

The “Spirit of Saratoga” must not be slavery

Response to the repulsive wall of “lawn jockeys” that both glorify slavery and erase the history of Black jockeys, currently installed at the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame.

This is not an act of vandalism. It is a work of public art and an act of applied art criticism.

This work of protest art is in solidarity with the Art Action movement and the belief that art is essential to democracy

We Reject the whitewashing of Saratoga’s history.

We Reject the whitewashing of our national history.

This nation was founded on slavery. So was the modern sport of Thoroughbred racing.

You insult us and degrade the godfathers of the sport by perpetuating, profiting from and celebrating the flagrant symbol of servitude and slavery that is now called the “lawn jockey.”

Just like the confederate flag, the “lawn jockey” is a celebrated relic of the antebellum era.

The evolution of the hitching post (later renamed “lawn jockey”) follows the historical national trend of racist imagery and perpetuated stereotypes about Black Americans. This iconography is not unique, and the evidence can be found in everything from postcards, napkin holders, toothpaste, key racks, cigarette lighters, tobacco jars, syrup pitchers and doorstops, to name a fraction of the products designed to maintain the ideology of slavery.

The original Jockeys were born into slavery or were the sons of slaves. From its inception in the early 19th century, African-American jockeys ruled the sport of organized Thoroughbred racing for almost a century. Isaac Murphy, the greatest American jockey of all time, was the son of a former slave. As a result of White supremacy, violence and institutional racism, however, they were pushed out of the sport and erased from history. As Arthur Ashe put it, “The sport of horse racing is the only instance where the participation of Blacks stopped almost completely while the sport itself continued—a sad commentary on American life.”

The display of “lawn jockeys” and the myths surrounding them form a jarring example of this historical revision and erasure. The history is no mystery. The original hitching post design was that of a SLAVE boy. This fact is evident by the base he stood on - a bail of cotton, and his name documented as “Darky.” It was produced decades—possibly a century—before emancipation. His image was that of a happy child, content with his role of servitude. But his outstretched arm, to which the ornament’s owner hitched their horses, will never let you forget he is indeed a slave. In a painful irony, as Blacks were being run out of the sport of racing, manufacturers started painting the Jockeys White.

By failing to acknowledge this history, we leave the door open for myths and legends surrounding the origin and intention of the lawn jockey to gain hold. In Saratoga especially, this history has been embellished, romanticized and reproduced. The most popular myth, that of George Washington's heroic servant (slave) who in 1776 guided soldiers by lantern light across the Delaware River, was debunked by a Mount Vernon librarian in 1987. The other popular legend of the hitching post being used as a “marker” for the Underground Railroad is not only unverified but has absolutely no bearing on the intent to produce these commodities. Many people will quickly evoke these tales with the assuredness of a scholar, but don’t be mistaken: there is no historical record of either the myth of Jocko Graves or the Underground Railroad legend.

Why are Lawn Jockey lovers so quick to recall these erroneous fables when confronted by the obvious symbolism of the hitching post? Does it really honor the original Black Jockeys to display a hitching post in their likeness, and later paint it white? Can’t we find a sincere way to “honor” the heroes of our first national sport, if this is indeed the intention behind the lawn jockey? Why, in one city block, are there over 30 statues whose origins promote slavery, but in the entire City of Saratoga not one monument honoring a single one of our many local or national Abolitionist heroes?

Just like owning slaves was specific to those of a certain class, owning a lawn jockey became a symbol of economic success. This is why they are found all over the country, particularly in suburbs: displaying a lawn jockey is part of the racial maintenance of our class structure. It reinforces the ideology of slavery—of Blacks as different and inferior, and Whites as stately and superior—even as it evolves into the emancipated era. As historian Barbara Fields has noted, however, “Ideologies do not have lives of their own. Nor can they be handed down or inherited...an ideology must be constantly created and verified in social life; if it is not it dies.” The persistence and reformation of the lawn jockey over time helps maintain the social reality of racial and economic inequality that keeps this morbid ideology alive. These stereotypes stifle social change, and help maintain existing systems of inequality.

We understand that many people do not know this history, but it is unacceptable for the National Racing Museum and Hall of Fame—whose motto is “to preserve and promote the history of Thoroughbred racing in America and honor the sport’s most accomplished participants”—to either blatantly ignore or claim ignorance on the subject.

Just like the confederate flag, the “lawn jockey” is a celebrated relic of the antebellum era. And just like the “lawn jockey,” that flag’s defenders claim that it is a symbol of history and heritage, not an emblem of racism and American Apartheid. Africana and American Studies scholar Matthew Guterl has commented on the confederate flag, “When someone says it’s about history, well, that particular history is inseparable from hate, because it is about hate. It’s about racism, and it’s about slavery.” Those words could just as well apply to the “lawn jockey,” a symbol of slavery and a monument to Black servitude. Its manufacturers and retailers profit off that antebellum nostalgia, and those who display it help keep the ideology of supremacy alive. Like the confederate flag, these statues should only be used in a proper context: education about the history of racism and the means by which it has been perpetuated.

You cannot ignore that arm, the arm of servitude, the arm of a slave. The lawn jockey is not a way of honoring Black jockeys or White jockeys. Its function as a hitching post is meant to reinforce the notion of Black servitude, even if the Jockeys are now mostly White. This is why it can’t be dignified. Whether the childlike form of the original “Darky” rendition, the hideous creature-like mold of the caricature “Groomsman” or the cavalier “jockey” Black or White, make no mistake: this is the ideology of slavery, of racism living and thriving in 2018.

Sincerely,

Jehu Sal Deyaun

