

Horse Racing ^[1]

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by Jim L. Sumner, 2006



The Sparrow Cup, made in London to commemorate the victory of the horse Sparrow in a race at Pembroke Plantation near Edenton in 1754. Courtesy of Rebecca Miles, Greensboro. Photography courtesy of

Additional research provided by David M. Egner. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

See also: [Wild Horses](#) ^[2]; [Horse, Colonial Spanish Mustang \(from Tar Heel Junior Historian\)](#); ^[3] [Horses](#); ^[4] [Mules](#) ^[5]

Horse racing was the most popular spectator sport in North Carolina from the colonial period until after the [Civil War](#) ^[6]. As early as the 1730s writer [John Brickell](#) ^[7] noted residents' fondness for it. Early horse racing was crude and often dangerous. It began to become more refined in the last two decades before the [Revolution](#) ^[8], when planters imported expensive English breeding stock to Virginia and North Carolina. Gradually plantation owners with the financial resources to purchase, breed, train, and race horses dominated the sport, which became a way for North Carolina's financial elite to display their wealth. This group included such prominent North Carolinians as [Willie Jones](#) ^[9] and [Jephtha Atherton](#) ^[10]. Gambling on horse races was widespread among all classes. The Wilmington Jockey Club was established in 1774. The famous race horse Janus was kept in North Carolina during the



An 1827 broadside produced by John Amis, Sir Archie's owner, advertising the horse at stud. From the Cameron Family Papers, no. 133, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, UNC-Chapel

1770s, establishing an enviable breed of thoroughbreds. Hill.

Horse racing expanded its hold after the American Revolution, as jockey clubs were established in every region, annual races became major social events, and horse breeding became big business. It became necessary to standardize racing weights, distances, and other variables. As a result horse racing became the first sport to become bureaucratized. The preferred distance for the top thoroughbred races was four miles, the so-called "heroic distance."

