

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

February 2025

TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALL FIELD...

PLEASE JOIN US FOR THE 83<sup>RD</sup> ANNUAL MEETING OF THE Birmingham Historical Society at 7 p.m. on Monday, February 24 at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Our speaker, Gerald Watkins, Director of the Friends of Rickwood, will regale us with tales of Rickwood Field, our city’s working museum where baseball history can be experienced and lots of ball is still played.

In the summer of 1993, Birmingham Historical Society cosponsored the documentation of Rickwood with the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the National Park Service. HABS’s team of architects and historians climbed, measured, drew, and recorded to exacting HABS standards Rickwood’s grandstands, dugouts, light towers, and outfield walls. And, most importantly, HABS historian Hemant S. Damle of the University of Cincinnati footnoted Rickwood’s claim as America’s oldest grandstand and ballpark. Hemant S. Damle concluded, “Until a challenger steps forth with plans and evidence the claim for Rickwood should stand.”

This claim established, promotional whiz Terry Slaughter, volunteering for the recently formed Friends of Rickwood, then (and still) led by Tom Cosby and Coke Mathews, colored the HABS drawings and launched the Friends’ campaign to raise funds and restore the ballpark. Their success, while hard won according to Cosby and

Mathews, has been astounding and the restored and expanded ballpark looks better now than ever.

Most recently in May 2024, Rickwood’s current director, Gerald Watkins, succeeded in bringing Alabama’s first Major League Baseball game to Birmingham, and with it mountains of favorable national press for the park and the city. The former banker and life-time baseball enthusiast will tell more “Baronial” history in his talk titled *Rickwood: Then & Now* at our annual meeting.

Following Gerald Watkins’ talk, Carolanne Roberts will announce the winners of the Great Chocolate Cake Competition and describe our members’ creations, sharing comments from our esteemed and secret judges. Then it will be time to chat with our speaker and the Friends of Rickwood, buy books about Rickwood, sample cakes, and pay Society dues for 2025.



Gerald Watkins, Director of the Friends of Rickwood.



RICKWOOD FIELD

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

“Erected in 1910, the original concrete and steel grandstand at Rickwood Field is the oldest baseball grandstand on the same site in the United States. The grandstand forms the core of an historic ballpark which includes a 1928 Mission style entryway and other subsequent additions. Modeled after Pittsburgh’s Forbes Field, Rickwood is one of the few grandstands which remain as a testament to the now classic early twentieth century style of ballpark construction. The stadium was built by local industrialist A.H. ‘Rick’ Woodward, III for his Birmingham Barons baseball club, and was also home to the Black Barons, and the Oakland A’s farm teams. As the center for leisure-time activity, the field was an important social and cultural institution in this southern industrial city.

“Playing in the Southern Association and later the Southern League, Birmingham’s Minor League franchises won nine pennants during their tenure at Rickwood Field. Each era produced its own memorable games and favorite players for the community at large. Rickwood Field holds a place in the heart for the baseball buff and casual fan alike.

“In 1920 the Birmingham Black Barons began playing in the Negro Leagues and Rickwood rapidly became the jewel of southern Black baseball. The field served as a central gathering place for Birmingham’s Black community as they watched stars such as Mules Suttles, Satchel Paige, and Willie Mays fine tune the skills that launched them into stardom. The Black Barons reached the Negro League World Series three times in the 1940s and continued playing at Rickwood—alternating field time with the (white) Barons—until 1963.

“Like all social institutions in Birmingham prior to 1964, Rickwood remained racially segregated in the stands and on the field. The Barons continued to attract large crowds before folding their club

CALLING ALL CAKES

For The Great Chocolate Cake Contest

THE RULES: Bake your cake and bring the form (on the back), the recipe and your cake for judging to the Birmingham Botanical Gardens Auditorium between 3:30 and 4:00 p.m. on February 24.

JUDGING CATEGORIES: Most Chocolatey Cake Creation + Best Overall Cake + Best Visual Presentation + Best Flavor Profile + Most Pleasing Texture + Best Memory Statement

in the face of integration prior to the 1962 season. Integrated professional baseball resumed at Rickwood in 1964 and continued off and on through 1987.

“In the 1920s Rickwood underwent major additions to the present grandstand and entryway, as well as the erection of the now-defunct drop-in scoreboard in left field. Light towers were added in 1936, and in the 1940s new fences were built in the outfield reducing Rickwood’s mammoth dimensions and allowing more homeruns. Though no longer home to professional baseball, Rickwood is used by the public schools and recreational leagues for baseball games. Efforts are underway to restore Rickwood to its former grandeur.”

—Hemant S. Damle, Historian, Birmingham District Recording Project 1993, Rickwood Field, Sheet 1/22, Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) AL-897.



These summer 1993 recruits from Auburn, Texas Tech, University of Cincinnati, and the Cooper Union formed the HABS team that scaled, climbed, measured, drew, and recorded Rickwood Field as the nation’s oldest ballpark. Birmingham Historical Society.

# A Rickwood Field Timeline



Birmingham Barons, with owner Rick Woodward, third from the left,1914. O.V. Hunt, Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts (BPL Archives).



Opening Day at Rickwood Field, with the overflow crowd seated along the outfield wall, August 1910. This view presents the mammoth dimensions of the original field, in which few homeruns were hit. BPL Archives.



Birmingham Black Barons, Negro League World Series Champions, 1948. The team included William Greason, Artie Wilson, and the 17-year-old Willie Mays, beneath the arrow. Friends of Rickwood.



Birmingham Baron Walt Dropo,1948. Dropo's 467 foot homerun remains marked on the Rickwood outfield wall. *Fame and Fortune in the Show* by Art Black.

- 1910 Rickwood Field opens as the first concrete and steel baseball park in Minor League Baseball and home to the Birmingham Barons. Founded in 1885 as the Birmingham Coal Barons, the city’s minor league team had been playing at Slag Pile field (where adjacent slag piles from the Alice Furnaces provided clear views and free seats!). More than 10,000 attended the opening game on August 18, 1910.
- In 1909, Allan Harvey (“Rick”) Woodward (1876-1950) had bought the Barons, building the stadium that bears his name the next year. Rick Woodward had played baseball during his college years and had managed the Woodward Iron Company’s industrial league team. Beginning in 1899, he became superintendent of Woodward Iron Company and following his father’s death he became company president in 1918. By the 1920s, Woodward Iron was one of the nation’s largest suppliers of pig iron to the foundry industry with 2,000 persons working at its coal and ore mines and furnaces.
- Named for the team’s hands-on owner and passionate promoter, the \$75,000 field and grandstand, modeled after Pittsburgh’s Forbes Field, is considered the crown jewel of Southern baseball. Under Woodward’s ownership (1909-1938) more players from the Barons went to the major leagues than from any other team.
- 1911,1913,1919, & 1920 Rickwood hosts spring training camps for major league teams.
- 1920 Birmingham Black Barons forms, alternating weekends with the Barons. They called Rickwood home until 1963 when they folded.
- 1926 Legendary pitcher Satchel Paige debuts at Rickwood, joining the Black Barons from 1927 to 1930.
- Until 1927 Many Alabama-Auburn games are played here. In addition, Rickwood hosts horse shows, concerts, and wrestling matches.
- 1928 The new Mission-style concrete entry provided a formal entrance and offices.
- 1931 Rickwood’s most famous game—Game One of the 1931 Dixie Series—pits the Barons’ 43-year-old pitcher Ray Cadwell against the Houston Buffaloes’ 22-year-old Dizzy Dean. Before a crowd of 20,074, the Barons prevail, 1-0.
- 1936 On the evening of May 31, 13,749 fans enjoy the first nighttime professional baseball game at Rickwood.
- 1943 1944 The Birmingham Black Barons win the Negro American League pennants.
- 1945 Playing for the Kansas City Monarchs, Jackie Robinson debuts at Rickwood. He also leads several post-season barnstorming teams into Rickwood.
- 1947 Integration of professional baseball begins with the Brooklyn Dodgers acquisition of Jackie Robinson.
- 1948 Rickwood hosts the Negro League World Series and the Black Barons win the Negro American League pennant. Piper Davis serves as team manager; his roster includes pitchers William Greason, Willie Powell, and Joe Bankhead, catcher Pepper Bassett, outfielder Ed Steele, and Artie Wilson, mentor and friend to a rising star, the teenaged Willie Mays.
- 1948 On May 21, 14,565 fans marvel as first baseman Walt Dropo’s mammoth home run hits the original outfield wall, 467 feet from home plate. “X” marks the spot on the wall to this day.
- 1948 Considered the heyday of the ballpark, the Barons win the Southern Association playoffs and the Dixie Series, and the Birmingham Black Barons win the Negro American League pennant and appear in the final Negro League World Series.
- 1949 Jackie Robinson plays before a crowd of 15,781 persons.
- 1950 The integrated Chicago American Giants team is informed that it could not play at Rickwood as it is a violation of Ordinance 597 of the General Code of the City of Birmingham. (With the Giants’ white players sitting in the grandstand, the game proceeds.) Soon thereafter Police Commissioner Bull Connor amends section 597 to include the prohibition of blacks and whites from playing sports, cards, dice, dominoes, checkers, or similar games together in any park or playground.





Atop the grandstand, Dr. Marsh leads Princeton Elementary students on a tour of Rickwood, 1995. Friends of Rickwood volunteers lead weekday tours. Birmingham Historical Society.

- 1951 Black Baron stars like native sons Willie Mays, Artie Wilson, and Piper Davis make their way into the major leagues.
- 1954 With the support of City Commission President Jimmie Morgan, four integrated games are played at Rickwood before the question of integrated play is put to a vote of the citizens. It loses three to one.
- October 1961 Federal Judge H.H. Grooms declares Ordinance 597 prohibiting integrated play unconstitutional.
- November 1961 The Barons announce that they will not play integrated baseball and Rickwood shuts down for two years.
- 1963 The Black Barons dissolve after 40 years of professional baseball.
- 1964 The Birmingham Barons, Alabama’s first integrated sports team, resume play at Rickwood.
- 1966 The City of Birmingham becomes owner of the field, retaining ownership to this day.
- 1967 Reggie Jackson hits a two-out grand slam home run in the bottom of the ninth to propel the Birmingham A’s to victory in the Southern League and Dixie Series.
- 1987 The Barons play their final game before moving to a new stadium in Hoover. They win the Southern League Championship in this year. In 1994 Michael Jordan joins the team.
- 1988 Birmingham Park Board takes over Rickwood and leases the facility to the Birmingham Board of Education Athletics Department that hosts high school and middle school baseball and football games.

- 1991 Chicago’s Comiskey Park, built several months before Rickwood, is demolished.
- 1991 Rickwood becomes the oldest ballpark in the United States, albeit with many contenders also making this claim.
- 1992 The not-for-profit Friends of Rickwood forms to oversee care of the ballpark, host amateur, police and semi-pro games, and welcome visitors to the park.
- 1993 The Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the National Park Service documents Rickwood as the nation’s oldest ballpark: HABS AL-897. Photographs, drawings, and a history, deposited at the Library of Congress, are online at the library.
- 1996 The first “Rickwood Classic” pits the Birmingham Barons against the Memphis Chicks, both teams playing in vintage uniforms. The now annual throwback game between Double-A teams honors a different era in Birmingham’s baseball history each year.
- By 2005 The Friends of Rickwood have raised \$2 million to refurbish the grandstands, press-box, locker rooms, the roof, and main entrance to the park. They establish a Museum of Southern Baseball in the entry pavilion and have plans to expand it.
- 2013 The Birmingham Barons move to Regions Field on Birmingham’s Southside.
- 2018-19 New sidewalks and antique-style streetlights are installed along 12<sup>th</sup> Street West, restoring the 1940s streetscape.
- 2023-2024 Rickwood undergoes \$5 million in renovations in preparation for Major League Baseball. Renovations include “upgrading the grass playing surface to modern big league standards, padding and moving the outfield walls, overhauling the dugouts, adding new lights” as well as other items.
- 2024 On June 20, Major League Baseball organizes “A Tribute to Willie Mays and The Negro Leagues.” In vintage uniforms, the San Francisco Giants and the St. Louis Cardinals play before a crowd of 8,332. The 99-year-old former Black Baron and Cardinal Bill Greason throws out the ceremonial first pitch. The game is the first MLB regular season game played in the state of Alabama.
- 2024 Of the 352 members of the National Baseball Hall of Fame, 181—including Willie Mays, Sathel Paige, Ty Cobb, Reggie Jackson, Jackie Robinson, Joe DiMaggio, and Babe Ruth—have appeared at Rickwood since 1910.
- 2025 Miles College and Birmingham City high schools play their home games here. And once a year, the Birmingham Barons return to play the “Rickwood Classic,” the turn-back-the-clock games that honor Birmingham baseball heritage.



On June 20, 2024, Major League Baseball organizes “A Tribute to Willie Mays and The Negro Leagues.” In vintage uniforms, the San Francisco Giants and the St. Louis Cardinals play before a crowd of 8,332.

Birmingham Historical Society  
P.O. Box 321474  
Birmingham, AL 35232

# Rickwood: Then & Now

*The Society’s Annual Meeting*  
*February 24, 2025, 7 p.m.*  
*Auditorium, Birmingham Botanical Gardens*



1948



2025.

Centenarian and former Birmingham Black Baron William (now the Reverend Bill) Greason. Friends of Rickwood.



## Ready...Set... Bake a Cake! *for the*

### Great Chocolate Cake Contest

Which chocolate cake from your past was tempting  
reward for cleaning your plate time after time?  
We can’t wait to taste it!

#### YOUR MISSION

Recreate a family favorite that celebrates chocolate—  
the richer and more decadent the better! And, of course,  
add your wonderful personal story and the recipe to go with  
it.

#### THE RULES

Bake your cake and bring it to the judging at the Birmingham  
Botanical Gardens Auditorium between 3:30 and 4 p.m.  
on Monday, February 24th.

*Don’t forget to fill out the form telling us why this particular cake is  
a winner in your life (find the form on the back of this document).*

#### JUDGING CATEGORIES:

Most Chocolatey Chocolate Creation • Best Overall Cake  
Best Visual Presentation • Best Flavor Profile  
Most Pleasing Texture • Best Memory Statement

— *For the sake of tradition, dark or milk chocolate are preferred  
over white or ruby chocolate.* —

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## The Great Chocolate Cake Contest

February 24, 2025

### CAKE BACKGROUND FORM

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Mobile Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME OF CAKE: \_\_\_\_\_

WHY IS THIS CAKE SPECIAL? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*(Typed and affixed story welcome.)*

WHOSE RECIPE WAS IT? \_\_\_\_\_  
*(Recipe is required. Please affix.)*

DO I MAKE IT OFTEN? \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: 2-24-25