

THE GREAT BLACK JOCKEYS

EDWARD HOTALING

THE LIVES AND TIMES
OF THE MEN WHO
DOMINATED AMERICA'S
FIRST NATIONAL SPORT

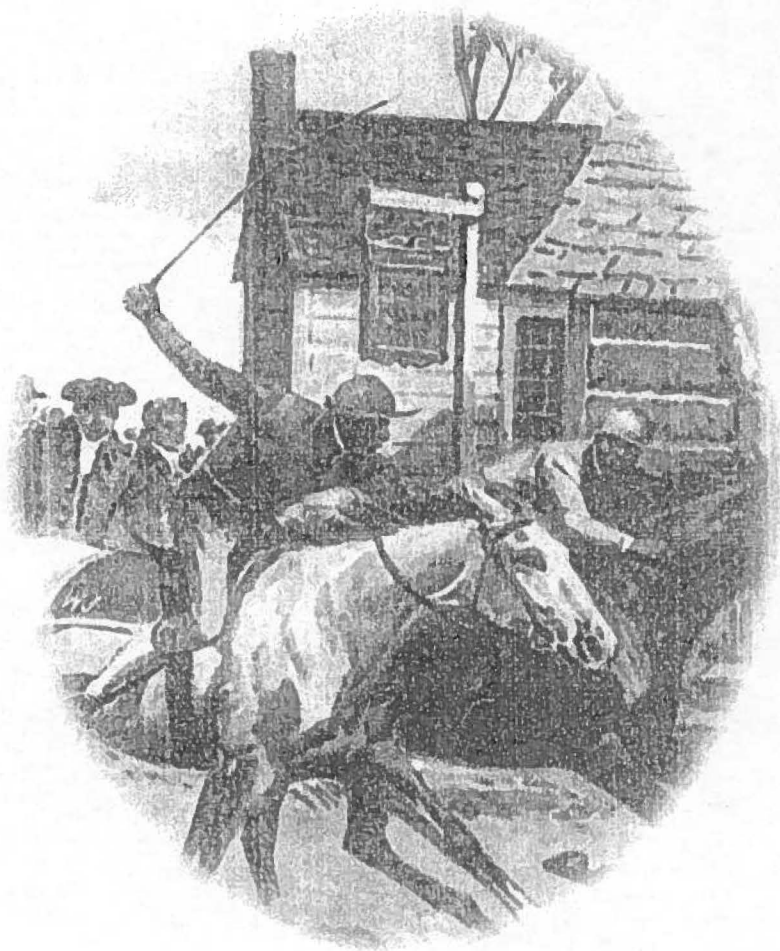
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FORUM

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*Match race at Tucker's Path, Brunswick County, Virginia. Austin Curtis
(with whip in air) rides Trick'em, whose saddle cloth is marked
WJ for owner Willie Jones. Modern painting by Sam Savitt.
Courtesy of Helen K. Groves/American Quarter Horse Museum.*

.I.

THE BIRTH *of* AMERICAN SPORTS

AUSTIN CURTIS AND
THE FOUNDING FATHERS

1607-1809

THEY WERE THE new people, the Americans, thousands of them streaming along the dusty roads toward the strange set of parallel lines on the grassy southern Virginia plain above the bright and furious Roanoke River. It would be judged the biggest crowd of Americans ever gathered before the Revolution or for nearly fifty years afterward. They came down from Petersburg, seventy miles north, across the cornfields and tobacco plantations, and they came up from the river port of Halifax, North Carolina, twenty miles south. They traveled by carriage, cart, horseback, and foot across the western Piedmont of both states. They arrived from the east, from the Virginia tidewater, from Norfolk, and from North Carolina's coastal plains—all converging at the two rigid paths. It was as if they were preparing for some unique American ritual, perhaps a joyous religious celebration if their smiles were any indication.

From the looks of them, it would have been hard to say what an American was. Apparently it could have been anybody. Thousands of English Americans gathered at the paths, whole families

of them. They were farm wives, great planters, loose children, indentured servants, skilled and unskilled laborers from places like the tobacco and hemp warehouses in Halifax, and clerks from the stores and counting houses of Petersburg, the tobacco capital. Accounts by witnesses at other such events indicated that thousands of African Americans came as well, whole families of them, plantation workers and servants, craftsmen and sawyers, warehouse workers, professionals who produced naval supplies—turpentine, pitch, rosin—from North Carolina's towering longleaf pines and who made barrel staves, countless thousands of barrel staves, to be exported to the world.

Native American families ferried across the raging Roanoke to the gathering, doubtless by the hundreds, since probably two thousand lived in Halifax County. However, they did not live openly as Indians, displaying their customs, because the hated Tuscarora War settlement, half a century earlier, had required them to leave their Carolina home. Many had stayed nonetheless, hoping to pass for white, or for colored, or for anybody but expelled Indians. To the paths the Dutch and German Americans must have come from New York and Pennsylvania. The inevitable Yankee peddlers, who liked a crowd, came as well, although nobody did a better business than the tavern keeper hard by the paths. Among the mixed-up thousands were many Scots and Scots-Irish, the ones with the burrs on their tongues, who had been pouring into the area over the past few decades. A few had trekked deeper into Virginia and the Carolinas, even into Tennessee, where the opportunities had to be unlimited. But many of them had stopped here, at the beginning of the Piedmont, which stretched west to the Appalachians, where one day they, too, might be headed, though none thought about it today. Today just about everybody was at the race paths in Brunswick County, Virginia, providing a loud, unruly, inappropriate (especially inappropriate), and joyful (especially joyful) preview of a new people.¹

It was America's biggest sporting event yet. The excitement on the Roanoke had been building for three months, ever since

Colonel Henry Delony, a planter from Mecklenburg County, Virginia, west of the paths, met Willie (he pronounced it Wiley) Jones, a Halifax County landowner and politician. It was about 1773—the exact year remains uncertain. The colonel had challenged Jones to a “quarter race,” an American invention if there ever was one.

In the decades after the English settled Jamestown in 1607, the Eastern Seaboard was too wooded to lay out racecourses a mile or more long, like the ones back in England—so the Americans simply thought up a new sport. They hacked a pair of adjacent paths through the pines anywhere from ten to twenty-four feet wide but always a quarter of a mile long, so that performances in different races could be compared. Not just once but up to twenty times a day the Americans would fling a pair of horses down these rigid paths at full gallop, jockeys jostling each other and whips smacking as they passed two walls of roaring spectators. They called the new sport “quarter racing.” Of course, they had to take breaks between races, and between their foolish and dangerous wagers on the horses, so invariably the paths were laid out next to a tavern. Sideshows, especially cockfights and wrestling—the latter highlighted by eye-gouging and both, it was hoped, as bloody as possible—rounded out the amusements.

Lieutenant Thomas Anburey, a British prisoner in Virginia during the Revolution, wrote of going “to see a diversion peculiar to this country, termed quarter racing, which is a match between two horses to run a quarter of a mile. . . . This diversion is a great favorite with the middling and lower classes, and they have a breed of horses which perform it with astonishing velocity.”²

By the day of the Brunswick County contest, quarter racing had been America's biggest sport for almost a century, its first form of mass entertainment. But nowhere was it bigger than on the Virginia–North Carolina border, the “Race Horse Region,” as it would soon be dubbed, which encompassed six counties on the Roanoke that had a total population of about seventy thousand. Four of the counties were in North Carolina: Northampton, Granville, Bute (later renamed Warren), and Halifax. Two were in

southside Virginia: Mecklenburg and Brunswick. The Race Horse Region's black population, which was about twenty thousand, supplied most of the jockeys. Indeed, because racing was centered in the South, most of the thousands of athletes involved for two centuries, from the mid-1600s to the Civil War, were slaves. But they were also professionals, and they were openly recognized as such, for this was their highly specialized job. As will be seen, some would be paid in various ways, including cash.

Of course, there were many white riders as well, especially the "gentleman jockeys" who raced their own horses. Many were brilliant reinsmen, among them Thomas Jefferson, although Jefferson declared George Washington the best horseman of his age, even in that day of American cavaliers. No record has been located of either of them riding in a formal race, but Jefferson himself remembered wondering as a boy: ". . . which of these kinds of reputation should I prefer? That of a horse jockey? A foxhunter? An orator? Or the honest advocate of my country's rights?"³ Many gentlemen did choose horse jockey—it was a hobby that often became a calling—but as the stakes rose, they increasingly dismounted in favor of the professionals, black or white. The black riders prevailed in the South, where there was far more racing, while the whites dominated in the North. A relatively few white professionals worked in the South as well.⁴

Almost as remarkable as the success of the slave jockeys was the fact that they competed alongside whites as athletic equals. As early as 1677, a white named Thomas Cocke rode for one Richard Ligon against "a boy of Chamberlaine" in the Richmond, Virginia, area for three hundred pounds of tobacco. In racing, "boy" simply meant, and still means, "jockey," white or black, but Thomas Chamberlaine's jockey was almost certainly black because white riders were usually identified by name in the court records, which was where this contest wound up. It is not clear who got the three hundred pounds of tobacco at stake because the case was settled out of court. More often, both riders in those one-on-one quarter

aces were black—and on this day in Brunswick County, one of them was America's first truly great professional athlete.⁵

THE JOCKEY was Austin Curtis—a slave, except in his own mind. Curtis was helping Willie Jones turn his Roanoke stable into the winningest, most profitable racing power in the American Colonies. As a modern quarter-racing authority, poring over ancient records, would put it, "Willie Jones was the fortunate owner of Austin Curtis, the best quarter horse jockey, trainer, and groom in the country." As that statement indicates, those first American jockeys did much more than ride. They were often grooms as well, responsible for the feeding, stabling, and exercising of one or more horses. As was the case with Curtis, they sometimes rose to the exalted level of trainer, supervising the conditioning of the horses, directing other jockeys, devising racing strategies, assisting in the purchase of horses—in other words, co-managing the business with the stable owner. Up to and beyond the Civil War, countless African American trainers managed, or helped manage, racing stables, which were the country's earliest major sports organizations. As one early authority noted, "training in the South was for the most part in colored hands." A few of the white stable owners were themselves great trainers, however, and a number of them hired white professional trainers.⁶

Their relationship may have been imbalanced—to put it mildly—but Willie Jones, in his early thirties, and Austin Curtis, in his early teens, were the first famous manager-athlete combination in America. However, when Colonel Delony bumped into Jones that day in about 1773, he reminded him that their sport was fast going out of style. The pioneers were taking quarter racing deeper into the woods (Kentucky would get its first quarter-mile strip in 1780) as proper oval courses opened outside one American town after another. So the colonel suggested that they make this final fling for a stake so big that neither of them would ever forget it. For anybody but Jones and Curtis, that might have been intimidating, since

the Race Horse Region was prime gambling as well as prime tobacco country.⁷

The planters sometimes raced their horses for a fortune's worth of the Colonies' leading export—indeed, for entire crops of tobacco. On one occasion, the stake was eighty thousand pounds of the weed; on another, a hundred thousand pounds. By comparison, a poor tobacco farmer's whole crop might total four thousand. But Delony and Jones outdid them all. Their two black jockeys would ride for an astounding one hundred hogsheads, which were huge, seaworthy containers, or the equivalent of about 147,000 pounds of top-quality leaf, officially inspected at Petersburg. Such prizes were distributed as "tobacco notes," payable, in cases of huge quantities such as this, upon sale abroad.

In a bit of wonderful luck, a few of the high-stakes capers of Jones and Curtis have been preserved in letters by Jones's great-nephew, Allen Jones Davie. From these we learn that when Jones showed up in Brunswick County that morning, Curtis had a scary message for him. They had just been had.⁸

Austin Curtis was getting ready to ride Paoli, a gelding of "uncommon beauty" but "apparently light for a quarter horse, his muscles finely developed but not very heavy." He was a fine horse, but their rival, Colonel Delony, had pulled one of the oldest scams in sports: he had entered a borrowed nag, in this case an undefeated champion known as the Big Filly, "much heavier in all her parts; evidently possessing great strength"—which would be a considerable advantage since each horse was required to carry 160 pounds. Curtis and the other jockey, a Delony slave named Ned, probably each weighed under 100 pounds, so extra weight would have been added to make 160: clearly, the going would be a lot easier for the Big Filly. Furious, Jones accused the horse's owner, Colonel Jephtha Atherton, of breaking his earlier word that he wouldn't loan the filly to Delony. But it was too late: Curtis and Ned were at the poles on either side of the starting line, two black athletes at the center of the biggest showdown in eighteenth-century American sports. All thoughts of hemp and tobacco prices,

of the next day's work, of the long trip back home, of the revolutionary stirrings up north, of cockfights and eye-gouging, were put aside as thousands of Americans stretched both sides of the quarter mile, several deep.⁹

"The fame of the horses, the high reputation of the gentlemen who made the race, the great wager," wrote Jones's great-nephew, "all united to collect a large crowd. They lined the paths as a solid wall the whole distance." He said it rivaled "in popularity and interest" the great 1823 match on Long Island between American Eclipse and Henry, although that would be hard to imagine, as that latter contest drew up to sixty thousand witnesses. While this throng, which was riveted on Curtis and Ned, quite possibly included some of the great Virginians of the day, it was no mere aristocratic *divertissement*. It was an American crowd, almost democratic, if only for the day. As John Bernard, a visiting English actor, said, describing some minor races in Virginia, both sides of the quarter mile were "generally lined by a motley multitude of negroes, Dutchmen, Yankee peddlers, and backwoodsmen, among whom, with long whips in their hands to clear the ground, moved the proprietors and bettors." The latter would cry out, "Two cows and calves to one!" or "Three to one!" or "Four hogsheads of tobacco to one!" Anne Ritson, an Englishwoman married to a Norfolk merchant, began a little poem with "A race is a Virginian's pleasure" and ended it as follows:

From ev'ry quarter they can come,
With gentle, simple, rich and poor,
The race-ground soon is cover'd o'er;
Males, females, all, both black and white
Together at this sport unite.¹⁰

Finally, as Davie wrote, "all eyes were toward the start as the riders mounted." Curtis and Ned were in a profession that put a premium on intelligence, bravery, and—especially at the start—independence. Quarter races were sometimes launched with the crack of an official's pistol, the blare of a trumpet, the tap of a

drum, or a shout of "Go!" But the best of the riders did not start that way. Instead, they used a method called "turn and lock." Curtis and Ned were to turn their mounts in a tight circle and then take off if and when—and only if and when—the horses were "locked," or aligned with each other, not necessarily perfectly but with one of them at least up to the other's rear quarters. "Ready?" one would shout. If the second jockey answered, "Go!" they were off. But if the second rider did not like the way they were positioned and shouted "No!" they repeated the turn and tried again. This method put all of the responsibility on the jockey for a bad start, but it also gave him a chance to get off faster than his rival.¹¹

Ned was a lot more experienced than Curtis, who couldn't have been much more than fourteen. The older man had studied both animals and knew he could count on the filly being relaxed, the gelding growing nervous. So he stalled, refusing to start out of the first turn, and again out of the second. As Paoli's nerves began to tell, Curtis realized that he could not cut Ned the slightest slack—the contest was too close. He had to come up with something, anything, to get the race off. According to Davie, who knew Curtis well in later years, the jockey told Jones after the race: "We made two turns and could not start. I saw old Ned did not mean to start fair. The Big Filly was cool as a cucumber. Paoli beginning to fret. You know, sir, we had nothing to spare; so I drew one foot, to induce Ned to think I was off my guard."

Would young Curtis have said "induce"? Possibly. Spoken language has certainly gone downhill since then. In any event, Curtis took a foot out of the stirrup, and the ruse worked. The unhitched foot caught Ned's eye, prompting him to start the race as they came out of their third circling and burst past the starting poles, whips snapping. "Paoli was in fine motion," Curtis said. "Ned locked me at the poles. Away we came." Davie said they took off "with the velocity of lightning." But Curtis had pulled a dangerous stunt with that dangling foot. He needed all the control he could get as the animal flew through the human corridor—which would have screamed in approval, as the English actor John Bernard said,

"if the horses had happened to jostle and one of the riders been thrown off with a broken leg." This time, however, the crowd was not screaming at all. Maybe it was the size of the prize. Davie wrote, "All was silence; not a man drew his breath; nothing was heard but the clattering of the horses. They passed with the noise and speed of a tempest."

The jockeying for position, with the riders crossing paths, whipping each other, kneeling, and elbowing, was one of the great sights of the sport for bloodthirsty Americans. The wild ride of the quarter race inspired the so-called "American seat": the rider, in short stirrups, crouched over the horse's neck, both for better control and to free up the horse's action. By contrast, the traditional "English seat" was bolt upright, usually with long stirrups. John Randolph, a white gentleman jockey who made his home on the Roanoke and who was later a Virginia senator, became one of the first, but by no means the last, American jockeys to be compared with a monkey when he assumed the quarter-race crouch. Travelers' descriptions and paintings show that Native American horsemen out on the plains also used the natural crouch. British visitors, however, were shocked not only by the crouch but by how quickly the American races were over.

"It is the most ridiculous amusement imaginable," said Lieutenant Anburey, that British prisoner of war during the Revolution. "For if you happen to be looking another way, the race is terminated before you can turn your head." It did not take thirty seconds to fly the quarter mile, but to the crowd it felt much longer, for it was fierce, focused, unforgettable. Anybody who wonders today how such quick sprints could have drawn thousands from far beyond the Race Horse Region might also ask how the Kentucky Derby, which lasts all of two minutes, outdraws any couple of hours of football, baseball, or basketball. Nobody forgets the unmatched, fist-clenching, jaw-dropping intensity of those couple of minutes in Louisville.¹²

As Curtis and Ned charged madly past the huge walls of people, Jones watched from the finish line, doubtless distracted by

the thought of what 147,000 pounds of Petersburg-inspected tobacco might bring in England. When Austin's loose foot whizzed by, however, he must have panicked. Maybe he saw all that golden weed go up in smoke prematurely. "The crowd was still silent; so close had been the contest," Davie said. "All felt the decision was yet doubtful. The judges met, compared notes, and finally determined Paoli had won by 23 inches." In other words, by a head: the clever young Curtis had outwitted and outraced the elder Ned. As it turned out, no other horse, no other jockey, ever beat the Big Filly. The celebration was wild. John Bernard described similar scenes thus: "The event was always proclaimed by a tornado of applause from the winner's party," the Negroes, he said, "in particular halloing, jumping, and clapping their hands in a frenzy of delight." His English phlegm was apparently startled into remission by the discovery of people who knew how to have a good time. Jones rode over to ask his teenaged jockey how it chanced that his foot hung loose. Allen Davie quoted Curtis as explaining, with maybe a bit of a grin if not a broad smile, "No chance at all, sir. Both horses did their utmost, and the loss of the stirrup has won the race."

WHAT WAS Curtis's share? As a slave, was he paid anything? There is no record of it, but the experiences of later slave jockeys suggest that he may well have gotten something, in cash or perks. Certainly their sport, their profession, set those athletes free for a few moments. Other slaves, not only jockeys, sometimes did get cash payments for specific jobs, and still more found an escape in their work. As Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee Cary put it in *Slavery in North Carolina 1748-1775*, the slaves' work "framed their world, providing both pain and, ironically, a means by which they could mold a sense of self-worth." Though barely acknowledged by most historians, not only the labor but also the expertise of the African Americans was critical to the survival of the Southern colonies. In many cases it was labor that the whites were incapable of doing. In North Carolina, as Kay and Cary point out, it

included work as supervisors, artisans—some of them actually making the plows that others drove—house-builders, boatmen, teamsters, spinners, and weavers. They helped develop the lumber industry—making staves, hoops, and ends for barrels for the West India trade. At a sawmill operated by African Americans near Wilmington, they turned out three thousand planks a day and could double that. Perhaps applying experience from iron production in Africa, they handled the main jobs at an ironworks called Chatham Furnace. In North Carolina's Lower Cape Fear, as in South Carolina, they successfully imported their own rice-growing methods from Africa.¹³

For the black jockeys and trainers, the work meant an opportunity to seek their personal best, a moment of triumph. But there was also another side for those less fortunate than Austin Curtis, those who had perhaps grown too big to ride, or for one reason or another were out of a job. A man advertised as a runaway in the *South Carolina Gazette* in 1754 sounded very much like a jockey in uniform:

ON SUNDAY THE 7th INSTANT (JULY) ran away from the Subscriber in *Charles Town*, a very hairy, short, thick, chubby negro fellow, named Marro, between 30 and 40 years old, Angola born, formerly the property of *Jonah Collins*, deceased, and lately belonging to *John Bulzigar* of *Orangeburgh*. He had on, when he went away, a checqued shirt . . . breeches with strings in the knees, an old hat cut in the form of a jockey cap and an old home-spun blue and white waistcoat; was lately bou't at vendue [bought at sale]; and it's imagined that if he is not harboured in or about *Charles Town*, he is gone towards *Orangeburgh* or *Santee*. Whoever takes him up in any part of the province above 10 miles from *Charles Town* shall have FIFTEEN POUNDS reward; and in the said town or within 10 miles thereof TEN POUNDS.¹⁴

Perhaps he could still ride and somehow still find work. Even as black jockeys stayed on the job, many faced the constant threat of punishment. John Bernard, the touring British actor, also noted that if blacks on the winning side cheered too much at a disaster for the opponents, "the defeated owner, or some friend for him, always dealt out retribution with his whip, for the purpose, as he termed it, of maintaining order." Allen Jones Davie told of a white trainer who gave a groom free rein in directing a jockey, but when the horse lost "is said to have punished his groom severely." He did not say what the punishment was, but "severe" could be terrible in that society. A beating sent its message beyond the crack of the whip. So did nailing a person's ears to a post and/or hacking them off, a not uncommon punishment for North Carolina slaves convicted of relatively minor crimes. Kay and Cary said some of the slaveowners offered "greater rewards for the return of their runaway slave's head than for the slave alive." The authors noted that a hundred slaves were executed in North Carolina for various crimes in a twenty-four-year period, from 1748 to 1772. They reported that the mode of death is known for fifty-six of them, starting with an unusual use of the gibbet (a post with an extended arm from which the body of someone already executed is hung as a warning): "One was chained alive in a gibbet to die slowly and horribly. Six were burned, two were castrated and then hanged, five were hanged and decapitated with their heads displayed on poles, one was hanged and burned, twenty-four were hanged, three died or were killed in jail, one committed suicide in jail, two died as a result of castration, seven slaves, most having been outlawed, were shot or beaten to death when captured, and five outlawed runaways drowned themselves to avoid capture and sadistic treatment."¹⁵

FOR THE captive African Americans, the pressures were often unbearable. But to resist them and to find an escape through work, religion, traditions from home, or love, was in and of itself a heroic act. Whatever pressures he may have known, Austin Curtis overcame them and in a real sense defeated slavery, dominating a sport

that provided endless challenges and entertainment. Those early American quarter races were always "matches," as contests between only two horses were called. They were simply a case of one man matching his speedster against another's. But the Willie Jones-Austin Curtis stable at Halifax was so strong that few would take them on or bet against them, which meant that Jones and Curtis kept having to dream up scams, not only to lure an opponent but to build up the odds. "For a quarter racer as famous and successful as Willie Jones," as one authority put it, "the problem was not how to win, but how to get his bets down at favorable odds."¹⁶

Consider what happened around 1770. A stable owner named Sharrard had convinced the 6,500-odd residents—about 5,200 whites and 1,300 blacks—in backwoods Dobbs County, North Carolina, south of the Race Horse Region, that his blue-gray quarter horse, Blue Boar, was plain unbeatable. When he heard of a Scot named Henry coming in, setting up a general store, and rolling his r's forever about his fast little saddle pony, he probably thought nothing of it. Everything was changing in North Carolina, general stores were popping up all over, Highland Scots and Scots-Irish were rushing in, and what would this one know about Blue Boar? So the magnificent Sharrard rode in on his champion to welcome young Henry to America—and make him an offer. He'd load the Boar with 160 pounds against the pony, who would have no weight requirement at all, zero: "160 pounds to a feather," as they put it. Deal.¹⁷

With everybody and his brother screaming for a piece of the Boar, the side bets quickly outgrew the cash prize of a hundred British pounds. Dobbs County residents bet more than their money on the Blue Boar nag. They bet horses and oxen. They even bet some of their slaves. Seeing and raising their bets, naïve Henry gambled the entire contents of his store and had it packed up—all the easier, the Sharrard crowd figured, for them to haul it away. At last, the race day came, and the county got the shock of its life: the Scot's little mammal somehow sailed home in front, defeating the legendary Blue Boar.

As the Piedmont dust settled, the Dobbs folks started to figure out that they'd been taken. But by that time Henry and his backers had already piled their winnings onto wagons—there's no indication of how many slaves were actually turned over—and were hurrying back north whence they came. Which turned out to be, of all places, Halifax Town. Henry's angels were none other than Willie Jones and company, who had arranged for the general store to be set up in the first place but who didn't appear until the night before the contest, bringing the empty wagons they'd be needing. As historian Mackay-Smith noted, Jones himself had bred Blue Boar, so he "knew exactly what he was racing against." Most important, the Scot's saddle horse, which stood just 13 hands, $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches tall (a hand is four inches, so this animal was a mere 4 feet, $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches tall) and weighed only 890 pounds, turned out to be one of Jones's undefeated chargers. With a perfect name: Trick'em.

The identity of Trick'em's rider is lost. It was not Jones's top jockey, since his name would have given the game away, though Austin Curtis was about to ride again. We do know something about the athlete who embarrassed Dobbs County, however, because Allen Davie, Jones's great-nephew, mentions him, though not by name, in one of his letters: "Of all those who attended that race from Halifax, none are now living, but the rider, now an old man; he was a slave of Gen. A. Jones, and was so small as to weigh about 50 lbs., at the time." General Allen Jones was Willie's brother and the letter-writer's grandfather, so we know where that old jockey spent his life—nine miles from Halifax, on the other side of the Roanoke River—and one day we might be able to trace more of his story, too. Strange to say, his feathery weight was no record. Eleven- and twelve-year-old riders were not uncommon. A diarist of the day was amazed to hear of one who weighed only forty-seven pounds and commented, "Strange that so little substance in a human Creature can have strength & skill sufficient to manage a Horse in a Match of Importance."¹⁸

Like Trick'em's rider, most jockeys went unidentified in contemporary newspapers and records. When it came to naming

contestants, the order of priority was: owner, as in "Mr. Jones's gray mare"; then horse, if it had a name. The horse definitely would get a name if it was extremely good, its performances being carefully exaggerated in records or advertisements for its sale or breeding services. As for the jockeys, black or white, most accounts made no reference to them whatsoever, almost as if the horses ran bareback. Naturally, those advertising a horse for sale were not about to dilute his accomplishments by citing human help. On the extremely rare occasions when they did refer to a rider, the white jockeys might be identified by name, the black jockeys almost never. Of course, the fact that most of the latter were slaves didn't help their chances for recognition, or as the racing historian John Hervey succinctly put it: "In the South, being slave lads, they were ignored." Which makes the saga of Austin Curtis, preserved by Allen Jones Davie, all the more remarkable.

Curtis was back in the saddle and Jones was up to his old tricks on a May Thursday in the 1770s. Again they faced Colonel Jephtha Atherton, whose Big Filly had lost to Austin's loose foot. Again the setting was Brunswick County, at a formal racing strip called Tucker's Paths, just north of the border. Again it was big versus little. Atherton's hefty Mud Colt would lug 165 pounds against 130 for any opponent under 14 hands, 8 inches (5 feet, 4 inches). Smelling the prize of five hundred British pounds, as well as possible side action, Jones proved wily indeed. He appeared with a horse three-quarters of an inch too tall, then made a show of telling Curtis to trim the hooves. Still too tall. Angry for all to see, Jones had his jockey-groom trim some more, until the hooves started bleeding and the Atherton forces heaped more money on their Mud Colt. Plainly desperate, Jones inquired of Curtis if the little animal pulling their baggage cart "was not a horse of tolerable speed." The latter allowed as how he was better than one with no feet, so the poor cart beast was saddled and approved by the judges, and yet more money was piled on the Mud Colt.¹⁹

Again the race start was "turn and lock." Because each pilot knew he could win the race (Curtis had his reasons), they actually

locked out of the first turn—and the Roanoke crowd must have been dumbfounded to see the cart puller metamorphose into a thing of beauty, “a horse of great power and fine action,” said Davie. In the fabled hands of Austin Curtis, he clobbered the Mud Colt by no less than twenty-seven feet. He had metamorphosed, all right, into Trick’em. “You will observe,” wrote Jones’s great-nephew, “that it was intended from the beginning to run Trick’em, and the first horse was measured, his hoofs pared, only to induce betting.”

It would not have been safe for Curtis, as a slave, to participate in Jones’s scams. Black jockeys were hardly in a position to cheat. Quite the contrary. In 1769, only a few years previously, a race in Charleston, South Carolina, was declared suspect in part precisely because the riders were not black. First it was disclosed that the white jockey-groom Robert Gay had taken a bribe to lose a race and had even fingered the briber as a minor judge, one of His Majesty’s justices of the peace for Berkeley County. The *South Carolina Gazette* reported, “After receiving the usual and proper punishment of the horse-whip, his worship was carried into a room by the gentlemen of the turf to protect him from the mob, who would otherwise have torn him to pieces.” His worship confessed to trying to bribe Gay in an earlier event, prompting the *Gazette* to add, in an unusual compliment to the black jockeys: “In short there is great reason to suspect that *the Race has not been to the swift* since white grooms have rode our horses.”²⁰

CURTIS WAS far more than a jockey. He became Willie Jones’s trainer, and therefore one of the most important trainers in the country. The job did not cease with the beginnings of the American Revolution in 1775; it just became more difficult, and in a sense more important, because Curtis’s unwritten job description was to lead Jones’s thoroughbred operation through whatever troubles lay ahead. Something of a Trick’em himself, Jones stunned everybody with his own metamorphosis on the eve of the Revolution, switching from playboy Tory and British sympathizer to radical, populist Whig. He became president of the North

Carolina Committee of Safety, which made him unofficial governor, one of the state’s founding fathers.

But he was not ready to give up his lucrative racing activities. In October of 1778, as the rebels debated whether the British army might make a move into South Carolina, Willie Jones was dispatching Curtis north into Virginia to prepare for a horse race. Like many other leaders of America’s enormously popular sport, Jones managed to avoid rules and regulations about what slaves could and could not do, including crossing state lines. A Williamsburg letter-writer told a friend that Austin’s job was to repair a worn-out thoroughbred named Sterne for an important race. “Mr. Willie Jones sent his man Austin to keep Sterne, who was with him about a month before the day [of the race, October 27], who mended him greatly, but the rains was much against us.” The correspondent did not say how the race turned out, but the fact that Jones dispatched Curtis on his own into Virginia, and that the trainer mended the horse “greatly,” reveals the jockey-trainer’s value as an employee.²¹

The British army did invade South Carolina in early 1780. There the goals of the murderous British cavalry raider Lieutenant-Colonel Banastre Tarleton included plundering the colony’s many valuable thoroughbreds, most of them in the hands of African American grooms and trainers. Throughout the war a slave trainer named Tommy managed colonist David Ravenel’s extensive breeding establishment, which included a legendary racer named Lucy. It was a dangerous job, especially when the British troops camped right on Ravenel’s plantation after the Battle of Eutaw Springs. British raiders stole thirteen thoroughbred mares, five fillies, and three colts from John Huger’s plantation near Charleston, but another slave manager named Mingo hid most of the stock and other valuables from the British. After the war, Huger freed Mingo and his wife for their loyalty, and the couple stayed on as employees.

In the autumn of 1780 Tarleton, in need of more horses for his troops, repeatedly tried to horsenap the imported English racer and sire Flimnap from another plantation near Charleston, the seat

of an American officer, Major Isaac Harleston. The famous Flimnap was easy to spot—he was a long, strong bay (reddish brown in color) with a black mane, black legs, and black tail—but each time Tarleton's troops came looking, the African American grooms hid Flimnap in the swamps along Goose Creek. One morning, a British party captured a groom and offered him a large reward to reveal the steed's hiding place. The groom flat-out refused. Told it would cost him his life, he still kept silent and was promptly strung up on a tree in front of the manor house and left to die. After the British left, the servants ran out of the house, cut down the groom, and revived him. Then a groom slipped Flimnap into North Carolina—again a slave crossing state lines—where the champion racer was turned over to Austin Curtis for safekeeping.²²

The following spring the war came to Curtis's neighborhood. As the British army of Lord Cornwallis moved north on its fateful advance toward Yorktown, Virginia, Tarleton's light force led the way into hostile Halifax. They charged and defeated some detached American units and then withdrew to a ravine a half mile from town to await Cornwallis, who was nearly fifty miles south-east of Tarleton. As he collected and secured a number of boats on the Roanoke below Halifax, Tarleton would write that he was "greatly assisted by some refugees and Negroes." Willie Jones's whereabouts just then would remain a mystery, not only to the British but to history; however, as a newly commissioned lieutenant colonel, whose militia unit had been watching Cornwallis, Jones was likely not far off.²³

No record has been found of Austin Curtis's whereabouts either, but there is evidence that his job—protecting Jones's valuable thoroughbreds—had assumed military significance. Tarleton said his losses in taking Halifax "amounted only to three men wounded and a few horses killed and wounded," but his need for horses was greater than that indicated. He sent back to Cornwallis for help from some of the lord's mounted guards, "as it was rather hazardous for a corps of light dragoons, without carbines, and sixty infantry, to remain on the same ground many days and nights, near

fifty miles from the army, in a populous and hostile country." His request was rejected. He was told "that the light company of the guards could not proceed for want of horses."

So Curtis's safeguarding of Jones's very serviceable horses may indeed have denied the British a useful asset. They could have assisted Cornwallis in his advance, or helped Tarleton defend his position, allowing him more time for his assigned mission to collect intelligence on the state of the British forces to the north on the James River in Virginia. To contribute to the thick volume of "might-have-beens" in military history, Tarleton might have even learned enough to convince Cornwallis to turn back. Later, with the wonderful advantage of hindsight, Tarleton claimed that at the time he "deemed it probable that Lord Cornwallis would forego the expedition of James River and return . . . to the frontier of South Carolina," thus avoiding his world-shaking defeat at Yorktown in 1781.

Military speculation aside, one can only imagine Tarleton's reaction had he known that the recent great object of his desire, the famous English import Flimnap, was again within his grasp. As it was, Cornwallis, short of horses, arrived at Halifax himself and set up headquarters at "Jones' house," most likely Willie's—ironically the most celebrated horse haven in the area. The apparent ignorance of Cornwallis and Tarleton in regard to the locally famous Jones-Curtis stables did not speak well for the talents of the lord's advance man. At Halifax, Cornwallis prepared for his advance into Virginia by ordering Tarleton and his cavalry to reconnoiter the Roanoke countryside. They had not gone four miles when "his lordship, attended by six dragoons of his guard," furiously overtook them. It turned out Cornwallis had learned that two of Tarleton's troops had committed rape and robbery the night before. Determined to calm the population, and to show his army's discipline, Cornwallis instructed Tarleton to dismount his entire cavalry, "for the inspection of the inhabitants," as Tarleton put it, "and to facilitate the discovery of the villains who had committed atrocious outrages the preceding evening."

It was an extraordinary scene: British soldiers brought down from their high horses by their own commander and humiliated in front of the American townspeople. "A sergeant and one dragoon were pointed out, and accused of rape and robbery. They were conducted to Halifax, where they were condemned to death by martial law." From wherever he was, Austin Curtis was close to history. In a letter dated "Jones' plantation, May 15th 1781, five P.M.," on the eve of his fatal trip toward Virginia, Cornwallis sent an urgent message to Tarleton. "I would have you proceed tomorrow to the Nottoway and remain near Simcoe's infantry. [Benedict] Arnold is ordered to meet me on the Nottoway. [Anthony] Wayne's having joined Lafayette makes me rather uneasy for Arnold until we join. If you should hear of any movement of the enemy in force to disturb Arnold's march, you will give him every assistance in your power."²⁴

When he reached Virginia, Cornwallis left no doubt as to the danger that Willie Jones, Austin Curtis, and their racing stable had just escaped. On the James River, Cornwallis established his headquarters in a country seat of another founding father, the outgoing governor, Thomas Jefferson, who was not there. Tarleton's advance troops had just chased him out of Monticello, Jefferson leaping on his horse and taking off through the woods toward Carter's Mountain. When Cornwallis got to Elkhill, Jefferson's plantation on the James, he practiced a policy of "total extermination," as Jefferson would put it. He destroyed all the crops, burned the barns, used the livestock ("as was to be expected") to feed his army, "and carried off all the horses capable of service: of those too young for service he cut the throats."

He carried off also about 30 slaves. Had this been to give them freedom he would have done right, but it was to consign them to inevitable death from the small pox and putrid fever then raging in his camp. This I knew afterwards to have been the fate of 27 of them. I had never had any news of the remaining three . . .

From an estimate I made at that time I supposed the state of Virginia lost under Ld. Cornwallis's hands that year about 30,000 slaves, and that of these about 27,000 died of the small pox and camp fever, and the rest were partly sent to the West Indies and exchanged for rum, sugar, coffee and fruits, and partly sent to New York, from whence they went at the peace either to Nova Scotia, or to England. From this last place I believe they have lately been sent to Africa. History will never relate the horrors committed by the British army in the *Southern* states of America.²⁵

AFTER THE Revolution, Curtis worked in the reflected glow of Willie Jones, who was both the hero of Halifax—North Carolina's social, commercial, and political capital—and the possessor of vast wealth accumulated through inheritance, land deals, racing, and gambling, with not a little help, of course, from Curtis himself. Jones's home, which he named the Groves, rose above Quankey Creek ("quankey" being a Native American term for red-tinted) on the edge of town. Sitting in a mossy-floored park of white oaks and sycamores, the house was surrounded by shrubbery, crepe myrtle, and mock oranges, but what made it remarkable was the celebrated window—reputedly America's first bow window, an expensive semicircular production. It gave him a view across the backyard toward his private "race ground," where he could watch the great former jockey Austin Curtis exercising his thoroughbreds.²⁶

At the same time Curtis had his own household to care for. The records are silent on most of his personal life, such as the source of his family name, Curtis, or exactly where he lived. But his will would mention his wife, Nancy, and nine children, five boys and four girls. His namesake, Austin, probably the eldest, apparently had arrived in that dizzying year of 1776. According to the first federal census, in 1790, Jones had a very large number of slaves, 120, and he had one more whenever Austin and Nancy Curtis had a child—until one momentous day in 1791. On December 5, Jones

took pen in hand and created a document that until now has lain buried in the North Carolina State Archives. "The petition of Willie Jones" to "the Honorable General Assembly of North Carolina" humbly stated "that a mulattoe slave of his, named Austin Curtis, by his attachment to his Country during the War, by his Fidelity to his Master, the said Willie Jones, and by his Honesty and good Behavior on all Occasions, has demonstrated that he deserves to be free.—

"The said Willie Jones therefore prays the General Assembly pass a Law to liberate the said Austin Curtis."

The petition was made into an Assembly bill, which stated "that the said Austin Curtis shall be, and he is hereby declared to be, free, by and under the Name of Austin Curtis Jones. And the said Austin Curtis, under the Name of Austin Curtis Jones, shall, from henceforward, be subject to, and enjoy the protection of the Laws, and the Benefits of the Constitution of the State of North Carolina, in the same manner as if he had been born a free man.— Any Law to the contrary notwithstanding."²⁷

The bill was passed by both houses, after having been referred in the state Senate to the new "Committee appointed to draw a Bill for the emancipation of Slaves." Curtis's was one in a spate of individual emancipations for loyal slaves in the midst of the heady atmosphere of Revolutionary victory. It is unfortunate that Jones did not provide specifics on Curtis's "attachment to his Country during the War." His newly discovered petition, however, does tell us that Curtis was a mulatto, and the bill itself gave him the name Jones. He would sometimes use that name, but years later his family would revert to the name Curtis.

As a result of his emancipation, Austin Curtis Jones, who already had begun training thoroughbreds for the celebrated Willie Jones, moved into his own. He became an important transitional figure in the history of sports as he shifted easily into the future of horse racing: from quarter racing to training thoroughbreds for full-scale races, with as many as twenty or more entrants, on full-size ovals.

Horse racing was America's first modern sport, its first national pastime. Racing on full-size tracks actually began extremely early in this country, just one year after the 1664 Dutch surrender of New Amsterdam. The English celebrated it by building a two-mile oval at Hempstead Plains in Nassau County on Long Island and baptizing it New Market, after the well-loved English racing center. It was some six decades before other ovals began to appear, but by the 1770s the big racecourses were a feature of many towns, from New York City to Charleston. Manhattan had three. Philadelphia boasted a famous two-mile course, except that it was short of two miles.

"Timothy Matlack, J. Lukens, Palmer, and myself measured the new race track very exact," the Philadelphia German Jacob Hiltzheimer told his diary on September 4, 1767, "and find it lacks 144 yards of being two miles." This was also one of the earliest American uses of the term "racetrack" instead of the more common "racecourse" (other early uses of "track" suggest it may have started in Philadelphia). Out on Long Island, they were still trying to be as English as possible, and this included a widespread concern with proper uniforms, which reflected the early professionalism of the sport. On a visit to Hempstead Plains, Hiltzheimer noted, doubtless with German approval, "The rider of Regulus losing his cap, his second heat was given to Steady." Announcements for races at Annapolis and Upper Marlboro, Maryland, specified, "Each Jockey to appear with a neat waistcoat and half-boots." While the gentleman jockeys could get themselves up in the best-looking buckskin that the plantation tailor could turn out, and black jockeys were often left with the most minimal threads, the frequent written dress codes for the athletes did not discriminate, and they helped equalize the competition.²⁸

The Pennsylvania Dutchman did not say whether the capless jockey was white or black, but most of the jockeys on the new northern courses were white, among them Irishman John Leary, who won the New York Subscription Plate on Smoaker in 1753. Leary has been called America's first professional jockey, but we

now see that this ignores the countless earlier black professionals. While Leary may have been good, to judge from the wispy records, he was still not good enough to erase the claim made here for Austin Curtis as America's first truly great professional athlete.

As with the quarter-racing paths, far more of the big ovals were built in the South. The white gentleman jockeys were still prominent there. British actor John Bernard noted that he saw horses of all ages at the Williamsburg Races one day in 1799, and he added, "The riders were chiefly their owners." But hundreds of slave athletes were required to provide most of the riding talent as countless courses sprang up all over the South. Irish traveler Isaac Weld observed of the races at Petersburg, Virginia, in the late 1790s: "The horses are commonly rode by negro boys, some of whom are really good jockies." One modern Virginia study said that "in advertisements for runaway servants, Negroes are several times mentioned as skillful and experienced jockeys."²⁹

Again their names were rarely recorded, so questions abound in the search for the individuals who did so much to create our first major sport. Consider, for example, George Washington's encounters with the black jockeys. The only rider mentioned in his writings is not a professional thoroughbred jockey but one Robert Sandford, to whom he paid 12 shillings "for pacing my horse" in a race at Accotink, a few miles south of Mount Vernon, on September 29, 1768. We do not know who Sandford was, except that he had a wife named Kerrenhappuck and kept the Eagle Tavern at Newgate. The horse was most likely a foxhunter and saddle horse. Other questions remain.³⁰

Who was in the saddle on Thursday, May 28, and Friday, May 29, 1761, for two three-mile races at Alexandria in Virginia? Among the managers and judges of the events was Washington himself, who was then twenty-nine years old, back from the French and Indian War, and farming at nearby Mount Vernon. Could Washington have blamed a black rider for the four-pound bet he lost at the Williamsburg Races in 1759? Which of the professionals were up when he helped finance the Williamsburg

TO BE RUN FOR,
On Thursday the 28th Day of May, on the usual
Race Ground at ALEXANDRIA,
A PURSE of FIFTY POUNDS, Three
Times round the Ground (being near three
Miles) the best in Three Heats, by any Horse,
Mare, or Gelding, 14 Hands to carry 10 Stone,
below that Measure, Weight for Inches.

And, on the Day following, will be Run for,
on the same Ground and Distance, A PURSE of
TWENTY-FIVE POUNDS, by Four Year old
Colts, 14 Hands to carry 9 Stone, below that
Measure, Weight for Inches

The Horses to be Entered on the Monday be-
fore the Race with the Managers, Mr. George
Washington, Mr. John Carlyle, and Mr. Charles
Digges: Each Horse to pay Fifty Shillings Entrance
on the First Day, and Twenty-five Shillings the
Second Day; and those who do not enter their
Horses on the Monday aforesaid, to pay double
Entrance.

Three Horses to Start or no Race.

All Differences that may arise, will be decided
by the Managers.

*An advertisement in the Virginia Gazette in May 1761
announces two races put on by 29-year-old George Washington
and friends at Alexandria, Virginia. Courtesy of author.*

Jockey Club purses through the 1760s? Which riders entertained him at Annapolis, Maryland, on several occasions in the early 1770s, or at Fredericksburg in Virginia?

Who was aboard during the Alexandria season when two of the entries were "a fine young horse called the *Roan Colt*," the property of Thomas Jefferson, and Magnolio, owned by Washington, who was just back from the Revolutionary War, farming again at Mount Vernon, and soon to be president? A number of historians have made this Alexandria race meeting more wonderful than it was, reporting that the Jefferson and Washington chargers competed

against each other, with Jefferson winning. They based their accounts on a misreading of a memoir by Thomas Peter, who married a daughter of Washington's stepson, John Custis. Peter saw Washington serve as a judge on the day that Magnolio lost. He thought that Jefferson's colt came home a winner but in a different event and on a different day.

Who was Altamont, unknown to researchers at Mount Vernon today but said to have been a former slave of Washington's and the constant navigator of a champion named Grey Medley? Foaled in 1791, this colt ran at Tappahannock in Virginia before he was taken west. It was an Irish-born surgeon, Dr. Redmond Dillon Barry, who brought to Tennessee both Grey Medley, perhaps its first important sire, and something still more important, the delicious Irish blade celebrated ever since as bluegrass.

The primary places of employment for the black riders were the countless ovals that had sprung up all over Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas. These courses were built and run by the local "jockey clubs," which were the first organizations of owners in American sports, forerunners to the modern "leagues." They were not clubs of professional jockeys, as the name might suggest, but racing associations founded by "gentleman jockeys" and others for the purpose of operating their own courses. From the beginning, the founders often declared the clubs were established "for the improvement of the breed," a notion snickered at ever since, but as Curtis could have explained, the breed would not survive without racing. The year 1730 brought the first English "blood," or "bred," horse to the Colonies. This arrival of the stallion Bulle Rock in Virginia was the beginning of increased selectivity by Colonial breeders. In 1791, publication of the *English General Stud Book*, listing the lineage of thoroughbreds, created a still more selective breed in America. So when the North Carolina planter Marmaduke Johnson decided to get into racing in the 1790s, he was a lot fussier than he might have been before.

Johnson commissioned the newly freed trainer and businessman Austin Curtis to buy him a filly "that after racing would make

a good brood mare," a producer of champions. Curtis responded by making racing history again. Whereas quarter horses were bred for bursts of speed, thoroughbreds had to have "bottom," the endurance to go incredible distances—up to five "heats," or rounds, of as many as four miles each, or a total of twenty miles with only a half-hour rest between heats. This would be unthinkable today, when thoroughbreds rarely compete as far as two miles. Locally legendary for his courtesy, Curtis doubtless displayed his unshakable good manners when he consulted a breeder in Greensville County, Virginia. From him, for fifty Virginia pounds, he purchased a small gray, "handsome and finely formed," sired by the imported Medley and a half-sister to Grey Medley. Known far and wide as the Medley Mare, Curtis's purchase scored many victories—the number is not known—and lost only once, on a technicality. Far more important, said the racing historian John Hervey, "she proved the value of Curtis' judgment by becoming the premier matron of her time," the mother of "the greatest chain of race mares of which we have knowledge." Their names were Reality, Bonnets o' Blue, and Fashion. Or as another authority put it, she was "a veritable 'blue hen,'" foaling a seemingly endless line of champions, many of them fillies.³¹

By the mid-1790s, Willie Jones's racecourse at Halifax had turned into a major public venue for thoroughbred racing, and the renown of its leading trainer reached far beyond the Race Horse Region—and beyond his time. In 1832, Judge William Williams, secretary of the Nashville Jockey Club, would compare Curtis with two white horse breeders of that earlier era, Harry Hunter and Turner Bynum, the latter having bred the Big Filly, who was beaten by a dangling foot. Along with Hunter and Bynum, the judge wrote, with the usual bow to the racism of the day, "flourished Austin Curtis, a man of color indeed but one of judgment, skill and courteous manners. He knew how 'to get the length into them,' or to bring out their game. Under his auspices the fame of Collector grew, and the powers of Snap Dragon were developed." Collector and Snap Dragon were two great runners of the day.

The Jones-Curtis stable was also where the imported Flimnap, who had been rescued by his black groom during the Revolution, sired both Betsy Baker, a great racing filly, and Young Flimnap, whose blood survives in many modern pedigrees.³²

Willie Jones died at the age of sixty, in 1801. By then Curtis had been a free man for ten years, but his emancipation had not meant emancipation for his children born under slavery. His son William, for example, was still a slave, and now he was transferred to another owner. Jones's will declared, "I give Austin C. Jones's son Billey to my son Willie but Austin is to have the use of him until my son Willie comes of age." Willie William Jones would become twenty-one four years after his father's death. Never married, he was quite close to Curtis, which perhaps was what made it possible for Curtis to acquire his own son later on. We know that Curtis did just that because his own testament notes that he gave his own son William his freedom.³³

Austin Curtis's assets expanded considerably after the death of his former "master" and racing partner. Jones bequeathed him two hundred dollars and the use of a nearby house and plantation, with permission to clear fifty acres for cultivation until Jones's five-year-old son Robert Allen came of age, at which time the property would transfer to Robert, but only if he chose to live on it. Two years later, Curtis acquired 165 more acres along Quankey Creek for six hundred dollars, and five years after that, in 1808, another 145 acres for three hundred dollars. He also purchased an unknown amount of land from his letter-writing friend Allen Jones Davie.³⁴

Once, when Davie had to vouch for the Medley Mare's pedigree, he said he could do so in part because "the blood was so stated by Austin Curtis (who purchased the mare for Mr. Johnson;) and who, though a man of color, was one on whom all who knew him relied." Although he tacked on that racial qualification ("though a man of color"), typical for whites of that time, Davie added proudly, "Austin was a *freed* man of my family." There was no qualification at all in an unusual item in the Raleigh, North Carolina, *Minerva*, on January 5, 1809. It was unusual because

there were not many people, certainly not many black people, whose deaths made the newspaper in the state capital. This notice, with no cause of death given, followed briefer obituaries for a Wilmington merchant and a member of the North Carolina Assembly.³⁵

DIED,

On the 10th ult., at Halifax (n.c.) AUSTIN JONES, a colored man, aged about 50 years—well known for many years past, as keeper of race horses; in the management of which useful animals, he particularly excelled. —His character was unblemished; his disposition mild and obliging—his deportment uniformly correct and complaisant—he possessed the esteem of *many*—the respect and confidence of all who knew him.