

“With All the Speed Imaginable”: Horse Racing in North Carolina

By R. Neil Fulghum *

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 48: 1 (fall 2008).
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It was the afternoon of May 27, 1823, in Long Island, New York. Over sixty thousand people—more than the entire population of New York City at the time—gathered around the Union Race Course. They were there to watch what many historians today call the greatest sporting event of the 1800s: the race between the North’s fastest horse, American Eclipse, and the South’s entry, a North Carolina thoroughbred named Henry.

At the starting line, the two sleek horses shuffled as they prepared to run the final “heat” in their nationally publicized three-race contest. Each race included four laps around the one-mile dirt track. Henry, a four-year-old chestnut stallion trained by Lemuel Long, of Halifax County, had won the first race in record time, becoming the only challenger ever to beat the nine-year-old northern champion. American Eclipse, however, had bounced back in the second race for a close win.

Now—rising above the crowd’s thunderous chants and cheers—the crack of the starter’s gun could be heard. Around the track the horses charged. Henry, guided by a replacement jockey, fell behind on the first lap. On the second and third laps, he slowly gained, closing the gap until he nearly bumped his opponent’s backside. Gradually, though, American Eclipse pulled away again, crossing the finish line ahead by three lengths. By the end of their grueling competition, Henry and American Eclipse had run a total of twelve miles, a staggering distance by modern racing standards. It was like running the Kentucky Derby more than nine times!

The North-versus-South contest of 1823 is one of many exciting stories in the history of American horse racing—a history in which North Carolinians have played big roles, especially before the Civil War. In fact, long before Kentucky was recognized as the nation’s top state for breeding and racing horses, some of the country’s most skilled trainers and jockeys and swiftest mounts came from the Carolinas and Virginia.

Races in North Carolina in the 1700s usually did not involve a group, or field, of horses. Instead, races were head-to-head competitions pitting one horse and rider against another horse and rider. These events were run on short, narrow, straight courses. A quarter mile was the preferred distance for races in the South, so special horses called quarter horses were bred for acceleration and top speed. John Brickell—an Irish doctor living in Edenton in the early 1730s—provides the earliest published reference to quarter racing in North Carolina. In his book *The Natural History of North Carolina*, Brickell notes:

Horse-Racing they are fond of, for which they have Race-Paths,

near each Town, and in many parts of the Country. Those Paths seldom exceed a Quarter of a Mile in length, and only two Horses start at a time. . . . These Courses being so very short, they use no manner of Art, but push on with all the speed imaginable. . . .

Later, such courses began to lengthen. They also changed shape. Oval courses let spectators watch races from start to finish. Maps from the late 1760s show elaborate oval tracks in towns such as New Bern and Hillsborough. Distances also became much longer. By 1800 the standard race—like the one between American Eclipse and Henry—included three four-mile heats. So endurance—or ability to withstand long, hard racing—also became an important trait in Tar Heel horses.

Many North Carolina planters and politicians became famous in this period as national leaders in breeding and fielding outstanding horses. These included Richard Ellis, Willie Jones, Jephtha Atherton, Marmaduke Johnson, William R. Davie, and William Ransom Johnson. None of those “gentlemen of the turf” showed a greater dedication to racing than Willie Jones, of Halifax County. One of Jones’s favorite race sites was Tucker’s Path, a quarter-mile course located along North Carolina’s border with Virginia. There, on May 2, 1778, another legendary race took place. Jones’s horse, Trick-em, ran against Mud Colt, an impressive Virginia thoroughbred that North Carolina planter Atherton had rented. Trick-em won handily, ridden by Austin Curtis, an enslaved man whom many experts at the time called North America’s finest rider and trainer. More than a century and a half before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major-league baseball, enslaved and free blacks filled many winner’s circles at both southern and northern racetracks.

North Carolinians continued to be major players in racing until the late 1800s. The loss of important breeding stock during the Civil War was one cause for the sport’s decline in the state. A greater cause was new local and state laws against gambling on racing. Those laws, for the most part, ended the sport professionally in North Carolina by the 1940s. But the passion that North Carolinians have for horses did not end. Thousands of Tar Heels still enjoy riding for fun, participating in horse shows, and going to races held as charity events. All of these ongoing “equine” activities should remind us of a time when North Carolinians often numbered among the frontrunners in American thoroughbred racing.

**R. Neil Fulghum retired in August as the keeper of the North Carolina Collection Gallery at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*