

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Jockey Shorts**

Jockey, a diminutive form of the name Jock, was first used in Scotland and Northern England as early as 1529. Back then and in the following century, the word signified not just a boy (or fellow) but an itinerant minstrel, wanderer or trickster. The equestrian definition was established in John Evelyn's Diary of 1670 (Samuel Pepys didn't have the only diary around). In *Richard III* Shakespeare referred to John Howard, the Duke of Norfolk, as "Jockey of Norfolk". The Duke was an important guy, Earl Marshal of England and Lord Admiral of all England, Ireland and Aquitaine. He was also great-grandfather of Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, two of Henry VIII's six wives. "Jockey" and Richard both died on Bosworth Field while the king was offering his "kingdom for a horse". In the future, kingly fortunes would be bet on both jockeys and horses.

Britain's Jockey Club was founded around 1750 by a group of gentlemen keenly committed to the "sport of kings". First meeting in London's Pall Mall at the "Star and Garter", the club eventually moved to the current location at rooms in 101 High Street. The Jockey Club became the official governing body for horse racing in Britain.

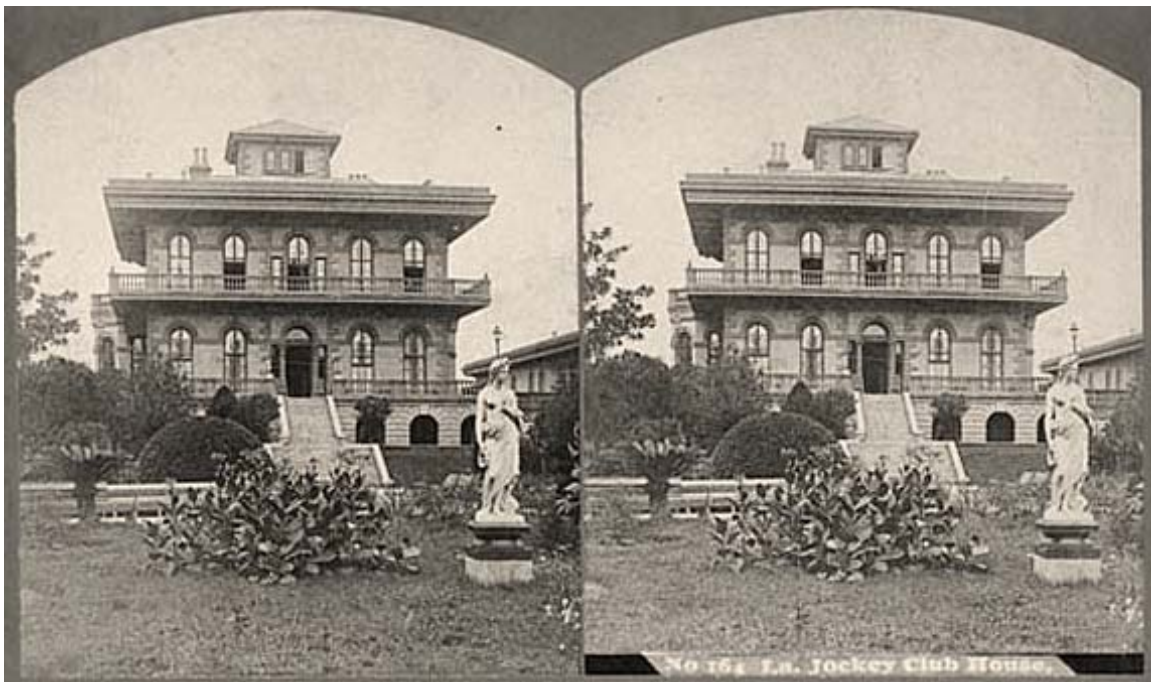
In New Orleans in 1838 a racetrack was built on the Metairie Ridge and quickly became the leading course in the South. Richard Ten Broeck of Albany, New York, became the track's owner ten years later. The first American to win on the English turf, he owned the champion thoroughbred "Lexington" who conquered "Lecomte" on the Metairie Course. The Union Race Course was laid out in 1852 on Gentilly Road. It was renamed the Creole Race Course in 1859 and became known as the Fair Grounds in 1863. It is the oldest site of racing in America still in operation. The Saratoga Race Track in Saratoga Springs, New York, opened on August 3, 1863, and calls itself "the oldest organized sporting venue of any kind" in the United States (but the Fair Grounds "site" has been used for thoroughbred races for over a decade longer).

There was much competition between the Metairie Course and the Fair Grounds Course. Young racing aficionados from the Metairie group broke away in 1871 to organize a new club. The first race card under

the auspices of the newly formed Louisiana Jockey Club was held at the refurbished Fair Grounds Race Course on April 13, 1872. The Metairie Course was sold off and became Metairie Cemetery the same year, and its oval track is still evident today in the layout. Legend has it that Baltimore native Charles T. Howard was denied membership at Metairie, so he led a coup to turn the club into one whose membership was not for the living. It is an unsubstantiated local myth, yet it is interesting to note that Howard (who furnished the first contribution toward the founding of the Krewe of Rex) died in 1885 after falling from a horse.

Young civic leaders were very busy in 1872. The Rex parade was planned for Mardi Gras, and it took advantage of the visit of the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia. Lydia Thompson was performing "If Ever I Cease To Love" but the Grand Duke (who had already seen her in St. Louis) was hanging out at the Jockey Club.

April 13, 1872, was the inaugural day of racing of the Louisiana Jockey Club at the Fair Grounds. The first race was a two-mile hurdle race with eight jumps won by "Monarchist", a son of the great "Lexington", in two consecutive two-mile heats. Four years before the "Little Big Horn", George Custer saw his horse "Frogtown" come in second in a pair of two-mile heats to a filly named "Hollywood". The Grand Duke Alexis of Russia was back in New Orleans to attend the races that day.



*Old stereopticon slide of the "La. Jockey Club House"*

When the Louisiana Jockey Club took over the operation of what is today the Fair Grounds in 1871, it also purchased a mansion just next door in the 1400 block of Leda Street. Architect James Gallier, Jr., (of

the firm of Gallier and Esterbrook) was hired to design this stunning Italianate edifice for a wealthy cotton factor named Florence A. (Florenz Albrecht) Luling.

Born in 1828 in Bremen Germany, Mr. Luling (yes, Florence is also a man's name – remember Ziegfeld) had purchased the 80-acre site in 1864 from the Evariste Blanc estate, and the 22-room house was completed a year later.



*The Luling Mansion in 2012*

Financial reversals in Luling's business prompted him to sell the property to the Louisiana Jockey Club for \$60,000 and eventually move to England. He died years later on May 21, 1906, in London, England, at a daughter's home. The town of Luling, Louisiana, in St. Charles Parish is named for him.

Luling's impressive dwelling served as the organization's clubhouse until the turn of the century, after which it would again become a residence. The front garden of the mansion was sold off as individual lots, upon which there are now houses facing Esplanade that now obscure the beautiful villa. These changes are said to have occurred during the 1920s ownership of the property by George W. Soulé. At that time, the streets "Labatut" and "Ducayet" off Esplanade were changed to "Leda" and "Verna". "Leda" was, after all, the name of Soulé's wife. The stately home was later designated an historic

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In addition to the Louisiana Jockey Club, there was also the New Orleans Jockey Club. It was a consortium formed in 1904 that opened the City Park Race Track the following year. It stood on ground occupied by Tad Gormley/Reggie Bush Stadium. The city then had these two popular tracks plus another on the West Bank. All of this activity resulted in an anti-gambling faction that succeeded in having the Locke Law passed in 1908. This legislation prohibited gambling on horse races, but the act was repealed in 1916. All tracks were closed during that time, and the New Orleans Jockey Club was liquidated in 1911.

The Business Men's Racing Association was running the Fair Grounds after the repeal and acquired the City Park course. The grandstand burned to the ground in 1918, was disassembled and rebuilt on the Fair Grounds (where it stood until it went up in flames again in 1993). The organization sold the City Park Race Track property to City Park in 1920.

The Fair Grounds closed another fabulous Jazz Fest on May 6, 2007. The day before, Churchill Downs (its current parent company since 2004) was hosting the prestigious Kentucky Derby (first held in 1875). Calvin Borel of St. Martinville rode "Street Sense" to victory, and Louisiana jockeys Robby Alabarado (on "Curlin") and Mark Guidry (on "Imawildandcrazyguy") came in third and fourth. Borel became the sixth Louisiana-born jockey to win the Kentucky Derby, joining Eddie Delahoussaye and Kent Desormeaux (who'd each won twice up until that point), Craig Perret, Eric Guerin and J. D. Mooney.

Since 2007, Calvin Borel won the Kentucky Derby twice again, in 2009 atop "Mine That Bird" and in 2010 on "Super Saver". Kent Desormeaux (who holds the U.S. record for most races won in a single year, 1989) won another Derby in 2008 riding "Big Brown" by just under five lengths. He and "Big Brown" rode to victory that year in the Preakness, as well.

Calvin Borel's 2009 Derby victory with "Mine That Bird" was the second biggest upset in Derby history behind "Donerail", and the Louisiana jockey's winning margin of  $6\frac{3}{4}$  lengths was the greatest in Derby history since "Assault" won by 8 lengths in 1946. Later in 2009, Borel won the Preakness atop filly Rachel Alexandra. With this feat, Borel became the first jockey to win the first two jewels of the Triple Crown riding two different mounts. As of 2012, Borel and Desormeaux each have three Kentucky Derby wins.

A few words should be mentioned about New Orleans favorite "Risen Star", the son of the great Triple Crown winner "Secretariat" out of the mare "Ribbon". Owned by locals Ronnie Lamarque and Louis Roussel III, he started off 1988 by winning the Louisiana Derby and (just two weeks before the Kentucky Derby) the Lexington Stakes. He just couldn't beat the favorite "Winning Colors" in the Derby, but beneath jockey Eddie Delahoussaye he came in third. "Risen Star" won the Preakness two weeks later, and won in the Belmont Stakes by a spectacular  $14\frac{3}{4}$  lengths. Prayers were offered throughout the process, since the "Little Sisters of the Poor", a Roman Catholic order of nuns, were promised a percentage of the winnings - only in New Orleans.

Louisiana has had some great horses though the years. It has also produced some remarkable jockeys, but there are always those who prefer boxers.

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