

## **The Biography of Thoroughbred Race Horse Trainer Hark West, Sr.**

Hark, a/k/a "Old Hark", a/k/a "Harkness" and "Hark of Virginia", was a professional race horse trainer best known for the 7:26 racing record set by the thoroughbred Lecomte at the Metairie Course in New Orleans at the Great State Post Stakes of 1854. It was at that race where Lexington, the greatest champion and sire of the 19th century, received his first and only defeat by his half-brother Lecomte.

As a slave, Hark's life was extraordinary compared to most other blacks at that time, enslaved or free. His experience with freedom of movement, with receiving pay, tips, and miscellaneous other bonuses, privileges and media attention though were common to other trainers of his caliber in the 19th century. Hark's rates as an enslaved trainer would always be used to undercut other race horse trainers, free black or white, who also tried to make a living training champion racehorses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

While a slave, Hark was owned and hired out by Dr. Alexander Thomas Belfield (A.T.B.) Merritt of Greensville County, Virginia and of Richmond, Virginia, and later of Vicksburg, Mississippi and toward the end of his life, of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. Dr. Merritt as a planter, thoroughbred importer and breeder, was very active at the Newmarket Course in Virginia near Petersburg, when the "Old Dominion" was the center of early American racing. As America expanded West in middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so did the training opportunities that Merritt secured and managed for Hark.

In the 1830s and 1840s, Hark was hired out to such titans of the American Turf as William Ransom Johnson, known as the "Napoleon of the Turf" of North Carolina and later of Virginia. In 1836, Hark trained Ransom's champion filly, Mary Blunt. She was used as a trial horse against Ransom's legendary stallion Boston, one of the first inductees into the National Racing Hall of Fame in 1955. Boston would later sire both Lecomte and Lexington in 1850.

As a trial horse, Mary Blunt was one of the horses used to push Boston to his racing limits in order to determine his worth on the track. Prior to Boston's try outs with Mary Blunt, he was on his way out to pasture, or worse, due to his infamous fiery temperament. Hark also trained for Richard Singleton of South Carolina, a prominent and honorary member of the South Carolina Jockey Club.

In the 1850s, Hark was chosen to manage the largest racing stable in the United States, Wellswood Plantation, owned by Thomas Jefferson (T.J.) Wells, in Rapides Parish, Louisiana. Managing a racing stable involved overseeing the staff required for the breeding shed; staff needed for the care, feeding, and training of yearlings, and staff responsible for the safe travels of valuable, prized champions to and from the races. Hark spent much of that time travelling back and forth to races at the Metairie Course in New Orleans, which was by then, the hotbed of thoroughbred racing. In 1855, the Governor of Louisiana, Paul O. Hebert, awarded Hark a

silver medal for his role in bringing prestige and honor to the state with the Louisiana-bred winner Lecomte.

After the Civil War, racing in the deep South collapsed. Most of the wealth of the planter elites that was used to support the turf, vanished. Their top beloved thoroughbreds were confiscated by Union and by Confederate cavalries alike. The remaining racing stock of any worth was seized and sold at auction by the U.S. military during the occupation of New Orleans, as ordered by Major General Benjamin F. Butler. Much of that racing stock was funneled north to New York, which quickly replaced Louisiana as the new epicenter of American racing.

At least one of the horses Hark trained Prioress, would escape the war to come. Prioress was owned by T.J. Wells who also owned Lecomte. Both horses were purchased from Wells in 1855 by racing promoter extraordinaire Richard Ten Broeck. He shipped both Lecomte and Prioress to England where Lecomte died shortly after his arrival. Prioress would go on to eventually find success on the English turf.

Lexington was one notable survivor of the Civil War. He was secretly shipped from Kentucky to Illinois for his safety later in the war. It has not been determined if Hark helped to hide Lexington in Illinois. But it would make sense if Hark clandestinely helped to secure Lexington, a horse he was very familiar with, if Hark was in Illinois around that same time.

In the 1860s, Hark followed racing North to Jerome Park in New York and to Springfield, Illinois where he trained the stock of a Virginia-born banker and state official, Samuel H. Jones. Hark's son Hark, Jr. married in Springfield, Illinois in 1866.

After slavery, Hark used the surname West and continued his training career. By 1871, less than 10 years after the end of the Civil War, Hark West raced his own horse, Shoo Fly, out of Jones' mare Fanny Boston, by the stallion Bill Alexander. Hark apparently purchased Shoo Fly from Samuel H. Jones. This is significant because previously, in the antebellum South, blacks were forbidden from racing horses in their own names.

The contributions of African-Americans from the 19th century, and especially of those who were enslaved, yet who greatly impacted the development, growth, and success of racing in the United States, have virtually been erased. Currently, there are only two black trainers acknowledged by the National Museum of Racing in Saratoga Springs, NY; Edward D. Brown and Ansel Williamson, both of whom were born a generation or more after Hark West and his contemporaries.

There was a seismic shift in the American turf after the chaos, death, destruction, and upheaval of the Civil War, and most importantly, after the loss of slave labor. Skilled trainers and jockeys followed the horses out of the South to racetracks nationwide, looking to continue making a living. The nature and character of racing though was reborn and redefined by the new bosses of the American turf, who chose to simply ignore centuries of knowledge, expertise, and

wisdom gained by generations of black turf men. Thoroughbreds would from now on be judged for brief bursts of speed, rather than for bottom, or stamina, that was to last all day, through three four-mile races per day. With the implementation of discriminatory Jim Crow laws, black turf men, trainers and jockeys were eventually banned from the sport.

As a result of the unfortunate tide that turned against black turf men, trainer Hark West's contributions to the American turf through several notable, yet forgotten 19th century champions such as The Queen, Mary Blunt, John Blunt, Phil Brown, Catherine Davis, Lecomte, Prioress, Ann Dunn and several other champions from his 40-year career, have been overlooked by the National Museum of Racing and by American historians in general. Unfortunate still, Lexington's original black trainer, Harry Brown has not received recognition from the National Museum of Racing either.

Hark West, Sr. though, has not been forgotten by his family nor by his admirers from yesterday and today. He has received mention in several authoritative books about American thoroughbred racing. Hark's story, his personal journey in, through and out of slavery, and the journeys of his contemporaries, will be documented and preserved for posterity in a forthcoming novel.



Hark West, Sr. and Lecomte, 1855

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