

# ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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## *Developing a Competitive Advantage:* **Antebellum Thoroughbred Horse Breeding in Kentucky**

When Daniel Boone crossed over the Allegheny Mountains and led his hunting party through the Cumberland Gap in 1767, could he have ever imagined that by 1840 “Kentucke” would be the pre-eminent breeder of thoroughbred horses in the United States? Consider that Virginia had a considerable advantage over Kentucky: the Old Dominion had been settled over one hundred years earlier, and the horse racing industry in Virginia dominated colonial sport. How could Kentucky possibly assume the mantle of leadership in thoroughbred breeding a mere fifty years after acquiring statehood (1792)?

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the early settlers of Kentucky achieved the pre-eminent position in the breeding of thoroughbred horses in less than fifty years and to determine who were the breeders and horsemen who led this shift of domination away from Virginia. It investigates the strategies used by the Kentucky sportsmen who actually bred the best racing thoroughbreds, and discusses the importance of the land, the “Blue Grass” region, in nurturing thoroughbred racehorses. It also considers how Kentucky breeders developed a mythology surrounding the superiority of thoroughbreds raised on bluegrass, a mythology that persists to this day.

The paper argues that the dominance of the Kentucky breeding industry was attained much earlier than has previously been thought. An examination of the papers and correspondence of the breeders themselves reveals that they systematically attained a competitive advantage and coordinated this through jockey clubs and other organizations.

Surprisingly little has been written about the early history of Kentucky racing and breeding. To look at the literature, one would almost think that the Kentucky horse industry bloomed fully formed with the first Kentucky Derby in May 1875. Some historians might grudgingly agree that Kentucky’s domination of the horse industry began with the birth of the super-horse, Lexington, in 1850. However, newly uncovered information suggests that Lexington was merely the culmination of a conscious effort to breed a superior thoroughbred and that Kentucky led the nation in breeding at least ten years earlier: a fact acknowledged by many Virginia breeders themselves.

The paper is based on primary sources from the Kentucky Derby Museum, the museums and libraries of Keeneland Race Track and the Kentucky Horse Park, the Filson

Club Historical Society, the Kentucky Historical Society, the University of Kentucky Library, and various county historical societies.