



State Representative David Leland
State Representative Thomas West

Sponsor Testimony – House Bill 59

Rep. Leland: Chairman Anielski, Vice Chair Hambley, Ranking Member Bishoff, and members of the House State and Local Government Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony this morning on House Bill 59, legislation that will designate October 7th as “Moses Fleetwood Walker Day.” This bill, which passed unanimously in the 131st General Assembly and which a number of the committee members in this room have chosen to sponsor, is an important step in commemorating the first African American to play under contract in major league baseball.

Moses Fleetwood “Fleet” Walker was born on October 7th, 1856 in Mount Pleasant, Ohio. Later on, he and his family moved to Steubenville, where he and his younger brother Weldy attended Steubenville High School. Upon graduation, Fleet enrolled in Oberlin College in 1877 and played on the school’s first ever varsity baseball team in 1881. Walker’s talent as Oberlin’s star catcher caught the eye of the “school up north,” where he was later recruited to play. I ask that the members of the committee overlook this regrettable blemish.

After college, Fleet began his groundbreaking professional career. He played for the White Sewing Machine Club in Cleveland and eventually with the Toledo Blue Stockings in 1883, which was in the Western Baseball League—the forerunner to the American Baseball League today.

Rep. West: Fleet was an excellent catcher and performed well while he was at bat. However, his baseball career and life were devastated by rising racism and discrimination. He was refused services granted to his teammates, opposing managers ousted Walker from catcher so that white batters would not need to be so close to him, and some opponents refused to even play if Fleet was on the same field. While racial attitudes hardened and segregation became the pattern of American society, Fleet experienced such incredible harassment from his teammates, coaches, and opponents that he was soon driven out of the major leagues. He later died in Cleveland on May 11, 1924 at the age of 67.

While Jackie Robinson is frequently credited with being the first African American player to play professional baseball, it was actually Walker who first was contracted by the Toledo Blue Stockings more than 60 years earlier. While we can never right the injustices experienced by Moses, by designating October 7th as Fleetwood Moses Walker Day, we can properly honor the legacy of a pioneer for civil rights.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. We look forward to taking your questions.