

*One of the greatest athletes  
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Isaac Murphy was one of the greatest athletes of the 19th century and unrivaled as the most recognizable jockey in the United States.

With his accomplishments, Murphy accrued a great deal of fame and personal wealth; he was also widely respected by both the international racing community and his neighbors in Lexington, Kentucky as a man of integrity, loyalty, and service.

Murphy was undeniably hardworking, talented, and well deserving of respect. Yet a less commonly known story about one of Kentucky's greatest athletes concerns Murphy's start in the business. The story begins with a master horse trainer named Eli Jordan.

**Eli Jordan was a well-respected horse trainer who, by the 1870s, was working for the stable of Williams and Owings in Lexington.**

Prior to emancipation, Jordan had been enslaved by physician and racehorse owner Dr. Elisha Warfield, "the father of the Kentucky Turf." As such, Jordan worked with some of the finest thoroughbreds in Kentucky. This included a homebred colt foaled in 1850 named Darley (the later renamed and famous Lexington).

After the Civil War, Jordan and his wife Lydia lived in East Lexington, first on 5th Street then later on 3rd Street where they raised their daughters. Lydia Jordan had known Isaac's mother America Murphy while they were enslaved. They renewed their friendship after emancipation and the death of



Isaac's father when 5-year-old Isaac and his mother moved to Lexington. After America found employment, Isaac spent the majority of his days at the Jordan's.

By 1871, America Murphy's health was failing, and she decided that her 10-year-old son would need a trade once she was gone. She turned to Mr. Jordan who agreed to take Isaac on as an apprentice in his stable. Under Jordan's guidance, Isaac started as a stable boy performing all of the necessary chores



# ELI JORDAN

## *Horse Trainer and Murphy Teacher*

for the horses assigned to him. He showed a natural affinity for horses and progressed quickly in his quest to become a professional jockey. He rode his first race in 1875 at 14 years of age. Equally, if not more important to his mentor, Isaac learned the importance of honesty, integrity, and perseverance. As Jordan remembered, he "was one of the first up in the morning, ready to do anything he was told to do or to help others. He was ever in good humor and liked to play, but he never neglected his work. . ."

Even Jordan could never have envisioned the career that awaited Isaac who had three wins in the Kentucky Derby and four wins each in the American and Latonia Derbies. Up on Salvator in one of the greatest races of the century, Murphy won the country's richest race, the Suburban at Sheepshead Bay. Over his career, his 44% career win record remains untouched. Murphy became the most recognizable figure in American sport – the greatest American jockey of the 19th century and arguably for all time.

Perhaps even more important to Eli Jordan was Isaac's standing as a fine man. His integrity, loyalty and respect for others were recognized by people throughout the Lexington community. Murphy was a member of the Masonic Lincoln Lodge 10 and later became a Senior Warden, second in authority to the Master of the Lodge. Seven years before his death, Murphy remarked:

"I am as proud of my calling as I am my record, and I believe my life will be recorded as a success, though the reputation I enjoy was earned in the stable and saddle. It is a great honor to be classed as one of America's greatest jockeys." (Lexington Leader, p3, c2-4, March 20, 1889)

The rigors of maintaining weight, and years in the saddle took a toll on Isaac Murphy. As resistance from white jockeys to Black riders increased, and his annual win total decreased, it became harder to secure quality rides. Isaac cut back on his riding schedule, and dabbled in training for his own stable.

Isaac Murphy died at his home in Lexington on February 16, 1896 of heart failure. He was 36. An estimated 500 people paid their respects as friends, noted trainers, and fellow jockeys accompanied his remains to African Cemetery 2 where his lodge members performed burial rites. In 1955, he became the first jockey ever inducted into the National Museum of Racing's Hall of Fame.



From the time of his death and burial, Murphy's grave was left untouched and nearly forgotten in an abandoned cemetery in Lexington, Ky. Finally in 1967, after a long search, his remains were found, exhumed and reburied at the old Man o' War burial site at Faraway Farm, and then were moved again, along with Man o' War, to the Kentucky Horse park prior to its opening in 1978.