**Name:**
Homestead Grays

**Region:**
Pittsburgh Region

**County:**
Allegheny

**Marker Location:**
West St. & East Eighth Ave., Homestead

**Dedication Date:**
September 27, 2000

**Behind the Marker**

They were a dynasty. They were a source of pride. They put a community on the map. And they gave the game a certain swagger. In the world of black baseball, the Homestead Grays were a juggernaut. Fueled by a force of nature named Cum Posey, they were the most storied franchise in the Negro Leagues.

The team that evolved into the Grays was born in 1900, the creation of black steelworkers and Homestead natives. The once quiet borough of Homestead, on the banks of the Monongahela River just east of Pittsburgh, had roused in the early 1870s when the first railroad came through, then boomed into a smokestack town with the arrival of the steel industry. In 1892, Homestead became the site of one of the most [infamous and bloody battles](http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-235) in the history of the American labor movement. The Carnegie Steel Company crushed worker efforts to organize a union, which left a bitter aftertaste in workers' mouths. In the years that followed, the promise of better paychecks and steady work began luring a new group of workers to Homestead - blacks from the rural South - whom the locals greeted with suspicion and distrust.





The 1913 Homestead Grays

It was not unusual then for mill owners to boost worker morale and promote a sense of unity by forming baseball teams. Interestingly, while the Grays formed on its own, the team ultimately did far more for Homestead's morale and fame than any steel magnate could have imagined. Originally dubbed the Blue Ribbons, the amateur nine barnstormed area sandlots, taking all comers. In 1910, they reorganized as the Murdock Grays.
Enter Posey.

Born in Cumberland, Pennsylvania in 1890, Willis Posey, Jr. grew up in the rarefied world of black wealth and privilege. A son of slaves, Posey's father had become America's first licensed black riverboat engineer before he turned his sights to real estate promotion. Posey's mother was the first African-American woman to both graduate from Ohio State and later, to teach there.

Lean, lanky, and light-skinned, Posey went off to Penn State, then the University of Pittsburgh, and finally Duquesne. A superb basketball player and baseball player, he joined the Grays in 1910 as their center fielder and quickly designed the blueprint that turned them into professionals. Within two years, the Murdock Grays renamed themselves the Homestead Grays, and embarked upon a voyage of unparalleled sporting achievement. They won 42 straight games in 1913. Over the next several seasons, Posey rose from player to captain to manager. In the early 1920s, he bought the team.

Posey was an autocratic leader who managed the team until 1935, booking opponents and stadiums, organizing travel schedules, and taking care of his best interests, which meant keeping his players content but under his thumb. The players reciprocated by winning against both white semi-pros and black professionals. The Grays won 46 straight in 1926, went 136-17 in 1931 and 152-11 in 1937 - the first of nine consecutive pennant-winning Negro National League seasons, a feat no other franchise in American professional sports has come close to matching. The team was enormously popular wherever it played, and their Sunday games were festive events the black communities eagerly looked forward to within black communities.





Hall of Fame first baseman Buck Leonard running to first during a game with...

"Posey gave black baseball status," remembered one of his players. "He made his players look the part, dress the part." And what players he had. Oscar Charleston, [Josh Gibson](http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-13), Smokey Joe Williams (who once struck out 27 Kansas City Monarchs in twelve innings), Buck Leonard, and Cool Papa Bell were all Grays for at least part of their careers. Elegant, well-educated, well-spoken, and well-dressed, Posey was a leader off the field as well, even winning election to the Homestead school board.

In the early 1930s, Posey's fortunes took a brief downturn. The Great Depression hurt him enough financially that he lost several players - including Gibson - to the cross-town rival Pittsburgh Crawfords. The Crawfords' owner, Gus Greenlee, based in the Hill, ran a series of nightclubs, and got rich running the numbers game - the so-called poor people's lottery. And he desperately wanted to run black baseball. Once Greenlee took over, he quickly turned the Crawfords into a baseball force, buying every great player he could. He built his own stadium and formed a second Negro National League. But in the summer of 1937, he disbanded the franchise after losing nine of his players to the Dominican Republic. Gibson immediately returned to the Grays, and the team's unprecedented string of league titles began.

By the 1940s, the Grays were splitting home games between [Forbes Field](http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-2A0) in Pittsburgh and Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C., when the Pirates and Senators were on the road. The Grays were such an attraction, however, they regularly outdrew their big league compatriots. Senators owner Clark Griffith briefly toyed with the daring idea of signing Gibson - thus integrating the majors - but deemed the time not right. Both he and Posey realized that they could make more money by keeping black and white baseball separate. After all, a segregated game meant that Griffith could keep renting his ballpark to the Grays, while Posey could keep the team by which he defined himself. Posey knew that if baseball integrated, blacks would enter the majors and the Negro Leagues would fade away.

Time, however, was on neither man's side. When Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson and [Roy Campanella](http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-4) to minor league contracts right after World War II, a door opened for other major league teams to go after black talent. "It's like coming into a man's store and stealing the merchandise right off the shelves," Posey complained, not long before his death in 1946. Four years later, with both Major leagues now integrated, his beloved Grays were dead, too. For a new generation of black ballplayers, the major league dream had turned into a reality.

**Beyond the Marker**

[**Robert Peterson**, *Only the Ball Was White* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 1970.](http://explorepahistory.com/citation.php?citeId=1-3-12)

[**Rob Ruck**, *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh* (Urbana, ILL: University of Illinois Press), 1987.](http://explorepahistory.com/citation.php?citeId=1-3-15)