



REV. RAY HAMMOND

PRESERVING THE YAWKEY LEGACY IN BOSTON

Tom Yawkey owned the Red Sox for 43 years, taking the franchise from one of the worst to one of the best in baseball. After he died in 1976, Jersey Street outside Fenway Park was renamed, at the prompting of fans and public officials, to honor his stewardship of the team and ballpark, as well as his philanthropy, including saving the Jimmy Fund, one of Boston's most enduring charities. It is no exaggeration to say Yawkey Way is as familiar as the Green Monster.

Nevertheless, Red Sox owner and Globe publisher John Henry is petitioning the city to remove Yawkey's name, based on the belief that he was a racially divisive figure and that the change is needed to help the team promote and practice the values of diversity and inclusion.

I have no doubt Henry is acting with honorable intentions. I also understand we still have a long way to go in our struggle to make the city more welcoming to people of color – issues brought into sharp relief by the Globe's recent series on race in Boston. But I am convinced that expunging Tom Yawkey's name from Fenway Park not only would be profoundly unfair and forever tarnish his reputation but would result in the opposite of what Henry intends.

Instead of furthering unity and healing, it would aggravate old wounds and force people to take sides over how to treat the Yawkey name, which appears on numerous buildings in Boston, a testament to the hundreds of millions of dollars the Yawkey Foundations have donated to our major institutions and hundreds of non-profits. And it would be a blot on the city, reinforcing the widely held belief that Boston is a racist place.

The case against Yawkey is that if he did not outright resist bringing black ballplayers to the team during the 1950's he was slow to try to hire them, with the result that the Red Sox were the last team in Major League baseball to integrate. However, the record, much of it confirmed by the Globe's own reporting at the time, shows otherwise.

The team signed its first black ballplayer, Lorenzo "Piper" Davis, to a minor league contract in 1949; in 1950, 1952 and 1954, the Red Sox made strong offers to other teams to acquire such star black players as Larry Doby and Charley Neal, and Bill Greason, a promising pitcher, but were rebuffed; and in 1957 the team was about to promote a black pitching prospect, Earl Wilson, to the Major League team, only to see him drafted into the military. Wilson rejoined the Red Sox in 1959, a week after Pumpsie Green officially integrated the team.

The Red Sox know these facts, yet are seeking to convince the city that Yawkey wasn't really serious about finding black ballplayers, and that he acted to integrate only after every other Major League team had done so. This distorted view of what actually happened hardly justifies taking the severe and irrevocable step of erasing his name from the ballpark. It will not move us forward. Instead, it will slander a man who sought no public acclaim while he was alive, gave generously to the city he loved and, with his wife, Jean, ensured there will be a steady stream of funding to help those in need for generations to come.

Rather than relitigating the 1950's, which will never lead to consensus and is certain to stoke conflict, I believe we should redeem our troubled racial history through positive, collaborative actions. The recent announcement by the Red Sox, New England Patriots, Boston Celtics, Boston Bruins and Revolution that they are launching a campaign to fight racism and discrimination is exactly the kind of initiative that will help our communities make progress. Surely, we can think of others.

None of this is to say we should avoid confronting the past. It is regrettable the Red Sox were the last Major League team to integrate. But that is far from the whole story, as the record clearly demonstrates. Nor does it begin to provide a complete picture of Tom Yawkey's life, how he supported his players, regardless of their color, and how his legacy continues to benefit Boston.

More than 40 years after his death, Yawkey Way remains a tribute to his historic ownership and his devotion to the city. Tom Yawkey deserves to have his name live on at Fenway Park. ■

Ray Hammond is pastor of Bethel AME Church and a board member of the Yawkey Foundation.

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