

# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



### "Moses 'Fleet' Fleetwood Walker" (October 7, 1857—May 11, 1924) "Official First Black Major League Baseball Player"

**Moses "Fleet" Fleetwood Walker** was born October 7, 1857, in Mount Pleasant, Ohio. His father, Dr. Moses W. Walker, was one of the first black physicians in Ohio and learned to play baseball from local Civil War veterans. His mother, Caroline Walker, was a midwife. In the Fall of 1878, Fleet entered Oberlin College where he played in all five winning varsity games of the season. Fleet left Oberlin College for the University of Michigan where he played for two more years. In 1882, he married Arabella Taylor. Together the couple had three children.

After college, Fleet used his baseball skills to earn a living as a bare-handed catcher with various minor league teams in Cleveland and Pennsylvania. In 1882, Fleet's Oberlin teammate, pitcher Harlan Burket, went to play professional baseball with a minor league team, the Toledo Blue Stockings. Fleet was later added to the team in the early summer of 1883. That same year the manager of the Chicago (Illinois) White Stockings, Adrian "Cap" Anson, protested, stating his team would not play Toledo with Fleet Walker in the lineup.



In 1884, the Toledo Blue Stockings moved up to the major league level when they joined the American Association - making Moses "Fleet" Walker a major league baseball player - and the official first black baseball player in the major league. With his new status came abuse and criticism. Racist fans of opposing teams, hurled insults during the games, especially when the team traveled south. Some hotels would not allow Fleet to stay with the other players, and opposing teams protested by refusing to take the field. At one point, Fleet's younger brother, Weldy joined the team, but only briefly. Between May 1 and September 4, 1884, Fleet played forty-two games for the Toledo Blue Stockings. By the late 1880s, growing segregationist policies nationwide barred blacks from major-league baseball. After Fleet played his last game for Toledo in 1884, no other black player would appear in the major league until Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier again in 1947. Fleet and several other black players played for a few more years in the minor leagues until 1889.



In April 1892, Fleet was attacked by a group of white men. During the attack, he fatally stabbed a man and was arrested. He was later acquitted of second-degree murder by an all-white jury who agreed he acted in self-defense. On June 12, 1895, Fleet's wife Arabella died of cancer. Three years later, he remarried Ednah Mason, another former classmate from Oberlin College. In September 1898, postal inspectors charged Fleet with mail robbery. He was found guilty and served a year in jail.

After his release, Fleet and Weldy purchased and operated the Union Hotel in Steubenville, Ohio. They also bought The Opera House, a "moving-picture" theater in nearby Cadiz, Ohio. The brothers published a black-issues weekly newspaper, *The Equator*. Fleet had three inventions improving film reel loading and changing and applied for patents on the equipment.

In 1908, Fleetwood Walker published the pamphlet *Our Home Colony: A Treatise on the Past, Present, and Future of the Negro Race in America*. In his writing, Fleet expressed racial defeat and urged black people to leave the U.S. in search of better opportunities in Africa.

Moses "Fleet" Fleetwood Walker died of pneumonia on May 11, 1924, in Cleveland, Ohio. He was 67 years old. He was buried in an unmarked grave in the Union Cemetery, Steubenville, Ohio.

The Oberlin College Heisman Club, an alumni athletic support group, selected Fleet Walker for induction into the college's athletic hall of fame in May 1989. They gave Fleet's hall of fame plaque to his grandnephew. In 1990, the same group placed a 350-pound granite tombstone on Fleet's grave to mark his place of rest. In 2017, the Ohio Legislature established an annual Moses Fleetwood Walker Day on his birthday. Fleet Walker was inducted to the Ohio Baseball Hall of Fame in 1991.

