

They were born into slavery. Then they won the first Kentucky Derby.

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Retropolis

Oliver Lewis and Ansel Williamson were among the Black turfmen who dominated the early days of the Derby, before Jim Crow changed everything.



7 min

Ansel Williamson, the trainer whose horse won the first Kentucky Derby, is depicted on the right in the 1864 painting “Ansel Williamson, Edward Brown, and the Undefeated Asteroid,” by Edward Troye. (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Paul Mellon Collection, 85.647. Photo by Katherine Wetzel © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts)

By Dave Kindy

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The track was fast and the weather clear on that spring day in Louisville, nearly 150 years ago. As the inaugural Kentucky Derby was about to start on May 17, 1875, Oliver Lewis and Ansel Williamson stood on the cusp of history, though they didn’t know it at the time.

Lewis, a jockey, and Williamson, a trainer — both born into slavery — would celebrate victory at the end of that very first race, then continue to leave a mark in the annals of horse racing. But 25 years later, their accomplishments — as well as those of other African American turfmen — would be all but erased as the injustice of Jim Crow descended upon racetracks across the South.

“Racing’s Black workforce experienced the same mounting systemic discrimination that targeted all African Americans,” Roda Ferraro, director of the Keeneland Library, the world’s largest repository of the thoroughbred industry, said in an email. “Within two decades, opportunities for African Americans working in the industry’s most visible and potentially high-earning roles as owners, breeders, trainers and jockeys regressed significantly.”

As the 150th Kentucky Derby kicks off Saturday, that legacy continues to linger. The Kentucky state song “My Old Kentucky Home” — which included racist lyrics until they were changed in 1986 — has been sung before each Derby since 1921. No Black jockey has won the Derby in more than 120 years.



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But at the very first Kentucky Derby, America's longest continually running sporting event, African American horsemen were still free to race — and would quickly come to dominate. In that first race, 13 of the 15 horses were ridden by Black jockeys, who also won 15 of the first 28 Kentucky Derbies.

Lewis, only 18 at the time, was already a veteran of what was then the nation's most popular sport, attracting countless spectators and bettors each year. According to the Louisville Courier-Journal, 1870 census records show that Lewis worked on a farm about 60 miles from Louisville. He was 14 then and could not read or write. As a jockey in 1875, Lewis weighed 100 pounds.

The much older Williamson, believed to have been born in 1806, may have served as a mentor to Lewis. He was a renowned trainer who worked with several famous horses while enslaved in the 1850s and '60s. During the Civil War, "Old Ansel," as he was known, trained Asteroid, one of the most successful thoroughbreds of the era. According to legend, when Confederate raiders tried to steal the horse, he swapped it with another to deceive them.

By 1875, Lewis and Williamson were working for H. Price McGrath, who owned a stable of horses in Louisville. He liked to gamble and was hoping for a big payout at the first Kentucky Derby.

More than 10,000 people were in attendance, including about 1,000 women dressed in their finery. The next day, the Courier-Journal described the "rich colors worn by our young girls," though there was no mention of stylish hats, which would soon become de rigueur at the racetrack.

This was also opening day for the venue now known as Churchill Downs. In 1875, it was inaugurated as the Louisville Jockey Club Association racetrack, founded by Meriwether Lewis Clark Jr., grandson of famous explorer William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition. The name was changed in 1883.

McGrath had two 3-year-old horses in the Kentucky Derby: Chesapeake and Aristides, which Lewis was to ride. Both horses were trained by Williamson. The plan was for Lewis to ride fast from the start and tire the field. Chesapeake would be held back to save his strength, then take the lead and win when the other horses faltered in the 1½-mile race. (It was shortened to today's 1¼ miles in 1896.)

"Chesapeake was the favorite," said Chris Goodlett, senior director of curatorial and educational affairs at the Kentucky Derby Museum, located at Churchill Downs. "Aristides was supposed to be the pacesetter and was not favored to win."

That's not what happened. Chesapeake was last off the line and never gained his stride. Aristides moved to the front and stayed there for most of the race.

"Oliver Lewis was in the lead coming down the stretch at the Kentucky Derby," Goodlett said. "Apparently, McGrath was motioning him to keep going since Chesapeake was pretty far back."

The next day, the Courier-Journal reported the finish: "It is the gallant Aristides, heir to a mighty name, that strides with sweeping gallop toward victory ... and the air trembles and vibrates again with the ringing cheers that followed."

The winning time was 2:37³/₄ — a record for 3-year-olds carrying 100 pounds. According to the newspaper, the winning stake for the horse's owner was \$3,100, nearly \$90,000 today. There were no reports of how much Lewis and Williamson were paid for their part in the victory.

The two turfmen didn't have much time to celebrate. On June 12, they were in Belmont, N.Y., for another race.

This time, McGrath had three horses in the running: Aristides, Chesapeake and Calvin. The strategy was the same: Lewis was to ride fast so either Chesapeake or Calvin could win at the wire. Calvin finished first at the Belmont Stakes — which eventually became the third leg of the Triple Crown — while Chesapeake came in fourth. Lewis and Aristides placed second.

McGrath, a gambler who often maneuvered his horses to win bets, reportedly won as much as \$30,000 on the race, according to Ferraro.

Lewis and Williamson continued to see success in their careers. Williamson won several major races and trained a number of undefeated horses before his death in 1881. Lewis rode multiple horses to victory as a jockey, then became a trainer. Later in life, he was a bookmaker and eventually provided handicapping information for publications that served as forerunners of the Daily Racing Form, the bible of horse racing today.

Before his death in 1924, Lewis worked as a laborer in Ohio. Like many other African Americans, he had been pushed out of the racing business at the start of the 20th century. After the Supreme Court upheld segregation in its 1896 ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson, the discriminatory practice spread to all manner of institutions, including horse racing. Black jockeys endured attacks from White jockeys and were prevented from riding mounts at tracks. In 1902, Jimmy Winkfield became the last Black jockey to win the Kentucky Derby.

Lewis and Williamson were nearly forgotten. In fact, for decades, Williamson's last name was thought to be Anderson until the late Lynn Renau, former curator of the Kentucky Derby Museum, dug through records to discover the truth.

Eventually, the accomplishments of the two turfmen were resurrected. Williamson was inducted into the [Racing Hall of Fame](#) in 1998. Lewis has been honored with various memorials, including a street named [Oliver Lewis Way](#) in Lexington, not far from his birthplace.

Both are recognized in a permanent exhibit at the Kentucky Derby Museum. “[Black Heritage in Racing](#)” remembers their legacy and those of other African American horse racing trailblazers.

“The stories of Oliver and Ansel are very prominent in that exhibit,” Goodlett said. “It is outstanding that, with 150 years of history at the Kentucky Derby, that we are looking back at how this all started. It gives us an opportunity to tell those stories again.”

correction

A previous version of this article stated incorrectly that the Belmont Stakes became the second leg of the Triple Crown. It became the third leg. The article has been corrected.

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