

FIRST BLACK UMPIRE CALLED GAMES HERE

For 19th century baseball loyalists in Syracuse, a June afternoon in 1885 guaranteed a slice of history. The Syracuse Stars, a minor league power, were hosting the Providence Grays, world champions of baseball's major leagues. Three thousand fans packed Star Park, while hundreds more climbed trees or searched for vantage points outside the stadium.

While the fans were right — it was profoundly historic — it was hardly because the Grays won a meaningless exhibition by a score of 4-1.

It mattered because the man calling balls and strikes was an African-American.

Jacob Francis was the umpire. At 34, he was one of three men picked that season to represent the Syracuse club as official umpires in the fledgling New York State League. A year later, the circuit would become part of the new International League, an early version of the league in which the Syracuse Chiefs still compete. While Francis described himself as "mulatto" in the U.S. Census of both 1870 and 1880, his racial background wasn't mentioned in baseball coverage by the old Syracuse Standard.

Still, it was hardly a secret. Researchers with the Society for American Baseball Research, or SABR, have found two articles from 1885 in which The

Utica Morning Herald referred to Francis as "a colored umpire." And Sporting Life, a national sports periodical, mentioned that Francis, "the popular umpire," was also

serving as manager of the Syracuse Pastimes, "who were at one time the strongest team of colored players in the state."

Historians often speak of this city's great sports pioneers, especially during Black History Month. Earl Lloyd, the first African-American to play in a regulation game in the National Basket-



Onondaga Historical Association

STAR PARK, 1885, was located at the north-west corner of South Salina and West Taylor streets. It was at this ballpark that a Syracuse man — a black man — Jacob Francis umpired many "white" professional league games.

Much appreciated

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ball Association, spent most of his career here. Moses Fleetwood Walker, who in 1884 became the first black to compete in the Major Leagues, played with the Syracuse Stars until 1889. No black American would be allowed to compete again at that level until Jackie Robinson played in 1946 with the Montreal Royals.

Even so, while Francis is almost forgotten, what he accomplished in 1885 staggers belief.

An umpire, then and now, is considered the ultimate authority at a baseball game. Yet the America of the 1880s offered little in the way of respect for blacks. The Civil War had only been over for 20 years. Segregation, formal and informal, was in place across the land. Blacks in many states lived in fear of lynchings, beatings and other violence. As for black players, they were about to begin an exile of almost 70 years from the "white" game.

Umpires faced an even deeper ravine. While Robinson shattered the game's color line in 1947, the Major Leagues waited until 1966 to bring in Emmett Ashford as their first black umpire. Larry Lester, chairman of SABR's Negro Leagues Committee, had a one-word response Thursday when asked if Francis is considered the first black to umpire in a "white" professional league:

"Definitely."

When it happened, Francis was very much a Syracuse guy.

Despite that triumph, much of his

life remains a mystery. According to census records provided by Pamela Priest, a researcher at the Onondaga Historical Association, Francis first shows up in Syracuse in 1870 as a 19-year-old, living with his wife, Sarah. Francis listed his birthplace as Virginia and his race as "mulatto." For the next 18 years, city directories would put him at a variety of addresses, often in traditionally black neighborhoods. His occupations vary; he was listed as a coachman, a laborer and a waiter, although he consistently identified himself as a carpenter.

In the 1880 census, he is mentioned twice. At home, he was listed with Sarah and their 9-year-old daughter. Francis was also numbered among the servants in the household of the Rev. Ezekiel Mundy, considered a father of the public library system in Syracuse.

The most intriguing item comes from the 1888-89 city directory, which lists Walker — the pioneering ballplayer — as being a door or two away from "Jason Francis" on Mulberry Street. If the writer of that directory simply misread the name, it means the first black player in Major League history was a neighbor to the game's first black umpire, at least until Francis left for Herkimer.

No photographs of Francis are known to have survived. OHA officials have no record of his story. What that leaves is a tantalizing sequence of unknowns. In 1885, for instance, after being named one of the official umpires for the Stars, Francis served as part of the umpiring rotation into July. At that point, his season seemed to end. The Standard never published any explanation, although Francis disappeared from the box scores shortly before the Stars played an exhibition

Why Jacob Francis left game is mystery

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against a Chicago club led by Cap Anson, a virulent racist who refused to take the field against any team that used a black player.

The crowds, for their part, seemed to appreciate Francis. Indeed, when Syracuse met powerful Buffalo of the National League in a July 3 exhibition at Star Park, a different umpire worked the game. The umpire "made decisions that were so plainly foolish and that so plainly demonstrated his incompetency that the crowd hissed him roundly and yelled for Francis," reported *The Standard*.

That was the last mention of his absence. Fans were preoccupied with other matters: The Stars won the league championship, but the season ended in a furor over accusations that the team intentionally lost a few season-ending exhibition games. By 1888, according to a *Sporting Life* correspondent,

Francis was managing a hotel in Herkimer. A year later, a writer with the same publication described how the International League was "lamentably weak" in the ranks of umpires.

That writer had a suggestion for league officials: Contact Jacob Francis.

Francis, wrote the correspondent, "is one of the most popular men that ever officiated as an umpire before a Syracuse audience. An instance cannot be recalled where there was any trouble or delay in a game in which Mr. Francis officiated. He possesses an excellent judgment, is quick on his feet and gives his decisions promptly."

By 1890, for a black American, that was no longer good enough.

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