first council meeting, when Gillette explained the ballpark's history and made a case for saving it, Perrotta wrote in the Hamtramck Review: "Something strange happened at last Tuesday night's city council meeting — everyone agreed on something."

Hamtramck City Hall has long had a reputation for political infighting and organizational chaos. Perrotta thought he could do a better job, so he ran and was elected to the city council in 2015. His own tenure has been controversial — he was censured by other councilmembers (<http://www.thehamtramckreview.com/a-city-council-divided/>) earlier this year, stemming from comments made about recent immigrants (<https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/wayne/2017/09/27/hamtramck-councilman-apologizes-immigrants-sanitation/707234001/>) — but Hamtramck Stadium has become a sort of rallying point for the city and its government.

"The project really has the potential to unite the community," Perrotta says. "Hamtramck is already a great community and a very unique place in Michigan, if not the entire world. This project, once it's complete, is going to be the icing on the cake in terms of bringing people to Hamtramck."

The more word spread, the more interest grew. Tom Habitz, a local baseball coach who is also an appointee to the city's planning and zoning boards, joined Friends of Historic Hamtramck Stadium, the nonprofit helping to raise the estimated \$18 million needed to fully renovate the stadium. Habitz has coached youth baseball teams in Hamtramck, and though he knows it is not exactly a baseball hotbed, sometimes he's surprised. Hamtramck is a city that still relies heavily on its public park space, and Habitz said he has witnessed children walking through the park, watching his teams practice and eventually asking about playing baseball.

"We've had teams that have had six, seven, eight different ethnic backgrounds represented, and I don't know where else in the country you would find something like that," Habitz said.

The Hamtramck Stadium project started as a grassroots effort, but it has evolved into something larger. In 2010, the city formed a committee to save Hamtramck Stadium. With the help of historic preservationist Rebecca Binno Savage, Hamtramck Stadium obtained a national historic marker in 2014. Soon

after, Gillette founded Friends of Historic Hamtramck Stadium as a nonprofit entity, and attempts to raise funds began. The group experienced plenty of setbacks — corporate sponsors that backed out, talks of involvement in a potential MLB Urban Youth Academy that never came to fruition. But in 2016, Melanie Markowicz took over as Hamtramck's city planner and immediately went to work applying for a National Parks Service Civil Rights Grant. In one of the group's biggest victories yet, the city of Hamtramck was one of 39 nationwide projects to get the grant and received \$50,000 for pre-development planning, integral to the process of one day restoring Hamtramck Stadium.

Earlier this year, a fundraiser through Patronicity ([https://www.patronicity.com/project/restoring\\_historic\\_hamtramck\\_stadium\\_1#!/](https://www.patronicity.com/project/restoring_historic_hamtramck_stadium_1#!/)) raised more than \$65,000. Now, Gillette is hoping a large grant from the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, which has already donated more than \$800,000 to help revamp Veterans Park, can become the catalyst the project needs for completion.

And though there's a subtle hope baseball can continue to grow in Hamtramck, there's also the reality that the Hamtramck of today is not the Hamtramck of 1930. As a result, the master plan for the development of Veterans Park now includes plans for a cricket pitch and maybe a soccer field at Hamtramck Stadium, ways to serve a diverse population (<https://www.npr.org/2017/03/28/519017217/hamtramck-michigan-an-evolving-city-of-immigrants>).

“(The stadium) is part of the fabric of a neighborhood, and I think that's really important, too,” Karen Majewski said. “And I think that really speaks to the way these public spaces and sports and baseball, the role that it used to play in day-to-day community life. Now, the national teams, they have these gigantic complexes and a sea of parking spaces in front of them. Here, we have this place that's integrated into a neighborhood and into local cultural life and local history, and that's the really inspiring story.”

Other renovation plans (<http://www.hamtramck.us/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Hamtramck-Stadium-Pre-Development-Planning.pdf>) call for signage leading to the stadium, and an interactive historical exhibit outside the stadium, a way of highlighting why this place matters, why its past is just as vital to the community as its future.

A few years ago, Majewski was at an estate sale when she heard a man, perhaps in his late 90s, sharing memories of watching Turkey Stearnes play at Hamtramck Stadium. The man had lived on the same street his entire life, and

he still remembered heading down to the ballpark with his father to watch the Detroit Stars. This ballpark was all but lost in the historical record, yet it remained alive in the hearts and minds of a select few.

*Branch Rickey and the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson on Oct. 23, 1945, a great victory for black athletes but also a movement that marked the beginning of the end for the Negro Leagues. Robinson made his major-league debut in 1947, and by then, other big-league clubs were beginning to integrate. The Negro National League folded in 1948. By the early 1950s, the Negro American League's quality of play dropped considerably. That league folded in 1958. Historians often disagree on an official ending point for the Negro Leagues, but by 1959, Major League Baseball was fully integrated, and the history of the Negro Leagues began its slow fade.*



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by Joyce Stearnes Thompson (Allison Farrand / The Athletic)

In 1979, an aging Turkey Stearnes flew with his daughter Joyce to Louisville, Kentucky, for a Negro Leagues reunion. Stearnes hated flying, and he was confused when they pulled up to the airport. But he got on the plane, and then they had a grand reunion, some of the best living ballplayers all together again.

Both daughters were struck by how little resentment their father and his friends showed, despite all those years playing in segregated leagues, despite their forgotten place in history.

After the reunion, Detroit Free Press reporter Joe LaPointe, who later worked for the New York Times, arranged to write a story and do a photo shoot of Stearnes out at Tiger Stadium. For years, Stearnes was a loyal Tigers fan. He had season tickets, and he liked to sit in the bleachers and mingle with the other spectators. On nights the Tigers were not hitting, Stearnes was known to get mad and leave the game early, and when his daughters heard the front door creak open, they knew the Tigers were getting beat. But until that photo shoot, when Stearnes stood at home plate with a bat in his hands and emotion swirling somewhere deep inside him, he had never stepped foot on the field at Tiger Stadium.

Stearnes died less than two months later, cancer in his stomach. He had stopped eating, and his other daughter Rosilyn finally asked if he needed to go to the hospital. Stearnes, usually incredibly stubborn, said yes. That's when they knew it was bad.

Joyce doesn't love the photo of her father (<https://collection.baseballhall.org/PASTIME/turkey-stearnes-photograph-1979-august-0>) at Tiger Stadium, because he looks so frail. But Rosilyn remembers how excited he was, how they went and got him new clothes just for that day. Gillette, too, loves the power of the photo, taken by Detroit Free Press photographer John Collier, because he says you can see the story of the Negro Leagues through the wonder in Stearnes' eyes.

Nearly every year after his death, Stearnes' widow, Nattie, would write a letter to the National Baseball Hall of Fame, arguing for her husband's inclusion. It wasn't until 2000, after the help of historians and even politicians, that Stearnes finally got in. The whole family flocked to Cooperstown, where they met former Tigers manager Sparky Anderson and got treated like royalty.

"It was like the Grammys," Rosilyn said, "like going to the Emmys."

Also for years, the family dreamed of their father being honored by the Tigers organization. In the mid-2000s, Joyce exchanged emails with Dave Dombrowski, then the Tigers general manager, arguing for her father to have a statue in Comerica Park, alongside other greats such as Ty Cobb and Hank Greenberg and Al Kaline.

Years later, digging through a white binder, she still has all the correspondence. "After researching your father, it's quite apparent that he was one of the more famous players; however, as you can see in our ballpark, we have only honored

players or individuals who have actually worked with the Detroit Tigers organization,” Dombrowski wrote. “There is no question that if we honored or had an area of celebration for the Negro Leagues, Turkey Stearnes would be the most deserving individual.”

Joyce waited a few days, then wrote back, detailing the racism her father faced. Turkey Stearnes worked winters in an auto factory owned by Walter Briggs Sr., but he was never allowed to play on Briggs’ baseball team. “It only takes one person to make a difference,” Joyce wrote. “I truly hope you are that person.”

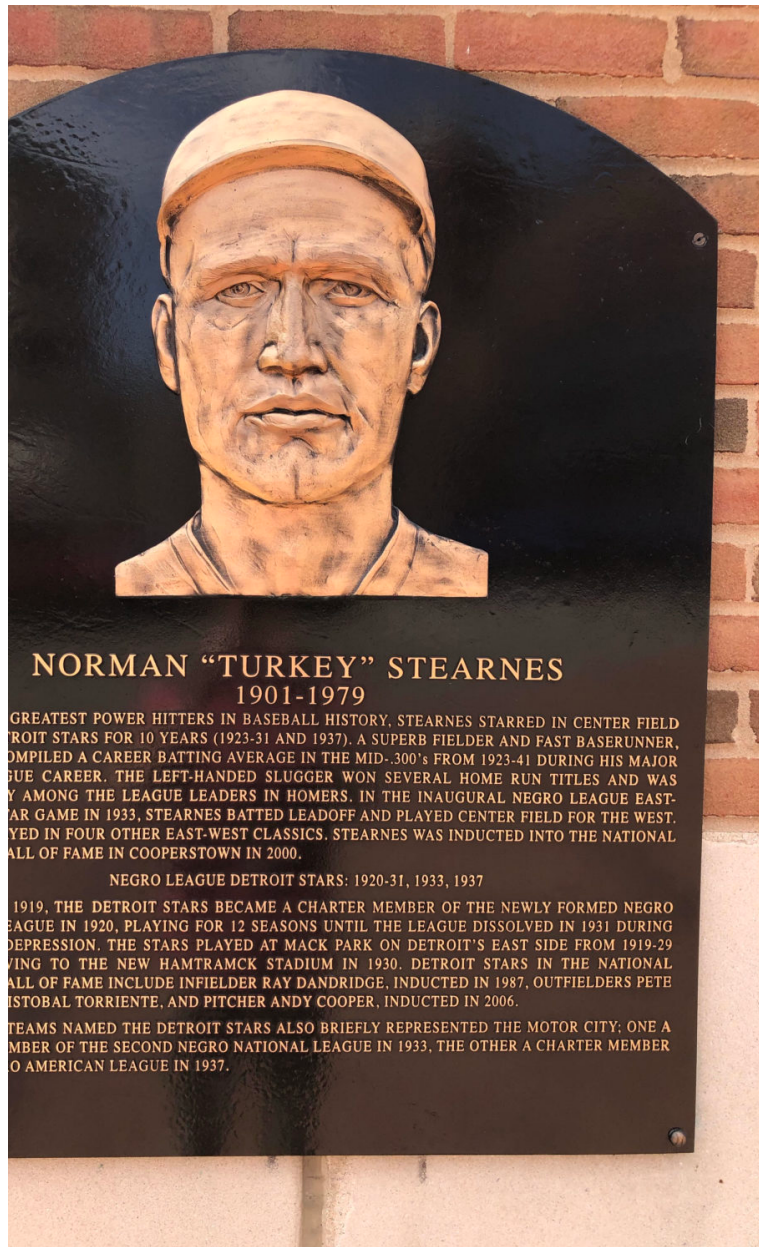
On July 20, 2007, the Tigers unveiled a Turkey Stearnes plaque at Comerica Park. It sits on the corner of Brush and Adams, out past center field. The day it was unveiled, Joyce made a big presentation and thanked Dombrowski and the Tigers. Rosilyn, a music teacher, brought her students out to the ceremony. Most of them, she said, knew nothing about the Negro Leagues, but by the end of the ceremony, they wanted to know more. One student looked at Rosilyn and said, “Ms. Brown, you’re famous!”

Interestingly enough, though, that plaque still rests *outside* the stadium. And that original plaque had mistakes. The depiction of Stearnes was different from the one in Cooperstown. It also listed stats different from the ones baseball historians consider to be official, and it had other factual errors. It even had a typo, saying Stearnes “complied” a certain batting average. It sat there like that for almost 10 years, until it was finally changed.

Joyce and Rosilyn, though, aren’t bitter about the fact that their father is only honored outside Comerica Park, nor the fact that the plaque was wrong. They just wish their father could have been there to see it.

“It’s a first step,” Joyce said.

“Better late than never,” said Rosilyn.



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A few years ago, Gillette contacted Joyce and Rosilyn about Hamtramck Stadium. Joyce knew her father had played there, and she knew the stadium was still around, but she didn't know exactly where it was. The first time she visited the site, she said she got tears in her eyes. She never saw her father play, and there's not even video footage from the Negro Leagues. This is as close as she would ever come.

"Just sitting there, you can envision what it must have been like for them to have a game there, and to play on that field," Joyce said.

Now, Joyce and Rosilyn love working with Gillette, helping one another learn more about their father and his career. The sisters have joined SABR, and they often attend meetings and give presentations. Gillette usually introduces them by noting: “We’ve got royalty in the house.”

Both sisters are active in the project to help restore Hamtramck Stadium, attending events and trying to help raise money and awareness. Rosilyn often wears Detroit Stars gear around town, and people get confused. “Is that the Tigers?” they’ll ask. She usually stops and tells them the story. She didn’t like history as a child, but now she sees how important it all is — to know the story of a city or a community, to know about the life of a relative.

“People,” she says, “need to know where they came from.”

The Detroit Tigers have hosted a Negro Leagues weekend each season for the past 25 years. Joyce and Rosilyn are both classically trained vocalists and accomplished singers. So every year at Comerica Park, they sing the national anthem. And they wonder what their dad might think.

*“I hope that some day the names of Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson in some way could be added as a symbol of the great Negro players that are not here only because they were not given the chance.” That’s what Boston Red Sox great Ted Williams said in his 1966 induction speech to baseball’s Hall of Fame. In 1971, a special committee elected Paige, Gibson and seven others to the Hall of Fame. From 1995 to 2001, the Hall made a new effort to honor and induct one Negro Leagues player each year, and in 2006, another committee elected 17 more representatives from black baseball — 12 players and five executives — to the Hall of Fame. Historians, though, are still learning more about the Negro Leagues and their history, and baseball is still searching for ways to best honor the black players who were for so long kept off white baseball fields. In 1990, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum was founded in Kansas City, Missouri, “dedicated to preserving and celebrating the rich history of African-American baseball and its profound impact on the social advancement of America.”*



(<https://theathletic.com/1123314/2019/08/08/saving-hamtramck-stadium-a-negro-league-ballpark-a-changing-community-and-a-fight-to-reclaim-history/071119-amf-0392/>)

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nd / The Athletic)

Ron Teasley used to play underneath the grandstand at Hamtramck Stadium. He remembers, ever so faintly, the days when his father would take him down to the stadium to watch baseball. It was usually on a Sunday, and people would head straight from church to the ballpark, all dressed up in their Sunday best. Teasley's understanding of the world as it was started early. His father would not take him to Detroit Tigers games because the club didn't allow black players. So Teasley's earliest baseball memories involve watching the Detroit Stars, hearing his father rave about Turkey Stearnes.

So many years later, Teasley sits in his basement near 7 Mile in Detroit. The basement is filled with memories — newspaper clippings, pictures of Jackie Robinson, photos and memorabilia from a full life in baseball. Teasley is 92 now, one of the last remaining men to have played in the Negro Leagues. His mind is still razor sharp — he reads and keeps up with the news, and on occasion, he even still goes out with his sons on the golf course. One wall is filled with medals from a few years ago, when he dominated the local Senior Olympics.

His stories, though, show just how much he has seen, how greatly things have changed in less than 100 years. Teasley grew up on Detroit's west side, once a prosperous black neighborhood filled with churches and shops and theatres. He played baseball like most kids back then did, and one day, at a local recreation

center, he saw a group of men playing on a field in the distance. The men asked if he wanted to practice with them, and soon, at age 12, Teasley was going on trips to play baseball games. He played for a team called the Detroit Cubs in 1939. Back then, he'd often play under another name — maybe Ronald or Donald or “Schoolboy,” because he was conscious of his amateur status and college eligibility.

Before Teasley had even reached high school, he had gone on trips down south to play baseball games. He remembers traveling by car, and how seriously the older men took it, making sure he said “sir” whenever they were stopped by police officers. He says their cars got pulled over for having northern license plates, and then they would be questioned harshly by white policemen.

“They were thinking about putting me in the trunk of the car,” Teasley said. “They were so afraid I would say the wrong thing.”

Teasley went on to become a star athlete (<https://www.nlbemuseum.com/history/players/teasley.html>), and he still holds the single-season record for batting average at Wayne State University, hitting .500 in 1945.

He served in the Navy, then went back to Wayne State, and then got an invitation from the Brooklyn Dodgers. It was 1948, and the Dodgers invited Teasley and fellow Detroiter Sammy Gee to spring training in Vero Beach. He remembers how much more tense things got the farther he traveled south — they started the journey from Detroit on a train, and by the time they reached Washington, D.C., they had to move to segregated seats. But he still recalls those days in Florida fondly — it was a group of young players, many of them black, trying to make it in professional baseball. One day the Dodgers’ big-league club stopped by, and Teasley met Jackie Robinson and wished him well. Teasley signed with the Dodgers (though he didn’t get a signing bonus) and briefly played with one of their minor league affiliates before being released.

He played with the New York Cubans of the Negro National League for one season, spent two years playing in Canada, then eventually moved on to a long and successful career as a high school coach in Detroit. Now all the stories blend together. He hit a triple off Satchel Paige, and as part of a promotion, he even ran a race against Jesse Owens. Teasley remembers a time, maybe 1945, when he was 17 and traveled to New Orleans with the Toledo Cubs. Turkey Stearnes was on that team, and as the team was leaving, Stearnes stopped by Teasley’s house, and Teasley’s father was in awe. He stopped and talked with Stearnes for a half-hour, and Teasley says that day was the only time his father was ever late to work.

In New Orleans, Stearnes and Teasley were roommates, and while other players went out to clubs and wandered the streets, Stearnes reminded everyone of how easy it was to get in trouble. Teasley stayed back, and he and Stearnes went on a walk instead. Stearnes was 43 and Teasley was 17, but they talked about family, and they talked about baseball. Teasley remembers Stearnes, so quiet and gracious.

A lifetime later, Teasley is sitting in his basement, talking about the time Gillette contacted him and told him about the renovation efforts at Hamtramck Stadium.

“A wonderful idea,” Teasley says. “The players that played on that field, to me, you’d think they played in the Olympics. They just loved that stadium. They were proud of the fact they represented Detroit. The stadium was a place they just revered.”



([https://theathletic.com/1123314/2019/08/08/saving-](https://theathletic.com/1123314/2019/08/08/saving-stadium-a-negro-league-ballpark-a-changing-community-and-a-fight-to-reclaim-history/unnamed-11-4/)

[stadium-a-negro-league-ballpark-a-changing-community-and-a-fight-to-reclaim-history/unnamed-11-4/](https://theathletic.com/1123314/2019/08/08/saving-hamtramck-stadium...ague-ballpark-a-changing-community-and-a-fight-to-reclaim-history/unnamed-11-4/))

ment (Cody Stavenhagen / The Athletic)

Teasley, too, played briefly at Hamtramck Stadium during his time at Wayne State. He has an old picture, and you can see the Hamtramck neighborhood in the background. He has many other pictures, too. There’s one that shows a Negro Leagues reunion in Kansas City, maybe 1995. A big group of former

players are packed in the infield of Satchel Paige Stadium. He has another picture, from 2013, when Barack Obama invited Negro League players to the White House to honor their contributions to American history and civil rights. Only 12 men made that trip.

“You have to be at least about 85 years old to have played in the Negro Leagues,” Teasley says. “I think it’s very important. It’s one of the great stories in the history of our country, just the fact they had separate teams. Maybe we can prevent that sort of thing from happening again.

“I don’t know,” he says, “with the way things are going.”

Teasley admits he gets emotional every now and then, thinking about all the memories, all the people he met and the places he traveled. He still speaks and appears at events related to Hamtramck Stadium. But he also knows nothing lasts forever.

There’s one story that still leaves Teasley mystified. It was in the 1970s, and Teasley had lost touch with Turkey Stearnes long ago. But Teasley was down at Tiger Stadium, watching pregame warmups, hoping to get ideas for his high-school team. He looked up in the stands, and he saw Stearnes sitting there, staring out at the field. Teasley went up and approached this man whom he hadn’t seen in years.

“Aren’t you Turkey Stearnes?” he asked.

Stearnes replied, *I used to be.*

*There are four other Negro League ballparks still standing. Rickwood Field in Birmingham, Alabama, still hosts one “Rickwood Classic” game each year, played by the Double-A Birmingham Barons. In Cleveland, League Park was restored and reopened in 2014, now the site of the Cleveland Baseball Heritage Museum. In Paterson, New Jersey, Hinchliffe Stadium received National Historic Landmark status in 2014, and efforts are ongoing to raise the million needed to restore its field and grandstand. In Jacksonville, Florida, Red Cap Field (now called J.P. Small Memorial Park) was renovated in 2006. But while these ballparks are saved, others have been lost. In 2014, they demolished most of the grandstand at Red Bird Stadium in Columbus, Ohio, and promised redevelopment never came to fruition; it sits half-demolished and abandoned. At Perry Stadium in Indianapolis, they preserved part of the outfield wall and the stadium’s exterior, but in 2012, they paved over the dirt, and the grandstand was gutted and transformed into loft apartments.*



(<https://theathletic.com/1123314/2019/08/08/savin>

stadium-a-negro-league-ballpark-a-changing-community-and-a-fight-to-reclaim-history/071119-amf-1008/)

aiser game (Allison Farrand / The Athletic)

There was a big game out at Hamtramck Stadium a few weeks ago, when musician Jack White of The White Stripes and his band gathered at the field and played baseball and raised money. White had already donated \$10,000 to the restoration of Hamtramck Stadium in March, a venture that garnered plenty of publicity. A full restoration of the stadium will take more time and more money, but the people involved are as optimistic as ever. Friends of Historic Hamtramck Stadium has raised \$115,000 — enough, Gillette says, to restore the playing field. The goal is to start work in the next month and to have the field in a top-notch playable condition by April 1, 2020. There are talks about moving Hamtramck's high-school baseball team over to the field, and Gillette hopes that is only the beginning.

During the fundraiser game in July, food trucks parked along the grounds, selling everything from gourmet spuds to snow cones. White's crew had a merchandise tent set up, and several hundred people gathered in the afternoon sun, packed together in lawn chairs and under canopies. The old grandstand remained empty, except for the people who climbed up to see it, and people crowded along the foul lines while a baseball game played out in the grass. There were police officers and a fire marshal, music and presentations. The

efforts of everyday people transformed into the spectacle of celebrity, fans leaning over ropes to get a glimpse of Jack White. The sun was hot and the old houses stood bright in the background. You could feel the forgotten park coming to life, and it was a reminder of how baseball can unite a community, how sometimes the two words are synonymous.

In the middle of the crowd, along the first-base line, a little girl looked up at her mother, eyes wide and confused. The mother looked down at her daughter.

“This is a historic ballpark,” the woman explained. “It’s important to save it.”

*(Top photos, from left, Cool Papa Bell, Satchel Paige, Comerica Park plaque of Norman “Turkey” Stearnes and Josh Gibson: Getty Images)*

What did you think of this story?



MEH



SOLID



AWESOME



**Cody Stavenhagen** (/author/cody-stavenhagen/) covers the Detroit Tigers for The Athletic. Previously, he covered Michigan football at The Athletic and Oklahoma football and basketball for the Tulsa World, where he was named APSE Beat Writer of the Year for his circulation group in 2016. He is a native of Amarillo, Texas. Follow Cody on Twitter @CodyStavenhagen (<https://twitter.com/CodyStavenhagen>).

84 COMMENTS

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**BRENDAN F.** Aug 8, 12:26pm 10 likes

Wow! Very nice work.

**Rogers A.** Aug 8, 12:30pm 7 likes

Fantastic article. Speaking for Rickwood Field, the Classic is put on every year by the White Sox AA affiliate, the Barons. It's a league game for them. I'm not sure how many other games are played at Rickwood every year by high school, college, and other leagues, but the last number I was aware of that there were 100 plus games one year