

## **Dillon Base Ball Club of Bloomsburg**

By W. M. Baillie

*The Bloomsburg Daily* for May 18, 1893 carried this item of interest to sports fans in the area:

The colored boys have organized a Base Ball Club, under the name of the “Dillon Base Ball Club of Bloomsburg.” It is composed of the following persons. John Banks, David Bootin, John James, Robert Hawkins, George West, Ed Green, William Johnson, W. E. Stuckey, Frank Parks, Wilbur Rux, Richard Reed, and Chas. Stuckey. The other team will be obliged to play better than they have been doing, or take a back seat.

By “the other team” was meant Bloomsburg’s existing team of white men, which for years had played teams from neighboring towns in the Central Pennsylvania League.

The “colored” club, under manager David Dillon, did develop an able team which played for two summers against other regional teams. There was no formal Negro league in the area, but several cities fielded “colored” teams. On occasion, as well, a white team would agree to play a colored team, but that didn’t happen often.

We don’t know a great deal about the Dillon team, since the local newspapers did not report on them regularly. There is occasional information, though, which can be set against the social context of race relations at the time. Further, we can glean from various sources the fascinating and sometimes tragic life stories of several of the players.

A week after the above-quoted announcement, the *Daily* noted that the new colored club was practicing every evening, and that the battery (pitcher and catcher) “Jno. James and Wellington Stuckey, are doing excellent work.”

David Dillon was the organizer and manager of the team, and thus the club took his name. Before July 1<sup>st</sup> that year, however, the team found a sponsor and became known as the Blue and Heddens Base Ball Club. The two names were those of the proprietors from 1891 to 1901 of Bloomsburg’s White House Restaurant, J. S. Blue and Phineas B. Heddens. The restaurant, at the northwest corner of Main and Center streets, was widely known for serving famed Morris River Cove oysters.

The club scheduled several games that summer of 1893, for example, on July 4 against the Lumber City Club at Williamsport and on July 7 against the Black Diamond team of Wilkes-Barre. At Wilkes-Barre spectators were charged 25 cents admission, a fee which was probably typical in other towns as well. It isn’t clear whether the players were paid; probably the admission charges covered travel expenses only.

In the summer of 1894 the Blue & Heddens squad announced that they had secured the town’s Athletic Park for Decoration Day (May 30), and games would be played morning and afternoon along with “colored fun.” The Black Diamond team was scheduled, but because of heavy

rainfall failed to appear; instead, the Bloomsburg team played “a professional club of Danville” which trounced the locals 24 to 2 in a four-inning game.

## THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

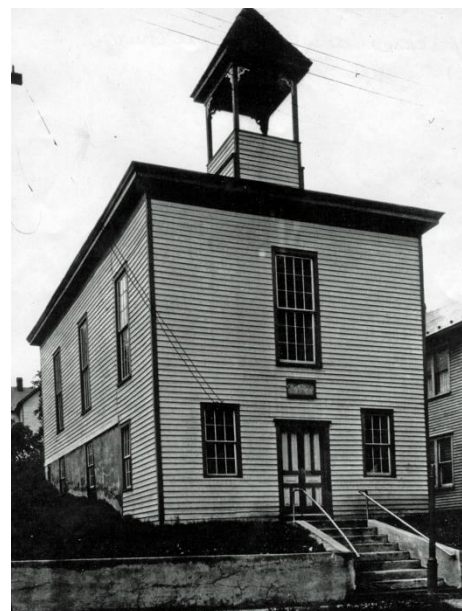
Towns in central Pennsylvania in the 1890s had a low proportion of African-American residents; Bloomsburg, for example, in 1880 counted 110 Black and Mulatto residents. Towns were not formally segregated; in Bloomsburg blacks lived in various sections of town—with clusters on First, Ninth, and Railroad Streets—and attended public schools and various churches. There was active discrimination, however: blacks sat in the balcony at the movie house, were not served in some restaurants, and saw crosses burned on their front lawns on occasion.

In Bloomsburg, black men found work in low-end service jobs as barbers, hotel porters, hostlers, or in the trades of mining and brick-making. Black women took in washing or worked as servants in well-to-do white households. The families were mostly very poor. In 1901 six black persons, including two of the Dillon players, were arrested and charged with stealing coal from dealers’ lots; the charges were dismissed when it became clear that they were desperate to heat their homes and were simply following the practice, common across the country, for poor families to glean coal accidentally dropped along railroad tracks, roads, etc.

Since the black community was relatively small, intermarriage within the group was frequent and by 1900 almost every black adult in the Bloomsburg area was related by marriage to most of the others. Three Dillon team members, for example, married Brooks sisters: John James with Irene (1894), Frank Parks with Harriet (1888), and Wilbur Rux with Sara Jane (1910, his second wife). Several other team members were connected to the Henry Jones family, to the Hensons, etc.

Although blacks worshipped in various town churches, they organized their own congregation after the Civil War and affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, the largest black religious group in America. The first pastor was the Rev. John Henson, a former slave. In 1870 the congregation built a church on First Street at the corner of Jefferson and named it the Mary Edgar A.M.E. Church after a white woman who donated most of the materials. The Dillon team members had many connections with this church, and several of them were married by its pastor.

The A.M.E. congregation organized a “lyceum” or cultural-improvement series of programs and debates. David Dillon was one of the organizers. In February 1892 he and teammate George West were among the four debaters on the topic “For which will a man go farther, woman or money?” (The judges decided in favor of woman.) The same two men in March 1893 debated “Which is the most destructive, fire or water?”



*A.M.E. Church in  
Bloomsburg*

## THE PLAYERS

The roster is as follows, adding the age of the players in 1893:

John A. Bankes	23	John Frank Parks	26
David Boughton	21	Richard Reed	17
Edward Green	13	Marsh Wilbur Rux	19
Robert P. Hawkins	19	Charles Stuckey	40
John James	21	Wellington Stuckey	18
William Johnson	?	George West	?
David Dillon, 27, manager			

Existing records are sparse for some of the players, or in some cases of common surnames the individual can't be distinguished readily from others with identical names. **Ed Green** in the 1900 census was listed as a barber living with his aunt Ada Wellington and his sister Girty at 728 Catherine Street. **William Johnson** was probably a son or relative of the A.M.E. pastor in Bloomsburg and Danville, Rev. Hutchinson Johnson. **Richard Reed**, son of Danville's Peter Reed, was by 1900 living in Lopez, Sullivan County, and working at a sawmill. **George West** is "lost" in a tangle of men of the same name in the records.

For the other team members, we can say somewhat more, and their life stories taken collectively illustrate nicely the life conditions of African-Americans in small-town America before and after 1900.

**John A. Bankes** was born in 1869 on the family's farm in Beaver Township. He married Amanda L. Erwin in 1893, the same year he was playing baseball. A year or two later he settled in Nescopeck, Luzerne County, where he and Amanda raised a family of six children. John worked as a laborer in various industries—scrap pile, car shop, railroad, borough maintenance; he died in 1943 and was buried in Nescopeck.

**David Boughton** achieved a brief fame in Bloomsburg as the impresario of "Davy Boughton's much talked of cake walk" in April 1897. (A cake walk was a competition and entertainment in which couples vied to outdo others in fancy dress and movement.) Held in Evans Hall in the Evans Building at Main and Jefferson, the event featured twenty couples strutting their stuff in formal dress and fancy slippers to music by "Rux orchestra of Williamsport." The first prize, a gold watch, was decided by a drawing when the seven judges—all white males—couldn't agree on the best strutters. Baseballer Frank Parks tied for the second prize. Boughton expected a large group of participants and audience from other towns and was disappointed, but enough local people paid admissions that he broke even on the event.

By 1899 Davy was a steward at the West End Club in Wilkes-Barre and then moved to the Elks Club. In August 1900 his five-year-old son was featured entertainer between horse races at the Pittston fair, performing trick riding on his miniature bike.

Team Manager **David O. Dillon** was the steward at the Bloomsburg Club at 122 Market Street, where he resided. In March of 1894 he married Annie Suel of Bloomsburg in a double wedding

with teammate John James, who wed Irene Brooks of Catawissa. The wedding took place in Jersey Shore, although the officiant was the Bloomsburg A.M.E. pastor, Rev. Hutchinson Johnson. Oddly, the report in the *Democratic Sentinel* named the groom as David Boughton, apparently mixing up the two Davids on the baseball team. (The marriage license, obtained the previous December, correctly names Dillon.) As reported above, along with organizing the baseball team Dillon also was a leader in the lyceum programs.

**Robert P. Hawkins** was the youngest son of former slaves Thomas and Emaline (Moore) Hawkins, who labored in early life on the plantation of Owen Tuck in Bowling Green, Virginia. After they were freed by the advance of Union troops, Thomas and family eventually made their way to Pennsylvania and settled by 1870 in Bloomsburg, taking a “funny little house” on Railroad Street. Before that, though, Thomas served in the Civil War in the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment, U. S. Colored Troops. This unit saw battle in Florida and then participated in the siege of Petersburg, Virginia; the 8<sup>th</sup> was the first regiment to enter Petersburg when the city fell. Later they were sent to Texas, where they patrolled along the Rio Grande River until the end of the war. Thomas died by 1900, but his widow lived until 1917 and was widely known as kind and generous Mammy Hawkins.



*Mammy Hawkins, the only former slave living in Bloomsburg, and a centenarian by several years*

Mammy’s son Robert, the baseballer, worked as a porter in a hotel barbershop. He never married. He died October 10, 1926.

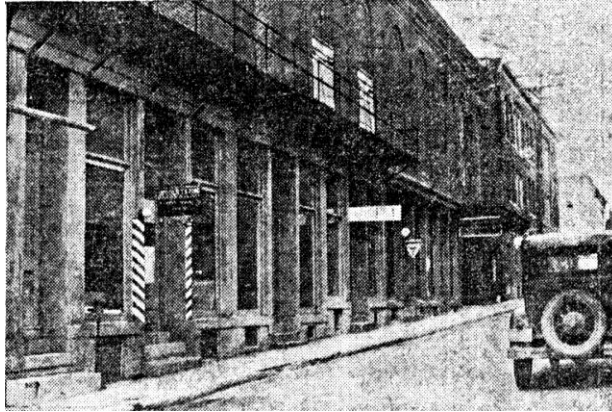
**John James**, the team’s pitcher, left little mark in local records except for the tragic end to his marriage. He wed Irene Brooks in 1894 in a double wedding with team manager David Dillon. The marriage ended just eighteen months later, as recorded in the *Bloomsburg Daily* on October 18<sup>th</sup> the next year:

Yesterday afternoon Mrs. John James a young colored woman lost her life while trying to get a bucket of water out of the canal. She had gone to a friend’s house which is situate near the old wharf below Market street, to do some washing, and as was her custom took a couple of buckets and went to the canal to get some water. While stooping over her foot slipped and she pitched head-foremost into the water. No one saw her fall but upon her not returning to the house for some little time the folks became alarmed, and going to the place

where she went for water they saw one bucket on the bank but not the other one and Mrs. James was nowhere to be seen. An alarm was at once given and search instituted when the body was found on the bottom of the canal.

Her husband was working in Connecticut at the time. They had one small child. John James' life after the incident is a blank in the records.

**J. Frank Parks** was the youngest son of Ephraim "Judge" Parks and his wife Catherine. As a teenager Frank trained as a barber and pursued that career until the day he died. In 1888 he married Harriet Jones, daughter of a former slave. In 1897 he bought equipment to outfit a two-chair barbershop and from then on he maintained his business, serving mostly white men, in various midtown Bloomsburg locations: the Exchange Block next to the Exchange Hotel, the Opera House around the corner on Center Street, and the courthouse alley.



*The Franks Barber Shop exterior and interior*

In 1905 Frank began to prepare for the ministry, and later for some years he served as pastor of the Bloomsburg A.M.E. church; he was not the minister appointed by the Presiding Elder of the denomination, but when the local congregation's officers voted to retain Frank, the Elder agreed. Some people objected, but others opined that Rev. Hawkins preached to better effect than prior official ministers. He also was for some years the organizer of an annual "colored" camp meeting in the grove at Rupert, a mile from Bloomsburg.

As he aged, Frank became bossy, aggressive and even abusive, according to his family. The very day on which he retired at age 72 after 56 years behind the barber's chair, he was killed by a

family member—the first murder in Bloomsburg for over fifty years. (The assailant, who pleaded guilty, was sentenced to 10 to 20 years, the maximum for Second Degree Murder.)

**Wilbur Rux** was a self-taught fiddle player and the leader of a dance band which was regionally famous. He was born in 1873 in Bloomsburg, son of a Civil War veteran who had served in the Colored Troops of the Union Army. Wilbur earned his living for most of his life as a laborer in a shoe factory in Catawissa.

We first learn of his dance band in 1897 when the “Rux orchestra of Williamsport” played for Boughton’s Cake Walk in Bloomsburg. Later notices of the band, gleaned from various newspapers, include: May 1923 “Wilbur Rux’s Orchestra from Catawissa” played at Rescue Fire Hall in Bloomsburg; February 1929 at a birthday party in Danville; summer 1932 regularly played at Knoebel’s Grove in Elysburg, earning a “Hot Cha” (enthusiastic approval). The latest mention was in October 1934 when “Wilbur Rux and His Seven Black Aces featuring Jesse Black, Comedian” were scheduled for a dance hall in Pottsville. The Rux Orchestra’s history thus stretched over most of four decades, from 1890s ragtime through the Jazz Age.

Wilbur played his fiddle solo also, finishing 4<sup>th</sup> in a fiddler’s contest in 1931 in Wilkes-Barre and 3<sup>rd</sup> at Berwick in 1935. In later life he lived in Bloomsburg and led music at the A.M.E. church services on First Street. Lillian (Stuckey) Fields recalls that when she was a girl in Bloomsburg after World War II she and her siblings used to walk to “Uncle Wilbur’s” house (“a shack”) at Tenth and Catherine streets, where he would entertain them with his fiddle.

Wilbur married twice. At age 22 in 1897 he wed Florence Jones, daughter of Emmit and Emma Jones of Virginia. (She was probably a niece of escaped slave Henry Jones of Catawissa.) Florence died in 1909, and eighteen months later Wilbur married Sara Jane Brooks, thus becoming a brother-in-law to two other Blue & Heddens baseball team members. Wilbur apparently never had children by either wife. In 1939 he was living in Catawissa and Mrs. Margaret Crawford, a daughter of team member Frank Parks, was his housekeeper. He died November 28, 1955 at his home on Catherine Street in Bloomsburg.

**Charles T. Stuckey**, the team’s pitcher, was born February 14, 1853 and thus in 1893 at age 40 was the “old man” on Dillon’s Base Ball Club. He worked for some years in Berwick as proprietor of a shoeshine parlor; he married Rachel Rux in about 1873 and had three sons, but he was a widower by 1910. In 1920 he was working in Berwick as a hotel fireman, but by 1930 he was settled in Bloomsburg. According to his granddaughter Lillian Fields, he owned a wood-frame house in Beach Haven, which he loaded on a log raft and floated down the Susquehanna River to Bloomsburg and then dragged the house to his lot at 920 Catherine Street.

He had a wood shop beside the house where he made toys such as wagons; he also made a small printing press, and his grandchildren helped produce a neighborhood newspaper. He was still riding his bicycle into old age. He died at home on January 15, 1950, at age 96 the grand old man of Bloomsburg’s black community.

**Wellington Stuckey**'s origins are unknown, but he probably was a nephew of Charles. He was born in April 1875 in Pennsylvania and on June 16, 1896 he married Mary McClow of Bloomsburg at the residence of Wilbur Rux's father on Railroad Street.

He and Mary were living next door in 1900 with two daughters, but after that he hasn't been found in records.