

The Spoils of the Turf

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Feature Essay

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The Travers Stakes, the Saratoga Race Course’s famous “midsummer derby” for three-year-olds, will be run for the 153rd time at Saratoga Springs, New York, on Saturday, August 27, but I didn’t need to tell you that, as I’m sure you’re as excited about it as I am! The anticipation of this upcoming race and the equally timely publication of *Animal Histories of the Civil War Era* from editor Earl J. Hess (reviewed in this issue of *Civil War Book Review*) together bring to mind a peculiar equine episode from the Civil War. This case of the military confiscation of thoroughbred racehorses and the absconding of an especially valuable jockey helped to end the dominance of Whig planters of the Lower Mississippi Valley in the world of American thoroughbred racing, while ultimately aiding in the birth of horse racing at Saratoga.

Duncan F. Kenner, a Louisiana sugar planter and member of the Confederate Congress, cut and ran when Union forces advanced upriver from New Orleans toward his Ashland Planation in Ascension Parish in late July 1862. He met up with William J. Minor, another Louisiana planter and thoroughbred owner, at the latter’s nearby Waterloo Plantation before both men fled to another plantation further upriver in Iberville Parish. Kenner’s wife and children remained at Ashland when Union soldiers arrived to arrest Kenner and either confiscate or destroy valuable items. In her old age, his then-teenage daughter Rosella recounted those four worrisome days when their home lay at the mercy of Federal soldiers in a manuscript preserved in the **Rosella Kenner Brent Papers**.¹ Unable to find the Kenner patriarch, the men confiscated household silver, wine, sugar, cattle, and sheep. More to the point of our story, they took all the horses that could not be hidden in the woods, even the children’s ponies, and some dozen of Duncan Kenner’s thoroughbred racehorses. They even stole the images of his prized stallions from the past. “I can remember peeping under the curtains that shaded and screened the upper

¹“The Federal Raid upon Ashland Plantation in July 1862,” Rosella Kenner Brent Papers, Mss. 1167, 1822, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA.

gallery, and seeing below a soldier busy in cutting with his penknife an oil painting from its frame. It was the picture of one of my father's race horses, and a good painting," his daughter recalled. They also marched upriver to raid Waterloo Plantation, seizing William Minor's thoroughbreds as well, before shipping them all downriver to occupied New Orleans.²

The sporting world was abuzz with news of the seizure and the announcement that the horses would be sold at auction in New Orleans the following February by order of General Nathaniel P. Banks.³ George Wilkes, publisher of the New York-based *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times*, which was the nation's leading sporting journal, opportunistically purchased several of the horses.⁴ He justified his acquisition as being in the national interest, acknowledging that the South had bred better horses and trained better horsemen because southerners encouraged turf sports more than Yankees did, an evaluation that he was not alone in sharing.⁵ Wilkes observed of the Confederacy, "They are better mounted in war because they were better mounted in peace. These facts fully account for the exploits of their light, irregular cavalry in those successful incursions in Virginia and Kentucky, which have annoyed our generals and caused our soldiers to swear as hard as the British in Flanders." His only solution was to breed thoroughbred stallions with northern mares, but only after having tested the former through the crucible of racing.⁶

Notably absent from the chaos at Ashland was Abe, Duncan Kenner's enslaved jockey and likely the most accomplished rider of his generation. Kenner had purchased Abe from Adam Bingaman, a renowned Natchez-area planter and turfman, for more than \$2,300. Although the property of another man, Abe was a national celebrity in the racing world by his own right. He had established a reputation for fiery competitiveness while racing at the tracks in New Orleans and Natchez, but he became truly famous when Kenner permitted him to ride Lecomte, the great chestnut horse of Rapides Parish planter, Thomas J. Wells, during Lecomte's celebrated rivalry with the legendary Lexington in 1854 and 1855. Lecomte had finished a close second to

² Katherine C. Mooney, *Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 129, 131-32.

³ "Great Sale of Thorough-Bred Horses," *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times* (December 27, 1862): 268; "The Thorough-Bred Horses Coming North," *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times* (January 3, 1863): 284; "Sale of Thorough-Bred Stock at New Orleans, on Monday, February 23d, 1863," *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times* (February 7, 1863): 365.

⁴ "Thorough-Bred Horses from the South," *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times* (March 28, 1863): 60.

⁵ Abraham Gibson, "War Horses: Equine Perspectives on the Confederacy," in *Animal Histories of the Civil War Era*, ed. Earl J. Hess (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2022), 85-86.

⁶ "Thorough-Bred Horses from the South," *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times* (April 11, 1863): 92.

Lexington in two four-mile heats at the “Great Post Stakes,” a contest among four premiere southern thoroughbreds at the Metairie racecourse near New Orleans on April 1, 1854.

Demanding a rematch, Wells switched riders for Lecomte, acquiring Abe’s services from Kenner. The gamble paid off when Lecomte smashed the world four-mile record on the same track just one week later in a thrilling two-heat victory over Lexington, the only time that great Kentucky-bred stallion had lost a race.⁷

One year later, on April 14, 1855, the two rivals met again in a match race on the Metairie course for a contest that captivated the South. The **Dugregiy Dupuy and Family Papers** hold a couple of letters testifying to the fascination this race held for southerners, especially in Louisiana.⁸ A friend in New Orleans wrote to Dugregiy Dupuy, a planter of Iberville Parish, about the excitement that captivated the city:

Many are the speculations on the great event, and, from what I can learn, Lexington has the call, and I have heard that there were several bets made on him, 2 to 1 against Lecomte, those knowing ones will in my humble opinion be very apt to get floored, though he has made extraordinary time that is not to say that he can beat our nag. No, and he shan’t do it either, they are two noble sons of that old hero Boston, and inherit all his good qualities, untiring, unflinching & game to the last, whichever wins, the other will share his glory. They will both be ever named together, for without the one, how could the other have attained his fame. You should be here to see it. I shall give you an account of it & send you every paper that notices it, and I sincerely hope and am almost assured that my heading will be ‘Lecomte victorious.’⁹

Nicholas Hoey managed to squeeze through the crowd to witness the race and relayed a disappointing account of it:

Lexington comes on the course in the best possible condition, and really surprised me, he looked splendid, his tread was elastic, he was pawing the earth & champing his bit, impatient for the start. Now look at Lecomte, the pride of the state, he is dragged along by his bridle, his ears lay back, his head extended, his eyes dull & glassy, and when he is uncovered he seems to shrink from everything, and keeps his tail tightly between his legs.

Lecomte was sluggish and finished a distant second in the first four-mile heat, compelling Wells to scratch him for the second. “Lecomte should have had a Doctor nursing instead of a

⁷ Mooney, *Race Horse Men*, 91-93, 96-97; Henry William Herbert, *Frank Forester’s Horse and Horsemanship of the United States and British Provinces of North America* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1857), 303-18; *Famous Horses of America* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1877), 10-13.

⁸ Dugregiy Dupuy and Family Papers, Mss. 3816, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

⁹ Nicholas J. Hoey to Dugregiy Dupuy, April 5, 1855, in Dugregiy Dupuy and Family Papers.

Jockey riding him. Col. Wells is blamed by everybody for his inhumanity for causing the noble brute exhausted as he was to start for a race which had he been himself he would most undoubtedly have won, though he would have had a most unflinching steed for a rival.”¹⁰ When rumors began to circulate that Lecomte had been drugged, Wells, Minor, and Kenner investigated the enslaved trainers, grooms, and jockeys closest to him. Some of their discussions and accusations are documented in the **William J. Minor Papers**.¹¹

The disturbance to the racing world kicked up by the Federal raids at Ashland and Waterloo Plantations eventually settled down at Saratoga Springs a year later. John Morrissey, a former New York City prizefighter turned casino owner (and later New York Congressman), organized Saratoga’s first thoroughbred meet over four days in early August 1863. In the second race on the second day, Ben West, a five-year-old chestnut horse, tired on the final stretch and finished fourth in a five-horse field over two and a half miles. His disappointing showing aside, Ben West was noteworthy as being one of the horses seized from William J. Minor’s stable at Waterloo Plantation, now running under the colors of George Wilkes.¹² One year later, at the first running of the Travers Stakes on August 2, 1864, Abe, who somehow had managed to make his way north and now rode as a free man on northern tracks under the name Abe Hawkins, mounted the betting favorite, a black colt named Tipperary. He ran close to Kentucky, a colt sired ironically by Lecomte’s old rival Lexington, before falling behind at the turn into the final stretch, losing by three lengths.¹³ Two years later, Abe Hawkins won the Travers Stakes, this time by a length aboard a chestnut colt named Merrill, also sired by Lexington.¹⁴ He died of consumption within a year of the win, having returned to Ashland Plantation for his final months, and was buried overlooking the plantation’s familiar training track.¹⁵

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¹⁰ Nicholas J. Hoey to Dugregiy Dupuy, April 20, 1855, in Dugregiy Dupuy and Family Papers; Herbert, *Frank Forester’s Horse and Horsemanship*, 329-36.

¹¹ William J. Minor Papers, Mss. 859, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. For a full account of this inquiry, see Mooney, *Race Horse Men*, 98-100.

¹² “Saratoga Races,” *Wilkes’ Spirit of the Times* (August 15, 1863): 370.

¹³ “Saratoga Summer Races,” *Wilkes’ Spirit of the Times* (August 13, 1864): 372.

¹⁴ “The American Turf: The Saratoga Summer Meeting,” *Wilkes’ Spirit of the Times* (August 4, 1866): 354. Lecomte (1850-1857), who died of disease while racing in England, was an insignificant sire when compared to Lexington (1850-1875), who led the American sire rankings every year from 1861 until his death.

¹⁵ Mooney, *Race Horse Men*, 169-70; “Death of Abe, the Jockey,” *Wilkes’ Spirit of the Times* (May 11, 1867): 173.

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