

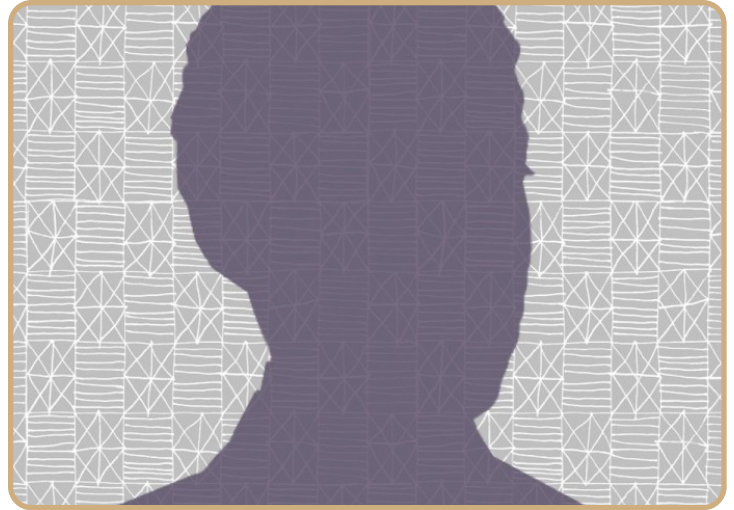
Jonathan Matt Figgs, Jr.

Author: Yvonne Giles,
Research Consultant

Places: New Zion, Scott County, Kentucky;
Georgetown, Scott County, Kentucky

Birth: October 21, 1955 **Death:**

Professions: Groom, Breeder, Trainer



Birth and Family

Jonathan Matt Figgs, Jr. was born in Lexington but raised in New Zion. This African American community borders the Scott and Fayette County line in Kentucky. He and his four siblings were guided and nurtured by parents, Jonathan, Sr. and Sally Jordan Figgs. Figgs married and became father to two daughters.

Determination

Figgs, during his oral history interview, said, "horses are in my blood." As a young boy he always had a toy horse in his pocket. When people asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, he would tell them he wanted to be a horse. His parents advised him that was not possible. He then decided he wanted to become a jockey. His father told him that he was already too big to ride. Those facts did not keep Figgs away from horses.

Learning From Others

Figg's interest and love of horses was influenced by his grandfathers. Figgs, as a young boy, spent summers with grandfather Charles Albert Jordan. He used horses to plow his three-hundred-acre farm in Mason County, Kentucky. Figgs learned to work with horses from him.

At the age of thirteen, Figgs was hired at Castleton Farms, Fayette County, Kentucky. Champion Saddlebreds, Standardbreds and Thoroughbreds were bred and trained at the farm. Figgs worked with his other grandfather, Luther White Figgs, who had been at the farm since 1917 as a stud groom. The younger Figgs acquired another set of skills while working at Castleton. What he learned became the foundation that he still uses today.

After work, Figgs had long talks with veteran horsemen. Frank Wilson, Thomas Embry and Oscar Dishman, Jr. shared their experiences. They were helpful mentors to him.

Working with the Best

Figgs was versed in grooming, breeding, breaking and training yearlings and preparing them for sales. With these skills, he found work at some of the top farms in Fayette County. Spendthrift Farm, Hamburg Stud Farm, Gainesway Farm and Overbrook Farm hired him.

In Bourbon County, he worked on the John T. Ward Farm and Claiborne Farm. The time at Claiborne was his most memorable. Among the Thoroughbreds there were:

- Forego
- Lure
- Heavenly Prize
- Inside Information
- Personal Ensign

They are National Museum of Racing Hall of Fame Thoroughbreds.

Outside Kentucky, Figgs was employed on the Ross Valley Farm, Baltimore County, Maryland.¹

All Time Favorite and Proudest Moments

Being a groom of Forego (1970-1997) was one of Figg's all-time favorite memories.

Figgs wrote, "One of my favorite things in Thoroughbred racing is seeing a new foal for the first time and wondering if he, or she, will be a champion, and win the Kentucky Derby."

His proudest moments were seeing Alysheba win the 1987 Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes. The Thoroughbred also won the Breeders Cup Mile Classic and was named Horse of the Year in 1988. In 1993, Alysheba became a National Museum of Racing Hall of Fame inductee.

Staying with The Horses

Figgs thought that he might like teaching. He obtained a degree in Art in 1978. He found that teaching was not his best choice of life work. He came back to the horses. His parents were upset because he chose not to teach. Before her death, his mother left him with a lasting compliment. She said that she "wasn't too worried about me for the rest of my journey in life, because I was happy because of horses."²

Sources

Figgs, Jonathan, 2019. interviewed by Marilyn Dishman. Chronicle of African Americans in the Horse Industry Oral History Project. Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History. University of Kentucky Libraries. <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt71hjpdj18w>

Figgs, Jonathan. 2020. Written narrative

Footnotes

¹Figgs, Jonathan. 2018. Chronicle of African Americans in the Horse Industry Oral History Project

²Figgs, Jonathan. 2020. Written narrative