

Introduction

Undoubtedly the most well-known African American associated with baseball in America is Jackie Robinson, who, in 1947, broke the color line to become the first black player in the Major Leagues. Far less famous is the African American central to the creation of that line nearly eighty years earlier: Octavius Valentine Catto. However, Catto's aim was not the establishment of a color line. It was just the opposite, in fact, as Octavius was merely the first black ballplayer to seek entry into the National Association of Baseball Players (NABBP), the nation's original governing body of baseball. Needless to say, his application was rejected, followed shortly after by a formal ban of African Americans from the league. Yet, this campaign was just one of many led by Octavius Catto during his inspiring mid-nineteenth century career as a black activist in Philadelphia, a career as fascinating as any other in the Civil Rights movement, including Jackie Robinson.

Why, then, did Catto drift into relative obscurity despite his profound efforts as a pioneer of black activism? One reason could be his early death at the age of thirty-two, which robbed Octavius of his most influential years as a community leader. Another factor has been the lack of scholarly writing devoted to his life. In fact, only one full-length historical work devoted to the life of Octavius Catto has been printed, Daniel Biddle and Murray Dubin's *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America*. Published in 2010, the book offers an extensive history of what Biddle and Dubin deemed the "First Civil Rights Movement," which spanned the middle of the nineteenth

century. The historians placed Catto at the center of the movement and established his centrality to the fight against racial injustice following the Civil War. Outside of Biddle and Dubin's work, information on Catto is scarce, with several mentions in baseball history books, but typically only in conjunction with the establishment of the color line.

However, two important aspects of Octavius Catto's story are left largely unexplored in *Tasting Freedom*. The first deals with Octavius' specific goals for fighting racial injustice. While Biddle and Dubin argue that Catto's actions were inspired by this fight, they do not explore his philosophical aims or his strategy in choosing the political battles that he did. The second unexplored aspect of Catto's story is how his Philadelphia Pythians baseball team provided a unique venue for his greater social objectives.

Luckily, extensive primary source documents exist from Octavius' life, and these documents allow for a further examination of the topic. The sources indicate that Catto's battle against social injustice was rooted in his efforts to dispel prominent black stereotypes of the era through the establishment of a new black manhood. Interestingly enough, the documents also point to baseball and the formation of the Pythians ballclub as a particularly successful means of demonstrating this manhood. Many sports historians, most notably Melvin Adelman, have illustrated the link between baseball and manhood ideals, although very few have associated the battle for black masculinity with baseball specifically. Yet, historian George Fredrickson points out in his *Black Image in the White Mind* that contemporary black stereotypes were largely based on negative perceptions of African American manhood. Thus, a proving ground for manhood like the baseball field

could also serve as an ideal venue for combating black stereotypes and a perfect place for Catto to focus his activist ambitions.

Despite the availability of primary source material relevant to Catto's life, many spaces in Octavius' story remain in the documents. To fill these gaps, Biddle and Dubin's book was an invaluable resource. *Tasting Freedom* also inspired the timeframe for this project, which begins with Octavius' father, William, and his struggles to escape pre-Civil War South Carolina. Biddle and Dubin selected this starting place as a marker of the earliest extremities of the First Civil Rights Movement. Yet, because of William's influence on his son, and his pattern of action which laid the foundation for Octavius' strategies and aims as an activist, Biddle and Dubin's starting point is also appropriate for this project.

Unlikely Beginnings

“By accepting the seat which has been offered, you would be conferring a lasting honor onto the above named institution, formed for the purpose of obtaining further progress in literary improvement and to establish the improvement of our mental faculties.

I have the honor sir of subscribing myself your servant,

William T. Catto”¹

The story of the Catto family, at least the part of the story that can be told using surviving primary source documents, begins in 1833 Charleston, South Carolina. Since its

¹ William Catto to Richard Holloway, September 6, 1833, Holloway Family Scrapbooks; available from <http://lowcountrydigital.library.cofc.edu/cdm4/browse.php?CISOROOT=/hol>; Internet.

founding before the turn of the eighteenth century, Charleston had been a central hub of the North American slave trade, and a treacherous area for free blacks. In fact, by this time, the city's nearly twelve thousand slaves outnumbered the white population². This is precisely what makes William Catto's 1833 letter to fellow free black Richard Holloway so fascinating. The letter demonstrates the existence of a somewhat sophisticated free black community in Charleston during the early nineteenth century, and places William at its center.

The closing lines of Catto's letter tell us several things about the young free black man. First, he is clearly literate. In fact, not only can he write, but his sweeping, elegant cursive actually gives the document quite an official feel. Second, he belongs to a society of black men, called the Bonneau Literary Society, intent on improving their "mental faculties." Despite the fact that Catto was clearly ahead of most of his southern peers in terms of education, he strove to further increase his knowledge. This is further underlined by Catto's leadership position in the Bonneau Society, where he served as secretary. It is evident from this document that the twenty-three year old William Catto was a fascinating young man who had positively overcome a hellish childhood as a free black boy in the pre-Civil War South.

Early Activism

Little is known about William's early years, but based on his later writings, much can be assumed. For example, it is extremely likely that Catto received his informal childhood education from Thomas Bonneau, a respected Charleston mulatto who often

² Daniel R. Biddle and Murray Dubin, *Tasting Freedom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 9.

held underground class sessions to educate the town's free black youth. It is no coincidence that Catto's peers would later name their literary institute after Bonneau, and Catto himself must have been inspired by Bonneau's commitment to teaching. It is also reasonable to assume that Catto's general environment as a teenager provided him with a unique education in itself. Charleston was not only a hub of slavery, but also a center of complicated relationships within the black community itself. By 1830, almost five hundred mulattos owned nearly 2,800 slaves in South Carolina, and most of these owners lived in Charleston.³ Yet, the tensions between free black and slaves went beyond the issue of mulatto slave ownership. Light-skinned, free blacks tended to distance themselves from the slaves, and without his light skin, William Catto would likely have been rejected by Charleston's elite black community.

Catto's environment as a young free black man in Charleston also subjected him to the racist attitudes common among the white population. As George Fredrickson notes, two popular perceptions of the negro existed for southern whites of the 1830s. The first is described by Fredrickson as a "soft" racism which depicted the black man as a docile and child-like. The second was a "hard" racist sentiment which asserted that "'lust and beastly cruelty' and not 'emotions of parental and kindred attachment' that 'glow in the negro's bosom.'"⁴ While this "hard" racism is believed by many historians to have originated during the start of the segregation era later in the century, Fredrickson argues that this type of thinking actually took root in the southern slave hubs, like Charleston, decades

³ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003) 66.

⁴ George Fredrickson, *Black Image in the White Mind* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1971) 58.

earlier. These two diametrically opposed images were especially degrading to free blacks like William Catto, who were hungry for opportunities to capitalize on their precious freedom but were often overlooked or mistrusted because of these common perceptions.

It is easy to assume that this Charleston environment inspired Catto to join the Bonneau Literary Society, where he first began to come into his own as a leader in the black community. The society gave Catto an opportunity to fight both negative black attitudes and stereotypes about overcoming docility by pursuing an underground education and displaying refinement through self-improvement. Being a Bonneau member also connected Catto with a free black community in need of his support. William found his first leadership opportunity as a Bonneau in 1834, when the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church of Charleston segregated itself. As a longtime member of the church who had grown accustomed to sitting among the whites, Catto was outraged. Yet, unlike many of his mulatto peers, he refused to leave the church, at least initially, disappointedly moving upstairs with the slaves.⁵ This interesting decision was an early attempt by Catto at leadership by example, and set a telling precedent for his subsequent views and actions towards equality. Catto wished to prove himself in the white realm, and had no interest in conceding by leaving the church. This same attitude would ultimately color the actions of his son, Octavius, nearly thirty years later.

This early defeat in the young adulthood of William Catto was soon upstaged by the latest sign of crumbling race relations in Charleston. A year after the segregation of the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, the black community again faced new racist legislation

⁵ Biddle, 19.

imposed this time by the South Carolina state legislature. Fearing slave organization and future mass revolt, an 1835 law was passed which banned the teaching of reading and writing to Negroes and decreed that breaking this law would be punishable by public whipping.⁶ The education of young free blacks in Charleston, which was already kept mostly underground, was now becoming too dangerous to even attempt. This must have been a major blow to William Catto who, as an educated member of a black literary society, clearly valued education and its liberating powers.

Perhaps the new law was in fact the inciting incident which drove Catto to his first try at activism, as just months later, in February of 1836, William finally decided to act on his displeasure with the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church. Now twenty-six years old, Catto penned a letter to the church's clergy humbly requesting a reversal of the chapel's new segregated seating policy. While the letter was penned in a polite and respectful tone, it was still clearly born out of frustration and audacity. This is evident when considering the full context of the letter. William wrote on behalf of six other signees, several of whom were older and likely better known in the community. The fact that he was chosen to pen the letter shows the respect William had already earned in the free black community of Charleston by his twenty-sixth birthday. It also points to his audacity. Blacks in pre-Civil War South Carolina did not typically correspond with the white population, especially when it came to appealing white regulations. Simply writing the letter was a carefully considered risk, but it was one Catto was willing to take for his peers. Catto's intentions in the letter must be evaluated as well, especially when the involved risk is considered. It may

⁶ Ibid., 45.

seem odd that Catto would take such umbrage in having to sit with his “dark brethren” (slaves), and it may seem even stranger that a black activist would so overtly attempt to separate himself from his black peers. Yet, William Catto was not attempting to end slavery with his letter, no matter how wrong or evil he may have thought the institution to be. In his eyes, he *was* different from the slaves: he was a free man. By writing an elegant letter, Catto tried to create a common ground for communication with the church’s leadership, and he hoped to get the consideration of a fellow free Christian man, not of a slave. His actions also countered contemporary racist images of the docile but dangerous black man. Catto was taking a stand, but doing so respectfully, exemplifying exactly the type of behavior many whites thought African Americans incapable of.

Unfortunately, William’s efforts would not be rewarded, as his letter went unanswered and the segregation continued in the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church⁷. By February 1839, twenty-nine year old William found himself mired in an unchanging environment set squarely against him. The only significant changes in his life occurred within his family, as his wife, Sarah, had just given birth to their third child, Octavius⁸. Now with a large family depending on him, William must have, at this point, been dreaming of an opportunity to move somewhere that would allow him to worship and his children to study.

⁷ Biddle, 24.

⁸ Berry, 31.

Escape from the South

In 1844, William Catto finally switched churches, this time moving to Charleston's Second Presbyterian. The move may feel like a concession, but it was actually part of a bigger plan for William, who had recently begun to embrace his passion for scripture and teaching. The death of his wife from complications following the birth of their fourth child in 1845 also added to his spirituality, and the following year, Catto applied to the ministry of the Second Presbyterian.⁹ The move was as bold as any he had previously tried, and his admission into the pro-slavery Presbytery seemed highly unlikely. However, after a year of religious instruction and a rigorous examination, the Presbytery admitted him, saying:

We have come to the conclusion that though the literary attainments are not such as the standards require, yet the decided evidence that he gives of personal piety—of a call to the Sacred Ministry and particularly of the call to the work of missions in Africa—the importance and urgency of that field of labour—coupled with the fact that he has been eminently useful among the Coloured People here justify in his case a departure of the ordinary rule and authorize his licensure.¹⁰

Though long-winded, the acceptance notice is telling. We see that an exception was actually made for William despite being short of the required standards, because of the “decided evidence that he gives of personal piety.” This demonstrates just how impressive a candidate William Catto was. While one might assume that an all-white ministry in Charleston would use any excuse to exclude a black minister, this ministry instead initiated a “departure of the ordinary rule” to accept William. It was a clear indicator of Catto's

⁹ Charleston Presbytery Minutes, quoted in Daniel Biddle, *Tasting Freedom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

personal success in defying contemporary black stereotypes, as he had clearly gained the respect of a white body. His dedication to advancing himself since joining the Bonneau Society was finally beginning to pay off, and it opened up new, unforeseen opportunities for Catto. The ministry notes the fact that William had expressed an enthusiasm for “the work of missions in Africa,” and this was, in fact, his wish. Catto had already picked out Liberia as an ideal destination due to its black leadership and preaching opportunities, and this soon became his first assignment.¹¹ Thus, in 1848, Catto and his family left Charleston for good, traveling to Baltimore to make preparations for the trip to Africa.

Unfortunately, William was unaware of the civil strife consuming the Liberian settlement, and his departure from Baltimore was immediately delayed as a result.¹² With time to contemplate his options, Catto decided on his boldest move yet: he would flee north with his family to Philadelphia. Setting his plan into action, Catto sent a cryptic letter back to Charleston, but it was intercepted by white authorities. Aware of his treacherous plot, the Presbytery immediately revoked William’s license, and a warrant was placed for his arrest and return to South Carolina.¹³ The development forced Catto to pick up his family and run for his life. They were lucky to successfully reach Philadelphia, and in very little time, Catto gained some serious clout in his new community. By October, word of Catto’s spectacular journey had somehow reached leading black voice Frederick Douglass in Rochester, New York, and he decided to print a story about it in his paper, *The North Star*. The article’s closing words describe Catto as having “the head, the heart, and the

¹¹ Emma Lapsansky, *Back to Africa* (College Park: Penn State Press, 2005) 148.

¹² *Ibid.*, 150.

¹³ Biddle, 70.

experience which would make him a powerful instrument, under God, for breaking down prejudice, and elevating the colored man in the public estimation.”¹⁴ The Catto family had finally been formally introduced to the northern black community, and their ultimate effect on Philadelphia would prove to be just as dramatic as Douglass’ paper predicted.

Philadelphia, the Cradle of Liberty

By the time Octavius Catto turned eleven in 1850, the Catto family had come a long way from its humble roots in Charleston, South Carolina. Octavius’ father, Reverend William Thomas Catto, had moved his family north of the Mason-Dixon Line to Philadelphia and found regular work as a minister at the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Here, the elder Catto lectured with some of the most influential black voices in the country, including Frederick Douglass, Charles Lenox Remond, Dr. Martin Delaney, and Henry Highland Garnet.¹⁵ William had found a home in the pulpit of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and from here he began to establish himself as a notable spiritual leader within the elite black community of Philadelphia.

Despite the early success of William Catto and the promise and potential of the large black community in Philadelphia, times were hard for the city’s Negroes in 1850. Recent legislation placed new restrictions on the black community, which at the time had no voting rights, could not work in most trades, and was often the subject of public verbal abuse from

¹⁴ *The North Star* (Rochester, NY), 20 October 1848, p. 2; Available from http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/91/947/114095665w16/purl=rc1_NCNP_0_GT3013080603&dyn=3!xrn_1_0_GT3013080603&hst_1?sw_aep=columbiau; Internet.

¹⁵ Emma Lapsansky, *Discipline to the Mind, Philadelphia’s Banneker Institute* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1993) 88.

the white population.¹⁶ Particularly affected was the black elite, whose status had been severely compromised by new laws which put them on civil and legal terms with the poorest members of the community.¹⁷ Thus, apathy replaced the feelings of fervent activism which had prevailed among the black upper class in previous decades. As a result, many prominent African Americans outside of Pennsylvania voiced their disappointment in Philadelphia's black elite during this time, including Frederick Douglas, who harshly commented in the late 1840s that the Philadelphians were neglectful of their duty to the black community as a whole.¹⁸ Once a hub of black activism, Philadelphia had become an afterthought in the minds of the nation's black leadership.

Philadelphia blacks of the 1850s also had to contend with the negatively evolving racist perceptions which were beginning to polarize the population. As George Fredrickson explains, tension around the slavery debate towards the middle of the nineteenth century led to a national intensification of black stereotypes which had existed decades earlier in the South. One image, the loyal "Sambo" figure, extended the stereotype of the docile slave. "Sambo" was said to be an "artificial creation of slavery," a trained demeanor which led slaves to be "happy, loyal, and affectionate" given a "firm and assured" master.¹⁹ On the opposite end of the spectrum, the brutish image of the Negro from earlier decades had evolved to a more aggressive generality: "that bestial savagery constituted the basic negro character."²⁰ These extreme stereotypes were utilized by defenders of slavery, who

¹⁶ Biddle, 80.

¹⁷ Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 152.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁹ Fredrickson, 54.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

claimed that an African American was “lovable” as a slave, “but as a freedman he would be a monster.”²¹ However, these perceptions also infiltrated, and affected, everyday life for blacks across America by 1850 as they became widely believed, even by northern whites.

However, the life of a free black person in Philadelphia was not completely miserable, especially when considering the number of active social institutions in the city. Historian Julie Winch reminds us that, by 1848, “the community had nineteen churches and a network of schools, benevolent societies, and literary groups unmatched by blacks anywhere in the nation.”²² It was in these social institutions that many Philadelphia blacks cultivated their first notions of community. At the same time, the churches, schools, and clubs also attracted a wide variety of other free blacks to the city, consistently adding to an already sizeable population. According to Winch, the black population of Philadelphia reached twenty thousand by the midpoint of the nineteenth century, making it the largest free black community in the north at the time.

Philadelphia’s large black community and developed social scene provided a perfect location for William Catto and his son to continue to fight the negative perceptions attached to African Americans. After all, William had begun his career as an activist in a literary society, and similar opportunities abounded for young Octavius during the 1850s. Unsurprisingly, in 1854, William decided not to miss the opportunity to enroll his fifteen year old son in Philadelphia’s exciting new black high school, the Institute for Colored

²¹ Fredrickson, 55.

²² Winch, 152.

Youths²³. Having opened just two years earlier to a class of six pupils, the I.C.Y. was clearly in its developmental stages at the time that Octavius enrolled. However, an aggressive strategy for growth had already been employed by 1854, and the policy garnered impressive results. I.C.Y. seniors knew their spring grades would be published in the *Christian Recorder*, Philadelphia's most popular black paper, and they also knew that as much as half the class in any given year could be held back from graduation.²⁴ Thus, with its rigorous exams and frequent expulsions, the I.C.Y. of Philadelphia quickly developed a reputation as an elite educational setting, and it soon became the desire of every black parent in the city to send their children to the school.

Just before Octavius' graduation from the I.C.Y., Reverend William Catto produced his only pamphlet, transcribed from a sermon he delivered at the First African Presbyterian Church in 1857. Catto's "A Semi-Centenary Discourse" would prove to be widely popular and inspirational amongst the Philadelphia black community as his urgings struck a chord with the populace. In the pamphlet, Catto continued to argue for an active lifestyle incongruent with prevailing ideas of black docility, saying,

Every one of us has work to do. We begin in childhood...as we grow in age, in size, in strength, so grows our labor; as we develop our physical and mental man, so must we produce qualifications necessary for the employments and engagements of life, every man for his calling.²⁵

²³ Berry, 115.

²⁴ Biddle, 158.

²⁵William Catto, *A Semi-Centenary Discourse* (Philadelphia: Pub. Joseph M. Wilson, 1857); available from <http://www.archive.org/stream/semicentenarydis00cattrich#page/n3/mode/2up>; Internet.

The reverend's hopeful message caught on with black Philadelphians, who had, in recent years, been criticized for their overly passive stance toward attaining equality and success. The pamphlet was widely read throughout the city, and seemed to arrive just as the black community was finally ready to actively pursue civil equality²⁶. Yet, the community still lacked active leadership outside of the church, and many began to look to the well educated young graduates of the Institute of Colored Youths for such an influence.

One hopeful was the reverend's son, Octavius, who excelled at the ICY despite the highly competitive atmosphere, both as a student and as a man. He graduated in four years as the valedictorian of his class, and supplemented his studies with tutoring in Latin and Greek, as well other extracurricular interests, like cricket.²⁷ Octavius seemed to triumph in nearly everything he tried as a young adult, so it was no surprise when he was admitted to the Banneker Institute, Philadelphia's elite literary society, just after his graduation. As described by early member Jacob C. White, the institute sought to "shed a halo of literary light throughout this city and to reflect great credit on those who constitute this association."²⁸ The obvious similarities between this group and the Bonneau Literary Society to which William had once belonged in Charleston should not come as a surprise; Octavius clearly valued his father's message and hoped to one day make a similar impact. For Octavius, the Banneker Institute was an opportunity for personal improvement as well as a means of connecting with some of the brightest members of Philadelphia's black community.

²⁶ Ira Brown, *Pennsylvania and the Rights of the Negro* (College Park: Penn State University Press, 1961) 52.

²⁷ Biddle, 207.

²⁸ "Banneker Constitution" *Papers of the Banneker Institute, American Negro Historical Society Collection 1790-1905*, (microfilm, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1856), Roll No. 2, Frame No. 2.

But after his first year as a Banneker, Octavius began to grow restless. In no time, he had risen to the office of secretary within the literary society and regularly delivered evening lectures on a wide variety of topics to fellow members.²⁹ Yet, he and many of his Banneker peers became concerned that their activism was not quite active enough. As historian Daniel Biddle discusses, it became apparent to Catto that “respectable behavior and well-kept minutes” would not be enough to change the minds of white men, and thus bring real change to the social circumstances.³⁰ Clearly influenced by his father’s goal of self-improvement through overcoming prevailing black stereotypes held by whites, Catto felt that the literary society was inadequate. While the club showcased the ability of his black peers to demonstrate refinement unattainable by a beast, it did little to disprove the image of the docile slave. It was during this time that Catto decided to re-dedicate himself to making a larger impact on the black community. Octavius joined the remarkable all-black staff of the Institute for Colored Youths in 1859, and vowed to continue searching for ways to unify and support his brethren. Not long after, he would stumble upon just such an opportunity.

As the 1859 spring semester at the I.C.Y. came to an end, many Bannekers, including Octavius, began looking toward July 4th. For them, Independence Day had become a complicated issue, as public celebrations had proven to be too dangerous for free blacks on the Fourth. Most celebrated on the 5th, on August 1st, or not at all, choosing instead to protest the entire celebration.³¹ However, Octavius and the rest of the Banneker leadership

²⁹ Lapsansky, *Discipline to the Mind*, 19.

³⁰ Biddle, 203.

³¹ Brown, 51.

rejected this tradition and believed the holiday could be well utilized as a way to unite the black community. Thus, on July 4th, 1859, Octavius Catto and the rest of the Bannekers marched into Franklin Hall, followed by hundreds of free black men. It was the first public celebration of Independence Day by the Philadelphia black community, and the events of the day were recorded and later published as a pamphlet.³² In the opening remarks, Banneker Chairman Jacob C. White delivered a clear message on behalf of the entire institute:

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have rights, and having rights dear to us as the apple of our eye, will maintain them. Have we not heard of all the daring exploits of our patriotic progenitors? has not infancy learned them from maternal lips? and has it not been the delight of the aged to recur to the patriotism of those whose very dust this day cries out against the inhumanities practised upon those whose greatest pleasure it was to free from tyranny and oppression, their sons, who to-day are happy to bestow upon them the highest encomiums, though they have no part nor lot in the affairs of our common country?³³

With these words, White was trying to incite a new era of black activism in Philadelphia by communicating the simple belief that “we have rights,” and we must, like our “patriotic progenitors” before us, fight for those rights. He was also striving to provide a new, more concrete goal for the disenfranchised black population: complete equality. No longer would the black leadership of Philadelphia work to merely “improve” their lives, they were set on becoming fully equal citizens, as promised by the Declaration of Independence.

³² The Celebration of the Eighty-Third Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, by the Banneker Institute, July 4, 1859, Philadelphia: WS Young, printer, 1859.

³³ Ibid.

Inspired by the writing of William and galvanized by the active courage of Octavius and his Banneker peers, Philadelphia blacks began to follow the Catto lead, beginning with the younger generation. The July 4th demonstration had empowered the community to a degree, and had created a nucleus of well-known, young black leaders, such as Octavius, Jacob White, and William Minton³⁴. By holding a public, organized, and calm demonstration, Catto and the Bannekers had overcome both of the widespread racist stereotypes of the time, displaying both refinement and fearless action, and inspiring the Philadelphia blacks. This corresponded perfectly with Philadelphia's evolving demographics, as the 1860 census showed that a majority of the city's 22,630 Negroes were under the age of thirty.³⁵ Youthful, energized, and ready for change, these blacks were eager for strong leadership, and they found it on the Fourth of July, 1859. The Yet for Catto and his Banneker peers, this was just the first step.

On the Warpath

Historian Daniel Biddle and Murray Dubin cryptically assert in their book *Tasting Freedom* that the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation changed everything and yet changed nothing for the American black population. Looking beyond its obvious contradiction, the statement manages to perfectly illustrate the importance of Lincoln's speech to Octavius Catto and the rest of the upper class black community of Philadelphia at the time. While the Emancipation Proclamation did nothing to specifically enfranchise free northern blacks, it did change the tone of the civil strife gripping the nation. The Union government

³⁴ Biddle, 224.

³⁵ Brown, 55.

could now be viewed as the defenders of the Negro cause, and, despite laws prohibiting it, many African –Americans of the north were immediately keen to join the fighting.

Included among these enthusiastic and battle-eager blacks was Octavius Catto, who was not alone in his desire to fight. Interested in capitalizing on the new unity within Philadelphia’s young black elite, Catto and several of his Banneker peers created a flyer to be posted throughout the city. The broadsides featured the now-famous headline “Men of Color, To Arms!” and featured a simple but determined message: “The country demands your services...For our own sake and the sake of our Common Country we are called now to come forward. Let us seize this great opportunity of vindicating our patriotism and manhood through all time.³⁶” The flier, which included the signature of Frederick Douglass, is significant because it was the first document to explicitly name the vindication of black “manhood” as a primary goal of Catto’s efforts. As George Fredrickson explains, questions regarding African American manhood helped to inspire the negative stereotypes Octavius and his father had been fighting for years. The word “degraded” was often associated with free black manhood specifically, suggesting “that there was some ideal of manhood from which the Negro had fallen or to which he might be raised.”³⁷ This widely accepted white sentiment remained even after the Emancipation Proclamation, and was clearly, and unsurprisingly, targeted by Catto and his peers in “Men of Color, To Arms!” Establishing manhood was, in its own way, fighting the very core of negative contemporary black images, which had long been the goal of the Catto’s and other African American leaders.

³⁶ “Men of Color, To Arms! Now or Never!” (accessed online, Philadelphia, 1863), available from <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/lprbscsm.scm0556>; Internet.

³⁷ Fredrickson, 5.

The tactic worked, and within weeks, Catto and his close friend and Banneker member Jacob C. White had organized a company of ninety black volunteers.³⁸ The group was set to be the first black company ever to represent Philadelphia, and thousands of the city's blacks rallied around the troops as they prepared to depart for the base in Harrisburg for formal training. Yet, despite the anticipation and empowerment felt by the pioneer company, Catto's troops were not welcomed in Harrisburg. Major General Darius Couch, citing War Department regulations which prohibited short-term enlistment, sent the company home to Philadelphia just days after their arrival. The decision must have come as a devastating blow to Catto and his compatriots, who were once again denied a level playing field to prove their manhood and value to their white peers.

The New National Game

Aside from the obvious disappointment of Catto's Civil War experience, the whole ordeal may have actually been best for Octavius and his peers. Fredrickson argues that the "image of innate black docility and inoffensiveness was, as it turned out, too deeply rooted to be demolished by the emergence of the negro as a soldier."³⁹ Therefore, the black Philadelphia regimen likely would have had little success in achieving the social impact they hoped for when enlisting. In fact, Fredrickson goes on to say that, "since their units were officered by whites, the alleged willingness of blacks to submit to military rule could also be interpreted as an instinctive sense of racial subordination."⁴⁰ Clearly, the Civil War battlefield was not the most opportune place for black vindication. Under white command,

³⁸ Biddle, 291.

³⁹ Fredrickson, 169.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 169.

African American troops could not establish their manhood because no attainable white ideal existed for them. Black troops were not on a level playing field with their white counterparts, and would always be subordinates, even in success.

Interestingly enough, Catto's brief Civil War experience put him in contact with a far more welcoming venue for social vindication: baseball. Exploding in popularity in the northeast, baseball had experienced enormous national growth in the northeast during the 1850s.⁴¹ By the start of the war, most of the country was rabid for the game, and nowhere was this more apparent than in the army camps themselves. The game was so entrenched in both Northern and Southern camps that, as George Kirsch describes in his book *Baseball in Blue and Gray*, officers (including generals) encouraged, facilitated, and often participated in games themselves. Kirsch elaborates, "It appears likely they did so because they recognized the beneficial aspects of the sport on their men, but it is also undoubtedly true that they simply enjoyed the play."⁴² While these games provided a much needed distraction from vicious combat, the ramifications of baseball's popularity among Civil War soldiers had much more significant ramifications. Kirsch adds that the widespread participation in the game during the war "introduced modern forms of the game to novices and helped with the cultural diffusion of baseball after the return to peace."⁴³ Aided by its popularity during the war, baseball became far and away the most influential sport in America by the end of the decade.⁴⁴

⁴¹ George Kirsch, *Baseball in Blue and Gray* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 41.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

Evidently, Catto's brief time in Harrisburg was enough to attract him to the game, as he turned his athletic focus away from cricket, which he had played since high school, and towards baseball after his return. The exact reason for this switch is unknown and undocumented. However, when keeping Octavius' greater goals in mind, it is not difficult to comprehend the change in preference. First, one must understand why baseball had become so influential in American society. Melvin Adelman argues against the widely held historical belief that baseball grew more quickly than other sports because of its fast, action-packed nature, going on to say that early white baseball players' "involvement in baseball was an extension of their desire to preserve traditional values and their ongoing veneration of physical prowess" while also demonstrating a "middle class status."⁴⁵ Even after the game grew more popular and spread to all classes, it retained the same ideals, and helped formulate a new idea of American manhood. Athletics and the struggle for white manhood were linked during the 1860s and 1870s as well. According to historian Michael Kimmel, "one could replace the inner experience of manhood...and transform it into a set of physical characteristics obtained by hard work in the gymnasium."⁴⁶ While the point is simplistic, it does indicate the enormous influence of sports on perceptions of manhood during this time. Anthony Rotundo agrees in his *American Manhood*, saying athletics were perceived by the mid nineteenth century as important providers of the virtues of manhood, which included fighting, social, and moral virtues. Baseball, in particular, seemed to exemplify these virtues, requiring strength, determination, coolness, courage, and self-

⁴⁵ Melvin Adelman, *A Sporting Time* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 8.

⁴⁶ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 45.

control for success.⁴⁷ Thus, the clear middle-class ideals represented in baseball attracted all kinds of men from around the country and made the game a national sensation.

These ideals also attracted Octavius Catto to the diamond. In contrast to the battlefield, the baseball field actually represented an opportunity for blacks to achieve a level playing as well as to demonstrate undeniable ideals of white middle-class manhood. Masculinity could be proven on the ballfield, as “each contest became a test of how well a player learned both nonutilitarian sports skills and skills that had practical value and were strongly identified with manhood” writes Melvin Adelman.⁴⁸ In other words, success on the diamond implied a mastery of the virtues of manhood, something Octavius had been eager to demonstrate since his teenage years at the Institute for Colored Youths.

Yet in 1864, baseball was still almost exclusively a white man’s game, with very few, if any, organized black teams in existence across the country. And while the game did allow for a display of masculinity, it was a very specific “white, middle-class” masculinity that was stressed, which aimed to “maintain the social hierarchies between whites and nonwhites, between upper classes and working classes, and between men and women.⁴⁹ If Catto wished to achieve success in baseball, he would have to demonstrate the masculinity of a middle-class white man and overcome public skepticism toward the potential of the Negro both on and off the field.

⁴⁷ Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood* (Andover: Basic Books, 1994) 241.

⁴⁸ Adelman, 174.

⁴⁹ Kimmel, 72.

Views of Black Manhood

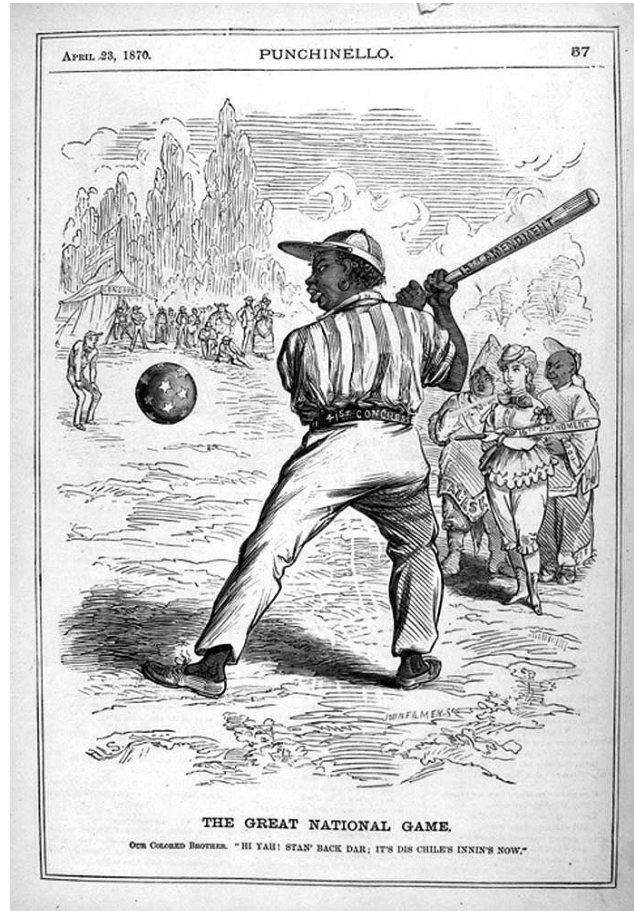
Such thoughts were clearly on Octavius' mind as he delivered the commencement speech to the graduating class of the Institute for Colored Youths in 1864. Speaking to a group of young blacks on the verge of manhood, Catto stressed the concept of manhood, telling the students, "There shall be no unmanly quibbles about intrusting to him a position of honor or profit for which his attainments may fit him. And that which is committed to him as a man, he will perform as no other than a man could perform."⁵⁰ Catto would go on to implore the graduates to be active and enthusiastic in their duties as men while remaining devoted to the improvement of their black peers.

With total equality a distant concept, establishing respect for black manhood seemed to be twenty-four year old Octavius Catto's main focus by 1864. Now faced with establishing his own masculinity in a white world, Catto gravitated towards baseball as a proving ground. Yet while some of the most respected white citizens by the end of the decade gained their fame through the ball game, most whites seriously doubted black players' ability to participate. Few questioned the physical aptitude of the Negro, but a vast majority believed the black athlete was incapable of displaying the civilized conduct of a gentlemanly sportsman.

Such views were reflected in a popular political cartoon featured in *Harpers Illustrated Weekly* in 1870. Drawn after the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment granting blacks the right to vote, the cartoon features a black man getting set to hit a baseball, an

⁵⁰ Octavius Catto, "Our Alma Mater" (accessed online, Philadelphia, 1864), available from http://openlibrary.org/books/OL1678929M/Our_alma_mater; Internet.

allegorical representation of the entire race's impending stab at citizenship. In the background, a woman, an Eskimo, and an Asian wait for a turn at bat while a white crowd watches. Initially, the drawing seems neutral, if not supportive, toward the black cause, but a closer examination reveals the problematic aspects of the Negro representation. First, the black man in the cartoon is immense, dwarfing the three figures waiting on deck and causing the one (white) fielder in view to cringe in anticipation of the impending swing. Another look at the batter's face reveals typical black stereotypical representations: small, narrow eyes, large lips and a wide, flat



nose. The most damning evidence of negative imagery comes in the caption, which is in the presumed voice of the batter: "Hi yah! Stan' back dar: it's dis chile's innin's now."⁵¹ Once again, negative undertones undermine the seemingly positive message by continuing to paint the black subject as a brute, whose combination of strength and intellectual underdevelopment was to be feared, not accepted or changed. While the black man is getting a turn at bat, he seems out of place in the game, perhaps an indicator of the artist's

⁵¹ James Brunson, *The Early Image of Black Baseball* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co, 2009) 15.

feelings toward the Fifteenth Amendment and racial integration. Such imagery was not unique, either. In fact, the *Harper's* cartoon simply mimicked the negative black imagery of the “Sambo” versus “beast” debate of the time.

The Pythians Are Born

It is interesting that the cartoon chose baseball as a metaphor for black men’s new status as free citizens. Four years earlier, Octavius Catto made the same connection, but had a very different outlook. While he understood the challenges present in establishing himself in the national political realm, Catto believed he could succeed on the baseball field. He also believed that gaining the acceptance of the white baseball community could only lead to increased political opportunity for his black brethren.

With these things in mind, Catto, along with longtime friend Jacob C. White, founded his very own baseball team, the Philadelphia Pythians, in 1866. The Pythians began with four teams worth of players, a majority of which were relatively well-to-do Philadelphia mulattoes, or citizens with mixed black and white ancestry. Around two-fifths of the initial group were also members of the Banneker Institute, and every team member was a native-born American.⁵² All told, the vast majority of the team was involved in some sort of social or civic organization in Philadelphia, and each member had leisure time and enough funds to pay membership dues.

While Catto was careful to select a competitive first nine to represent the club, he also strove to improve the inner workings of his organization during the Pythians’ first year

⁵² Michael Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003) 17.

of operation. By this time he knew that black American manhood needed to be established through more than just competitive success. Acceptance from the white clubs could come only if the Pythians paired their on-field accomplishments with the gentlemanly demeanor and intellectual acumen of a middle class American. To meet this end, founders Catto and White decided to create a rigid club structure for their organization, a concept they undoubtedly picked up during their time as Bannekers.

The Pythian Organization

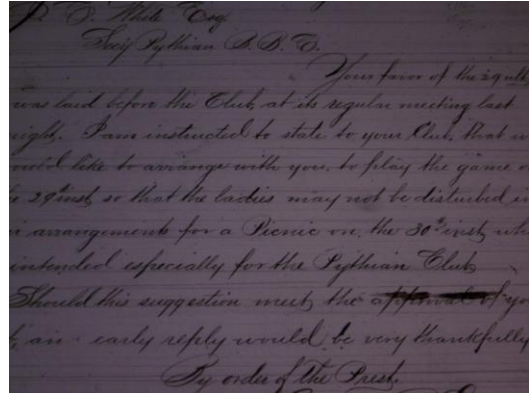
The Philadelphia Pythians organization began with a constitution. Clearly modeled after the Banneker constitution in layout, the Pythian version advocated for active participation and set basic rules for members. One rule stated “all gambling, betting on games, and card playing is strictly prohibited,” and was punishable by “suspension.”⁵³ Each Pythian was also required to pay dues in the amount of five dollars per year and behave in a gentlemanly manner befitting of the team.⁵⁴ The Pythian constitution showed the club’s desire to initiate a courteous atmosphere. Modeled after the Banneker Institute’s and insistent on organization and proper conduct, the document was a strong foundation for Catto’s experiment. Colonel Jacob Purnell, a former hero of the Underground Railroad, was soon elected club president and regular meetings began in a room on the second floor of Liberty Hall.⁵⁵

⁵³ “Reports and Minutes,” *Papers of the Pythians Baseball Club, American Negro Historical Society Collection 1790-1905*, (microfilm, American Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1867), Roll No. 7, Frame No. 1116.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Lomax, 17.

Now ready for play, the club began to send out challenges to other black teams. These challenges were far from contentious, however, and reflected the team's efforts to display gentlemanly conduct. Invitations were carefully written in ornate handwriting, and consisted only



of pleasant and polite exchanges.⁵⁶ Before long, the Pythians were also receiving challenges, which were met with equal courtesy. One such challenge came from the Mutual club of Washington D.C., and was met by a quick response from secretary Jacob White. The reply was formal and gracious: “[The Pythians] accept the proposition to play a match game of baseball with the club you represent...with the expression of a hope that nothing may transpire to interfere with our mutual desires.”⁵⁷ Another letter, sent by Charles Douglass, the son of Frederick Douglass, challenged the squad to a game and spoke of “arrangements for a picnic...intended specifically for the Pythians.”⁵⁸ This formal language was not accidental; rather it was a planned effort to match the standard of middle-class manhood required to earn the respect of their white counterparts.

The Pythians' attempt at formality did not end here, however. Ball games were accompanied by elaborate social events which were often celebrated by the entire black

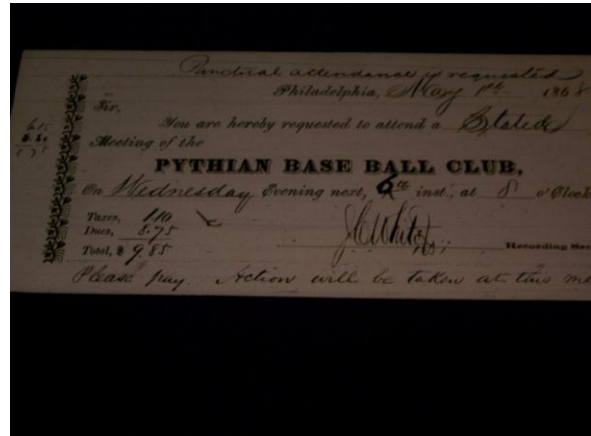
⁵⁶ “Correspondence, 1867-1869” *The Papers of the Pythians BBC, ANHSC 1790-1905* (microfilm, AHSP, 1867), Roll No. 8, Frame No. 0064.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ “Correspondence, 1867-1869” *The Papers of the Pythians BBC, ANHSC 1790-1905* (microfilm, AHSP, 1867), Roll No. 8, Frame No. 0119.

community.⁵⁹ To support these functions, secretary Jacob White kept close tabs on the club's expenses and produced a yearly financial report which detailed purchases ranging from uniforms to groceries to printing costs.⁶⁰ Meeting reminder slips were printed with a club letterhead which informed members of the date and time of the next meeting as well as the amount they owed in dues and taxes.⁶¹

The Pythians even aimed for the best playing facilities, as a personal letter from Octavius Catto confirmed in 1868 that the club had "secured the grounds of the Athletic B.B.C." (the most prominent white club in



Philadelphia), a field which he deemed "the best in the city."⁶² This meticulous attention to detail, formality, and excellence quickly made the Pythians stand out as a legitimate organization. The next goal was success on the field.

Catto the Captain

For a stocky young man with a cricket background, Octavius Catto was a magnificent baseball player. He was immediately made captain of the Pythians' first nine, and soon became the club's star player.⁶³ The game seemed to come naturally to his teammates as well, who rallied around their captain in the early years with excellent supporting

⁵⁹ Lomax, 18.

⁶⁰ "Bills and Receipts, 1867" *The Papers of the Pythians BBC, ANHSC 1790-1905* (microfilm, AHSP, 1867), Roll No. 8, Frame No. 0153.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "Correspondence, 1867-1869" *The Papers of the Pythians BBC, ANHSC 1790-1905* (microfilm, AHSP, 1867), Roll No. 8, Frame No. 0125.

⁶³ Biddle, 370.

performances. After a six game inaugural season in 1867, the Pythians went undefeated in 1868, finishing the season with six wins and one tie. They outscored opponents 274 to 143 in that year and were involved in just two close games.⁶⁴ This apparent emphasis on successful play is supported by the meticulous statistics kept by the team. Despite still a novelty in the 1860s, the Pythians kept multiple types of detailed statistics, including game box scores and overall season stats.⁶⁵ Such a stress on record keeping implies an insistence on consistent, measurable performance from the Pythian players intended to ensure success, which was often rewarded.

A document from the team's second season indicates that the "players making the highest score in the Washington matches in August" would receive "a gold badge" purchased by the club and a cash consideration.⁶⁶ These tactics seemed to work, as the Pythians' early forays on the diamond were filled with success.

To top off the enormously successful summer, Jacob White

Name	Games	Runs	Hits	Outs	Runs	Outs
Garnon	15	60	7	7	8	0
Garcus	15	70	11	11	6	0
Gatta	15	59	20	20	6	0
Barr	15	50	20	20	2	2
Selasy	15	39	24	24	1	0
Knight	15	40	24	24	4	2
Venning	15	45	16	16	3	1
W. H. Minton	15	19	35	35	2	5
J. Jones	15	37	28	28	1	3
Francis	14	24	30	30	1	4
R. Walker	13	39	17	17	3	2
H. Barcom	13	32	17	17	2	1
L. Barnwell	13	22	22	22	2	1
J. Walker	12	30	19	19	1	0
Morris	12	41	19	19	3	1
Nanby	14	33	17	17	2	0
Vidal	9	18	16	16	2	1
White	9	21	13	13	1	1
Wabam	8	23	16	16	0	0

commented in his annual report that the club's members had "performed their labors with

⁶⁴ "Scorecards, 1867-1868" *The Papers of the Pythians BBC, ANHSC 1790-1905* (microfilm, AHSP, 1867), Roll No. 8, Frame No. 06.

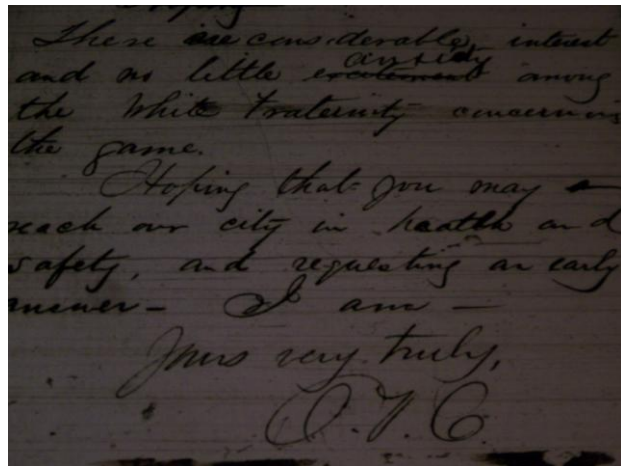
⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Frame No. 12.

⁶⁶ "Correspondence, 1867-1869" *The Papers of the Pythians BBC, ANHSC 1790-1905* (microfilm, AHSP, 1867), Roll No. 8, Frame No. 0130.

zeal and with an ardent desire to do all in their power to sustain our character and reputation as a baseball club and as an association of gentleman.”⁶⁷ Such a comment made it clear that the Pythians were operating with two goals in mind: to achieve success on the playing field and to demonstrate gentlemanly character off it. Towards the end of 1867, it seemed they were already succeeding in both realms. Earlier, the club received a letter from the Mutual Ballclub of Washington D.C., which offered congratulations for “the high position you, as an organization, have achieved in our National Game.”⁶⁸ Later that year, a letter to the players boasted of “indiscriminate challenges” from other clubs eager to battle the Pythians.⁶⁹ So excited, in fact, was Octavius Catto that he gushed in a personal letter the following season that there seemed to be “considerable interest and a little anxiety among the white fraternity” concerning the Pythians’ fast rise.⁷⁰ In just two years, Octavius had succeeded in grabbing the attention of the white community, but he had no intention of stopping there.

Despite his best efforts on the diamond to overcome the prominent

stereotypes of black men as violent brutes and docile slaves, Catto knew that true baseball



⁶⁷ “Membership, 1867-1869” *The Papers of the Pythians BBC, ANHSC 1790-1905* (microfilm, AHSP, 1867), Roll No. 8, Frame No. 028.

⁶⁸ “Correspondence, 1867-1869” *The Papers of the Pythians BBC, ANHSC 1790-1905* (microfilm, AHSP, 1867), Roll No. 8, Frame No. 0134.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Frame No. 0138.

⁷⁰ “Correspondence and Personal Papers” *The Papers of William Octavius Catto, ANHSC 1790-1905* (microfilm, AHSP, 1868), Roll No. 8, Frame No. 0571.

equality could only be achieved if he and the Pythians competed for the same championship as the white clubs. While Jacob White and Colonel Purnell were both content with the recent success of the team, Octavius had grander plans for the ballclub's newfound leverage, and decided to make the Pythians the first black club to apply for membership in the white national championship system. This required that the team apply for acceptance into their state's association, the Pennsylvania Association of Amateur Base Ball Players (PAABBP), which would allow them to eventually compete for the National Association (NABBP) championship.

In October 1867, Pythian Raymond Burr was dispatched to Harrisburg for the PAABBP's state convention with the hopes of gaining membership. During the convention's morning session however, the vote on the Pythians' acceptance was deferred to the evening session. That night, the delegation offered Burr the opportunity to withdraw the application rather than face blackball.⁷¹ He did, and Harrisburg again became the site of devastating disappointment for Catto and his cause. Unsatisfied, Catto soon applied straight to NABBP headquarters in New York, where he was flatly rejected "to keep out of the Convention the discussion of any subject having a political bearing."⁷² In December, the NABBP adopted a formal ban of black clubs and players, officially creating the color line which kept African-Americans out of white baseball for the next eighty years.

Despite the obvious disappointment of the decisions, the ordeal did yield some positives for Catto and his squad. As historian Melvin Adelman notes, many prominent

⁷¹ Lomax, 24.

⁷² Biddle, 367.

white newspapers came to the defense of the Pythians, who were gaining national support. The *New York Times* called the decision inconsistent with the events of the decade while the *Daily Tribute* described the actions of the national nominating committee as “cowardly.”⁷³ Catto may have been fighting an uphill battle, but at least he was generating national exposure for his team and his cause.

A White Challenge

Stung once again by the bitterness of defeat in Harrisburg, the Pythians’ captain was eager to capitalize on his team’s newfound fame. The waning months of 1868 were ripe with rumors regarding potential white challengers for the Pythians, and Catto was thrilled by the idea.⁷⁴ The following fall, the first exhibition game between white and black clubs was finally organized, and pitted the Pythians against one of the country’s first teams, the Olympic club. To get a game with the famed club was a tremendous show of acceptance in itself, and indicated how far Catto and his squad had come in just a few years. Four thousand fans, a massive turnout, showed up for the game, which was won by the Olympics 44 to 23 on September 4, 1869. The contest once again thrust the Pythians into the national spotlight, and drew newspaper coverage from New York to Utah.⁷⁵

Of course, the defeat was a blow to Catto and the Pythians, who got another game with a white club just two weeks later. This time, they triumphed, defeating the Philadelphia City Items 27 to 17.⁷⁶ The game capped an impressive run for the club, which

⁷³ Adelman, 176.

⁷⁴ Biddle, 374.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 375.

⁷⁶ Biddle, 376.

had quickly skyrocketed from creation to national attention in less than three years. While Catto's ultimate goal, to join the white league, failed to come to fruition, he did manage to garner an unprecedented level of acceptance from his white ball-playing peers in Philadelphia as well as the white national media. His Pythians were very good, but it was undoubtedly their dedication to exhibiting gentlemanly conduct and a more mainstream masculinity that allowed for this acceptance. Michael Kimmel asserts that "baseball was one of the chief institutional vehicles by which masculinity was reconstituted and by which Americans accommodated themselves to shifting structural relations."⁷⁷ Never was this more evident than in the case of Octavius Catto's ballclub, which sought to specifically combat the violent, brutish perception of black manhood through organization and genteel behavior. The club's structure was modeled after a literary society and more money was spent by the team on banquets than baseball equipment. It was these efforts which allowed the Pythians to be pioneers of the black game and brought them under the gaze of the white media.

The Pythian achievements had a wide impact on the national baseball scene, as well. While the NABBP's color barrier remained in place, it became a contentious issue among baseball fans across the country. By the end of 1870, games between white and black clubs had become almost common, due in great part to the pioneering efforts of the Pythians.⁷⁸ This relationship would later prove to be critical to the survival of black baseball, as gate receipts from unofficial interracial contests helped keep many of the black clubs in

⁷⁷ Kimmel, 62.

⁷⁸ Biddle, 378.

business.⁷⁹ After years of fighting and failure, Octavius Catto was finally making the type of impact he dreamed of as a young Banneker Institute member. The Pythians were on top of a new black baseball world by the start of the 1870's.

Trouble at the Polls

A new political world existed as well for African Americans in the early 1870's with the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment. Ratified in February of 1870, the amendment allowed blacks the opportunity to vote for the first time. While the legislation was a major victory for black Americans, it was also a source of major conflict in many US cities. Election Day 1870 featured riots and violence at the polls in Philadelphia and Camden, among other US cities, with white citizens taking to the streets to prevent the newly enfranchised black voters from casting their ballots.⁸⁰ The violence was an unfortunate scar, but many blacks, including Octavius Catto, were hopeful that Election Day 1871 would be far less problematic.

However, this optimism proved to be misguided, as trouble at the polls began early in the morning of October 10, 1871. Just after nine in the morning, policemen began separating and barring black voters at a polling place in the Fifth Ward.⁸¹ The tension spread from there, and by the early afternoon, much of the city had become unsafe. Realizing this, Octavius Catto dismissed his students early from the Institute for Colored Youth and started home. A member of the National Guard since his failed attempt an army

⁷⁹ Lomax, 29.

⁸⁰ Brown, 77.

⁸¹ Biddle, 422.

enlistment during the Civil War, Catto was scheduled to report to brigade headquarters armed and in uniform by six o'clock to help maintain the peace.⁸² He stopped only to pick up cash and a weapon before starting back toward his home on South Street.

Octavius Catto was at the height of his popularity and success as both a baseball captain and community leader as he left the I.C.Y. in the early afternoon of October 10. His Pythians had just completed another marvelous season and the Institute for Colored Youths was growing more rapidly than ever. Given this, Catto should have perhaps been aware of the fact that he was an obvious target for unruly white rioters. Maybe he was aware of this as he strode down South Street at around three-thirty that afternoon, within sight of his front door.⁸³ Yet, he certainly could not have envisioned the imminent and mortal danger that lay ahead.

Down the street from his residence, Catto was stopped by a white rioter, who drew his weapon and fired twice, inflicting serious wounds to Octavius' left shoulder and chest. Those first to arrive at his body discovered Catto "in a dying condition" and in urgent need of medical assistance. Catto was rushed to the nearby Fifth District Station House, but was pronounced dead soon after arrival.⁸⁴ He was just thirty two years old.

⁸² Biddle., 427.

⁸³ *Philadelphia Inquirer (Philadelphia, PA), 11 October 1871*, p. 2; available from http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iwsearch/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=S4EX45LAMTMwMjY5NjE0NC4xMjAyNTM6MToxNDoxNjAuMzkuMTgxLjEwOQ&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissueque ryname=11&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=11&p_docnum=2&p_docref=v2:110C9BFA1F116650@EANX-111FE13573505A40@2404712-111FE1359F3C0478@1-111FE137024C16C8; Internet.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Picking up the Pieces

Even amidst the multiple violent and criminal acts that were perpetrated during the Election Day riots, the murder of Octavius Catto immediately became urgent news in the City of Brotherly Love. The following day, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported on the murder, beginning the article by stating, “The riots of the Fourth and Fifth Wards yesterday proved to be disastrous in many particulars...Among those killed was Mr. Octavius V. Catto, a prominent colored man of this city.”⁸⁵ The white newspaper would go on to praise Catto’s accomplishments, calling him “a young man of considerable talent” and a “fine speaker.” The *Inquirer* also added that “his death will be mourned by a large number of friends, both white and colored.”⁸⁶ The commendations granted Catto the respect he had searched for during his lifetime, and serve as a major indicator of his impact on the city.

However, details of the murder itself remained hazy in the immediate aftermath, including the identity of the malicious culprit. An article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published the day after the murder reported that Catto and a couple of rioters “got into an altercation” and that Octavius proceeded to draw his revolver and fire a shot. It could not be ascertained whether the shot was fired “at the white men or merely to intimidate them.” But it was followed, according to the paper, by “three other shots...fired in rapid succession by the white men and when the smoke had cleared away the men had made good their

⁸⁵ *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), 11 October 1871, p.2.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

escape.” The article concluded by reporting that Catto was found with about fifteen dollars, some voting tickets, and a pistol.⁸⁷

For most other black citizens of Philadelphia, the story would have ended here. One would not typically expect that the murder of a black man during a mass riot with little evidence against a guilty party in 1871 would be further investigated by white authorities. Yet, two days after the shooting, the *Inquirer* reported that the coroner had already “impanelled a jury to investigate the circumstances attending the shooting of Mr. Octavius V. Catto.⁸⁸ Also included in the October 12 article were the first details of the investigation, which told a very different story than the one printed a day earlier. The eyewitness account referenced in the story claimed that “the statements published by some of the city papers in regard to the matter were incorrect.” The eyewitness further added that he did not think the shooting came about due to an altercation. Instead, he called the incident “a cold-blooded assassination of a peaceful, inoffensive man.⁸⁹”

The assassination claim was brow-rising, but the attached account was even more damning. The statement of the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* eyewitness, Mr. Samuel Wanamaker, provides an eerie account of the murder as he saw it:

I saw deceased jump off the pavement into the street. A man who was pursuing him fired a pistol. Mr. Catto still continued to run, and the man fired two shots more, which took effect, and deceased whirled around and threw up his hands...The murderer at first dodged back toward the crowd, and then ran along South Street to Ninth, and down Ninth to Bainbridge, and

⁸⁷ *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), 12 October 1871, p.2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

into a tavern on the upper corner, where it is said, he disappeared through the backyard⁹⁰.

Wanamaker then went on to describe the murderer, and the article verified that his portrayal of the shooter “answers the description of a man who participated in several of the disturbances previous to the shooting of Mr. Catto, and was supposed to have been a ring leader through the early stages of the riot.”⁹¹ Yet, no name was included with this claim, nor anywhere else in the article.

This follow-up story from October 12, 1871 reveals multiple telling aspects of the murder as well as Catto’s reputation in the community. The evidence provided by Mr. Wanamaker tells us, first of all, that Octavius likely was assassinated. He was not only singularly attacked and pursued; his assailant also had an escape plan in place with a local tavern. Assassination becomes an even more probable explanation when the assailant is considered. If he truly was a “ring leader” of the riot, then the task of killing Catto must have been prioritized, pre-planned, and intentionally placed in his hands. The targeting of Octavius Catto indicates his prominence as a black leader as well as the legitimate threat he posed to the white power structure. It also shows his general visibility and fame within the community as a whole. Clearly and speedily identified by both the shooter and the eyewitness (who noted that he quickly realized that the victim was “Mr. Catto”), Octavius seems to have been a generally recognizable face both within and beyond his neighborhood.

⁹⁰ *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), 12 October 1871, p.2.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Catto's reputation and prominence in the city was further established three days later during his funeral, which was also covered in-depth by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The opening lines of the coverage read: "The remains of Major Octavius V. Catto were yesterday followed to their last resting place by an immense concourse of people, irrespective of color. White and black, side by side, participated in doing homage to the memory of the dead man."⁹² On the day of the funeral, the body lay in state at the City Armory until ten o'clock, and an estimated five thousand people viewed the body there, while hundreds of others were unable to gain entrance. The *Inquirer* called the scene at the armory "imposing and impressive, and will long be remembered by all who were eye-witnesses."⁹³ Later, at the gravesite, the mood was more somber, as Catto's betrothed cried out in agony while his father, the now old and already sickly William, sobbed in silence. An earlier article had already mentioned William, claiming that he "appeared overwhelmed with grief" in the days following his son's murder and that "some of his friends are fearful that the severe shock will be too much for his already feeble health."⁹⁴ They had a right to be fearful, as William passed away from "heart disease" within weeks of his son's murder, a tragic and undeserving ending to a magnificent and significant life.⁹⁵

⁹² "The Last Rites. Obsequies of Major Octavius V. Catto" *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA) 17 October 1871; available from

[⁹³ *Ibid.*](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iwsearch/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=S4EX45LAMTMwMjY5NjE0NC4xMjAyNTM6MToxNDoxNjAuMzkuMTgxLjEwOQ&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissueque ryname=12&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=12&p_docnum=3888&p_docref=v2:110C9BFA1F116650@EANX-111FE14A66896AE0@2404718-111FE14A9ADE0958@1-111FE14C1C10A1A0@The+Last+Rites.+Obsequies+of+Major+Octavius+V.+Catto; Internet.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

⁹⁴ *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), 12 October 1871, p.2.

⁹⁵ "City Affairs" *North American* (Philadelphia, PA) 9 December 1871; available from

[Di Benedetto 40](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iwsearch/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=S4EX45LAMTMwMjY5NjE0NC4xMjAyNTM6MToxNDoxNjAuMzkuMTgxLjEwOQ&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissueque ryname=12&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=12&p_docnum=3888&p_docref=v2:110C9BFA1F116650@EANX-111FE14A66896AE0@2404718-111FE14A9ADE0958@1-111FE14C1C10A1A0@The+Last+Rites.+Obsequies+of+Major+Octavius+V.+Catto; Internet.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

The amount of white attention garnered by Octavius in the days after his murder, both by the public and the media, was shocking for an African-American. The turnout and coverage showed that Catto's message had not only been well received by blacks, but had also transcended race to make a larger impact in the Philadelphia community as a whole. And while the *Philadelphia Inquirer* provided the most detailed coverage of the murder, newspapers across the country, from Trenton, NJ (Trenton Star Gazette) to Little Rock, AK (Morning Republican) to New Orleans, LA (Weekly Louisianan) all ran stories about the incident within the next week. Again, the attention serves to prove that Catto had indeed made the impact he had hoped for with his baseball club, building a nation-wide reputation for black excellence that was clearly mourned in many parts of the country in the days after his death. The *Morning Republican* called Catto "another addition to the long list of martyrs who have been assassinated for their fidelity to the principles of liberty,"⁹⁶ and the *Trenton State Gazette* added that he was a "brilliant and highly cultivated young colored man."⁹⁷

The outpouring of love and respect may have done little to cheer those left in mourning,

ryname=12&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=12&p_docnum=3940&p_docref=v2:11CA8D156F8C24F5@EANX-11D7722439461818@2404771-11D772244D4C2108@0-11D7722486C857E8@City+Affairs; Internet.

⁹⁶ **"Octavius V. Catto" *Morning Republican* (Little Rock, AK) 20 October 1871; available from** http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iwsearch/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=S4EX45LAMTMwMjY5NjE0NC4xMjAyNTM6MToxNDoxNjAuMzkuMTgxLjEwOQ&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissueque ryname=12&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=12&p_docnum=3895&p_docref=v2:11158F6B73A3E4F8@EANX-1131B99AB667B430@2404721-1131B99AFA1385F0@1-1131B99C16FBAAC0@Octavius+V.+Catto; Internet.

⁹⁷ ***Trenton State Gazette* (Trenton, NJ) 17 October 1871; available from** [Di Benedetto 41](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iwsearch/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=S4EX45LAMTMwMjY5NjE0NC4xMjAyNTM6MToxNDoxNjAuMzkuMTgxLjEwOQ&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissuequeryname=12&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=12&p_docnum=3891&p_docref=v2:11AE7F1FB2EE9D55@EANX-11B5BE49339D16C8@2404718-11B5BE494B603370@1-11B5BE49901FA7B0@[New+York%3B+World%3B+Democratic]; Internet.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

but it certainly shows the impact and notoriety Catto had achieved as a young black man in nineteenth century America.

Conclusion

No man was ever convicted for the murder of Octavius Catto. Frank Kelly, now widely recognized by historians as the assassin, stood trial for the crime but was acquitted by a white jury. The saga continued in the press for over a decade, but this was not the only short term ramification of his death. In the *Philadelphia Inquirer* article from two days after the murder, major police changes are cited, including the importing of more reliable officers from other areas of the city, with the hopes of providing “better protection” for the colored citizens of the Fifth Ward.⁹⁸ The murder also greatly impacted Philadelphia African Americans. In November, the *Inquirer* reported on a large meeting of the Philadelphia black community, which resolved to “commemorate the virtues of the patriotic dead,” and decreed that Catto’s “interests shall be our constant care.”⁹⁹ The meeting was meant primarily to promote unity within the African-American community in the wake of the

⁹⁸ “**City Intelligence. Fifth Ward Riots.**” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA) 12 October 1871; available from

http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iwsearch/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=S4EX45LAMTMwMjY5NjE0NC4xMjAyNTM6MToxNDoxNjAuMzkuMTgxLjEwOQ&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissueque rurname=12&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=12&p_docnum=3841&p_docref=v2:110C9BFA1F116650@EANX-111FE1388BE0D908@2404713111FE138E6DB3078@2111FE13A6AA80370@City+Intelligence.+Fifth+Ward+Riots: Internet.

⁹⁹ “**Sorrowing, Large Meeting of Colored Citizens**” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA) 11 November 1871; available from

http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iwsearch/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=S4EX45LAMTMwMjY5NjE0NC4xMjAyNTM6MToxNDoxNjAuMzkuMTgxLjEwOQ&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissueque rurname=12&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=12&p_docnum=3924&p_docref=v2:110C9BFA1F116650@EANX-111FDF641E2B2118@2404743-111FDF6453471EA0@1-111FDF65C329A1A0@Sorrowing%2C+Large+Meeting+of+Colored+Citizens-Phramble+and+Resolutions+Adopted-the+Stand+Taken-Addresses; Internet.

Election Day tragedy, and this notion alone would have been seen as productive and important by Catto.

The death of Octavius Catto also brought about the end of the Pythians Baseball Club. No correspondence of any kind exists in the Papers of the Pythians following the murder, and the team would never take the field together again. The club's collapse demonstrated Catto's importance to the organization and its complete inability to operate without him. The best colored baseball squad in America had come to an abrupt end at a crucial time in the development of the black game, a development which had detrimental long-term effects. However, the short term effects were severe as well. Despite the fact that black Philadelphians attempted to rally around the heinous crime, the city still struggled to find new, dynamic leadership comparable to Octavius. This problem, which had marred black advancement in the city in the decades prior to Catto's emergence, returned during the 1870s, and slowed the amazing progress that had been made by Catto and his peers since the start of the Civil War.¹⁰⁰

However, the life and achievements of Octavius Catto should not be overlooked because of this. Historians Daniel Biddle and Murray Dubin placed Catto at the center of what they deemed the "first civil rights movement," and for good reason. Finding social clubs and literary societies as inadequate vehicles for change, Catto became one of the first black men in American history to strive for a completely level playing field, an area of activism where black manhood and ability could be objectively demonstrated and directly compared to the whites.

¹⁰⁰ Lomax, 34.

Catto's first attempt at attaining such a playing field for he and his black activist peers in Philadelphia was actually the Civil War. After organizing an all-black battalion and departing for Harrisburg to join the fighting, Catto and his men were heartbreakingly turned away by the Union Army. But the plan was understandable. The battlefield would not only have given Catto and his peers an opportunity to prove their worth alongside white troops, it also would have afforded them the chance to fight *against* pro-slavery whites. His next plan was far more successful, and surprising, as Catto turned to sport, specifically baseball, to continue his search for a level playing field. In 1866, he organized the Philadelphia Pythians Baseball Club and began seeking inclusion in Pennsylvania's white baseball circuit. While baseball may seem like a far less meaningful vehicle of social change than war, the game actually afforded Catto exactly the type of venue he was searching for. As Bret Carroll explains, baseball was an ideal "central arena for men of differing ethnic origins to prove their place amid 'real' (i.e. white) men" and an effective means "of asserting black manhood by proving its right to be fairly compared with dominant definitions of masculinity."¹⁰¹

While baseball gave Catto a possible window to demonstrate the athletic abilities of blacks compared to whites, he also refused to abandon his education and roots, and thus also stressed organization and gentlemanly conduct within the Pythians ballclub. Primary source evidence suggests that this meticulous approach was working, as a positive reputation for both Octavius and his ballclub was quickly growing at the time of his

¹⁰¹ Bret E. Carroll, *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia* (New York: The Moschovitis Group, 2003) 15.

assassination. The murder itself points to the influence and notoriety of Catto by 1871, and this was gained through his years as a Pythian. Remarkably, it was baseball which proved to be the ideal proving ground for Catto to establish his manhood and strive for equality, a historical facet almost as unrecognized and unexplored as Octavius Catto himself.

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