Moses Fleetwood Walker:
A Depiction of his Notable and Innovative Inventions.

Since the creation of Oberlin in 1833, the town and college have fostered a multitude of people who have influenced the world. Moses Fleetwood Walker is no exception to this claim. To many, Walker is known by his prominent and inspirational baseball career. But, like so many historical figures, he was more. He was a loving husband and a notable leader in the rights of African-Americans. He was also a businessman and inventor, being the owner to a few patents. Walker obtained four patents during his lifetime that all had to do with the advancement of machinery in various fields, with three patents in movie reels and one patent in artillery shells.

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1 David Zang, Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart (University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pg. 70-71
Figure 2: Walker's Transcript from Oberlin College.

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2Oberlin College, "Moses Fleetwood Walker's Transcript" (Oberlin College Archives, n.d.)
In 1879, Walker was a second-year student attending Oberlin College. His studies were starting to decline due to his increasing interest in baseball but there was one class that he didn’t miss: mechanics. This class was a part of the Philosophy and the Arts Department and within the Classical and Scientific concentration. It was described by the course catalogue at the time as a class on machines, projectiles, forces and motions, and strength of material. This course influenced his involvement in a future invention. After this course, Walker’s main focus shifted towards his baseball career and by his junior year he transferred to Michigan State to play. Walker kept pursuing his career in baseball, playing for the Toledo Blue Stockings in 1883 until he became a mail clerk due to severe injuries. Starting again in 1885, Walker played for various teams trying to revitalizing his career. One of the teams Walker played for was the Waterbury team in Connecticut, managed by Charles Hackett.
Walker’s first, and least-known, patent story began when he went to Syracuse after following Hackett to New York to get more chances to play. He earned a position as the Syracuse Stars’ front line catcher, which was a part of the international league and managed by Hackett. This league made new rules in 1888 against the hiring of black players on teams; however, the new rules did not call for the firing of black players already in the league. This was good for Walker and let him keep up his career on the team but did increase tensions. When playing for his team, once he arrived armed with a fully loaded revolver to detour the patrons from heckling him. Some patrons usually utilized phrases including the word “n****r”. His defensive efforts were not documented by the news and thus did not greatly affect the outcome of Walker’s career as one might expect. Walker was eventually let go from the team in 1889 despite this loophole and became the last openly black player in the “white” leagues of baseball until Jackie Robinson. After being let go, Walker stayed in Syracuse and became a postal worker to keep busy and stay afloat.

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7 David Zang, Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart (University of Nebraska Press, 1995). pg. 70-71
8 Ibid. pg. 58
9 Zang, Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart. pg. 48
10 Ibid. pg. 77
11 Zang, Fleet Walker's Divided Heart. Pg. 70-71
Figure 6: First page of Walker’s patent for exploding artillery shell.  

Walker filed for a patent for an artillery shell cartridge on January 13, 1891. He was inspired by this idea he heard was conceived by a Syracuse professor who recently attempted to make an artillery shell. This failed on a catastrophic scale for the professor. The shell exploded during a demonstration at which the professor had invited his students, peers, and various reporters.  

Walker heard of this happening and became enthralled by the challenge and attempted to modify the shell to make one that wouldn’t explode when fired. Walker utilized his knowledge gained from the mechanics class he took his sophomore year at Oberlin to aid him in the actual theory of the shell. He also utilized his time as a licensed carrier of firearms in Toronto to make sure that his idea was feasible for use in both military and everyday life. This knowledge of firearms paired with research on artillery and his coursework allowed for him to perfect the shell. He filed the patent with hopes of making a fortune. Unfortunately, a high volume of competitive patents were created at the same time as Walker’s, outshining his patent.

Worse yet, Walker was dealing with legal problems. On April 9, 1891, Walker was charged with second degree murder for killing a man. He was invited to have drinks with a patron of a saloon, then was struck with an object and acted in self defense. He pleaded not guilty and won his case due to the court feeling sympathy for him and his family members, who were present at most, if not all, court proceedings. Their pleas were successful in gathering sympathy from the jury for what was described as a “domestic picture seldom seen in criminal court.”

This was interesting for the time because the jury and attackers were all white and the basis of the argument was on character, in that there were five-character witnesses on Walker’s behalf discounting the testimonies given by the prosecution’s witnesses, which usually contained some form of slander against Walker. This and the defense counsel’s moving ending testimony, which brought the audience to tears, won the case for Walker. The court also showed overwhelming support for the baseball player’s verdict through cheers, which were to the judge’s dismay and caused a ripple of arrests. This fame and excitement

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12 David Zang, Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart (University of Nebraska Press, 1995). pg. 70-71
13 Harry Smith, “Fleet Walker Scores Big” (Cleveland Gazette, July 2, 1921)
14 Zang, Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart. pg. 68
15 Ibid. pg. 58
16 Zang, Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart. pg. 73
17 Ibid. pg. 78
18 Zang, Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart. pg. 79
regarding Walker and the case was prevalent in the city’s disposition towards him but it was not enough to stop the end of his career with the Syracuse Stars. Some could debate that this case was the end to a long path of torment for Walker from involvement with this sport. After the case he decided to move back to Ohio to spend time with his family because of this attitude from the “white” leagues and white race overall failing him with their actions towards him.

Walker began a peaceful existence in Steubenville, Ohio after the case with his family as a mail deliverer. Not long after, however, a plan including mail fraud and tampering by the federal authorities to bust Walker for mail infringement was executed by U.S. officials due to speculation of mail theft. By the evidence provided it is more apparent today that he was innocent in this incident since the officials placed an open letter within his carrier. Walker was charged in 1898 and served one year in jail. Contrary to the previous trial, the trail was not documented as heavily in the media. Walker eventually exhausted all avenues for reducing his sentence, such as pleas, writing for presidential pardons, and trying all approaches at proving his innocence and getting back to his family. In the end, Walker got out and became a racial theorist, authoring a 48-page book, *Our Home Colony: The Past, Present, and Future of the Negro Race in America,* exploring how this cruel and unforgiving country wronged him through centuries of oppression.

In the early 1900s, movie houses were on the rise and one of the most patented things from this time was the movie reel due to the

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19 David Zang, *Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart* (University of Nebraska Press, 1995). pg. 96
20 Zang, *Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart.* pg. 80-90
21 Moses Fleetwood Walker, “US1348609” (patents.google.com)
large increase of usage and people wanting to make them more efficient. Walker was no exception to this yearning as he filed three patents related to movie reels after acquiring an Opera house at the end of his racial theory career. He filed a patent to improve the fasteners on the movie reel which aided in making sure that they didn’t burn after the movie ended. This idea also went with another patent that he got for making a specialized holder. His final patent created on this subject involved making the changing of movie reels between different films, and sometime during films, more efficient. This was a movie reel changer attached to the primary device itself. This portrays Walker’s yearning to be innovative in whatever field he pursued.

In all, having invented four mechanisms, Walker’s life is one that can be considered eventful when just looking at his life from the viewpoint of an inventor. In 1921, after the death of Ednah, his wife, to long term illness, Walker retired and sold the Opera house and started working managing another theater, at the age of 65. Walker died shortly after in 1924. This does not mark the end to his legacy, in that he was a famed baseball player, inventor, husband, race theorist, and movie and opera house manager.

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22David Zang, Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart (University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pg. 107-109
23Zang, Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart. pg. 122
24Ibid. pg. 123
25Zang, Fleet Walker’s Divided Heart. pg. 124