

# Theophilus Irvin, Jr.

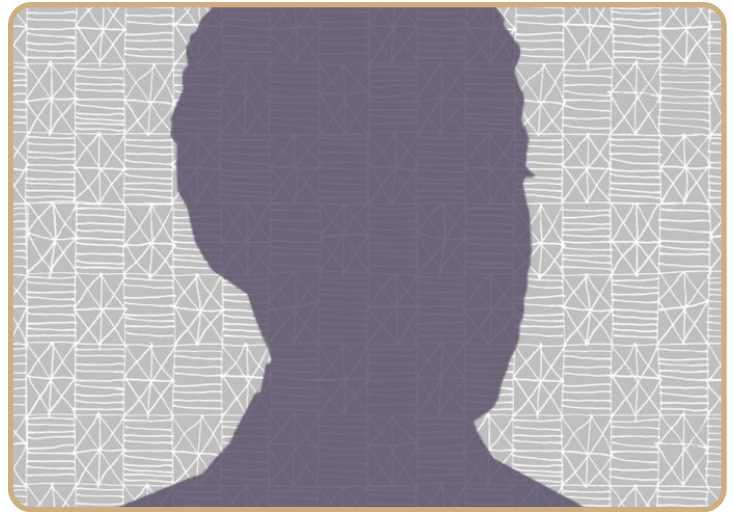
**Author:** Merlene Davis

**Places:** Lexington, Kentucky; Florence, Kentucky; Louisville, Kentucky; Henderson, Kentucky; New Orleans, Louisiana; Narragansett, Rhode Island

**Birth:** August 22, 1915

**Death:** March 31, 2009

**Professions:** Exercise Rider, Trainer, Race Commissioner



## Early Years

Theophilus Irvin Jr. and his parents, Ada B. Morton Irvin and Theophilus Irvin Sr., lived at 511 Chestnut Street in Lexington, Kentucky. Their home was close enough to the backstretch of the Kentucky Association Track for the younger Irvin to climb a fence and be at the Thoroughbred racetrack. The area is now a downtown Lexington neighborhood.<sup>1</sup>

Irvin's father and grandfather, George Morton, were horse trainers. Irvin Sr., was a horse trainer working as a foreman at the Kentucky Association Track and at the Will Perkins Stables.<sup>2</sup> Irvin and his father also worked at Hickory Farm, now The Thoroughbred Center, in 1931 when Irvin was fifteen.<sup>3</sup>

He took pride in breaking Myrtlewood, a foal of 1932, which became the foundation mare of horseman Leslie Combs II. Myrtlewood was inducted into the National Museum of Racing Hall of Fame in 1979.<sup>4</sup>

## Exercise Rider

In 1937, Irvin earned a license as an exercise rider. In the late 1930s, he traveled to New Orleans where he had heard jobs were plentiful. They weren't. He spent far too long riding low-level horses for pennies and missing too many meals. He never forgot that period in his life, loaning money to track workers who could not support themselves. He didn't expect repayment.<sup>5</sup>

## Trainer

In 1947, he earned his trainer's license in Narragansett, Rhode Island. For decades, he trained horses for J. Graham Brown, owner of the famed Brown Hotel in Louisville. He also trained for Keene Daingerfield, a well-known Kentucky steward at the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission.<sup>6</sup>

As a trainer, Irvin was given the “cast-offs and patch-ups,” as he called them, that needed mending. Those were the less-expensive horses he tended to at Turfway Park and River Downs, and at various farms. It was as close to being a doctor, his dream occupation, as he would get.<sup>7</sup>

## Racing Commission

Daingerfield, Irvin’s longtime employer and friend, was instrumental in hiring him in 1979 to work for the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission, making Irvin the first Black staff member with that organization.<sup>8</sup>

The commission, established in 1906, regulates horse racing and wagering in Kentucky while overseeing the welfare of the horses. Irvin worked in the detention barn, collecting horse urine from the top winners that were to be tested for drugs. He also issued licenses and hauled equipment from track to track and from the commission headquarters to race meets. He was one of three full-time assistants, and the one trainers hoped to see when they left the paddock.<sup>9</sup>

Known to be attentive to details, Irvin went strictly by the book. Depending on the racing schedule, Irvin preferred to commute from Lexington to work at either Ellis Park in Henderson, Kentucky; Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky; Turfway Park in Florence, Kentucky; or Keeneland in Lexington, Kentucky.<sup>10</sup>

## Retirement and Legacy

Irvin retired in 1995 after sixty-four years in the horse industry. He was married for fifty-nine years to Olive Bell Irvin, who died in 1996. The couple had no children.

Irvin, the first Black man hired by the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission in its first seventy-three years, died in 2009 at age ninety-three.

## Sources

Hewlett, Jennifer. “Theophilus Irvin, 93, Dies – First African-American Employed by the Ky. Racing Commission.” Lexington Herald-Leader. April 2, 2009.

BloodHorse.com. “Horseman Theophilus Irvin Jr. Dead.” Accessed January 15, 2021. <https://www.bloodhorse.com/horse-racing/articles/149286/horseman-theophilus-irvin-jr-dead>.

“Irvin, Theophilus, Sr. · Notable Kentucky African Americans Database.” Accessed February 8, 2021. <https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2752>.

“Irvin, Theophilus, Jr. · Notable Kentucky African Americans Database.” Accessed March 4, 2021. <https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2751>.

Guilliams, Cliff. “Seven Decades of Racing: Irvin Has Lived the Life and Seen It All.” The Daily Racing Form, September 14, 1991.

Taylor, Louise. “Winner of a Different Sort.” Lexington Herald Leader, April 28, 1999.

Davis, Merlene. "Quilter Specializes in Stitches in Time." Lexington Herald Leader, November 28, 1999.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Taylor, Louise. "Winner of a Different Sort." Lexington Herald Leader, April 28, 1999.

<sup>2</sup>Irvin, Theophilus, Sr. · Notable Kentucky African Americans Database." Accessed February 8, 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Taylor, Louise. "Winner of a Different Sort." Lexington Herald Leader, April 28, 1999.

<sup>4</sup>Guilliams, Cliff. "Seven Decades of Racing: Irvin Has Lived the Life and Seen It All." The Daily Racing Form, September 14, 1991.

<sup>5</sup>Taylor, Louise. "Winner of a Different Sort." Lexington Herald Leader, April 28, 1999.

<sup>6</sup>Hewlett, Jennifer. "Theophilus Irvin, 93, Dies - First African-American Employed by the Ky. Racing Commission," April 2, 2009.

<sup>7</sup>Taylor, Louise. "Winner of a Different Sort." Lexington Herald Leader, April 28, 1999.

<sup>8</sup>Taylor, Louise. "Winner of a Different Sort." Lexington Herald Leader, April 28, 1999.

<sup>9</sup>Guilliams, Cliff. "Seven Decades of Racing: Irvin Has Lived the Life and Seen It All." The Daily Racing Form, September 14, 1991.

<sup>10</sup>Guilliams, Cliff. "Seven Decades of Racing: Irvin Has Lived the Life and Seen It All." The Daily Racing Form, September 14, 1991.