Black Baseball's First Rivalry: The Cuban Giants Versus the Gorhams of New York and the Birth of the Colored Championship

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Since the 1980s, baseball has received a great deal of scholarly attention. Scholars have focused primarily on both the black and white professional major leagues. Little attention has been given to baseball as it was played by independent clubs outside the organized structure. While the plight of African American players has been examined in both the major and minor leagues in the late nineteenth century, the black clubs of that era have received little or no attention.¹

Both the Cuban Giants and the Gorhams of New York were the top black independent clubs of the late nineteenth century. The Gorhams were the first known African American club that was black owned and operated, and the they were the Cuban Giants' chief rivals. Their rivalry evolved into a series of games known as "Colored Championships." Tracing the origins of the colored championship series can reveal the impact of the changing attitude of business towards baseball, illustrate how the old black middle class shaped the characteristics that constituted the African American game, and also show how the black theatrical profession affected the itinerant playing style of these black clubs. This paper will analyze the rivalry that emerged between the Cuban Giants and the Gorhams of New York. Four themes will serve to guide the narrative: the rise of the mulatto elite after emancipation, the impact of business on the formation of both the Cuban Giants and the Gorhams of New York, the creation of the colored championship series, and the impact of the black theatrical profession on the black game on the field.

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Prior to emancipation, mulattos had already formed a significant group among free blacks. By 1850 more than one out of every three blacks were mulattos. Primarily the offspring of slave women and white masters, these mulattos were freed due to kinship to their owners. After obtaining their freedom, former slaves were sometimes able to capitalize on this early advantage by creating for themselves a more lucrative and higher status occupation. Some of these opportunities included working as skilled artisans, domestic servants for wealthy white families, or even as self-employed businessmen catering to the needs of a wealthy white clientele. In Philadelphia, for example, black caterers, many having the city's wealthiest whites as clients, were numerous enough to form a guild in 1840.2

Both the distinction of white ancestry among a subordinate group and opportunities to exploit this characteristic for economic and social gain led to the emergence of a small mulatto elite in urban communities in both the North and South. Feeling privileged over the unmixed blacks around them, the elite distanced themselves and developed their own social and community life. Their lifestyle was often patterned after that of whites whom they were able to observe closely because of their frequent contacts in service capacities. This clearly defined status group of mulattos had appeared by the Civil War, and they had also ascended to the top of the social ladder; they would continue to grow during the fifty years after emancipation.3

With their roots in white society, the mulatto elite evolved primarily through a paternalistic relationship with upper-class whites. In the larger cities of the North as well as the South, craftsmen, barbers, headwaiters, and other small businessmen serving the needs of a wealthy white upper class played a prominent role in the local black elite. While this was a continuation of the roles assumed by some free blacks before the Civil War, for others these occupations offered the only opportunity to rise above the common condition of the black masses. Historian David Katzman called barbering the "single most important black business" of that era.4

It was from the ranks of the mulatto elite that aspiring entrepreneurs sought to capitalize on the baseball craze by creating a business enterprise. The mulattos' relationship with the wealthy white upper-class placed them in contact with influential businessmen who could finance such a venture. More importantly, these black baseball teams would cater to a white clientele and reflect an effort on the part of the mulatto elite to gain acceptance in American society by assimilating to American middle class ways. The rise of the mulatto elite after emancipation occurred almost simultaneously with the emergence of semiprofessional, or semipro, teams. In the 1870s, semipro teams could be classified into three categories: local teams, or "stay-at-homes"; traveling teams; and touring teams. Local teams usually played games within close proximity of their home base. These teams would develop a close-knit network with other semipro teams, perhaps within a hundred-mile radius, as a means of decreasing both travel