

## Baseball Legend Bud Fowler Once Played in Montpelier, Vermont!

Considering how far back Vermont goes as one of the United States – it gained statehood in 1791 – it’s not surprising that this state has a long and storied history. Veteran Vermont journalist and [historian Mark Bushnell](#) authors a column in VTDigger called “Then Again,” which covers obscure pieces of Vermont history.

One of his articles came to my attention because it was about [Bud Fowler](#), a famous 19th-century African-American baseball player, who in 2022 was elected (posthumously, obviously) to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Apparently, [Fowler played for an independent league team in Montpelier, Vermont!](#)

Widely regarded as the first black pro baseball player, John “Bud” Fowler was the son of a former slave who grew up in Cooperstown, New York. Yes, *that Cooperstown where the Hall of Fame stands*. His early career was spent playing for a team in Lynn, Massachusetts. While racism was rampant back then, especially in the wake of the Civil War, there was no rule banning players of color from baseball until the Major Leagues did in 1887. This ban would end 60 years later with the debut of Jackie Robinson in 1947.

So, how did Fowler end up in Montpelier, Vermont? He was playing for a team in the state next door in Binghamton, New York, a city that still has a Major League affiliated minor league team today. The team had nine white players who threatened to go on strike if Fowler and fellow African-American William Renfro were not immediately released. The team gave in to the threat and Fowler and Renfro were out of a job.

Fortunately, the pitcher and second baseman Fowler found work by early August in the independent baseball league informally known as the Vermont State League. The league included teams from Burlington, Rutland, and St. Albans, as well as Malone, New York. Fortunately for Fowler, he was warmly received, “colored” or not. It was also noted in newspapers that Fowler was named Captain of the Montpelier team, making him the first captain of any integrated baseball team. Whether this was an official title or not doesn’t so much matter; he was far and away the best player in the entire league. Also, it’s well known that Fowler had genuine leadership skills and was reported as having such qualities.

While statistics weren’t as readily available back in 1887, [it’s believed by baseball historian Tim Hagerty](#) that Fowler hit for a .429 batting average and stole seven bases in eight games for the Montpelier Capital Cities. He didn’t play longer for the team, because it folded before the season ended, a commonplace occurrence in pro baseball back then. Fowler finished the year with a team in Laconia, New Hampshire. He played eight more pro seasons before transitioning into management roles for Black baseball teams and leagues. Sadly, Fowler passed away at the age of 54.

The Montpelier team has a spiritual successor today in the [Vermont Mountaineers](#), a collegiate summer league. Fowler sadly never made the Major Leagues thanks to jerks like Cap Anson helping draw the color line in Major League Baseball that would remain for over a half century. However, that 1887 Montpelier team did have some Major League alumni. Those 1887 players who played alongside Fowler were [Bill Jones](#), [John Mansell](#), and [George Walker](#); none of them were particularly good, but they were still MLB players! The next team to play in Montpelier, which was actually mostly Ivy League college players playing under assumed names, existed for several years between 1901 and 1907, sending *twenty players to Major League baseball*.

It's really neat to know that Vermont has such a great place in baseball history. Thanks to Bud Fowler now being a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame for eternity, this part of Vermont sports history will be forever remembered.

~ Amelia Desertsong