HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATIONS:
USING TRADITIONAL AND UNUSUAL RESEARCH COLLECTIONS
TO WRITE ABOUT HORSE RACING

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When I first decided to go on for a Ph.D. in American history, I
thought long and hard about what topic to write on. I needed something I
felt I could get enough information about, one that hadn’t already been done
to death, and one that I wouldn’t get sick of during the five years I had to
research and write my dissertation. After listing several possibilities and
sounding them out with colleagues, I chose horse racing in Florida. I’d been
interested in and followed racing since I was nine years old so I began with a
twenty-six year head start. I knew the horses and tracks from the 1950s
from New York to Florida but very little about the tracks’ earliest histories.
As part of my work as the Florida librarian in the Special Collections
Department at Florida State University, I read the monthly issues of *Florida
Horse*. But I knew of only one article written about antebellum racing,
Dorothy Dodd’s “Horse Racing in Middle Florida 1830-1843,” published in
the Tallahassee Historical Society’s journal, *Apalachee*. The mysterious
period between the 1840s and 1940s intrigued me. No one else working in Florida history seemed interested in racing and I had the field to myself.

The first obstacle to overcome was my master's degree major professor. When I asked him what he thought about my writing the history of horse racing in Florida as my dissertation, he was horrified. "Do something serious for your dissertation," he said. "You'll never get a job with that. Do it for fun later as a book." I told him I already had a job as a librarian and didn't plan to teach so it really didn't matter. Determined to pursue horse racing, I then sought the opinion of the professor who taught Florida history. When he enthusiastically supported my choice, I asked him to be my major professor and kept the first one on my committee.

I began examining the printed sources available at Florida State. Dodd's article contained no footnotes so I had to track down her sources from internal references. The earliest record of racing in antebellum north Florida appeared in *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*. From this I identified the names and locations of the racetracks, horses and their owners, and the racing calendar. Local newspapers carried notices of race meets. To flesh out this skeleton, I needed some first-person accounts of racing. Ellen Call Long wrote in her book, *Florida Breezes*, about attending the races in antebellum Tallahassee. Knowing that many of the planters like
the Call family had migrated from Virginia and North Carolina, I sought manuscript letters written to relatives and friends back home.

Although I started with the earliest known racing in north Florida, I soon jumped to the 1920s and the tracks in south Florida. I took the opportunity to write certain chapters as class papers and wrote out of chronological sequence for my graduate courses. Semester breaks afforded me the chance to travel to different parts of Florida to do my research. Several times I pitched my tent in a campground in Homestead, set up my forty-pound “portable” Kaypro computer on a picnic table, and plugged it into an outlet in the laundry room so I could write by buglight at night after spending the day poring over research materials in the Miami-area libraries, offices, and racetracks. I completed the majority of my Florida research before moving to Richmond in 1988 three days after passing my oral comprehensive examination. The few remaining pieces of information I found I needed to complete the writing in 1993 I obtained through interlibrary loan.

In those days before the Internet and the World Wide Web and the increasing number of MARC:amc cataloged collections and finding aids online, the best places to search were NUCMC (the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections), RLIN (Research Libraries Information
Network), and DAMRUS (Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States). Many large research libraries own published guides to manuscript collections at other repositories but the labor-intensive searching is limited to how extensively the collections are indexed, how recent the publication, and if a repository even published a guide. Now, NUCMC, DAMRUS, and NIDS (National Inventory of Documentary Resources in the United States) are available as a CD-ROM and online as ArchivesUSA from Chadwyck-Healey.

RLIN led me to the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and to manuscript collections at Duke University. It also brought me to the Keeneland Library at the Keeneland Race Course in Lexington, Kentucky that I visited twice while on vacation. While Keeneland doesn’t collect manuscripts, it does have fine photograph collections, scrapbooks of clippings, and racing books and periodicals unavailable elsewhere.

Whenever I identified a repository with potentially valuable collections pertinent to my research, I always wrote to them first, explained what my research was about, what I needed to use in their collections, and my expected date of arrival.
To place Florida racing in context of what was happening in other parts of the country, I knew I needed to include information about tracks in Alabama, Louisiana, the Carolinas, Virginia, New Jersey, and New York. Although I didn’t work on or write my dissertation chronologically, it is organized that way. I used conferences and vacations to take side trips to visit repositories. I’m like a dog that has to stop at every fire hydrant and tree; I planned each vacation around as many repositories as I could fit in the itinerary without driving my husband over the edge of tolerance. And still I heard, “What time will you be finished?” and four hours later, “Are you done yet?”

When MARAC met down the road in Albany, I drove here to Saratoga Springs and spent a day in the National Museum of Racing and at the public library. While the museum did not collect manuscripts at that time, their library had books and periodicals not owned by other libraries.

Toward the end of my research, when I was working at the University of Virginia, they acquired the library of Marion DuPont Scott, a noted horsewoman and racing stable owner. This book collection, like many others, is not available through interlibrary loan thus necessitating a personal visit.
Outside of traditional libraries and archives, the tracks themselves, racing associations, and regulatory agencies contain a wealth of original resources. Some of the Florida racetracks have their own library mainly consisting of scrapbooks of clippings but others have photographs, racing programs, and press releases—all part of the Publicity Department. The Thoroughbred Racing Association office on Long Island, New York, documented its history in a book and maintains its organizational records. The Florida State Racing Commission records in the Florida Division of Pari-Mutuel Regulation offices in Miami, later transferred to the state archives, provided a wealth of information about the early attempts to regulate betting and the construction and licensing of racetracks.

While we know of the most famous racetracks built in the Miami area in the 1920s and 1930s—Hialeah, Gulfstream, and the defunct Tropical Park—tracks existed in other parts of the state in the late 1800s into the 1910s in Pensacola, Jacksonville, Orlando, and Tampa. Visits to the public and university libraries and historical societies in these cities exposed primary and secondary sources of local interest not listed in the national databases—everything from racing programs to descriptions of the long-forgotten tracks in local history books and transcripts from oral history interviews.
Because racing and betting have been controversial, citizens opposed to the sport voiced their opinions in letters to Florida governors. The Florida State Archives houses the governors’ records and the legislative papers documenting the debates and votes for and against part-mutuel betting. In addition, opposition came from organized religious groups whose published conference minutes provide a glimpse into their thinking. On the local level, the Historical Association of Southern Florida in Miami not only has personal papers of individuals involved in developing the area but Chamber of Commerce minutes and county sheriff’s department papers concerned with criminal activity at the racetracks.

Organized crime’s involvement in Florida horseracing is touched upon in books about individual criminals such as Meyer Lansky but being a federal offense brings in government documents and Senator Estes Kefauver’s commission report on organized crime for the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce.

While there often are books written about the well-to-do owners (Wideners, Whitneys, and Vanderbilts) and their personal and business papers may reside in some of our repositories, the lives of the track workers are harder to document. Some famous trainers and literate jockeys either wrote autobiographies (such as trainer Woody Stephens and jockey Tod
Sloan) or were the subject of biographers. But the vast majority of the shedrow horsemen lead itinerant lives, traveling a seasonal racing circuit from state to state. Contemporary newspaper accounts reveal the comings and goings of trainers and jockeys, their winning streaks, and their life-threatening or fatal accidents.

Sports historians rely heavily on newspapers often as the sole record for detailed accounts of activities. But, as most of us are aware from the reportage following anything we’ve been involved in or from an interview, reporters put their own unique spin on information. Early sports coverage was less reporting and more advertising or publicity written by the promoter to attract business. So, while we can accept most of the facts on who ran and who won, the descriptions of record-breaking crowds need corroborating evidence from letters, diaries, or racetrack attendance figures.

Photographs reveal much more than mere words. “Beautiful Hialeah” Park Race Course began life with a “grandstand and clubhouse look[ing] out over red and green barns and the usual litter of stable gear and rub rags hanging on wash lines.” The image of a “mustard-yellow oval around the dusty brown infield, situated on a snake-infested stretch of suburban Everglades” is all the more vivid when viewing a photograph of rows of early 1920s automobiles hub-deep in the sandy parking area.
Racetrack promoters and owners photographed their tracks, had postcards made to sell, captured the horses crossing the finish line, and posed the owner with his or her victorious horse and jockey in the winner’s circle. When I was a kid Jim Raftery photographed races at New Jersey’s Monmouth Park. Now both he and his daughter Peggy make their living as freelance track photographers who sell the images to newspapers. Turfotos is another source for racetrack photographs.

Postcard collections are an underutilized source of visual information. One enterprising fan, Cindy Pierson, designed a website called Your Mining Co. Guide to Horse Racing (http://horseracing.miningco.com/msub10.htm) containing images of old postcards and racehorses. In Florida, for example, the Florida Photographic Collection in the state archives holds many photographs donated by professionals and amateurs. The Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division also houses images of racing. Motion pictures vividly portray racing action from the early part of the twentieth century. The Kentucky Horse Park and International Museum of the Horse in Lexington not only operates a museum but has a 3,000-volume library as well. Anyone specializing in the Kentucky Derby should not overlook the Kentucky Derby Museum library in Louisville. Both museums have web sites (http://www.imh.org/khp/ and


My research experiences are limited to the sources I needed to write my dissertation on Florida racing. But every state in the MARAC region boasts one or more racetracks with a history of racing, some predating Florida's. If you are interested in "the sport of kings" there's plenty of research begging to be done about Gravesend, Monmouth Park, Liberty Bell, Delaware Park, Pimlico, Charles Town, and Fairfield.