

James Leslie Wilkinson

Founder and Owner of the Kansas City Monarchs
1874-1964

by David Conrads

J. L. Wilkinson made his mark on history in three important ways: as the founder and owner of the Kansas City Monarchs, one of the greatest teams in the history of the Negro Baseball Leagues; as a pioneer in the use of lights in baseball; and as the man who gave Jackie Robinson his professional start in the game.

Born in Perry, Iowa, in 1874, Wilkinson grew up in Des Moines and attended Highland Park College, where he pitched for the baseball team while also playing professional and semiprofessional ball. An injury ended his playing career, but he remained on the management side of the game for the rest of his working life.

In 1912, Wilkinson co-founded the All Nations, a multi-racial team that later evolved into the all-black Kansas City Monarchs. Wilkinson was among those who signed the charter of the Negro National League, the first viable league of all-black teams, at a historic meeting at The Paseo YMCA in Kansas City in 1920. In 1930, he invested in a portable lighting system and the Monarchs became the first professional baseball team to play regularly under lights. The novelty of night baseball, along with a championship-caliber team, allowed the Monarchs to survive the Depression.

In 1945, on a tip from pitcher Hilton Smith, Wilkinson hired Jackie Robinson to play short stop for the Monarchs. Robinson's one-year stint with the Monarchs launched his Hall-of-Fame baseball career and his historic role as the first black player in the modern major leagues.

Wilkinson remained at the helm of the Monarchs until 1948, when he sold his share of the team to Tom Baird, a long-time associate and partner. During his 28 years, the Monarchs won 12 league championships and made four appearances in the Negro League World Series, winning two of them.

Wilkinson died in a nursing home in Kansas City in 1964 at the age of 90.

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