By his fourteenth birthday, Isaac’s apprenticeship in the stables of James T. Williams and Richard Owings began to pay off. In the beginning, no one could have imagined that the little boy from Lexington would become the greatest representative of horse racing the state—maybe even the country—would ever produce. What is even more amazing is that despite his greatness, Isaac remained humble and focused in a sport where dishonesty and treachery prevailed. Like most boys filled with potential, Isaac would have had little hope of achieving success without sponsorship and guidance, so the opportunity to demonstrate his talent with horses was inestimable. For the next eight years, Isaac’s rise would be shaped by a series of events far from his day-to-day activities on the racetrack or in the quiet time he spent by himself. In some ways, his path was created by circumstances outside his comprehension and beyond the narrow world of Lexington and the Bluegrass. Isaac was fortunate that he began his journey headed in the right direction.
Before becoming an apprentice jockey, Isaac first had to prove his salt as a stable hand.\(^1\) Eli Jordan, who had known Isaac since he was a small boy, would recall years later that he was quiet and “always in his place,” and Jordan could always put his “hands on him any time, day or night.” Isaac “was one of the first up in the morning, ready to do anything he was told to do or help others. He was ever in good humor and liked to play, but he never neglected his work, but worked hard summer and winter.”\(^2\) This seriousness suggests that Isaac’s mother had instilled in him the value of hard work and the savvy to take advantage of his opportunities. America was a smart and determined woman who clearly recognized the character traits her son would need to find a place in the world for himself. In addition, Jordan’s tutelage gave him both a sense of purpose and the skills he needed to succeed. It seems that Isaac, like his mother, was both smart and determined; this was reflected in his work ethic, which would lead to his later success and consistency, which became his signature quality.

Isaac learned that horses depended on people for everything. Stable boys were in charge of feeding and grooming the horses they were assigned to care for. Isaac slept in the stall of his charge and was responsible for keeping it clean. This involved removing the droppings and used bedding, separating the soiled straw from what was still usable; sweeping the hard dirt floor and allowing it to dry out; and then replacing the bedding with a thick layer of clean wheat straw or wood shavings, depending on the cost and availability of materials, as well as the temperament of the horse. Isaac was also responsible for transporting the solid waste material to the drying area away from the stables, where it would eventually be hauled away and used as fertilizer by local farmers and gardeners.

These tasks and others were vital to the welfare of the horses and had to be performed daily, without fail. Neglecting this routine could jeopardize the horses’ health, especially a newly foaled colt or filly, and it could mean a severe beating or worse for the stable boy who forgot his responsibilities. Whether Isaac and his fellow apprentices were abused by head trainer Jordan or stable owner Williams for neglecting their chores is not known. However, physical punish-
ment was considered an acceptable consequence for apprentices who failed to properly feed, groom, and exercise their animals. This was part of the conditioning process for those who wanted a chance to wear the black and red colors of Williams and Owings.

Fortunately, Isaac was conscientious about always being in his place when called on, so he probably avoided beatings, and given their personal relationship, Jordan may have had more patience with him than with the other boys. Early on, Isaac demonstrated a commitment to his calling. After performing his early-morning tasks of feeding and watering the horses and preparing them for their morning workout, he watched the exercise riders putting the horses through their paces. Isaac’s first assignment as an exercise boy was to ride George Rice’s horse Volcano, which promptly reared up and threw him to the dirt track. At that moment he had two choices: get back on and try again to control the horse, or run away and hide. In reality, there was nowhere for him to go. His mother was dying of tuberculosis and needed the money he earned working at the stable; his father was dead; and his few remaining blood relatives had moved away to Covington, Kentucky, just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. So he made the only decision possible for a boy whose prospects were as narrow as they were shallow: he got back on the horse.

After their workouts, the exercise boys helped the grooms rub down and massage the horses to ease their muscles and to feel for tight ligaments and firm flesh. Still learning about the habits of horses, Isaac watched the grooms’ technique for brushing and combing the horses to put them at ease. Isaac understood that he had a lot to learn if he wanted to become a successful jockey. There were plenty of other boys and men who aspired to the fame and life of ease enjoyed by the Napoleons of the turf, who rode fast and lived even faster. But not everyone had the know-how and the talent to control a horse and get it to perform well enough to win. Indeed, although they were separate, the horse and its jockey were, ideally, one entity as they charged around the oval track in pursuit of victory. And for a select few, immortality would be their reward. As exciting as it seemed, the life of a nineteenth-century
jockey was filled with danger, but the potential rewards compelled a few brave souls to choose the saddle and reins, the post and paddock, as a way of life. In his poem “Aintree Calls,” British poet Will Ogilvie expresses the essence of what it means to be a jockey: “Danger beckons yet to daring / And the colours wait for wearing / While Fame proffers gifts for sharing.” Through trial and error, young Isaac learned to be fearless. Through the teaching of Jordan and the advice of fellow jockeys, he learned how to ride races and win stakes. Isaac was a quick study, and everyone saw that he was born to ride. He had the head and the heart for les belles bêtes: the beautiful beasts.

In early February 1875 Benjamin Bruce’s Lexington-based Kentucky Live Stock Record reported that the “prospect for fine sport at this place is more flattering than it has been for many years, judging from the number of horses in training in this section.” Along with the Williams and Owings stable, others preparing for the spring races included H. P. McGrath, B. G. Thomas, J. A. Grinstead, A. Keene Richard, General Abe Buford, F. B. Harper, Daniel Swigert, and T. J. Megibben. The number of quality horses had increased over the last few years, and the new stakes race in Louisville had been on all their minds during the winter months. Horses nominated for the inaugural meeting of the Louisville Jockey Club were being prepared for the race that was destined to be a showcase for quality Kentucky-bred Thoroughbreds such as Aristides, Ten Broeck, Bob Woolley, Clemmie G, and Kilburn. Quality black jockeys would also participate in the event, although, at the time, they were still a somewhat invisible presence. These jockeys included Oliver Lewis, William Walker, William Lakeland, Howard Williams, Dick Chambers, and Raleigh Colston Jr., all from Kentucky and all proven champion pilots of horseflesh. These men’s names would be lost to history because, whether black or white, the jockey was not as important as the horse, which was being showcased for sale to the highest bidder. This would change significantly as the popularity of horse racing increased and the public began to demand exciting races based on rivalries between horses and, eventually, between individual jockeys and their ability to bring home a winner with style. By the later years
of the nineteenth century, black jockeys were increasingly excluded, owing to a number of factors, including jealousy among white jockeys, who saw the huge salaries earned by successful blacks as an affront to white men; collusion between owners and white jockeys to bar blacks from the richest stakes races; and hostility toward blacks in general during the 1890s, when lynching reached its peak in America.

On February 25, 1875, Williams and Owings shipped their string of horses to Louisville, under the care of Eli Jordan, to begin training for the Jockey Club race. The decision to train in Louisville was probably based on several factors, such as the desire to introduce the horses to the new track, get a feel for the track’s speed and where the low points were, and take advantage of the new facilities built by the Louisville Jockey Club. The owners and trainer may have gone early to observe the competition and create a plan of action for each horse based on the jockey’s ability and the field of competitors. The Association Course at Lexington, where the Williams and Owings stables were located, was connected to Louisville and Nashville via railroad, so transportation was not a problem. From Lexington, they could travel south and test their horses at smaller tracks along the way, such as Crab Orchard, some forty-six miles south of Lexington.

The records are unclear regarding how many races Isaac had prior to the first one in Louisville, but he claimed his first official race was in May 1875 at the Crab Orchard track. The oldest circular track in the state, Crab Orchard was a great testing ground for potential stakes-winning horses and reliable, talented jockeys. Here, among his peers, Isaac “rode several races” and secured his first win on B. F. Pettit’s chestnut filly Glentina (future winner of the Louisville Jockey Club’s Colt and Filly Stakes). According to Murphy, he rode Lady Greenfield in a losing effort in 1875 prior to his victory on Pettit’s filly, but it “marked the real beginning” of his life as a professional jockey. We cannot know how the impish yet resilient boy handled his first victory or how Uncle Eli responded to his pupil’s success. Isaac may have been modest and humble, smiling slightly but not wanting to draw too much attention to himself, or
he may have laughed out loud at the joy and elation of putting it all together. We can only imagine how a fourteen-year-old boy coming into his own would have acted.

It is not known whether Isaac traveled to Louisville with Jordan, to set up the accommodations there, or journeyed south to Nashville with the rest of the boys, where Williams had entered his colts in stakes races beginning on May 4.\textsuperscript{14} If he went south, Isaac may have had one or two mounts at the Nashville Blood Association Meeting on the Williams and Owings horses Creedmore, Fair Play, or Playmate, all of which either won their respective races or placed in the top three. At Nashville, even if he did not ride, Isaac would have helped with stable duties, grooming, and preparing the horses for their races. This experience would have been invaluable to young Isaac, who still had much to learn about how races were run, different ways of riding at race meets, and the rules of the match race format, whereby additional weight was added to a horse as a handicap to determine the champion among horses of different breeds, ages, or sexes. In some cases, the outcome of a match race was determined by the best two out of three or three out of five heats.

Isaac also would have been schooled on the dangers of gambling on horses. Essentially, Jordan would have told Isaac that good jockeys don’t gamble; they don’t have to. If Isaac was a good boy, he would get what he deserved. In later years, he would draw from this wisdom provided by Jordan and others, and Isaac would become a role model for other young jockeys who hoped for financial security and the opportunity to ride in stakes races.

In an 1889 interview, Isaac said he had to “laugh as he thought of himself in those old days,” yet he seemed to value coming up, albeit briefly, through the Association Course, also known as the “Chittlin Switch” racetrack, at Lexington to become a jockey of some ability.\textsuperscript{15} Although in the spring of 1875 he had been training as a jockey for less than a year, he had learned the value of a good seat and the details of riding a horse at maximum speeds, and he was gaining an understanding of the art of pace. Still, Isaac was untested in big-time stakes races, where lives could change for better or worse on any given day. By mid-May, Isaac was in Louisville to test
how well he had learned from his mentors, Jordan and Williams, and from his mother. Everything was working in his favor, and he was preparing to take flight in a world filled with possibility.

Louisville and New Beginnings

In May 1875 the Kentucky spring was chilly. However, the winter-like temperatures did not prevent curious crowds of patrons, horse-racing enthusiasts, and men of the turf from descending on Louisville for the inaugural races at the new horse park. Indeed, under the banner of Kentucky pride and advancement of the state’s long-standing tradition of horse breeding and racing, the streets of the river city were filled to the brim with eager black and white faces anticipating something new and thrilling on the horizon. For the thousands who traveled to Louisville to participate in the spectacle, the atmosphere was more than electric: it was contagious. Many of the attendees were interested in seeing the best Kentucky-bred horses run fast; others came to bet on their favorites and, if they were lucky, go home with some easily won cash. Bachelors arrived in town looking not only for trackside entertainment but also for that which could be found in the red-light district and the many saloons throughout the city, where unattached women could be persuaded to engage in sin at an affordable price. Families also came to the inaugural event. Fathers brought their sons to participate in the fair-like atmosphere as a rite of passage and to mark the day the races came back to Louisville.

For the gentlemen of the turf, especially those with a genteel philosophy of breeding and running horses and a desire to export their stock to enthusiastic customers in the East and across the Atlantic in England and France, Louisville became a mecca for well-bred horses and a new commercial center. Breeders such as Woodford County’s Daniel Swigert, Franklin County’s J. W. Hunt-Reynolds, and Fayette County’s H. P. McGrath would use the new venue to showcase the quality of the horseflesh available on their farms, as well as the quality of the trainers, grooms, and jockeys they employed. As boosters and beneficiaries of Kentucky’s most important industry,
these men joined with others of considerable influence, power, and wealth to pool their resources and develop a new model for horse racing that would benefit Kentucky’s identity as the Thoroughbred capital of the United States, if not the world.

That May, however, the focus was on the new course located in the Louisville suburbs, still surrounded by farms and the rural landscape from which it had been carved. The design of the Louisville Jockey Club and Driving Park was based on the tracks and courses in Europe. Its principal founder and chief organizer, Meriwether Lewis Clark, was no doubt taken aback by the throngs of people who came to usher in a new era in Kentucky horse racing.

In 1872, three years prior to the opening of the Louisville track, a group of gentlemen of the turf, businessmen, and politicians made it known that they wanted to expand Kentucky’s horse markets into the East, West, and South. But to do so, and to compete with Lexington, racing would have to return to the city of Louisville on a grand scale. Clark, his influential uncles John and Henry Churchill, and a number of wealthy breeders were convinced that Louisville could become the epicenter of Kentucky’s prized Thoroughbred industry. At the request of this distinguished group of Kentuckians, Clark, a former banker and tobacco merchant, traveled to Europe for the sole purpose of studying horse racing there and developing a new approach to American racing based on the grand spectacles organized by the English Jockey Club. In Europe, the “Sport of Kings and of the aristocracy” was steeped in tradition and ritual unlike that found in America. While in England, Clark met fellow Kentuckian and former vice president John Cabell Breckinridge, who introduced him to members of the Jockey Club. These interactions would prove significant not only to the development of the racetrack in Louisville but also to the sense of pride in Kentucky horse racing.

While in England, twenty-seven-year-old Clark visited the Newmarket Heath course, where the Two Thousand Guineas Stakes was held; Epsom Downs, where the Epsom Derby and Epsom Oaks were held; and the location of the original St. Leger Stakes, held at Town Moor in Doncaster. Clark learned about the history of the Jockey Club, the process of selecting competitors, the origins of cer-
tain traditions, and the importance of honor as the basis of success and failure. For two years, Clark immersed himself in the habits of the “most chivalrously honorable” traditions and culture of the turf and, in the process, mastered the many details of managing a race-course. The knowledge he gained would inform the creation of the Louisville Jockey Club and the policies it implemented under Clark’s strong leadership. However, unlike the English, American horse breeders were in the racing business to make money. So Clark studied a system of betting used by the French called “pari-mutuel.” Although it would take some time for this system to catch on in the United States, Clark saw its possibilities.

Enthusiastic about the future of horse racing in Kentucky, Clark returned to Louisville in 1874 with a plan to change the sport for the better. With the support of a newly formed board of directors that included E. H. Chase, Daniel Swigert, John E. Green, H. Victor Newcomb, J. W. Hunt-Reynolds, W. H. Thomas, and John Churchill, Clark incorporated the Louisville Jockey Club and Driving Park and began to raise funds to build the racetrack itself. One of the unique features Clark proposed to the board was a new racing format that eliminated heat races; each race would be self-contained, and each horse would run only once a day. The emphasis on stakes races also created excitement for the betting public, who could see different races in a single day or over a series of days that showcased Thoroughbreds of different ages. After raising $32,000 through subscriptions, Clark began construction of what would become a monument to Kentucky’s genteel past. By the spring of 1875, the track was completed and the gates were opened to the enthusiastic “racegoers” and the voguish petite bourgeoisie engaged in social jockeying at Kentucky’s newest attraction.

Matt Winn’s memoir recounts his experience on the first day of races at the Louisville track:

The first Derby Day I remember as if it were yesterday. It was May 17, 1875. I was 13—nearing 14—when Col. M. Lewis Clark, the Louisville sportsman, and his associates of the race track which now is Churchill Downs, were making ready for
the opening. My father decided to be there. He wasn’t a horse player. But this was more than a race day. It was a festival, and my father felt he ought to be at the track to see if the “goings on” would be worth all the fuss the people had been making about the new track, and the new kind of racing.

Clark, in making up his racing programs, had decided to have three races aping the English. One was to be the Clark Handicap, named after himself, because the St. Leger was named after Colonel St. Leger, who had arranged the conditions for the world’s first stakes race. Another was to be the Kentucky Oaks, for three year olds, named after the Epsom Oaks. The third and, of course, the most important was to be the Kentucky Derby in which conditions were the same as for the Epsom (or English) Derby. The distance of the Kentucky was fixed at a mile and a half (1 mile, 880 yards) as compared with the Epsom Derby distance of 1 mile, 881 yards.22

Clark presided over the inaugural races at the Louisville track. Proof of the track’s success was the number of people waiting to enter the Louisville Jockey Club racecourse on opening day.23

Beyond the dirt track, the facilities included 150 stalls for horses, a clubhouse for Louisville Jockey Club members, and a grandstand that could accommodate up to 5,000 spectators.24 Clark and the club’s membership understood that the prestige generated by the track, with its European-style racing program and high-quality horseflesh, would add value to Louisville and satisfy horse breeders’ aspirations to grow the industry beyond the boundaries of the state. What is more, such a prestigious event would encourage local merchants and horsemen to invest in their businesses and farms to satisfy the anticipated demand in the East. Along with horses and other livestock, Kentucky farmers wanted to export hemp, rope, wool, tobacco, and corn to markets outside the Ohio River Valley. If Clark’s European-style races at the new double-cupolaed structure turned out to be a success, Kentuckians would benefit immediately from the local attention and the national publicity. Yet, even as the grandstand and infield filled with people of various occupations, income
levels, and racial backgrounds eager for the races to begin, things were far from perfect.

Understandably, the history of slavery and the thousands upon thousands of blacks bought, sold, and bartered in and around the city of Louisville could not be forgotten. Even as times were changing and prosperity seemed attainable, race was an ever-present reality. Following the Civil War, Louisville, like Lexington, had become a popular destination for former slaves from the surrounding rural areas, especially those seeking refuge and protection from the escalating violence unleashed on them and their families in the countryside. By all accounts, the presence of Federal troops in urban areas served as a deterrent against former Confederate soldiers and other dejected whites who terrorized former slaves. Although many wealthy farmers whose livelihoods had depended on slave labor during the antebellum period still depended on the wage labor of blacks during Reconstruction, including those who raised Thoroughbred horses, it is unclear how many of Kentucky’s prominent horse breeders were members of the Ku Klux Klan. There is some speculation that the Klan’s midnight assassins used horses owned by local farmers who believed blacks were becoming too much of a threat to Kentucky traditions.

Like Lexington, Louisville’s black population increased significantly after the Civil War. Between 1860 and 1870, the number of residents grew from close to 7,000 free and enslaved blacks to nearly 15,000. By 1870, numerous religious, educational, and political meetings and conventions were being held in the city by African Americans trying to establish a foothold in society and exercise their rights guaranteed under the Constitution. Leading the black community in such endeavors were the Reverend Henry Adams, pastor of the Fifth Street Baptist Church; his daughter Susie Adams, a teacher at the church’s school; musician and teacher William H. Gibson Sr.; and Horace Morris, an accountant and former cashier at the Freedmen’s Bank before its collapse in 1874. Their success served as a catalyst for others. Although success was not inevitable, the individual achievements of many blacks encouraged the forward-thinking to take advantage of opportunities as they arose.
Even in the midst of the nationwide scandal involving the Freedmen’s Bank, Louisville’s African American leadership maintained its focus on education, religion, work, and savings as integral to the achievement and social mobility of the community. By demonstrating their value through productivity, order, and faith, African Americans protected their own psyches and that of the larger black community from the external abuses perpetrated by that portion of white society bent on exterminating the Negro in America—or at least in their particular part of it.

The image of Louisville as a gateway to opportunity and prosperity was countered by the reality of African Americans’ ongoing struggles to achieve freedom and citizenship. Overt challenges to their sovereignty after passage of the Fifteenth Amendment led numerous individuals to become politically active and agitate for the right to be recognized as men with the power to change their own circumstances. A number of the Kentucky horsemen who were members of the Louisville Jockey Club and Driving Park had been slave owners, the children of slave owners, or supporters of the former Confederacy. For some of these turfmen, one of the most attractive features of Thoroughbred horse breeding and racing was the creation of a distinct Southern identity connected to the “lost cause” narrative. In some ways, the Louisville Jockey Club was a reaction to the Federal government’s attempt to pacify and change the true nature of the so-called traditional Kentuckian through the Civil War and Reconstruction. This public display of one of antebellum Kentucky’s most influential industries was, in essence, a refutation of the notion that the North had won the war. In the postbellum period, Kentucky’s most powerful white men used horse breeding and racing to become the new masters of the Bluegrass, claiming the honorary titles of colonel and general and, metaphorically, continuing the battle for white supremacy.

On the surface, this newly created sense of identity promised to boost Kentucky pride as well as the local economy. But not to be forgotten were those individuals who would make Kentucky’s horse industry a success by shaping the land with their muscle and using their knowledge of horses to groom and train the spirited foals to
run and win on the racetrack. These black men, many of whom were former slaves, created their own opportunities for social mobility and economic success through the same revived Bluegrass industry. On a tour of Lexington, a farmer from Cincinnati, Ohio, observed:

Whether it is the normal condition of the outskirts of Lexington or not, it appears as if they were given up to little negroes, in single file, riding horses that were covered as with garments, and looked out upon a sinful world, through round holes cut in their head clothes. One could not but imagine that a circus was always getting ready to start on a parade through the streets. This mixing up of the negro element with the horse is a striking feature of the neighborhood. Wherever you see a horse you see a negro. If the horse is to be ridden, a little “nigger” is perchance on his back; if to be led, it is done by a big negro. It is almost to suggest the idea that while white people may have descended from monkeys, the colored race must have been bred from horses, the two affiliate so readily. This theory might be a great comfort to the good white people who are so tenacious of their exclusive descent, and is respectfully referred to the professors of “Darwinianism” for learned consideration.27

Although grotesquely ignorant and conditioned by the “Darwinianism” of the time, these observations of the intimacy between black men and horses support the notion that African Americans were invaluable to the development of horse racing in Kentucky.

The value and success of the horses raised on the various Bluegrass farms can be attributed to the black men and boys who devoted themselves to bringing the colts and fillies under their care into their own. And those horses’ winnings, breeding fees, and offspring would be responsible for the economic success of the horse industry for generations. Ironically, that industry would try to exclude those who helped create it.

By the spring of 1875, this was Isaac Murphy’s world. The wide-eyed boy born during the Civil War and coming of age during Reconstruction had arrived in Louisville, where the Jockey Club’s
version of the sport of kings had attracted 12,000 spectators to witness the speed of Kentucky-bred horses piloted by skillful jockeys in their colorful silks. Isaac would have seen everything Matt Winn saw from the infield that day, but from behind the scenes—in the stalls, where Eli Jordan and James Williams fussed and fretted over their well-prepared runners, and on the rails near the finish line, where he would watch the end of races and the results. Like the crowd in the stands and Matt in the infield, Isaac was looking forward to an exciting day at the races. He could not help looking at the well-dressed men and women in the grandstand, the assemblage of fashionable ladies in flowery hats and their diamond-pinned gentleman companions, or the array of common folk on the rails along the homestretch. The boy would soon be the focus of their attention, and his performance could either make his career or sabotage his future as a jockey. But luckily, he did not have a mount in the first race or, for that matter, on the first day.

At 2:30, after some jostling among the horses, the official starter tapped the drum to begin the first race. The six four-year-old horses and their jockeys took off around the oval track, each one hoping to claim the first prize. After a beautiful start, General Abe Buford’s chestnut gelding Kilburn took the lead and held it for the first mile. At various points in the race, the crowd held its breath when the favorite, William Cottrill’s chestnut filly Bonaventure, took the lead, lost it, and then regained it after some prodding by her able jockey, William Lakeland. When Bonaventure managed to hold off the field and claim victory, cheers went up. After two minutes and thirteen and a half seconds, the region’s most important horse park had officially been christened. The judges, jockeys, and spectators all recognized that the track was fast, and old records were in jeopardy of falling. Ideally, this would happen during the second event on the program: the Kentucky Derby.

In what was being touted as the premier contest for Thoroughbred horses and breeders, the Kentucky Derby had been designed by Colonel Meriwether Lewis Clark Jr. to equal the Epsom Derby in England. Clark had called on his friend Colonel William H. Johnson, president of the Nashville Blood Horse Association, to officiate
at this most important race.\textsuperscript{28} Isaac, along with everyone else present, watched as Johnson walked across the dirt track wearing his best suit. They watched him as he drew a line in the dirt to mark the starting point; then he reminded the fifteen jockeys to keep their horses behind that line until the official drum was tapped, signaling the start of the race. It is instructive to note that thirteen of the fifteen jockeys were black, but this was not unusual. As Johnson climbed into the starter’s box, Isaac watched the jockeys position themselves and their horses for the best possible start. When Colonel Johnson struck his drum, the field burst forward as if on fire, with the familiar Volcano (Isaac’s first mount as an exercise boy) battling General Buford’s McCreery for the lead. Both of Henry Price McGrath’s horses—Chesapeake, ridden by William Henry, and Aristides, ridden by Oliver Lewis—were in the middle of the pack, with Lewis forcing a heavy pace. Both horses had been trained by Ansel Williamson, who had gone to work for McGrath after the death of Robert A. Alexander, the owner of Woodburn Farm. The thunderous sound of hooves impacting the ground competed with the cheers from the stands as the favorite, Chesapeake, was bested by stablemate Aristides. The chestnut colt opened up a gap between him and the field after the first mile and then dashed unchallenged down the stretch with McGrath’s “green and orange colors flying in the wild,” to the delight of the crowd.\textsuperscript{29} Aristides came within seconds of tying the record for three-year-olds at a mile and a half and netted McGrath the healthy sum of $2,900—not to mention bragging rights to the very first Kentucky Derby victory. Finishing second was Volcano, winning $200 for his owner George Rice and proving his salt in a big race.

Williams and Owings stables also did well that first day. The favorite, Fair Play, won two out of three one-mile heats to take the Association Purse of $400. And in the fourth and final race of the day, Playmate finished out of the money but placed sixth in the field of fifteen. It is safe to say that when Fair Play rounded the final turn, Isaac, the jockey in training, was watching carefully as, coat shining and muscles flexing, the horse bore down the straightaway toward the finish line. Watching from behind the rails, Isaac would be learn-
ing how to judge a horse’s pace by watching its body movements and looking for signs of fatigue and tightness in its stride. He would be listening to Jordan as he barked instructions to the jockey, telling him when to let the horse run free of the bit and when to punish him with the whip. Or maybe Jordan just let the jockey do his job, leaving the critique until later, when it could be delivered in private and more readily absorbed and understood, and the public would not be privy to knowledge of the horse’s or the jockey’s weaknesses. It makes perfect sense that Isaac would learn these important lessons by listening and by watching theory and practice merge into performance. He would begin to understand the small margin between winning and losing and the big difference between a job as an exercise boy and a career as the best jockey of the day.

On May 22, the fifth and final day of the Louisville meeting, it was Isaac’s turn to ride. His mount was Robert Scott’s Lady Greenfield,\(^3\) and the race was the Consolation Purse for horses that had already been beaten.\(^4\) There is no doubt that Isaac was eager to demonstrate what he had learned at Chittlin Switch as an exercise boy and at Crab Orchard as a newly minted jockey. After a few words of encouragement from the other jockeys, Isaac mounted his horse and was led to the track. All of a sudden, Isaac’s big moment was at hand. With everyone watching, it was time for him to show exactly what he knew and achieve the primary objective for any new jockey: finish the race alive. Jordan’s instructions to Isaac were probably quite simple: get the six-year-old mare off the line at the tap of the drum and run her to the finish line. But whatever they were, it didn’t matter in the end. Isaac was the last off the line. In no time, Lady Greenfield was distanced by the field and finally cantered past the judges’ box to the applause of the exhausted crowd, ending the first Louisville Jockey Club meeting.

Isaac might not have appreciated this recognition from the crowd; it would have been embarrassing and humiliating to perform so poorly. But he would have many other opportunities to ride past the judges’ stand to the cheers of spectators. On those occasions, he would understand that their applause was an expression of appreciation for his skill in the saddle. He would use this first race as a
reminder to always compete, regardless of the horse he had under him. This was one of many lessons he would learn from his first ride in Louisville.

What did Eli Jordan think of Isaac’s initial performance at Louisville? Did he laugh to himself when the mare failed to get off the line, or did he look for signs of a great jockey being born? We can only speculate, but it seems likely that he used the experience as a teaching tool for his young, eager jockey. Jordan himself may have been a jockey at one point, as were most black trainers of his generation. Weight, age, and fading ability forced many out of the saddle and into the role of trainer, molding both horses and boys into winners. Jordan would have understood if Isaac froze when the drum was tapped. He knew that the jostling and slashing from other jockeys could intimidate a young boy trying to become a man in a do-or-die occupation. Master trainer that he was, Jordan understood the desire to be successful, and he knew how to get what he wanted out of a horse and a young jockey, especially one who trusted his every word and command. Whatever the exchange between trainer and jockey was after the race ended and Isaac weighed out, it likely included a constructive critique that helped Isaac understand what he had done right and where he had failed.

Given Isaac’s future success, it is obvious that he took Jordan’s criticism to heart. Yet he was still just a boy, and he may have taken his failure hard, even crying once he was out of the public eye, where his peers could not see him and question his toughness. Or he may have demonstrated the same stoically cool demeanor that would characterize his later victories, seemingly achieved without much effort. Or perhaps this loss gave him the incentive to work even harder to become the most successful jockey of his generation—maybe of all time.

In any case, we can assume that Jordan began a regimen to condition Isaac to anticipate when to get off the line, having him practice hundreds of times. In other words, Jordan drilled Isaac in the proper techniques to stay in control of the race before it became a race. He also would have taught him to know the strengths and weaknesses of the horse he was riding, as well as the strengths and
weaknesses of the other horses in the field. Isaac needed to develop an awareness of everything going on around him at all times, anticipating the unexpected and trusting his instincts at every turn. The lessons would be ongoing. But Isaac was bright and willing, and his commitment was obvious to all who saw the little yellow boy with long arms, some ability, and a good seat. Despite the loss at Louisville, the fourteen-year-old had passed the first test for a professional jockey: he came back for more.

Winning It All

Looking back on the career of Isaac Murphy, Philip St. Laurent wrote glowingly about the “cool and assured” way he guided his horses, sometimes with a simple “whisper” to coax his steed across the finish line to win by a nose. In his match races on Salvator, against Ed Garrison riding Tenny, Isaac became famous for two things: “winning and handling his mounts gently.” Over the years, Isaac had proved himself head and shoulders above the competition. According to St. Laurent, “That’s the way Murphy proved things. He won races.” What exactly he had to prove is not mentioned, but by the 1890s, there were several issues affecting black Americans that Isaac could not avoid, even on the racetrack.

The most prevalent was the so-called Negro question, whereby whites wondered what to do with the nation’s more than 7 million blacks, who were considered alien in the country of their birth. Whites wanted nothing more than to rid themselves of “the stain” of slavery, on the one hand, and the competition by blacks, on the other. Solutions to the supposed problem were posed by historians such as Philip Bruce, who demonized African Americans as naturally savage and incapable of achieving a sense of civility after emancipation:

The return of the race to the original physical type, involves its intellectual reversion also. The alteration of its mental character will be disclosed in the development of simpler and more distinct intellectual traits; with the elimination of mulattoes,
the points of mental difference between the blacks and the white will grow more apparent. So far, the only persons of unusual capacity whom the former race has produced have been men who were sprung, either directly or remotely, from white ancestry. . . .

The reversion to the original type is apt to make the Negro a more dangerous political factor, because it will increase his inability to grasp enlightened ideas about public policy.\textsuperscript{34}

Bruce promoted the concept of reversion, suggesting that, because of their nature, blacks were destined to become extinct socially, politically, and culturally. His theory also claimed that because mulattoes had “white” blood, the elimination of mixed unions between blacks and whites represented a break in the civilizing of the darker race. In other words, blacks were recognized as a threat to a civilization in which whites once again dominated as masters of their own destiny.\textsuperscript{35}

By 1890, black intellectuals had recognized and articulated why white men were so adamantly opposed to the progress of the black race: fear of economic competition was a cloaked reference to fear of black masculinity. If a black man who had once been at the bottom of society proved himself capable of achieving and sustaining success, what could be said about a white man who had never been a slave yet has achieved nothing? Black men’s successful competition with whites for jobs, security, and power came to define white masculinity as less potent and therefore less manly. This new reality framed numerous contests between white and black men in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

For Isaac Murphy, his contests against white rivals like Ed Garrison and Jimmy McLaughlin became more significant to racing fans. They still watched to see which horse won the race, but some became more concerned with which race (black or white) won the competition. Horse racing had been good to Isaac, and he had been good for horse racing. What he thought about the Negro question, how it influenced his riding, or whether he became more determined to win because of the growing tensions between the races is
not clear. What we do know is that in the spring of 1876, Isaac was a year older and wiser. The most important issues on his mind were the quality of his seat and his understanding of the art of pace. The future was still undefined, and so was his place in it.

By the spring 1876 meeting of the Louisville Jockey Club, Isaac had gained additional experience with the horses owned and managed by the Williams and Owings stable. He had also gained ten pounds. Although Isaac’s weight gain—he now tipped the scales at eighty-seven pounds—seemed to bolster his ability to control his mounts, other jockeys were not so lucky. Isaac was probably aware of some of the harsh methods they used to keep the pounds from adding up, including being buried in manure, running and riding while wearing heavy wool sweaters, limiting their food intake, and practicing a regular regimen of vomiting (which, as we now know, can damage the esophagus and rot the teeth, due to stomach acids).

During the winter, Isaac and Eli Jordan no doubt discussed some the finer points of riding to win, especially how to judge the pace of a race and the speed of a horse. When the weather was right and the horses were ready, Jordan began training his eager apprentice in the field, where Isaac excelled. To get as close to his horse as possible, Isaac would have spent hours in the saddle, learning how the horse’s shoulders moved in anticipation of the inevitable impact of its feet on the ground. He would have learned how to balance himself in the stirrups, using his knees and hips and head as he and his charge attacked the course with raw determination and intent. He would have felt the rush of accelerating from a dead standstill to speeds that felt like he would leave the earth forever if he just leaped off the horse with his arms open. Finally, he may have visualized himself riding the perfect Kentucky Derby, as Oliver Lewis had in 1875.

For those involved in the horse-racing business, the work was never ending, especially as it related to developing the next champion Thoroughbred. In the Bluegrass, most trainers and turfmen knew which horses were primed to win the stake races at Nashville, Lexington, and Louisville and which ones could succeed back east at Saratoga, Long Branch, and Monmouth Park. Horses that showed
well in the early spring and were in peak condition by June had their legs under them and could begin training for the fall races. Controlled tests to measure a horse’s submission to the will of the trainers and jockeys provided a glimpse of the animal’s temperament and character both under stress and under ideal circumstances. The profits to be made from investing in a good horse and a proven winner could be phenomenal—earnings from the sale of horses, stud fees, and the auctioning off of foals of a winning breed. However, to win races and make money, one had to do two things: get the horse to run fast, and get the jockey to run smart.

Like the horses, the jockeys underwent conditioning and tests of endurance, especially those who were talented but still unproven, like Isaac. The more real competitions they could ride in, the better they would become. Each time they climbed onto the back of a well-conditioned, well-prepared animal, they had an opportunity to show the maturity and instincts needed to be successful. But there was a catch. The jockey had to want to win more than the trainer, more than the owner or breeder, and more than the other jockeys in the field. And he had to convince the horse he was riding to run fast enough to win the race. Isaac was that kind of jockey. Later in his career, Isaac’s good friend and attorney Llewellyn P. Tarleton asked him about the potential of a particular young rider. Isaac sternly replied, “He can’t expect to get up and ride right without work and exercising. It was practice that made me know when I was going a 45 or 50 gait.”

Putting in the necessary work made Isaac great.

It is intriguing to think of Isaac as a track rat, always willing to exercise any horse available to be ridden. Maybe he even imagined what it was like to be a horse, running fast with the wind blowing past him. He likely befriended les belles bêtes with apples and carrots and kept some feed stuffed in his pocket to reward a spirited colt, resisting the saddle or bit, for his good work and cooperation. Isaac and the horses he rode most frequently became kindred spirits. He watched as they ate, slept, and ran freely, getting to know them and understand their habits. Not all jockeys shared Isaac’s patience with the horses; some preferred to use the riding whip to intimidate and punish a horse for not running fast enough, demonstrating who
was in control. Isaac, however, connected with horses in a way that seemed to create an agreement between equal parties. Isaac may have wondered to himself what the horses were thinking when they saw him. Did they like him? Could they understand him? Isaac saw and understood each horse as an individual with a distinct personality and particular likes and dislikes. Knowing each of his partners so well gave Isaac the edge, allowing him to win on any horse at any time.

In addition to spending time with the horses and training with Jordan, Isaac no doubt benefited from listening to the wisdom being doled out in huge doses by the old philosophers who hung out at the stable and the racetrack, all eager to impart the tiniest bit of information to guarantee an advantage over an unsuspecting rival. Although there is evidence that a number of these men were former colored troops and veterans of the Civil War, there is no indication that any of them knew Isaac’s father. If they had, that would have been an important part of Isaac’s growth as a man—sharing memories of his father with men who knew him and might have fought beside him during the war. These are just some of the gaps in African American history that we long to know but never will.

Although he was still a year away from participating in his first Kentucky Derby, Isaac had the opportunity to prove his abilities in other races over the five-day period in 1876. In fact, in the Louisville Ladies Stakes for two-year-olds, he showed the skills that would make his name synonymous with dramatic finishes. On May 17, the third day of the meet, Isaac was the jockey of choice to ride Williams and Owings’ Springbranch in a field of ten that included another horse from the same stable, Classmate. At the tap of the drum, the field got away, with the bay filly Princess out in front. After only “a few yards,” Classmate took the lead, followed by Lizzie Whipps and Isaac on Springbranch. After the three-quarters pole, Isaac managed to maintain his third position, holding off Eva Shirley and Glentina. Down the stretch, Springbranch answered Isaac’s call and sprinted past Lizzie Whipps and gained ground on Classmate, only to lose the race by two lengths. Isaac finished second and in the money, which was good for his employer and therefore good
for him. He was still learning how to wait for the right time to let his horse open up and get to the finish line first. His second ride atop Springbranch, in the Tennessee Stakes, was not as successful; he finished out of the money in fifth place.

From Louisville, the Williams and Owings stable traveled north to Cincinnati, Ohio, to participate in the Cincinnati Jockey Club meeting at Chester Park, one of the new racecourses in the Midwest. Inaugurated in 1875, the same year as the Louisville Jockey Club, Chester Park fixed its spring racing schedule to come after the Louisville races and before the meetings at St. Louis. Officials in Cincinnati understood the value of their city as a major hub between those two other destinations for wealthy owners and breeders, as well as the masses that followed the turf. To accommodate patrons of the turf, the Marietta and Cincinnati Railroad created a special train from downtown Cincinnati, near the corner of Pearl and Plum Streets, to Chester Park. Judge Edgar M. Johnson, president of Cincinnati’s Queen City Jockey Club and a lawyer by trade, helped build the racecourse to boost the Cincinnati economy as horse-racing insiders and fans traveled to the city.

Similar to Louisville, Chester Park was energized by a new enthusiasm for racing, and local citizens flocked to the track to enjoy the spectacle of daring jockeys defying death as they piloted their 1,200-pound torpedoes around the dirt tracks designed for that purpose. At the four-day event in Cincinnati, Isaac did not fare so well, finishing fourth in two races on two different days. But again, at this stage of his career, what he needed was experience. To continue to develop as a jockey who was capable of winning races consistently, he had to ride as often as he could, testing out Jordan’s instructions and critiques, as well as his own self-evaluations. Still, nothing could have prepared Isaac for the politics of the turf and the unintended consequences—both positive and negative—of trying to win at all costs.

In September, at the annual Lexington meeting at the Kentucky Association racetrack, Isaac took a giant leap forward. In the second race of the fifth day, the Colt and Filly Stakes, he won aboard P. Bennett’s Glentina, the chestnut filly previously owned by B. F.
Pettit, and the same horse Isaac had ridden for his first win at Crab Orchard the previous spring. On this particularly cool and cloudy day, Isaac put everything together, beating a field of horses that included Baden-Baden, a future Kentucky Derby winner, as well as McWhirter and King Faro, both winners of major stakes races. The editor of the Kentucky Live Stock Record provided a detailed account of the race:

After several false starts Major [B. G.] Thomas sent the eleven away to a most capital start. The field was so large and the horses crowded together so close on the turn that it was impossible to say who had the lead until half way round the turn, when Glentina’s colors showed in front, King Faro who was cut off by the crowding on the turn was second, the remainder of the lot pretty well bunched. Just after passing the quarter, 25 seconds, King Faro showed half a length in front of Glentina with Harry Peyton, Baden Baden and Headlight lapped a length from them. No change occurred down the back stretch or past the half mile, 50½ seconds. Coming around the lower turn Glentina again showed her nose in front, with Baden Baden lapped on King Faro. They passed the three quarter pole, 1:18, in this order, and on entering the homestretch Glentina increased her lead and finally won by a length, King Faro in second, half a length in front of Harry Peyton, third, who in turn was lapped by McWhirter, fourth, Baden Baden fifth, Allen Pinkerton sixth, Endorser seventh, Bradamante eighth, Headlight ninth, Blarneystone tenth, Victory eleventh. Time, 1:45½.42

In this race, Isaac demonstrated the style that would make him not only a consistent winner but also a popular jockey among owners. He was growing into his full potential, and everyone saw it, including his mother, America.

Sometime during the fall meeting in Lexington, after his win on Glentina, Isaac decided to change his surname from Burns to Murphy. Why would Isaac choose to distance himself from the
memory of his father, a Civil War veteran who had fought against slavery? What was the benefit of taking the last name of his grandfather Green (Jeremiah) Murphy? Evidence suggests that Isaac took his grandfather’s name as a gesture of respect and to honor the man who had taken in a desperate America and her children in their time of need. The other alternative is that he did it because his mother asked him to. And being an obedient child who loved and respected his mother, and perhaps because of her poor health, Isaac chose to honor his mother’s wishes. But why would America ask her son to change his name? The answer is unclear and open to speculation. However, it is possible that Jerry (Skillman) Burns was not Isaac’s father. Jerry may have adopted Isaac as his son, and Isaac may have already known and accepted this, taking Burns as his last name because that was the name of the man who had cared for him as a father. But at this point, Isaac may have decided to change his name to set the story straight for himself and to stay connected to his real past.

We cannot be sure how Isaac spent his leisure time, but he probably had few free days to lose himself in the streets of Lexington or spend time with his mother. It is likely that during the winter months of November through January—or, in modern terms, the off-season—Isaac sought out his mother’s company, but his time with her was probably limited because of her tuberculosis. Still, it seems safe to assume that America maintained an ongoing relationship with her son, despite her illness. They may have attended church together at one of the six black churches listed in the 1876 directory. While we will never know for sure the inner workings of the relationship between Isaac and America, one thing is clear: she placed her son on the path he seemed born to follow. America was important to Isaac, and he would be committed to fulfilling her vision for him long after her death in 1879.

Isaac’s first official ride under his grandfather’s name was a dramatic success, even though he was four and a half pounds overweight. On September 21, 1876, the second day of the fall meeting of the Louisville Jockey Club, the ninety-one-pound jockey again rode Springbranch, entered in the Bluegrass Stakes for two-year-
olds. The field of stellar Thoroughbreds included Belle of the Meade, Glentina, Felicia, and Miss Ella. After a series of false starts, each jockey trying to get the jump on the others, the race began with Isaac in the awkward position of being in the lead. By the half-mile pole, the gap had been closed, with Belle of the Meade and her jockey Scott challenging Isaac and Springbranch for the lead. Keeping his cool, the rookie jockey maintained his pace and piloted Springbranch beautifully around the lower turn. With the two horses now running side by side and entering the homestretch, Isaac asked his light-flanked filly to give a little more, and she responded by opening up her stride and separating from the challenger to win by a length. With this victory, Isaac Murphy the jockey was born. But at that moment, no one could have known that the small fifteen-year-old with thin lips and a straight nose would create such a demand for great horses and even greater jockeys.

Overall, Isaac had a good showing at Louisville. He finished second to Alexander Keene Richards’s Redding atop T. J. Megibben’s Eaglet, and he had a fourth-place finish on Bennett’s Glentina in the Sanford Stakes. The records for the rest of the 1876 season are fragmented. It is not clear whether Isaac rode in the Nashville Association meeting in October. However, records indicate that the Williams and Owings stable was there and that several of their horses competed and won major stakes races, so Isaac may have participated in some of these wins. Official records indicate that Isaac had mounts in fifteen races and recorded victories in two: at Lexington and at Louisville. However, if he rode in additional races in Nashville, he easily could have increased his mounts to twenty and his wins to four or five.

It is instructive to know that during this period, top jockeys rode 150 to 300 races per season, primarily because there were fewer horses and fewer races compared with later in the century. A jockey’s salary could vary from $15 to $100 per month if he rode for a single stable, plus whatever bonuses he received for winning. Some jockeys, such as William Walker, frequently bet on the horses they rode, hoping to make extra money.

Now that he was a professional jockey, Isaac’s life was about
to change—his understanding of his new career, the world in which it functioned, and his place in it. How he would adjust and what choices he would make would be just as unique as his talents on the racetrack.

The End of an Era of Progress

With the election of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes to the presidency in 1876, the “bargain between Big Business and the South” was about to change the trajectory of progress in American society, especially as it related to blacks’ ability to retain the rights gained through the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. In Kentucky, Republican politicians argued over the future of the South, which was still unwilling to admit its “own acts of ‘madness, folly, and wickedness’ [toward blacks]; instead of taking the Negro by the hand and leading him in a friendly way in to the paths of virtue, intelligence and material prosperity, they [Southerners] have appealed to the passions and prejudices of race against race, until they have excited the ignorant and vicious deeds of violence and outrages . . . which cast a dark shadow over the entire South.” Unfortunately, the hotly contested election, the arguments in favor of the nation’s growth and the development, and the hatred of the Negro by whites in both the North and the South resulted in compromises that not only threatened to start a new civil war but also put African Americans at the mercy of white Southerners who were still seething over losing the war, losing their property, and seeing their former slaves gain power and use it to refute and deny the idea of white dominance.

Almost immediately after the Federal government removed troops from the South, Southern planters and Southern Democrats set out to disenfranchise blacks by denying them access to the ballot box “by force, by economic intimidation, by propaganda designed to lead him [the Negro] to believe that there was no salvation for him in political lines but he must depend entirely upon the thrift and the good will of his white employers.” With the election of Hayes, segregation found a friend in Washington who was willing to pro-
mote the destruction of African American life as mere sport to enable growth and prosperity: the new basis for American capitalism.

In *Slavery by Another Name*, Douglas A. Blackmon writes lucidly about the consequences of the return of “white political control” in the South. In states like Mississippi, black life was already criminalized through legislation outlawing vagrancy. In a majority of Southern states, blacks faced the possibility of being jailed and forced to work under conditions that were, in some cases, worse than slavery. Blackmon writes: “By the end of Reconstruction in 1877, every formerly Confederate state except Virginia had adopted the practice of leasing black prisoners into commercial hands. There were variations among the states, but all shared the same basic formula. Nearly all the penal functions of government were turned over to the companies purchasing convicts. In return for what they paid each state, the companies received absolute control of the prisoners.”47 In other words, to feed the South’s need for cheap labor and to reassert white privilege and power, the law and big business conspired to subjugate and reenslave African Americans through convict leasing programs.

In some Southern states, black boys under the age of fourteen were arrested for misdemeanors and petty crimes, or just for being orphaned and homeless. These mostly innocent victims were sent to convict camps with adults for terms ranging from a few months to life. In Kentucky, the first prison leasing contract was signed in 1825; by 1877, it was on the verge of expansion as white leaders debated the best way to answer the Negro question.48 The extent to which African Americans in Lexington experienced the consequences of American racism and the new Southern capitalism is not known. However, if Isaac had not been apprenticed to Williams and Owings by his mother, or if she had died before he was established in some occupation, he might have ended up in one of those convict camps, leased to a company looking to fill its labor quota with able-bodied blacks.49 Fortunately for Isaac, his career as a jockey was taking off like a rocket. There seemed to be no end in sight to his success.

In April 1877 James Williams bought out his partner, Richard Owings, for an undisclosed amount of money and shipped his
stable of horses to Nashville in preparation for the annual meeting there. In addition to Williams, Isaac rode for several other owners, including the firm of Rice and Bethune and J. W. Hunt-Reynolds, the proprietor of Fleetwood Stock Farm. In Nashville, Isaac finished third in his first four races; his lone victory came on day three on Williams’s Vera Cruz in the Cumberland Stakes for three-year-olds. In both one-mile heats, he successfully piloted the bay colt to impressive wins over the field of competitors. Similar to his performance the previous fall, Isaac did extremely well for a novice jockey. His victory on Vera Cruz demonstrated that he was learning to judge the ability of the horse under him, as well as the abilities of the other horses in the field. In the final heat, King William jumped into the lead from the start, but by the half-mile pole, Isaac had brought Vera Cruz up and was challenging for the lead. There was something special about how he handled his horses down the stretch. With a little encouragement from Isaac, they responded and won by whatever it took—a length, a head, or a nose. In this race, Vera Cruz answered his request. The season was only beginning, and there would be plenty of close finishes to come.

Isaac had to be hoping that this season would solidify his career as a full-fledged jockey who was free to negotiate contracts and earn a set salary plus bonuses for victories. His apprentice’s salary, which was paid to his mother, was obscenely low, considering the progress he had made over the past two seasons. An increase in salary would allow Isaac’s mother to live more comfortably and perhaps try one of the numerous cures for consumption publicized in the *Lexington Observer* and *Lexington Daily Press*. Although these remedies were experimental at best and opportunistic quackery at worse, none would benefit America. Unfortunately, the real cure was decades away, and America had less than three years to live. But Isaac may have thought about the possibility of saving his mother’s life from time to time.

Isaac arrived back in Lexington in time for the May 12 start of the Kentucky Association meeting. Riding Classmate in the Phoenix Stakes, Isaac was able to negotiate the turns on his home track but failed to close the distance on Bradamante and lost by a length. The
next day, on J. R. McKee’s Waterwitch, he won the Filly Stakes in dazzling fashion. Coming down the stretch, Isaac piloted the chestnut filly past Queechy like a missile, winning by a head. These dramatic finishes gained the public’s attention.

By 1877, Isaac was no doubt maturing as he was increasingly exposed to the world beyond Lexington. What he thought about the election of Rutherford B. Hayes, the loss of Federal protection for blacks in the South, or the possibility of a war with Spain over Cuba, we will never know. But at the very least, he had to realize that one did not have to be white, educated, or middle class to be concerned about race, politics, and business. For most urban-dwelling blacks, their race represented a political position and therefore presented limited economic opportunities. Luckily for Isaac and other black jockeys, they were still somewhat insulated in horse racing. For the most part, at least in the South, whites still saw working with animals as “nigger work,” and they gladly let the “darkies” occupy most of those positions. Very soon, that would change. And Isaac would have a major role in transforming jockeying into a highly lucrative profession, and therefore one that was highly sought after by whites, who viewed black jockeys’ high salaries as an affront to white boys, who could ride horses too.

In the meantime, James Williams, Eli Jordan, and Isaac Murphy made their way to Louisville on the special excursion trains from Lexington to prepare for the third meeting of the Louisville Jockey Club. Isaac was scheduled to ride in his first Kentucky Derby, piloting Vera Cruz. Benjamin Bruce, editor of the *Kentucky Live Stock Record*, wrote glowingly of the first day: “Never in the history of the Kentucky turf with all its splendid antecedents, has the promise been so bright or the prospects flattering for a brilliant meeting as the forthcoming one of the Louisville Jockey Club.” The weather on May 22, the first day of the races, was beautiful and “tempered by a gentle breeze,” and those sitting in the infield were anxious for the races to begin. After the first race, the spectators took up their positions all around the track and in the stands to witness the third installment of the spectacle that represented Kentucky pride, as well as its future: the Kentucky Derby.
In the field of eleven capable three-year-olds, Isaac’s only advantage was his understanding of Vera Cruz and how to ride him. He had ridden the horse on numerous occasions and was well acquainted with his temperament, but different competitions and different fields can bring out the best and worse in athletes, even horses. After several false starts and a pause in the action, the field was off, but Vera Cruz had a poor start; the horse “reared and plunged” and was left behind. Isaac regained control over the temperamental animal to finish strong—in fourth place—but out of the money. Most believed that Vera Cruz would have won the Derby “if he had not unfortunately been left at the post.” Many years after the race, Isaac expressed the same sentiment: “I have always thought I should have won the Kentucky Derby that year . . . had not Vera Cruz, my mount been left at the post. Vera Cruz was a superior race horse, but was never sound and when this is considered his career was all the more remarkable.”

During the final days of the Louisville Jockey Club meeting, Isaac had two other mounts; he finished first on Fair Play in a heat race on the sixth day, and he came in fourth on Classmate in a final-day “purse race” sponsored by a consortium of Louisville hotels. Early on the morning of the last day, the clouds had dispersed and the threat of rain had subsided, and the track was filled with racing fans and others interested in watching history unfold. They crowded the infield, the grandstand, and the areas surrounding the track to see Frank Harper’s five-year-old bay stallion Ten Broeck, ridden by Isaac’s friend and mentor William Walker, race against the clock.

Horses born in the Bluegrass were bred for speed, and Ten Broeck was capable of running very fast. In the time trials, he broke the American record for the mile at 1:39¾ and ran the best two miles, at 3:27½; the best three miles, at 5:26¼; and the best four miles, at 7:15¾. Newspaper headlines read: “Ten Broeck’s Great Race,” “Ten Broeck Cuts Down the Fastest Two Mile Record Three Seconds,” and “A Glorious Event in Old Kentucky: Ten Broeck the Fastest Horse in the World.” The glory of “Old Kentucky” had been realized, and horse racing had emerged as a national spectacle worthy of coast-to-coast press coverage. The widespread attention
garnered by this particular feat was the beginning of a number of changes in horse racing, the Bluegrass, and those who participated in the sport, especially Isaac Murphy.

That season, Isaac would ride for the first time at Saratoga, giving eastern horse-racing aficionados a glimpse of his abilities with *les belles bêtes*. The boy from Lexington was about to enter a world where fast horses, politics, and gambling were an integral part of the decadent realm of the eastern kings of the turf and their style of horse racing, which would directly and indirectly affect the entire nation.

Horse racing in the East had been in existence longer than the United States of America. When and where it was perfected mostly depended on who had money to spend on horses, where venues for racing were available, and whether people were interested in watching Thoroughbreds run around dirt tracks in the suburbs. In post–Civil War New York, wealthy investors such as Leonard Jerome, August Belmont, Cornelius Vanderbilt, William R. Travers, and John Hunter supported the sport’s revival, and a new culture of horse racing was developed for the large crowds of spectators who could afford to spend time and money doing whatever they pleased. Tracks were built at Saratoga Springs, Jerome Park, and Monmouth Park at Long Branch to satisfy the need for class affiliation and elevation. Writing about horse racing in New York, historian Steven Reiss observes, “Wealthy New Yorkers were creating racing stables because of personal satisfaction with their horses’ accomplishments and a desire to enhance and certify their elite status.” By the 1870s, the resort town of Saratoga Springs, New York, became synonymous with the changing nature of the turf: it was obstinate, crooked, and unclean. Still, the lucrative purses in the East and the chance to showcase the pride of the Bluegrass drew Kentuckians to the Adirondacks version of Sodom and Gomorrah, where gambling, drinking, and other vices were rampant among the well-connected, well-heeled, and, most likely, well-armed.

In 1862 gambler, former prizefighter, and future congressman John Morrissey led the push to make Saratoga Springs a destination for wealthy patrons who were interested in casino-style gambling
and entertainment. Within a year, he added four days of horse racing to the growing list of activities, which included carriage rides, horseback riding, and boating. Seeking to expand the sporting aspect of the upstate New York resort, Morrissey formed the Saratoga Racing Association for the Improvement of the Breed, with the backing of Leonard Jerome, John Purdy, Cornelius Vanderbilt, William R. Travers, and John Hunter, who also became founding members of the organization. When the opportunity presented itself, the association secured an additional 125 acres to construct a new track and a grandstand capable of seating 5,000 spectators, with enough space left over to entertain as many as 10,000 on the grounds surrounding the track. The races were not always the most popular entertainment in Saratoga, and the racetrack’s clientele found numerous other ways to spend their time and money—at the shops lining Broadway, in the local restaurants, and in the private hotel parlors where “Cubans” provided “musical entertainment” to the fashionable and the restless.

The resort town was also a haven for an array of working-, middle-, and upper-class blacks. During the antebellum period, free blacks migrated to Saratoga Springs to work for wages as bellhops, waiters, or washerwomen in the hotels and boardinghouses and as trainers, stable boys, grooms, and exercise boys at the track and stables. Blacks were the main source of labor at the United States and Grand Union Hotels and in the town’s restaurants; others worked as carriage drivers, transporting resort patrons to the train station or the racecourse or just taking them for a leisurely drive along the expansive avenues. Saratoga provided a significant amount of income for many seasonal workers who lived in New York, Philadelphia, or other nearby locations in the off-season.

Historian Myra Armstead writes that the postbellum “growth of the black population in Saratoga Springs” was tied to the service industry, but the gambling economy expanded blacks’ financial opportunities, allowing them to generate “peripheral income, as proprietors of permissive” black businesses. And although African Americans were permitted to ride as jockeys, historians Ed Hotaling and Steven Reiss note that black owners were barred from entering
their horses in races, and black spectators were barred from the seating area, probably in the grandstand. Armstead suggests that although Saratoga’s African American community was transient and relatively small compared with the visiting white clientele, it found a way to partake in the festivities. An article in the July 19, 1865, edition of the New York Times notes that one of the many attractions in Saratoga was a lecture “by an intelligent colored gentleman from Africa in the Baptist Church.” The identity of this “intelligent colored gentleman” is unknown, but the account of this particular event in the history of Saratoga’s black community is intriguing.

It is important to note that during this period, tensions between blacks and Irish immigrants and Irish Americans were once again on the rise, particularly with regard to employment opportunities. Not that long ago, New York had been the site of the 1863 draft riots—a response to the Conscription Act. Given the country’s prevailing racism and economic instability, impoverished Irish and native white men responded violently to the law, which allowed draftees to avoid military service if they hired substitutes or paid $300 to buy their way out. Unwilling to participate in a war to free blacks, who would ultimately compete for and possibly take their jobs, whites lashed out. First they attacked draft offices, but then blacks became the targets of their hatred. Black men, women, and children were tortured, hanged, and burned by mobs of whites of all ethnicities who joined in collective opposition to black suffrage and opportunity. By 1877, the seasonal jobs once reserved for blacks had become appealing to “vast numbers of Catholic Irish immigrants,” who used their whiteness and the specter of violence to oust blacks from these previously undesirable jobs. This would happen in other occupations as well, including that of jockey.

By 1876, under the guise of the Saratoga Racing Association, John Morrissey sought to control horse racing in the East and the gambling activity related to it. Morrissey’s strong-arm attempt to restructure racing in New York in favor of Saratoga Springs—that is, to ensure that races at the resort took precedence over all other scheduled meetings—was part business and part vendetta. In 1867 Morrissey had a falling-out with his partners in the luxurious casi-
Learning to Ride and Taking Flight

no at Saratoga, professional gamblers H. P. McGrath of Lexington and John Chamberlain of St. Louis. Shortly afterward, McGrath left New York for Kentucky, and Chamberlain began planning for Monmouth Park at Long Branch, New Jersey. It is not clear why the partnership dissolved, but it is possible that McGrath and Chamberlain were willing to fix races by having jockeys pull horses and having betting operators lower the odds to encourage unsuspecting patrons to wager more money. Trusted by the wealthy and well positioned, Morrissey probably asked his partners to leave to protect his distinguished board of directors, and himself, from scandal.

To guarantee first-rate racing at Saratoga Springs, Morrissey believed they had to ensure the quality of the horses participating. To do so, racing officials decided to penalize stables whose horses had run in races within five days before the Saratoga Springs meeting. For Kentuckians traveling to the East to compete at Monmouth Park, the penalties represented an escalation of political maneuvering by racing officials to seize commercial control of the sport. On June 16 the *Kentucky Live Stock Record* observed:

The Monmouth Park races begin on June 30th and to prevent horses from running at Long Branch, the Saratoga Association programme penalizes winners over any other course after June 25th. The penalties range from 5 to 12 pounds. We thought turf interests had received a sufficient backset in New York this year by the suppression of pool selling, without any additional handicapping; but in this it seems we were mistaken. These penalties imposed on winning horses at Long Branch may work injury to that meeting, and while it does, it is certain to injure Saratoga in a like degree. It is a declaration of war against owner and other associations which they may accept to the great injury of both meetings. Penalties like handicaps are not popular with the American racing public, and the best thing Saratoga can do is at once abolish these penalties.

The commercialization of racing as an entertainment for the masses, the prevalence of high-stakes gambling, and the New York
The legislature’s banning of pool selling forced many unique aspects of the sport to change. Whereas Kentucky turfmen had once been welcomed and had introduced some of the best-bred animals in the country, along with some of the best jockeys, this new era of horse racing was shaped by a politics of the turf that was exceedingly influenced by the wealthy, the politically powerful, and the plungers who wagered fortunes on the outcome of races, many of which they influenced. The eastern racing circuit, with its connections to the nation’s wealthiest families, became a haven for horse-racing aficionados from around the country who wanted nothing more than to establish themselves as members of the moneyed elite. Less influential were those interested in the improvement of the breed.

For Isaac Murphy, the chance to race in the East was both a blessing and a curse. When he arrived in Saratoga Springs, where he stayed and ate, and which individuals he interacted with are not known. What we do know is that his monthlong stay in Saratoga exposed Isaac to African Americans from different backgrounds, professions, and occupations; Spanish-speaking Cuban musicians who moved between the elite white society they played for and the black community they lived in; and the anti-Semitic movement initiated by Henry Hilton, whose “interdiction” of Jews from the Grand Union Hotel was supported by hotel patrons. We also know that Isaac put on one hell of a show in his debut at Saratoga Springs.

On July 31, the fifth day of racing, the weather was clear and the track was sound from the steady “drying wind, and a warm sun.” Riding the energetic Fair Play, one of the favorites, Isaac was poised to compete against the field of eastern horses and jockeys that included George Lorillard’s Lucifer, ridden by Harris; the Dwyer brothers’ Vermont, ridden by Sayers; and T. W. Doswell’s Rappahannock, ridden by Hughes. After a poor start, Isaac was unable to get a feel for the field and finished an unimpressive fifth. But this was just the first race, and Isaac would have a month to gauge the riding styles of the eastern jockeys and study the temperaments of the different horses.

The following day the weather was clear and attendance was high. It was a good day for the jockey from Lexington to show what
he was capable of. In the third race, a heat race of three-quarters of a mile for a $300 purse, Isaac was once again piloting Fair Play. At the start, D. J. Crouse’s Auburn jumped out in front with Isaac right behind, pressing the lead. Miscalculating, Isaac waited too late to make his move and lost the first heat by a length. However, he adjusted his strategy in the final two heats. He allowed Auburn to get away quickly, but at the lower turn and into the straightaway, Isaac leaned forward, signaling to Fair Play to open up, and the horse responded. There was one difference in the final heat: Isaac used the whip just enough to motivate his mount to win convincingly—a rare display of coercion by the usually cool horse whisperer. But Isaac was not yet proven. During the second meeting at Saratoga, from August 5 to 22, he would get closer to perfection.

Of the six races Isaac started, he won three: twice on Vera Cruz and once on Fair Play. Consistently improving and demonstrating his ability to judge the pace of the field and maintain control of the race, Isaac got his horses to the finish line by the slightest of margins, winning by a head or a nose. On the third day of the second meeting, in a dash race of a mile and three-quarters for a $600 purse, Isaac apparently intimidated the other jockeys from attacking the track and running aggressively. In fact, based on the account in the Kentucky Live Stock Record, the other jockeys seemed to be waiting for Murphy, who provided an excellent start as the pace was slow, steady, and “quite uninteresting.” However, after the first mile the race became a sprint to the finish between Isaac on Vera Cruz and George Barbee on Tom Ochiltree. Not until the end of the race did Isaac let his horse go to the lead, and with the very last jump, Vera Cruz “headed Big Tom” at the finish line. The sixteen-year-old master in the saddle had captured the attention of everyone at the Saratoga Springs horse park. He was making a name for himself by beating the best in the East.

Returning home to Lexington, the conquering hero likely began to prepare for the fall meeting of the Kentucky Association, scheduled to start on September 17 on what could be considered Isaac’s home track. In his free time, he likely interacted with various members of the community at church, at the barbershop, or on Vine
Street (Lexington’s black Main Street), where his accomplishments on the track may have been praised by his admirers. Upon his return home, Isaac probably learned of the movement to leave Lexington for Nicodemus, Kansas, and the role played by the Reverend Morrison M. Bell of Pleasant Green Baptist Church. Although the end of Reconstruction marked the end of the era of progress for black-white relations in America, especially in the South, a place like Nicodemus provided hope for a people in search of “racial uplift.”

As president of the Nicodemus Colony, Reverend Bell and his officers, which included Isaac Talbott, W. J. Niles, Daniel Clarke, Jerry Lee, William Jones, and Abner Webster, promoted a new beginning for the “colored people” of Lexington. An outgrowth of the movement started by Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, the Nicodemus Colony offered three specific enticements to African Americans who were willing to move to Kansas: access to land and the opportunity to become self-sufficient; escape from the violence of the South and the white men who perpetuated the degradation of blacks; and security for their families, especially their children, whose future looked bleak if they stayed in Kentucky, where their perceived value was based on their usefulness to whites.

Printed in bold letters across the top of a broadside announcing the migration to Nicodemus was this statement: “All Colored People That Want to Go to Kansas, on September 5th, 1877, Can Do So for $5.00.” The officers of the Nicodemus Colony understood the need to convey the seriousness of the venture to the masses, and they printed the following resolutions on the same broadside to clarify the mission and goals of the expedition:

Whereas, We, the colored people of Lexington, Ky., knowing that there is an abundance of choice lands now belonging to the Government, have assembled ourselves together for the purpose of locating on said lands. Therefore,

Be it Resolved, That we do now organize ourselves into a Colony, as follows:—Any person wishing to become a member of this Colony can do so by paying the sum of one dollar ($1.00), and this money is to be paid by the first of September,
1877, in installments of twenty-five cents at a time, or other-
wise as may be desired.

RESCUES, That this Colony has agreed to consolidate itself
with the Nicodemus Towns, Solomon Valley, Graham County,
Kansas, and can only do so by entering the vacant lands now
in their midst, which costs $5.00.

RESCUES, That this Colony shall consist of seven officers—
President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and three
Trustees. President—M. M. Bell; Vice-President—Isaac Tal-
bot; Secretary—W. J. Niles; Treasurer—Daniel Clarke; Trust-
tees—Jerry Lee, William Jones, and Abner Webster.

RESCUES, That this Colony shall have from one to two
hundred militia, more or less, as the case may require, to keep
peace and order, and any member failing to pay in his dues, as
aforesaid, or failing to comply with the above rules in any par-
ticular, will not be recognized or protected by the Colony.

Based on the available evidence, 900 families caught “Kansas fever”
and signed up to leave with the expedition.

On September 6, the Lexington Press reported the mood of the
previous day’s departure of no more than “two hundred and fifty,
men, women, and children” as they boarded train cars heading for
Ellis, Kansas, to begin life anew.79 According to historian Nell Irvin
Painter, in “September 1877 the second and largest addition, 350
settlers, came to Nicodemus with Reverend M. M. Bell of the Nico-
demus Colony, under the aegis of W. R. Hill.80 In March 1878 Hill
would bring another group of 150 people from Scott County, Ken-
tucky, to Kansas. Nicodemus represented a new start for blacks in
search of land, opportunity, and a sense of freedom not found in the
previous places they had called home.

There is no question that the state of Kentucky in gener-
al and the counties surrounding Lexington in particular were not
the friendliest of places for African Americans. Between the end of
the Civil War and the end of Reconstruction, brutal crimes against
blacks, especially lynching, became part of the daily lives of Afri-
can Americans throughout the state. As historian George Wright as-
serts, “Although poor, young, uneducated blacks were the primary victims of white violence, no black person within Kentucky was immune from attacks by whites. Furthermore, the entire legal system upheld white violence by refusing to apprehend, charge, and convict white offenders of blacks, thus ensuring that all Afro-Americans were at the mercy of whites.” In other words, whites were complicit in denying blacks their humanity through the criminalization and destruction of black life in the Bluegrass. Those who chose to leave Lexington saw no other way to save what mattered most: their lives and the lives of their children.

Isaac could not have missed the commotion at the train station on the day so many people (called Exodusters) left Lexington, and he probably understood why they left. But if Isaac intended to pursue a career as a professional jockey, he would have to construct his own identity in a way that supported his economic pursuits and protected his psychological need to be recognized as hardworking and productive. He would eventually have to cultivate a persona of masculinity tied to the Victorian ideal espoused by aspiring middle-class professional men of the period. In addition, Isaac would have to demonstrate a nonthreatening attitude that was honest and trustworthy in relation to the white patriarchy and its unyielding need to be appeased.

In Lexington, amid the sadness and excitement of the departed Exodusters, Isaac still had a job to do, and he showed well at the Kentucky Association’s fall meeting. Out of nine starts, he won three: twice on Vera Cruz and once on Alexander Keene Richards’s L’Argenteen. Most important, Isaac began riding for the impresario of Fleetwood Stock Farm, J. W. Hunt-Reynolds, piloting Blue Eyes to a third-place finish in the Colt and Filly Stakes. Less than a month later, at the Louisville Jockey Club’s track, Isaac demonstrated his ability to be a consistent winner. On October 1, the first day of the fall meeting at Louisville, ninety-eight-pound Isaac rode Vera Cruz to victory in his first major stakes race—the St. Leger. Later, he would say of this particular victory, “I have often thought of that day. Success made me very happy.” In the very next race he won on L’Argenteen, finishing cleanly and coming away with a “big cantor by a length.” Over the seven-day period, Isaac won five of the sev-
en races he started, including the Galt House Stakes for three-year-olds on Abe Buford’s Lizzie Whipps. In his final race of the season, at the Maryland Association meeting in Baltimore, he won again on Vera Cruz in the Breckinridge Stakes for three-year-olds; the competition from the East including August Belmont’s Susquehanna and David McDaniel’s two entries, St. James and Major Barker. A description of the race in the *Kentucky Live Stock Record* paints a picture of how Isaac awed spectators with his breathtaking finishes:

When the flag fell Major Barker took the lead, Susquehanna second, Vera Cruz third, St. James fourth, Wash Booth fifth and Oriole sixth. Before reaching the quarter St. James was in the lead some six lengths, Wash Booth second, Oriole third, Vera Cruz fourth, Major Barker fifth and Susquehanna sixth. St. James opened a gap of twenty lengths in front of Oriole, who was lapped by Vera Cruz. No change at the three-quarter pole, and as they came back to the stand St. James was ten lengths in front of Vera Cruz second, Wash Booth third, Oriole fourth, Susquehanna fifth and Major Barker sixth. Vera Cruz gradually closed the gap on St. James, and by the time they had reached the lower turn he was within a length, and as they entered the homestretch he showed a length in front, and galloping along won the race in a canter by two lengths in front of Wash Booth third, Oriole a bad fourth, Susquehanna fifth, Major Barker sixth.84

That the little jockey from Lexington had become a master of the turf was obvious to anyone paying attention. Rather than a struggle to make his horse work beyond its natural capabilities, Isaac’s performance as a jockey was artistry, as he coaxed his mount to move at the pace required. For Isaac, riding had become as natural as breathing.

**Seasons of Death and Renewal**

After his success in 1877, Isaac was in for some changes. Sometime between the beginning of the off-season and January 1878, Isaac’s mentor and father figure, Eli Jordan, left the Williams stable and be-
came head trainer at the Hunt-Reynolds stable. One possible clue to the reason for the parting of ways was the death of Williams’s “valuable and richly bred young stallion Creedmoor” on November 6, 1877. Foaled in 1873, the chestnut colt, a son of Asteroid, stood sixteen hands high, “had excellent legs, broad, flat knees with immense bone and great substance. His racing career had been extremely good,” so his premature death due to colic must have been a blow to Williams. Whether Jordan was directly responsible for Creedmoor’s death through his own negligence, or whether it was the fault of an assistant trainer, groom, or stable boy assigned to care for the four-year-old, Jordan was the trainer on record, so ultimately he was responsible and may have been fired. For the first time since he began working as a stable boy, Isaac was without Jordan. In the long run, this separation would prove invaluable to his development as both a jockey and an individual.

By the end of May 1878, Isaac had ridden in several meetings: the Nashville Blood Horse Association meeting, where he won two of three races on Williams’s Fair Play and Shortline; the Kentucky Association meeting, where he finished second in the Blue Ribbon Stakes on R. H. Owens’ Leveler and third on Vera Cruz in the sweepstakes race on the second day; and the Louisville Jockey Club meeting, where he finished in second place in three of the five races he started. Clearly, Isaac was not in top form. Perhaps the absence of Jordan was affecting his performance; Williams’s instructions to Isaac may not have been what he was accustomed to, negatively influencing the results. There is a possibility that Isaac was hoping to be released from his contract so that he could join Jordan at Fleetwood. One could speculate that he purposely lost races to diminish his status with Williams. However, this is unlikely; Isaac would not have damaged a relationship that was so important to his career as a jockey, which was just beginning to flourish. In addition, a black boy refusing to follow the directions of a white man would have been too risky. Common sense and ambition would have kept the humble, quiet Isaac out of trouble.

The Williams stable traveled to Cincinnati for the Queen City Association meeting at Chester Park, scheduled to start on May 30.
Arriving a few days early allowed both the horses and the jockeys to get accustomed to the track, its surface, and other particulars, such as knowing where the headwind was and where to make the winning jump on the field. On June 1, a generous crowd of 2,500 spectators came out to enjoy the races under clear skies. As Isaac trotted Classmate onto the track and positioned himself and his horse behind the starting line, he could not have anticipated the events that followed and the repercussions they would have on the rest of his life. In an 1889 interview, he recalled the incident that cost him four months of salary and bonuses:

I have been exceedingly fortunate in keeping the respect of starters and racing officials, and thus avoiding the ban of suspension with but one single exception. . . . I was riding Classmate in a race and a boy started to cross me, not only cutting me off, but running the risk of injuring both the mare and myself. As it was, it knocked the mare to her knees, but I soon pulled her together and was quickly in the race again. Another boy, Link Gross, who was in the race was also jostled by the same daring rider, and, Link’s temper getting the best of him, he struck the offending lad in the face. The blood spurted on my shirt, and when the latter claimed foul against me and brought charges of my having hit him, the officials looked at the shirt and blood, and putting more faith in the circumstantial evidence than in my denial, disqualified Classmate for the head, fined me $25 and suspended me for a year.87

During his suspension, Isaac might have exercised horses for Williams or for other owners, who would have jumped at the opportunity to have their horses trained by a talented jockey. Or it is possible that his suspension forced Isaac to find work elsewhere, in some other occupation. Prevented from earning a living as a jockey, Isaac temporarily returned to a state of poverty. In hindsight, however, the suspension may have been the best thing for his career and perhaps his life.

Four months passed between Isaac’s suspension from racing
and his exoneration and eventual reinstatement on September 11, 1878, by the president of the Queen City Association, Edgar Johnson, who “later on apologized for his hasty action.”88 By this time, Isaac may have been released from his contract with Williams, because a jockey who could not race was of no use. In the same 1889 interview, Isaac recalled that the suspension cost him “considerable at the time, since I was a poor lad and the money I earned by my riding was all I had to live on.”89 This statement implies that Williams did not continue to pay Isaac during the suspension, but we do not know Williams’s version of events. It may not have been the best of circumstances for Isaac, but it seems to have worked out to his advantage once he made his way to Frankfort, where Jordan was now working for Hunt-Reynolds.

Hunt-Reynolds was from one of the oldest families in Kentucky, a grandson of Lexington merchant John Wesley Hunt, a breeder of fine racehorses. Hunt-Reynolds was continuing his grandfather’s legacy while indulging his lifelong passion for horses. A brief glimpse into his life is important to understand the type of man he was and the influence he would have on Isaac’s future.

Born to Anna Taney Hunt and William Bell Reynolds in 1846, J. W. and his sister Catherine were raised by their mother’s sister, Mary Hunt, and her husband, Judge John Hanna, after their mother died and their father was unable to care for them. The Hannas, who had no children of their own, adopted their niece and nephew. As part of the Hunt family, J. W. grew up with his first cousins, John Hunt Morgan (the future Confederate general) and his brother C. C. Morgan, who loved horses and rode them “like demons over the countryside.”90 John Hunt Morgan’s skills as a horseman would be documented in the reports of Union officers, who noted his use of guerrilla tactics in raids on Union depots and supply lines and his ability to evade capture. The fact is that Morgan knew the land better than the Union soldiers chasing him. As boys, he, his brother C. C., and their cousin J. W. had stayed in the saddle from dawn to dusk, pursuing adventures on horseback.

As soon as Catherine was old enough, Mrs. Hanna sent her to New York to attend Madame Chageri’s Seminary for ladies, where
she would learn to be a proper lady. However, after the outbreak of the Civil War and the death of Judge Hanna in 1861, Mrs. Hanna moved with the children to Frankfurt, Germany, to escape the violence and uncertainty in Kentucky. J. W. attended the University of Heidelberg, where he studied history, politics, languages, literature, and the arts. By all accounts, he was an “ebullient spirit” who quickly developed into a mature and effusive gentleman.\(^9\) He met his future wife, Meta Fleetwood Westfeldt, in Germany; she was also attending the University of Heidelberg and was an intellectual force equal to her future husband. It is not clear whether they married in Germany, in Kentucky, or in New York City, where Meta’s father, Gustav Westfeldt, was a coffee merchant.

We do know that after the Civil War, Hunt-Reynolds returned to Frankfort with his sister and his aunt. After settling in and adjusting to the changes that had taken place in Kentucky, he began the process of establishing his livestock farm, concentrating on Thoroughbred horses. Within a few years of his return to the United States, and using the substantial wealth inherited from his father, grandfather, and uncle, Hunt-Reynolds purchased “637 acres of high, rolling land, mostly set in grass” and surrounded by trees, near the Kentucky River on the Frankfort and Louisville Turnpike. Named after an ancestor of Meta’s, Fleetwood Stock Farm was completed sometime between 1867 and 1868.\(^9\) J. W. and Meta’s only child, Meta Christina Hunt-Reynolds, was born January 20, 1869.

In the Frankfort community, J. W. served in a number of capacities: as a member of the Knights Templar and Commandery, on the board of the directors of the Frankfort Agricultural and Mechanical Association, and as a delegate for Ascension Episcopal Church at the annual convention in Louisville.\(^9\) A generous person who “gave a hand in every public enterprise, and took the lead in many social interests,” Hunt-Reynolds was considered a man of unimpeachable character.\(^9\) It is unknown where he stood on the race question and whether he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan or participated in the lynching of blacks.

Over the course of ten years, Hunt-Reynolds built an estate worth an estimated $82,000, with additional assets in Louisville
real estate. Although genial and scholarly, Hunt-Reynolds was also competitive: he wanted his horses to win. J. H. Walden, Hunt-Reynolds’s trainer and the superintendent of his Fleetwood Stock Farm, was responsible for maintaining the property but was inconsistent in bringing home winners. Hunt-Reynolds was a founding member of the Louisville Jockey Club, and despite all his work to ensure the quality of Jockey Club meetings, his horses fell short. Hunt-Reynolds’s decision to hire Eli Jordan as his new head trainer was a sign that he was anxious to put it all together: his investment of time, energy, and resources to improve the breed and his patience in working to develop the perfect Thoroughbred. When Isaac decided to join Jordan and ride for Fleetwood, he started down a path that would establish his reputation as a consistent winner, an individual of radiant character, and an exemplar of manly virtues.

On Wednesday, September 11, the third day of the Kentucky Association’s fall meeting, Isaac made his debut wearing the red and white colors of Hunt-Reynolds’s Fleetwood stable. In his first race after his suspension, Isaac took the reins of the bay colt Caligula in a mile-and-a-half “Selling Sweepstakes Race” worth $525. After a “fairish start,” the field of six set out on a feverish pace to gain momentum in an effort to capture the lead and eventually the victory. Isaac waited for the right moment to guide his spirited horse to the front. As the “platoon” rounded the lower curve and entered the stretch, Isaac and Caligula made their move. Without hesitation, they surged into the lead and held on to win by two lengths. On day four, riding Ed Turner for Taylor and Company in a match race against Dan Swigert’s Mexico, Isaac kept the pace where he needed it and broke away to win easily by two lengths. Two days later, the editor of the Kentucky Live Stock Record remarked on the result: “Ed Turner bowled over Mexico in the mile and half race. Isaac Murphy, who has been reinstated, rode him with artistic skill and judgment.” Clearly, the horse world was taking notice.

At Louisville that fall, Isaac struggled to find his rhythm and gain a sense of familiarity with the horses. He finished in the money in six of his twelve races but had no victories. His rival from the East, James McLaughlin, won a majority of the races he started, and
Isaac finished behind him in every race except the last one. What is most significant about that final race was an incident that validated Isaac’s character and honesty. On the seventh and final day of the races at Louisville, Isaac was asked to replace Spillman, the jockey riding J. C. Murphy’s bay colt Edinburgh, in the third race of an all-ages contest of one-mile heats for a purse of $300. It is not clear why Jockey Club president Meriwether Lewis Clark removed the assigned jockey and selected Isaac to fill in. Did he suspect that the jockey had pulled Edinburgh in the first heat? Had Spillman said or done something that led Clark to believe he was plotting to bring shame to the club and the track?

Earlier in the year, on the Fourth of July, the Louisville Jockey Club had hosted a big $10,000, four-mile match race between Kentucky’s Ten Broeck, owned by Frank Harper, and California’s champion mare Mollie McCarthy, owned by Theodore Winters. Clark heard rumors that the great black jockey William Walker was going to throw the race. In an interview, Harper recalled the confrontation between Walker and Clark:

The jockeys were called up to receive their instruction from the Judge. Col. Clark said . . . “I hear there are suspicions that you are going to throw this race. You will be watched the whole way, and if you do not ride to win, a rope will be put about your neck and you will be hung to that tree yonder (pointing the tree just opposite the Judges’ stand), and I will help to do it.” Walker tried to answer him, and say that he did not want to ride in the race, but Colonel Clark would not let him speak.

It is likely that Isaac was at that race to support Walker, his friend and mentor, and heard the threat against his life if anything in the race looked suspicious.

Given the history of lynching in Kentucky and the seriousness of the accusation, the threat was a real one. Clark demanded unwavering honesty in the saddle, especially among the black jockeys. However, there were too many variables in a race—unforeseeable circumstances or obstacles—that might result in a loss and be con-
strued as intentional, leading to the death of an innocent jockey. Did the white boys receive the same threats if they lost? Probably not. Why were black jockeys subjected to this kind of abuse? Quite plainly, it was part of the history of the sport in Kentucky and the traditions associated with black labor and white power. Historian Maryjean Wall identifies the connection between wealthy “landowners who bred horses” and the violence inflicted on blacks in Kentucky.\textsuperscript{100} The fact is that numerous members of the Klan were local farmers and gentlemen of the turf who refused to accept the changes brought about by the Civil War. Reconstruction had come to an abrupt end, and Southern white men were no longer under surveillance by the Federal government, allowing them to perpetrate violence against blacks undisguised and in broad daylight. Blacks were slipping back into a state of nonpersonhood: the “socially dead.”\textsuperscript{101}

Whatever Clark’s motivation was for choosing Isaac as the replacement jockey for Edinburgh, no one contested it. He finished second, but in front of his rival McLaughlin.\textsuperscript{102} It is quite possible that this particular episode in his early career informed or confirmed Isaac’s decision to always be honest and avoid the temptations of gambling that led jockeys to pull horses and throw races. He would tell his fellow jockey John “Kid” Stoval that if he were honest, he could get all the mounts he desired. That was true for the time being, but there would soon be other unsavory influences to deal with.

Through the end of the 1878 season, Isaac’s superb riding elevated Fleetwood to the premier stud farm for Thoroughbreds in the Bluegrass. It was also home of the best jockey in the state of Kentucky, if not the entire South. But he still had to prove himself back East.

Prior to the start of the 1879 season, eighteen-year-old Isaac had ballooned up to more than 130 pounds. This marked the beginning of his battle with weight and the debilitating disease that afflicted a majority of jockeys of the late nineteenth century and cost some of them their lives. Isaac’s weight gain was not the result of overindulgence; the winter months spent away from horses and the track gave his body a chance to recover from the stress of maintaining a low
riding weight. (Later, like most professional athletes, Isaac would spend the off-season savoring his well-deserved rest, dining, traveling, and otherwise enjoying his wealth. As he eventually learned, there was a price to pay for success.) No longer the lithe and lightweight exercise boy, Isaac was overweight in the spring of 1879 and needed to drop thirty pounds as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{103} Most jockeys did not have nutritional programs or structured exercise routines to help them keep fit and active during the off-season. Scientifically sound techniques of weight control for athletes were decades away.\textsuperscript{104}

There were several methods for “training down.” Fred Taral used to run with several sweaters on to increase perspiration, and Ed “Snapper” Garrison ran behind a moving wagon holding onto the “tail board.” Other jockeys took Turkish baths or sparred with boxing gloves to lose weight. Although it was supposedly effective, most jockeys avoided the old-fashioned method of sitting in a pile of manure to induce perspiration. In extreme cases, jockeys used starvation diets to lose weight quickly or “purged” after eating.\textsuperscript{105} Some jockeys used enemas or natural laxatives, like “black draught,” to clear their bowels. Learning from other jockeys, Isaac eventually developed his own method, which in time would prove both beneficial and costly. For now, he simply went without food and took extended walks, covering several miles, in the weeks and days before a race.\textsuperscript{106} As he got older and heavier, the results of his rigorous and dangerous weight-loss routine left Isaac weak and ineffective at the beginning of each season, but once he was at his optimal weight, he managed to maintain it by eating eat fruit and small pieces of “very rare steak.”\textsuperscript{107} Between races, he spent a considerable amount of time resting, attempting to recover from the tremendous fatigue and strain on his body that came from trying to control his spirited mounts while in a perpetual state of hunger.

When Isaac mounted Falsetto for the Phoenix Stakes at the Kentucky Association meeting on May 10, 1879, he had dropped more than thirty pounds and was probably feeling weak. After numerous false starts, the race began with Trinidad, ridden by Allen, in the lead. Isaac kept Falsetto back and waited until the furlong pole to rush “between Scully and Ada Glenn, throwing the latter off
her stride, and winning the race on the post by a neck.”

Though exhausted, he won two other races over a three-day period.

After winning the stakes race in Lexington, and no doubt feeling pleased with his performance, Isaac and the Hunt-Reynolds stable made their way to the Louisville meeting. May 20 was clear and warm, the track was fast, and “attendance was very large.” In the first race, atop Hunt-Reynolds’s Fortuna, Isaac took control of the race, only to have it end in a dead heat with William Jennings’s Glenmore. In the second race, the Kentucky Derby, Isaac rode Falsetto again, but he waited too long to reel in the colt named Lord Murphy, ridden by white jockey Charlie Shauer. In what was described as “a most exciting race,” Falsetto came on like a dynamo “within forty yards of the stand where Lord Murphy drew clear and won the race by a length and a half.” Although he probably thought he should have won the Kentucky Derby, the race was still in its infancy (not the premier contest it is today), so Isaac considered it just another race. It was just one of the 100 or more starts he would have that season. Still, he may have felt the need to redeem himself in his remaining races, and by the end of the meeting he had nine wins, including the Louisville Cup on Fortuna, the Tennessee Stakes on G. W. Bowen and Company’s Wallenstein, and the Merchants’ Stake on Hunt-Reynolds’s Blue Eyes.

From Louisville, Isaac traveled to Missouri for the St. Louis Jockey Club meeting from June 10 to 14, where he won two out of four races riding for James Williams, including the first race of the engagement on Checkmate. He left St. Louis and headed for the Chicago Jockey Club meeting, scheduled for June 21 to 27, where he won with S. and R. Weisiger’s Incommode and finished in the money on L. P. Tarleton’s Solicitor, D. McIntyre’s King Faro, and Brien and Spencer’s Captain Fred Rice. He then traveled to Michigan for the first meeting of the Detroit Jockey Club, held from July 1 to 4. That event promised to attract prominent “horses from Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee stables, as well as Martin & Baldwin’s Pacific Stables.” Winning twice on the second day on Williams’s Checkmate and Enquiress, Isaac swept the entire card the next day, riding to victory on Checkmate, Bonnie Oaks, and Glenmore twice. Two
days later in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he came close to duplicating that success; he brought home three winners and might have swept the entire program if he had had a mount in the last race. Thus far, the 1879 campaign was Isaac’s most successful to date.

Because the spring and fall racing seasons overlapped, and because jockeys who were under contract went wherever their stables sent them, they had little time to explore the communities they visited. Local entertainments and cultural events may have been plentiful and attractive to a young bachelor, but after competing on the track, he was likely ready for bed. Opportunities for companionship may have been limited for Isaac: another train ride, another city, another boardinghouse, another paddock, another paycheck—and another woman? It is possible that Isaac had sexual relationships before he married, but abstinence would also make sense, considering the racial uplift programs promoting temperance, abstinence, and community building through achievement.

During Reconstruction, African American community leaders advocated abstinence as a demonstration of civility, Christian morals and values, and a progressive orientation toward the future. As historian Michelle Wallace explains, African Americans worked hard to “construct themselves as members of [a] collectivity not just because they and their forebears shared a past, but also because they believed their futures to be interdependent.” This somewhat magical disposition allowed individuals to claim their humanity not only through their personal achievements but also, in the case of black men, through their public exhibitions of Christian uprightness, temperance, and gentlemanly decorum that represented the progress of blacks as a whole. What better crusader for morality than Isaac—a man-child who entered the lion’s den every day of the racing season and emerged not only unscathed but seemingly strengthened by confronting his temptations? This, of course, is problematic: we cannot know what Isaac did in private. The prevalence of public teetotalers who drink in private and ministers who sin is a clear indication that some performances are for public consumption, while others are private, reserved for personal scrutiny, self-critique, and self-judgment.

As monotonous as the life of a jockey might sound, it was a
great opportunity for a talented young man to see the country and, if good fortune was on his side, make enough money to marry, settle down, and perhaps have a string of horses to run. This may have crossed the eighteen-year-old’s mind now and again, as he imagined what his future would look like when he got too big to ride.

By the fall of 1879, Isaac was a rising star and no newcomer to Saratoga Springs. His 1877 race on Vera Cruz had created quite a stir among patrons of the turf, who caught a glimpse of a new type of jockey who was intelligent, calm, patient, and disciplined. He gained the attention of some of the most powerful breeders in the East, whose jockeys failed to match Isaac’s single-minded focus on his work. When he arrived at Saratoga in 1879, what were the spectators anticipating from Murphy? Surely, they had read the newspapers and were aware of his dominance at Louisville, Detroit, and Milwaukee races. They may have had a pretty good idea of the outcome, but like any race, nothing was certain.

On June 16, a full month before the races opened at Saratoga, Eli Jordan and the Hunt-Reynolds stable arrived to begin training for the meeting. Sometime after his last race in Wisconsin, Isaac boarded an eastbound train headed for New York. What were traveling conditions like for Isaac? In those cities and towns that drew the color line, they could have been almost anything—from riding in unsafe and unsavory conditions to being ejected from his seat by a white man unwilling to sit in the same car with a black man—even (or perhaps especially) one who seemed to be a social equal or a middle-class professional. Anything other than the stereotypical “coon” or “Sambo” could be an affront to a white man’s sense of privilege. In the 1870s and 1880s numerous legal actions were brought against railroads for not protecting the rights of black passengers or for actively enforcing separate car policies by denying blacks access to available seating.

By the time Isaac arrived in Saratoga, the resort town was a crush of humanity—white women dressed in the latest fashions from Europe, wealthy men holding court on the piazzas of the various hotels, and sporting men looking to fill their pockets with winnings based on hot tips and inside information. On Saturday, July 19, the
weather was lovely, the track was in good condition, and the crowd was anxious for the first race to begin. Along with the white visitors, "African American tourists and conventioneers" participated in the festivities where they could, enjoying the benefits of their wealth and mixing with other middle-class strivers, rubbing elbows—both literally and figuratively—with the obscenely rich. It is safe to assume that all were looking forward to the day’s main event—the prestigious Travers Stakes—and the performance of Spendthrift, the new prize of New York financier and turfman James R. Keene. White society may have considered blacks second-class citizens, and some excluded their darker brothers from the human race altogether, but everyone at Saratoga agreed that the little jockey from Kentucky was exciting to watch, especially when he won such big races with such uncommon style. After the Travers, however, horse-racing fans talked about Isaac Murphy with new enthusiasm:

In 1879, the last year in which the owners of the great racing stables of the seaboard met at Saratoga in force, at the time when George Lorillard’s Sensation, Grenada, and Rosalie came in first, second, and third in the Flash Stakes, a chunky colored boy appeared with quiet old Eli Jordan, the able trainer for J. W. Hunt-Reynolds of Kentucky. A large delegation of New Yorkers had come to back Spendthrift for the Travers, the three year old event of the year. While the applause which greeted Spendthrift was making the great colt prick his ears, the colored boy appeared on Falsetto. The way the boy handled Falsetto and won the race attracted the attention of turfmen from all sections. The Kentuckians were wild with joy; they threw their hats in the air and carried off the coveted trophy from its pedestal in front of the grandstand. The lad repeated his victory by winning the Kenner Stakes, at two miles, on Falsetto. The boy’s name is Isaac Murphy. He has had remarkable success on the turf.115

Spendthrift, the favorite, was a quality Thoroughbred born on Daniel Swigert’s farm outside Lexington and purchased by Keene
for $15,000 after the colt went undefeated as a two-year-old. But in the end, it was the quality of the jockey that mattered most. New York had become the showplace for two of Kentucky’s most prized exports: fast horses and brilliant jockeys. Eighteen-year-old Isaac guided Falsetto to a two-length victory over Spendthrift, ridden by Feakes. In a postrace interview that appeared in *Spirit of the Times*, we get a glimpse of Murphy’s thoughtfulness and intellect:

I met Murphy, who rode . . . [Falsetto]. He is a bright youth, and although his winter weight was over 130 lbs., he can under the reducing process, ride at 105 lbs. I inquired of him what were his instructions in the race, and he said:

“I had no instructions, except that I was to win the race.”

“With such instructions, do you not think you laid away rather far for the first mile?”

“Well, I don’t know sir. I wanted a waiting race. I thought Spendthrift was the horse [I] had to beat. I did not know about Harold, but I believed that my horse could win from either of them if I could get the race put upon a brush down the homestretch, and I kept away from them to keep them from becoming alarmed. I was always within striking distance, and you know when Spendthrift went away down the homestretch I was ready for the move.”

“Yes, that is true, but why did you go up to Harold and Jericho, at the half mile, and then fall away again?”

“I did not care for Jericho, but while I thought Spendthrift was the dangerous horse, I wanted to go up to Harold to see how he felt, so I tapped Falsetto with the spur one time, went up to them, felt of Harold, found him all abroad, sprawling over the course, and saw he was out of the race, and I fell back to keep Feakes from thinking I was at all dangerous.”

“How did you get between Harold and the pole on the turn?”

“I didn’t intend to go upon the turn, but when we started toward the stretch Harold was tired and unsteady, and he leaned away from the pole and gave me room to go in. I thought it bet-
ter to run for the position than to have to run around him, so I jumped at the chance and went up between him and the rail. I steadied my horse here a moment to compel Harold to cover more ground on the turn, and beat him good, for he was very tired, and just before we got to the stretch I left him and went off after Spendthrift.”

“Where did you catch him?”
“Just after we got straight into the stretch.”
“Did you have to punish Falsetto?”
“As I tell, when I went up to Harold at the half mile, I hit him one with the spur. Then when I ran between Harold and the pole I gave it to him again. When I got to Harold, I laid there a little while, and kept touching my colt with the right spur, to keep him from bearing out to Harold, and also to make him hug the pole. He is a long strider, and is inclined to lean out on the turns. I kept the spurs pretty busy in him until I got to Spendthrift. Here Feakes drew his whip, and Spendthrift refused to respond to it. So I stopped and let Falsetto come along, but I kept urging him with the reins. He moved so strong that I did not have to punish him any more.”

“Is Falsetto a free mover?”
“No, sir, not generally. He does not run on the bit, but ran better on it today than I ever knew him. He held it till I hit him with the spur the first time—the end of a mile and a quarter. He turned it loose as soon as he felt it and never took hold of it again.”

This exchange between Isaac and the reporter reveals three important aspects of the race: he knew his horse, he knew the other horses in the field, and he knew himself. His skill and his knowledge of how to ride races, not just run horses, gave him a distinct advantage over the other jockeys. Most impressive was the way he directed and orchestrated the outcome of the race, calmly calculating his options with a “steady hand, a quick eye, a cool head, and a bold heart.” Also impressive was his command of the English language, his confidence, and his intellect, which could not have been cultivated in
the stables among the horses and the waifs attending them. For that, Isaac had his mother and Lexington’s black community to thank.

Through his performances on the track and in the media, Isaac attracted a following among the throngs of Victorian groupies in the stands, who idolized the wealthy owners and patrons, and among horse-racing fans, who read the newspapers to keep up with his results. His success also attracted the attention of sporting men who were willing to pay jockeys to manipulate races and change the outcome. According to his obituary, Isaac was offered “enough [money] to buy a Bluegrass farm if he would have agreed to lose on Falsetto in the Kenner Stakes,” three weeks after his win on Falsetto in the Travers.118 As far as we know, Isaac did not take the money; instead, he guided Falsetto to another win over Spendthrift.

Although jockeys were not considered professionals in the same sense as doctors, lawyers, politicians, and businessmen, it took considerable skill to ride races. With his performances and his interviews, Isaac was elevating the profession through his representation of muscular Christianity, honesty, and consistency. Murphy’s standards, his artistic approach, and his professionalism may have challenged the definition of both jockeys and their work.

During the Saratoga races, Isaac wore the colors of his two most consistent benefactors, James T. Williams and J. W. Hunt-Reynolds, and he attracted the attention of Californian E. J. Baldwin, whose horses finished poorly at the meeting. Winning races consistently with style and grace in front of the wealthiest men in America would be to his advantage as the new decade began. But sadly, while Isaac was at Saratoga his mother, America, died.

The Fayette County commissioner’s supplemental schedule of recorded deaths from June 1879 to May 1880 lists the death of America Burns in August 1879 of complications related to consumption and cancer of the rectum.119 It is hard to imagine how she must have suffered, but nineteenth-century cases studies of women being treated for rectal cancer are revealing. Walter Harrision Cripps describes a woman who could have been America: “She was very thin and emaciated, and for some time had been unable to work as a laundress. For more than a year she suffered discomfort in the
rectum, and had lost blood from time to time, a muco-purulent discharge being persistent. During the last few months the pain had greatly increased, her nights were sleepless, she was tormented with the constant desire to go stool.”

The form that reports America’s death contains invaluable information: her age, her race, where she and her parents were born, the cause of death, and the attending physician. What it does not tell us is where she died. Did she die in a hospital or in an alleyway? Who discovered her body? And finally, who contacted her son? Did he receive a telegram informing him of his loss? Did he share his grief with Eli Jordan, a minister in Lexington or Frankfort, J. W. Hunt-Reynolds, or one of his fellow jockeys, like William Walker?

Surely America was proud of her sole surviving child. We can only imagine that as she took her last breath, she was confident that her boy would be all right. He was educated, independent, and successful; his character, honesty, self-effacing nature, congenial demeanor, and altogether cheerful outlook on life were imprints of America Murphy Burns, her family’s history, and her wishes for her son’s future. Where she is buried and who attended the service are not known. Even Isaac and his magical disposition could not save his mother or himself from falling through the cracks of American history, with its tendency to make invisible the stories at the root of African American success and achievement.

Despite the loss of his mother, Isaac ended the year on a positive note, winning the St. Leger on G. W. Darden’s Lord Murphy and finishing in the money in six of seven races at Louisville. After returning to Frankfort, to the home he shared with Eli Jordan and several others, Isaac likely reflected on all that had happened, perhaps turning to his mentor and surrogate father for support. Being a thoughtful person, he may have kept a journal where he recorded his meditations on life, along with information about his number of wins, the character of the horses he rode, the different cities and horse tracks he visited, and new acquaintances he made. At Fleetwood Stock Farm, J. W. and Meta Hunt-Reynolds may have consoled their young employee, whom they had grown close to. Having lost his own mother at an early age, J. W. may have helped Isaac
deal with his grief. Acknowledging that children honor their parents by fulfilling their dreams for their offspring, the men may have discussed the finer points of what it meant to be a man in nineteenth-century America. Although their friendship would have been problematic for a number of reasons linked to the history of slavery, white supremacy, and the persistence of violence against blacks, J. W. and Isaac may have found common ground that allowed them to go beyond a formal employer-employee relationship or one based on the social construction of race and the definitions of black and white. An indirect result of this fostered kinship tie would be Isaac’s formulation of a new black masculinity. Black jockeys of his generation could enjoy the elevated status of professional men who joined social clubs, served as community leaders, and represented the best class of citizen. Professionalization supported class stratification and development, which legitimized citizenship for some but barred others from participating.

Professionalization of what had been deemed “slave work” during the antebellum period and “nigger work” during Reconstruction dramatically changed the notion of how a jockey should act both in and out of the saddle. Isaac won the respect of owners and spectators, who had grown to expect and appreciate his measured riding and exciting finishes. They respected how he went about his work, and they enjoyed watching him perform. Still, Isaac was no doubt aware of the widespread perception of African American men as holdovers from slavery and a problem to be dealt with by the rope or the lash. But Isaac, who was better educated than the average black or white man, used his facility with language to explode the caricatures that represented black men as half-witted, effete, and inconsequential to the outcome of important events. Even in the midst of the success enjoyed by Isaac and other black jockeys such as William Walker, Oliver Lewis, James “Soup” Perkins, and Anthony Hamilton, images of stereotypical “colored boys” riding hoses began to appear more frequently as advertisements and reminders of the preferred social, political, and economic status of black men in America. Fortunately, Isaac was just getting started.

Drawing on the example of successful blacks in Lexington,
Louisville, and Frankfort, Isaac understood that achievement and will alone could not refute and deny the imposition and audacity of white supremacy. One had to refine, reform, and represent oneself in society. However, very few black jockeys were able to win over the public with the charm and gentlemanly sensibilities Isaac conveyed by the way he dressed, his body language, and his reserved air of confidence and humility. Clearly, Isaac believed that being successful required discipline. This understanding helped him shape his ideas about himself and make plans for a future beyond the saddle that would include marriage, children, the purchase of real estate, and ownership of a string of horses. But in addition to mastering the necessary riding skills, Isaac would have to master himself and the ever-present temptations in the burgeoning spectacle of horse racing.

By the spring of 1880, Isaac would be a year older and wiser in the ways of the turf and life’s disappointments. During the winter months, he may have joined Frankfort Baptist Church, attended public lectures about black suffrage, and even taken advantage of educational opportunities at the local school for blacks. Isaac would go into town to get his hair cut at the barbershop, purchase clothes and shoes, and satisfy his other indulgences, whatever they were, with like-minded individuals. And he would meet his future wife, Lucy Carr.

Still, the status of blacks in Frankfort was no different from that of blacks throughout Kentucky. Those who were seen as threats to white power were singled out and persecuted for their advocacy of black citizenship rights. A Republican stronghold, Frankfort had one of the most active black communities in the state in terms of pushing back against the aggressive agenda to jettison the gains won in the Civil War and the radical policies of Reconstruction. Unfortunately, the collusion among state and local governments and wealthy, middle-class, and poor whites undermined the democratic process and hindered blacks’ progress. White men worked with impunity to regulate, criminalize, and eliminate black lives. The amount and degree of violence and lawlessness visited on African Americans—in a state where Christianity was professed to be the
foundation of civilization—were shameful. It would be another decade before Kentucky passed an antilynching law to protect its black citizens from white mob violence. If Isaac learned anything from the black community of Frankfort, it was that his relationship with J. W. Hunt-Reynolds, the city’s favorite son, was vital to protect him from jealous white boys who thought that his success limited theirs.

There is good reason to believe that white Kentuckians considered blacks a detriment to the progress of the state, as well as the country. In March 1880 a writer in the *Kentucky Live Stock Record* suggested the following:

> If the negro would leave the State, it would be greatly benefitted thereby, both in wealth, population and increased development. The negro in large numbers, be he slave or freeman is detrimental to the development of the country, as history of every slave State in the Union has demonstrated.

> As a class, with few exceptions, they are ignorant, indolent, dull, improvident, and any thing but enterprising citizens. Nothing has done so much to retard Kentucky’s progress as negro labor, which has hung like an incubus upon her development, and the sooner our people are convinced of the fact the more rapid will be our increase in wealth, prosperity and power.\(^{122}\)

Of course, the writer ignores the history of slavery and the human equity poured into the state’s development by people of African descent. Nor does the author recognize that the wealthy had no desire to provide other white men with opportunities to climb economically, socially, or politically; their sole objective was profitability and the power wealth provided.

Arguments like these would be responsible for a gradual decline in the employment of black boys and men as jockeys at major tracks across the country. On the major horse farms in the South and at tracks in the East, African American trainers and jockeys were already losing ground as whites began to consolidate power around Negro hating. But in Isaac Murphy’s case, his phenomenal
success on the turf still drew the attention of owners who wanted him to guide their horses in the major stakes races, which of course increased his earning capacity significantly. In the 1880 season Isaac rode at weights from 100 to 113 pounds for ten different owners, including J. W. Hunt-Reynolds and H. P. McGrath. Over the course of four months, however, the popular jockey rode in only thirty-two races, posting ten victories and a dozen second-place, seven third-place, one fifth-place, and one eighth-place finishes. In the month of August, Isaac was absent from the track at Saratoga Springs—or any other track, for that matter. This could be explained by any number of things—an injury or illness, or perhaps some violent act against him by those hoping to sabotage his success. One other possibility is that America Murphy’s death, recorded as occurring in 1879, actually took place in 1880; this would justify Isaac’s absence in August, placing him in Lexington making preparations for his mother’s burial. Wherever Isaac was in August, the next month would bring another tragedy.

In September, in between the Lexington and the Louisville Jockey Club meetings, the Hunt-Reynolds family departed Fleetwood to attend the Westfeldt family reunion in Shufordville, North Carolina, right outside of Asheville. J. W., Meta, and their daughter Christina left Frankfort the week of September 15. J. W. probably planned to spend some time with the Westfeldt family before joining Eli and Isaac in Louisville for the races. Prior to their departure, J. W. had been suffering from an undiagnosed sickness, but based on published reports, he was in relatively good health. However, on the evening of September 22, 1880, thirty-four-year-old J. W. Hunt-Reynolds died from a ruptured blood vessel in the brain. Two days prior, he had complained of a headache but did not seek the advice of the local doctor. Hunt-Reynolds’s contributions to the turf would not be forgotten. With J. W.’s death, Isaac lost not only a generous mentor and employer but also his security in the horse-racing world. He would have to find other owners to ride for to fulfill his destiny. In this time of great disappointment, loss, and uncertainty, Isaac had to take hold of his future.