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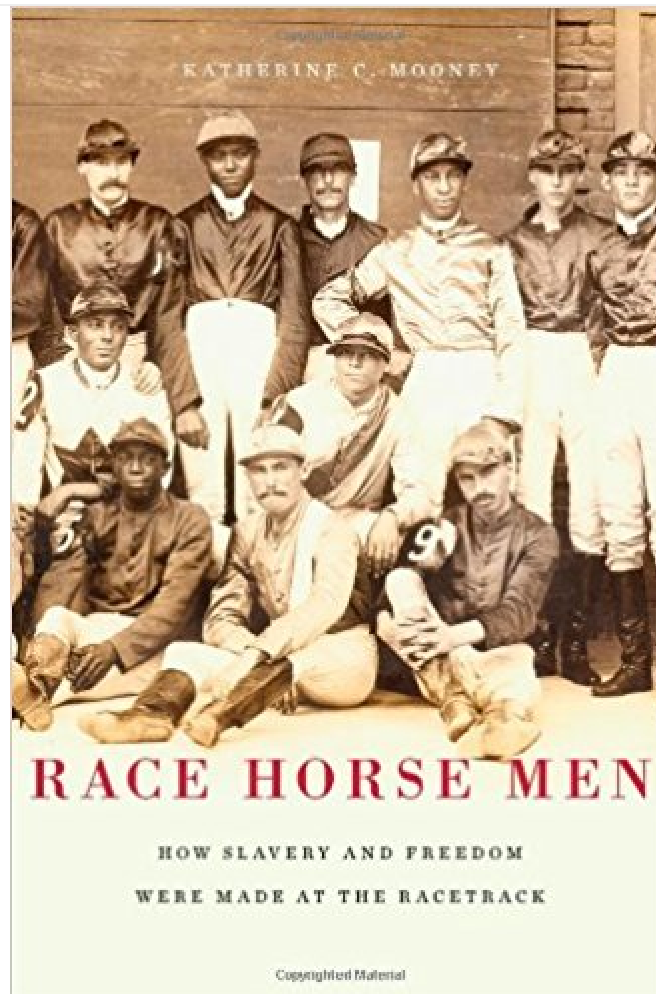
The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack



Volume 48 (2015)

Reviewed Work(s)

Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack. By Katherine C. Mooney (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2014). Pp. 336. Cloth, $35.00.

Go to any racetrack in the United States, and you're likely to see diverse groups of people. At the track, the well-heeled equestrian set mixes with unlucky railbirds. Grooms, jockeys, trainers, and owners make up the racing hierarchy, while the gambling crowd invests betting slips with Horatio Alger dreams, and the upper class exhibits their wealth in parades of expensive equine bodies, fashionable clothes, and large bets. This contemporary panorama is not much different from the nineteenth-century scenes Katherine C. Mooney describes in *Race Horse Men*. Mooney has a clear thesis: "For many Americans of earlier times, horse racing was not merely a leisure pastime but a practice to which they owed a powerful and tenacious allegiance; the racetrack was an institution that defined who they were or who they wished to become" (3).

Arranged like a tableau vivant, racetracks represented models of the world that elites wanted to create. The racetrack was a world in miniature where powerful architects controlled every variable. As the rich and powerful projected their ideals onto racetracks, they created a space in which slaves and free blacks could negotiate power. Horrific tales of slaveowner abuse temper Mooney's stories of black success. Slaveowners withheld food from their slave jockeys to keep them at racing weight, and one slaveowner recounted with perverse glee how he stunted the growth of his jockeys by burying them up to their necks in manure. Mooney's book presents a vision of slavery that allows for negotiation and success without neglecting the violence of the institution. By tracing the rise and fall of black horsemen throughout the long nineteenth century, Mooney shows that the great issues of American history played out at the racetrack: the debate between slavery and free labor; the sectional crisis; and enduring racial tensions.

During the colonial period and the early republic, the racetrack was among the best places for status-seeking whites to display their wealth and prove their breeding. Racing continued to be the sport of choice for wealthy Americans who wished to model themselves after the British aristocracy. Mooney illuminates the rise of horseracing in the United States by emphasizing the relationship between ownership—of horses and humans—and status. In the microcosm of the society that Thoroughbred owners created at the racetrack, hierarchy was paramount. Horseracing relied on slave labor not only to create the wealth required to race, but also to supply jockeys, trainers, and grooms. The Thoroughbred industry's reliance on slavery and the success of a select number of high-profile slave jockeys compelled observers and participants to reckon with the institutional contradictions of slavery. Slaves used their status to negotiate certain privileges and freedoms. But white slaveowners argued that the perfected animal bodies displayed at the track offered a compelling argument for the institution of slavery. "To them," Mooney writes, "because they weighted Thoroughbreds and black horsemen with their dreams of a future of perfect bondage and cutting-edge progress, an America that venerated Thoroughbreds must be a nation that recognized the viability of their conception of the United States as a slaveholder's republic" (95).

After the Civil War, finance capital replaced slave-produced commodities as the engine of economic growth, and the patrons of Thoroughbred racing changed as well. Horseracing enjoyed something of a renaissance in the north as eastern capitalists bought up some of Kentucky's most famous stud farms. Racecourses opened in Saratoga Springs and the Bronx, New York and Long Branch, New Jersey. Wall Street investors followed horseracing news the same way they would follow grain prices. And in the post-bellum period, Mooney writes, "Between the rails of the racetrack, at least, black men were to be the acknowledged equals of white ones" (165). For a brief moment, black jockeys and trainers could enjoy success at the track, and they too conceived of their vision for America in terms of horseracing. Communities of professional black horsemen sprung up, only to be blotted out by the restrictions of Jim Crow or threatened off northern tracks by angry white jockeys. Black jockeys won 15 of the first 28 Kentucky Derbies, but a black rider has not won the Run for the Roses since Jimmy Winkfield won his second consecutive Derby in 1902.

Within her account of the worlds created at the racetrack, Mooney gives ample attention to the lives of the black horsemen who captivated Americans in the nation's first mass audience spectator sport. Reading a variety of sources against the grain, Mooney teases out compelling stories of black success. She is particularly adept at writing the history of slavery into the discursive world of sporting newspapers. The long nineteenth century saw the publication of multiple journals devoted to the Turf, like New York's *The Spirit of the Times* and *The Turf, Field and Farm* and Baltimore's *The American Farmer* and *The American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*. These magazines often published content supplied by subscribers, many of them from the slaveholding South and eager either to elide slavery from their missives or to portray slavery as a benign institution. From these sources, Mooney recaptures the role of black workers in the Thoroughbred industry, from well-known figures in the history of horseracing like Jimmy Winkfield to obscure horsemen like Charles Stewart. Mooney's nuanced readings are not limited to bringing black men into the narrative. She is adept at questioning the validity of sources and finding meaning in their falsehood. For instance, a story circulated in the South after the Civil War that Robert E. Lee's famed horse Traveller refused to submit to any black jockeys or grooms and would only behave for a white college student from Texas. "In telling and retelling the story," Mooney writes, "Southerners…completely ignored the realities of the equine world; black men would have worked with Traveller throughout his life. But they did not love the story for its accuracy" (151).

Mooney's skill at cutting through horseracing lore to excavate its historical meaning is one of the strongest facets of this book. However, the abundance of narratives that she dissects can be arresting. Mooney's book covers nearly two centuries and most of the United States east of the Mississippi River. Historical actors sometimes appear abruptly and disappear too quickly to leave an impression. But this stands as a testament to the popularity of horseracing as a national pastime and contributes to her national argument. This is an impressive book, and the multiplicity of actors is more evidence of its ambition than of a particular shortcoming. The expansive scope of *Race Horse Men* allows Mooney to give both slavery and freedom sufficient attention. By turning her attention to the track, Mooney finds a middle path between slave resistance and negotiation and the absolute violence of slavery.

Additionally, when the institution of slavery disappeared, the Thoroughbred industry remained. As Frederick Jackson Turner turned to the frontier to locate an American identity, Mooney uses the racetrack as her lens onto the history of race in the United States. While Americans continue to watch the Kentucky Derby every May, Katherine Mooney's book will help to explain just why we watch horses so keenly.

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