

Prologue

The Loss of the Stirrup Has Won the Race

Everything depended on the start. In a dash race of a quarter mile like the one North Carolina planter Willie Jones and his opponent had agreed to, the two horses circled and plunged beside the starter, as their jockeys tried desperately to keep their mounts calm. All strategy would be exhausted after the first moment. From then until the horses crossed the finish line, the contest would be one of main force, as the horses and riders jostled each other along the narrow track laid out amid the crowd. The ritual was a rough but much-beloved tradition of the colonial South, its tricks and subtleties as much to be savored as victory itself.

Jones and an old friend from Virginia had agreed to an intercolonial match race and staked a hundred hogsheads of tobacco each on the outcome. Jones had sent his entry, the delicate, nervous Paoli, ahead to the course and had arrived himself only shortly before the start. No sooner had he dismounted than Austin Curtis, the enslaved black man who was Jones's trusted jockey and groom and would later serve as his trainer and stable supervisor, delivered a nasty surprise. Their opponent was to be the mare that everyone knew as Bynum's Big Filly, though Jones and her owner had an agreement to the contrary.

Willie Jones preferred to be the man surprising rather than the man surprised when it came to the races. By the early 1770s, when Paoli faced Bynum's Big Filly, he had firmly established himself as a crafty competitor. He and Austin Curtis had once disguised a pony-sized speedster aptly named Trick 'em as a packhorse and, with both men loudly professing their reluctance, entered him against a well-regarded racer. The odds had skyrocketed, and Jones and his friends had laughed all the way to the bank.¹ To pull off a victory for Paoli against a mare like Bynum's Big Filly, ridden by the cunning slave horseman Ned, would be more difficult, but Jones had the luxury of Austin Curtis in the saddle.

The size of the wager and the fame of the competitors had drawn a large crowd, a wall of bodies that lined the course. The jockeys began to circle their horses. Only when both were for the same fleeting moment roughly parallel to each other and the track would the starter send them off, and an experienced jockey could circle again and again, shouting "No!" to forestall the start, as he sought to gain a sendoff that would find his own mount ready and his opponent unprepared.² The experienced filly stayed quiet and alert as her rider turned her, but Paoli's nerves began to fray, just as Ned had hoped they would, and he kept the horses circling, his eyes

on the other animal and on Austin Curtis. Suddenly Ned saw the weakness he had been waiting for and quickly lined his mare up. The two horses shot away from the post, the silence broken only by the rumbling, concussive rush of their passage. With horror, Willie Jones realized that his rider was galloping the narrow course at high speed, his opponent dangerously close, with only one stirrup. Without it to support his weight, his balance seemed impossible to maintain. The horses dueled at close quarters, locked together all the way to the finish. As the judges conferred, Jones rushed to Curtis to ask what mischance had caused such a potential calamity. “No chance at all,” the jockey was said to have replied. “We made two turns, and could not start. I saw old Ned did not mean to start fair. . . . So I drew one foot, to induce Ned to think I was off my guard. . . . Away we came—both horses did their utmost, and the loss of the stirrup has won the race.” It had, indeed. Austin Curtis had brought Paoli home a winner, the judges finally determined, by twenty-three inches.

Those inches lived on in legend, one of the early thrillers of America’s first mass-audience sport. Fifty years later, Curtis’s explanation of his daring ride was still being served up in print.³ Americans before the twentieth century, dependent on equine transportation, lived in a world where horses’ habits and peculiarities formed an integral part of daily living.⁴ But they also followed the exotic world of Thoroughbred racing, where the equine verities they knew so intimately were transmuted into glorious power and speed. In the twenty-first century, when most Americans think of the racetrack only in the week before the Kentucky Derby, such a preoccupation can be difficult to grasp. Horse racing is usually regarded as a charming anachronism, a colorful survival—the sport Americans followed before baseball, football, basketball, ice hockey, and the countless other contests the country has adopted in its place. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, men from wildly varying walks of life—white and black, free and slave, young and old, rich and poor—felt deep passion for the world of the backstretch. For many Americans of earlier times, horse racing was not merely a leisure pastime but a practice to which they owed a powerful and tenacious allegiance; the racetrack was an institution that defined who they were or who they wished to become. This book tells the story of the American racetrack and the white and black men who made their lives on it for almost a century, from the Jacksonian period to the eve of World War I. The story is, in truth, a patchwork of many stories. It is less an attempt to answer a set of analytical questions about historical cause and effect than a portrait that seeks to reveal some complex and difficult realities in the lives of people in the past.

Racing was always an indispensable part of life in colonial America. The English built the first racetrack in New York in the 1660s. By then, breeders in Britain had perfected the crosses between imported Arabian horses and older European stock that produced the Thoroughbred, a breed of horse designed to fly. Virginia and Carolina planters raided the great racing stables across the Atlantic and came away with stallions who would found their own dynasties in America.⁵ In the eighteenth century, groups of men in towns and regions across the United States met and chartered themselves as jockey clubs, on the model of Britain's Jockey Club, headquartered at Newmarket, or on the model of the club in Charleston, South Carolina, which claimed to predate it. In 1797, the Kentucky Jockey Club was formed in John Postlethwait's tavern in Lexington. The group agreed both to a set of rules and to the laying out of a course in Lee's Woods. The pattern was repeated at countless hotel bars and woodland tracts.⁶

Spectators pressed into colonial racetracks and gathered on market and court days to watch less formal races, like the one Austin Curtis won with one stirrup. Boys cherished glimpses of famous runners and stored up their memories of great contests to relive in old age.⁷ They inherited the dramas and assumptions and argots of racing as a birthright that often extended into a lifetime commitment. Philip Fithian, who had come to Virginia as a tutor to the sons of Robert Carter III in 1773, sat across the dinner table from local beauty Sally Panton and hoped to get a chance to talk to her during the meal. But any tenuous efforts at flirtation were doomed, he informed his diary disgustedly later that night. The only dinner conversation consisted of "Loud disputes concerning the Excellence of each others Colts—Concerning their Fathers, Mothers . . . Brothers, Sisters, Uncles, Aunts, Nephews, Nieces, & Cousins to the fourth Degree!"⁸ The Carters and their neighbors saw nothing odd in discussing horses with all the command of detail that they lavished on the human families about whom they cared the most. Indeed, they appear to have found horse gossip just as absorbing as the human variety.

Wealthy men like Willie Jones bankrolled and sometimes supervised the breeding, raising, training, feeding, shoeing, medicating, grooming, and running of Thoroughbreds. Why were they willing to put so much time and so many resources into racing? American historians have contended that what really stirred a Virginia or Carolina planter's blood was the chance to gamble impressively large sums. In doing so, a wealthy man demonstrated how reckless he could afford to be with his income and thus how richly he deserved to have the respect of his neighbors.⁹ The pleasure of a wager may account for the magnate who enjoyed besting his friends aboard a talented animal or pointing out to them that his horse had just triumphed at the

local race ground. But it seems an insufficient explanation for the sheer amount of time and effort such men devoted to thinking and arguing about the minute details and frequent disappointments that lay behind a single afternoon's racing. Scholars of British history, who have a longer record of national equine obsession to explicate, have given more emphasis to the horse itself, and the voices of their human subjects decisively support their choice. The British artist Benjamin Marshall, who painted the racehorses of the wealthy at the turn of the nineteenth century, observed of his clients in the shires: "I discover many a man who will pay me fifty guineas for painting his horse who thinks ten guineas too much to pay for painting his wife."¹⁰

The horsemen of the eighteenth-century British Empire and their nineteenth-century descendants were willing to pay good money for pictures of their horses because they genuinely found them beautiful. And, like the allure of most beautiful things, the horses' appeal did not lie solely in the aesthetics of their construction. They inspired such devotion because for their owners they evoked a sense of clarity about how the world worked or should work. Willie Jones was an Old Etonian, brought up to revere the sporting culture of the British Atlantic world.¹¹ What he inherited from his forebears he and his friends passed down to generations of wealthy white men who followed them to the track. For powerful cliques of upper-class men in the United States between the colonial period and the turn of the twentieth century, the track was about far more than the careless joy of ostentatiously splashing money around in symbolic moments of display. To justify weeks and months of worry and money put into the work of the office and the pasture, the barn and the breeding shed, affluent white men had to understand racing as more than one of many means to show off their wealth. Eighteenth-century racing enthusiasts coined the name "turfmen" for themselves, adopting it as a title of rightful authority both on and off the track. To be a turfman was not merely to be rich; it was to be a gentleman worthy of respect in the most select circles for savvy and judgment, grace and style. It was to be marked with the right to rule.

The nineteenth-century track became a proving ground for the powerful and the aspiring, an incubator of socially and politically useful alliances, a place in which men took practical realities and fashioned them into what they believed to be concrete evidence of the rightness of their ideologies. It helped to shape the political convictions of generations of elite white men. From the beginning of American racing, some of the nation's most prominent turfmen were Southerners, and at the track they practiced sophisticated and complex forms of human bondage and believed that they demonstrated how integral slavery was to building a powerful and prosperous United States, how richly they deserved Northern deference to their economic

imperatives and social customs. Decades later, with the coming of emancipation, they joined with congenial Northerners to stifle the effects of Reconstruction and bring businessmen together across regional boundaries against working-class agitation. At the track, powerful men exhibited in a particularly revealing light how continuously and deeply they believed in the necessity of hierarchy to make a great and modern United States and how hard they were willing to work to protect social divisions and inequalities.

Among Southerners, the mechanics of subordination were an issue of particular urgency, because the racetrack was not just a stage on which white men acted out the world they wanted to make. It was a place run on the labor and skill of black men. Everywhere Willie Jones went on the race grounds of colonial North Carolina, Austin Curtis went as well, familiar to knowledgeable men as a formidable opponent, as his one-stirrured victory attested. Grooms, trainers, jockeys, breeding supervisors—these men were absolutely necessary to a successful stable. A wealthy horse owner, proud of his competence, might know what had to be done around a barn, he might thoroughly enjoy ensuring that stable work was done up to his specifications, he might even pitch in and help on occasion, but he could not and did not wish to be everywhere and do everything necessary to a large operation. So much depended on subjective judgment grounded in long experience. How was one hoof disease to be distinguished from another in the early stages, when it might still be cured? What minute adjustment of saddle or bridle could magically cheer up an unhappy and recalcitrant animal? Most owners left such questions to specialized workers. The knowing ones understood that their stables, their little worlds in which they demonstrated their rightful authority, depended on such men. They would never be invited into drawing rooms, but at the racetrack they were to be acknowledged.¹²

Austin Curtis was not just a social inferior. He was an African American slave, both an individual and a commodity that belonged to Willie Jones. His situation was hardly an unusual one. Africans had a well-deserved reputation for equine expertise in the Atlantic world. The people of North Africa and the Middle East were world famous for their horses, and trans-Saharan caravans brought their animals and their equestrian practices to West Africa, just as trade with Europeans brought to Britain the Arabian foundation sires of the Thoroughbred.¹³ Horsemanship became a signature accomplishment, especially for northern West Africans. By the seventeenth century, Malinke horsemen traveled throughout the region, selling their formidable services as cavalry to the highest bidder. The kings of the Yoruba and the Hausa boasted massive stable complexes, over which slaves presided.

Such slaves were valued members of the royal household, supervisors of large staffs, intimates of princes. Slaves like the Oyo king's chief horseman, the *Olokun Esin*, gave orders and received privileges. They were in charge of legions of other stable slaves, many of whom performed manual labor that carried no status and, indeed, was thought to embody the degradation inherent in servitude. But all equestrian slaves, whatever their privileges, were obliged to use their command of horses' speed and endurance to hunt down other bondsmen who had attempted to escape.¹⁴ Horsemen's slavery was always a complicated institution that separated them from their fellow slaves and sometimes even drew lines among the men who worked in the stables.

Across the Atlantic, African and colonial-born slaves continued to bear the responsibility for the care of horses and other livestock. In French Saint Domingue, an epicenter of Caribbean sugar production, slaves were the primary caregivers and veterinarians for the work animals who kept plantations running smoothly. Men with such skills were among the most expensive slaves in island markets; white owners trusted them with extremely valuable four-footed assets, even as they kept a sharp eye out for the trouble that might come from according deference to slaves' specialized knowledge and granting them positions of relative autonomy.¹⁵

Slave owners readily accepted the presence of black horsemen in their stables, a natural result of lifetimes of owning bondsmen and reading the classic equine treatises of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like those authored by William Cavendish, first Duke of Newcastle. Included in his tomes were engravings of the North African grooms who cared for his imported horses. The artist carefully stippled the faces of the men to an unrelieved black and gave them knotted hair; prominent foreheads; and thick, flat noses. These men were unmistakably alien, yet they were an acknowledged fact of life in the ducal stables.¹⁶ Long habit and implied precept thus reinforced each other for American gentlemen like Willie Jones.

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Until the turn of the twentieth century, black men like Austin Curtis would be a constant presence in American racing stables, their expertise necessary to the world white turfmen held so dear. Austin Curtis and those who followed him onto the track lived in highly unusual bondage, in which they wielded considerable authority and commanded autonomy and privilege beyond the wildest dreams of most slaves. But they were also subject to more subtle pressures than many of their contemporaries—the knowledge of their own difference, the fear of their privilege's

fragility, and the tension of constantly calculating self-interest that often divided them sharply from loved ones and colleagues. They enjoyed many of the conventional signifiers of freedom—the ability to move without impediment, to exercise some control over their employment, to offer opinions that might well be heeded. In Carlyle Brown’s *Pure Confidence*, a 2005 play about the relationship between white turfmen and their slaves, the black protagonist asserts his desire for freedom, and his owner scoffs, “Hell, I don’t know no nigger more free than you.” What does he want with a piece of paper, his owner asks, when he has experienced the thrill of driving a great racehorse for home, gathering himself and his mount at the top of the stretch and feeling the surge toward victory? “Boy, if that ain’t freedom, then the damn thing don’t exist,” the turfman concludes.¹⁷ Black horsemen had daily experiences that transcended the conventional restrictions of slavery, so they knew how flexible and clinging the coils of bondage could be, how many irregularities and potential threats it could absorb. They faced the likelihood that they would live out their lives knowing only very circumscribed forms of freedom, and some even buried their hopes for it and turned to forms of mastery over animals and people that seemed a negation of bondage easier to attain. The story of the slaves who worked American Thoroughbreds illuminates just how complex and insidious human bondage could be, how deeply and how differently it marked the disparate people who lived in it.

Willie Jones and his brother between them owned nearly 300 slaves, so many that they often did not recognize men and women who were legally their property.¹⁸ And yet from the time Jones and Austin Curtis were both young men, they wandered together through the mid-Atlantic, matching races, running up the odds, sizing up their opponents, and seizing their chances at victory. Curtis was as well known as Jones; on Curtis’s unerring eye would be built the mightiest empire in antebellum racing. In the 1790s, Marmaduke Johnson, a planter from Warrenton, North Carolina, forty miles to the west of Jones’s Halifax County home, got bitten by the racing bug. Like rich men before and after him buying their way into the horse business, he took a fat roll of cash to an expert. He asked Austin Curtis to find him a prospect—a young, inexperienced mare that could be a successful racehorse and later, Johnson cannily calculated, a profitable broodmare. It was a tall order. It can take years of training to know whether a horse can be a good racer, and genetics and plain luck determine the horses that become important breeding stock. But, at the farm of a man named Jordan just across the border in Virginia, Curtis found a small gray mare that he liked, and he bought her for Johnson for fifty pounds Virginia currency. Usually called Johnson’s Medley Mare, identified by owner and sire, she turned out to be a great

success at the racetrack, but in the breeding shed she was an immortal. She was the mother of Reality, who became the mother of Bonnets o' Blue, who became the mother of Fashion, each of them in her turn considered the greatest mare in American racing.¹⁹

The Johnson stables, founded on the offspring of Curtis's purchase, dominated the Thoroughbred world for decades. Marmaduke Johnson's son William was nicknamed "the Napoleon of the Turf," and all his equine exploits were subject to critical scrutiny in the sporting press of the 1830s and 1840s. In 1833, the writers and subscribers of the *American Turf Register*, frustrated by the sparse records kept on American Thoroughbreds, sought to establish just what the little gray mare's bloodlines were. In the days before an official Thoroughbred registration process, a purchaser depended almost entirely on the seller to tell him the truth about a horse's pedigree. Especially famous horses' *real* breeding was inevitably the subject of rumor and speculation that could discomfit or enrage an owner or breeder. Vicious acrimony was always a pen stroke away when the topic of breeding came up, and, for a mare so important to the Johnson enterprise and to racing as a whole, the density of proof demanded was particularly high. Allen Jones Davie, the great-nephew of Willie Jones, was almost apologetic when he wrote to the editor that he did "not mean this as a *contradiction* to provoke contest," but he was quite sure his version of the pedigree was correct, "because the blood was so stated by Austin Curtis . . . who, though a man of color, was one on whom all who knew him relied."²⁰ Immediately, all debate in the columns of the *Turf Register* ceased. Austin Curtis had made his name one to conjure with. In life and in death, he was a man to be recognized and reckoned with, and he and the men of his generation paved the way for black horsemen of comparable skill and standing to follow them. Black horsemen fascinated white turfmen, who knew how they depended on the competence of men like Curtis in a sport that they used to define themselves and make sense of their world. In Austin Curtis's lifetime and long afterward, white turfmen told stories to themselves and each other that made the reality of that dependence seem commonplace and safe.

Indeed, much of what we know about black horsemen comes from the tales of white men. Throughout the nineteenth century, such stories circulated around the track, crossed the nation in letters, and came to homes and offices in a growing number of racing periodicals. How many of these stories were true? We cannot know. But it is true that they are stories—and as such they are worth examining, not necessarily for their factual content but for the facts that fictions tell us about the people who tell them. The stories white men told reveal how deeply white turfmen needed black horsemen's work, how complex were their efforts to ensure black men's subordination, and how tortuous and desperate the logic of those efforts could be.

Willie Jones left only a few sentences about Austin Curtis. They appear in the petition he filed with the North Carolina General Assembly in 1791 to free Curtis, who “by his attachment to his Country during the War by his fidelity to his Master (the said Willie Jones) and by his Honesty and good Behavior on all Occasions, has demonstrated that he deserves to be free.”²¹ Jones started with an affirmation of Curtis’s loyalty to the American cause in the Revolution, a difficult choice for slaves in the Carolinas, torn between the hope that white Americans would grasp the implications of their own quest for freedom and the reality that the British government was promising emancipation to those who joined His Majesty’s cause.²² Something about his own situation—a concern about traveling safely to British lines, a disinclination to leave the familiar, a knowledge that Jones had promised he would be free, and a hope that their long and curious camaraderie might carry some weight—decided Austin Curtis’s loyalties in the American Revolution. Throughout the Carolinas, the British and the Americans were on the hunt for top-notch bloodstock, and Curtis had a perilous job to protect the animals in his care. Major Isaac Harleston of South Carolina nearly lost the famous imported stallion Flimnap to a British raiding party, but his groom concealed the horse in a nearby swamp and then spirited him over the border to the safe haven of Willie Jones’s place in Halifax—or, as the groom may have thought of it, Austin Curtis’s place.²³

When Jones drafted the manumission request for the state legislature, such memories were perhaps uppermost in his mind, and they were decidedly memories that would appeal to the men who had to vote on his petition. His language, too, was safely vague and reassuring, a formula designed to soothe legislators’ fears and echo their customary usages. Curtis was faithful, he behaved well, he *deserved* to be free because he was so extraordinary and thus, by implication, would take his good fortune gratefully, not seek to undermine the institution of slavery. Jones may have crammed into the restricted vocabulary of faithful servitude decades of feelings about his long racetrack partnership with Curtis, or he may not have known how to think beyond the barren boilerplate phrases he used about their history together. The general assembly repeated Jones’s language, granting Curtis his freedom because he had “demonstrated that he deserves to be free.”²⁴

In the hackneyed words of the petition there are indicators and foreshadowings of the tangle of necessity and fantasy that turfmen wove around black horsemen in the nineteenth century. Examining the confined world of the track, we can unpick those knots and see that white turfmen were often strikingly sincere in the ties they professed with black horsemen, with these particular privileged slaves. But as clear as their sincerity is their complete inability to see black horsemen

as full human beings. They recognized these black men as competent professionals and often as congenial companions. But they only saw black horsemen in relation to themselves; they could hardly imagine them with lives and feelings in which white interests played no part. This view of human beings as useful instruments was smotheringly all-encompassing, far deeper than any individual affection or sentimentality, malice or hypocrisy.

Turfmen could thus speak of black horsemen in emotional terms and believe they were describing their feelings accurately. They entertained ideas of horsemen as the perfect slaves, precisely calibrated extensions of a master's will and living proof of the long-term viability, the cutting-edge power of a slave society. They dreamed of black men who could support them in their efforts as seamlessly as the black assistant of William Faulkner's mythical horse trader Pat Stamper, of a wordless bond like the one that the two men shared, "a kind of outrageous rapport like a single intelligence possessing the terrific advantage over common mortals of being able to be in two places at once and directing two separate sets of hands and fingers at the same time."²⁵ Black talent and black subordination were equally integral to turfmen's vision of a great American future. They created in their stories generations of slaves and freedmen whose skills furthered important and difficult work while their blackness dictated their every feeling and action. The world of the racetrack reveals a complicated and painful form of human bondage, in which turfmen simultaneously acknowledged black men's individual talents and integrated them into their conceptions of slavery and black inferiority.²⁶ These complex forms of recognition and justification survived slavery, and they continued to dictate much of white men's view of black horsemen into the twentieth century. In the small space of the stable, we can see how white men negotiated this balancing act so necessary to their view of hierarchical order, how daily interactions with particular human beings could be made to bolster and particularize theories of human servitude and subordination.

Willie Jones mentioned Austin Curtis in another document as well. In his 1798 will, Jones left Curtis \$200 and the use of fifty acres and a house until one of Jones's sons came of age.²⁷ When he died in the winter of 1808, Curtis left over three hundred acres to his wife and provided for his eleven children. He had bought his son William and emancipated him, which meant that at least nine of his children were free at his death. His daughter Lucy's husband was strictly forbidden by the terms of the will to touch her portion.²⁸ Austin Curtis's authority held as good at home as it did in the barn.

We do not know what Austin Curtis felt about his experience of bondage or about what he achieved in freedom. He left no written record of his life, nor of what it felt like in his stomach

and throat to draw his foot out of the stirrup and send his mount careening toward the finish line at top speed. But in the provisions of Curtis's will, in the few accounts by those who came after him, and in the other scraps of evidence they left, we can sometimes see not only the pain of black horsemen's lives, their sacrifices and frailties, but also their pride and determination and style. Enslaved horsemen struggled to make their way at the track, in a profession and a world that demanded minute calculations of status and self-interest. A few ultimately dared to use their work to benefit their families, friends, and communities. After emancipation, men made freedom for their families out of their racetrack lives, just as Austin Curtis had done. Black horsemen of the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s had learned their trade in slavery or had been taught by men who had; their ties to bondage remained personal. The spotlight American newspapers shone on their careers illuminates how a particular group of former slaves and their sons experienced and tested the abstraction called freedom. Privately and publicly, they did the daily work of defining and displaying its multifarious meanings and the range of its consequences. Postbellum black horsemen achieved prosperity and respectability and commanded attention and admiration in the African American press. Curtis and his successors were subjects on which many black people exercised an old but unwritten American right—the right to tell a heroic story that promised a better future.

There were always those who found the lives of black horsemen inadequate grounds for hope, who believed them too compromised to serve as a model for the future of African Americans. In 1931, the Harlem Renaissance writer Arna Bontemps recounted the life of a nineteenth-century black horseman in his novel *God Sends Sunday*. At first Little Augie, the novel's central character, glories in the sense of confidence that sitting on a horse gives him as a small, crippled child. As he grows up, those feelings evolve into a proud belief in his own independence. As Bontemps describes his thoughts, "He was no simpering pie-backed nigger. . . . He was a race-horse man." But Bontemps saw in those words only a fleeting conceit, not true autonomy. He believed that kind of pride pulled unwary young men into a degrading dependence on rich white horse owners and a consequent adoption of white standards of value and white-sanctioned forms of self-destruction. Augie shares a final scene with his nephew. The boy, standing with his uncle and a horse, realizes that they both take comfort in the animal's "warm unembarrassing presence." But Augie's life has taken him beyond the simplicity of that bond. "The tiny old man looked into the horse's face sadly, like one remembering love. And it seemed as if water would drop out of his eyes."²⁹ Augie's career at the track leads him to drinking, gambling, and,

ultimately, murder. He ends the novel on a train, speeding away from the family that has disowned him. The track had been a snare for black men, Bontemps suggested, one that had taken their talents and diverted them from building their own communities and their own political and cultural future.

Bontemps's great-uncle had been a jockey, and the matter-of-fact harshness of his portrait of Augie's downfall has the grim certainty of pain felt close to home.³⁰ But white turfmen at the turn of the twentieth century did not share Bontemps's view of black horsemen as pathetic figures. Instead, they saw evidence of the emergence of a proud corps of black racehorse men poised to claim a freedom that entailed respectability and even equality. More unsettling still, they came to believe that those men's example inspired African Americans to resent the constraints placed on their freedom and to reject the codes that kept them subordinate. And so white men forced black ones out of the racetrack jobs that they had held since before Austin Curtis. They mobilized their personal power and the power of the state to make the fictions they advanced to justify the expulsion appear valid and true. As Jim Crow ended black men's decades of prestigious, widely recognized work in the Thoroughbred world, many of them simply could not bear it. Buried in the newspapers of the period are the records of the mental breakdowns, domestic assaults, and suicides that tore them and their families apart. The racetrack reminds us of how deeply Jim Crow wormed its way into daily life, into dreams and hopes. It was insidious, and it was deadly.

While the Thoroughbred industry was a confined sphere and black horsemen a tiny minority of slaves and freedmen, the unusual intimacy of the world of the track and the attention afforded it brings us into the heart of the personal consequences of some of the greatest political debates of nineteenth-century America. Examining the world of nineteenth-century turfmen shows us just how thoroughly political convictions were—and are—entangled with personal identifications, with beliefs about who and what is good and right, and with fidelities and passions without any direct connection to the legislative chamber or the ballot box. To follow the characters and events of the world of the racetrack reveals the complicated ways in which ideas about race have been moored in physical reality and vested with power, so that they have gained the strength to slaughter human beings.

Racing men of the nineteenth century were accustomed to thinking about horses and horsemen from earlier times. They reached back into the past for performance records, training tricks, jokes, and lessons. The dead were ever-present in American stables. Willie Jones, Austin Curtis,

and the horses and men who came after them thus appear throughout this story, long after their natural lifespans, because the men of the nineteenth-century racetrack knew they lived always in the presence of the past, and they looked to it for precedents and answers. The horses and the men they carried in their minds have largely faded from our view, but the convictions that they held dear, the hopes and fears with which they lived, have shaped today's United States.

The privileges and loyalties of turfmen certainly did not die with the nineteenth century. In 1922, when Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt Jr. was nine, his mother took him to his first race. He would go on to own the mighty gray Native Dancer, one of the greatest Thoroughbred runners and sires ever. As an old man, Vanderbilt explained the lure of the sport he had adored from that first childhood moment. "When I go to the track," he summed it up, "I know who I am."³¹ Vanderbilt went to the racetrack the day he died at the age of eighty-seven.³² American men of an earlier time would have understood the deep certainty Vanderbilt expressed. Those feelings have survived the centuries, as have the entrenched race and class hierarchies that white turfmen's careers show us with uncomfortable clarity. These are histories whose consequences we live with so intimately that we can overlook their presence. But we never escape them.

Just as much as the men of the nineteenth-century backstretch, we live with systems of inequality so enmeshed in daily life and reflex, so resilient in the face of challenge, that to eradicate them seems well-nigh impossible. And, like them, we are still in the presence of the dead: the African American men who sought to make lives under those constraints and who demonstrate for us the dignity and grace, the callousness and wretchedness with which human beings have lived with their history, which is also our history. Some of those men, far removed from Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, also knew who they were at the track. Like Bontemps's Little Augie, some of them followed that feeling into isolation and self-destruction, but others made of it the basis of lives of proud distinctiveness. They have left traces of their certainty for us to reckon with. In 1925, George Marshall, who had been born in Kentucky before emancipation, died in Rock Island, Illinois, at the age of about seventy. At some point in his final illness, he or a family member answered brief questions about the most basic details of his life. In the official record of his death, the state of Illinois noted his occupation as "Race Horse Man."³³

Notes

¹ “Sports and Sportsmen of the Olden Time,” *American Turf Register*, Dec. 1831, 193.

² John Hervey, *Racing in America, 1655–1865*, vol.1 (New York: Jockey Club, 1944), 24.

³ “Quarter Racing of the Olden Time,” *American Turf Register*, May 1832, 450. This article, penned by Allen J. Davie, is the source of this account of the race.

⁴ On the ubiquity and importance of horses in earlier times and their relative neglect in historiography, see Ann Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 5–23; Karen Raber and Treva J. Tucker, eds., *The Culture of the Horse: Status, Discipline, and Identity in the Early Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2–3.

⁵ Hervey, *Racing in America, 1655–1865*, vol. 1, 74–77.

⁶ Kent Hollingsworth, *The Kentucky Thoroughbred* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 16; Hervey, *Racing in America, 1655–1865*, vol. 1, 6–8, 64, 247–48.

⁷ John B. Irving, *The South Carolina Jockey Club* (Charleston: Russell and Jones, 1857), 14.

⁸ Hunter Dickinson Farish, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773–1774* (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg, 1957), 177.

⁹ T. H. Breen, “Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling among the Gentry of Virginia,” *William & Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 34.2 (1977): 239–57; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (1982; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 60, 99–120, 317.

¹⁰ Quoted in Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London: Penguin, 1983), 117.

¹¹ For an examination of Jones’s life and career, see Blackwell Pierce Robinson, “Willie Jones of Halifax,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 18.1 (1941): 1–26, and 18.2 (1941): 133–70.

¹² See Donna Landry, *Noble Brutes: How Eastern Horses Transformed English Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 6–7, 139–63, on cross-class relationships in the eighteenth-century British equestrian world that influenced American views of slave horsemen and other stable subordinates.

¹³ Robin Law, *The Horse in West African History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 46–53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 64–76, 148.

¹⁵ Karol K. Weaver, *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 88–95.

¹⁶ William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, *A general system of horsemanship in all it's branches* (London: J. Brindley, 1743); Karen Raber, “A Horse of a Different Color: Nation and Race in Early Modern Horsemanship Treatises,” in *Culture of the Horse*, ed. Raber and Tucker, 237; Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 236–37.

¹⁷ Carlyle Brown, *Pure Confidence* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2005), 9–11.

¹⁸ Robinson, “Willie Jones of Halifax,” 8–9.

¹⁹ “Pedigree of Reality,” *American Turf Register*, Aug. 1832, 594; Hervey, *Racing in America, 1655–1865*, vol.1, 157.

²⁰ Allen J. Davie, “Marmaduke Johnson’s Mare,” *American Turf Register*, June 1833, 520.

²¹ Petition by Willie Jones to North Carolina General Assembly, 7 Dec. 1791, General Assembly Session Records, Dec. 1791–Jan. 1792, Box 1, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

²² For an example of discussion of the dynamics of this difficult choice, see Sylvia F. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 53–80.

²³ “Turf Register,” *American Turf Register*, Nov. 1829, 163; Hervey, *Racing in America, 1655–1865*, vol.1, 125.

²⁴ “Bill to liberate a Mulattoe Slave, named Austin Curtis, belonging to Willie Jones,” 7 Dec 1791, General Assembly Session Records, Dec. 1791–Jan. 1792, Box 1, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC. See also William L. Byrd III, *In Full Force and Virtue: North Carolina Emancipation Records 1713–1860* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1999), 4.

²⁵ William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 32–33.

²⁶ Walter Johnson has cogently pointed out how crucial this kind of thought process was for the workings of slavery. See Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 207.

²⁷ Willie Jones Will, 1798, *Halifax County Wills, 1758–1824* vol. 3, 355–62, North Carolina State Archives.

²⁸ Margaret M. Hofmann, *Genealogical Abstracts of Wills, 1758–1824 Halifax County, North Carolina* (Weldon, NC: Roanoke News, 1970), Ref #773; Paul Heinegg, *Free African Americans of North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina from the Colonial Period to about 1820*, 5th ed., vol. 1 (Baltimore: Clearfield, 2005), 383.

²⁹ Arna Bontemps, *God Sends Sunday* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931; New York: Washington Square Press, 2005), 4, 20–21, 100–104, 129–30, 198.

³⁰ Kirkland C. Jones, *Renaissance Man from Louisiana* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992), 73.

³¹ Carole Case, *The Right Blood: America's Aristocrats in Thoroughbred Racing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 52.

³² Joseph Durso, “Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, 87, Is Dead; Horseman from an Aristocratic Family,” *New York Times*, 13 Nov. 1999, B11.

³³ George Marshall death record, Illinois, Deaths and Stillbirths Index, 1916–1947. Accessed through ancestry.com, 3 May 2013.