

Isaac Burns Murphy

Author: Michael Phelps,
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Places: Lexington, Kentucky

Birth: January 2, 1861

Death: February 12, 1896

Professions: Jockey, Exercise Rider



Childhood and Apprenticeship

Isaac Burns Murphy was born to Jerry Burns and America Murphy in Bourbon County, Kentucky. His father joined the United States Colored Troops and died of camp fever shortly after his enlistment in the Army. Murphy was only three years old.¹ When he was ten years old, his mother also fell sick. She asked family friends, Eli Jordan and his wife to take in Murphy so that he may learn a profession.

Jordan was a horse trainer at the stables of James T. Williams. Murphy began working there too as an exercise rider. He was thrown off his first ride and it took some "vigorous instruction" to get him back in the saddle.²

Record-Setting Jockey

In his day, Murphy stood "at the head of all American jockeys, and whose services as a rider are in constant demand at race meetings."³

During his career, he won many notable races. He won several of them multiple times:

- American Derby (1884, 1885, 1886, 1888)
- Kentucky Derby (1884, 1890, 1891)
- Latonia Derby (1883, 1885, 1886, 1887)
- Suburban Stakes (1890)

With these and other triumphs, Murphy won 44% of his races, a record that remains unbroken. The Louisville Courier-Journal reported on his accomplishments, claiming that "[f]or several years, his annual earnings were four or five times those of a United States Senator, and he was better known than most statesmen."⁴

Mourned by Many

The extreme measures that Murphy endured to maintain a low weight were detrimental to his health. He died of heart failure at the age of thirty-five. With his passing, the extent of his community involvement, his stature within the horse industry, and his sheer wealth were all evident.

The Masonic Lodge and his brethren of the Lincoln and Sardis Lodges buried Murphy. He had served as Senior Warden, second in command to the Master of the Lodge.⁵ The funeral chorus was conducted by the Lexington Choral Club.

His pallbearers consisted of well-known African American horsemen:

- John T. Clay
- Henry Mack
- Lee Christy
- Howard Williams
- Edward Dudley Brown
- William Walker
- H. S. Williams

As a final ode to both his status and wealth, Murphy was laid to rest in a special casket, "which is one of the finest ever seen in Lexington... trimmed in royal purple, and is a duplicate of the one in which General Grant was buried."⁶

Enduring Legacy

Murphy was not only an extraordinary horseman but "known by all [as] an honest man", "a sterling character", and "absolutely incorruptible".⁷ In celebration of his stellar career, the National Racing Hall of Fame inducted Murphy as the first jockey at its creation in 1955.⁸

While no jockey has ever matched him, the National Turf Writers Association presents the Isaac Murphy Award to the North American jockey with the highest win percentage each racing season. In 2014, the Isaac Murphy Memorial Art Garden was built in Lexington, Kentucky at the site where his home originally stood. The location is across from the original grounds of the Kentucky Association racetrack, where Murphy had impressed crowds with his craft.

Sources

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Footnotes

¹"Widow's Application for Military Pension Certificate # 137891."

²Freeland's Famous Jockey. Joe Cotton's Owner Tells How He First Taught The Boy To Ride."

³A Jockey's Life; Isaac Murphy Tells How the Riders of Thoroughbreds Train Themselves."

⁴Isaac Murphy."

⁵Last Rites, The Funeral of Isaac Murphy This Afternoon."; Ballard, Sr., History of Prince Hall Freemasonry in Kentucky.

⁶Noted Jockeys To Act As Pall Bearers At Isaac Murphy's Funeral."

⁷Last Rites, The Funeral of Isaac Murphy This Afternoon."; "Freeland's Famous Jockey. Joe Cotton's Owner Tells How He First Taught The Boy To Ride."

⁸McKenzie, "The Forgotten Godfathers of Black American Sport."