

BRANCH RUSSELL, STAR OF THE NEGRO NATIONAL LEAGUE

By Ellen Knight¹

Among the notable names in the history of sports which belong to people who grew up in Winchester is a professional baseball player, Branch Lee Russell.

Russell was the youngest of six siblings born in Halifax County, Virginia, to Apollodora Russell and Aeolian Squires. Soon after his birth on Oct. 9, 1895, his mother died, and the family moved to Winchester, as did several other African-American families from Halifax County.

Arriving in Winchester in 1899, the Russells moved into the neighborhood between Swanton and Irving Streets where most of the town's African-American families lived during the first decades of the 20th century. In 1900, the Russell children were living with grandmother Elizabeth Squires at 35 Florence St. According to school enrollment records, they moved to Chester Street and Raymond Place and arrived at 32 Harvard St. by 1910.²

Because the family moved from one street to another, young Branch Russell attended at least two elementary schools, the Chapin School on Swanton Street and the Washington School on Cross Street. In addition to the Winchester schools, Russell attended the Henderson Institute in North Carolina. Founded in 1887, the school's object (before it closed in 1970) was to give black people the opportunity for a good education.

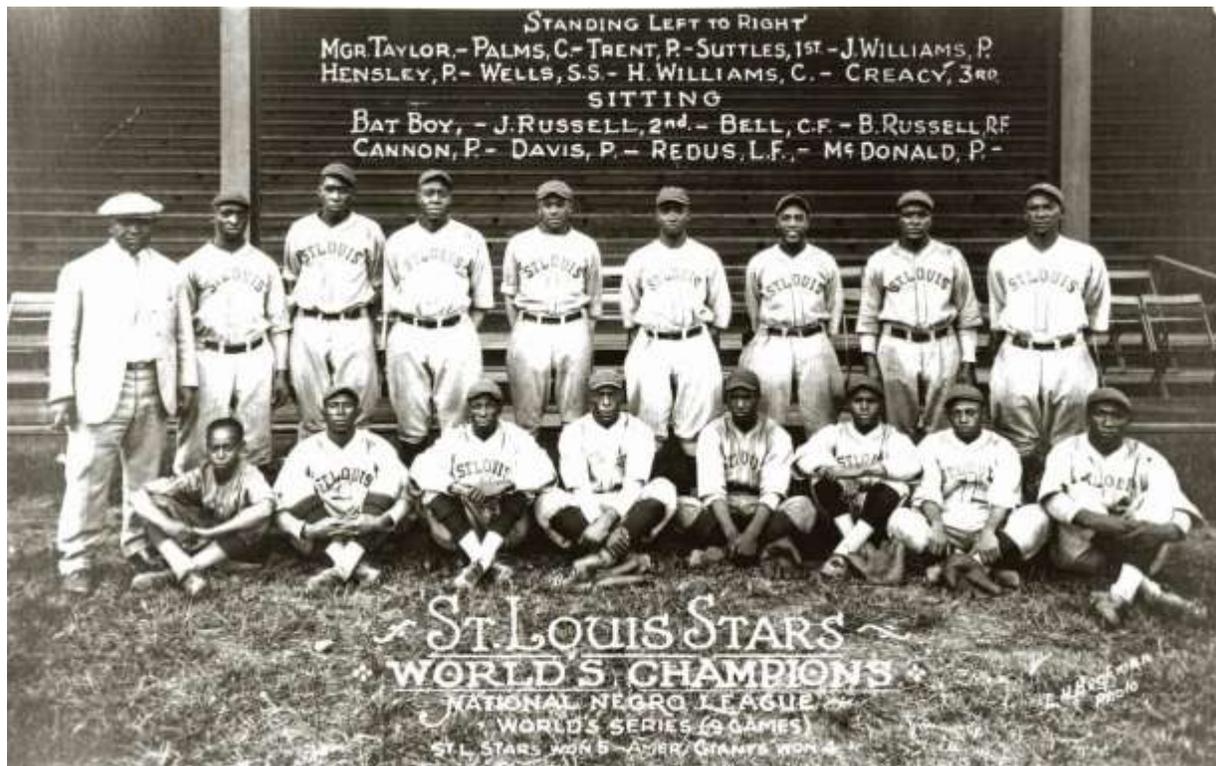
Russell started working at a young age. In 1910, when all six Russell siblings were still together, the census recorded that Branch, age 14, and his brother William were working as gardeners on a private estate. At that time his brothers John and Breckenridge were working as stone masons. Later, brothers John and William formed the Russell Brothers Construction Company which operated for many years in Winchester. But Branch did not join them.

To judge by his later life, Russell also found time during his school years for sports.³ Since the mid-19th century, baseball had been a popular American and Winchester pastime. In Russell's boyhood, there was a new baseball field at Manchester Field, but it is more likely that he would have played in his own neighborhood on the open lot on Cross Street behind the Washington School. The town later purchased this lot, prepared it as a playfield in the 1910s, and dedicated it in 1925 as Leonard Field. By that time Russell had embarked on a career as a professional baseball player.

On Sept. 27, 1914, Russell enlisted in the army at Ft. Slocum, N.Y. In 1917, the year that the country entered World War I, he was promoted to corporal. He continued in the service through the war years and, after the war ended, re-enlisted in March 1919. He served in Headquarters Co., 25th Infantry, one of the all-black units of the United States Army known as the Buffalo Soldiers.

During his army service, Russell's athletic ability earned him a place on the army track team,⁴ and he played baseball with the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Wreckers. In 1920, the Wreckers played the St. Louis Giants, a team Russell would later join. Also in 1920, Russell competed in the army athletic championships that helped form the 1920 U.S. Olympic team. He placed second in the running hop, step, and jump, but it is unknown if he went further with track events.

After eight years of army service and an honorable discharge, Russell went from army baseball to professional baseball. He made his professional debut at age 26 playing two games for the 1922 Kansas City Monarchs, reportedly recommended to them by Casey Stengel. The following year, Russell joined the St. Louis Stars, another black baseball team.



At that time, all-black teams were his only choice. The first all-black professional baseball teams began in the 1880s, and the first league for black teams, the Negro National League (NNL), was organized in 1920. One of its eight charter members was the St. Louis Giants, formed in 1910 and renamed St. Louis Stars in 1922. Russell was said to have been one of the team's best players.

Reportedly, "Branch Russell was a good contact hitter in his 11 years in the Negro Leagues. ... Branch batted .283/.341/.416 his first year in St. Louis, out hitting fellow rookie Cool Papa Bell and leading the team in triples (9, tied for sixth in the Negro National League) and runs (64). He bounced around the field, playing 25 games at third base, 22 at shortstop, 17 in right field, and 14 in left field while hitting third, first, or seventh."⁵ At a height of 5' 10", he played second base, moving to right field in 1925. He reportedly batted left and threw right.

From 1922 to 1931, Russell's team played in Stars Park, one of the few ballparks built expressly for the Negro Leagues. His club reportedly had some of the best talent in the NNL. The Stars won three League pennants in 1928, 1930, and in 1931, the NNL's final season.

Since 1907, when Cuba opened up its integrated Cuban Professional League to foreign players, many American ball players played there during the winter. Russell played in Cuba in 1928-1929 and returned to St. Louis.

Russell was captain of the St. Louis Stars for eight years and remained with that team for most of his baseball career. In 1931 he was with the Cleveland Cubs and in 1932 concluded his career with the Cleveland Stars, which was established that year and played for only one season.

After leaving baseball, Russell was a supervisor with the Parks and Recreation Department of St. Louis. In 1958, ill health forced his retirement, and he died on May 1, 1959 in St. Louis. His tombstone in St. Louis notes his World War I service with the 25th Infantry. In Winchester, his name appears on the World War I Roll of Honor on Winchester's Veterans Memorial. Largely overlooked, however, has been the fact that the name Branch Russell belonged not only to a veteran but also to a star baseball player.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb 16, 2010. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² 1910 federal census.

³ *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 2, 1903 reported that "Branch Russell received a very severe blow on the forehead last Wednesday afternoon while playing ball." Where he was playing was not noted.

⁴ Obituary, *The Winchester Star*, May 15, 1951.

⁵ baseball-reference.com