



## KEENELAND — A THOROUGHBRED TRADITION

### Founding

In 2011, Keeneland celebrates 75 years of outstanding horsemanship. It all began on October 15, 1936 — when the Lexington-based racetrack hosted its first day of live racing.



However, a sequence of events years earlier actually set the stage for the founding of Keeneland — beginning with the closing of the historic Kentucky Association track near downtown Lexington in 1933 — leaving the Horse Capital of the World without a racetrack for the first time in more than 100 years.

Two years later, in the midst of the Great Depression, a volunteer committee comprised of ten men and led by respected horsemen Hal Price Headley and Major Louis Beard, began their quest to bring racing back to Lexington.

Their goal was to create a racetrack unique in structure. It would be a community project, a nonprofit venture in which proceeds would be plowed back into the racing purse money for horsemen and improvements to the facility, with any remaining profits to be donated to local charities. Most importantly, they wanted to create a racetrack that would carry on Kentucky's Thoroughbred tradition for future generations

From among 20 locations, they selected Jack Keene's property. It was selected first and foremost because Keene was willing to part with the property for much less than its fair market value. Plus, it included a mile and a furlong private track, combination stone castle and barn, a 100,000-gallon water tank, a roadway and land for future stables and parking.

Keene was an internationally known Thoroughbred trainer who started the ambitious project of building his own private racing and training facility during the 1920s on a tract of land that belonged to Keene ancestors long before Kentucky became a Commonwealth in 1792 (see Architecture backgrounder for more information). Keeneland's sprawling stone clubhouse, grandstand and other original structures were quarried from native Kentucky limestone. These beginnings gave Keeneland's planners a foundation for constructing a new facility.

The facility, while a good start, still required much work to welcome racing's finest. Headley, Beard and others worked feverishly around the clock, and a mere 15 months later, Keeneland opened its



gates and became one of the world's first and only not-for-profit tracks. It was managed by the Keeneland Association, which consisted of a team of volunteers under the direction of Beard and Headley, Keeneland's first president.

On opening day, more than 8,000 fans came to the races — ranging from locals who simply wanted to see racing in their hometown for the first time in years to titans of business who brought some of their best bloodstock to compete. By the end of the nine-day meet, Keeneland had scraped by, losing just \$3.47 in its first year. Lexington, a town of 46,000, had supported racing's comeback as the meet posted attendance of 25,337. And even with 15 million Americans out of work, those fans had taken a gamble or two, wagering more than \$500,000.

As Headley said, “We want a place where those who love horses can come and picnic with us and thrill to the sport of the Bluegrass. We are not running a race plant to hear the click of the mutuel machines. We want them to come out here to enjoy God's sunshine, fresh air and to watch horses race.”

### **Modern-day Keeneland**

Today, Keeneland is a National Historic Landmark, attracting racing enthusiasts from around the world to watch top Thoroughbreds, trainers, owners and jockeys vie for a spot in racing history. Keeneland prides itself on maintaining the traditions instilled by its forefathers, while remaining consistent with changes in the ever-evolving equine industry.



In 1940, the Keeneland Association reorganized its corporate structure so that more profits could be channeled back into the community through charitable donations. Today, Keeneland operates as a for-profit company with a not-for-profit ethos and mission.

Keeneland began conducting horse sales in the 1940s. Initially, the horse sales were offered on a relatively small scale — in fact, the first sale took place under a tent in the Keeneland paddock. Today, Keeneland is the world's largest Thoroughbred auction house, with gross sales exceeding \$400 million annually.

Fueled largely by the success of its horse sales, Keeneland reinvests its profits in the equine industry in the form of higher purses to horsemen, capital improvements, research into equine health and safety issues and efforts to ensure the integrity of racing. Additionally, Keeneland makes generous contributions to charitable, educational and research organizations in Central Kentucky. To date,



Keeneland has contributed more than \$18 million, chiefly in the areas of health and human services, research, education, arts and culture, animal welfare and historic preservation.

Keeneland's proud tradition continues today under the leadership of Nick Nicholson, president and chief executive officer. In 2006, Keeneland again underscored its commitment to the horse by installing a revolutionary Polytrack racing surface on its main track as part of a major renovation project that also widened and improved the turns to make them safer.

**Story Idea**  
Take a look at Keeneland's contribution to the community and industry through the years.

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