



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Contact: Darren Rogers
Senior Director, Communications & Media Services
Churchill Downs Racetrack
(502) 636-4461 (office)
(502) 345-1030 (mobile)
Darren.Rogers@KyDerby.com

THE EARLY YEARS OF CHURCHILL DOWNS

LOUISVILLE, Ky. – Horse racing in Kentucky is rich in history, dating back to 1789 when the first racecourse was laid out in Lexington. However, it was almost 100 years later, in 1875, that Churchill Downs officially opened and began its tradition as “Home of the Kentucky Derby.”

In 1787, The Commons, a park-like block near Lexington’s Race Street was used by horsemen for racing. By 1789, complaints by “safety minded” citizens led to the formal development of a race meet at The Commons. The men who organized this race meet, including Kentucky Statesman Henry Clay, also formed the Commonwealth’s first Jockey Club. The organization later was named the Kentucky Jockey Club in 1809.

Racing in Louisville dates back to 1783 when local sources reported that races were held on Market Street in the downtown area. To alleviate the problems associated with racing on the busy city thoroughfare, a course was developed at the now abandoned Shippingport Island in 1805. Racing was conducted on the island in the Ohio River at what was called the Elm Tree Gardens.

By 1827, a new track, known as the Hope Distillery Course, was laid out on what is presently Main and 16th Streets. Racing was also held on a number of private tracks located on farms throughout the local area. One of the more prominent of these was Peter Funk’s Beargrass Track which was located in an area now bordered by Hurstbourne Lane and Taylorsville Road.

The Oakland Race Course was opened in the fall of 1833 and brought racing back to a formal site with the track, complete with clubhouse, located at what is now Seventh and Magnolia Streets in “Old Louisville.” This was followed in 1858 by the opening of the Woodlawn Course on the Louisville and Lexington railroad lines just outside of today’s St. Matthews, east of Louisville. The site closed in 1870, but the Woodlawn Vase, the track’s premier trophy, has been used in the presentation to the winner of the Preakness Stakes at Pimlico since 1917.

Harness racing was also a significant part of Louisville’s early racing history with a number of tracks in existence. One of the most prominent was Greeneland, a racecourse for trotters was built just east of Churchill Downs in 1868.

The founding...

The demise of these tracks did not sway the enthusiasm of 26-year-old Col. M. Lewis Clark, who while traveling in England and France in 1872-1873, devised the idea of a Louisville Jockey Club for conducting race meets. While abroad, Clark toured and visited with a number of prominent racing leaders, including England’s Admiral Rous and France’s Vicomte Darn, vice president of the French Jockey Club.

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Upon his return from Europe, Clark began development of his racetrack which would serve to showcase the Kentucky breeding industry. The track would eventually become known as "Churchill Downs." The first reference of the name Churchill Downs came in an 1883 Kentucky Derby article reported by the former Louisville Commercial.

"The crowd in the grandstand sent out a volume of voice, and the crowd in the field took it up and carried it from boundary to boundary of Churchill Downs."

The track was incorporated as Churchill Downs in 1937.

The first public notice of establishment of the track was reported in the May 27, 1874, edition of the Courier-Journal. The notice was met with some objections because another track had already been proposed by the Falls City Racing Association for a site near the river just east of downtown Louisville. Clark and a group of prominent Louisville gentlemen met at the Galt House on June 18, 1874, to prepare articles of incorporation with the actual filing for the Louisville Jockey Club and Driving Park Association taking place on June 20.

To fund the construction of the track, Clark raised \$32,000 by selling 320 membership subscriptions to the track at \$100 each.

Eighty acres of land, approximately three miles south of downtown were leased from Clark's uncles, John and Henry Churchill. A clubhouse, grandstand, porter's lodge and six stables were all eventually constructed on the site for the opening of the track.

For his inaugural race meet, Clark designed his three major stakes races, the Kentucky Derby, Kentucky Oaks and Clark Handicap, after the three premier races in England, the Epsom Derby, Epsom Oaks and St. Leger Stakes, respectively. These events have each been held continuously at Churchill since their debut in 1875. However, in 1953, the Clark was moved from the spring to the fall meet. The Falls City was also offered during the inaugural meet and after four interruptions, the race continues to be held.

The track formally opened May 17, 1875, with four races scheduled. The winner of the first race was Bonaventure, however the winner of the day's featured race, the Kentucky Derby, was a 3-year-old chestnut colt, Aristides. Owned by H.P. McGrath, Aristides was trained by and ridden by two African-Americans, Ansel Williamson and Oliver Lewis, respectively. The Kentucky Derby has been held each year since 1875 and stands as the oldest, continuously held major sporting event in the United States.

Financial crisis and development...

Despite the success of the first Kentucky Derby, the track was not financially successful and on Nov. 24, 1894, the New Louisville Jockey Club was incorporated. William F. Schulte was appointed president and Clark was retained as presiding judge for the track.

Under Schulte, a new grandstand was constructed during fall 1894 - spring 1895 on the opposite side of the track for a reported cost of \$100,000. The grandstand was complemented by two spires constructed atop the roof. The Twin Spires, a simple architectural element, would become the symbol of Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Derby.

However, financial problems continued to plague the racetrack, and finally on Oct. 1, 1902, a group headed by Louisville Mayor Charles Grainger (1901-1905), Charlie Price and Matt J. Winn agreed to take over the operation. The takeover was done by amending the track's articles of incorporation with no transfer in the form of a deed. Grainger was named president, Price racing secretary and Winn vice president.

Under this administration, the track finally showed its first profit in 1903, 28 years after its founding. As the Kentucky Derby grew in popularity so did the racetrack. In 1907, the owners of Churchill Downs, who were officials of the New Louisville Jockey Club, joined with nearby Douglas Park to form the Louisville Racing Association. The purpose of the new Association was to establish race dates and policies for racing in the City.

This relationship led to the formation of the Kentucky Jockey Club in February 1919 as a holding company for Churchill and three other tracks in the State: Latonia in the north, Lexington in the bluegrass region, and Douglas Park and Churchill Downs in Louisville.

Under the powerful Kentucky Jockey Club, the track's domain grew for the next 10 years (1919-1929).

ABOUT THE KENTUCKY DERBY

The \$5 million Kentucky Derby takes place on the first Saturday in May at historic Churchill Downs in Louisville, Ky. Inaugurated in 1875, the legendary 1 ¼-mile race for 3-year-olds is the longest continually held major sporting event in the United States and the first leg of horse racing's Triple Crown series. Also known as "The Run for the Roses®" and "The Most Exciting Two Minutes in Sports®," the Kentucky Derby is the most attended horse race in the nation. The 152nd running of the Kentucky Derby will take place on Saturday, May 2, 2025. For more information, please visit www.KentuckyDerby.com.

ABOUT CHURCHILL DOWNS RACETRACK

Churchill Downs Racetrack ("CDRT"), the world's most legendary racetrack, has been the home of The Kentucky Derby, the longest continually held annual sporting event in the United States, since 1875. Located in Louisville, CDRT features a series of themed race days during Derby Week, including the Kentucky Oaks, and conducts Thoroughbred horse racing during three race meets in the Spring, September and Fall. CDRT is located on 175 acres and has a one-mile dirt track, a 7/8-mile turf track, a stabling area, and provides seating for approximately 60,000 guests. The stable area has barns sufficient to accommodate 1,400 horses and a 114-room dormitory for backstretch personnel. CDRT also has a year-round simulcast wagering facility. www.ChurchillDowns.com.

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