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African American Professional Horsemen of Keswick

A History of the Significant Contributions Made by Local Black Horsemen

By Elizabeth H. Sutton

On May 12, 2022, in Keswick, VA, the Keswick Hunt Club hosted a special reception to raise funds for the renovation of the Rosenwald School St. John Family Life and Fitness Center in Cobham, VA. The St. John-Rosenwald School, built in 1922–1923, is one of the seven schools constructed in Albemarle County for black elementary school children. Kenneth Wheeler, Jr. MFH and Hunt Club president Peter Taylor organized the event for friends and professional associates in honor of an African American professional horseman, Carroll Bates, and to acknowledge the contributions made by area black horsemen to the success of prominent horse farms in Keswick. Bates, along with several local professional horsemen honored at this reception, were all alumni of schools that offered education for blacks during the era of racial segregation in schools that persisted until the mid 1960s.

Historically wealthy industrialists from cities in the Midwest and northeast like St. Louis, Cleveland, Buffalo, and New York City came to Virginia to buy farms, attracted by the milder climate and availability of labor to work the land and handle the livestock. In the early days, Gordonsville, Keswick, and Cobham were easily accessible. Trains had regular stops in small stations

near farms where Thoroughbred horses were bred and raised in Albemarle. Thoroughbred racing, horse shows and hunt competitions were very popular among wealthy white families whose leisure time and lifestyle allowed them to ride for pleasure, fox hunt for sport, and to show for competition as well as to enhance the reputations of their breeding and training operations. By the mid-twentieth century, the horse racing and sporting industry was thriving in Virginia, home to millions of dollars of wealth in horseflesh that were entrusted to the care and management of people whose ancestry traced back to colonial times.

Fox hunting clubs flourished throughout the US with particular success during the early 20th century, and in Virginia, the open land and varied terrain were particularly favorable for the sport. Hunting horses and exceptionally talented show animals were bought and sold among the white families who owned the farms where they were raised, handled, trained, and ridden by what was in the horse industry a skilled and predominantly black workforce. Hunt team competitions at prominent horse shows were a “big thing,” according to Virginia Sports Hall of Fame horsewoman Peggy Augustus. Hunt masters served as hunter show judges, and spectators came in numbers to the Pennsylvania National





Lifelong horseman Carroll Bates was born in Barboursville and worked as an exercise rider and assistant trainer.

Image courtesy of Cindy Chandler and Cismont Manor Farm.



Carroll Bates, photo Rip Payne.
Courtesy Marieka Williams

Fox hunting clubs flourished throughout the US with particular success during the early 20th century, and in Virginia, the open land and varied terrain were particularly favorable for the sport.

Horse Show in Harrisburg, PA, and America's oldest indoor horse show, the National Horse Show, held at Madison Square Garden in NYC. Members of the local Keswick Hunt Club were frequent winners, and framed photographs of these riders and champion foxhunters lined the walls of the hunt club.

Carroll Bates (1937–2022) was a lifelong horseman born in Barboursville who worked as an exercise rider and assistant trainer for local white trainers. Black riders like Bates were among the professional grooms that fox hunted, riding in the back of the hunt field. The black riders could exercise and train but were rarely seen riding in the show ring unless at a local black horse show or a groom's class. At local shows such as the Keswick Horse Show, a popular event was the groom's class, where riders rode their owners horses in a jumping competition for the prize money gathered by passing the hat among spectators. Carroll Bates was a frequent winner of prize money, which was a sizable benefit to add to the modest wage paid by the stable. He rode many of the champion hunters of his day, including the nationally famous Cold Climate, owned by Mrs. J. Deane Rucker of Grosse Pointe, MI. Cold Climate won the conformation hunter championship four times, including the Washington International Horse Show in 1961. "He was the head guy in charge at Jack Payne's stable in Gordonsville in 1956," recalled Keswick resident Walter J. "Jimmy" Lee, USEF "R" rated judge and an internationally renowned hunter judge, trainer, and breeder. "Like

many of those (black) riders, he never had any real training. He just learned by doing it, from experience—they rode by feel. They guided a horse rather than riding," he said. "They exercised and trained horses at the farm and prepped them for the shows. The grooms lived with the horses at the shows and took tremendous pride in their horses, they worked hard on getting them in top shape and looking perfect. There was a friendly competition about whose horse was in better condition and whose looked the best."

Carroll Bates left the Payne stable to spend more time with his family in Barboursville. Bates took a new opportunity closer to home going to work for accomplished horseman and cattle farmer Peter Howe, helping train thoroughbreds and manage the cattle operation at Howe's Red Horse Farm in 1964. While Peter Howe travelled to train horses for internationally renowned Virginia horse breeder Mrs. Marion DuPont Scott, of Montpelier, and New York, Carroll Bates and John Minor were responsible and took care of the farm.

Remembering Carroll Bates, retired equestrian Cindy Chandler recalled, "He could operate any machinery needed to keep the hundreds of acres usable for good farming. He knew how to repair all



Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Wheeler, Sr., with Archie Bowler, Jr. and Leroy Quarles, Sr., after their triumphant circuit in Michigan and Kentucky with Isgilde and Showdown, 1967. Photo by Hank Cohen, courtesy of Cismont Manor Farm, published in *The Chronicle of the Horse*, March 24, 1995.

of the machinery too. He liked being with the cattle and planting and harvesting crops better than being a horseman, he once told me,” said Chandler. He was a solid horseman, “a person with common sense yet open to learning new ways to make animals, nature, and humans better.”

Carroll Bates passed away on May 15, 2022, after a long illness, just three days after the event at the Keswick Hunt Club. His sons Hilearthan D. Bates and Donovan L. Bates accepted the praise and tributes offered by Kenneth Wheeler on behalf of their father along with the other families of alumni of the St. John School, to the contribution to historical wealth and prominence of the area farms. The photographs of these black horsemen have been added to the Keswick Hunt Club gallery of notable equestrians that remind us of the champions of days gone by with the honor they rightly deserve.

**Working with the Wheelers:
The Championship Duo at Cismont Manor Farm, Archie Bowler, Jr. and Leroy Quarles, Sr.**

Cismont Manor Farm in Keswick, home of the Wheeler family, has a significant history in Albemarle County. The farm was



Archie Bowler, Jr., Tommy Serio, and Carroll Bates at Keswick Horse Show in 1986. Photo by Louise Serpa. Courtesy Cindy Chandler.

formed from the Cloverfield plantation in 1820 as a home for Peter Minor Meriwether and his wife, Mary Walker Meriwether. The Meriwethers initially lived in a tavern on the property, later serving as a home for Rev. Ebenezer Boyden. The tavern no longer stands, became known as the Cottage Rectory, and Boyden conducted a school there. The Meriwethers built the present residence in 1836. Sallie Busch Wheeler, daughter of Adolphus Busch

III and Catherine Gibbs Milliken Busch, acquired the farm in 1952. In partnership with her husband for the next sixty years, they bred, trained, and exhibited some of the country’s top show horses, gaining prominence throughout Virginia and nationally as a premier show horse stable. Many gifted horses from the Keswick area competed and won on the hunter show circuit extending as far north as Toronto, west to California, and south as Florida. Many grooms, like Archie Bowler, Jr. and Leroy Quarles Sr., had the opportunity to travel with the show horses. They drove



The professional team at Cismont Manor Farm, c. 1967. "Butch" Thomas Dickerson, groom, Sam Branch, home stable manager, Kenneth M. Wheeler, Sr. owner and trainer, Archie Bowler, Jr., groom, show stable manager, van driver, Leroy Quarles, groom. Photo courtesy Cismont Manor Farm.

transport vans, trained, groomed, and worked with the horses on the ground, walking them in hand to cool down after training and to offer exercise during rest stops on long trips to out-of-town shows. On the road, they lived with the horses, bunking in the empty vans or show stable tack rooms set up with cots for sleeping. In later years, notable stables like Cismont Manor Farm provided a camper for the grooms. According to John Coles, Joint Master of Foxhounds for the Orange County Hunt in Middleburg, the Cismont camper "was pretty high-end accommodation for those days." The duo of Leroy Quarles Sr., and Archie Bowler, Jr. were two hardworking grooms that benefitted from the accommodations.

Leroy Quarles (1928–2016) was raised by Ned Quarles and Mary Ruth Wilkerson Quarles, in Lindsay, VA. Mrs. Quarles was a teacher at St. John Rosenwald, where

both Archie Bowler, Jr. and Leroy attended elementary school. Like Bowler, Quarles was independent and self-educated, and he left high school early to work in a number of jobs before becoming a professional groom. He worked for various show-horse owners during his lifetime, including Mrs. Pansy Poe, and traveled in winter to work at her Pebble Hill Plantation in Thomasville, GA. Quarles worked with Archie Bowler, Jr. at Cismont Manor Farm in Keswick, later grooming for Elizabeth Busch Burke at Meadow Bluff Farm in Free Union.

Archie Bowler, Jr. (1935–2003) was the eldest of four children raised in Albemarle County. His sister Becky Bowler Kinney said that he "wasn't particularly interested in school." His real education in the horse business came through hard work and experience, training "on the job," that began when he went to work at age 18. When Old Keswick Farm was purchased

by Mr. and Mrs. Ellsworth Augustus in 1952 he joined Kenneth Wheeler. He later moved his career to Cismont Manor Farm, working for the Wheelers as a groom, driver and manager for over forty years, retiring in 2001. In 1998 he was honored with the American Hunter and Jumper Foundations' Award for Groom of the Year. Bowler managed the show stable when they were on the road. He drove vans to the shows, groomed, braided and cared for the Wheelers top show horses, including Isgilde, the Wheelers favorite. She was one of the top working hunters in this country for many years.

In the 1960s and '70s, when the nation was in turmoil with high civil rights disputes, segregation, and racial tensions, work in the rural areas around Keswick went on in relative peace. Some of the better employment available at the time was to be found on wealthy horse farms, and working with show and race horses were

Archie Bowler, Jr. and Isgilde at her formal retirement ceremony held at the National Horse Show, Madison Square Garden, in 1970. This beautiful 15.2 bay Hanoverian mare was imported to North America from Germany. Isgilde won many accolades during her lifetime and achieved the prestigious honor of being inducted into the National Show Hunter Hall of Fame and the Virginia Horse Show Association Hall of Fame. Isgilde lived at Cismont Manor after her retirement until the age of 31. Photo courtesy Cismont Manor Farm.



highly valued and well respected by whites and blacks. Despite the hardships and racial discrimination experienced traveling and working long hours away from home, the men endured and prospered by working odd jobs in their off hours. Family member Becky Bowler Kinney, president of the St. John Family Life and Fitness Center, said her brother Archie, like his father, was an entrepreneur. He supplemented his income and supported a family with independent work, including being a barber. Mrs. Kinney shared, "He cut hair for local customers and had a side business mowing grass." Leroy Quarles, Jr. remarked that his father built two extra rooms for their home. "He did the whole thing, roof and all. He taught himself plumbing, roofing, and fixing machinery. He could do just about anything and he taught me all I know about being an independent business owner and contractor." These men enjoyed a high level of respect and recognition for their work from their co-workers and employers. Leroy Quarles, Jr. said in a recent interview by phone from his home in Fayetteville, NC. "When I was a teenager working at Cismont Manor with my dad, Mrs. Wheeler would often tell me to listen to my father and do what he told me, he knew what he was doing." He knew he was valued and never heard his father complain about his job. "We got up every day and looked forward to going to work," he recalled. He said that when they were away from home, he was aware that the Cismont manor staff were luckier than others. "We were paid extra for expenses," he said. "I realized pretty early on at the shows that other grooms were not (as well off), so we just kept quiet about it. We were

Sam Branch's experience and knowledge of equine conformation were well recognized in the show horse business and qualified him to serve as a judge. Photo courtesy Olivia Branch and Cismont Manor Farm.



Sam Branch exhibiting champion hunter Stocking Stuffer. Sam conditioned and managed many famous horses. Stocking Stuffer and Ruxton were inducted into the National Show Hunter Hall of Fame in 2002. Photo courtesy of Olivia Branch and Cismont Manor Farm.



Boo Coles, bound for the World Driving Championship competition in England. Photo courtesy Bunny Camp Gibbons.



Sonny Jordan, photo by Robert McClanahan, Warrenton VA. Courtesy of Peggy Augustus.

Black horsemen were instrumental to the success of prominent horse farms in Keswick. The photographs of these black horsemen have been added to the Keswick Hunt Club gallery of notable equestrians that remind us of the champions of days gone by with the honor they rightly deserve.



Junior Cunningham with Alive, Devon Horse Show. Photo courtesy Cismont Manor Farm.



John E. "Shorty" Minor, (1939–2018), from Barboursville, worked with Carroll Bates.



Sylvester Brasfield, was the stable manager at Beau Val and Edgewood, working for owner Anthony "Tony" Rives in the 30s and 40s.

St. John-Rosenwald School Cobham, VA

St. John School in Albemarle County was one of the thousands of Rosenwald-funded schools built and operated to educate Black children across the rural South during segregation.

The St. John School in Cobham, VA, was built in 1922–1923. Through a partnership between African American intellectual Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, 5,000 Rosenwald Schools opened between 1917 and 1932, educat-

ing over 700,000 Black children across four decades. Although the St. John School closed in 1955, today, the congregants of the neighboring St. John Baptist Church and other community members are ensuring the former school and its history are preserved in perpetuity. The building continues to be a structure that serves those living in the rural Southwest Mountain district.

Through its non-profit, founded in 2011 to restore the historic structure, and

led by Rebecca Bowler Kinney, who attended the school before its closure, St. John Church is not only restoring the original structure but is also transforming the former school into an all-encompassing community center. The center is slated to include a fitness room, auditorium, computer lab, and an exhibit commemorating the school's history. The St. John School is one of seven Rosenwald schools constructed in Albemarle County (all are still standing) and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2018. Learn more about the effort to rehabilitate the structure at stjohnfamilylife.org.



St. John-Rosenwald School, Cobham, 1940. Photo courtesy St. John Family Life and Fitness Center, Fisk University archives.

treated like family,” he said, “one time in particular, I was riding with Mrs. Wheeler back from one of the shows, and we were going through someplace in the South. We stopped to get something to eat, and I wasn’t allowed in the restaurant. Mrs. Wheeler went in, got the food, and we ate in the car.”

Percy “Sam” Branch, Jr. (1909–1989) grew up in Keswick and worked at Tall Oaks for Mrs. Jamie Terrell. He and his wife Elizabeth worked at Cismont Manor for over 40 years, managing the home and overseeing the feeding and handling of the young horses and the stable of show horses that were conditioned, groomed, trained and campaigned for sale across the country.

According to Dr. Reynolds Cowles, DVM, Sam was “the dean of care and feeding” the horses, preparing them to be shown “on the line” in perfect condition—to exhibit their physical conformation—key to success in the breeding competitions at shows. Kenneth Wheeler, Jr. recalled working in the barn along-

side Branch, with each horse being given different amounts according to their individual needs. At the 2022 Hunt Club event, Wheeler, speaking to an assembly of guests to pay tribute to Sam Branch, recalled being told, “‘give this one this,’ demonstrating an armful of hay, then we’d go down to the next stall, and he’d say, ‘this one should get that’ and add another handful of hay. The adjustments in feeding were fine-tuned and might change from day to day, week to week. He knew each individual horse and what they needed. I’d say, ‘how in the world am I supposed to remember all this?’ According to Wheeler, Sam Branch was ever dependable, attending to the barn and horses every day 365 days a year, and he never missed a night check.”

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Resources

Keswick Hunt Club
Foxhunting, Equestrian Events,
and Venue Rental
keswickhuntclub.com

119th Keswick Horse Show
May 17–May 21
Virginia Horse Center, Lexington, VA
keswickhorseshow.com

The Grace Church Historic Farm Tour
gracefarmtour.org

St. John Family Life and Fitness Center
stjohnfamilylife.org

Keswick Heritage Fund, Inc
keswickheritagefund.org

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