

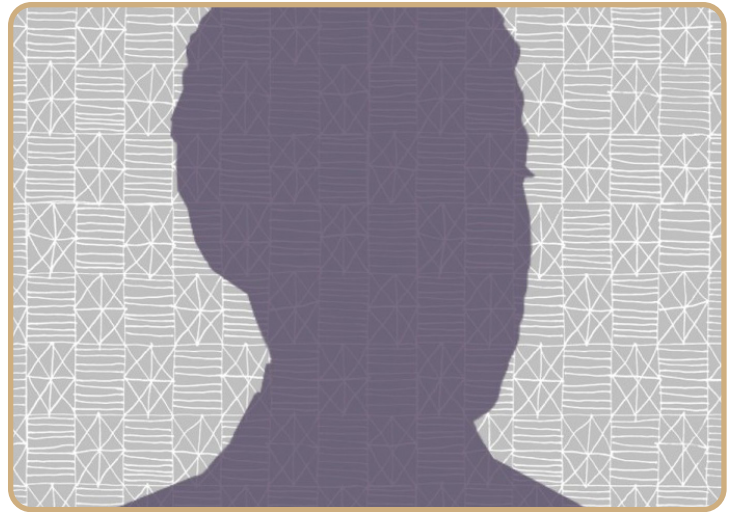
# Erskine Henderson

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**Places:** Versailles, Woodford County,  
Kentucky

**Birth:** ca. 1861 **Death:** November 25, 1913

**Professions:** Jockey



## Birth and Family

Erskine Henderson was born in Versailles, Woodford County, Kentucky in 1861, although another source reports 1864.<sup>1</sup> His parents were "Jer Henison"<sup>2</sup> and Mary J. Blackburn.<sup>3</sup>

## Career Beginnings

Henderson began his jockey career at the age of fourteen years old. He was known as a "lightweight" weighing in between eighty and one hundred ten pounds. Henderson started off as a jockey for S. J. Salyers' stable. In 1875, Henderson rode Bill Bruce in the Spring Meet at the Kentucky Association track in Lexington, Kentucky, finishing second. At the Fall Meet Henderson won three races riding two-year old Thoroughbreds Katie, Novelty, and Clemmie. They won the Purse for all ages, the Produce Stakes, and the Bluegrass Stakes. He rode for the following owners:

- A. Keene Richards
- James T. Williams
- Oden Bowie
- Thomas J. Megibben
- Elias J. Baldwin
- August Belmont
- James R. Keene
- Asabel Burnham<sup>4</sup>

Henderson was on his way to becoming an accomplished jockey.

Five years later, Henderson experienced another career-building year. On June 22, 1880, he won his first race at Sheepshead Bay mounted on Enquiress. During that same year, Henderson won six of thirty-seven other races.

## The Fabulous Trio

In 1885 a racing relationship triangle formed between trainer, jockey, and horse. Henderson was contracted to ride horses for James T. Williams. Under this arrangement, Henderson could ride horses belonging to other owners if Williams did not have an entry in the race. In the span of a year, Henderson mounted forty-seven Thoroughbreds; only fifteen were from Williams' stable.<sup>5</sup>

Another employee for the Williams' stable was Abraham Perry, an African American trainer who began as a jockey but rose to the rank of trainer by 1870.<sup>6</sup>

The third side of the triangle was Thoroughbred Joe Cotton, a two-year old foaled in 1882.

Henderson and Joe Cotton had their first win in 1884 in Nashville, Tennessee. They made history in 1885 when they finished first in the Cottrill Stakes, Tennessee Derby, and the Kentucky Derby. In the Kentucky Derby, Joe Cotton was favored to win. Henderson and the stallion lagged behind the field of ten. Abraham Perry, who conditioned the Thoroughbred, may have advised Henderson to pace at the beginning – not to race ahead. Henderson coolly waited a mile to make a move to the front. He and Joe Cotton won by a neck, creating a memorable and exciting race.<sup>7</sup>

## Jockey Career Continues Post 1885

Despite having a good record, Henderson received fewer and fewer mounts. Yet, he did not give up. He applied to have his name listed in the 1889 Goodwin's Turf Guide. He continued to seek work as a jockey. In 1893 he signed to ride for Jackson and Gaylon stables.<sup>8</sup> His name disappeared from archival records before resurfacing twenty years later.

In 1913 forty-nine-year-old Henderson was at Churchill Downs with two horses. He was at one-hundred-and-ten pounds and described as "not much heavier than when he piloted Joe Cotton to victory in the big classic nearly thirty years ago."<sup>9</sup>

## Legacy and Death

An announcement about Henderson's death in 1913 prompted a search for confirmation. The person who had completed his death certificate had spelled his name as "Earskins Henison." It would have been dismissed had it not been for the listed occupation "A Race Horseman".<sup>10</sup> His death and burial occurred in Versailles, Woodford County, Kentucky.

## Sources

Goodwin's Annual Official Turf Guide, Goodwin Brothers, New York. Issues for 1875, 1880, 1882, 1883, 1884, 1885, 1886, 1889, 1893

"E. Henderson at the Derby." The Courier Journal (Louisville, Kentucky). May 6, 1913, 9

"Death Certificate: Erskine Henderson. 1913." Woodford County, Kentucky. #30819

"Colored Notes: Death of Erskine Henderson", Lexington Leader (Kentucky). November 26, 1913, 5

Vosburgh, Walter Spencer, Famous American Jockeys. 62. Saalfeld, New York, 1883

Giles, Yvonne. 2019. In Tales from the Turf: History of the Horse 1825-1950. "African American Horsemen in Kentucky 1825-1950". J.B. Speed Art Museum

Kentucky Derby Winners, accessed December 14, 2020 <https://www.kentuckyderby.com/history/kentucky-derby-winners>

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Vosburgh, Walter Spencer. Famous American Jockeys. 1883

<sup>2</sup>Death Certificate: Erskine Henderson. 1913. Woodford County, Kentucky. #30819

<sup>3</sup>Death Certificate: Erskine Henderson. 1913. Woodford County, Kentucky. #30819

<sup>4</sup>Goodwin's Annual Official Turf Guide. 1875

<sup>5</sup>Goodwin's Annual Official Turf Guide. 1885

<sup>6</sup>Giles. Tales from the Turf: History of the Horse 1825-1950. 2019.

<sup>7</sup>Kentucky Derby Winners | 2022 Kentucky Derby & Oaks | May 6 and May 7, 2022

<sup>8</sup>Goodwin's Annual Official Turf Guide. 1889, 1893

<sup>9</sup>E. Henderson at the Derby. Courier Journal (Louisville, Kentucky) May 1913

<sup>10</sup>Death Certificate: Erskine Henderson. 1913