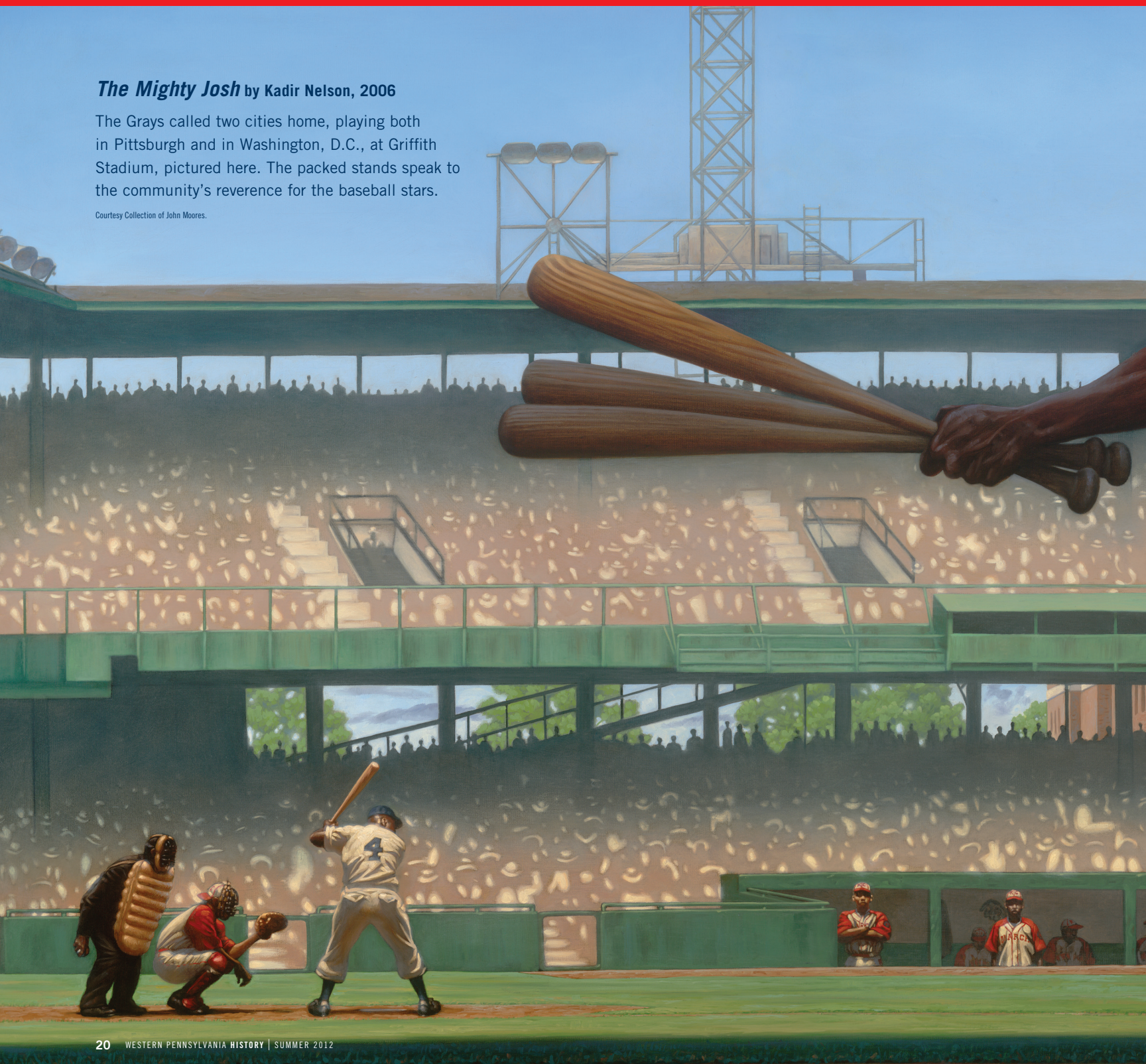


WE ARE THE

The Mighty Josh by Kadir Nelson, 2006

The Grays called two cities home, playing both in Pittsburgh and in Washington, D.C., at Griffith Stadium, pictured here. The packed stands speak to the community's reverence for the baseball stars.

Courtesy Collection of John Moores.



SHIP

Art and **INSPIRATION**

By **Anne Madarasz**

All images from *We Are the Ship* by **Kadir Nelson** unless noted.



“We really were the Kings on the Hill – no one like them.

God bless them. God rest. But you know, it brings back a lot of glorious memories to think the way we came up from nothing to be somebody, respected by both white and black.”

~ Reverend Harold Tinker, 1990



***Pop Fly* by Kadir Nelson, 2006**

Nelson uses light and shadow to both mimic real playing conditions and to highlight the team on the field, the Detroit Stars. Negro League teams often played major league teams, winning about 6 out of every 10 games. As a result, major league teams banned their players from wearing team uniforms in these games, calling them exhibitions. Nelson puts the major league batter in the shadows, and the Negro League team in the light, reversing the emphasis of history.

Much of documenting history involves shedding light on subjects or stories once shrouded in darkness, and peeling back the layers of time to expose that which has been hidden or forgotten or had remained untold. Kadir Nelson's artwork in the book *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* plays with these elements of light and dark. The book and resulting exhibit tell a story that had been lost until recent years to time and memory. The work itself uses light and shadow to both emphasize and illuminate Nelson's subjects, and to document people and stories from the past too often left in the shadows.

Born in Washington, D.C., Kadir Nelson moved cross-country and attended high school in San Diego. He began drawing at a young age, encouraged by his uncle, an artist and art teacher. Nelson entered his art in competitions and earned a scholarship to study at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. After graduating

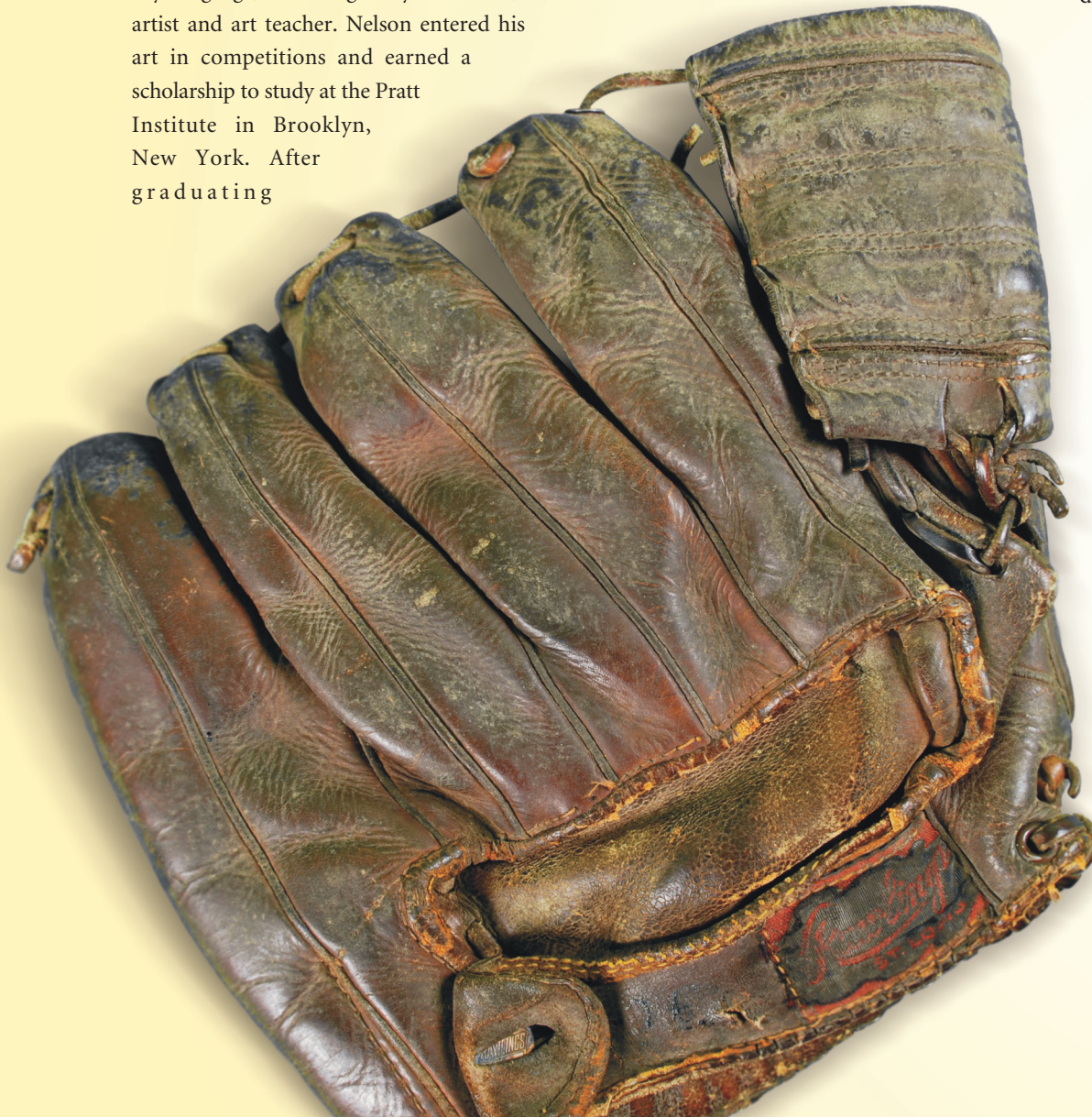
with honors, Nelson took his "dream job," as he described it, as a visual development artist with DreamWorks film studio. It was there, while working on the Steven Spielberg film *Amistad*, that his interest in African American history was kindled.

That interest spawned a new facet of Nelson's career, as a book illustrator, first for a commemorative book of the *Amistad* movie, then for children's books. Nelson's first illustrations appeared in *Brothers of the Knight*, written by the award-winning producer, actor, and choreographer Debbie Allen. The influence of Spielberg and his movies is, as Nelson has acknowledged, visible in how these images are composed and how the subjects are framed. Nelson often places his key subjects in the foreground, then uses shadow or background to frame them. One also sees

the influence of illustrators such as Norman Rockwell, N.C. Wyeth, and others in Nelson's work. His style is emotive and dramatic, but at the root of the work it is people, and their strength and spirit, that shine through.

Nelson's next commission, the illustrations for the children's book *Big Jabe* written by Jerdine Nolen, foreshadowed his art for *We Are the Ship*. The cover art features the main character, Jabe, a larger-than-life hero who strides across the landscape, his head touching the clouds. In the foreground is a river, a symbol of life and hope, and also of escape for the slaves held captive on the Southern plantation where Jabe lives. The book realistically portrays the conditions of slavery without being explicit about its violence and brutality. The slaves' clothing is rendered in earth tones, linking them to the ground they work and emphasizing the darkness that surrounds them—yet the light of the North Star shines through in one illustration, a hopeful beacon of freedom.

Nelson continued to refine his style: a blend of art, illustration, and emotion



Baseball glove used by Satchel Paige, 1950s

A Hall of Fame pitcher, Paige played for the Pittsburgh Crawfords from 1932–34 and in 1936. One of a small group from the Negro Leagues who also played Major League Baseball, he was signed by the Cleveland Indians in 1948.

Courtesy Tom Qualters, photo by Paula Andras.

centered on sculptural imagery of people. His work is based in storytelling and often the stories told are those of the African American experience. *We Are the Ship*, the first book that Nelson both authored and illustrated, follows in that tradition. Nelson spent seven years working on the book, traveling the country, researching his subject. He talked to former Negro League players, studied photographs and oral histories, searched out old sports equipment and uniforms, even posed and photographed himself dressed as a Negro Leaguer in an effort to establish a personal connection to the subject.

This study resulted in a book written from the perspective of a Negro League ballplayer and illustrated with large, full-color painted images. Nelson focuses on the full story of the Negro Leagues—the pioneers and the founding of the league, key players and teams, championships, the atmosphere surrounding the sport, the challenges players faced, and even the decline of the Negro Leagues after the integration of Major League Baseball by Jackie Robinson. But the book and the resulting exhibit do more than just recount a story of sport: they shine a light on athletes, many forgotten to time, who created a successful economic and social institution rooted in and controlled by the black community. As Nelson describes his work, “My focus is

to create images of people who demonstrate a sense of hope and nobility. I want to show the strength and integrity of the human being and the human spirit.”

Though Nelson’s story of the Negro Leagues is national in scope, it is also very much a Western Pennsylvania story. Only Pittsburgh—of all the cities in America—had two Negro League teams, the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords. Between them they captured more than a dozen Negro League titles, with 7 of the first 11 Negro Leaguers inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame having played for one or both teams. Pittsburgh was central to the development and success of the sport. It became home to the first ballpark built by an African American, Gus Greenlee, for the Negro League, and several of the greatest athletes to ever play the game played here, including catcher Josh Gibson, pitcher Satchel Paige, and

center fielder Oscar Charleston.

Nelson’s story of the Negro Leagues begins with those African Americans who competed before segregation of the sport in the late 1880s. Nelson not only names those early players, but also creates trading card portraits of men such as Bud Fowler, Moses Fleetwood Walker, Pete Hill, and others for whom few images survive. Nelson then turns to the development of the Negro Leagues and the central role played by Rube Foster. A former pitcher and manager, Foster settled in Chicago, running the American Giants. A portrait of Foster captures him full figure, centered in the image. Dressed in a dark suit and red tie, Foster’s eyes stare out from the shadow cast by his straw hat. He puffs on

Homestead Grays uniform worn by Euthumn Napier, late 1940s

Few uniforms survive from the Negro Leagues. These rare pieces provide valuable information on the colors and design of the equipment worn by players and helped guide Nelson’s depictions of these athletes. Napier wore this heavy wool uniform while serving as backup catcher to legendary Grays slugger Josh Gibson. He replaced Gibson as the starting catcher when the future Hall of Famer passed away in 1947, the same year that Jackie Robinson broke into the Major Leagues.

Courtesy Napier Family, photo by Paula Andras.



***Game Bus* by Kadir Nelson, 2006**

Most teams traveled by bus in the 1930s and '40s. Some, such as the Newark Eagles, pictured here, were profitable enough to purchase a team bus. Team owners Abe and Effa Manley enjoy the five-part harmony of their players. This, the only image in the book to depict players smiling and socializing, captures the camaraderie of the team together on the road.





Kadir Nelson

Baseball Cards by Kadir Nelson, 2006

Nelson acknowledges the pioneers of the game with these faux Negro League baseball cards that picture (from upper left) Bud Fowler, Frank Grant, Moses Fleetwood Walker, Charlie Grant, Rube Foster, Sol White, Pete Hill, Ben Taylor, and Grant "Home Run" Johnson.

his famous pipe, believed to have been used to send signals in smoke from the dugout. In his massive right hand, Foster grips a baseball, as if he might pitch it right off the page at the reader. Behind him, the Giants warm up for a game. They are dressed in clean, matching uniforms and look every inch the professional team. Further still, in the background, almost out of sight, the stands are full. Obviously this is a team successful in every way, with a strong leader at its center. Though Foster's back is to his team and their fans, he fills the foreground of the painting, clearly the focus of this scene and a power to be reckoned with. The title of Nelson's book and exhibit *We Are the Ship* is taken from a famous Rube Foster quote, "We are the ship, all else the sea," indicating Foster's belief that for black baseball to survive and thrive it must organize its own professional league and sail alone.

As depicted in all the portraits in the book, there is joy in the game, but no smile on the faces of those portrayed. Nelson's players are serious, stately in their expressions and their bearing. These are men at play, but also men at work. There is a dignity in the way they are rendered, but also a quiet defiance. In the segregated society of 20th-century America, baseball became one of the few arenas where blacks exercised control; they owned this business in which the athletes were the equals, and often the better, of their white competitors. In the portraits, baseball caps shield the players' eyes from the hot sun but also perhaps from the indifference of history.

In several paintings, the players' hands are accentuated. John Henry "Pop" Lloyd grips a bat, his mighty hands almost choking the neck. Wilbur "Bullet" Rogan sits in the dugout, a baseball almost obscured in his large, muscled hands. The hands were the workhorse of the ballplayer; Rogan's show the result of his battle to succeed. Josh Gibson grips three bats in one hand as he warms up in the on deck circle. His back is to the viewer as he watches Satchel Paige pitch. Light falls across his broad shoulders, the muscles in his back coil as he swings the bats. Gibson's jersey sleeves are rolled up in



***Rube Foster* by Kadir Nelson, c. 2005**

A pitcher, then player/manager, and later owner of the Chicago-based American Giants, Foster is recognized as "The Father of Negro Baseball" for his founding of the Negro National League.

his trademark style, exposing the upper arm strength that made him a homerun king.

Clearly Nelson studied the black-and-white photographs of these players, images that form one of the few surviving visual records of the sport. But his art adds color to the historical record – the bright red of the piping on the Crawford uniforms, the blue of Gibson's cap, faded by the sun – sometimes even venturing beyond what is known or proven. Nelson's images bring the past to life in a new way. He freezes time and action in his works – even


in those paintings where play is in motion, time stands still. The work adds stature to the moment, each piece more than a snapshot or visual record. Nelson's portraits serve as biography, telling a story in the painted details, writing a history on canvas. They build on the taped remembrances and faded newsprint that survive, showing the inner strength of athletes strong enough to carry not just a team but a community on their shoulders. His work, as he describes it is, "figurative and emotional and spiritual at its heart."

Nelson also deals with the double-edged sword of integration. In his portrait of Jackie Robinson, the barrier breaker stands front and center, bat raised and at the ready. Robinson's fist faces the viewer, raised halfway to the level of a black power salute. Robinson's white teammates are arrayed behind him and the American flag is just below his left hand. The promise has been realized, but as the painting, *End of the Leagues*, illustrates, there is a cost. As Major League Baseball began to sign black ballplayers, the Negro Leagues suffered, on the field and at the gate. Few owners received fair compensation for their players and as the talent left the leagues, fans began to drift away. Eventually the Negro Leagues folded, and with it went a black-owned institution, a center of unity and pride for the community. In the painting, the Negro Leaguer is posed, front and center, in a beam of light; all else—the

stadium, the fans, the dugout—are in the dark.

Yet the concluding text of Kadir Nelson's book is hopeful and positive. He has lifted a veil on this history, elevated unsung heroes to their rightful place, added color to a story long in the shadows. Speaking as the everyman narrator, he finishes, "If there had been no such thing as a Negro League, there would have been no Jackie Robinson or Willie Mays or Hank Aaron. These guys stand on our shoulders. We cleared the way for them and changed the course of history. And knowing that satisfies the soul. How can you be bitter about something like that?"

Since publishing *We Are the Ship* and organizing the exhibit, Nelson has continued to illustrate books and to write as well. In 2011, he authored *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*, a history from colonial times through the Civil Rights

Movement. In addition to commissioned and corporate work, he also created the cover art for the album *Michael*, Michael Jackson's first posthumous album release. And Nelson returned to the subject of the Negro Leagues, creating the artwork for two Negro Leagues Baseball Stamps for the U.S. Postal Service in 2010. While *We Are the Ship* is at the History Center, Nelson's Willie Stargell stamp will debut, continuing the arc of his baseball art and connecting to the greats who have played the sport and impacted our lives here in Western Pennsylvania. 

Anne Madarasz is museum division director and co-director of the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum at the History Center.

Negro Leagues Baseball: We Are the Ship is sponsored by the Double Eagle Foundation, The Fine Foundation, and the Pittsburgh Pirates.

STAMP HONORS PIRATES' LEGENDARY STARGELL

By Craig Britcher, Project Coordinator and Curatorial Assistant, Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum

Many Pittsburgh Pirates fans are anxiously awaiting the July 20 release of the Willie Stargell U.S. Postal Service forever stamp, commissioned by *We Are the Ship* author and artist Kadir Nelson as part of the "Major League Baseball All-Stars" set. Nelson's bold colors and realistic detail recall vivid memories of the late 1970s "We Are Family" leader. Upon hearing the announcement last year, some writers observed that Stargell's bat practically caused baseballs to cross zip codes and now his stamp actually will.

Although "Pops" did not play in the Negro Leagues he certainly endured racism in the southern minor leagues and as a young Pirate in the early 1960s. In *Willie Stargell: An Autobiography*, Stargell recalled that a baseball fan in Plainview, Texas, pressed a shotgun to the 19-year-old's temple outside the park and threatened to shoot him if he played that day. He decided, "If I was going to lose my life, at least I would lose it doing what I loved." He later felt welcomed upon his promotion to the majors in Pittsburgh and recounted, "Last night, coming in from the airport, we came through the tunnel and the city opened up its arms and I felt at home."

Stargell matured into a true leader under the watchful eye of Roberto Clemente. Statistics could never sum up his team contributions, much as reports of his charitable works never summarized his value to the community. During a winter cold spell he once distributed a truckload of portable heaters to families in need, and his efforts to raise money to fight sickle cell anemia were well publicized.

Stargell played his entire 21-year major league career with the Pirates. His contributions to baseball and to Pittsburgh earned him the honor of a stamp alongside fellow Pirates Roberto Clemente, Pie Traynor, and Honus Wagner, as well as Negro Leagues legends Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige. Filling out the new stamp block of the Major League All-Stars are fellow-sluggers Ted Williams, Larry Doby, and Joe DiMaggio.

Willie Stargell
U.S. Postal Service
Forever Stamp.

Kadir Nelson, 2011.
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***Jackie Robinson* by Kadir Nelson, 2006**

Robinson proudly stands on Ebbets Field in Brooklyn on the first day of his major league career, the beginning of a spectacular season that would earn him Rookie of the Year honors in 1947. His play on field and his character opened the door to African Americans in Major League Baseball and added energy to the growing push for equality in all parts of society.

Courtesy Collection of Jackie Robinson Foundation.