

ROBBIE ROBINSON HAD THE RIGHT STUFF FOR PRO BALL

By Ellen Knight¹

During the era when professional baseball was segregated, one ball player in Winchester, William Henry “Robbie” Robinson, may have had the potential to play for a major league but was denied the opportunity to find out. Nevertheless, he became a star player on the ball fields of Winchester and other communities.

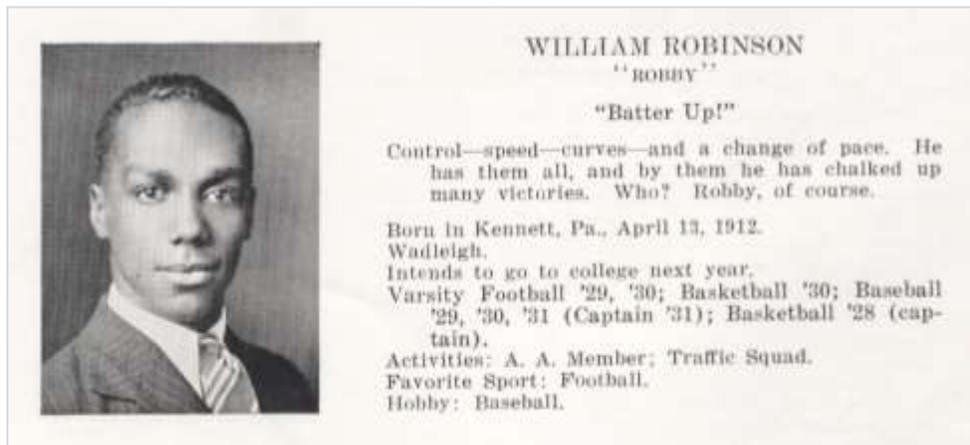
In high school, Robinson won letters in baseball, football, and basketball and participated in track. According to his yearbook, football was his favorite and baseball was his hobby. His basketball skills were so impressive, *The Winchester Star* called him “Forget Me Not” Robinson.



“Robbie” Robinson, WHS Class of 1931, with the baseball team he captained

Robinson was not only a good all round baseball player, he was chosen as captain of the baseball team in his senior year (1931), probably Winchester High’s first black team captain. He was reportedly a great pitcher. According to his yearbook, “control–speed–curves–and a change of pace. He has them all, and by them he has chalked up many victories.”

In one of his last school contests, “The game was all Winchester,” the *Star* reported. Wakefield “could do nothing with the pitching of Capt. ‘Robbie’ Robinson on the mound for Winchester. This boy ‘Robbie’ was the works last Saturday. Besides holding Wakefield to three scattered hits while fanning 10, he hit safely four times out of four and fielded his position well.”²



SEMI-PRO

While still in school, Robison was approached to join a semi-pro team, the Boston Colored Tigers. Playing with them during the summers, he got a new nickname, "Windshield Willie," due to his habit of sitting up close to the windshield in the old team bus. It was a nickname he reportedly loved and the black community used with admiration.

"I remember," Robison said, "I was 16 years old and I went to Kendall Square Street in Rockford where we were supposed to join the Boston Tigers and go what they call barnstorming. We started out in Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, [and Canada]. Quite a schedule.... There were about eight fellows on tour. The four of us, the young fellows, got so we had a chance to tour all over Canada, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick. They gave us two dollars a day just to eat."

In addition to the barnstorming tour, he played with the Tigers in a park league against teams from a variety of communities like South Boston and Stoneham. Both the *Star* and the *Globe* praised his "masterly twirling."³ An article from the *Boston Chronicle*, quoted in the *Star* in August after Robison pitched four straight wins for the Tigers in July, said, "For the first four innings Robison had the Cambridge boys looking his delivery over in vain. This new Tiger pitcher is only a youngster but has the stuff and is coming strong. The most promising thing about him is that he loves, and is willing to listen to instructions."⁴

Sportswriter Mabrey Kountze reported that, when former Tigers player Stody Ward compiled a list of players with the potential to compete at the major league level, that list included "Windshield Willie" Robison. According to his son Bill, people most often compared him as a pitcher to Bob Feller.

Boston never hosted a major Negro League ball club. There were, however, a number of ball clubs for blacks, notably the semi-pro Tigers and the Boston Royal Giants, also known as the

Boston Giants, Quaker Giants, Philadelphia Giants, and Boston Colored Giants. The second such team to use Robinson's pitching talents, during 1933 and 1934, was the Cleveland Colored Giants.

Then he left. "I loved baseball, but you see it was an all-black team.... I played in St. Catherine's Field in Somerville. They stopped the game in the fifth inning and introduced this big blonde fellow who had done a lot of baseball pitching and this ball looked like it was balloons, it was so easy to hit. And he was going to try out for the minor leagues. That's when it came to me that the ones that would teach me [men who traveled with his team] were barred from it. And that's the last time I ever played with the blacks.... I could have gone to Chicago, I could have gone to New Jersey, but I didn't." What he wanted was to join a white team. "I'm very sensitive so that's why I didn't join Negro League. It wasn't good for me."⁵

Nevertheless, Robinson continued playing with teams formed in Winchester.

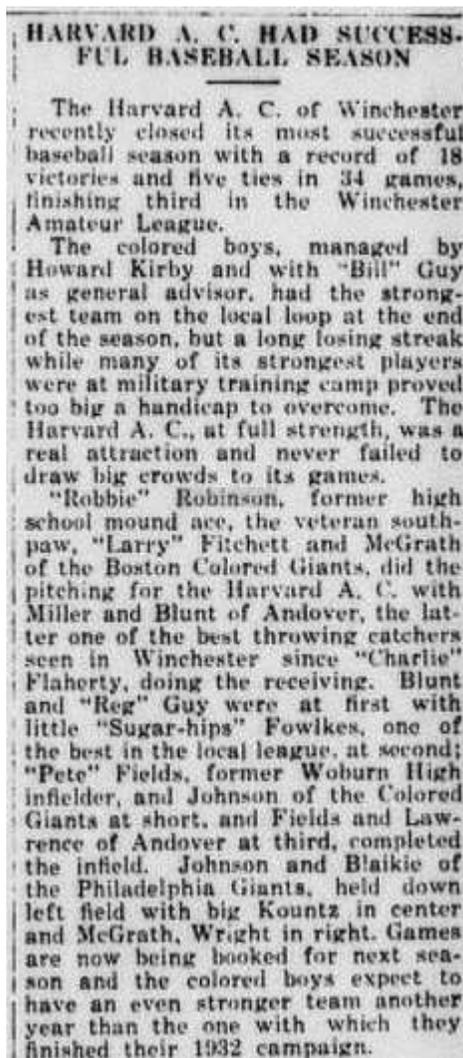
HARVARD A.C.

During the 1930s, baseball dominated summer sports in Winchester. In 1932, among many others, there were four teams playing regularly scheduled games in the Winchester Amateur League – the Town Team, Winchester Cubs, Winchester A.A., and the all-black Harvard A.C.⁶ They played one another, as well as teams from other towns, such as Arlington and Woburn.

"Bill Guy's Harvard A.C.," as it was called in the *Star*, was apparently named after the street where Guy then lived. The manager and players had jobs typical for that time, e.g., janitor, chauffeur, and tannery worker. But in their spare time they put together a team as good as, and sometimes better than anyone's.

One of the players was Guy's son Reg, who played first base. Other Winchester natives were Mason and Richard Barksdale and Donald McCarthy. On second base was Harold Boardley who worked in the *Star's* press department. The star pitcher, when he was not away pitching for the Tigers or Giants, was Robinson, henceforward simply nicknamed "Robbie."

The typical practice of using only surnames to name players makes it difficult to identify them all. Added to that, the team was not confined to Winchester men. Two of the regulars were Fields, a former Woburn High player,



and Larry Fitchett, also of Woburn. A relative recalled that when a bus would pick up the players it made stops in Woburn and Medford.

After a good start, the team slumped into a long losing streak while some of its players were in camp at Fort Devens. By the end of July, the *Star* reported, "The league has given permission to the Harvard A.C. to secure players from out of town as the colored boys are a distinct asset to the circuit, but thus far the local team has been unable to secure much added strength."⁷

Guy found a lot of new strength by introducing players from other black teams – Miller, Blunt, Lawrence, and Wright from the Andover Colored Giants; Johnson and Blaikie from the Philadelphia Colored Giants; and Jack McGrath, who like Fitchett played for the Boston Colored Giants.

Again the team began winning and continued to do well after its original men returned. On Aug. 19, the report was that the club "has not lost a game since its wrecking crew returned from military training camp." At the end of the 34-game season, the club "had the strongest team of the local loop at the end of the season [and] at full strength was a real attraction and never failed to draw big crowds to its games."

WINCHESTER, MASS., FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1932

ALL STAR AMATEUR LEAGUE BASEBALL TEAM				
(Selected by Managers of Teams Represented)				
Position	Player	Club	Votes	
Pitcher	Robinson	Harvard A. C.	6	
Pitcher	Callahan	Winchester A. A.	2	
Catcher	Blunt	Harvard A. C.	5	
First Base	J. Fitzgerald	Winchester A. A.	6	
Second Base	Hevey	Winchester A. A.	3	
Third Base	Prucopio	Cubs	3	
Shortstop	Fields	Harvard A. C.	3	
Left Field	F. Tansey	Winchester A. A.	4	
Center Field	Kountz	Harvard A. C.	5	
Right Field	N. Fitzgerald	Winchester A. A.	4	
Res. Catcher	J. Tansey	Winchester A. A.	4	
Res. Infielder	H. Chevalo	Winchester T. T.	3	
Res. Outfielder	Roche	Winchester A. A.	3	

That September, the managers of the four teams, plus the official scorer and umpire, were asked to select an all-stars team. Robinson headed the list. Other Harvard players picked were identified simply as Kountz (cf), Blunt (c), and Fields (ss). The *Star* would have added the "classy and timely hitting infielder," Fowlkes, runner-up for the highest batting average in the League.

The Harvard A.C. continued with the Amateur League in 1933. For three months they were playing great baseball. In June they had an extra game after Bob Johnson broke his knee during a game. A benefit game was played between Harvard and an all-stars team assembled from

players of the other clubs. Harvard won, and then won a couple more games, but then, after July, news of the team stopped. In August, a Harvard A.C. Juniors team was mentioned (and continued for at least a few years), but the men's team disappeared from the newspaper.

That was not the end of black teams playing on Winchester's fields. Local teams played other black teams, like the West Medford Independents, and the semi-pro teams often used fields in communities around Boston. In 1933, the *Star* reported that a series between the Philadelphia Colored Giants and the Legion team was in the making, but it was the Lord Tanners of Woburn who made the news for playing against the Giants on Manchester Field in 1934.

The Tanners also played the Cleveland Colored Giants (including Robinson) on Manchester Field that August, drawing "one of the largest crowds ever to witness of a baseball game here." The *Star* reported that "The big crowd was ranged along the foul lines into the outfield and literally was jammed around the diamond. Automobiles filled the center and extended along Church Street and the Parkway for some distance."⁸ Despite Robinson's good pitching, Woburn won.

The Cleveland Giants did not survive 1934. After what the *Star* called "a long layoff," in 1936 Robinson returned to pitching, now with the Cottage Crest team which played in the Suburban League twilight games. (Though an out-of-town team, the Park Department allowed Cottage Crest, like the Tanners, to use Manchester or Leonard fields when no local teams applied.)

INTEGRATED COMMUNITY BASEBALL

Unlike professional baseball, local teams were open to anyone, regardless of color. And they played anyone. This was true as far back as 1872 when the Winchester Mystics played the Boston Resolutes (a black team) on the Common.⁹

In 1933, Robinson pitched for the Winchester Legion team, playing with the newly retired professional Horace Ford. In 1934, the "crack submarine fast-baller"¹⁰ pitched for the Winchester A.A. and then for the Town Team from 1934 through 1938, when other players included the likes of Harry Chefalo and Frank Provinzano. By 1941, he was apparently no longer pitching either for the semi-pros or the local teams, but he appeared to umpire at least one local game.

For the next few years, Robinson, like several fellow players of the Harvard A.C., was on a new team within the U.S. Army. Again subject to segregation, he was assigned to the all-black 57th Ordnance Ammunition Co. The years 1944 and 1945 found Staff Sgt. Robinson serving in Normandy, northern France, and the Rhineland while his company supported the 1st Army. His son revealed that due to the brutal winter weather during the Battle of the Bulge he lost a lung.¹¹

After the war, Robinson returned home to his family, wife Elizabeth Nunley whom he married in October 1933, and their four children, William Jr., Don, Nancy (later Mrs. Thompson), and Dennis. The Robinsons moved to Cambridge, though "Robbie" returned to Winchester after his mother's death in 1960 to stay for nearly 20 years before moving away again. Professionally, he worked in the trade of wallpaper hanging, teaching and working with his son Don for Robinson was active

well into his senior years, swimming, skiing, and playing golf. Among his other talents, he was accounted a good singer and sang in his church.

Robinson, who commenced life on April 13, 1912, in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, the son of Clara Ann (Webster) and William Maxwell Robinson, died in Brookline in 2007.

The time is past due to recall and honor Robinson not simply as an outstanding athlete in Winchester's black community but also as a team player for his school and his town, who won admiration all round and was well liked to boot.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb, 17, 2016. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, May 8, 1931.

³ *Boston Globe*, Aug. 27, 1931.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 14, 1931.

⁵ Interview of William H. Robinson by Randy Bairnsfather and Amy Grates on January 20, 2006.

⁶ A.A. and A.C. presumably stand for athletic association or club.

⁷ *The Winchester Star*, July 29, 1932.

⁸ *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 10, 1934.

⁹ Twelve teams were competing for a championship that year, named Boston, Excelsior, Aurora, Lowell Jr., Amateur, Resolute (Boston), Una, Howard Jr, Mystic (Winchester), Tremont, Scott, and Mutual (S. Boston). Winchester's record was 7-4. The Resolutes, who won none of their games that year, were a black baseball team dating from at least 1870 which was reformed in 1887 as part of the League of Colored Baseball Players.

¹⁰ *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 19, 1932.

¹¹ Reported by Bill Robinson Jr. in a conversation with the author. Robinson's medical condition is not noted in the available military record.