

TENNESSEE'S GREATEST STUD — BELLE MEADE

WILLIAM RIDLEY WILLS, II

With all the political, social, and economic ties between Kentucky and Tennessee, it seems normal that Belle Meade, Tennessee's greatest stud farm, had close Kentucky connections. The Belle Meade Plantation began in 1807 when John Harding bought 250 acres of land and an old station located six miles southwest of Nashville on the Natchez Road. This trail, which had long been used by the Indians, was a route for boatmen, mail carriers, preachers, soldiers, and settlers traveling between Tennessee and Kentucky on the north and Natchez on the south. Harding was one of those tough farmers who periodically took slaves and produce on flatboats down the rivers to Natchez and New Orleans.

The Belle Meade Stud dates to 1816 when the imported stallion Boaster stood at John Harding's. By the end of the decade such prominent Tennesseans as Sam Houston and Felix Grundy were boarding horses and ponies there. Grundy had moved to Nashville a few years earlier from Kentucky, where he had been chief justice of the state's supreme court. During the 1820s imp. [imported] Eagle, imp. Bagdad, and Sir Archy, Jr., stood at Harding's stable.¹

In the 1830s Harding's interests turned to cotton plantations in Louisiana and Arkansas. Accordingly, near the end of the decade he turned responsibility for managing Belle Meade over to his thirty-two-year-old son, William Giles Harding. The younger Harding, who was already a brigadier general in the Tennes-

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¹ James Douglas Anderson, *Making the American Thoroughbred* (Nashville: Grainger Williams, 1946), 57, 63; *Republican Banner* [Nashville], 27 February 1827; John Harding's ledger, vol. 1, 1819, Harding-Jackson Papers (HJP), Southern Historical Collection (SHC), University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill.

see militia, was a widower. His young wife, Mary Selena McNairy had died in 1837. A year before her death, Mary's uncle, Dr. Boyd McNairy, wrote to his friend Henry Clay in Lexington: "Dear Sir: My relation Mr. William G. Harding visits your state for the benefit of his lady's health. My brother's wife is with him. Your attention will be highly appreciated. My regards to your good Lady and accept of my personal esteem. Yours Truly, Boyd McNairy." That McNairy, whose brother John brought Andrew Jackson to Tennessee in 1788, was a Whig and a supporter of Clay shows the depth of the political split in Nashville between Clay and Jackson supporters.²

William G. Harding took up where his father left off in expanding the plantation and running an increasingly important stud. In 1840, Harding gained regional renown when his filly Gamma upset Wagner, a celebrated Virginia thoroughbred, in a race at Nashville. Wagner's owner had offered to bet Harding \$10,000 to \$1,000 that Wagner would win. Harding, who never bet on a horse race in his life, was tempted but declined. Gamma's victory may have occurred because Wagner had spent the summer at stud in Kentucky and was ill prepared for the race.³

A year before the Wagner-Gamma race, Wagner played a leading role in two of the most memorable contests in the annals of Kentucky racing. In the first race at Louisville, Wagner defeated Gray Eagle, the Kentucky champion, in two heats. In a rematch Gray Eagle won the first heat, lost the second, and broke down in the third. As not a dollar of Kentucky money was bet on Wagner, Kentucky was said to have "broke down too."⁴

The decade of the 1850s was a period of great prosperity in Middle Tennessee. Great plantation houses, such as Belle Meade, Fairview, Rattle and Snap, and Pillow Place, dotted the countryside in Davidson, Sumner, and Maury counties. General Harding's stud had grown in importance also. In 1854 a Nashville

2 HJP, Box 5, folder 3, SHC, UNC.

3 "Stories and Reminiscences of Jacob McGavock Dickinson," *Outdoor American* (January 1927): 12.

4 Anderson, *Making the American Thoroughbred*, 113.

newspaper correspondent wrote that Harding's "breeding stud comprises the greatest number of Thoroughbred horses of any perhaps in the Union."⁵

Prominent men frequently visited Belle Meade to see the thoroughbreds and visit Harding's 400-acre deer park where, by 1858, there were around two hundred deer, fourteen buffalo, a few elk, and a water buffalo. A Nashville correspondent said that it was the only wild animal park worthy of the name in the South or Southwest. One group of visitors was a delegation from Louisville, headed by Mayor Thomas H. Crawford, that came in 1859 to celebrate the completion of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad from Nashville to Bowling Green. Unfortunately, they missed the celebration because, when they got to Ritter's, the terminus of the railroad south of Louisville, "they found the stages full" and had to hire a private conveyance which caused them to miss the cars at Bowling Green.⁶

General Harding, who was one of the wealthiest planters in Middle Tennessee, sided with the South when the Civil War came. In January 1861, he armed and equipped a company of soldiers for the South's defense. A. Keene Richards, the great Kentucky horse breeder, incidentally, did the same thing. After President Lincoln's April call for 75,000 volunteers, the Tennessee legislature convened to establish a military organization. Within days, Governor Isham Harris named Harding to a Financial and Military Board of Tennessee, authorized to spend up to \$5,000,000 to arm and equip an army to take the field for the South. Harding, who was president of the board, offered his credit and cash to any amount he could command to sustain the sovereignty of Tennessee.⁷

Because of having taken such a prominent role in behalf of the Confederacy, the fifty-four-year-old Harding was arrested

⁵ *Union and American* [Nashville], 7 October 1854.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8 September 1859; *Republican Banner*, 8 August 1867.

⁷ W. W. Clayton, *History of Davidson County, Tennessee* (Philadelphia, 1880), 170; *Union and American*, 28 April 1861.

in the spring of 1862 by military governor Andrew Johnson. Harding and two other influential rebels were put in the state prison in early April. A few weeks later they were transported to a prison on Mackinaw Island in Lake Huron. Mrs. Harding first heard from her husband when he wrote her a short note from Louisville to say that he was all right and bearing his fate as best he could.⁸

A week later, W. E. Millon wrote Harding from Louisville, asking him to pay a \$300 forfeit, plus interest, for his failure to race horses entered in the previous fall's Association and Galt House Stakes. The man lamented: "I have now a large Southern debt and cannot collect." With her husband in prison, Mrs. Harding asked her stepson John what to do. He told her not to pay the forfeit: "You could not have gotten your horses there while both armies were between you and Louisville."⁹

After six months in prison, General Harding was released on \$20,000 bail and allowed to return to Belle Meade. During his absence, his wife had managed the plantation and looked after her daughters, her aged father-in-law, 125 slaves, and the thoroughbreds. Despite repeated visits by pillagers, Mrs. Harding did not lose General Harding's sire Childe Harold or any of his twenty-seven broodmares.¹⁰

In 1863 Governor Johnson responded to the Hardings' pleas for protection by placing two "safeguards" at Belle Meade. This was also in his best interest as Belle Meade was providing forage for the Federal cavalry. The Union soldiers, one of whom was a Kentuckian, had been recuperating in a Nashville hospital after being wounded at Stones River. Confederate guerillas, who then operated freely in Middle Tennessee, considered them to

8 Elizabeth Harding to William G. Harding, 2 May 1862, Harding-Jackson Papers, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

9 W. E. Million to Gen. W. G. Harding, 15 April 1862, HJP, Box 5, folder 2, SHC, UNC. The race may have been held at Louisville's Woodlawn track.

10 Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson, Vol. 6, 1862-1864* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 4n, 14.

be spies, and decided to act. One Sunday just before dawn, when General Harding was away from home, the two guards, both twenty years old, became conscious of a persistent knocking on their door:

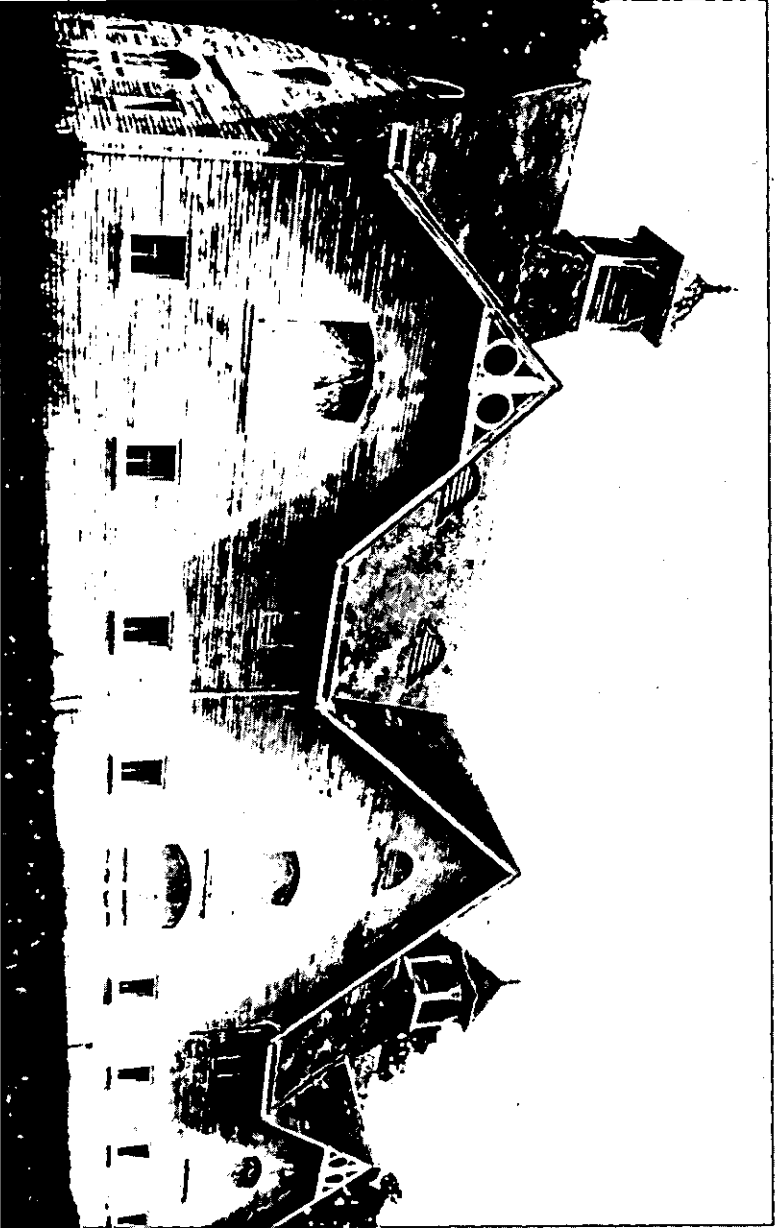
Hastily rising and opening it slightly, we heard the frightened voice of a faithful darky girl saying: "Hush! Don't make no noise, kas dere's a party of guerrilors outen the front yard'n dase getting ready a rope to hang bothen you gemmens." Thanking her, we locked and bolted the door, and opening the shutters of the windows slightly, we looked out in the faint, gray light, and there sure enough was a party of horsemen, about a dozen, and some had already dismounted; and the truth had been told, as two of them were adjusting a rope over the limb of a large tree. . . . Then came a loud knocking at the front door, and a demand that the door be opened instantly and the Yankees be delivered up: We were just about to open fire from the window, having secured our carbines and revolvers, when to our consternation we could see that the door had been opened, and there right out in front of the entrance stood brave Mrs. Harding, with a drawn pistol in her hands, covering the leader, and telling them all to begone! The leader could face men, but the sight of that lone woman, braving the entire band, appealed to his chivalry — and although the whole band had come prepared for any devilry — all being more or less drunk — the leader drew back, took off his hat, and bowed to Mrs. Harding. Then turning to his men, he called: "Mount and get away boys! We don't want to disturb no lady as game as that!"¹¹

Quickly, the whole band was off at break-neck speed, cursing and yelling as they rode. The Union soldiers hastily dressed and rushed downstairs to thank Mrs. Harding, who was, by then, surrounded by a group of admiring servants. After modestly waving aside the boys' thanks, she said: "But what else could I have done? General Harding being away, our fighting force was not strong enough for that number even if we shot from the window. I was therefore certain that if I went to the door, pistol in hand, they would at least pause and then seeing one lone woman, they would be ashamed to do violence, for even the roughest men of our country have some good in them; and you see I was right."¹²

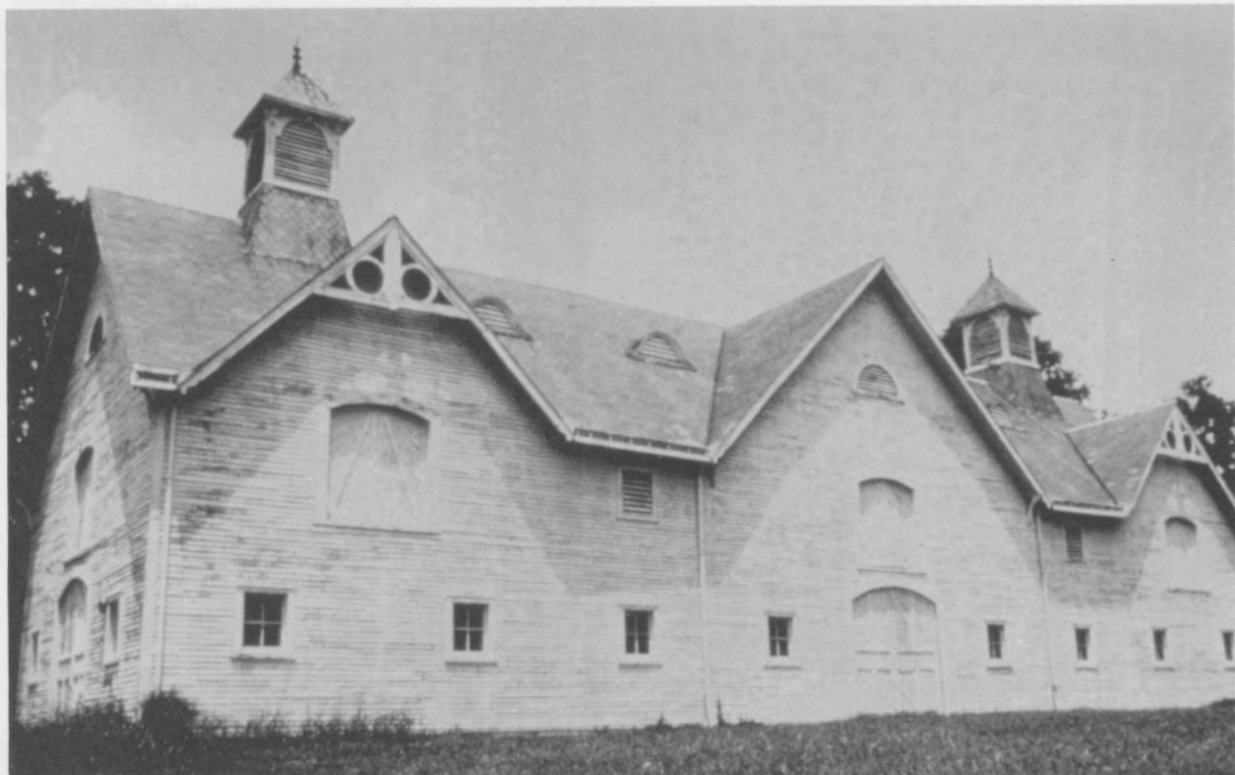
Despite the heavy economic costs of the war, Belle Meade was

¹¹ "Belle Meade Plantation, Tale of a Northern Trooper in the Civil War," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 February 1908.

¹² *Ibid.*



Carriage House/Stable, Belle Meade
Nashville Chapter, Association for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities



Carriage House/Stable, Belle Meade

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in better condition at its close than most Southern plantations. Amazingly, Harding's slaves stuck with him and were still there at the war's close. However, his father John Harding died in 1865 at age eighty-seven. Then General Harding's wife Elizabeth died the following year in her forty-seventh year. Her heroism during the war, particularly during her husband's imprisonment, continues to be publicized.¹³

Harding set about to rebuild Belle Meade. He received unexpected help in 1868 when his older daughter Selene married a thirty-two-year-old planter from West Tennessee named William Hicks "Billy" Jackson. Jackson, who had a distinguished career as a brigadier general of cavalry in the Confederate Army, twice succeeded Nathan Bedford Forrest in command. Before their marriage, Jackson agreed to move to Belle Meade and assist his future father-in-law in running the plantation and stud.¹⁴

Space precludes a full discussion of Jackson's fascinating military career. When the war started he was a lieutenant in the army, fighting Indians on the Southwest frontier. When he learned that Tennessee had seceded, he tendered his commission and, in company with James Longstreet of South Carolina, Colonel George B. Crittenden of Kentucky, and several others, made his way to Galveston, ran the blockade, and sailed to New Orleans. Longstreet went on to gain fame at Gettysburg and Chickamauga; Crittenden was charged with drunkenness at the shocking Confederate defeat at Mill Springs in Kentucky; Jackson became a brigadier general.¹⁵

After returning to his home in West Tennessee, Jackson received a commission as captain in the Corps of Tennessee Artillery. He soon found himself at Columbus, Kentucky. In October he was dangerously wounded in the Battle of Belmont. A few

13 Katherine M. Jones, *Heroines of Dixie, Confederate Women Tell Their Story* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1955), 155-56.

14 "William Hicks Jackson," *Dictionary of American Biography*, IX, 561-62.

15 William S. Speer, *Sketches of Prominent Tennesseans* (Nashville, 1888), 446.

weeks before the battle, some ladies from his hometown of Jackson, Tennessee, visited the Confederate fortress. During this period, Jackson's battery was periodically dueling with Federal gunboats which occasionally approached near enough to shell the Southerners. As the ladies sat in front of Jackson's tent one day, the Federal gunboats happened to come down the Mississippi. Jackson tried to get the ladies to stay and see them, "as they were safe, but they concluded they better go."¹⁶

Toward the end of the war, Jackson fought under Joseph E. Johnston in the Atlanta campaign and was active in the disastrous 1864 Middle Tennessee campaign. His troops covered Hood's retreat from Nashville that December. In early 1865, when it was clear that the war was lost, life went on, even in the demoralized Confederate Army. That January, Regina Harrison, General Stephen D. Lee's fiancée, asked Jackson, then in north Mississippi, to invite "such gentlemen in your command as you see proper" to a dance where there would be 45 young ladies, "dependent on you for partners." About the same time, Lee asked Jackson to stand as "first attendant" at his marriage. At the wedding, both Lee and General Abe Buford of Kentucky were on crutches. Buford, who was said to weigh 280 pounds, had just been released from the hospital. When he suddenly fainted in the middle of the reception, there was considerable consternation. In trying to dodge the falling giant, a grand dame of Mississippi collided with a fourteen-year-old boy named Jacob McGavock Dickinson of Columbus, Mississippi. As a result the venerable lady spilled a cup of coffee, consisting of parched sweet potatoes and rye flavored with a little captured coffee, on her silk dress and on young Dickinson, who naturally got the blame. Fourteen years later Jackson bought one of his most famous sires, Enquirer, by imp. Leamington, from his old army friend

¹⁶ William H. Jackson to Eunice F. Jackson, 18 September 1861, William H. Jackson Papers (WHJP), Box 2, folder 3, Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA), Nashville.

Buford, whose stud was at Midway, Kentucky. In 1906 Jacob McGavock Dickinson purchased Belle Meade.¹⁷

The Belle Meade yearling sales began in 1867. The practice continued either at Belle Meade or in New York for thirty-five years. At first most of the buyers were from Middle Tennessee, although Abe Buford bought colts in both 1869 and 1871. By the mid to late 1870s, several other prominent Kentucky turfmen were coming to Belle Meade for the sale. Among them were Major Ben G. Bruce of the *Kentucky Livestock Record*; Colonel Sanders D. Bruce, a Lexington native who was the founder and publisher of *Turf, Field, and Farm*; M. Louis Clark, president of the Louisville Jockey Club; A. Keene Richards of Georgetown; Dan Swigert whose colt Spendthrift was undefeated in 1878; and Milton Young of Henderson.¹⁸

In 1875 at age sixty-six, Harding quit racing. A contributing factor in his decision was his disapproval of the increasingly significant role that professional gambling played in the sport. He missed the antebellum days when racing was run by amateurs. Harding believed that his mission was to discover the most valuable bloodlines to propagate. He cared little about amusing and pleasing the public. His dispersal plan was to enter his horses in the spring meeting of the Nashville Blood Horse Association and then ship them to Louisville for the inaugural meeting of the Louisville Jockey Club at the racetrack soon to be known as Churchill Downs. After the Louisville races, he hoped to sell the four horses in Kentucky.

General Harding decided at the last minute not to go to Louisville and sent General Jackson in his place. Harding's younger daughter Mary Harding Jackson had unexpectedly come to Belle

17 Regina L. Harrison to William H. Jackson, undated; Stephen D. Lee to William H. Jackson, 30 January 1865, WHJP, Box 2, folder 6, TSLA; "Stories and Reminiscences of Jacob M. Dickinson," *Outdoor America* (July 1924): 23.

18 *Republican Banner*, 8 August 1867; *Union and American*, 30 April 1869 and 7 May 1871; *Daily American* [Nashville], 1 May 1877 and 29 April 1879; William H. P. Robertson, *The History of Thoroughbred Racing In America* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1964), 130.

Meade from West Tennessee for a visit. He told Mary after Billy left that, if his horse Camargo won a new race called the Kentucky Derby, he could sell the thoroughbred for \$5,000. He estimated the purse at about \$3,000. Mary's response was that "those Kentuckians would never let a Tennessee horse win if cheating would keep him from it."¹⁹

As it turned out, Camargo did not start in the Kentucky Derby on 17 May 1875. Of the fifteen horses that did, six, however, had or would later have close ties with Belle Meade. Volcano, which placed second, was by Harding's Vandal. The fifth-place finisher McCreery, owned by General Buford, was from a dam by Harding's Bonnie Scotland. Searcher, the eighth-place finisher, was also from a dam by Bonnie Scotland. Vagabond, which came in third from the last, was by Vandal, dam Gem by Harding's Childe Harold. Two of the above mentioned horses, McCreery and Searcher, were by Enquirer, a stallion Harding would acquire in 1879. Two others, Enlister and Bill Bruce, the sixth and eleventh-place finishers were also by Enquirer. The starter for the Derby was W. H. Johnson, president of the Nashville Blood Horse Association, and a good friend of Harding's.²⁰

Camargo was one of seven three-year-olds to start in the Falls City Stake on Friday, 20 May. Before a crowd estimated at between 15,000 and 20,000, he won with times of 1:42.75 and 1:43.25. On Sunday Harding's Volligeur won the Clark Stake on 22 May, a two-mile dash, beating ten other starters with a time of 3:50.75. Soon afterward, Harding sold Camargo, Ventilator, and Volligeur for \$8,500 and retired from racing to devote his full energies to breeding horses.²¹

When he was at Belle Meade, Colonel Bruce admired Harding's

¹⁹ Mary Harding Jackson to Howell E. Jackson, 18 May 1875; Howell E. Jackson Papers (HEJP), Box 1, folder 7, TSLA.

²⁰ Transcript of the results of the first Kentucky Derby taken from the original scales book at Churchill Downs, Louisville.

²¹ Mary Jackson to Howell E. Jackson, 23 May 1875, HEJP, Box 1, folder 7, TSLA; *Republican Banner*, 21, 23 May 1875; William H. Jackson to Howell E. Jackson, 18 June 1875, HJP, Box 3, folder 8, SHC, UNC.

deer park with its herd of several hundred deer. Bruce thought of asking Harding to give some fawns to a hunting and fishing club in Pennsylvania that he helped found. When he asked Harding about doing so, he agreed and shipped a carload of fawns by train to a club he did not belong to and probably never saw. He did so out of friendship with Bruce, a Kentuckian who only fifteen years earlier had greatly helped Union General George Thomas win the Battle of Nashville. It is interesting that the secretary of the club assumed that Harding was a Kentuckian. The Tennessee deer venture was obviously successful as descendants of the Belle Meade fawns still flourish at the Blooming Grove Hunting & Fishing Club.²²

Ever since the first of the Belle Meade bred get of Bonnie Scotland came out as two-year-olds in 1876, this stallion's climb up the ladder of great American sires had been rapid. Bonnie Scotland's two greatest rivals Lexington and Leamington died in 1875 and 1878. Following their deaths, Bonnie Scotland ranked first among all living American sires in 1878 and in 1879. In 1880 he finally attained the crown as the leading American sire. That season his get won 137 races and \$135,700, erasing the records of 102 wins and \$120,360 that Lexington, the great sire from Woodburn Farm, had established ten years earlier. Unfortunately, Bonnie Scotland did not live to wear his crown. He died at Belle Meade on 1 February 1880. His bloodline established through his son Bramble would, however, "saturate the American racing fabric" for decades to come, and he would be known as the horse that made Belle Meade famous.²³

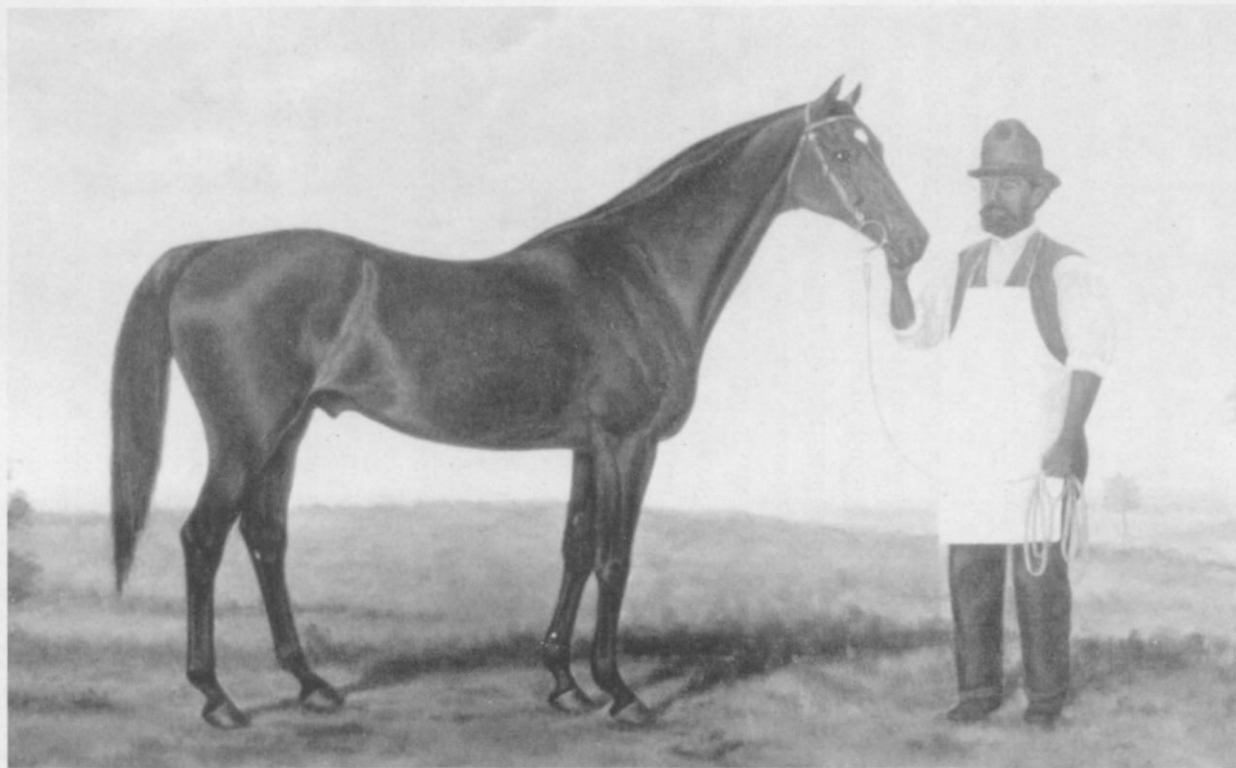
In the spring of 1881 Baron Favoret de Kerbreck and Captain De La Chere of France visited the United States as representatives of the French government to inspect horses and breeding

22 Minutes of a meeting of the stockholders of the Blooming Grove (Pennsylvania) Hunting and Fishing Club, 31 May and 21 November 1878.

23 James Anderson, "Bonnie Scotland Made Belle Meade Famous," *Nashville Banner*, 14 April 1929; John Hervey, *Racing in America, 1665-1865* 2 vols.; New York: The Scribner Press for The Jockey Club, 1944), II, 261-62.



Bonnie Scotland
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Bonnie Scotland

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establishments. The Frenchmen stated in their report that the finest trotting horses they saw were in Kentucky (probably at Woodburn Farm) and that "the best specimen of the thoroughbred horse we found at Gen. Harding's in the State of Tennessee. Indeed, we saw a crop of thoroughbred yearlings there that surpassed anything we had ever seen in England or France."²⁴

Everyone in the turf world knew that the 1881 Belle Meade yearling sale would be outstanding. Magnificent performances on the track by two Belle Meade colts Bramble and Luke Blackburn had stimulated great interest in the last get of Bonnie Scotland to be sold. For example, the previous September, Luke Blackburn set a course record of 3:04.75 for 1.75 miles at the Louisville Jockey Club. Already, Belle of the Meade, another Bonnie Scotland get, held the fastest time on the Kentucky track for one mile for two-year-olds with a time of 1:44.25. Harding and Jackson were not disappointed in their sale. Between 1,000 and 1,500 people came, including Milton Young who acquired McGrathana Stud the next year.²⁵

A number of guests spent the night at Belle Meade before the sale. One of them was Jacob McGavock Dickinson, a relative of Mrs. Harding who had had the coffee spilled on him at General Lee's wedding. That evening the conversation centered around the sale and the probable price that Joe Blackburn would bring. Because of the achievements of Luke Blackburn in 1880, it was obvious that bidding would be high for his brother. The men concluded that he would probably sell for more than \$1,000 at a time when any price above \$500 was extraordinary. The next day, the bidding for Joe Blackburn was spirited from the start. It began at \$500 and quickly went to \$3,500. When someone bid \$3,750, General Harding, who was sitting nearby, stood up and said: "No untried colt was ever worth any price like that. I will stop this foolishness, and not permit the horse to be sold. Mr.

24 Speer, *Sketches of Prominent Tennesseans*, 452.

25 *Daily American*, 1 May 1881; program, Louisville Jockey Club, Spring meeting, 1882, in the collection of the author.

Auctioneer please withdraw him." According to Dickinson, the crowd yelled out: "General Harding, there has been a second bid on him and he belongs to the crowd." Harding sat back down and the sale went on with the colt bringing \$7,500.²⁶

Sometime later, Governor Luke Blackburn of Kentucky saw Dickinson in Panama and told him a story about the two colts, Luke Blackburn and Joe Blackburn. Dickinson knew that Joe Blackburn, the younger colt, was named for the governor's brother, Senator Joe Blackburn, while the colt Luke Blackburn had been named for the governor. It seems that at a dinner in Kentucky, held sometime after the Dwyer brothers bought Joe Blackburn from Harding, Senator Blackburn said that he did not think there was much in names:

His brother replied that he did and added:

"There was a famous race horse in Tennessee named Luke Blackburn that was without a rival, but he had a full brother by the name of Joe Blackburn, and he never won a race."²⁷

The 1881 Belle Meade sale crushed all previous records. Thirty-four colts and fillies brought \$38,530, an average of \$1,133.23 per yearling. The eleven Bonnie Scotlands sold for \$21,050, a breathtaking average of \$1,913.63. The highest priced colt sold was Joe Blackburn.²⁸

Confirmation of Belle Meade's status as one of the country's premier stud-farms came in 1886 from the second contingent of Frenchmen to visit Belle Meade in five years. That September two inspectors general of the *Ministere de l' Agriculture* of France visited Belle Meade. After attending an exhibition of Percheron horses in Chicago, they extended their tour to visit ten stud farms in Kentucky and one in Tennessee — Belle Meade.

²⁶ Dickinson, "Memories of Belle Meade," *Outdoor America* (April, 1927): 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Luke Blackburn was bred and presumably named by James and A. C. Franklin of Sumner County, Tennessee. The Dwyer Brothers was a partnership consisting of Philip J. and Michael J. Dwyer of Brooklyn, New York. Known to the racing public as Phil and Mike, they dominated thoroughbred racing in America in their time.

²⁸ *Daily American*, 1 May 1881.

Before leaving Nashville, the Frenchmen said that "nothing we have seen anywhere is comparable to Belle Meade in the number of good horses to be seen there. Even the mares are of a superior kind. Harding's is indeed the best place we have seen in America." The Frenchmen also mentioned to a *Daily American* reporter that the Kentucky breeders encouraged them to visit Belle Meade and were "very warm" in its praise.²⁹

At the time of this visit, General Jackson knew that Pierre Lorillard was going to auction all the horses at his fabulous Rancossa Stud in Jobstown, New Jersey. Iroquois, the most famous horse Lorillard owned, was in the group. This caught Jackson's attention, so he went up for the sale. A *Spirit of the Times* correspondent described Jackson for his readers:

Gen. W. H. Jackson, of Belle Meade, in his slouch hat of the trooper days, his eyes dancing merrily beneath his bushy brows, enlarges to his auditors upon the merits of Mortimer as a diversion from his intended coup d'etat on Iroquois, as he leans forward and leans on his stick and chews the end of his cigar, which goes out at regular intervals of five minutes.³⁰

The auction brought \$149,050 for an American record average of \$5,520.37. Iroquois, 1881 winner of both the English Derby and the St. Leger, went to Jackson for \$20,000. In a short speech, Jackson explained that he bought "the carrier of American colors on foreign soil for fear he might be taken away" — a patriotic statement for an ex-Confederate officer whom the Federal government had never pardoned!³¹

When Belle Meade's new thoroughbred reached Nashville, it was exhibited at a stable downtown. More than half a century later, Lee Roy Jordan, who was a barefoot boy of eleven in 1886, recalled the excitement of Iroquois's arrival: "When Iroquois was brought in, people stood around and sung songs. They holered and they yelped. They made up one song to the tune of

29 Ibid., 24 September 1886.

30 Ibid., 25 October 1886.

31 Robertson, *The History of Thoroughbred Racing In America*, 128; *Daily American*, 25 October 1886.

Casey Jones, telling how Iroquois had whipped the British, and they sung it all over the country. It was a happy day."³²

In December 1886 William Giles Harding died at age seventy-eight. His Belle Meade plantation, which he had managed from 1839 until 1883, was famous the world over as a breeder of famous thoroughbreds. His stallions Epsilon, Priam, John Morgan, Vandal, Bonnie Scotland, and Enquirer were equally well known. From 1870 up to the close of 1885 their get had won \$1,163,869 in stakes and purses. With the exception of Woodburn Farm in Spring Station, Kentucky, Belle Meade was considered at the time of Harding's death "America's greatest stud."³³

During the 1888 racing season, Luke Blackburn, the head of the Belle Meade Stud, was the fourth leading sire in the country. His son Proctor Knott, named by General Jackson for a Kentucky governor, won the first Futurity at the Coney Island Jockey Club that year before 40,000 people, bringing additional acclaim to Belle Meade. After the race, a newspaper correspondent called Proctor Knott "the greatest horse ever bred in Tennessee and probably the best horse that ever looked through a bridle." For the season, Luke Blackburn's get had 447 starts, coming in first 81 times, second 68 times, and third 55 times. Their total winnings were \$100,339. In 1889, General Jackson acclaimed Proctor Knott as "a greater horse than Luke Blackburn and the best he ever saw. Unless some accident should befall him," Jackson said, "the three year old stakes of America are at his mercy."³⁴

Proctor Knott did not live up to this heady praise. He lost to Spokane in the Kentucky Derby by a whisker, breaking "thou-

³² *Daily American*, 24 October 1895; Will Grimsley, "Yas, Suh! Dat Iroquois Was Some Hoss!," *Nashville Tennessean*, sometime in 1944.

³³ Margaret Lindsley Warden, *The Belle Meade Plantation* (Nashville: Association for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities, 1979), 31.

³⁴ *Nashville Banner*, 23 July 1888; "Winning Sires of 1888," *Turf, Field, and Farm*, late 1888; Warden, "Fabulous Belle Meade, the Blooming," *Nashville Tennessean Magazine*, 7 May 1950; *Spirit of the Times*, 2 May 1889; Special dispatch to the *Daily American*, 4 September 1888. A painting by L. Maurer of Proctor Knott winning the 1888 Futurity Stakes is in the collection of the National Museum of Racing at Saratoga Springs, New York.

sands of Tennessee hearts and purses." According to an eyewitness, Proctor Knott had a five-length lead coming out of the backstretch when suddenly the horse broke to the outer rail. The witness said that a Negro standing at the infield fence threw a rolled-up newspaper in front of Proctor Knott causing him to veer to the outside lane and allowing Spokane to catch him at the finish line.³⁵

The winter after Proctor Knott's exciting Futurity victory, William Easton, president of the Easton Horse Exchange of New York, contacted General Jackson to propose that he bring his yearlings to New York for sale in the spring of 1889. This was a new idea to Jackson as neither he nor any of the other southern and western breeders were accustomed to taking their yearlings to the east for sale. Nevertheless, Easton's argument was logical and convincing. Jackson realized that, since the war, the east had become the center of the racing scene and that there were more of the larger buyers there than there were in Kentucky or Tennessee.³⁶

Easton also approached J. B. A. Haggin, of Rancho del Paso near Sacramento and Kentuckians Milton Young of McGrantha Stud and Daniel Swigert of Elmendorf Stud about bringing their yearlings to New York in 1889. This caught Jackson's attention. These men were his biggest competitors. He knew their sales catalogs almost as well as he knew his own. Of them all, only Swigert had beaten the average prices obtained by Jackson at that year's Belle Meade sale. Jackson said yes to Easton.³⁷

With Jackson's approval as well as with approval from Haggin, Swigert, Young, and Leslie Combs, a third Kentucky breed-

35 Interviews by Robert Nash, Louisville, of G. Chapman Young, Louisville, 6 October 1948.

36 Adams Express Company appellant vs W. H. Jackson, H. E. Jackson and John Harding, Jr., appellees, in the Supreme Court of Tennessee from the Circuit Court of Davidson County, p. 2, Supreme Court Case, 1892 — transcript Middle Tennessee #934 (hereinafter referred to as transcript Middle Tennessee #934).

37 *Spirit of the Times*, 27 April 1889; W. H. Jackson to William Easton, 2 April 1889, transcript Middle Tennessee #934, exhibit #3, p. 101.

er, Easton completed plans for the great New York sales of thoroughbred yearlings. The first sale would take place on Kentucky Day, 14 May 1889 at Easton's new sales paddocks at Hunt's Point on Long Island. Altogether over one hundred head would be offered at this sale. On Tennessee Day 17 June, fifty-seven head of yearlings from "the historic Belle Meade Stud," as well as yearlings from two other Tennessee studs would be sold. Finally, on 1 July, one hundred and three yearlings from Haggin's Rancho del Paso Stud would be auctioned. Catalogs for the sales were printed, giving the pedigrees of the yearlings, and publicity was generated in the *Spirit of the Times* and various horse journals.³⁸

Following Kentucky Day, Eaton wrote Jackson to say that the sales were "extremely encouraging" and that Swigert and Young were "highly pleased with the averages obtained." He assured Jackson that the Kentucky "yearlings arrived without a scratch on them" and advised him to move his shipment up a few days so that his yearlings would arrive at Hunt's Point a fortnight before the sale.³⁹

In April Jackson struck a deal with the Adams Express Company to furnish him with four red baggage cars "such as were used by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company," that his horses were to be carried at "express rates of speed," that the time in transit from Belle Meade to New York would not exceed forty-eight hours, that the train would be run as a special, and in charge of an agent of the Adams Express Company for the entire trip. The route would be over the Louisville and Nashville Railroad to Cincinnati, and from there to New York on the Pennsylvania Central Railroad, passing through Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and Jersey City to Hunt's Point.⁴⁰

The Johnstown flood prevented Jackson's thoroughbreds from being shipped on time. Four of the Pennsylvania Central bag-

38 *Spirit of the Times*, 27 April 1889.

39 Transcript Middle Tennessee #934, Exhibit A, p. 103.

40 *Ibid.*, 4, 11.

gage cars that the Adams Express Company had obtained were trapped east of the flood. After a flurry of last minute discussions and schedule changes, fifty-seven Belle Meade yearlings left Belle Meade a day late in poorly ventilated cars. They were routed through Louisville to Pittsburgh, where they were switched to a coaling train for seventy-two miles through the Pennsylvania mountains. This segment of the trip took twelve hours; because of the starting and stopping, the horses were thrown about, bruised, and roughly treated. The entire trip, which took the horses as far north as Elmira, New York, took seventy-two hours.

When asked how his yearlings looked when they were off-loaded at Hunt's Point, Bob Green, the chief hostler at Belle Meade, said:

They looked rugged — just butchered. Let me tell you something. When I started from here . . . to that sale of horses — when we loaded the colts up that evening for New York I was in high spirits for I thought when we got to New York I was going to knock the black out, but when we got to that place, and they got to going on so and got so butchered up, I give up.⁴¹

At the sale, the fifty-three Belle Meade yearlings brought a total of \$26,175, an average of \$682.54. These prices were nothing like those Easton had led Jackson to expect. To say that he was disappointed was an understatement. His average price turned out to be only a little greater than the average of his three most recent yearling sales at home and did not come close to approaching the record 1881 sale.⁴²

Jackson asked the Adams Express Company for a rebate for not having delivered on its promises regarding the type of cars furnished, the time of the trip, and the running of an express train under the supervision of one of their employees. Unable to settle their disagreement with the express company, Jackson and his partners, his brother and brother-in-law, brought suit in the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 62. "Knock the black out" was apparently a colloquialism meaning "to steal the show."

⁴² *Daily American*, 1 May 1881; 28 April 1886; 1 May 1887; and 28 April 1888; *Spirit of the Times*, 22 June 1889.

circuit court of Davidson County against the common carrier for \$10,000. The court ruled in favor of plaintiff for \$8,000. The defendant appealed in errors to the Supreme Court of Tennessee. On 4 March 1893, nearly four years after the alleged damages to the Belle Meade yearlings occurred, the state supreme court upheld the circuit court's verdict.⁴³

Meanwhile, a writer for the *Memphis Weekly Commercial*, who visited Belle Meade in the spring of 1891, praised it as being in many respects, "the most remarkable breeding establishment in the world." To support this claim, he said that "in acreage no other stud farm devoted exclusively to the breeding and raising of the thoroughbred horse in America surpasses or even equals it." Proctor Knott, a Belle Meade product, was "the largest winning gelding in the history of the American turf." His final argument was that Iroquois was the highest priced thoroughbred horse ever sold at auction in America exclusively for breeding purposes.⁴⁴

Belle Meade's reputation was enhanced in 1891 through a stroke of good luck. It escaped an epidemic that swept Kentucky in 1890, causing mares "to slip their foals." Because of this, Belle Meade had its usual crop of yearlings in 1891 which was larger than the combined crops of the important Fannymede, Woodburn, and Elmendorf studs in Kentucky.⁴⁵

During the 1891 racing season, one hundred and twenty-five horses by Belle Meade sires won over 450 races, totaling over \$300,000 in purses. Iroquois headed the list of American sires in 1892 when thirty-four of his get won 145 races and \$179,447. To take advantage of the success that Belle Meade bred yearlings were bringing to others, Jackson ran a large ad in the *Spirit of the Times* in the spring of 1892, publicizing the stud services of his seven stallions. The ad carried lavish endorsements from

43 Transcript Middle Tennessee #934, pp. 326-34.

44 *Memphis Weekly Commercial*, 23 April 1891.

45 *Ibid.* Forty-four yearlings brought an average price of \$1,074.43 at the 1891 Belle Meade yearling sale. *Daily American*, 28 April 1891.

three important newspapers — the *New York Sun*, the *Philadelphia Record*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. The *Sun* said that Belle Meade had earned the title “home of the race-horse.” The *Record* said: “In many respects Belle Meade is the most remarkable breeding establishment in the world.” The *Tribune* stated that, “The oldest in years, Belle Meade has always kept in the front rank as America’s greatest thoroughbred nursery.”⁴⁶

The Panic of 1893 and the subsequent depression which lasted for several years had a demoralizing effect on all racehorse values. This situation influenced the decision to discontinue the famous Woodburn Stud in Woodford County. It also badly hurt Belle Meade. Although Jackson did not know it, 1893 was a watershed; from that year on the average prices he would receive at his annual yearling sales would be lower and the winnings of Iroquois’s get would be progressively smaller.⁴⁷

The final dispersal sale at Woodburn Farm took place in October 1899. The last dispersal sale at Belle Meade took place almost exactly five years later, following Jackson’s death in March 1903 and the death of his only son, twenty-nine-year-old William Harding Jackson, of typhoid fever four months later. Unlike Woodburn Farm, which remained in the Alexander family, Belle Meade was sold with most of the land incorporated into what has since become Nashville’s most fashionable residential community. The Belle Meade mansion, magnificent carriage house and barn, and thirty acres, however, have been faithfully preserved and maintained as a historic site by the State of Tennessee under the auspices of the Association for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities.⁴⁸

In the front hall at Belle Meade, the walls are covered with paintings of some of the famous thoroughbreds which once lived there. On another wall Belle Meade’s silks of solid maroon are displayed. When they were retired in 1971 after being raced by a family member Howell E. Jackson, III, at his internationally-

⁴⁶ *Spirit of the Times*, 23 April 1892.

⁴⁷ Hervey, *Racing In America, 1665-1865*, II, 335.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; *Nashville American*, 13 October 1904.

known Bull Run Stud in Middleburg, Virginia, they were the oldest registered racing silks in America.⁴⁹

At the National Museum of Racing in Saratoga Springs, New York, there are portraits of Howell Jackson, III, of Middleburg, Virginia, and General William Hicks Jackson of Belle Meade. Also hanging in the museum are the Belle Meade racing silks and portraits of five Belle Meade horses. Luke Blackburn, a sixth Belle Meade horse, is in the racing museum's hall of fame, while prints of Iroquois are on sale in the museum's gift shop.⁵⁰

The bloodlines of Belle Meade horses are very much alive today. Of 684 stallions advertised in the *Stallion Register* for 1977, 377 won at least \$100,000 on the track or sired stake winners. Of those 377, at least 270 were descended from Belle Meade thoroughbreds, many from Bonnie Scotland. Among some of his descendants are Seattle Slew, Secretariat, Citation, Forego, Foolish Pleasure, Bold Forbes, Ruffina, Risen Star, and Sunday Silence, the 1989 Kentucky Derby and Preakness winner. Of the 53 thoroughbred horses of the year between 1987 and 1989, 46 are descended from Bonnie Scotland. Easy Goer, the winner of the 1989 Belmont Stakes, does not carry Bonnie Scotland's blood. He is descended from another Belle Meade stallion, imp. Great Tom, and Grace J, one of General Jackson's best broodmares. It seems appropriate, though, that Bonnie Scotland, the horse that put Belle Meade on top of the racing map, had the most enduring bloodline of all the great Belle Meade stallions.⁵¹

49 Warden, *The Belle Meade Plantation*, back inside cover.

50 Joseph C. O'Dea, ed., *Catalogue of the National Museum of Racing* (National Museum of Racing, 1963); The Hall of Fame brochure, National Racing Museum, Inc., 8.

51 Warden, "Belle Meade's Glory Days," *Nashville Magazine*, November 1977.