

BARRON'S

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Trove of Vintage Photographs and Artifacts Tell the Complex Story of Baseball's Integration

By **Abby Schultz** March 22, 2024 12:21 pm ET



A photograph by Tom Watson of Tommy Tatum shaking Jackie Robinson's hand as he touches home for his first home run with the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 18, 1947. The image was on the back cover of the New York Daily News on April 19, 1947.

The circa 1885 sepia-colored photograph of a Black baseball catcher, hands on his knees, eyes looking straight ahead, long captivated collector Paul Reiferson, who bought a glass negative of the image in the 1990s, sight-unseen, through an advertisement with the barest of descriptions.

After holding the fragile negative up to the light and seeing the image's vitality, Reiferson had it printed and then placed in his office where it stayed for many years. Today, the print serves as a touchstone for an exhibition of photographs and artifacts from Reiferson's collection at Gitterman Gallery in New York next month titled "Jackie Robinson and the Color Line."

"I was always taken by the power of this image, but there was something about it that kept kind of gnawing at me with a question," Reiferson says. And that was, "How did this image come to be?"

His curiosity was piqued because the player was wearing "very expensive equipment," including a chest protector and a glove, and moreover, the image appeared to be taken by an anonymous photographer "with quite a bit of admiration."



Javan Emory, circa 1885.

After a dogged search to answer that question Reiferson determined the player's name was Javan Emory, who had founded a club for Black players called Lumber City when he was 17. According to news accounts, Emory played at least once for a National League baseball team in Boston in the 1880s. In a 2015 essay for Southern Methodist University's "Southwest Review," Reiferson details an article he unearthed that concludes Emory's skills as a ballplayer during that game against a team in Toronto caused the league to ban Black players entirely.

"He played well—so well, we can infer, that it threatened white players because it foretold that other outstanding Black athletes would follow," Reiferson wrote.

The exhibition at Gitterman Gallery, which runs from April 15 to May 24, will tell even more forgotten stories through vintage photographs, telegrams, and other artifacts of Black players such as Roy Partlow, Johnny Wright, and Dan Bankhead—lesser-known peers of Jackie Robinson, the Brooklyn Dodgers' player renowned for breaking the color barrier in baseball in 1947. The show will also include several vintage images of Satchel Paige, a famous player of the Negro Leagues who debuted for the Cleveland Indians (now Guardians) as an American League player in 1948 when he was 42.

"It's almost an American duty to tell the story of Jackie Robinson and the story of the color line," Reiferson says. "But that story is much bigger and more complex than most people think."

Reiferson, who works in wealth management, began collecting photographs in 1993, after stumbling upon a vintage image in an antique store and then a book by the photographer Charles M. Conlon. He became drawn to the power of photography as a "medium for storytelling," eventually collecting about 500 images by Conlon, who took detailed, surprising portraits of baseball players, focusing on their eyes or hands. That collection of prints has been gifted or promised to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, while others have been exhibited at several museums.

The thread through Reiferson's collecting is a desire to chronicle American history. The Gitterman Gallery exhibition, for instance, aims to paint a fuller picture of baseball's slow and difficult path to integration in the U.S., while also revealing the power and beauty of photography. A close look at Emory's photo, for instance, shows his broken hands, ravaged like those of many catchers of the time who didn't have proper gloves.

“That’s actually one of the reasons why Blacks were first able to make greater strides in baseball, because they were willing to play catcher. It just took a lot of courage,” Reiferson says.



Roy Partlow being carried by fans after defeating Satchel Paige, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1939

One image in the collection is a vintage gelatin silver print of Roy Partlow being carried triumphantly by fans after the pitcher won over Satchel Paige during a 1939 game in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Partlow was briefly Robinson’s roommate when they both played for the International League team the Montreal Royals, a farm club for the Dodgers. Unlike his teammate, Partlow didn’t get called up to the National League.

Branch Rickey, the Dodgers’ general manager who recruited Robinson and other Black players, also figures prominently in the exhibition’s storytelling.

There’s a 1903 photograph of Rickey with the Ohio Wesleyan team he coached as a student that includes Charles Thomas, a Black player who was refused a hotel room when the team traveled to South Bend, Ind., to play Notre Dame, Reiferson says, citing published accounts of the incident. Rickey convinced the hotel clerk to let Thomas stay in his room as a “servant,” as that was permitted by the hotel. The incident reportedly motivated Rickey to integrate baseball.



The Ohio Wesleyan Baseball Team, with Branch Rickey (far left, back row) and Charles Thomas (third from left, middle row), 1903.

“As an image, that isn’t particularly powerful—it’s just men in rows—but the story that’s contained in this image is just incredible,” Reiferson says.

Rickey also appears in an iconic photograph from Jan. 24, 1950, as Robinson signed the largest deal in Dodgers history up to that point, a one-year, US\$35,000 contract. The tightly framed image of Rickey and Robinson sitting side-by-side shows a portrait of Abraham Lincoln above the manager’s head—all other framed photos on the wall had been taken down.

“His interest in Abraham Lincoln was genuine, but he is someone who understood the power of images,” Reiferson says.

The exhibition also includes a color image taken on March 2, 1955, by photographer Hy Peskin of New York Giants’ Willie Mays, actress Laraine Day, and Giants manager Leo Durocher that was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* on April 11 that year. The photo, which shows Day with hands on the shoulders of

both Mays and Durocher—her husband—happened to be taken the same day Martin Luther King became involved with the Montgomery bus boycott.

Reiferson mentions that connection as the history of baseball's integration was closely linked to broader social forces at the time. In an April 2013 article about the movie *42*, the Atlantic magazine recalled a quote from King saying to Don Newcombe, another Dodgers star from the Negro Leagues featured in the Gitterman exhibition, "You'll never know what you and Jackie and Roy [Campanella] did to make it possible to do my job."

Reiferson says he was drawn to the Sports Illustrated photograph "because it transcends baseball." The entire story of the color line, "is best seen as a prologue to the Civil Rights movement," he says.