

Oliver Lewis

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Places: Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky;
Cincinnati, Ohio

Birth: December 22, 1856

Death: January 30, 1924

Professions: Jockey



Childhood and Personal Life

Oliver Lewis was born to parents Elanora and Goodson in Fayette County, Kentucky.¹ He had at least four siblings: Lena, Hattie, Mattie, and John. Lewis married Lucy Wright at Mt. Gilead Baptist Church in Lexington, Kentucky on April 7, 1881. They lived on Ballard Street and had eleven children, six of whom survived to adulthood.²

Career Beginnings

Along with twenty-one other African American workers, H. P. McGrath employed Lewis at McGrathiana Stables.³ The stables were on the land where the University of Kentucky's Coldstream Research Farm is currently located.

Lewis became a successful jockey and rode Aaron Pennington to first and second place in heat races at the Kentucky Association Track. Lewis also rode Calvin to second place in the Clark Sweepstakes at Churchill Downs.⁴ These early successes prepared him for the biggest season of his career.

The Inaugural Kentucky Derby

In 1875, at nineteen years old, Lewis rode in the very first Kentucky Derby aboard Aristides. The African American trainer Ansel Williamson trained Aristides. McGrath intended for Lewis and Aristides to simply set the pace for Chesapeake, another of his horses.⁵

But Lewis was too fast, and created such a lead that he and Aristides won by two lengths. Later that season, Lewis and Aristides took second place in the Belmont Stakes. Lewis never rode in the Kentucky Derby again.

Post-Racing Career

In 1881, H. P. McGrath died. His estate was sold in 1884. After losing his employer in the racing industry, Lewis worked as a teamster. By 1910, Lewis and his family had moved to Ohio, where he worked for the Cincinnati street department.⁶ On the side, Lewis was also a bookmaker.⁷

Death and Lexington Legacy

Lewis died in 1924 in Cincinnati, Ohio. He was survived by his siblings, wife, and children. His funeral was held in Lexington and he was buried in his family's plot in African Cemetery Number 2.

In 2010, the city of Lexington, Kentucky built an extension to Newtown Pike. The city of Lexington held a contest to name the new street. Because this was the road where McGrathiana Farm had once been, Oliver Lewis' name won with 60 percent of the votes cast.⁸ In addition to the newly-named Oliver Lewis Way, the University of Kentucky's Class of 2011 funded a historic marker that was installed in 2012. Located at the Coldstream Research Campus, the marker honors Lewis, Ansel Williamson, and Aristides.⁹

Additional Research Provided By

Yvonne Giles, Research Consultant

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Footnotes

¹1880 United States Federal Census," 170B.

²Fayette County Clerk, "Marriage Record of Oliver Lewis and Lucy Wright."

³1880 United States Federal Census," 170B.

⁴Goodwin Brothers Firm, Goodwin's Official Annual Turf Guide.

⁵Klein, "Oliver Lewis (1856-1924)."

⁶1910 United States Federal Census," 67B.

⁷1920 United States Federal Census," 196B.

⁸"And The Winner Is."

⁹New Historical Marker to Be Unveiled at Coldstream."