

Testimony of Craig Brown

Chairman Uecker, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Senate Local Government, Public Safety, and Veterans Affairs Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on House Bill 59, legislation that will designate October 7th as Moses Fleetwood Walker Day.

My name is Craig Brown, and I am an adjunct lecturer at Kent State University and Stark State College. It is a pleasure to encourage you to designate a day in honor of Ohioan Moses Fleetwood Walker.

This effort is a result of a class discussion from one of my political science and government classes regarding civil rights. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today about a forgotten Ohioan.

Moses Fleetwood Walker was an inventor, author, businessman, and one of our nation's first celebrity athletes.

On May 1, 1884 Walker took the field as the first African American to regularly play baseball for a major league team. His career in the majors was brief, and his team, the Toledo Blue Stockings, would only last a year, but what he did for professional sports and civil rights was monumental. After leaving Toledo, he would play for other predominately white baseball teams in Newark, Cleveland, Toronto, and Syracuse.

After the Civil War, America struggled to accept a new multiracial society where the boundaries of race and class were blurred. Many would create laws and rules that divided and segregated Americans. Others would seek scientific and religious reasons to justify such actions. Actions we would consider abhorrent today.

On May 1, 1884 many white Americans viewed African Americans as inferiors both intellectually and physically. When Moses Fleetwood Walker walked onto a field in Toledo he did more than just play a game. He was more than just an athlete. He did more than throw, catch, or hit. That day and everyday he played he started a conversation.

As we have undertaken this endeavor, I have been asked many times what things have been done to remember or memorialize the life of Moses Fleetwood Walker. Of course there are plaques and articles, mostly which focus on his achievement as the first African American to play Major League Baseball, but recently there seems to be a focus on Walker's trial in 1891.

On April 8, 1891 Walker was involved in a physical altercation with a group of men in Syracuse, New York. The men insulted Walker using racial slurs and Patrick Murray threw a rock at Walker striking him in the head. Walker retaliated by stabbing Murray with a pocket knife. Walker was charged with second degree murder and acquitted by an all-white jury on June 3, 1891.

It is interesting that a man having accomplished so much, as an athlete, business owner, author, inventor, and prominent Republican leader, is remembered by many due to what many would consider a very difficult part of his life. This period has been remembered by the play *The Trial of Moses Fleetwood Walker* recently performed at the Black Ensemble Theater in Chicago and by the creation of Moses' Acquittal, a craft beer produced by The Black Cloister, a brewery in Toledo, Ohio.

Walker lived a life that was more than merely a game. He lived life as a spectacle. A life where he was a walking experiment. People went to see games, because they wanted to see if an African American man could compete. They wanted to see if this black man or any black man could be as good as a white man.

As a member of this committee you are being asked to honor an athlete that was one of the first people to create a public dialogue. A dialogue that continues today.

Moses Fleetwood Walker was a baseball player, but he was so much more. He not only helped lead America into the eventual integration of athletics, but helped America discuss what it meant to be equal. This being in itself a discussion of what it means to be an American.

Unlike Jackie Robinson, Moses Fleetwood Walker will never be a household name, He didn't live in a time of ESPN Sportscenter, televised games, or million dollar contracts. Still, his life made a huge contribution to the history of our state and nation. Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. I am more than happy to answer your questions.