

Pine Ville Race Course History ~

Early in their history, South Carolinians began to take a very marked and practical interest in the sports of the turf. The earliest notice of public racing in the colony appeared in the South Carolina Gazette, February 1, 1734, and the first race was run on Charleston Neck on the first Tuesday in February 1734. This was many years ahead of Virginia, where the first public racing took place in 1753.

The planters of Berkeley County were among the first to undertake the breeding and raising of thoroughbred horses, the stock being kept up to a high standard in the colony by importations from England, beginning about 1747, some of which had made fine records before being brought to South Carolina. There were several who went into the business on an extensive scale. As early as 1761, Daniel Ravenel, who bred almost entirely from imported stallions, developed an extensive breeding establishment on his Wantoot Plantation, which continued until 1785. Peter Sinkler was another colonial planter who went largely into the business, and when the British raided (his) Lifeland Plantation on Santee River during the American Revolution, they carried away "sixteen blooded horses and twenty-eight blooded mares and colts."

Some of the other planters in Berkeley County who raised, and in some cases trained, thoroughbred horses during a long period were: Frank Huger, of Midway; Nicolas Harleston, of Bossis; Henry Laurens, of Mepkin; Robert Hume, of Goose Creek; William Sinkler, of Eutaw; Major Isaac Harleston, of Irishtown; John Huger, of The Hagan (who lost to the British "twelve valuable brood mares, five fillies, and ten colts"), P. Gaillard Stoney, of Medway; and Colonel James Ferguson, of Dockon. The famous racing mare, Albine, was raised at Dockon by Colonel Ferguson, and began her racing career under the auspices of Mr. Stoney. This mare scored a great victory on the turf on the Charleston course in February 1861, when she beat Planet, owned by Mr. Doswell of Virginia, and at that time, the most famous racehorse in the South. Albine's record in that race has never been beaten on the American turf. Two four-mile heats were run, and the official time was: for the first heat, 7 minutes, 36 ½ seconds, and for the second heat, 7 minutes, 42 ½ seconds.

The South Carolina Jockey Club was the oldest such organization in the United States. Races were held successively on the York (1735), New Market (1760), and Washington courses (1792) at Charleston. But there were several other courses outside of Charleston, viz., at Strawberry, Pineville, and Bluford Plantation. The course at Strawberry appears to have been in operation as

early as 1770, and it was used by many prominent turf-men throughout the state until 1822.

Probably the most in-depth description of a Course was taken from a very rare hardback book owned by my Eutawville cousin, William Henry Sinkler V, *History of the Turf in South Carolina*, where author John Irving states, "There was no 'gambling' at these races. Pineville is, and always has been, a very popular meeting. It has many attractive and peculiar features. It is a meeting conducted entirely unlike any other we know of in our country. It is aristocratic in its character, or, we ought rather to say, the company in attendance is always of so select an order, composed of the gentry of the immediate neighborhood, that it resembles a large united family party, rather than the promiscuous throng of all sorts and conditions of people it is usual to find congregated on a race ground in other places."

"We think the name of this interesting meeting ought to be changed from "Pine Ville Races" to "Goodwood Races," after the most fashionable, and, perhaps, delightful place of meeting at present in England. The Course at Pine Ville not only resembles that famous and popular *locale* (we have alluded to) in situation, being surrounded by a fine park or wood, but the company is likewise always so *good*, that we cannot but come to the conclusion that the name of "Good-Wood" very appropriately applies to it."

"At Goodwood (being private property), 'the sacred precincts' are guarded with the utmost vigilance by the Duke of Richmond, part of whose domain it is, and who suffers no gambling booth or tent, or any thimble or gaming tables, of any description, to be erected; and constables, employed specially for the purpose, have strict instructions to apprehend all persons so offending, or gaming in any other way whatever. At Pine Ville, the same rules and surveillance are observed. In fact, everything is conducted with the strictest decorum and refinement; indeed, so much so, that if it were not for the name of the thing, the most pious and rigid moralist could attend the races without being offended in the slightest, nor be able to take exception to any of the proceedings going on around him."

"During race week, the most jovial conviviality abounds in the neighborhood. To write on this subject, however, to persons who know society only as it exists in other parts of the United States, is like pointing out the beauties of nature to a blind man; he may hear, but cannot comprehend your meaning. Here you see a people – a primitive people standing by themselves – a type of the feudal past – living upon the lands of their fathers, marrying and intermarrying, continuing to practice that hospitality, and those

polite attentions to strangers, which their fathers practiced “in the good old times before them.”

The venerable Major Samuel Porcher (of Mexico Plantation), long regarded by his neighbors with an affectionate little short of idolatry – the kind-hearted Stephen G. Deveaux, and his son Marion, dearly beloved by all who knew them – these will be seen no more doing the honors there’ but Col. Dubose, one of the good old set, still survives to show what a gentleman of the old school was; and Mazyck Porcher, too, representing him whose name he bears, and representing him worthily, and many others, also, keep open house, and “fare sumptuously” every day – the brightness of their countenances, as newcomers drive up to their doors, indicating more plainly than words can express it, the cordial welcome they extend to all.”

A club was formed, known as *The Santee Jockey Club*, where the first meeting took place on March 7, 1791. Capt. John Palmer, of Richmond Plantation (my 4th Great-grandfather), was elected President. The Club increased tremendously, for in the second year there were ninety-seven members. Colonel Washington, Colonel Alston, Colonel Warren, and Colonel McPherson were all members and supporters of the Pine Ville club, all very distinguished *Turfites* of those days, as well as many of the local planters.

The Pineville Race Course’s date of origin is not known for sure, though Henry Mouzon’s Map of the St. Stephen’s Parish in Craven County shows the “Race Course” plainly in ca. 1771. A lead to the date of origin is that Daniel Ravenel imported stallions and began the breeding of fine horses at his Wantoot Plantation in 1761, showing an interest in sporting horses in Upper St. Johns Parish.

The course at Pineville, one mile in length, was laid out by Colonel Hezekiah Maham, our American Revolutionary War Patriot, who was born, lived, and died here in St. Stephen’s Parish. The race-course’s name was later called *The St. Stephen’s Race Course*. The location was described as being "a plain, a little to the northeast of Pine Ville, in the center of which is a large Savannah pond, which never growing trees upon it, enables persons from any point to see horses on any portion of the track."

According to *Memoirs of Porcher*, by the year 1831, the *Pineville Jockey Club* was "rather a humble affair when compared with other clubs in the state. None of the people had any sporting propensities, and it was kept up rather from a feeling of reverence for an old institution than from any genuine love of the sport. The purses now are very small. The race on the

first day was two miles, and one mile on the second." This was quite contrary to thirty or so years prior. However, Pine Ville was one of less than twenty places in the state where race meetings were held annually. Subsequent decades later must have seen some renewal of enthusiasm, for an observer in 1860 referred to the prize of "Silver Pitcher \$100."

During the 1850's the Jockey Club did not put up prizes, apparently, for as many races as the company would have enjoyed. A 'subscription list' for the "purse" are shown in the *Ravenel Papers* for the years 1855, 1856, and 1857, and a sampling below:

"Sport" Mile Race 1856 -

We the undersigned pledge ourselves to pay (on the first day of the Pine Ville Races 1856) the sum opposite our names to constitute a "Purse" for a mile Race opened to all *untrained horses*, to be run as a Second Race on the second day of the Pine Ville Races. A "mile and Repeat," "Post entrance," "Catch weights." Entrance \$5.00. Entrance money to be thrown into the Purse.

Thomas P. Ravenel	\$1	P.P. Bonneau	\$1	Wm. H. Cain	\$1
R.S. Porcher	"	W. H. Sinkler	"	S. J. Legare	"
R. P. Smith	"	J. B. Moore	"	K. Simons, jun	"
C. Fitzsimons	"	Wm. F. Ravenel	"	J. Gaillard, jun	"
B.M. Warley	"	P. C. Kirk	"	P.E. Porcher	"
A. F. Porcher	"	E. Dubose	"	I.M. Dwight	"
J. E. Dubose	"	P. G. Snowden	"	J. L. Porcher	"
Jas Palmer	"	T. F. Porcher	"	Eugene Gaillard	"
I. S. White	"	Peter Gourdin	"	P.R. Porcher	"
S. Warren Nelson	"	C. Gaillard	"	J.B. Richardson	"
K. S. Palmer	"	T. T. Gourdin	"	S. W. Palmer	"

In the book *Ravenel Records* is provided an interesting recollection of the St. Stephen Club, and other 'clubs.' It states as follows:

"A very prominent feature of the social life of the planters was their Club meetings. Some of the liveliest anecdotes are told in connection with these club dinners, and it is said that tales of horses ridden into the clubhouse and made to leap over the dining-table are not imaginary. Nor is it fiction that on one occasion a horse was ridden up-stairs to the second story of a house, and special appliances had to be used in order to get him out through a window and over a shed."

(My cousin) William Henry Sinkler, of Eutawville, has in his possession a beautiful silver pitcher, won by his 2nd Great-grandfather William Sinkler at an annual race in Pineville in the year 1839. Daniel Clarke,

of Oakland Club in Pineville, has in his possession another silver pitcher won at this race-course. Clarke's grandfather was very active in the sport of horse racing in the 1930's, but that's a story for another time.

By Keith Gourdin

References:

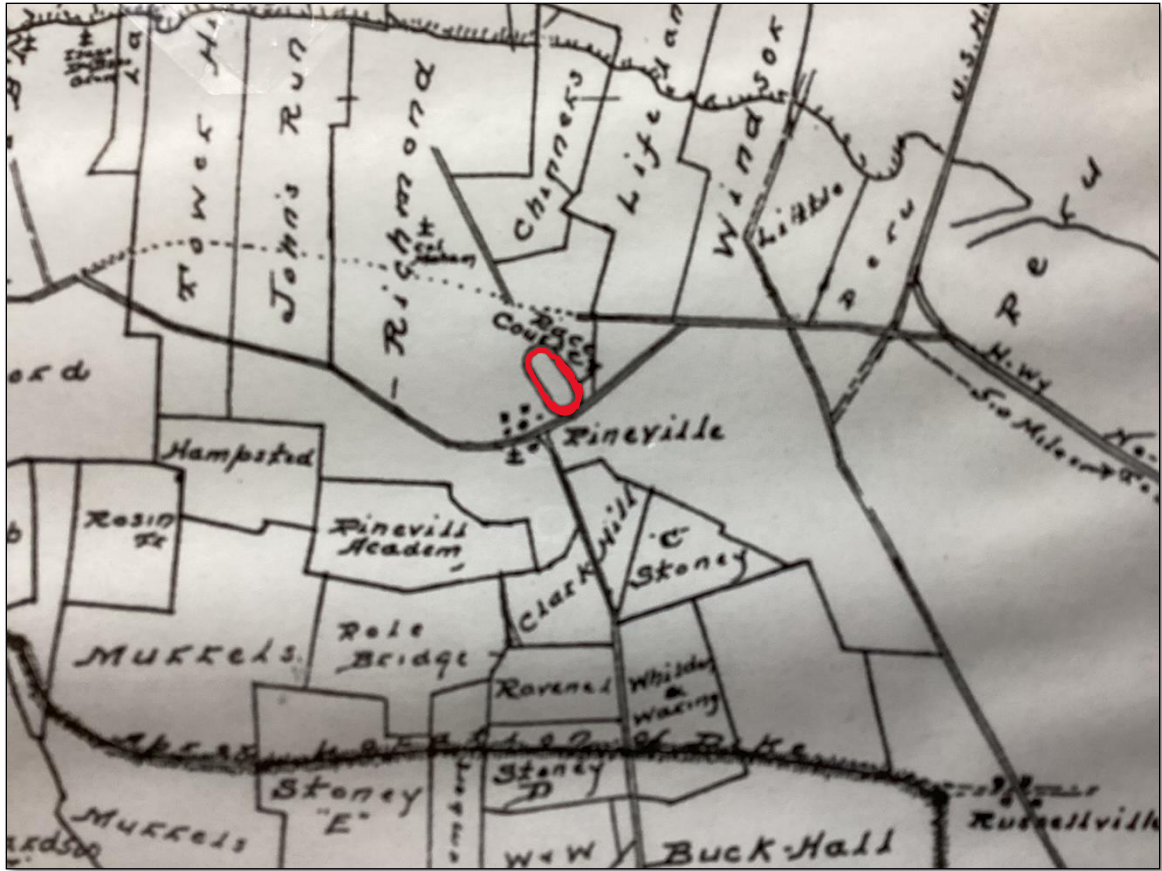
**Belvidere*, by Ann Sinkler Fishburne.

*History from collections of Keith Gourdin.

**History of the Turf in South Carolina, The South Carolina Jockey Club* by John Irving, Russell & Jones, Charleston, S.C., 1857.

**South Carolina Historical Magazine, Memoirs of Porcher*, 46:89.

**Ravenel Records* by Henry Edmund Ravenel.



*Originally called the Pine Ville Race Course,
name later changed to St. Stephens Race Course*