



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Alexandrian Charles Fremont West: sports hero and doctor

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Image: Charles West and La Verne Gregory, 1936. Office of Historic Alexandria.

Those who watched the 2018 Rose Bowl parade and game may have noticed that there was an Alexandria connection. Charles Fremont West, the first African American quarterback to play in the Rose Bowl, was inducted into the Rose Bowl Hall of Fame.

West was born to William B. and Hannah Thomas West, a farming family living near Washington, Pennsylvania. Even as young boy, his athletic prowess engendered stories. It was said he could out-run the family horse and wrestle the family bull to the ground, stories his sister said were true. West attended Washington and Jefferson College, where he excelled in football, track and field and baseball. He was an offensive back for the 1921 "Presidents" who "played a scoreless tie with the University of California in the 1922 Rose Bowl."

West, known to friends as "Pruner," was almost killed playing in that game. A lynch mob met the team bus. West, the first player off the bus, saw the mob, who said they were there "to kill the N——!" West, a very light skinned African American told the mob, "We did not bring him." Later, during the game, when those attending realized West was in fact playing, racial slurs were shouted at him. There was even a toy display in the town pharmacy window of a "Sambo-like" figure — with tag reading "West" — being carted away in an ambulance. After the game, West went to the store and asked the owner, Frank Connors, for the figure. Connors, impressed by his courage, gave the figure to West. It remains in the family collection today.

West went to Paris, France, his travel and participation paid for by Washington and Jefferson College, to compete as part of the 1924 Olympic team. He qualified for the team, but French officials would not allow him to compete. On his return from France, West was offered a spot with the professional football team, the Akron Pros, but chose to attend medical school instead. He worked his way through Howard University Medical School by coaching their football team; in 1934 he was made head coach.

On Halloween evening in 1936, Charles West married La Verne Gregory in the Gregory home. The Wests had two children.

Dr. West practiced general medicine in Alexandria for more than 50 years. While living in Alexandria, West served as the team doctor for Parker-Gray High School. He retired from the practice of medicine in 1979, shortly before his death at the age of 80.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

As the years have gone by, West's contributions have been recognized as an African American pioneer in both medicine and sports. In 1978, Howard University Medical Alumni Association honored him for his years of practice. He was inducted into the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame in 1979. Howard University established a Charles Fremont West Memorial Athletic Fund after his death. In 2011, Washington and Jefferson College had a ceremony in honor of West, and installed a display of his accomplishments in the library. They honored him again in 2012 when the alumni magazine highlighted him as an unsung hero in African American sports.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.