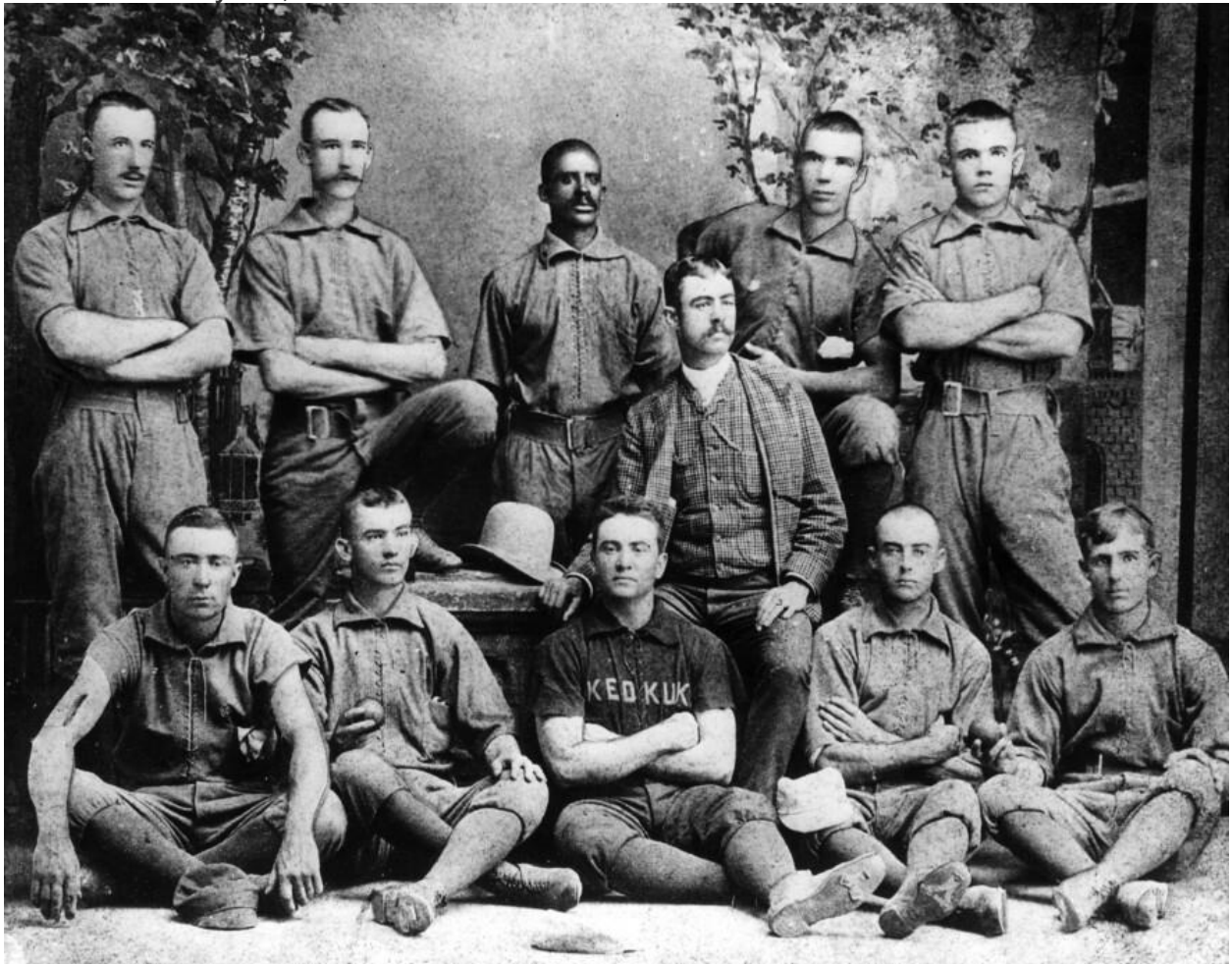


# Bud Fowler's Hall of Fame induction shines light on 1800s Black baseball players

By [Vaughn Golden](#)

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[Bud Fowler \(center\) will be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame Sunday. \(Provided by National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum\)](#)

Decades before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier by becoming the first Black major league player, John Jackson, better known as Bud Fowler, was playing on professional white teams. Fowler will be inducted in the National Baseball Hall of Fame Sunday. His induction represents not only the honoring of his own legacy, but a renewed effort to honor the contributions of Black players in the 1800s.

Fowler was a well-regarded pitcher and second basemen in the 1880s.

"It's not merely the stats that we have, but the fact that there was always a home for him," Major League Baseball's official historian, John Thorn said. "Everybody wanted Bud Fowler until they didn't and the people who didn't want him were his teammates."

Fowler encountered that racism often. In 1887, two players on the Binghamton Bingos refused to play with Fowler. The team's owners caved and Fowler left. Within two weeks, all the teams in the league banned Black players, beginning the creation of baseball's color line that would only be broken by Robinson decades later.

Thorn was on the committee that voted to induct Fowler. He said Fowler's credentials matched Hall of Famer contemporaries like Sol White and Frank Grant. Unlike the latter, Fowler moved frequently from team to team, whereas White and Grant played for teams for longer periods of time.



Fowler is buried in Frankfort, NY. The exact location of his remains isn't known because he is buried in a communal grave. The Society of American

Baseball Researchers erected a stone in his honor in the 1980s. (Vaughn Golden/WSKG)

"The disqualifying factor, the thing that left him off the ballot when Sol White and Frank Grant went in was the very thing that got him in this time, because it was his dignity as an African American that prevented him from accepting slights from teammates or townspeople or media," Thorn said, acknowledging that Fowler often moved so he wouldn't have to put up with racist backlash.

Some historians believe the status quo of how early baseball players, especially Black players, are judged needs to be reconsidered.

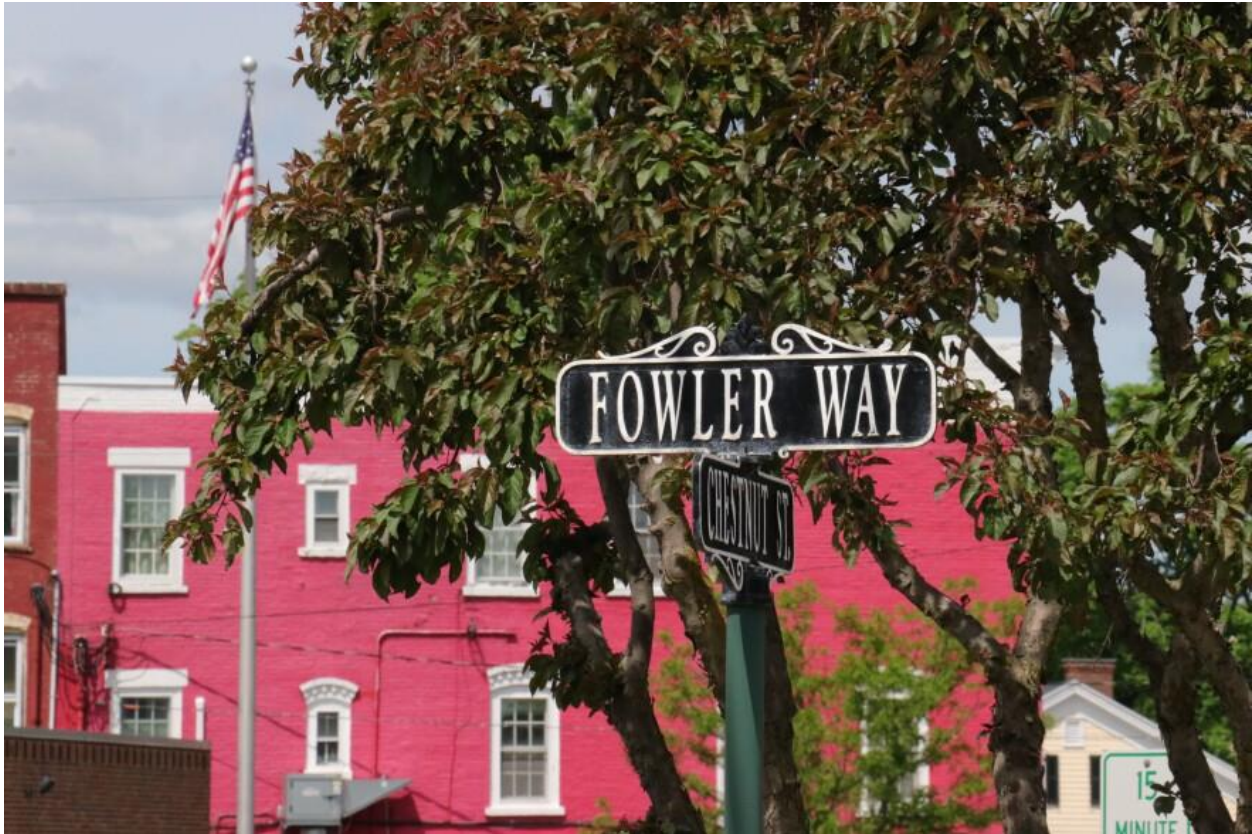
"We need to take it seriously," Dr. James Brunson III said, an author and historian specializing in Black baseball. "And I think we're still operating on a pre-Jackie Robinson philosophy that nothing good came out of Black baseball in the 19th century."

Brunson points to statistics. He said while digitization of old newspapers is helping provide statistics from the early days of baseball, those stats aren't always reliable, even if they are available. Therefore, they shouldn't be the determining factor over whether a player is inducted into the Hall of Fame.

Brunson said he thinks it runs deeper though. For instance, many accounts incorrectly credit Fowler as the first Black professional ball player. Brunson said that fails to acknowledge professional [all-Black teams](#) that were around since the 1860s.

"When the first professional teams showed up, Fowler was what, 12 years old? I mean, that's an insult," Brunson said.





Named in 2013, Fowler Way in Cooperstown abuts Doubleday Field. (Vaughn Golden/WSKG)

In 2020, Major League Baseball [acknowledged](#) that the segregated Negro Leagues qualified as a major league, meaning its players belonged in the record books along with the white athletes. President of the Hall of Fame, Josh Rawitch, said that mission extends to Cooperstown too.

"I think Major League Baseball has done a great job in trying to bring light to the fact that there were in fact leagues that existed, Negro Leagues, and that when you look at the caliber of talent that existed in the Negro Leagues, it was certainly on par with the National League and the American League," Rawitch said.

Both Thorn and Brunson agree, there are more historical players like Bud Fowler out there, and finding and honoring them only presents opportunities to deepen baseball's legacy.