

The Search for Isaac Murphy's Parents

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During his brief life, nineteenth century jockey Isaac Murphy achieved the most impressive thoroughbred racing record in history.² Sports reporters covered every detail of his exciting, dangerous track life³ and speculated on the extent of his resulting wealth.⁴ Everything Murphy did was news. When he bought a large home in Lexington, Kentucky, *The New York Times* picked up the story.⁵ When he employed a valet for the racing season, it made the front page.⁶ On occasion, someone would write that he “was not born of slave parents,”⁷ but then offer nothing more about the early years of a man called “the shrewdest of the spurred and booted gentry,”⁸ Even Murphy's own accounts began with his first days in a training stable.⁹

Speculation about the name of Murphy's father and his birthplace began appearing in print shortly after his 1896 death, and has continued for more than a century. This search for Isaac Murphy's parents takes into account the most commonly held of these assumptions (presented below in *italics*).

James Burns

Isaac Murphy was born about 1861 in Fayette County, Kentucky.¹⁰ Named Isaac Burns,¹¹ he was the son of James Burns, a freedman¹² who entered the Union Army, was captured and taken to Camp Nelson,¹³ where he died a military prisoner.¹⁴

Murphy rode his first races under the name under the name I. Burns.¹⁵ Although he clearly used the name Burns in early adolescence, connecting him to a James Burns was difficult. No freedman named James Burns was found in Fayette County directories, tax records, census records, or newspaper indexes. Camp Nelson was a Union Army supply depot. If Murphy's father had died there as a prisoner of war, he was either being held by his own army for some reason, or served the Confederacy. But no military service record or Camp Nelson burial for an African American soldier named James Burns was located.

Green Murphy

Murphy's mother moved into Lexington where her father, Green Murphy lived and it was to gratify him that the jockey began using the name Murphy.¹⁶

The only likely Green Murphy was found on a Freedman's bank card dated 21 April 1873. The account holder was a self-employed housekeeper named America Burns, age 32, who named a husband, Jerry; a child, Isaac; father Green Murphy (dec'd.); mother Annie (dec'd.); a brother, James; and a sister, Annie.¹⁷

America Burns also had opened an earlier Freedman's bank account on 28 December 1870. Then age 29, she named her husband, Jerry (dead), and son, ~~Jerry~~ (sic) Isaac. She listed her parents, Green and Annie, a brother, James, and a sister, Annie.¹⁸ Although she had not noted in 1873 that her husband was dead, this card provided direct evidence that Jerry (presumably Burns), had died sometime earlier and that her son may have been known as Jerry as well. It now seemed entirely possible that America (née Murphy) Burns could be Isaac Murphy's mother and Jerry (presumably Burns) his father. The next step was to find out more about Jerry Burns.

Jerry Burns

A Jerry Skillman alias Jerry Burns served in the U.S. Colored Troops and died of “camp fever” while in service. There was considerable confusion about his death date, but a reconciliation in his service record held that 24 July 1864, exactly one month after his enlistment, was the correct date of his death. He was interred in Section C site 989 at Camp Nelson National Cemetery on 27 July 1864.¹⁹

On 7 April 1869, America Burns filed for a widow’s pension based on the service of Jerry Skillman alias Jerry Burns. In her application, she made sworn statement that:

- she married Jerry Burns alias Skillman in Bourbon County, Kentucky on 28 December 1859;
- her name before her marriage was America Murphy;
- her husband’s name at their marriage was Burns, but his army enlistment was in the name of his owner, Skillman;
- her husband died leaving one surviving child named Jerry Burns alias Skillman;
- the child Jerry Burns was born 2 January 1861 at Colonel John Brown’s residence in Bourbon County Kentucky; and
- her deceased husband left no minor children by a former marriage.²⁰

The application was approved, and America Burns drew a pension until her death in August 1879.²¹ In March 1890, Caroline (née Oliver) Skillman made a widow’s declaration for pension on the service of Jerry Skillman alias Jerry Burns. She died on 13 April 1891 before a determination was made.²² Her children then filed application, saying they were the soldier’s only surviving legitimate children. Their application was denied on the grounds that they were over the ages of 16 when the possible widow Skillman died.²³

Isaac Murphy’s Parents

This research confirms that the famous jockey was born into slavery and was first named Jerry, most likely for his father. It also confirms the identities of Isaac Murphy’s parents. Newspaper and online articles, monographs, vital statistics, subscription databases, and military service and pension records, were all used to build the following summary of findings:

America Murphy, a daughter of Annie and Green Murphy²⁴ was born about 1842 in Kentucky and died there in Fayette County during August 1879.²⁵ On 28 December 1859 she married²⁶ Jerry Burns alias Jerry Skillman.²⁷ He was born about 1834 in Bourbon County, Kentucky²⁸ and died 27 July 1864 at Camp Nelson, Jessamine County, Kentucky.²⁹ He may have married first Caroline Oliver about 1853.³⁰

The known child of America Murphy and Jerry Burns alias Jerry Skillman was:

- i. Jerry Burns alias Jerry Skillman alias Isaac Burns alias Isaac B. Murphy, born 2 January 1861 in Bourbon County, Kentucky³¹ and died in Fayette County, Kentucky on 12 February 1896.³² On 24 January 1883 he married Lucy Carr,³³ a daughter of Adam Carr and Susan Osborn.³⁴

The possible children of Caroline Oliver and Jerry Burns alias Jerry Skillman were:

- i. Alfred Skillman, born 29 November 1853³⁵
- ii. John Sanford Skillman, born 25 December 1856³⁶
- iii. Anna Bell Skillman, born 31 July 1858³⁷
- iv. William L. Skillman, born 3 March 1861.³⁸

Notes

¹ CG is a service mark of the Board for Certification of Genealogists.

² Betty Earle Borries, *Isaac Murphy: Kentucky's Record Jockey*, (Berea, Kentucky: Kentucky Imprints, 1988) and Kentucky Horse Park, "Isaac Burns Murphy, Legends of the Park" (<http://www.kyhorsepark.com/> : viewed 16 June 2008).

³ "Racing in Chicago Mud," *New York Times*, 28 June 1885, page 2.

⁴ See e.g., "Prominent People," *The Columbus Enquirer-Sun*, Columbus, Georgia, 26 November 1888, page 2, and "A High Priced Jockey," *Brooklyn Eagle*, Brooklyn New York, 12 July 1885.

⁵ "Jockey Murphy's New House," *New York Times*, 13 June 1887, page 1; citing dateline Lexington, Ky.

⁶ Brooklyn Public Library, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online, 1841-1902 Online*, database and images, (<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/> : accessed 15 August 2007), "Sporting News," 15 May 1886, page 1.

⁷ see e.g., "The Pig-Skin Bayard," *The Kansas City Star*, Kansas City, Missouri, 13 July 1886, page 2, column 3.

⁸ "The Backstretch," *Brooklyn Eagle*, Brooklyn, New York, 21 May 1882, page 3.

⁹ "Isaac Murphy. Biographical Sketch of the Great Lexington Jockey," *Lexington Leader*, Lexington, Kentucky, 20 March 1889, page 3, columns 2-4.

¹⁰ Kentucky. Fayette County, Death Certificates, Isaac B. Murphy, microfilm roll 1, certificate 1025, Kentucky Room, Lexington Public Library, Lexington, Kentucky.

¹¹ "Ike Murphy's New Name," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, Chicago, Illinois, 28 July 1891, page 3, column 3.

¹² Edward Hotaling, *The Great Black Jockeys*, (Rocklin, California: Forum, 1999), 239.

¹³ Robert Saunders and Monica Renau Saunders, *Black Winning Jockeys in the Kentucky Derby* (Jefferson, North Carolina: James, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 51.

¹⁴ Quintard Taylor, "Murphy, Isaac Burns (1861-1896)," BlackPast.org, (<http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/murphy-isaac-burns-1861-1896> : viewed 12 December 2008).

¹⁵ Betty Earle Borries, *Isaac Murphy: Kentucky's Record Jockey*, (Berea, Kentucky: Kentucky Imprints, 1988), 23.

¹⁶ "Isaac Murphy. A Memorial," L.P. Tarlton, *The Thoroughbred Record*, Lexington, Kentucky, 21 March 1896, page 136.

¹⁷ America Burns, bank card no. 1479 [bank not identified but almost certainly Lexington KY]; "Freedman's Bank Records, 1865-1874," digital image, Ancestry.com. (<http://www.ancestry.com>: 04 May 2007); citing "Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, 1865-1874, M816, 27 rolls." National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

¹⁸ America Burns, bank card no. 294 [bank not identified but almost certainly Lexington KY]; "Freedman's Bank Records, 1865-1874," digital image, Ancestry.com. (<http://www.ancestry.com>: 04 May 2007); citing "Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, 1865-1874, M816, 27 rolls." National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

¹⁹ Compiled service record, Jerry Skillman, Pvt., Co. C, 114 Reg't U.S. Col'd Infantry; carded records, volunteer organizations, Civil War; Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780-1917, Record Group 94; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²⁰ Deposition of claimant, 17 April 1867, America Burns, widow's pension application no. 174,318, certificate no. 137,891; service of Jerry Skillman alias Jerry Burns (Pvt. C. 114 U.S.C. Inf., Civil War); Case Files of Approved Pension Applications...1861-1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Department of Veteran Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Deposition of claimant, 10 March 1890, Caroline Skillman, widow's pension application no. 418,001, (Rejected); service of Jerry Skillman alias Jerry Burns (Pvt. C. 114 U.S.C. Inf., Civil War); Case Files of Rejected Pension Applications...1861-1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Department of Veteran Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²³ Deposition of claimant, 28 January 1892, Alfred Skillman, John S. Skillman, Anna B. Skillman and William L. Skillman, minor's pension application no. 538,598, (Rejected); service of Jerry Skillman alias Jerry Burns (Pvt. C.

114 U.S.C. Inf., Civil War); Case Files of Rejected Pension Applications... 1861-1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Department of Veteran Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²⁴ America Burns, bank card no. 294 [bank not identified but almost certainly Lexington KY]; "Freedman's Bank Records, 1865-1874," digital image, Ancestry.com. (<http://www.ancestry.com>: 04 May 2007); citing "Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, 1865-1874, M816, 27 rolls." National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.

²⁵ 1880 U.S. census, Fayette County, Kentucky, mortality schedules, p. 294 (penned), line 6, America Burns, digital image by subscription, Ancestry.com, (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 12 April 2007), citing *United States. Federal Mortality Census Schedules, 1850-1880 (formerly in the custody of the Daughters of the American Revolution), and Related Indexes, 1850-1880*. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C., T655, roll 18.

²⁶ Slaves could not legally marry, but ministers typically performed their marriage ceremonies and records were often kept by their owners. Couples so joined were considered fully married by both blacks and whites.

²⁷ Deposition of claimant, America Burns, widow's pension application no. 137,891, Civil War, RG 15; NA—Washington.

²⁸ Compiled military service record, Jerry Skillman, Pvt., Co. C, 114 Reg't U.S. Col'd Infantry; Civil War; RG 94; NA— Washington.

²⁹ "Dates of death of Jerry Skillman" compiled military service record, Jerry Skillman, Pvt., Co. C, 114 Reg't U.S. Col'd Infantry; Civil War; RG 94; NARA Washington.

³⁰ Caroline Skillman, widow's pension application no. 418,001, (Rejected), Civil War, RG 15, NA—Washington.

³¹ Deposition of claimant, America Burns, widow's pension no. 137,891, Civil War, RG 15; NA— Washington.

³² Kentucky. Fayette County, Death Certificates, Isaac B. Murphy, microfilm roll 1, certificate 1025, Kentucky Room, Lexington Public Library, Lexington, Kentucky.

³³ Kentucky. Franklin County, Marriage Records, Book 4: 234, Murphy-Carr, 1883, microfilm roll 7002278, Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Frankfort, Kentucky.

³⁴ Kentucky. Fayette County, City of Lexington, Death Certificates, Lucy B. Murphy, microfilm roll 1, certificate 166, Kentucky Room, Lexington Public Library, Lexington, Kentucky.

³⁵ Caroline Skillman, widow's pension application no. 418,001, (Rejected), Civil War, RG 15, NA—Washington and Alfred Skillman, John S. Skillman, Anna B. Skillman and William L. Skillman, minor's pension application no. 538,598, (Rejected), Civil War, RG 15, NA—Washington.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*