

Chisel'em

Author: Merlene Davis

Places: New Orleans, Louisiana

Birth: Unknown **Death:** Unknown

Professions: Jockey, Groom



How He Got His Name

Chisel'em was an enslaved jockey who rode a stable of horses owned by Duncan F. Kenner of Louisiana. Kenner, a prominent sugar cane planter and Confederate legislator, owned 500 slaves at his Ashland Plantation. According to one source, Chisel'em's original name was Jack. Kenner put Jack on a mare named Kate Aubrey for a half-mile workout. Something frightened the mare, causing her to throw her rider and to kick him in the face once he landed.

Jack's mother rushed to his side, fearing the worst. Kenner came to his aid as well and said, "...they have chiseled you this time, Jack."

"Let me up," the newspaper reported Jack saying, "and I will chisel 'em."

From that day on, Jack was known as Chisel 'em.¹ Other accounts said his name was a distorted version of Chisholm. In fact, there are several references to that name and only one for Jack. Thereafter, Chisholm became known as "the jockey who had a scar."²

Career

Chisel'em was very influential in the growth of horse racing in Louisiana in the years before the Civil War.³ From 1843 to 1845 Chisel 'em was the leading jockey in New Orleans. He rode on the premier racetracks of Metairie, Eclipse, and Louisiana, built in the South in the late 1830s.

Chisel'em won what turf writers deemed the "Best Three Mile Race Run in America." The event took place on January 5, 1844. Chisel'em, riding Patrick Henry Gallwey, and Monk, another enslaved jockey, riding the favorite Saartin, raced three one-mile heats. The horses ran neck-and-neck in each one.

In the early days of horse racing, riders and horses typically competed in races of a mile each. They were held on the same afternoon with only a brief rest period between. That day, Chisel'em won two out of the three heats. The races were so thrilling, the turf writer gave unusual credit to the Black jockeys, not the horses.⁴

Subject of a Lost Painting

Kenner, extremely proud of the feat, commissioned a portrait. He paid the famed equestrian artist Edward Troye to paint Gallwey. Kenner asked if Chisel'em could be placed astride him. Troye agreed, although he usually painted horses without a rider. He preferred having the jockey hold the reins while standing near the horse.

In 1862, Union forces raided the plantation for horses and other valuables. All the paintings of Kenner's horses, except for one, were burned. The portrait of Chisel'em and Gallwey was among them. Chisel'em was still living at Ashland when it happened.⁵

Legacy

Chisel'em's skills and story as a pre-Civil War jockey made horse racing history. His career ended as he "grew too big and heavy." Owners often chose young boys to work their stables, creating a near-endless line of experienced horsemen and riders. As they grew too big to ride, like Chisel'em, they continued to work as grooms, exercisers and trainers. Chisel'em worked with Abe Hawkins, the most famous of Kenner's jockeys. Hawkins continued his racing career in the North after the Civil War.⁶

Sources

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Footnotes

¹The Times-Picayune. December 30, 1842.

²Smith, Harry Worcester, "Duncan F. Kenner, Grey Fanny and Ashland Plantation."

³Hotaling, The Great Black Jockeys.

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⁵Smith, Harry Worcester, "Duncan F. Kenner, Grey Fanny and Ashland Plantation."

⁶Smith, Harry Worcester, "Duncan F. Kenner, Grey Fanny and Ashland Plantation."