

There Used to Be a New York Racetrack There: But Where Was It?

All of us who are involved in some way with horse racing like to talk about the rich history of the sport – especially in New York State. We all may know that Long Island is the cradle of horse racing. The New York Times, a century ago, could write, “From the beginning of the sport there, away back in 1665, Long Island has never been without a track for organized racing.”¹

Yet, while we give lip service to all this racing history, we pay scant attention to where these racetracks actually were situated and what went on at these tracks. For example, it has been fifty years since horse racing was last conducted at Jamaica Racetrack. Yet, nobody whatsoever paid any attention to the anniversary of this closing of the track. We just don’t do racing history very well.

Here is a short, but hopefully accurate summary (We have not buried ourselves in the libraries and historical societies across New York State.) of where the abandoned racetracks of New York State are located.

1. The Newmarket Course – Site of the first racing in America, this was located on the Hempstead Plain (or Salisbury Plain) in Nassau County. The area did not have many trees making it possible to have a site for horse racing. As soon as the British took over the New York colony, they began racing. The general belief is that the racecourse was located near the Garden City Hotel site at Stewart Avenue and Hilton Avenue in Garden City.
2. The Union Course – This was the first dirt track in the nation opened in 1821 and was the site of the famous Eclipse – Sir Henry match race in 1825, as well as the site of many of the major match races of the first half of the 19th century. Its site is in Woodhaven in Queens County. It was located between Atlantic Avenue, 84th Street, Jamaica Avenue, and 78th Street. This map from 1872 gives a pretty good idea of the location of the track. <http://www.geographicus.com/P/AntiqueMap/Woodhaven-beers-1873>
3. The Eclipse Course This was also known as the Centerville Course and was opened in 1825. It hosted both harness and thoroughbred races in the second quarter of the 19th century. It was also in Woodhaven located east of Woodhaven Boulevard and South of Rockaway Boulevard. This is very close to current Aqueduct, and in fact, Centerville Street is part of the eastern border of Aqueduct Racetrack.

¹ “Where the Ponies Run for the Masses,” New York Times, May 31, 1908.

4. The Fashion Course – Often referred to as being either in Newtown or West Flushing, this racetrack- which focused on harness racing - was in existence from 1856 to the late 1860’s. It hosted a number of major trotting events often featuring the horse Dexter, the “King of the Turf.” Dexter Park, located not surprisingly in Woodhaven, is allegedly named for the trotter, and the site of the park was where Dexter’s trainer/driver, Hiram Woodruff had his stables. The Fashion Course was also the site of some of baseball’s earliest games.

The track was located in present day Corona, off National Street near 44th Avenue. It is just west of Flushing Meadow Park, the site of the World’s Fairs of 1939 -1940 and 1964 -1965.

5. Jerome Park – This was the first major racetrack built after the Civil War. It ran thoroughbreds from 1866 – 1894 in the west Bronx. It is now the site of the Jerome Park Reservoir which was built to replace the track, as well as Lehman College. Besides the reservoir and the college, the streets in the area of the track were Sedgwick Avenue, Kingsbridge Road, Mosholu Parkway and Jerome Avenue.² Jerome Avenue was named for Leonard Jerome, who built Jerome Park. The Belmont Stakes, the Jerome Handicap, and the Manhattan Handicap, and the Champagne Stakes originated at Jerome Park. For city park information, see <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/X137/>
6. Morris Park – Morris Park, in the center of the Bronx, Jerome Park. It ran until 1904 and was, in turn replaced by current Belmont Park. The Morris Park neighborhood in the Bronx is largely carved out of what was the former racetrack. It is slightly east of the Bronx Zoo. The borders are Sackett Avenue to Pelham Parkway and Williamsbridge Road to Bronxdale Avenues. The clubhouse was on Fowler and Van Nest and, and the grandstand was on Fowler and Bogart. Besides hosting the Jerome Park features, Morris Park started the Metropolitan Handicap, the Toboggan, and the Matron.
7. Gravesend – There were three major thoroughbred tracks in south Brooklyn that were located in close proximity to each. All stated in the final quarter of the 19th century. All of them closed and never reopened after racing was shut down in New York in 1910. Of these three tracks, the furthest west of the tracks was Gravesend. It was situated in the Gravesend section of Brooklyn and was bordered on the south by Avenue U,³ on the north by Kings Highway, on the west by McDonald Avenue, and on the east by Ocean Parkway. The Brooklyn Handicap, the Gazelle, and the Astoria Stakes all derive from Gravesend.

² “The Big Jerome Park Reservoir,” New York Times, June 23, 1901.

³ In Brooklyn, the alphabet letters get higher as the avenues go further south.

8. Brighton Beach – Slightly south and east of Gravesend was Brighton Beach which was located near the ocean in Brighton Beach. It was located by Brighton 10th Street, Ocean Parkway, Coney Island Avenue, and by what is now Brighton Beach Boulevard. Brighton Beach probably was the least prominent of the Brooklyn tracks. Brighton Beach hosted harness racing in the early 20th century, and Dan Patch raced at the track. Dan Patch even established a world's record time of 1:59 for a pacing mile at Brighton Beach.⁴
9. Sheepshead Bay – Sheepshead Bay was probably the most prominent of the Brooklyn tracks. It encompassed much of what is now the current area of Sheepshead Bay. It was located northeast of Brighton Beach and southeast of Gravesend. It was between Gravesend Neck Road to the north, Voorhies Avenue⁵ to the south and Ocean Avenue (which would otherwise be 20th Street) to the east. Since the track was built by Leonard Jerome, there is a “Jerome Avenue” running by the track. Sheepshead Bay originated the Futurity and the Suburban. It also was unique in that it had a turf course. When turf racing ended at Sheepshead Bay, it virtually stopped in America until a turf course was constructed in Hialeah in the 1930's.
10. Jamaica – Jamaica Race Track ran from 1903-1959. The people's track was in south Jamaica in Queens. It was sold off to help pay for a reconstructed Aqueduct and for other improvements at the other turf properties. To get to Jamaica, you would take the train to the Locust Manor Station on the Long Island Rail Road. The Locust Manor stop is still in operation. Jamaica originated the Wood Memorial.

Jamaica is the site of Rochdale Village, which was at its creation the largest single cooperative housing community in the world. It is now the second largest cooperative community (to Co-Op City) encompassing 20 buildings 5,680 apartments, and approximately 25,000 residents. It is bordered by Baisley Boulevard, Bedell Street, 137th Avenue, and Guy R. Brewer Boulevard.

11. Roosevelt Raceway – This was the massive and historic harness track in Westbury which opened in 1940, reconstructed in 1957, and shuttered in 1988. It was located off Old Country Road and Post Avenue in Westbury. It was the major harness track in the nation, and its loss is still felt. For pictures of the track see http://www.flickr.com/photos/roosevelt_raceway/3183009265/. To remember Roosevelt, see <http://www.angelfire.com/ny2/sgtjeff/rr.html>
12. Kenilworth Park - Kenilworth Park was operated by the Buffalo Racing Association as a thoroughbred track from 1902 -1908. It was located in the Town of Tonawanda at the

⁴ “Dan Patch Beat Record,” New York Times, August 20, 1903.

⁵ Voorhies Avenue is south of Avenue Z.

corner of Kenmore Avenue and Niagara Falls Boulevard. It, too, was a victim of anti-horse racing legislation. See generally

http://wnyheritagepress.org/photos_week_2004/kenilworth/kenilworth.htm

13. Good Time Park – Good Time Park was the mile harness racing track in Goshen, New York. Unlike Historic Track in Goshen, which has survived, Good Time Park, which was in southern Goshen off Route 17M, has not. Good Time Park was the far more prominent of the two tracks. Under the management of Billy Cane, it hosted the Grand Circuit beginning in 1927. It was the site of the Hambletonian from 1930-1956, except for 1943 when the race was held at Yonkers. For more information, take a look at http://www.hambletonian.org/archive_hambo_history.html; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Time_Park; and <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1073991/index.htm>
14. Others - There is no need to review Empire City which conducted thoroughbred racing until 1942. Yonkers Raceway is on the current site of Empire City which would explain why the current racino facility is labeled Empire City at Yonkers Raceway. Similarly, the current Tioga Downs is on the site of the former Tioga Park which hosted quarterhorse racing in the late 1970's. The state's other quarterhorse facility was Parr Meadows./ Suffolk Meadows in Yaphank in the town of Brookhaven in Suffolk County. It was located right off the Long Island Expressway near the William Floyd Parkway. See <http://maps.google.com/maps?hl=en&ie=UTF-8&q=suffolk+meadows+yaphank&fb=1&split=1&gl=us&cid=9401482512188909900&li=imd>