

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Charles W. Follis

(February 3, 1879 – April 5, 1910)

"First African-American Professional Football Player"

Charles W. Follis was born, February 3, 1879, to James and Catherine Follis, in Cloverdale, Virginia. When Charles was just six years old, the family moved to Wooster, Ohio. One of seven children, Charles was the oldest son. All of the Follis boys played football for Wooster High School, but Charles was notably the biggest at six feet tall and 200lbs.

Charles graduated high school in 1901, and enrolled in Wooster College. And although he played baseball for the college, he chose to play football for Wooster Athletic Association, a local amateur football team, where he earned the nickname, "The Black Cyclone."

In one of the last games of the 1901, Charles played against the Shelby Blues, a football team based in Shelby, Ohio, and part of the larger Ohio League football organization. After a two-game series, Charles' impressive performance and spectacular speed, caught the attention of Shelby's team manager, Frank C. Schiffer.

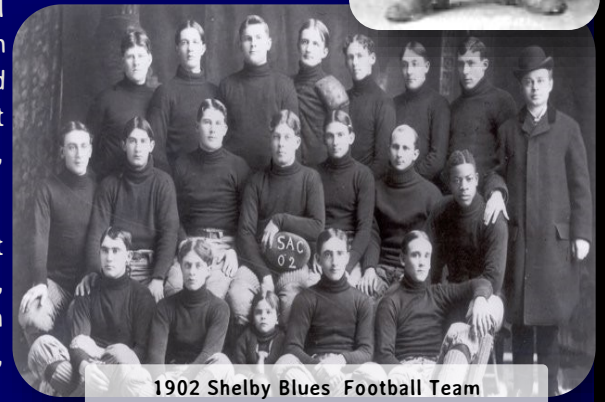
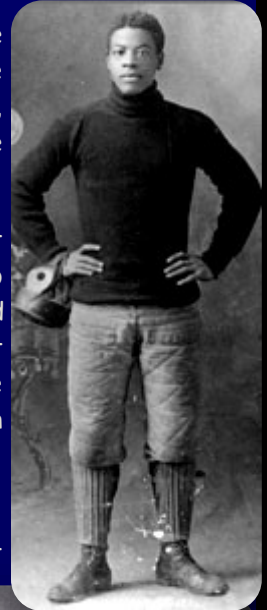
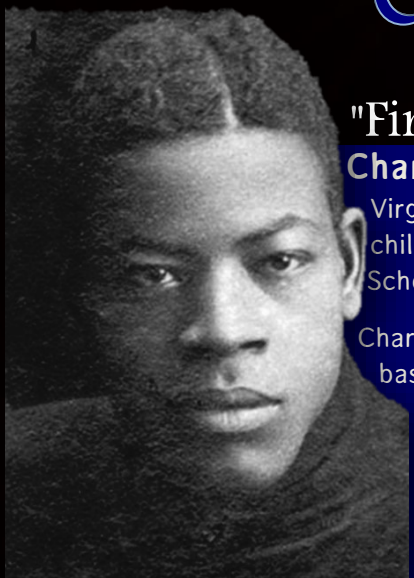
Impressed with his athletic ability, Schiffer asked Charles to play for the Shelby Blues. Charles accepted and moved 45-miles east, to Shelby, Ohio. Schiffer secured a job for Charles at Howard Seltzer and Sons Hardware Store and ensured his work hours allowed time for practice and games. Charles continued his football stardom during the 1902 and 1903 seasons, running for a 60-yard touchdown in a 58-0 win over a team from Freemont. But tragedy struck in 1903, when Charles' younger brother Curtis, died from a football injury at the age of 19.

In 1904, Charles W. Follis made history when he signed an official, paying contract, to play football for the Shelby Blues, making him the first African-American professional football player. The Shelby Globe newspaper reported: "The Shelby Athletic Association secured the services of Charles Follis for this season. The contract has been signed and football enthusiasts will be pleased to know Follis is on the team again this year." Eight days later, Charles played his first official professional football game, leading the Shelby Blues to a 29-0 victory, scoring an 83-yard touchdown.

Although Charles enjoyed a bit of celebrity, his time on the field was not without racial tensions and targeted abuse. He received many unpenalized, late hits, that eventually took a toll on his body. The last hit happened on Thanksgiving Day, 1906, Charles was helped off the field with a leg injury, never to return.

After the end of his football career, around 1909, Charles returned to baseball with the first African-American Professional Baseball team, the Cuban Giants. Again capturing the spotlight, becoming a star catcher and the leading power hitter. However, his return to sport was short lived when, in the spring of 1910, Charles was rushed to the hospital, where he died of pneumonia. He was 31 years old.

In 1995, Wooster High School named their new home stadium after Charles Follis. Wooster High School football is now played on Follis Field in his honor.



1902 Shelby Blues Football Team