

# The Decline And Demise Of The Chicago Turf, 1891-1904

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This research chronicles and explains the demise of thoroughbred racing in Chicago, which in the late 1880s was the center of western racing. The sport then enjoyed considerable social cachet because of the prestigious Washington Park and its prominent races, particularly the American Derby. It remained quite popular in the 1890s, and at one time or other, there were eight different thoroughbred

tracks in the metropolitan area. However the sport operated under a pale because of such problems as dubious races and lowlife crowds at proprietary tracks, winter racing at Lake County tracks in Indiana, the ownership of plebeian tracks by bookmakers, and the gambling menace. On-track bookmaking and off-track poolrooms were controlled by the local gambling syndicate, led by Mike McDonald, the first head of organized crime in the United States.

The fight to curtail racing was led by religious leaders, journalists, and mugwumps who wanted to promote mod reform. Their first target was the bookmaker controlled Garfield Park in Chicago which they closed in 1891 after a violent confrontation in which two people were killed. However racing continued at Washington Park, across the city line in Cicero and Maywood, and emerged at Roby, Indiana. The fight to clean up Chicago racing was led by the Civic Federation, and upper middle class progressive voluntary association that publicized the gambling menace at Washington Park and investigated the changing character of crowds there. Their pressure succeeded in closing the elite track in 1894, although it did operate intermittently in the late 1890s.

Racing continued at the proprietary tracks despite the efforts of good-government groups and fierce competition among Hawthorne and Harlem Race Tracks that led to a police riot at Hawthorne in 1898. The tracks were finally closed in 1904 as a result of a major fight by Mayor Carter Harrison II and his police department to clean up gambling in Chicago. Harrison closed down the racetracks and the boxing arenas and ordered daily raids against betting parlours to demonstrate his reform credentials and gain publicity for his campaign for the Democratic party's presidential nomination. The result was the virtual halt of racing until the 1920s.

Data for the research is drawn from the daily press (*Chicago Daily News, Tribune, Times, and Times-Herald*), sporting periodicals (*National Police Gazette. Spirit of the Times, Turf, Field, and Farm*), the papers of the Civic Federation (Chicago Historical Society), and the Herman Schuettler Scrapbooks, 1904-08 (assistant police chief in charge of suppressing gambling)[Chicago Historical Society]. Research was funded by a summer stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities.