

Charles Stewart

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Places: Phocahontas, Virginia; Paris,
Kentucky; Natchez, Louisiana

Birth: Circa 1808 **Death:** After 1884

Professions: Trainer, Groom, Exercise
Rider, Jockey, Stallion Manager,
Stud Manager



Childhood and Early Life

Charles Stewart was born in Pocahontas, Virginia around 1808. His parents were Charles Stewart, Sr. a free mixed-race man, and Sally, an enslaved woman. William R. Johnson, a wealthy and influential stable owner, bought Stewart when he was eleven years old.¹

From Groom to Jockey

Under Johnson's English trainer, Arthur Taylor, Stewart learned how to take care of horses.² Stewart began his career as a groom and was soon entrusted with the care of Johnson's top horse, Reality. Johnson promoted him to exercise rider and then to jockey. Stewart rode his first race at thirteen years old.³ Stewart eventually became the top jockey of Johnson's racing enterprise.⁴

Career as Stud Manager

While Stewart was a successful jockey, he found greater prestige in the next phase of his career. He became a trainer and a stallion man, or stud manager. By 1837, Stewart ran one of Johnson's satellite stables in Paris, Kentucky. From there, he travelled to other states as far away as Pennsylvania to breed Johnson's stallions to local mares.⁵ Stewart was still enslaved, but due to his knowledge of horses and the racing industry, he was given a greater degree of autonomy compared to most enslaved people.⁶

Career as Trainer

After his second wife died in Paris, Stewart asked Johnson to sell him to someone away from Paris and Virginia. In 1840, Judge Alexander Porter purchased Stewart to work as head trainer at Oaklawn Manor, his plantation on the Bayou Teche. Stewart continued his successful career as both trainer and stud manager there.⁷

Impact of the Civil War

During the Civil War, the Oaklawn plantation and stables fell into disrepair. After gaining his freedom, Stewart continued to live near the once-thriving plantation.

Stewart's Legacy: His Story in His Own Words

In 1884, Stewart recounted his life story to Annie Porter, a relative of the Oaklawn Porter family. Annie published Stewart's story in Harper's Weekly and its first-hand account of his life gives insight into his experience.⁸ Researchers are continuing to search for more information about Stewart's life. In 2017, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources erected an historical marker in Petersburg to honor Stewart.⁹ His legacy remains as a skilled horseman who rose to prominence despite the limitations of his enslaved status.

Sources

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Footnotes

¹ Stewart, "My Life as a Slave."

² McDaniels, "An Accidental Historian in Antebellum America," 9.

³ Hotaling, *The Great Black Jockeys*, 70.

⁴ Hotaling, 66.

⁵ Hotaling, 79.

⁶ McDaniels, "An Accidental Historian in Antebellum America," 9.

⁷ Hotaling, *The Great Black Jockeys*, 88.

⁸ Stewart, "My Life as a Slave."

⁹ "Charles Stewart Historic Marker."