

Oliver Lewis

1856-1924

Oliver Lewis, the African American jockey who rode the colt Aristides, won the first Kentucky Derby on May 17, 1875. His time of two minutes 37.75 seconds set an American record over the mile and a half distance. The winning thoroughbred was trained by renowned African American trainer Ansel Williamson. Williamson was later inducted into the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame in 1998.

Lewis was born in Fayette County, Ky., in 1856. He was 19 years old in 1875 when he entered the inaugural Kentucky Derby. Very little is known about Lewis' life, but according to the Black Athlete Web site, Lewis was "A family man, a husband and father of six children."

The race known as the "The Most Exciting Two Minutes in Sports" was held on the newly-opened Louisville Jockey Club racetrack, now known as Churchill Downs. Lewis won by two lengths in front of an estimated crowd of 10,000 spectators and in a field of 15 three-year-old horses. In the late 1800's, African Americans dominated racing, winning 15 of the first 28 Derbies and training six of the first 17 winners.

By the early 1900's, however, African Americans had been pushed out of the business, which had also become wealthier and less accessible to the working classes. It was not until 2000 that black jockeys reappeared in horse racing.

Lewis' achievement in the opening year of what has become America's longest-running sporting event went almost unrecognized for over a century. He rode Aristides to second place in the Belmont Stakes, which later became one of the "Triple Crown" races, and won a total of three races at the Louisville Jockey Club that season. Lewis never rode in another Kentucky Derby, but it is known that he attended the 33rd race, in 1907.

Despite his role in the history of one of America's most famous sporting events, Lewis has been neglected by sportswriters for well over a century and his life beyond the famous race is practically undocumented.

Oliver Lewis died in 1924, in Lexington, Ky., and is buried in the Lexington No. 2 Cemetery along with several other black jockeys of the period, including Isaac Murphy, who won the Derby three times.



Oliver Lewis rides Aristides to win the historic first Kentucky Derby on May 17, 1875.



Gallery of Great Black Kentuckians

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