

# At the Starting Post: Racing Venues and the Origins of Thoroughbred Racing in Kentucky, 1783–1865

By Gary A. O'Dell

The citizens of Kentucky, and of the Bluegrass region in particular, have been famously preoccupied with racing spirited horses since the pioneer era, when communities were little more than huddles of primitive cabins in the wilderness and competitions were impulsive sprints through muddy streets still dotted with occasional tree stumps. The first equines brought into Kentucky by the pioneers were all, by necessity, working horses required for taming a wilderness and the needs of a burgeoning agricultural society, but even these common sorts were pitted against one another in races. Among the settlers, however, were men of wealth and a sporting disposition who soon began to import Thoroughbreds from the east, horses described as “hot-blooded” and bred strictly for speed on the racecourse.<sup>1</sup> Horseracing was the first spectator sport in America, and by 1800, nearly every significant community in the Bluegrass had established a racecourse of its own, much like present-day small towns erect and support high school football stadiums.

Most of these early competitions were “flat” races, in which horses competed on a level racecourse over a predetermined distance, controlled by jockeys mounted on their backs. Most, but not all, flat

<sup>1</sup> John Hervey, *Racing in America, 1665–1865*, 2 vols. (New York, 1944), 1:223–33; Bruce Denbo and Mary Wharton, eds., *The Horse World of the Bluegrass* (Lexington, Ky., 1980), 10–16. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose comments were so helpful in bringing the present article to completion, and especially Katherine C. Mooney of Florida State University, who reviewed successive drafts and provided many useful insights.

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racing involved Thoroughbred horses. The sport is comprised of three interrelated components: Thoroughbred horses; the breeders, trainers, jockeys, and other ancillary personnel; and the supporting infrastructure, including the horse farms, racing associations (jockey clubs), and racecourses. Many of the historical accounts of Thoroughbred racing are little more than hagiographies of prominent horses and horsemen of the nineteenth century, focusing upon such celebrated equine heroes as Grey Eagle and Lexington and turf magnates such as Elisha Warfield and Robert Aitcheson Alexander and their lavish Bluegrass estates.<sup>2</sup> Recent scholarship, particularly contributions by Maryjean Wall, Katherine Mooney, and James C. Nicholson, has provided more critical examinations of the development and growth of the sport.<sup>3</sup>

Kentucky's early racing infrastructure has received less attention in the histories; even the best usually contains little more than a brief reference to early quarter-horse racing, the founding of the Kentucky Jockey Club in 1797 and the Kentucky Association in 1826, and then skips to the establishment of Churchill Downs in 1875—as if little of significance had occurred during the intervening half century or in any location other than Lexington or Louisville. By examining primary sources such as advertisements for race meetings in early newspapers and race results published in sporting journals, along with secondary sources, it is possible to reconstruct the hitherto overlooked developmental chronology and geographic distribution of venues for racing in Kentucky prior to the Civil War and to examine the periodic decline and resurgence of the sport during the period. Although turfmen in Lexington—and to a lesser extent Louisville—developed

<sup>2</sup> Among the most thorough treatments of Thoroughbred racing in antebellum Kentucky are Hervey, *Racing in America*, 2 vols.; Lyman H. Weeks, *The American Turf: An Historical Account of Racing in the United States* (New York, 1898); Kent Hollingsworth, *The Kentucky Thoroughbred* (Lexington, Ky., 1985); and Denbo and Wharton, *Horse World of the Bluegrass*. Even these works, however, give scant coverage to racing venues prior to the Civil War.

<sup>3</sup> Maryjean Wall, *How Kentucky Became Southern: A Tale of Outlaws, Horse Thieves, Gamblers, and Breeders* (Lexington, Ky., 2010); Katherine C. Mooney, *Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014); James C. Nicholson, *The Kentucky Derby: How the Run for the Roses Became America's Premier Sporting Event* (Lexington, Ky., 2013).

a stable racing organization and infrastructure in the decades prior to the Civil War, most other communities in the state struggled to maintain such organizations and racing venues. The numerous small tracks and county associations that often existed for only five to ten years at a time show that alongside the story of long-term professionalization and success in building a horse industry in Kentucky, there is a larger story of false starts and failure in the decades before the Civil War.

### **Early Racing Venues in the Bluegrass Region**

At the time of Kentucky's settlement, the Thoroughbred horse was a relatively recent innovation in the equine world. This fast-paced, high-spirited breed had been developed in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by crossing native mares with so-called Oriental stallions—Arabian, Barb, and Turkmen horses imported from the Middle East. The importation of British Thoroughbreds to North America was interrupted during the Revolutionary period, although many blood horses brought over by English officers were captured and subsequently became part of American pedigrees. Conversely, the British confiscated American horses for use as military load haulers and cavalry mounts, and often spitefully destroyed some of the finest breeding stock. The disruption of equine livestock and infrastructure was particularly severe in Virginia, essentially bringing the sport to a virtual halt for decades and encouraging the westward shift of Thoroughbred racing and breeding into Kentucky and Tennessee.<sup>4</sup>

The Kentucky settlers brought livestock with them, and they discovered that the climate and soils of the Inner Bluegrass region were well suited to producing outstanding horses, strong in bone and long on endurance. The first settlers wasted no time in setting up racing venues in what was still largely wilderness, the crudest of

<sup>4</sup> James Rice, *History of the British Turf, from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, vol. 1 (London, 1879), 35–37; John G. Speed, *The Horse in America* (New York, 1905), 40; Fairfax Harrison, *Early American Turf Stock*, vol. 1 (Richmond, Va., 1934), 27–32; Julie A. Campbell, *The Horse in Virginia: An Illustrated History* (Charlottesville, Va., 2010), 31–32, 35, 41.

facilities at first with increasing refinement as the region was settled. The first horseraces were what were called “quarter races” in Virginia. Quarter races were an American invention of the seventeenth century, developed out of necessity by Anglo settlers who brought their love of horseracing from the mother country but found it physically daunting to hew long circular courses out of the dense forests of the New World. An American quarter race was run on a much shorter course, consisting of two parallel paths about a quarter-mile in length, each wide enough for a single horse. These were generally “match” races that involved only two horses, ridden by their owners, resulting from a challenge to the alleged superiority of one mount over another. The wager was as likely to be for tobacco, whiskey, or even the loser’s horse as it was to be for cash. If “quarter paths” were not available, the main street of the town made an acceptable track for competitions, which were the most popular form of public entertainment of the time. According to historian Rhys Isaac, quarter races

tested not only the speed of the horses but also the daring and combative skill of the riders. A straight quarter mile track ran from starting to finishing point. Sometimes it was hedged in; other times the lines of boisterous spectators served to define its limits. Contestants might ride among this throng, clearing the ground with long whips. At the start the two riders were accustomed to jockey for position, and when the starter’s signal sent them hurtling at full gallop down the narrow track, each might be free (depending upon agreed rules) to use whip, knee, or elbow to dismount his opponent or drive him off the track.

The more aggressive the behavior of the riders became, the louder spectators cheered and applauded. Afterward, custom dictated adjournment to the nearest taverns for further celebration.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Mackey-Smith, *The Colonial Quarter Race Horse* (Madison, Wisc., 1983), 3–4; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (1982; repr., Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), 99 (quotation); Hervey, *Racing in America*, 1:21–25. The Inner Bluegrass region consists of Bourbon, Fayette, Franklin, Harrison, Jessamine, Scott, and Woodford counties.

One of the earliest paths for quarter racing in Kentucky was laid out around 1783 at Shallow Ford Station in Madison County, about eight miles from Boonesborough. The race path paralleled the road from Boonesborough to Harrodsburg in a straight line, at a distance of about two hundred yards from the road. No reports of race events survive to the present day. The first records of actual races were the 1783 competitions near Harrodsburg at “Humble’s race path” in April and at “Haggin’s race path” on May 10. Another early site was an actual dirt track built in 1788 beside the Wilderness Road in Lincoln County by William Whitley, laid out in a circle around a prominence near his house; observers who congregated at the top of “Sportsman Hill” had a perfect view of the proceedings. Whitley’s facility bears the distinction of being the first known circular course in Kentucky.<sup>6</sup>

The need for tracks was real, because the reckless dashes of a quarter race through the streets of a frontier community could pose a real hazard to residents. At Lexington, since the sport was so popular, the exasperated town trustees tread carefully, claiming that they did not possess sufficient authority to stop the practice. Instead, the trustees called a public meeting in the autumn of 1793 to address the “dangers and inconveniencies which are occasioned by the practice of racing through the streets of the in lots of the town.” The outcome of the meeting requested by the Lexington trustees was not reported,

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Collins and Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 2 vols. (1874; repr., Frankfort, Ky., 1966), 1:514, 2:521; Charles G. Talbert, “William Whitley, 1749–1813, Part 1,” *Filson Club History Quarterly* 25 (April 1951): 110; Robert L. Kincaid, *The Wilderness Road* (Indianapolis, 1947), 175–76. “Humble’s race-path” was probably laid out by Michael Humble, an early pioneer best known as Kentucky’s first gunsmith, who left Louisville in 1782 and settled near Harrodsburg. See J. Stoddard Johnston, ed., *Memorial History of Louisville from its First Settlement to the Year 1896*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1896), 1:50, 1:140; Mel Hankla, “Across the Woods with Kentucky’s ‘Humble’ Gunsmiths,” *Kentucky Rifle Association Bulletin*, Winter 2009, p. 19. “Haggin’s race-path” was most likely associated with another early settler, John Haggin, one of the first settlers at Harrodsburg. He resided for a time at what was known as Haggin’s Station, four miles northeast of Harrodsburg, which was the probable site of the race path. His grandson, James Ben Ali Haggin (1822–1914), later became one of the most famous Thoroughbred breeders of his time. See William Fields, comp., “Anecdote of a Kentucky Pioneer,” *The Scrap-book, Consisting of Tales and Anecdotes*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1851), 253–55; Willard R. Jillson, *Pioneer Kentucky* (Frankfort, Ky., 1934), 85; Peter Brackney, *Lost Lexington* (Charleston, S.C., 2014), 105–10.

although the sentiment against street racing must have been sufficiently compelling to convince the Kentucky General Assembly to endow the board with the necessary mandate. An Act for the Better Regulation of the Town of Lexington, approved by the legislature on December 21, 1793, generally prohibited nuisances or obstructions in the streets of the community but specifically banned street racing. The act further noted that the showing of stud horses in the streets could be likewise prohibited if the trustees would set aside for this purpose two acres conveniently located within the town limits, although it did not make any similar requirement for provision of racing venues. The same legislation also banned racing horses in the streets of Bardstown, Georgetown, and Washington; similar legislation over the next four years also banned these races from Paris, Milford, Danville, Maysville, and Stanford. Eventually tiring of this piecemeal approach, the General Assembly universally prohibited street racing, showing stud horses on main streets or in public squares, or “covering horse to mare except in an enclosed lot” in any town in Kentucky on February 7, 1798.<sup>7</sup>

Although gambling has been a crucial economic element of modern racing, the morality of the earlier era discouraged overt wagering or betting at early racing venues. In 1783, Hugh McGary was tried and found guilty in the Lincoln County Court of wagering on a mare at the Haggin’s race path. He was required to pay a fine. The court noted that McGary was “deemed an infamous gambler . . . not eligible to any position of trust or honor within this state.” The language used by the court in its ruling was taken verbatim from a Virginia law of 1779 prohibiting “excessive gaming,” which was then in force in its Kentucky counties. After statehood, the law was adopted by the Kentucky legislature, which was careful to add, in 1823, a provision

<sup>7</sup> Lexington Trustees Minute Book, October 21, 1793 (first quotation) and February 3, 1794, Lexington, Kentucky, Board of Trustees Records, University of Kentucky Special Collections Research Center, Lexington, Ky. (hereinafter UK); *Kentucky Gazette* (Lexington), October 26, 1793; *Ibid.*, November 2, 1793; *Ibid.*, February 8, 1794; William Littell, *The Statute Law of Kentucky*, vol. 1 (Frankfort, Ky., 1809), 221–22, 225–26, 341, 575, 648, 650–51; William Littell, *Statute Law of Kentucky*, vol. 2 (Frankfort, Ky., 1810), 61, 62 (second quotation).

that the statute was not intended to “prevent the running of horses in the Commonwealth.”<sup>8</sup>

By 1800, Kentucky was home to nearly ninety thousand horses, more per capita than any other state in the nation. Many of the early Kentucky settlers came from Virginia or the Carolinas, where there was a long-established tradition of breeding and racing fine horses among the gentry. Most Kentucky equines were ordinary stock, saddle horses for transportation or work horses for field and farm, but Bluegrass gentry with the means to import fine Thoroughbreds from the east began to do so in an attempt to improve the bloodlines of Kentucky horses. Most of them were originally imported English horses or their offspring, and since stud horses generally commanded higher fees for service in the Atlantic states, many of the stallions first imported into Kentucky represented older horses whose value had declined with age. Virginia horsemen of the era rather contemptuously dismissed the West as a dumping ground for inferior horses and had no suspicion that Kentucky and Tennessee were quietly rising to national prominence in breeding and racing Thoroughbred horses.<sup>9</sup>

Lexington became a center of horse breeding because the landscape of the Inner Bluegrass was, in all essential aspects, a virtual duplicate of the Yorkshire region, the heart of Thoroughbred production in England. Possessing a generally mild climate, the gently rolling terrain around Lexington was eminently suited for agriculture and stock breeding, with deep, fertile soils rich in phosphate derived from the underlying limestone and favoring abundant growth of nutritious bluegrass, *Poa pratensis*. Eastern gentry seeking new opportunities

<sup>8</sup> Lucien Beckner, “History of the County Court of Lincoln County, Va.,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* (hereinafter *RKHS*) 20 (May 1922): 175 (first quotation); Robert G. Blakely, *The Development of the Law of Gambling, 1776–1976* (Washington, D.C., 1977), 237–54; William W. Hening, *The Statutes at Large Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia*, vol. 10 (Richmond, Va., 1822), 206 (second quotation); William Littell and Jacob Swigert, *A Digest of the Statute Law of Kentucky*, vol. 1 (Frankfort, Ky., 1822), 639 (third quotation).

<sup>9</sup> Charles R. Staples, *The History of Pioneer Lexington, Kentucky, 1779–1806* (Lexington, Ky., 1939), 63; Charles B. Heinemann and Gaius M. Brumbaugh, *First Census of Kentucky, 1790* (1940; repr., Baltimore, 2005), 3; Lee Soltow, “Horse Owners in Kentucky in 1800,” *RKHS* 79 (July 1981): 203–10; James A. Ramage, *John Wesley Hunt: Pioneer Merchant, Manufacturer and Financier* (Lexington, Ky., 1974), 43–47; Hervey, *Racing in America*, 1:236.

gravitated to this region, and in a mere two decades, the Lexington settlement expanded to become the most important economic and cultural center of the trans-Appalachian country and one of the fastest-growing communities in the new nation.<sup>10</sup>

In no other part of the state was the culture of breeding and raising horses more firmly ingrained than the Inner Bluegrass. According to the 1789 tax lists, Fayette County residents possessed 9,607 horses and 56 stallions among a white population of 14,626 persons. Many of the horse breeders brought their stallions to Lexington in order to better display their attributes on the street to a crowd of onlookers, which, in the view of the town trustees, created another sort of public nuisance. The trustees found themselves often occupied enforcing measures intended to keep the streets clear—no easy task in a frontier town in which residents were busily engaged in erecting new domiciles and businesses. Through the winter and early spring of 1795, the trustees issued numerous orders to residents directing them to remove the hitching stations known as “horse racks” from their property, since equine congregations tended to interfere with movement on the streets. On March 21, 1795, the trustees published an order in the *Kentucky Gazette* reserving an area on Water Street south of Main Cross (modern Broadway) for showing horses; anyone who showed horses elsewhere was penalized by a fine of three dollars for each offense.<sup>11</sup>

Since horseracing was banned from public spaces in the state, venues for the sport had to be established on private property. As a result, in the early national and antebellum periods, courses and tracks were typically supported by private associations made up of local elites. There were no commercial tracks during this period as would

<sup>10</sup> Hervey, *Racing in America*, 1:221–23; Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790–1830* (1959; repr., Urbana, Ill., 1996), 20–22, 49–53; Heinemann and Brumbaugh, *First Census of Kentucky 1790*, 3; Staples, *History of Pioneer Lexington*, 63. In 1789, Fayette County had about double the land area of the present-day county. Kentucky bluegrass was not native to the state but was introduced by early settlers.

<sup>11</sup> Lexington Trustees Minute Book, March 16, 1795, UK; *Kentucky Gazette*, March 21, 1795.



become the dominant form in the late nineteenth century. Most early racing venues were ad-hoc ventures established for a fixed term (usually five years or less) and entirely dependent upon the financial backing of small groups of individuals. Consequently, these privately operated tracks tended to appear and disappear rather abruptly, except in larger cities such as Lexington and Louisville, where a more-or-less continuous level of support could be maintained.

As the premier city in the Bluegrass and home to many horse breeders, Lexington also became the center for horseracing in the state. Most of these early races were impromptu affairs, likely held on an open grassy area known as the Commons. Yet, some organized events were held even before the prohibition on street racing. The *Kentucky Gazette* of August 22, 1789, published the first notice of a formal purse race, consisting of three-mile heats, to be held at Lexington at one p.m. on the second Tuesday of October, the prize money collected by subscription. Entrants were directed to register their horses at Stephen Collins's tavern, and judges for the event would be elected by the participants on race day. Specification of three-mile heats indicated a larger racecourse had been established, since the Commons was too narrow to host anything except a quarter race.<sup>12</sup>

The property on which the purse races were held, known formally as the "Lexington Course" or simply as the "Race Field" was located just east of the Georgetown Road and north of Main Street. This land was part of a two-hundred-acre military grant surveyed by John Floyd in 1775, which he subsequently sold to John Todd in 1781. There was a significant problem with Floyd's survey, however, in that it overlapped with the boundaries later established for the city of Lexington. Todd relinquished his claim on seventy acres of this property, which conflicted with the town bounds, donating it to the Lexington trustees. When Todd was killed in the ambush at the Battle of Blue Licks on August 19, 1782, his infant daughter and only child, Mary Owen Todd (1781–1847), inherited his entire estate and became one of the wealthiest persons in Kentucky. During

<sup>12</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, August 22, 1789.

her childhood, the family did not use the property just west of town, now reduced to 130 acres, and the locale served as a racecourse for the next twenty years.<sup>13</sup>

Even on this course, most races likely remained contests between only a few riders. Advertisements for purse races at the Lexington and other regional courses during the 1790s generally noted, “Three horses to start or no race.” Some idea of the management of the Lexington course can be gained from a notice placed in the *Kentucky Gazette* on September 3, 1796, in which William Simpson informed “the Gentlemen of Lexington, [who] would wish to encourage the Purse Race, that I will have the course open, ready to run on, the third Tuesday in October; it will do to practice on in a short time. Those who wish to make use of it must apply to me at my bars to go in the field.” Whether Simpson was acting on behalf of the Todd estate, or merely as a representative of local horsemen in maintaining the course, is unknown, but he evidently had the authority to control the sale of food and drink and other items during the event: “All those who have made a practice of [selling] at the course races in Lexington, that they need not put themselves to the trouble of bringing any thing on the course ground, as they will not get the liberty of selling it there.”<sup>14</sup>

When planter families of wealth and status from the Tidewater and Piedmont regions arrived, they brought with them a determination to bring order and civilization to the trans-Appalachian West, to recreate the genteel culture they had left behind. Much of the planter culture was a conscious emulation of the aristocratic English lifestyle, in which the primary diversions were focused around horses:

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Land Office Patents B, 1779–1780 (December 1, 1779), 160–61, Reel 43, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.; Benjamin Monroe, *Reports of Cases at Common Law and in Equity, Decided by the Court of Appeals of Kentucky*, vol. 12 (Frankfort, Ky., 1852), 289–303. For an example of a property transfer referring to the “Race Field,” see Fayette County Deed Book F, October 11, 1811, pp. 118–19, Fayette County Clerk’s Office, Lexington, Ky. (hereinafter FCC).

<sup>14</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, September 3, 1796 (second and third quotations). Examples of advertisements for the “Lexington Races” denoting a minimum number of horses can be found in the *Kentucky Gazette*, October 11, 1794, and October 10, 1795 (first quotation). After the turn of the century, the minimum was increased to four horses; see, for example, *Kentucky Gazette*, September 24, 1802.

riding, hunting, and racing. Although the short dash of the quarter race was the earliest form of racing in the colonies, for the gentry, distance racing became the preferred mode as the primeval forests of the seaboard were cleared and transformed to agricultural land. Distance racing in the English style involved multiple circuits of a mile or more each around a grassy oval course where the object was as much a test of endurance, a trait known as “bottom,” as of speed. Individual Thoroughbreds competed in several such grueling races in a day, known as “heats,” the winner being the horse that won two out of three, or three out of five heats. The first such course in North America was laid out in 1665 on the Hempstead Plains of Long Island, New York, and named Newmarket after the famous English course in Suffolk. New York remained an important regional racing center, but it was in the southern colonies that the culture and practice of Thoroughbred racing truly flourished. For the Virginia gentry, “participation in these contests identified a person as a member of the elite group. Great planters raced against their peers. They certainly had no interest in competing with their social inferiors.” Although many of the Lexington elite may have enjoyed viewing quarter races on the Commons, or been willing to place a wager on the outcome of a particular race, as the frontier receded few wished to sponsor or participate in such an event.<sup>15</sup>

For the gentry, a more desirable form of horseracing required order and rules, and so, on June 8, 1797, a group of prominent Bluegrass citizens met to establish rules and regulations to govern the conduct of the Newmarket Jockey Club of Woodford County, possibly the first

<sup>15</sup> Karl B. Raitz, *The Kentucky Bluegrass: A Regional Profile and Guide* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980), 6–7; Stephen Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore, 1996), 124–29; Craig T. Friend, *Along the Maysville Road: The Early American Republic in the Trans-Appalachian West* (Knoxville, Tenn., 2005), 59–101; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 100–1; Jane Carson, *Colonial Virginians at Play* (Williamsburg, Va., 1965), 51–60; Weeks, *American Turf*, 17–18; Timothy H. Breen, “Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling among the Gentry of Virginia,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (April 1977): 257 (quotation). Horses competing in heat races might sometimes be expected to race for twenty or more miles in a single day, a practice that we would today consider to be cruel. Many horses broke down as a result of such racing, their careers terminated.

organized association of racing enthusiasts in Kentucky. Race meetings had been held at courses in various communities before this time, such as the Lexington purse race of 1789, but these appear to have simply been ad-hoc affairs put together by local horsemen who were not part of any formal organization. Most jockey clubs in America from the colonial through the Jacksonian eras were associations of horsemen customarily organized for a specific period of time. At the expiration of this term, usually no more than five or six years, the club was either reorganized and continued to operate or else allowed to lapse and a new club later formed to conduct race meetings. The property was usually leased by the club, rather than owned outright, and the purses offered financed by member subscriptions. Only members could nominate or sponsor a horse at a race meeting, although it was not required that the member own the horse he nominated.<sup>16</sup>

The course used by the Newmarket Jockey Club had been in existence since at least 1795, laid out on the farm of George Blackburn near Spring Station in northern Woodford County about five miles north of Versailles. Only scattered evidence of races at the venue exists. For example, the Franklin County grand jury indicted Theodoric Boler for “selling brandy by retail at the race ground at George Blackburn’s” on September 16, 1795. A year later, a racing event for “a Purse of considerable amount” was held at “Maj. Blackburn’s Course” on September 17, 1796. Although the name of the association was soon changed to the Farmer’s Jockey Club, the venue continued to be referred to in racing advertisements as the Newmarket course and operated until at least 1804, after which race meetings shifted to a new course nearer to Versailles. This latter course, “said, by those who made it, to be 1600 yards,” was on the land of Luke Harrison, about three-quarters of a mile from Versailles. Advertising the property for sale in 1812, Harrison noted that it contained 150 acres, “eighty-five are cleared and under excellent fencing, and divided into fields and pastures.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, May 13, 1797, and successive issues through June 7; Hervey, *Racing in America*, 2:13–14.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis F. Johnson, *The History of Franklin County, Kentucky* (Frankfort, Ky., 1912),

Woodford County's Newmarket association may have been preceded by the formation of the Lexington Jockey Club, also in 1797. The first mention of the Lexington club appeared in the *Kentucky Gazette* on October 21, 1797, but constituted an activity report for an already established organization. Meeting at Postlethwait's tavern on October 17, the members of the Lexington Jockey Club resolved to hold a three-day race meet at the Lexington course on the second Wednesday of November. The appointment of a committee at this meeting to "admit persons wishing to become members of the Club" would seem to indicate that the club had not existed long, yet advertisements in early September for the forthcoming "Bairdstown" (Bardstown) races stated, "The rules of the Jocky [sic] Club of this state are to be observed in these races," an indication that the regulations adopted by the Lexington Jockey Club were by then considered to be the model for the conduct of racing in the region.<sup>18</sup>

The closing years of the century witnessed a proliferation of racing organizations and venues established across the commonwealth, including those at Bardstown, Danville, and Georgetown, where courses were in operation by 1796, and at Paris and Shelbyville, which hosted race events by 1798. As the new century commenced, additional facilities began to offer racing at Frankfort (1801), Maysville (1802), Glasgow (1803), Winchester (1803), Shepherdsville (1804), Flemingsburg (1806), Richmond (1807), Russellville (1807), Springfield

38 (first quotation); *Kentucky Gazette*, September 3, 1796 (second and third quotations); *Ibid.*, September 29, 1802; *Ibid.*, September 7, 1803; *Ibid.*, August 21, 1804; *Ibid.*, October 27, 1806 (fourth quotation); *Ibid.*, October 22, 1807; *Ibid.*, September 25, 1810; *Western World* (Frankfort, Ky.), September 24, 1807; *Reporter* (Lexington), August 15, 1812 (fifth quotation); John L. O'Conner, *Notes on the Thoroughbred from Kentucky Newspapers* (Lexington, Ky., 1927), 107; William E. Railey, *History of Woodford County, Kentucky* (Frankfort, Ky., 1938), 33. George Blackburn came to Kentucky from Virginia about 1784 and established the farm near Spring Station around 1792. His son Edward M. Blackburn built a home on the property near that of his father and became one of the most prominent Thoroughbred breeders in the state. Many famous horses of the era stood at E. M. "Ned" Blackburn's farm, known as "Equira," including American Eclipse and Boston, sire of Lexington. See Railey, *History of Woodford County*, 187, 210; Sanders D. Bruce, *American Stud Book*, vol. 2 (New York, 1873), 81, 82, 290, 401, 468, 552.

<sup>18</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, October 21, 1797 (first quotation); *Ibid.*, September 9, 1797 (second quotation).

(1810), and at the Greenville Springs resort at Harrodsburg (1810).<sup>19</sup>

For most of these early racing venues, only one or two advertisements appeared during the period from 1795 through 1815, and they were intended to attract entries from regional horsemen. Advertisements usually listed race dates and terms of competition without providing much information about the facility. The single 1806 advertisement for the Flemingsburg races, for example, notes only that the course was “adjoining this place.” Courses such as those at Lexington, Louisville, Georgetown, Frankfort, Richmond, Harrodsburg, and Versailles were more durable than most of their contemporaries, most operating (although with sporadic interruptions) over a span of decades, and some details about the individual courses can be found in sporting journals, county histories, newspaper retrospectives, and other documents.<sup>20</sup>

Although Lexington was the hub of horseracing in early Kentucky, racing enthusiasts formed associations and venues in many of the smaller Bluegrass communities. The first racing venue to operate in Scott County was likely the Gano track, built in 1793 by Lynn West just north of the city on a tract nearly surrounded by Elkhorn Creek, on the east side of the Cincinnati Road (present-day US 25). The first advertisement for “Georgetown Races” appeared in the *Kentucky Gazette* on September 24, 1796, but did not identify the location or proprietorship of the course. The Georgetown Jockey Club, which began to advertise racing events in 1809, held most of their meetings at the Gano course, and the venue was still occasionally used for horseracing as late as 1905. Colonel Robert Sanders established

<sup>19</sup> *Stewart's Kentucky Herald* (Lexington), October 4, 1796; *Ibid.*, September 9, 1798; *Kentucky Gazette*, September 24, 1796; *Ibid.*, November 5, 1796; *Ibid.*, August 29, 1798; *Ibid.*, September 24, 1802; *Ibid.*, October 11, 1803; *Ibid.*, September 18, 1806; *Ibid.*, October 13, 1807; *Guardian of Freedom* (Frankfort, Ky.), November 10, 1802; *Ibid.*, September 28, 1803; *Western American* (Bardstown, Ky.), November 2, 1804; *Mirror* (Russellville, Ky.), August 22, 1807; *Palladium* (Frankfort, Ky.), October 20, 1810; *Reporter* (Lexington, Ky.), October 20, 1810. The dates listed in the text above should be considered as estimates rather than definitive because racing notices might appear only in local, rather than regional, papers and archives for many early newspapers are often incomplete or altogether missing.

<sup>20</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, September 25, 1806.

another early Scott County course on his thousand-acre farm three miles south of Georgetown on the Lexington Road. Sanders was one of the wealthiest men in Kentucky and a devoted breeder of Thoroughbred horses. His course may have begun operation as early as 1792, for in that year Sanders opened a tavern on his property. His tavern, the Plow and Oxen, was an enormous building for the time, reportedly capable of accommodating several hundred patrons, and on race days it was crowded with guests. Although Sanders died in 1805, race meetings continued to be held on his course until 1815.<sup>21</sup>

The first organized horseraces in Franklin County were associated with annual agricultural fairs conducted at Leestown on the east side of the Kentucky River, about three-quarters of a mile north of the Frankfort courthouse. Although the first report dates from 1798, fairs and racing had evidently been held in this location for many years. The grounds were a popular recreational resort during the summer and fall, when “large crowds of men and boys would congregate there on Sunday for the purpose of horse racing, foot racing, cock fighting, and whiskey drinking, which would sometimes end in a free for all fight.” County officials were kept busy handing down indictments against spectators for the illegal sale of whiskey at the fair grounds and on the racecourse. About 1800, a new racecourse and fair grounds were constructed a few miles east of Frankfort at the confluence of North and South Elkhorn Creeks and race meetings were held there for nearly half a century afterward. The first notice of races at the Forks of the Elkhorn course, “at Henry Brock’s tavern,” appeared in a Frankfort paper in November 1802. The course was known for a time as the Bowling-Green course, so designated by Henry Brock,

<sup>21</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, August 18, 1792; *Ibid.*, September 24, 1796; *Ibid.*, May 21, 1805; *Reporter* (Lexington), October 2, 1813; *Ibid.*, August 2, 1815; William O. Gaines, *History of Scott County, Kentucky* (Georgetown, Ky., 1905), 1:60–61, 1:77, 2:418–19; Lindsey Apple, Frederick A. Johnston, and Ann Bolton Bevins, *Scott County, Kentucky: A History* (Georgetown, Ky., 1993), 48, 69–70, 93; Ann Bolton Bevins, *A History of Scott County as Told by Selected Buildings* (Georgetown, Ky., 1981), 108–9. Sanders’s racing facility and hotel were supported by extensive stables and carriage-houses, and in 1797 he built a two-story brick house on a hill overlooking the course.

who in 1806 built a new tavern, “a large new two-story hewed log house” at the “Bowling-Green” three and a half miles from Frankfort. Brock noted that he had laid in “a good stock of Liquors, Corn, Oats, and Corn-fodder, and is building stables with all haste.” The course at the Forks continued under his proprietorship until at least 1811.<sup>22</sup>

Despite being the oldest community in Kentucky and in 1783 the site of the first reported quarter races, organized racing in Harrodsburg received no mention in the Bluegrass press until 1810, when a local health resort, Greenville Springs, announced that a sweepstakes race would be run over the Greenville course in October. Similar to the famed spas or watering holes of Europe, during the early nineteenth century numerous resorts such as Greenville Springs were established in Kentucky in association with mineral springs and became popular attractions for the gentry. The hosts of such establishments provided a wide variety of entertainments for the amusement of their guests, who often would spend the entire summer in residence partaking of the waters and socializing with other patrons. The Greenville spa opened for business in 1807 with a large hotel and tavern and dozens of cottages for guests. Although such resorts likely featured horseracing as one of the many diversions available for the amusement of patrons, Greenville Springs appears to be the first such establishment to sponsor a formal three-day race meeting, specified as “agreeable to the rules of the Lexington Jockey Club.” The races were apparently a success, since a race meeting was again featured at Greenville Springs in the following year, 1811, and again in 1815 and 1820.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, *History of Franklin County*, 29, 109 (first quotation); *Guardian of Freedom*, November 10, 1802 (second quotation); *Palladium*, January 1, 1807 (third, fourth, and fifth quotations); *Ibid.*, September 28, 1811.

<sup>23</sup> *Reporter* (Lexington), October 20, 1810; *Ibid.*, August 2, 1815; *Kentucky Gazette*, October 1, 1811; *Argus of Western America*, May 25, 1820; Mai Flourney Van Deren Van Arsdall, “The Springs at Harrodsburg,” *RKHS* 61(Oct. 1963): 300–23; J. Roderick Heller III, *Democracy’s Lawyer: Felix Grundy of the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge, La., 2010), 77–80. The 1820 race meeting was the last hosted at Greenville Springs. Dr. Christopher C. Graham purchased Greenville Springs in 1827 and its nearby rival, Harrodsburg Springs, a year later, combining both operations under the name of Graham’s Springs. The Harrodsburg Spring location eclipsed Greenville in popularity and in 1829, a new racecourse was established



Organized racing also apparently got a rather late start in Richmond, although by 1807 a jockey club had been established in the community and races were held on a regular basis. In 1809–1810, the secretary of the club was Archibald Woods, and the course may have been laid out on his property, described as being “400 acres of first-rate land,” located within one mile of Richmond. Since Wood’s farm was advertised for sale in late 1810, its purchase may account for a gap in Richmond race meetings that lasted until a new course was established in 1819. The brief hiatus notwithstanding, from 1807 to 1838 only the horsemen of Lexington sponsored more race meetings in Kentucky than the Richmond Jockey Club.<sup>24</sup>

Soon after the nineteenth century began, Lexington racing enthusiasts found it necessary to develop a new course. After its establishment in 1797, the Lexington Jockey Club sponsored three-day subscription races on an annual basis in October or November on the Georgetown Road course; announcements noted that “one time around the course will be considered a mile.” The convenient use of the Todd property as a racecourse came to an end in 1809, when Mary (Todd) Russell, now an adult and recently widowed, began to develop the land, a valuable property by virtue of its location adjacent to the town. She extended streets through the tract and sold off parcels and individual building lots, placing an advertisement in the *Kentucky Gazette* on February 13, 1809, that ran in successive issues through July: “LOTS FOR SALE: On that well known and beautiful spot of ground, the RACE FIELD, in Lexington.” All of the land between Main and Short and east of Georgetown Road was referred to in property transfers as part of the “race field” property. Although development of the Todd tract took several years to complete, it was

there but advertised racing only for a single meeting in August of that year. See J. Winston Coleman Jr., *The Springs of Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 1955), 23–24; and O’Conner, *Notes on the Thoroughbred*, 215.

<sup>24</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, October 13, 1807; *Ibid.*, September 20, 1808; *Ibid.*, July 25, 1809; *Ibid.*, October 10, 1810; *Reporter* (Lexington), October 13, 1810; *Globe* (Richmond, Ky.), July 12, 1810 (quotation); O’Conner, *Notes on the Thoroughbred*, 112.

apparent that a new venue for the Lexington races would be required.<sup>25</sup>

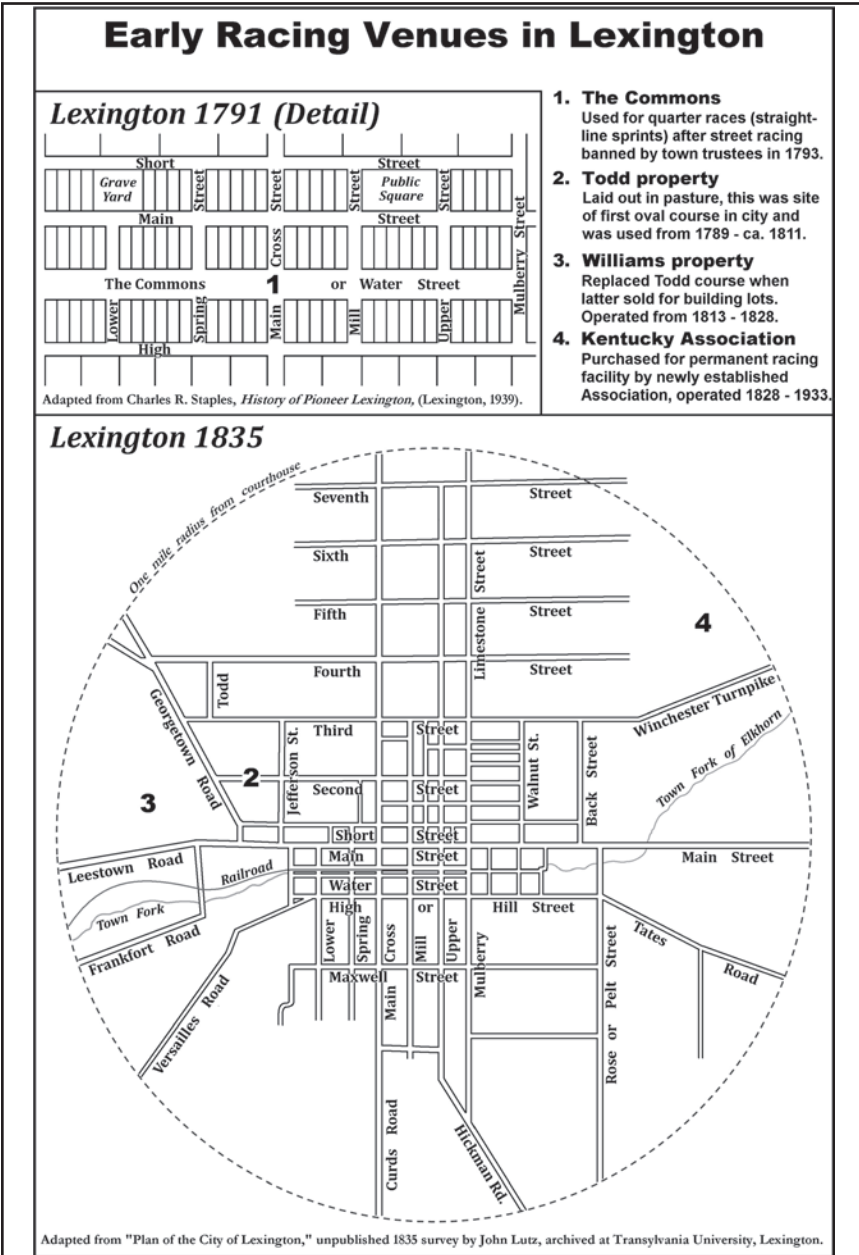
During the next decade, several locations served the purpose until arrangements were made for a permanent location. For the first year or so after Mary Russell began to sell off lots from the Todd tract, races continued to be held on the same course that had been used since 1797. From 1811 to 1813, the annual fall races occurred outside of town at a site known as the “Pond course.” This location was most likely the property of William Wright, a blacksmith and wagon-maker who also operated a tavern on his fifty-six-acre farm three miles northeast of Lexington on the Maysville Road, known to Lexington residents as “Wright’s Pond” or simply as the “The Pond.” Wright liked to host events of various types on his property, including a summer barbecue in 1811 and a music festival and dinner in 1814, which, like race meetings, were certainly good for his tavern business. Horse enthusiasts also used a pasture on the property of William Williams, which was conveniently situated on the west side of the Georgetown Road almost exactly opposite the Todd property.<sup>26</sup>

### **Formalizing a Racing Culture in Early-Nineteenth-Century Kentucky**

The establishment of a formal Jockey Club in Lexington standardized rules for racing and breeding Thoroughbred horses in that city, but the rules of the club were also adhered to unequivocally at racing events outside of Lexington. So, although the organization referred to itself as the “Lexington” Jockey Club in the *Kentucky Gazette*, elsewhere in the state it was known as the “Kentucky” Jockey

<sup>25</sup> Charlotte Mentelle, *A Short History of the Late Mrs. Mary O. T. Wickliffe* (Lexington, Ky., 1850), 11; Randolph Hollingsworth, “She Used Her Power Lightly: A Political History of Margaret Wickliffe Preston of Kentucky” (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 1999), 303–4; *Kentucky Gazette*, September 21, 1801 (first quotation); *Ibid.*, September 24, 1802; *Ibid.*, February 13, 1809 (second quotation).

<sup>26</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, July 11, 1809; *Ibid.*, May 29, 1810; *Ibid.*, March 19, 1811; *Ibid.*, April 30, 1811; *Ibid.*, July 30, 1811; *Ibid.*, August 6, 1811; *Ibid.*, January 26, 1813; *Reporter* (Lexington), September 21, 1811; *Ibid.*, September 26, 1812; *Ibid.*, September 25, 1813; *Ibid.*, July 11, 1814; *Ibid.*, November 28, 1814; George W. Ranck, *History of Lexington, Kentucky: Its Early Annals and Recent Progress* (Cincinnati, 1872), 130; Benjamin G. Bruce, untitled chapter in *History of Fayette County, Kentucky*, ed. William H. Perrin (Chicago, 1882), 140, 142.



Maps detailing the locations of early racing venues in Lexington during the frontier and antebellum periods. *Courtesy of the author.*

Club or, simply, the “Jockey Club” as can be seen in numerous racing notices of the period.

During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, race meetings in Kentucky were relatively short affairs, most scheduled for no more than three consecutive days of heat racing. Meetings generally began on a Wednesday or Thursday and ran until Friday or Saturday. By the late 1820s, some of the largest and most popular courses, such as those at Lexington and Richmond, began to offer longer race meetings of four or five days, beginning earlier in the week and completed by Saturday; there was no Sunday racing. Within another decade, longer race meetings had become the norm for nearly all courses, and by 1850, Lexington and Louisville began to host meetings that sometimes ran seven or eight days.<sup>27</sup>

There were two types of races commonly staged in Kentucky during this era, the subscription purse and the sweepstakes, which were differentiated by the way prize money was awarded. The prizes for both types were obtained from members of the racing association or jockey club, as their contributions to the “race fund” or expenses of the meeting. The subscription purse was divided across the entire race meeting, with the winner of each day’s racing allocated a portion of the total purse and often supplemented by the entry fees; the sweepstakes, on the other hand, was a prize awarded to the winner of a specific race. An 1825 dictionary of sporting terms defined a sweepstakes as “a subscription of three or more, which only one of the parties can *sweep off*, or carry away, by winning the race.” The term sweepstakes was soon shortened to refer to a “stakes race,” by which such races are known today. For either type it was winner-take-all;

<sup>27</sup> For examples of race meeting duration, see *Kentucky Gazette*, September 21, 1801; *Ibid.*, September 27, 1803; *Ibid.*, October 31, 1805; *Ibid.*, September 25, 1806; *Ibid.*, October 4, 1808; *Ibid.*, October 16, 1809; *Ibid.*, October 1, 1811; *Ibid.*, October 7, 1825; *Argus of Western America*, April 13, 1820; *Ibid.*, September 5, 1832; *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine* (Baltimore) (hereinafter *ATR*), October 1829, pp. 108–9; *ATR*, July 1834, pp. 588, 590; “Racing Calendar” appendix, *ATR*, 1839, pp. 20, 26–28, 30, 32, 35, 43, 51, 53; “Racing Calendar” appendix, *ATR*, 1855, p. 26; “Racing Calendar” appendix, *ATR*, 1856, p. 26.

there were rarely any prizes for second place.<sup>28</sup>

Prizes for subscription races often included practical items such as saddles and bridles as awards, usually for the last day of racing. For example, the winner of the third day's racing at the Georgetown course in October 1805 received the entrance money of the preceding day and "an elegant Saddle and Bridle," the latter to be paid for "by the persons starting horses for it." For a one-day event at Lexington in June 1810, the entire award consisted of footwear: "one pair fair top boots, one pair back strap [boots], one pair cossack [boots], and one pair fine shoes, to be made of the best leather, by Isaac Reed, to fit the winner, or to pattern, the whole valued at \$26." At the Forks of the Elkhorn in Franklin County, race winners were awarded barrels of corn in 1802 and 1803; for the latter meeting, the winner of the first day's events received fifty barrels, on the second day twenty-five barrels, and two day's entry fees for the victor of the third day. Awards such as silver bowls were commonly presented as racing trophies in colonial America, but the custom was slow to take root in Kentucky, where breeders were apparently more interested in financial rewards than in plates, cups, or candlesticks as prizes. The first mention of such items as prizes does not appear in Kentucky racing advertisements until 1828, although trophies of this sort afterward became increasingly common and were often supplemented by purses of cash.<sup>29</sup>

Nearly all contests for running horses during the early nineteenth century were of a sort known as "weight for age" races, in which each horse carried a specified weight, being the combined weight of the

<sup>28</sup> John Bee, *Sportsman's Slang: A New Dictionary of Terms Used in the Affairs of the Turf, the Ring, the Chase, and the Cock-Pit* (London, 1825), 168 (quotation). An exception to winner-take-all policy can be found in the conditions advertised for the Danville races of October 1801, in which "The second-best horse, if within his distance, to be entitled to the entrance money each day." See *Stewart's Kentucky Herald*, September 8, 1801. In modern Thoroughbred flat racing, prizes are awarded for the first, second, and third horses across the finish line, termed the "win, place, and show" positions.

<sup>29</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, October 31, 1805 (first and second quotations); *Ibid.*, May 29, 1810 (third quotation); *Guardian of Freedom*, November 10, 1802; *Ibid.*, October 12, 1803. Isaac Reed was a well-known shoe- and bootmaker located on Main Street in Lexington; see William A. Leavy, "A Memoir of Lexington and Vicinity," *RKHS* 41 (Oct. 1943): 323. On silver cups as prizes, see O'Conner, *Notes on the Thoroughbred*, 201, 215–16, 234, 239.

jockey and saddle supplemented, as needed, by lead weights in saddle pockets. The total weight was determined by the age and gender of the horse; fillies and mares were allocated lesser weights than male horses or geldings of the same age. This practice was intended to compensate, in part, for differences in maturity and endurance among horses. If all the horses in a race were of the same age and gender, all would carry the same weight; if a mixture, the older, stronger horses would carry more weight than younger, less mature horses. In the middle of the eighteenth century, most horses being raced were at least four to six years old and carried weights as much as 140 pounds; younger horses were thought unable to withstand the rigors of heat racing. During the next century, weights were gradually reduced and horsemen began to race three- and even two-year-old Thoroughbreds. This tended to eliminate heavyweight jockeys from competition, leading to a more limited supply of riders of small size so that some horses were ridden by boys as young as eleven or twelve years of age.<sup>30</sup>

The handicapping system was different from weight-for-age and, although originating in England, was not common in Kentucky during the early part of the nineteenth century. In an effort to level the playing field, horses in this system are assigned weights according to past performance, so that the most accomplished horses carry the greatest amount of weight. Although handicap races have declined in modern times, such races once accounted for the majority of stakes races and offered some of the largest purses. One of the earliest in the Bluegrass was sponsored by the Lexington Jockey Club in 1823, a “Handy Cap” race held on October 18 following three days of weight-for-age races.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Wray Vamplew and Joyce Kay, *Encyclopedia of British Horseracing* (London and New York, 2005), 256–57; Gerald Hammond, *The Language of Horse Racing* (Chicago, 2000), 77; Wray Vamplew, *The Turf: A Social and Economic History of Horse Racing* (London, 1976), 23–24, 60; Hervey, *Racing in America*, 1:31; *Kentucky Gazette*, October 18, 1794. The first racing notice in Kentucky giving weight requirements was for the Lexington races in October 1794.

<sup>31</sup> Melanie Greene, *Kentucky Handicap Horse Racing: A History of the Great Weight Carriers* (Charleston, S.C., 2014), 13–18, 94–96; *Kentucky Gazette*, August 25, 1823; *Ibid.*, October 20, 1823. Greene states that Kentucky was the first American state to hold handicap races, but does not provide any documentation to support this claim.

Although most race events were open to “any horse, mare, or gelding,” sometimes racing on a certain day of a meet would be limited to a specific class of horse, for example only very young horses, those with no prior victories, or only those belonging to local breeders.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes proven champions were excluded in order to give less successful horses a better opportunity to compete. A contest at the Winchester course in 1803 was open only to horses “who [have] never run the heats and won a purse or match race.” Similarly, at the Bardstown meeting in November 1804, one race day was reserved for any horse “that has never won a purse,” and, at Shepherdsville during that same month, the stipulation for the entire meeting provided that “no horse will be permitted to start that has taken a purse in any other county.” Frequently, winners of previous races during a given meeting were excluded from participating in events of succeeding days. For the second day of the October 1796 meeting at Georgetown, the race was open to all “the winning horse of the first day excepted,” and, on the third day, “the winning horses of the first and second days excepted.” Exclusions were also occasionally made for specific horses.<sup>33</sup>

Participants were required to register their horses and pay the entrance fee by evening of the day before their race, otherwise to pay double the day of the race. These entry fees were separate from the subscriptions or stakes put up but were part of the general race fund and used to supplement the prizes awarded. Both entry fees and purses were highest on the first day and decreased proportionately as the meet continued. Many of the early race meetings were open to anyone who wished to enter a horse, although jockey clubs tended to be more selective, generally limiting entries to horses belonging to their own members. Even so, participation was not entirely exclusive,

<sup>32</sup> *Stewart's Kentucky Herald*, October 9, 1798 (quotation); *Kentucky Gazette*, October 20, 1823.

<sup>33</sup> *Stewart's Kentucky Herald*, October 4, 1796; *Kentucky Gazette*, October 11, 1803 (first quotation); *Ibid.*, October 30, 1804; *Ibid.*, September 25, 1806; *Ibid.*, August 18, 1807; *Ibid.*, September 25, 1810; *Reporter* (Lexington), August 2, 1815; *Western American* (Bardstown, Ky.), November 2, 1804 (second and third quotations); *Kentucky Gazette*, September 24, 1796 (fourth and fifth quotations).

since members could nominate any horse as an entry, including those from outside the region, and there were additional provisions to allow participation by outsiders. Advertisements for the Versailles races of October 1807 and for Richmond in 1809 both noted that “any person not a member can run a horse by paying double entrance.”<sup>34</sup>

On race day, spectators flocked to the race field and lined the perimeter of the oval course, concentrating, of course, in the vicinity of the starting post. In effect local holidays, horseraces were not only the primary form of mass entertainment of the era but were also occasions for social interaction. For owners, the races afforded the opportunity to display their wealth, power, and sense of racial order by publicly showing off their horse-flesh and the enslaved men who served as their grooms, jockeys, and trainers. On some courses, coaches and carriages were admitted to the infield, from which ladies viewed the proceedings in relative comfort, while gentlemen observed from horseback, exchanging courtesies with their peers and riding about from carriage to carriage to pay their respects to the ladies. Crowds of common folk on foot lined the outside of the course and jostled one another as they sought the best vantage point to watch the competitions. Racing was free for spectators; there were no admission charges nor was it practical for race organizers to attempt to collect such fees because there was no way to limit access unless the grounds were completely enclosed. Fees could be collected from any patrons who wished to view the races from the grandstand, although few of the early courses provided such facilities. There were no sheds for bookmakers or any other provision for placing bets at trackside; in fact, jockey clubs strictly prohibited any form of gambling on course grounds in accordance with state law. Bets were certainly placed on race outcomes, often quite substantial, but these were conducted privately between spectators in violation of club rules or arranged off the premises beforehand. Following the Civil War, however, as horseracing increased in popularity and more commercial tracks

<sup>34</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, October 30, 1804; *Ibid.*, October 10, 1809 (quotation); *Western World*, October 22, 1807.



began operation, fees collected from pool-sellers and bookmakers providing trackside wagering for patrons became an indispensable revenue stream for racetracks.<sup>35</sup>

Laid out in some conveniently located grassy field or pasture, the perimeter of the course was marked by a series of poles set into the ground every few rods (fifty to one hundred feet) that served to guide race-riders around the circuit. There were, in the early days, no railings around the inside or the outside of the course; at best, the home stretch might be roped off on either side. When more permanent and well-defined courses were built, railings were at first confined to the home stretch and only later extended to the circumference of the track. The crude poles were later replaced by sturdy painted posts set at intervals of one furlong, or one-eighth of a mile, a convention still observed by modern racetracks. Racing on the early courses could be quite hazardous to both horses and riders, since no real effort was made to create a level surface. A small platform or stand for the judges of the race was erected at the starting post, often covered by an awning. At the earliest Kentucky races, the owners of the participating horses elected the judges, but as racing became more organized, judges were usually officers of the local jockey club. Serving as a race judge was a position that carried quite a bit of prestige, and visiting dignitaries were often invited to serve as honorary judges. The prizes awarded were often placed in silk purses, which were festooned with ribbons and hung from a post at the judges' stand. At the October 1806 Georgetown races, for example, the *Kentucky Gazette* noted, "a very handsome subscription is raising—the money will be hung up at the poles."<sup>36</sup>

The jockeys during this period were likely to be both white and black, selected not only for their skill in handling horses but for small size and weight. During the pioneer era in Kentucky, horses were

<sup>35</sup> Vamplew, *Turf*, 18–19; Robertson, *History of Thoroughbred Racing*, 33; Mooney, *Race Horse Men*, 4–6, 23–54.

<sup>36</sup> Hervey, *Racing in America*, 1:30–31, 33, 247–49; "The Voyages and Travels of Columbus Secundus," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, October 1821, p. 394; Robertson, *History of Thoroughbred Racing*, 33; *Kentucky Gazette*, October 6, 1806 (quotation).

usually ridden in races by their owners; the subsequent proliferation of courses, the increasing financial stakes, and the limitations imposed by required weights, created a considerable demand for a cadre of professional riders. As elsewhere in the South, this demand was answered by drafting riders from the ranks of slaves, who were customarily already occupied in caring for their owner's bloodstock.<sup>37</sup>

English racing regulations had long dictated that jockeys be uniformly attired in a rounded peak cap, velvet jacket, breeches, and topped boots, a custom that was imported into the eastern colonies. On the western frontier, however, attitudes toward clothing were far more relaxed, and it was not until the nineteenth century that anything like a formal dress code was imposed upon race riders in Kentucky. The first notice of dress requirements for jockeys appeared in the *Kentucky Gazette* on July 8, 1809, and ordered that participants in the forthcoming Lexington races be "dressed in silk or satin jackets, and wear caps." The dress code was soon adopted by many other courses in the state, as indicated by an 1811 announcement for the Georgetown races that directed that riders wear "short jackets and caps." The practice was dictated through the state by the ubiquitous notice that a given race would be governed by the rules of the Jockey Club in Lexington. Taking advantage of these requirements, merchants began to carry regulation garb in their stores. An 1816 runaway slave advertisement is indicative both of the style of riding apparel and that the Danville fugitive was most likely one of the black jockeys of the era. "Joe," according to the advertisement, "had on when he went away a blue jockey jacket with numerous white buttons" and "blue pantaloons."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Edward Hotaling, *The Great Black Jockeys: The Lives and Times of the Men Who Dominated America's First National Sport* (Rocklin, Calif., 1999), 12, 22–23, 31–34; Wall, *How Kentucky Became Southern*, 109–42; Mooney, *Race Horse Men*, 8–9, 37–54.

<sup>38</sup> "Old-Time Turf," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 8, 1897, p. 18; Frederick M. Burlew, "Silks and Satins: A Research Study of the Origin and Evolution of Racing Colors," unpublished typescript, 1966, Keeneland Library, Lexington, Ky.; *Kentucky Gazette*, July 8, 1809 (first quotation); *Telegraph* (Georgetown, Ky.), September 25, 1811 (second quotation); *Reporter* (Lexington), April 14, 1812; *Ibid.*, October 24, 1812; *Eagle* (Maysville, Ky.), January 26, 1816 (third through fifth quotations); *Ibid.*, September 26, 1817.

During a meeting each day's racing usually commenced at the noon hour. As the judges arrived on the field and stepped up onto the platform beside the starting post, the hubbub gradually died away as the crowd of spectators focused its attention on the proceedings. At a signal from one of the officials, a drum roll sounded, summoning the horses and their riders to the starting post. Once all was ready, another roll of the drum, or sometimes a blast from a bugle, ordered the riders to saddle their horses and mount up. At last, a single loud tap from the drum signaled the start of the race, and the horses leapt forward. This starting procedure differed from that used at British courses, where the race was launched by the blare of a horn, the dropping of a flag, or simply shouting the word "go!" and was vigorously defended by American observers as being less likely to produce false starts.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Fall and Rise of Racing in Kentucky, 1812–1826**

The effect of the War of 1812 on racing activity in Kentucky was reflected by an abrupt decline in newspaper advertisements for race meetings. According to available sources, in 1810 and 1811 racing was provided by a half dozen courses in the state, but in 1812 and 1813, only the Sanders course in Scott County and the Lexington Jockey Club advertised forthcoming meetings. Aside from a brief flurry of planned meetings in 1815 at Versailles, Georgetown, and Harrodsburg, and at Greensburg in 1818, there were no other race notices for the period from 1814 until 1819; this hiatus represents the first time that racing had been largely absent from Kentucky since the first associations were organized two decades before.<sup>40</sup> In the east,

<sup>39</sup> "The Starting of a Race Horse," *ATR*, January 1831, pp. 217–19; *ATR*, October 1831, 93–94. See also the novelized account of a Thoroughbred race at Richmond, Virginia, in James K. Paulding, *Westward Ho! A Tale* (New York, 1832), 27–34.

<sup>40</sup> Notices for race meetings for the period can be found in (with location of race in brackets): *Argus of Western America*, November 20, 1818 [Greensburg]; *Kentucky Gazette*, May 29, 1810 [Lexington]; *Ibid.*, October 16, 1810 [Lexington]; *Ibid.*, September 19, 1810 [Georgetown]; *Ibid.*, September 2, 1810 [Versailles]; *Ibid.*, March 11, 1811 [Lexington]; *Ibid.*, October 1, 1811 [Harrodsburg]; *Palladium*, October 20, 1810 [Harrodsburg and Springfield]; *Ibid.*, September 21, 1811 [Springfield]; *Ibid.*, September 28, 1811 [Frankfort]; *Reporter* (Lexington), October 6, 1810 [Richmond]; *Ibid.*, September 14, 1811 [Mercer Co.]; *Ibid.*,

British incursions devastated racing establishments along the Tidewater, particularly in Maryland and at the national capital. Although Kentucky was far removed from the coast, the region remained under threat of invasion from the northwest. Under such conditions, interest in entertainments such as horseracing was minimal, and, of course, the many thousands of Kentucky men who volunteered rode off to war on mounts that otherwise would have been pitted against one another. Immediately after the war, economic considerations likely played an important, if lesser role, for the nation soon entered a period of mild depression, which culminated in a major financial crisis, the Panic of 1819; such circumstances also discouraged leisure pursuits.<sup>41</sup>

After a long period of inactivity, Thoroughbred racing in Kentucky again flourished by the mid-1820s, and the sport was soon carried out on a scale that far exceeded that of the pre-war era. By 1825, race meetings were held at no fewer than seven community venues, and this was just a portent of the great expansion that took place during the 1830s. The resurgence of the turf, as might be expected, was led by the sporting gentlemen of Lexington. On August 27, 1821, a notice placed in the *Kentucky Gazette* by the club secretary, Sanford Keen, announced that the reconstituted Lexington Jockey Club would hold a race meeting in the autumn. Although not a horseman of note, Keen was likely elected as secretary of the Jockey Club because he had purchased John Postlethwait's inn and tavern in 1817.<sup>42</sup>

August 15, 1812 [Lexington]; *Ibid.*, October 2, 1812 [Scott Co.]; *Ibid.*, August 28, 1813 [Lexington]; *Ibid.*, October 2, 1813 [Scott Co.]; *Ibid.*, August 2, 1815 [Harrodsburg and Scott Co.]; *Telegraph* (Georgetown), September 25, 1811 [Georgetown]; O'Conner, *Notes on the Thoroughbred*, 107, refers to Versailles races in October 1815.

<sup>41</sup> Hervey, *Racing in America*, 1:244, 2:3–5; Richard G. Stone Jr., *A Brittle Sword: The Kentucky Militia, 1776–1912* (Lexington, Ky., 1977), 40–51.

<sup>42</sup> *Kentucky Reporter*, August 27, 1821; John Postlethwait to Sanford Keen, September 20, 1817, Fayette County (Ky.) Deed Book Q, FCC; Leavy, "A Memoir of Lexington and Its Vicinity," 125–26. The Keen(e) family has a long association with the horse industry in the Bluegrass, beginning with Lexington pioneer and horseman Francis Keen (1744–1818), the father of Sanford Keen. John Oliver "Jack" Keene, who during the early years of the Great Depression built a magnificent racing establishment on the Versailles Road west of Lexington that later became the core of modern-day Keeneland, was the great-great grandson of Francis Keen.



**ASSOCIATION COURSE**

**THE FALL MEETING** of the Lexington Association for the improvement of the breed of Horses, will commence on *Wednesday the 7th day of October* next.

The 1st day's race, 4 mile heats—purse \$400  
 The 2d day's race 3 mile heats—purse 250  
 The 3d day's race 2 mile heats—purse 150  
 The last day, one mile—best three in five, for the gate money and entrance of that day.  
 Lexington, August 1829—34

*Colt Course, (late Stevenson's) Woodford County.*

**T**HERE will be three days running, to commence on *Thursday the 17th day of Sept.* The first day, a Poststake, two mile heats, for three year olds, for \$200 between Col. Wm. Buford and Edward Blackburn, Esq. each of them selecting the best horse from his stock—This will no doubt be a most interesting race to breeders of fine horses, as both of those gentlemen are among the most distinguished stock raisers West of the mountains.

Second day, a Sweepstake, two miles and repeat, \$25 entrance, free for any thing.

Third day, mile heats—I propose offering a beautiful Silver Cup, and the entrance money, also free for any nag—entrance 10 or \$20 as those who run may choose. The proprietor will furnish race horses with stables gratis.

DAVID REES.

Cross Roads, Woodford city. Sept 1, 1829—34

**T**HE RACES at *Harrodsburg Springs*, on the *Central Track of Kentucky*, will commence on *Wednesday, September 9th*, and continue through the week. The track has been recently established, and will be inferior to none in the Western country.  
 August 24, 1829.—34-3 [Watchtower.]

**SPORTING INTELLIGENCE.**

THE Richmond Jockey Club Races will commence over the Wood Lawn Course, near town, on *Wednesday the 23d day of September* next, and continue three days, free for any horse, mare or gelding—weight agreeably to the rules of said Club. The first day's race, 3 mile heats; second day, 2 mile heats; and the third day, the best three in five, mile heats—fourth day, on Saturday, will be run over the same course a Sweepstake race, 2 mile heats, free for any thing in the world, carrying weight agreeably to the rules of the said Club—entrance \$100 each—time of entering to expire on the 15th day of August next, five now entered and a prospect of as many more. Sportsmen are generally requested to attend, and particularly invited to enter their best horses in this sweepstake.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD, Sec'y.  
 Richmond, Ky July 18, 1829.—22

**RACES!!**

**T**HERE will be racing over the NEWPORT course, commencing on *Wednesday the 9th day of September* next.

First day—for \$ 150, three mile heats.

Second day—for \$100, two mile heats.

Third day—for sweepstakes, one mile heats, the best three in five.

Each day's racing free for any horse mare or gelding.

Fourth day for match races.

N. B. The above purses will certainly be run for, and a probability for increasing the 1st day's purse to \$200, and the 2d to \$150.

This is a beautiful and well situated course, contiguous to Cincinnati, equally convenient to the Kentuckians and Ohioans, where an opportunity will be afforded to test the breed of horses in the two states.

Newport, Ky. Aug. 17, 1829.—34

Newspaper advertisements for races at tracks in central and northern Kentucky, September 1829. *The Reporter (Lexington, Ky.), September 2, 1829.*

It was at Postlethwait's in 1797 that the Lexington Jockey Club had been organized, and thereafter it was the scene of many significant events in the history of the sport. In 1817, the original proprietor, John Postlethwait, sold the tavern to Sanford Keen for \$35,000. "Mr. Keen's Inn" continued to prosper under its new owner, with Sanford's wife, Martha, as the gracious hostess, until the main hotel building was consumed by fire on March 3, 1820. In its coverage of the fire, the *Lexington Public Advertiser* expressed the hope that the hotel, like the legendary Phoenix, would soon rise from the ashes. With the generous assistance of Sanford's friends and neighbors, the Keen hotel quickly rose again over the succeeding months, with a grand reopening on January 8, 1821. It would not be long before the com-

munity bestowed the name Phoenix Hotel upon the establishment.<sup>43</sup>

With his house once again in order, Keen found time to participate in the phoenix-like regeneration of the Lexington Jockey Club, which, of course, held its meetings at the Keen hotel just as tradition had long dictated. Keen served as secretary of the club for three years, helping to organize the annual October races, which were held at the course on the Williams property on the west side of Georgetown Road, today the site of the Lexington Cemetery. This course had first been used just prior to the beginning of the War of 1812, and, after the war, it was the primary racing venue in Lexington until 1828. He might well have continued to serve as secretary for many years, but just before sunrise on October 4, 1823, Sanford Keen died of an unspecified cause in the thirty-eighth year of his life. His place as secretary of the Jockey Club was quickly filled by William G. Wilson, and the fall races were held as scheduled.<sup>44</sup>

In 1826, Martha Keen presided over the hotel on a notable day, which witnessed the refashioning of the old Lexington Jockey Club into a new organization that would direct organized racing at Lexington for more than a century. Earlier that year, a notice in the *Kentucky Reporter* directed subscribers to the Lexington Jockey Club to meet at “Mrs. Keen’s Inn” on May 8 to adopt “rules and articles of association.” No records exist of the discussions that took place at this meeting, although it is evident from subsequent events that there was sufficient discontent among the members that it was not the usual reaffirmation of the status quo. In recent decades, many of the leading Bluegrass gentry had developed an interest in acquiring

<sup>43</sup> Fayette County Deed Book Q, September 20, 1817, pp. 302–4, FCC; John D. Wright Jr., *Lexington: Heart of the Bluegrass* (Lexington, Ky., 1994), 49; *Kentucky Gazette*, March 10, 1820; “Fire,” *Kentucky Reporter*, March 8, 1820; “Keen’s New Hotel,” *ibid.*, January 8, 1821; “Fire! Fire! Fire!” *Lexington Public Advertiser*, March 4, 1820. A Lexington landmark, the Phoenix Hotel operated under this name until its demolition in 1982 to make room for a skyscraper that was never built.

<sup>44</sup> “Races,” *Kentucky Reporter*, August 27, 1821; “Jockey Club Races,” *ibid.*, August 26, 1822; “Lexington Jockey Club Races,” *ibid.*, August 25, 1823; “Died,” *ibid.*, October 6, 1823; “The Races,” *ibid.*, October 20, 1823.

and developing superior bloodlines in cattle and other livestock in addition to horses. The exclusive focus of a jockey club upon equine matters was too narrow and did not adequately represent the increasingly diverse interests of members. Shortly after the May meeting of the club, a proposal circulated among the stockmen of the region, an agreement to form an association “for the purpose of promoting the purchase and sale of stock, and to encourage the breeding of horses.” The association was to purchase a suitable site for the “exhibition and sale of various stock and manufactured articles, and the trial of speed and bottom of our horses.” On July 29, 1826, the subscribers met at Mrs. Keen’s Inn to form the “Kentucky Association for the Improvement of Breeds of Stock,” electing William Pritchard as president and John Wirt as secretary. The list of subscribers was a catalog of some of the most prominent citizens and horsemen of the Bluegrass, most of whom were dedicated Thoroughbred breeders.<sup>45</sup>

The members of the Kentucky Association wasted no time in scheduling their first race meeting, a three-day event beginning October 19, noting that the meet would be governed by the printed rules of “the late Lexington Jockey Club.” The fall races of 1826 and those during the next two years were held at the Williams course. The articles of association specified, however, that the organization was to purchase property upon which to establish a permanent racing facility, and so in July 1828 an announcement in the *Reporter* informed members of the association that arrangements had been made to acquire land and the first installment of \$25 was due. The land, two tracts totaling twenty-nine acres located north of Winchester

<sup>45</sup> “Lexington Jockey Club,” *Kentucky Reporter*, April 24, 1826 (first and second quotations); *A Souvenir from the Kentucky Association, Inc., Lexington, Ky.: Centennial Meeting Spring 1926* (Lexington, Ky., 1926), 5–7 (third through fifth quotations on 5). Despite the assertions of numerous histories, the noted statesman Henry Clay was not a charter member of the Kentucky Association, although he later served several terms as an officer. Among the many equine luminaries who were charter members of the association were Elisha Warfield, Elisha I. Winter, Leslie Combs, and Robert J. Breckinridge of Fayette County; Abraham Buford, James K. Duke, Willa Viley, and Ralph B. Tarlton of Scott County; and Edward M. Blackburn and William Buford of Woodford County.

Road between Fifth and Seventh streets, was purchased for \$1,500 from subscriber John Postlethwait, who had acquired the property on behalf of the association. Subsequent purchases over the next few years increased the total extent of the race grounds to more than sixty acres. The land was put to use immediately; an announcement in the July 16 edition of the *Reporter* (two days before the sale was finalized!) stated that the association's annual races would henceforth run over the new course.<sup>46</sup>

For the first few years, the new Kentucky Association course was similar to the Lexington course on the Williams property, being laid out as a grassy oval similar to English courses and described as being "rather a slow course to run over, having two sharp hills." Writing to the *American Turf Register* in May 1832, Kentucky Association secretary John Wirt informed the editor that, "Since my last our track has been altered, and I think it as near an exact mile as it can be made." The alterations to which Wirt referred would soon become the hallmark of a distinctive American style of racing pioneered in 1821 by the Union Course in Long Island, New York. The turf of the oval was skinned—turned over by the plow and harrowed to create a racing surface comprised of bare dirt. Circuits of this type are called tracks, rather than courses, and the association track was the second such created in North America, helping to set the future style for Thoroughbred racing on this side of the Atlantic. A racing fan later recalled the appearance of the track shortly after the renovation: "We can recollect when nothing but an old post and rail fence inclosed the track; the judges' stand stood at the cow-pens, and the grand stand was an old rickety building, with high steps, which stood on top of the hill in the center of the course. Admittance to the course was free, to the stand twenty-five cents." The first crude rail fencing was soon replaced by a high wooden fence that surrounded the establishment and screened the action from outside. The grandstand was rebuilt

<sup>46</sup> *Kentucky Reporter*, August 14, 1826; *Ibid.*, October 16, 1826 (quotation); *Ibid.*, October 23, 1826; *Ibid.*, July 2, 1828; *Kentucky Gazette*, October 20, 1826; Fayette County Deed Book 4, July 18, 1828, pp. 183–84, FCC.



on the outside of the oval, at the starting line, and the judges' stand placed across the track from the grandstand.<sup>47</sup>

At the time, most racecourses in England were not designed for the benefit of spectators. They were adapted to the contours of the landscape, rising and falling with broad curves and long straight stretches taking the action out of sight of onlookers. In America, courses catered more to spectators, most racing venues were regular one-mile ovals, almost flat, with nearly all sections clearly visible from the centerfield or grandstand areas. Whereas English Thoroughbreds raced over a grassy surface, in the United States, the turf was more figurative than actual. The skinned surfaces of dirt were thought to be faster surfaces and easier to maintain than grass and soon became the standard for American racing. In another departure from English custom, most races on American soil were run in a counter-clockwise direction, rather than clockwise. This practice appears to have derived from sentiment against British customs that resurged during the War of 1812, just as, decades earlier, patriotic fervor prompted Kentucky sportsman William Whitley to reject British racing traditions during the Revolutionary War era. Reflecting on this issue, in 1840, the editor of the *Turf Register* tactfully observed that "in this, as in some other things, our countrymen do not choose to follow the lead of their European brethren." Lastly, English and American racing devotees held slightly different perspectives in regard to race results. For English sportsmen, Thoroughbred racing was all about the competition between horses, and they were baffled by the developing American obsession with time as a performance measure. Although horseraces

<sup>47</sup> "Measure of the Kentucky Race Courses," *ATR*, November 1829, p. 162 (first quotation); Letter to the editor from John Wirt, May 28 1832, *ATR*, July 1832, p. 572 (second quotation); An Old Turfman [Cadwallader R. Colden], "On Race Courses," *ATR*, April 1831, pp. 372–74; Kent Hollingsworth, *The Kentucky Thoroughbred* (Lexington, Ky., 1976), 22; Sanders D. Bruce, "Kentucky Association," *Turf, Field and Farm*, April 19, 1872, p. 249 (third quotation). William Whitley might instead justifiably be considered the true pioneer of the dirt-track oval and the American custom of racing in a counter-clockwise direction at Sportsman Hill in Lincoln County, Kentucky, which he constructed prior to 1788. Whitley detested the English, and the customs he established at his track were in direct opposition to English practice.

in Britain had often been timed by stopwatch since the middle of the eighteenth century, time comparisons were more meaningful in America where most courses were laid out to standard lengths and configuration. One British turf historian noted that in America, even in the late nineteenth century, clocking, or timing of races, “is thought much more of than among ourselves.”<sup>48</sup>

For more than seventy years, from their inaugural race meeting in October 1828 until the spring of 1897, the affairs of the Kentucky Association functioned smoothly. The association regularly sponsored racing events each spring and fall, with occasional extra meets during the year. One of the first actions by the officers of the organization was, in 1831, to establish an annual stakes race to honor the long-hallowed meeting place and watering hole of Lexington horsemen, the establishment of John Postlethwait, who had reclaimed his hotel from the widowed Martha Keen in 1827. By then, the old inn was informally known to Lexington residents as the Phoenix Hotel, and so the event was designated the “Phoenix Hotel Stakes.” The Phoenix has been held, with occasional interruptions, from 1831 to the present day, making it the oldest stakes race in North America.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Reemergence of Racing Venues in Antebellum Kentucky**

Several other jockey clubs in Kentucky, including those at Frank-

<sup>48</sup> John Dizikes, *Sportsmen and Gamesmen* (Columbia, Mo., 2002), 123–29; Robertson, *History of Thoroughbred Racing*, 32–33; *ATR*, September 1840, p. 508 (first quotation); Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift, *Shaping the Day: A History of Timekeeping in England and Wales, 1300–1800* (Oxford, U.K., 2009), 271; Robert Black, *Horse Racing in England: A Synoptical Review* (London, 1893), 277 (second quotation). On the American preoccupation with time, see Alexis McCrossen, *Marking Modern Times: A History of Clocks, Watches, and Other Timekeepers in American Life* (Chicago, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> *Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, December Session 1837* (Frankfort, Ky., 1838), 144; “John Postlethwait’s Inn,” *Kentucky Reporter*, March 28, 1827; Hamilton Busbey, “The Running Turf in America,” *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, July 1870, p. 245; Weeks, *American Turf*, 29; “America’s Oldest Stake Events,” *Daily Racing Form*, May 4, 1991, p. 79. Last sponsored by the Kentucky Association in 1930, shortly before the dissolution of that body, the event was revived at Keeneland in 1937. The Phoenix Stakes in October 2017 marked the 165th running of the race; see “Stoll Keenon Ogden Phoenix Stakes,” Keeneland Media Guide, Spring 2017, pp. 100–103, <http://www.keeneland.com/media/guide> (accessed August 14, 2017).

fort, Richmond, and Newport, took their cue from the Lexington horsemen and reorganized as associations with similar articles and bylaws. Racing enthusiasts in Louisville were the first to emulate the Kentucky Association. In 1831, they organized as the Louisville Association for the Improvement of Breeds of Horses, adopting the articles of the Lexington association almost verbatim. The evolution of Thoroughbred racing in Louisville, which lacked a newspaper such as Lexington's *Kentucky Gazette* during the settlement era, is more difficult to trace. Local tradition holds that horseraces—most likely quarter-mile races—were staged on Market Street in 1783. By 1823, local horsemen had established a jockey club, and several racecourses were in operation during the 1820s. The primary venue for the Louisville Jockey Club appears to have been a course laid out, perhaps as early as 1815, at the Hope Distillery at Main and Sixteenth streets. Major Peter Funk operated a private facility, the Beargrass Course, on his farm in the area now bounded by Hurstbourne Lane and Taylorsville Road. An entertainment complex known as Elm Tree Garden, which featured a treetop tavern, was built on Shippingport Island in 1829 by Joseph L. Detiste and incorporated a preexisting racecourse for the amusement of patrons.<sup>50</sup>

After its formation, the Louisville Association soon established a new course, known as Oakland for the large and gracious oaks on the property, on fifty-five acres of land in the vicinity of present-day Seventh Street and Magnolia. The construction of the course was announced in August 1832:

A beautiful track of land has been purchased on the Salt river road, one and a half miles from the city of Louisville, on which a running track has been laid off, thirty feet in width and precisely a mile in length, enclosed by a close plank fence eight feet in height,

<sup>50</sup> *Constitution of the Louisville Association for the Improvement of the Breed of Horses, and Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Course* (Louisville, Ky., 1832); Johnston, ed., *Memorial History of Louisville*, 2: 323–24; Leland R. Johnson and Charles E. Parrish, *Triumph at the Falls: The Louisville and Portland Canal* (Louisville, Ky., 2007), 46–47.

and having a light railing extended round the whole of the inner circuit.

The association erected an elegant three-story clubhouse and hotel, known as the Oakland House, on the grounds, and the course opened in 1833. It became nationally prominent after hosting the famous match race in 1839 between Wagner and Grey Eagle. Oakland operated successfully for another decade, when increasing financial difficulties led to a cancellation of race meetings in 1849 and again in 1851, and the track finally ceased operation after the 1858 racing season. A new facility, Woodlawn, located near present-day St. Matthews, began operation in 1859, but this track also failed by 1870. Jefferson County, being removed from the core Thoroughbred breeding region of the Bluegrass, could not generate the same level of public support as in Lexington, and so a permanent facility was not established until the opening of Churchill Downs in 1875. Even the Downs operated on a shaky financial basis until taken over by Matt J. Winn and associates in 1903.<sup>51</sup>

The Jacksonian era witnessed many significant changes in Kentucky racing venues. Although racing was revived, ultimately, in most of the communities where it had been present prior to the War of 1812, few of the original courses remained in existence. Instead, many new venues were opened throughout the state, many of which were located in communities where courses had not previously operated. The number of tracks hosting advertised competitions peaked during the years 1836–1840, with twenty-one different tracks in operation during this period and fifteen of these facilities sponsoring meetings

<sup>51</sup> George H. Yater, "Oakland Race Course," *Encyclopedia of Louisville*, ed. John E. Kleber (Lexington, Ky., 2001), 665; "Louisville Fall Races," *ATR*, August 1832, inside back cover (quotation); Carl E. Kramer, *Old Louisville: A Changing View* (Louisville, Ky., 1982), 4–5; William T. Porter, "Wagner and Grey Eagle's Races," *ATR*, March 1840, 116–32; *ATR*, 1859, p. 41; Johnston, ed., *Memorial History of Louisville*, 2:323–24; Marjorie Reiser, "Horse Racing in Central Kentucky and Jefferson County" (MA thesis, University of Louisville, 1944), 15–22; Frank G. Menke, *Down the Stretch: The Story of Colonel Matt J. Winn* (New York, 1945), 22–38; Kimberly Gatto, *Churchill Downs: America's Most Historic Racetrack* (Charleston, S.C., 2010), 13–46.

in 1838 alone.<sup>52</sup> Most of these tracks were located in the Bluegrass region, with a scattering in the western part of the state, mostly near the Tennessee border; this was a natural development since Tennessee was another important area of Thoroughbred breeding and racing during the antebellum era.<sup>53</sup>

The most active tracks were, unsurprisingly, associated with the major population centers; the Kentucky Association track at Lexington and the recently opened Oakland Course at Louisville maintained more-or-less continuous racing during the period, hosting both spring and fall meetings as well as occasional extra meetings and match races. Aside from Lexington and Louisville, the best-known and most-active track in antebellum Kentucky was the Spring Hill course at Crab Orchard in Lincoln County, which held its first race meeting in August 1835. Like the Greenville Springs course at Harrodsburg, Spring Hill owed part of its success to an association with a popular mineral-waters spa, the Crab Orchard Springs. The health resort began operation in 1827 when Jack Davis opened a “House of Entertainment” near the springs at the corner of Lancaster and Stanford streets in Crab Orchard, and it soon rivaled the resorts at Harrodsburg as the most popular watering place in Kentucky.<sup>54</sup>

The Spring Hill course at Crab Orchard was located about a half mile southeast of the springs. The owner, Henry W. Farris, later recalled, “In 1835, we settled in Crab Orchard, built the greater part of

<sup>52</sup> Unlike the period from settlement through the first quarter of the nineteenth century, in which the chronology of racing venues can only be gleaned from rather erratic notices in Kentucky newspapers advertising races, which may or not have been held, a more reliable and systematic reporting of race results began with the publication of John Stuart Skinner’s *American Turf Register* (1830) and William T. Porter’s *Spirit of the Times* (1831). In addition to race results, these publications also often provided detailed accounts of races, descriptions of courses, and news about jockey clubs and racing associations. The distribution and chronology of post-1829 race tracks in Kentucky in this article is based primarily upon reports from the *American Turf Register*, in its successive iterations.

<sup>53</sup> On the significance of Tennessee to the development of the American Thoroughbred industry, see Anderson, *Making the American Thoroughbred*; Hervey, *Racing in America*, 1:233–36.

<sup>54</sup> *ATR*, October 1835, p. 92; *Kentucky Reporter*, May 12, 1827; Coleman Jr., *Springs of Kentucky*, 25, 67.



track to be the final resting place for his champion horse. Favored by sportsmen from Woodford and Fayette counties, and attracting competitors from Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and other southern states, Spring Hill operated almost continuously from its opening season until about 1875, and even as late as 1897 was still used as a training track by local horsemen.<sup>55</sup>

The proliferation of new courses moved outward from the core Thoroughbred region of the Inner Bluegrass, providing venues for sportsmen in more distant areas of the state. Racing ovals were laid out for the first time at Columbia, in Adair County, in 1825; at Greensburg, in Green County, in 1832; at Cynthiana, in Harrison County, and near Bethlehem, in Henry County, in 1837; and for race fans in northern Kentucky, at Cincinnati in 1825 and Newport in 1834. New courses in the western section of the state, for whom an establishment date cannot be determined but which began advertising race meetings during the period, include those at Burkesville (Cumberland County), Merry Oaks (Barren County), Glasgow (Barren County), Keysburg (Logan County), and Hopkinsville (Christian County).

The rapid expansion of the sport after 1820 fostered competition among venues, which can be gleaned from race advertisements in newspapers. For example, Robert H. Burton, "Inn Keeper in the Town of Columbia" and operator of the "Columbia Turf" in Adair County, carried out an extensive advertising campaign. He placed advertisements for the forthcoming race meeting in May 1825 in several papers of the region, including those of Frankfort, Louisville, Russellville, and Nashville, noting the convenience of the central location of the course. By the time of the October 1826 races, the Columbia Jockey Club had been established, but for all the fanfare, no further advertisements appeared until 1832, by which time the course had passed to another proprietor, James Moore, of Columbia. The Greensburg Jockey Club announced its existence in the *Turf*

<sup>55</sup> Will of Henry W. Farris, March 12, 1884, Lincoln County Will Book, pp. 3, 140, Lincoln County Clerk's Office, Stanford, Ky. (first quotation); "Racing Half a Century Ago," *Memphis Public Ledger*, October 23, 1883; "Old-Time Turf," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 8, 1897 (second quotation).

*Register* in June 1832 and invited “the raisers of fine horses” in Kentucky and Tennessee to attend, noting, as Columbia, that their one-mile “coursing ground” adjoining Greensburg was centrally located between Nashville, Louisville, and Lexington. The Greensburg club continued to advertise race meetings through 1839.<sup>56</sup>

In January 1837, the horsemen of Harrison County gave notice, “We have organized a Jockey Club at this place, called the Cynthiana Jockey Club, to continue five years,” and reported the results of a four-day race meeting held the previous October. The course was owned by James J. Allen, a “noted race-horse dealer.” The Cynthiana club sponsored racing from 1836 through 1841 and then disbanded as stipulated; there were no further reports of race meetings taking place in Harrison County. In the same year, 1837, turfmen in Henry County met on March 7 to organize the Mobley Jockey Club. “The course is precisely one mile in length, it is of an oblong form, and on first rate ground,” a subscriber informed readers of the *Turf Register*, noting that “the rules of the Central course [i.e., Baltimore] govern this course.” The course was so designated because of its location at Mobley Stand, now known as Bethlehem. The first race meeting was held in September 1836 (prior to organization of the jockey club) and racing was conducted sporadically until 1851.<sup>57</sup>

Cumberland County’s Burkesville course held its first reported race meeting, of four days’ duration, beginning on October 12, 1836. A local jockey club had been formed, comprised of “gentlemen of high character.” The course was described as adjoining the town, “immediately on the bank of the Cumberland river. It is laid off in an oblong form, having two stretches of six hundred yards long, almost a perfect level. Inferior to no course in America, well planked and railed.” In 1836, two Burkesville subscribers wrote to the editor of

<sup>56</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, April 28, 1825 (quotations); *Ibid.*, September 1, 1826; O’Conner, *Notes on the Thoroughbred*, 295; *ATR*, June 1832, p. 530.

<sup>57</sup> *ATR*, January 1837, p. 231 (first and second quotations); *Ibid.*, December 1836, p. 180 (third and fourth quotations); *Ibid.*, April 1837, p. 380; William H. Perrin, ed., *History of Bourbon, Scott, Harrison and Nicholas Counties, Kentucky* (Chicago, 1882), 309; Maude J. Drane, *History of Henry County, Kentucky* (n.p., 1948), 41–44.



the *Turf Register*, noting that the county surveyor had measured the distance around the center of the track as an exact mile. Race meetings occurred at Burkesville from 1836 through 1840. The club thereafter disbanded and organized racing ended in that community.<sup>58</sup>

In southwestern Kentucky, near the Tennessee border, several racing venues emerged for brief periods. In Barren County, race meetings were held both at Merry Oaks, located about halfway between Glasgow and Bowling Green, from 1836 through 1840, and later at Glasgow from 1854 through 1858. The first settlers of Merry Oaks were the Denton brothers, Thomas, David, and Charles. "For many years they kept up a race track which was patronized by all the sportsmen of the country, far and near," a local historian has noted. "They ran a store, and as that was in which would be termed by some the good old days of pure whiskey and peach brandy, a sufficient amount of that was generally on hand." The first record of a race meeting was a one-day sweepstakes on October 7, 1836; there were no further reports until 1840, and none thereafter. Even less information is available for the Glasgow course, although the five-year time span for race results at this location, from 1854 to 1858, suggests that a jockey club was organized to hold meetings and subsequently disbanded. The Keysburg course in Logan County, close to the Tennessee line, reported only two race meetings, beginning with a two-day meet on October 16, 1834; the first day's race was termed the "Jockey Club purse" so presumably a local racing association was in charge of events. The second, and final, report for Keysburg was for a four-day meeting in October 1840; the name of the track had been changed to the Grey Eagle Course, honoring Wagner's opponent in the celebrated Oakland Course match race of the previous year. No other known race reports were published for the Keysburg track.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> *ATR*, February 1837, pp. 256–58 (quotations on 258); *Ibid.*, March 1837, p. 326; *Ibid.*, April 1837, p. 363; *Ibid.*, September 1837, pp. 497–99.

<sup>59</sup> *ATR*, May 1835, p. 479; *Ibid.*, December 1836, pp. 181; "Racing Calendar" appendix, *Ibid.*, 1840, p. 46; *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), August 26, 1840; Sandra K. Gorin, comp., *Backroads of Barren County, Ky., as Written by William Daniel Tolle from 1877 through the 1920's* (Glasgow, Ky., 1991), 32 (first and second quotations).

In Todd County, a single race meeting was reported at the Trenton course for May 1838, and nothing further until another single meeting in 1854. According to a county history, two “horse-fanciers,” James Beazley and Thomas McDaniel, came to Todd County in 1816 and settled about three miles south of Trenton, later constructing a race track “kept up for many years. Here in an early day the people for miles around came in large numbers to view the races.” The Hopkinsville Jockey Club in Christian County provided their first report of a race meeting held over three days beginning October 31, 1833. The club continued to host meetings through 1839 and then apparently disbanded with no further indication of racing in Christian County.<sup>60</sup>

No formal course or track was ever established in Henderson County in the nineteenth century, although informal “quarter races” of the sort prominent in the Bluegrass region during the settlement period were held at the county seat of Henderson from the earliest years of the community (established 1797) until growing public disapproval forced the practice to be discontinued in 1840. In that year, the town trustees ordered that “any person or persons guilty of running or racing any horse or horses . . . should be punished by a fine of three dollars.” Although no advertisements for these events could be located, an 1887 county history reported that one of the favored locations for this purpose was on Elm Street from Upper Fifth Street to the foot of the hill and the races drew large crowds of spectators. Also in this county, at Robards Station, south of Henderson near the Green River, was a “straight quarter or half mile race track,” where, from about 1810 to 1840, “men used to congregate to bet, test the speed of their animals, drink liquor and otherwise indulge their vicious and uncultured appetites.”<sup>61</sup>

Several new locations began race operations in the northern and

<sup>60</sup> *ATR*, July 1834, pp. 585; *Ibid.*, January-February 1839, p. 90; “Racing Calendar” appendix, *Ibid.*, 1839, p. 50; “Racing Calendar” appendix, *ibid.*, 1854, p. 26; J. H. Battle and William H. Perrin, eds., *Counties of Todd and Christian, Kentucky: Historical and Biographical* (Chicago, 1884), 1:152 (quotations).

<sup>61</sup> Edmund L. Starling, *History of Henderson County, Kentucky* (Henderson, Ky., 1887), 289–90 (first quotation), 395 (second and third quotations).

northeastern section of the state. The first known report of racing in northern Kentucky was a notice in 1802 for the “Limestone Races” at present-day Maysville in Mason County, an event that would not be repeated for nearly a quarter century. In 1825, a newly formed Maysville Jockey Club began hosting races at a track called the “Beechland Course” and continued to do so sporadically through 1831; a long break in racing reports thereafter was followed by a resumption of race meetings beginning in 1838 that ran through 1841. Racing began in 1829 at Newport in Campbell County, directly across the river from Cincinnati, with a single meeting, which was not repeated until the formation of a local jockey club in 1834. A member of the new organization wrote to the editor of the *Turf Register* to announce that “there has recently been established in the vicinity of this place . . . one of the most beautiful race courses in the United States. Some twenty or thirty gentlemen have associated themselves, who are styled the ‘Newport Association,’ for the purpose of drafting rules and regulations for the future government of the course.” The organization continued to sponsor races until the expiration of the articles of association in 1838. Horseracing would not resume at Newport until the establishment of the “Queen City” track in 1896. Races also occurred sporadically at Falmouth in Pendleton County. For example, a three-day race meeting was held in October 1837 but apparently was not repeated until 1853.<sup>62</sup>

Several communities in the Bluegrass region that had racing venues shuttered by the War of 1812 or other causes embraced Thoroughbred racing once again by renovating the courses or through construction of new facilities. After having lain dormant since 1811, the course at the Forks of Elkhorn near Frankfort was once again put in order by the turf-minded citizens of Franklin County, who reorganized as the Franklin Association and held annual meetings from

<sup>62</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, September 24, 1802; *Maysville Eagle*, September 5, 1827; *Ibid.*, August 13, 1828; *Tennessean* (Nashville), September 21, 1829; *Kentucky Reporter*, September 23, 1829; O’Conner, *Notes on the Thoroughbred*, 174, 175, 182, 216, 221; *ATR*, July 1834, pp. 586–87; *ibid.*, September 1834, p. 43; *Ibid.*, January 1838, p. 41; “Racing Calendar” appendix, *Ibid.*, 1853, p. 53.

1831 until 1842. In 1839, the association wrote to the *Turf Register* to inform subscribers that “a new Course has been established near Frankfort, Ky., to be styled the Capitol Course. It is an association upon the plan of the Lexington Jockey Club.” This was, however, not a new course but referred to the venue at the Forks, perhaps newly rehabilitated. Racing in Woodford County had been intermittent from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the early 1830s, usually consisting of occasional blocks of two consecutive years of racing followed by long breaks in between. Beginning in the 1820s, the Versailles track was known as the Daisy Hill Course. After a decade-long hiatus that began in 1834, Thoroughbred racing was resurrected at Versailles in 1845 for five unbroken years of racing, suggesting the work of an active jockey club.<sup>63</sup>

During the first quarter of the century, Madison County exhibited an erratic pattern of race meetings similar to that of Versailles, with races sometimes conducted at the course near Richmond, known as Woodlawn, and sometimes at the Colt Course of Thomas Stevenson. In 1828, the horsemen of the county were apparently reenergized, entering upon a phase in which race meetings were held on a nearly uninterrupted schedule for more than a decade. The Richmond Jockey Club was reorganized in 1832 to become the Madison Association. Members purchased acreage near the city upon which to build a new track:

Our track is in form a parallelogram, the sides of which are one hundred and ten poles. It is well inclosed upon the outside by a six rail cedar post fence, and upon the inside by a two rail cedar post fence; there is on the outside one hundred pannels of plank fence, where it binds upon the public road. Entering at the gate, which is situated at the head of the front stretch, its declension is about

<sup>63</sup> *ATR*, November 1839, p. 636 (quotation); “Racing Calendar” appendix, *ibid.*, 1839, p. 53; *Argus of Western America*, September 5, 1831; O’Conner, *Notes on the Thoroughbred*, 173, 181. The Daisy Hill Course was located on the north side of the Lexington-Versailles road (present-day U.S. 60) near the town, and the location continues to be known as Daisy Hill today.

half a degree, until you pass the judges' stand and reach the first turn—its elevation then is about two degrees, until you enter the back stretch—the back stretch undulates from one to one degree and a half—the third turn is at an elevation of two degrees—it then declines one degree and a half to the gate. The soil is a deep black loam.<sup>64</sup>

Although Bardstown, in Nelson County, hosted one of the first courses in the state during the settlement era, a final race meeting was held there in 1804 and no further racing advertisements or reports were published until 1838. In that year, the old track was leased by Thomas H. Boyle and Zachariah H. Dorsey of Louisiana and Abraham G. Watts of Woodford County, Kentucky, all three relocating to Nelson County to run the facility. A new Bardstown jockey club was organized with eighty-seven subscribers and the rehabilitated track was rechristened as the Medoc Course in 1840, honoring the recently deceased champion running horse of the same name. Dorsey entered several horses of his own during meetings held in 1839 and 1840. After the lease expired in 1843, the club disbanded, and there was no further organized racing at Bardstown.<sup>65</sup>

The proliferation of courses in the late 1830s was short in duration, for all the heady atmosphere of the period. The collapse of the racing establishment began in the North as a consequence of the Panic of 1837, the worst financial crisis yet experienced by the young American nation. During the ensuing seven-year recession, many northern turfmen, dependent upon industry and commerce for their wealth, were forced to close their breeding farms and sell their Thoroughbreds. During the expansive years of the 1830s, many breeders had invested heavily in expensive imports and subsequently over-produced; in the wake of the Panic of 1837, Thoroughbred

<sup>64</sup> *ATR*, November 1832, p. 146 (quotation); O'Conner, *Notes on the Thoroughbred*, 154, 233, 302.

<sup>65</sup> John C. Stevens, "Memoir of Medoc," *ATR*, March 1834, pp. 341–44; *Ibid.*, January–February 1839, p. 109; *Ibid.*, May–June 1839, p. 362; "Racing Calendar" appendix, *ibid.*, 1839, p. 43; "Racing Calendar" appendix, *ibid.*, 1840, pp. 23, 34–35. Medoc was the leading American sire in both 1840 and 1841.

prices plummeted and breeding came to a near standstill. In New York and many other northern states, rising public sentiment opposed to gambling greatly hindered recovery of the sport even after the immediate crisis had passed. Although the recession was felt more severely in the Deep South, particularly in the Cotton Belt where many planters were bankrupted, the western section of the country, including Kentucky, was affected to a lesser extent, in large part due to a greater agricultural diversity.<sup>66</sup>

From a peak of fifteen tracks operating in Kentucky in 1838, only three were still active by 1845, those at Louisville, Lexington, and Versailles. Gone were the numerous community racecourses that had sprinkled the Bluegrass landscape at the beginning of the nineteenth century, now consolidated into a few larger, better-financed courses in regional population centers. By the onset of the Civil War, only two locations in Kentucky still sponsored Thoroughbred racing with any regularity, the Kentucky Association track in Lexington and Woodlawn in Louisville. Similar consolidations occurred in other states, and also coincided with a general decline in the popularity of Thoroughbred flat racing. On the eve of the Civil War, the American Thoroughbred racing establishment flourished only in the West, in California, and in the South, in Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, and Tennessee, and, in greatly reduced form, in Kentucky. Nearly three out of every four American racetracks operating in 1840 had gone out of business by 1850.<sup>67</sup>

The decline of Thoroughbred racing during the period can also be attributed to the growing popularity of harness racing. Whereas Thoroughbred racing was a pastime of wealthy elites, the racing of

<sup>66</sup> Hervey, *Racing in America*, 2:153–56; Steven Riess, “The Cyclical History of Horse Racing: The USA’s Oldest and (Sometimes) Most Popular Spectator Sport,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 31 (Jan. 2014), 31–34; Alasdair Roberts, *America’s First Great Depression: Economic Crisis and Political Disorder after the Panic of 1837* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2012); Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820–1870* (Urbana, Ill., 1986), 42–52, 78–79.

<sup>67</sup> Henry G. Crickmore, *Racing Calendars 1861, 1862, 1863, 1864, 1865* (New York, 1901), 1–18; Weeks, *American Turf*, 36–40; William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World* (Urbana, Ill., 1988), 109.

trotting horses was far more democratic. Few could afford to purchase and maintain a Thoroughbred but nearly everyone owned a horse and buggy. Prior to 1825, harness races were simply casual contests that took place mainly on northeastern roadways; there was no organization of the sport, which had no standardized rules, kept no permanent records, and attracted little public attention. As the sport became more popular, harness races between pacing or trotting horses became regular fixtures at many county fairs. Beginning in the early 1840s, New York businessmen began to promote harness racing as an alternative to Thoroughbred racing, establishing tracks that catered to ordinary spectators rather than the equine aristocracy. Since trotting races, at least initially, were not associated with gambling, respectable middle-class folk could attend without damage to their reputation. Harness racing became the first American sport to be successfully commercialized, far earlier than Thoroughbred racing.<sup>68</sup>

The rapid growth of the sport can be viewed in the pages of the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*, which changed its name to the *American Turf Register and Racing and Trotting Calendar* in 1845. In that year, the new *Turf Register* listed fourteen venues that had hosted trotting-horse race meetings, two-thirds of which were located in the North. By 1858, harness racing had expanded to 110 tracks across the country, many being facilities dedicated to the sport. In Kentucky, harness racing during the antebellum period was largely a phenomenon of the urban centers of Louisville and Lexington. Louisville's Oakland track began advertising occasional harness races in the mid-1840s, which were soon expanded to regular meetings lasting for several days; in 1860, two years after Oakland ceased operation, the new Woodlawn facility featured separate tracks for running horses and trotters. Harness racing had less success in the Inner Bluegrass. Most of the horsemen of the region did not consider a trotter to be a real race horse and "did everything possible to hinder the introduction of the sport." Nevertheless, trotting-horse fanciers

<sup>68</sup> Melvin L. Adelman, "The First Modern Sport in America: Harness Racing in New York City, 1825–1870," *Journal of Sport History* 8 (Spring 1981): 5–32; Robert O. Davies, *Sports in American Life: A History*, 3rd ed. (Malden, Mass., 2017), 17–19.

met at the Phoenix Hotel in 1853 to form the Lexington Trotting Club and constructed a mile-long track in Lexington on the east side of Rose Street. Only a few meetings were held, however, and during the Civil War the facilities were heavily damaged by Federal troops camped on the property.<sup>69</sup>

If the recession of 1838–1844 and, later, the Panic of 1857, were responsible for precipitating a decline in Thoroughbred racing across the nation, the effect of the Civil War was nothing short of catastrophic. The regional Thoroughbred infrastructure was utterly devastated. As the conflict swept back and forth across the land, the great breeding houses of the South were ruined, the historic race-tracks destroyed, and much of the finest blood stock in the nation trotted off to war, never to return. Under these circumstances, the North, and New York in particular, took the lead in the revival of Thoroughbred racing after the war and became the new geographic focus of a revitalized sport.<sup>70</sup>

The character of horseracing also changed, becoming increasingly commercialized. Race meetings prior to the Civil War were invariably hosted by racing associations comprised of Thoroughbred breeders and owners, with the operating costs underwritten for the benefit of the sport. With very short racing seasons, comprising only a few weeks per year, gate receipts and entry fees were insufficient to cover annual expenses. Most states, like Kentucky, had laws against public gambling so commercial horseracing venues were not economically feasible without the revenue streams that would later be provided by legalized gambling. During the antebellum period, a handful of commercial tracks were established by businessmen who had little other connection or interest in the sport other than profit. After the

<sup>69</sup> *ATR*, 1845, p. 111; *ATR*, 1858, p. 199; *Louisville Daily Courier*, January 26, 1844; *Ibid.*, October 16, 1849; *Ibid.*, June 5, 1851; *Ibid.*, June 4, 1852; *Ibid.*, July 1, 1853; *Ibid.*, July 16, 1855; *Ibid.*, October 23, 1856; *Ibid.*, August 31, 1857; *Ibid.*, September 13, 1858; *Ibid.*, September 20, 1859; *Ibid.*, June 13, 1860; *Ibid.*, June 15, 1860; *Ibid.*, June 22, 1860; Levi Herr, untitled chapter in *History of Fayette County, Kentucky*, 171–72, 175–76; Ken McCarr, *The Kentucky Harness Horse* (Lexington, Ky., 1978), 9 (quotation), 117–18.

<sup>70</sup> Hervey, *Racing in America*, 2:339–56; Adelman, *Sporting Time*, 79–83; Wall, *How Kentucky Became Southern*, 13–53.



war, gambling laws were relaxed and operation for profit became the prevailing model. A growing number of farms specialized in breeding Thoroughbred horses as the primary occupation rather than as an element of the operation. When wagering became the most important revenue stream, it completed the transformation of Thoroughbred racing from a provincial pastime of the elite to a national form of mass entertainment.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Adelman, *Sporting Time*, 84–86; Hervey, *Racing in America*, 2:102–4. An example of a late antebellum proprietary track was the one built at Montgomery, Alabama, in 1857 by David H. Carter; see Jeffrey C. Benton, *Respectable and Disreputable: Leisure Time in Antebellum Montgomery* (Montgomery, Ala., 2013), 57–58, 60.

	1800	1805	1810	1815	1820	1825	1830	1835	1840	1845	1850	1855	1859	TOTALS BY TRACK																																										
Lexington														53																																										
Louisville														27																																										
Versailles														18																																										
Georgetown														16																																										
Richmond														16																																										
Crab Orchard														15																																										
Frankfort														13																																										
Maysville														9																																										
Glasgow														8																																										
Greensburg														7																																										
Bardstown														7																																										
Hopkinsville														6																																										
Cynthiana														6																																										
Harrodsburg														5																																										
Burkesville														5																																										
Mobley														4																																										
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Springfield														2																																										
Columbia														2																																										
Falmouth														2																																										
Merry Oaks														2																																										
Hickman														2																																										
Russellville														2																																										
Smithland														2																																										
Trenton														2																																										
Dover														2																																										
TOTALS BY YEAR	1	3	4	2	5	5	2	5	6	4	1	2	0	3	0	0	1	2	3	1	1	1	6	5	2	3	6	5	7	7	6	8	12	8	13	11	11	7	6	3	3	3	4	4	3	2	2	1	2	4	4	3	4	3	3	237

**Thoroughbred Race Tracks in Kentucky 1800 - 1859**

Table is based on advertisements for a forthcoming race meeting or a report of the results of a race meeting provided by regional newspapers and the *American Turf Register* (1829–1859). Totals represent number of years in which racing took place, not the number of meetings; some tracks held multiple meetings per year. Not shown in the table are courses represented by only a single racing notice during the period: Danville (1801); Shepherdsville (1804); New Castle (1819); Paris (1821); Bowling Green (1826); Elkton (1833); Carrollton (1833); Mount Sterling (1838); Olympian Springs (1838); Moscow (1839); Owensboro (1848); Shelbyville (1854); Tompkinsville (1854); and Woodburn (1858). Data for Versailles, Georgetown, Harrodsburg, and Glasgow is amalgamated, representing two or more courses in or near the specified location.