Galloping Through Maryland's Rich Thoroughbred History

By Olivia Wood, Equiery Intern

The Preakness Stakes at Pimlico Race Course this month may be the 146th running of this second jewel in the Triple Crown, however, Maryland's Thoroughbred racing history starts over a century earlier than the first Preakness with the industry's roots dating back to mid-18th century Colonial Maryland.

Maryland was the first colony to organize the sport with the founding of the Maryland Jockey Club in 1743. Two years later, the first official Thoroughbred-only race in the colonies was held in Annapolis, with the winning owner receiving a silver punch bowl called the Annapolis Subscription Plate. The race was organized by Samuel Ogle, Proprietary Governor of Maryland for most of the period from 1731 until his death in 1752, when he ordered an "English style" race at Annapolis in 1745.

The Ogles and Taskers

Samuel Ogle is credited by many with bringing Thoroughbred racing from England to North America when he and his brother-in-law, Colonel Benjamin Tasker, imported several Thoroughbred horses from England in the late 1740s with the hope of strengthening local racing bloodlines. Their breeding operation was housed at the Ogle's Belair Stud in Collington, which was later run by Tasker.

Their most notable import was the English mare Selima who not only had a stellar racing career, but produced winning offspring with her bloodlines still found in racing today. She is considered one of the foundation mares of the American Thoroughbred.

Although changing hands many times over its 200 years as a racing stable, Belair Stud is considered one of the most important stables in the nation, producing such great horses as Triple Crown winners Gallant Fox (1930), Omaha (1935) and Nashua (1955). The stables and mansion still stand today as the Belair Stable Museum and are open to visitors looking to learn more about the "Cradle of American Thoroughbred Racing."

Racing Halted by Wars

The Revolutionary War brought a halt to racing in Maryland as it did to so many other aspects of American life, with many racehorses being conscripted for cavalry mounts and other military uses. After the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783, Governor William Paca and Charles Carroll helped the Maryland Jockey Club bring the sport of Thoroughbred racing back to life once again.

Despite this strong start to the racing tradition in Maryland, the Revolutionary War naturally dampened what had been a growing interest in racing. Nevertheless, months before the war's official end in 1783, Maryland Jockey Club members Governor William Paca and Charles Carroll became presiding officers of the club and helped reorganize it in the war's wake.

The Civil War brought racing to a halt once again, when Thoroughbreds that were once in demand for their athleticism on the track became sought after for utilitarian, war-related needs, like carrying equipment. As an interesting side note, the Woodlawn Vase that would eventually be given to every Preakness Stakes winner starting in 1917, was buried at Thomas G. Moore's Woodlawn Farm in Kentucky in 1862 for fear Confederate troops would melt it down for ammunition. The priceless trophy was created by Tiffany, Co. in 1860 and was first awarded in 1861 to Moore's filly Mollie Jackson in Louisville. Moore dug the trophy out after the war and it changed hands several times before becoming the official Preakness trophy. The trophy is now housed in the Baltimore Museum of Art with a smaller replica given to the winning owner each year.

Just three years after the Civil War ended, then-Governor Oden Bowie boasted at a party in New York that he could build an even more impressive racetrack than Saratoga, the country's first racetrack. Governor Bowie was true to his word, opening what is now the iconic Pimlico Race Course on October 25, 1870. The featured race on opening day was the Dinner Party Stakes (run today as the Dixie Handicap). It was won by a horse named Preakness. He gave his name to the Preakness Stakes, first run three years later, on May 23, 1873. The first Preakness Stakes was won by Kentucky-bred Survivor for a purse of $1,000.

The Golden Age

The Preakness Stakes would remain at home in Baltimore until 1890, when, in a massive blow to Maryland's Thoroughbred horse racing culture, the event was moved to New York due changes in wagering leading to its increasing lack of profitability in Baltimore. However, in 1909, the Preakness returned to its home at Pimlico.

An anti-gambling movement drove racing events like the Preakness out of New York. It had not taken such a strong hold in Maryland, which allowed Maryland to reclaim the Preakness Stakes. Thus was ushered in a golden age of horse racing in Maryland. During this time, new racetracks opened all over the state, including those at Marlboro (1910), Laurel Park (1911), Havre de Grace (1912), Bowie (1914), Cumberland (1924), Hagerstown (1929) and Bel Air (founded in early 1870s, reopened in 1937).

During the Great Depression, racing became

Survivor, ridden by George Barbee, trained by A. Davis Pryor and owned by John F. Chamberlain, was the first Preakness Stakes winner in 1873.

The Belair Stud Farm in Bowie still stands today with a Maryland Historical Society plaque marking the site the "Cradle of American Racing."

Deputed Testamony's 1983 Preakness win marks the last time a Maryland-bred has won the Preakness Stakes.