

The life of Lexington, America's greatest racehorse

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David Kindy

“Best Time ever Made” declared the headline in the *Louisville Daily Courier* on April 4, 1855. Two days earlier, at a racecourse in New Orleans, a champion thoroughbred named Lexington had run four miles in seven minutes, 19 and three-quarter seconds, smashing the previous record by more than six seconds.

Lexington's blazing speed record would stand unmatched for 20 years. But a severe infection had left the stallion blind in one eye and nearly so in the other. No longer able to race, he was sent to a stud farm, where he earned even greater renown.



One of the few known photographs of Lexington, this stereoscopic image was included in a series titled *Gems of Kentucky Scenery*.

Photograph via James Mullen, Gift of Weston J. and Mary M. Naef/ Getty Museum

“Lexington sired a powerful lineage filled with champions today,” says [Kim Wickens](#), author of a forthcoming book on the legendary racehorse. “He was the most dominant horse of his day and passed those genes down to a phenomenal line of winners, including War Admiral, Citation, Secretariat, Affirmed, and Justify.”

All the horses competing in the 2023 Kentucky Derby descend from Lexington, as do 12 of 13 winners of the coveted Triple Crown, a trifecta of races consisting of the Kentucky Derby, Preakness Stakes, and Belmont Stakes.

Lexington's greatness traces back to a partnership that was highly unusual in the antebellum South. His first owner, Elisha Warfield, was a prominent Kentucky obstetrician who delivered thousands of babies, including future First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. In 1821 he opened a stud farm and became so devoted to breeding, training, and racing thoroughbreds that today he's remembered as the "father of the Kentucky turf."

Lexington was born on Warfield's farm in 1850. Originally named Darley after an illustrious Arabian stallion, he was big and strong like his father—another legendary thoroughbred who won 40 of 45 races—but he needed the guiding hand of a trusted track sage.



Harry Lewis, in top hat and tailcoat, prepares to saddle the champion racehorse Richard Singleton in this portrait by famed equine painter Edward Troye.

Image via Edward Troye, Paul Mellon Collection, Virginia Museum of Fine art

Enter Harry Lewis, an African American born into slavery who grew up to become a highly esteemed horse trainer. A painting from 1835 shows an impeccably dressed Lewis standing beside an impeccably groomed thoroughbred.

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“If they were good, Black trainers and jockeys enjoyed a certain amount of liberty in the South,” Wickens says. “They moved about more freely because of their horsemanship skills. Still, they were treated about the same as the horses.”

But Lewis was a horseman of exceptional talent, and by 1850 he had earned his freedom. Known to turfmen across Kentucky as Old Harry, he was just the man Warfield needed to turn his promising young colt into a champion racer.

“Warfield wouldn’t have turned over his prized thoroughbred to just anybody,” Wickens says. “He would have been familiar with Lewis’ reputation, who had trained the champion racehorse Richard Singleton, as well as other winners.”

By 1853 the aging Warfield was in failing health, and his wife insisted that he ease back on running the horse farm. So he agreed to lease Darley’s racing rights to Lewis, who set to work training the young stallion.



Racehorses speed toward the finish line in this vintage print by Currier and Ives. Horse racing was one of 19th-century America's most popular sports.

Illustration via GraphicaArtis / Bridgeman Images

In those days thoroughbred racing was a grueling endurance sport. Whereas today horses may sprint a mile, back then they might run four—and they had to win two races to earn the title of champion. It was not uncommon for a steed to run eight to 12 miles in a single afternoon of exhausting competition.

While Lewis put Darley through his paces, Warfield offered advice from afar. His wife had issued strict orders that he abstain from the daily rigors of horse rearing, but he still found a way to stay involved.

“He’d sneak upstairs to the attic of his home with binoculars so he could watch Darley being trained and raced at the track next to his farm,” Wickens says.

For two men of opposite races to work together in the then slave state of Kentucky surely raised eyebrows. The unusual pairing occurred at a time when tensions were high as the nation edged closer to Civil War. What made their partnership possible?

“We don’t know the exact nature of their relationship,” Wickens says, “but I’m betting it was one of mutual respect.”

Their combined efforts paid off for both men. Darley won his first set of races with such distinction that Richard Ten Broeck, a New Orleans racetrack owner, told Warfield to name his price. They settled on \$5,000—equivalent to nearly \$200,000 today.

But the event included a second set of races four days later. When Darley again finished first, a dispute arose over who was entitled to the purse, Ten Broeck or Lewis. In a landmark decision, the racing authority ruled in Lewis’ favor. He collected \$2,150, almost \$85,000 today.

Ten Broeck took Darley to New Orleans and, in keeping with the custom of the day, renamed his new horse Lexington, in honor of his hometown. The powerful thoroughbred went on to win four of his next five contests—many of them arduous four-mile events—before faltering eyesight cut short his racing career. Retired to a stud farm, he sired more than 230 horses who won nearly 1,200 races.

When Lexington died in 1875, the celebrity stallion was given a lavish funeral and buried in a custom-built coffin. His massive skeleton was later exhumed and today is reverently displayed at the International Museum of the Horse in Lexington’s namesake town.

Will there be a Triple Crown winner this year? If so, odds are the triumphant racehorse will be related to a famous forebear made great by Lewis and Warfield’s unusual partnership.