

Austin Curtis

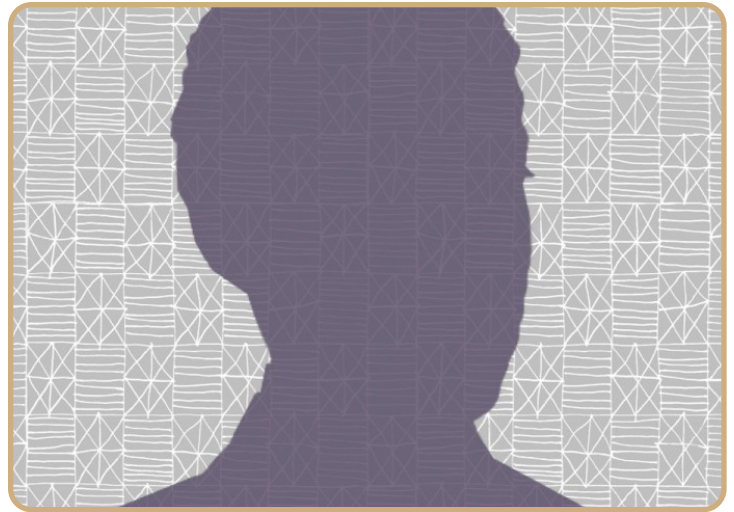
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Places: Halifax, North Carolina

Birth: circa 1760

Death: December 10, 1808

Professions: Jockey, Trainer, Bloodstock
Consultant



Childhood and Family

Austin Curtis was born around 1760, likely to enslaved parents. He married a woman named Nancy and they had eleven children. Researchers are seeking more information about Curtis' childhood and personal life.

Unusual Jockey Career

Willie Jones, a founding father of North Carolina and prominent stable owner, enslaved Curtis. Although Jones and his brother enslaved nearly three hundred people, he relied particularly on Curtis for his skill as a jockey.

Jones and Curtis traveled throughout the mid-Atlantic region competing in races. They were the first well-known manager-athlete combination in America.¹ In 1773, Curtis became famous for dangling his foot out of a stirrup to unnerve another jockey in a quarter-mile race. His trick won him the race, and the prize of 147,000 pounds of tobacco.

Breeding Consultant

Curtis was not only a popular jockey. He was also consulted on matters of horse breeding. For example, he selected the brood mare for Marmaduke Johnson's stables. Known as Johnson's Medley Mare, her offspring included Reality, Bonnets o' Blue, and Fashion. These horses influenced Thoroughbred bloodlines for decades to come.²

Freedom and Post-Revolutionary War

Curtis served in the Revolutionary War. He protected Jones' horses from British troops raiding the Carolinas for breeding stock.³ In appreciation, Jones filed a petition on December 5, 1791 for Curtis' freedom.

Jones stated that “by his attachment to his Country during the War by his fidelity to his Master (the said Willie Jones) and by his Honesty and good Behavior on all Occasions, has demonstrated that he deserves to be free.”⁴ His name was legally changed to Austin Curtis Jones, but he and his family reverted back to Curtis after some time.

Curtis continued working with horses and became a trainer. He owned more than three hundred acres of land.

Legacy

Sometime before his death in 1808, Curtis had purchased his son William’s freedom and ensured the freedom of at least eight of his other children too. Upon his death, Curtis’ will left three hundred acres of property to his wife and amply provided for their eleven children.

A Raleigh, North Carolina newspaper published Curtis’ obituary. It lauded not only his skills with horses but also his personal integrity. “His character was unblemished; his disposition mild and obliging—his deportment uniformly correct and complaisant—he possessed the esteem of many—the respect and confidence of all who knew him.”⁵

Sources

Hotaling, Edward. *The Great Black Jockeys: The Lives and Times of the Men Who Dominated America’s First National Sport*. Rocklin, Calif.: Forum, 1999.

Mooney, Katherine. *Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Footnotes

¹Hotaling, *The Great Black Jockeys*, 13.

²Mooney, *Race Horse Men*, 9.

³Mooney, 12.

⁴Mooney, 12.

⁵Hotaling, *The Great Black Jockeys*, 37.