

“MY OLD KENTUCKY HOME”

“My Old Kentucky Home” is the state song of Kentucky. Although there is no definitive history on the playing of the Stephen Foster ballad as a Kentucky Derby tradition, it is believed to have originated in 1921 for the 47th running. Reports provide evidence that 1930 may have been the first year the song was played as the horses were led to the post parade.

It is well-documented by historians that the lyrics were influenced by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the original handwritten lyrics show that the initial working title of the song was “Poor Uncle Tom, Good Night.” In his autobiography My Bondage My Freedom, Frederick Douglass wrote that the song, “awakens sympathies for the slave, in which antislavery principles take root, grow, and flourish.” In the context of modern times, the legacy of the song is met with some debate.

Since 1936, with only a few exceptions, the first verse and the chorus have been performed by the University of Louisville Marching Band as the horses make their way from the paddock to the starting gate. In 2020, the song was solemnly played by a single bugle and preceded by a moment of silence in which fans were asked to reflect on renewed hope for a more just country to truly “take root, grow and flourish.”

Statement from Churchill Downs:

“Churchill Downs gives careful consideration to our traditions each year. “My Old Kentucky Home” is the state song of Kentucky and it has been performed before the running of the Kentucky Derby for more than 100 years. Our fans overwhelmingly cite the playing of the song as a meaningful and emotional moment of self-reflection. The great abolitionist, Frederick Douglas wrote in his autobiography that the ballad, “awakens sympathy for the slave, in which antislavery principles take root, grow and flourish.” We have great appreciation for that historical perspective and the principles that inspire a more equitable future for all.”

My Old Kentucky Home

The sun shines bright in the old Kentucky home,
Tis summer, the people are gay;
The corn-top’s ripe and the meadow’s in the bloom
While the birds make music all the day.

The young folks roll on the little cabin floor
All merry, all happy and bright;
By’n by hard times comes a knocking at the door
Then my old Kentucky home, Good-night!

Weep no more my lady, Oh! Weep no more today!
We will sing one song for my old Kentucky home
For the old, Kentucky home, far away.