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Creating an institution

Keeneland takes shape 75 years ago

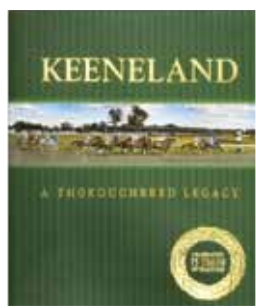
“The sport of horse racing is the heritage of Kentuckians, especially of those Kentuckians who live in the midst of the region where the majority of the champions of the American Turf have been bred.”

And so begins the 23-page prospectus dated April 17, 1935, in which the newly formed Keeneland Association describes its goals and its desire to purchase 148 acres, including an unfinished training track, from horseman J.O. “Jack” Keene to establish a new racetrack in Lexington. Now a new book titled *Keeneland: A Thoroughbred Legacy* details the colorful history of the track, founded during the Great Depression; its impact on the global

Thoroughbred industry through sales, racing and efforts to improve the industry; and its treasured relationship with the people of Central Kentucky.

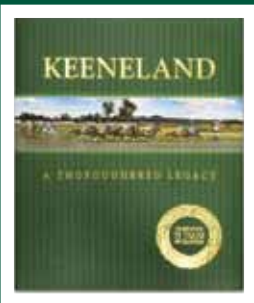
In Chapter 3, titled “Building on a solid foundation,” author Vickie Mitchell describes the 13 months during which the Keeneland Association purchased land from Keene and began to transform the private training center “into what its creators hoped would be ‘a model racetrack,’ revered not only for its gracious grounds but for its unorthodox organization, a nonprofit structure designed to improve the sport and the community rather than line its founders’ pockets with profits.”

An excerpt of the chapter begins on page 6.



Keeneland Library

The new book *Keeneland: A Thoroughbred Legacy* details the creation of the Keeneland Association, which 75 years ago was in the midst of transforming J.O. “Jack” Keene’s private training track into one of the world’s most celebrated racetracks.



Following is an excerpt from Chapter 3 of *Keeneland: A Thoroughbred Legacy*. The chapter was written by Lexington freelance writer Vickie Mitchell.

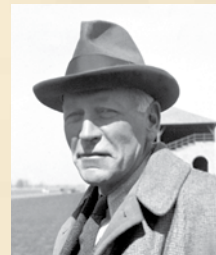
Unconventional track

When the Kentucky Association racetrack closed in 1933, Lexington was without a racetrack for the first time in 107 years. But even before the track's demise, horsemen and town leaders had talked of building another. The Kentucky Association track, a storied place whose founders included statesman Henry Clay, had had its day, and inattentive and inconsistent management, coupled with poor upkeep and the city's encroachment on its urban site, had made it "an unlovely affair," according to the Keeneland prospectus.

(Hal Price) Headley, considered one of the most influential Thoroughbred owners and breeders of his generation, and others believed Lexington's next racetrack should be in the country where it could showcase the rolling Bluegrass countryside.

"In planning and starting a racetrack at Keeneland Stud, it is my earnest hope to give the Bluegrass and Kentucky, my native state, a place where sportsmen and sportswomen might some day gather and enjoy Thoroughbred racing in its finest form. Changing conditions made it impossible to fulfill that desire. The Keeneland Association, I am sure, will carry out those ideals of perpetuating Thoroughbred racing as a means of improving the Thoroughbred and establishing a place where racing is conducted as a sport."

J.O. "Jack" Keene



A committee of ten men, led by (Major Louie A.) Beard, began the search for a new site. From twenty potential locations, they pared the list to five, with Jack Keene's private racetrack at Keeneland Stud topping the list.

The committee favored Keeneland for several reasons. For one, Keene was willing to part with 148 acres and all the improvements he'd made for a price far less than the property's value. There was a dependable spring on site, a major consideration in the days before city water lines stretched out to the countryside.

And finally, all the work Keene had done—from his racecourse and 100,000-gallon water tower to his by-now locally famous stone barn—would give the new racetrack a running start.

And so the Keeneland Association was formed, led by a board of twenty-one directors. There were, of course, horse owners and breeders among them but also a banker, a hotelier, a doctor, and a judge. Those who had

never owned, raced, or bred a horse were chosen for just that reason—they were to represent other aspects of the community.

From the outset, it was clear Keeneland would not be a conventional racetrack. The men who conceived it believed the track should be a community project, a nonprofit venture in which proceeds would be plowed back into better purses for horsemen and improvements to the facilities, with any remaining profits to be donated to local charities.

The unusual concept, the founders hoped, would make for a racetrack immune to economic ills. Money to build it would also come from the community, through the sale of stock—stock that would never pay dividends.

In its prospectus, the track was described as "a model racetrack dedicated solely to the perpetuation and improvement of the sport and specifically committed never to seek profits, except insofar as it may be necessary to pay interest upon money used."

It would differ from the Kentucky Association track in a number of ways. There, many patrons paid no admission. At Keeneland there would be "no free passes." Admission for ladies would be fifty cents; for men the charge would be one dollar.

There would also be few paid staff; many committee members and board members would volunteer as stewards and judges.

When Headley, Beard, and other leaders explained their plan to 200 citizens in the spring of 1935 at the Lafayette Hotel, there were doubters who said, "Keeneland will never make it."

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Keene Stud, the future Keeneland, as it appeared in 1935.

Creating an institution

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It's way out in the country with no public transportation. No free passes. No public address system. It gets its water from Manchester Spring, which . . . will pump dry."

But others, familiar with the determined man at the helm, countered the negative claims. "Don't underestimate Price Headley. He can flip a silver dollar into the air and have it come down gold."

Effective team

Like many good friends, Headley and Beard were nothing alike, and it was their differences that made them a powerful pair. They and a young man named William T. Bishop were the forces behind Keeneland's successful opening.

Headley, a Lexington native, was a Princeton man who had returned to his family's farm after college to run his family's tobacco warehouse business and manage his Beaumont Farm, where he raised Thoroughbreds and tobacco.

A dizzyingly busy man, Headley could be abrasive and abrupt, and those who weren't well acquainted with his steamrolling style often deemed him rude.

Well-to-do, but also well respected, Headley had worked hard for what he



Major Louie A. Beard

had. John H. Clark, a bloodstock agent and public relations director for Keeneland, once said, "Hal Price Headley did the work and thinking and planning of five men."

Beard was the quieter and gentler of the pair. Born in Texas, he graduated from West Point and later served under General George S. Patton. A champion polo player and a horseman, Beard had left the military in 1925 to manage the Lexington Thoroughbred farms

owned by the Whitney family, including Greentree and the C.V. Whitney farm.

The drastic differences in their personalities were summed up by trainer Tom B. Young. "Price is trying to make a horseman out of Louie, and Louie is trying to make a gentleman out of Price—and they are both failing."

Their roles in the Keeneland project suited them. Accustomed to driving



Architect Robert McMeekin, who had a reputation in Lexington for the handsome homes he was building of stone, designed Keeneland's 2,500-seat grandstand.

his workers hard on the farm, Headley had no problem taking the helm at Keeneland, firing off orders, making fast decisions, and setting a breakneck work pace. The master of Beaumont Farm had become the master of Keeneland and the intensity of his involvement was lost on no one. As Keene Daingerfield, a Kentucky racing steward, said, "every brick and stone at Keeneland has a drop of Price Headley's blood on it."

In the background, Beard made his calls to the genteel mansions and plush offices of the Thoroughbred owners and others, convincing them to provide their financial support.

In short, their jobs boiled down to this, as Bishop so succinctly put it: "Major Beard raised the money; Price Headley spent it wisely."

Counting pennies

In just five weeks, Beard's fund raising had scraped together a little *continued on page 10*



Keeneland now has seating for nearly 9,000 fans and has had crowds of more than 30,000 people on eight Saturdays in the past decade.

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more than \$250,000, enough to buy and start work on the racetrack. The group would eventually raise nearly another \$100,000; \$55,000 from selling lifetime clubhouse memberships at \$500 each, Beard's innovative idea.

To get the job done with what little money was on hand required penny pinching. Bishop was the only paid full-time employee, hired at \$1,800 a year; the rest of the staff was seasonal. Headley brought men and mules from his farm to work at Keeneland.

To economize further, Headley headed to the dispersal of the Kentucky Association track, where he bought the framing and roofing for five barns and 1,500 grandstand seats at fifty cents apiece.

His most brilliant acquisition was a cast-iron post, more than 100 years old. The letters KA, for the Kentucky Association, were emblazoned upon it. "Get that too," Headley told his men. "I don't care how many men it takes to get it loaded." He had a plan for the post and its two-letter monogram. It would become the entrance marker for the Keeneland Association's new racecourse.

Little more than a plowed path

Arriving at the site of the new race track in September 1936, Bishop, or "Bish" as he became known, had no inkling of the long workdays ahead for him.



W.T. Bishop

Keeneland Library

Bishop was twenty-two, a recent graduate of the University of Kentucky. He had approached Headley about a job at Keeneland on the advice of his friend, sports writer Joe Estes, who thought racetrack management a field with excellent potential for a business administration major such as Bishop. Estes was correct. Bishop eventually became Keeneland's general manager; he held the position for thirty-six years.

Although Bishop had been to a racetrack only once, he was a quick study and convinced the skeptical Headley he could do the job.

Given its beauty today, it is hard to imagine Keeneland as shabby, and yet, that's what Bishop and others found in the fall of 1935.

Keene's track, roughly laid out four years earlier, was little more than a plowed path in a field. Weeds poked up through the broken soil with enthusiasm. Keene's tobacco crop grew in the infield; a big barn was nearby to house it.

His stone barn stood like a medieval fortress, its lines harsh and square. A sinkhole had swallowed much of the

"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 mutuel machines. We want them to come out here to enjoy God's sunshine, the fresh air, and to watch horses race."—Hal Price Headley



Keeneland Library

earth where a grandstand would be built; the quarter-mile enclosed training track was half finished.

What Keene had left was definitely rough, but with the right polish it had potential. His barn would be transformed into the racetrack's clubhouse. Its great room, warmed by a massive fireplace large enough for logs six feet long and three feet wide, would become the clubhouse's main entry. The beamed ceilings topped out at twenty feet and a staircase led to balconies branching off to two wings, both of which offered spaces that would become dining rooms for guests and offices for staff. Keene had dreamed big and his barn's forty-four rooms, twenty-car garage, and stable for a dozen racehorses would all find new purposes in Keeneland's new plans.

Even Keene's indoor training track, an idea inspired by the success he'd seen come from similar facilities in Russia, could be artfully repurposed. Its outer stone walls would be cut down to chest height; the inner walls would be demolished; and the large expanse, planted with sycamores and other trees, would become Keeneland's picturesque paddock.

Ambitious schedule

The Keeneland founders were an ambitious and optimistic bunch. They took ownership of Keene's property in September and were convinced they would open their new racetrack the following April.

The work schedule was rigorous. When architect Robert McMeekin told Beard he needed time off to go on his honeymoon, the quick retort was, "You have to finish this clubhouse."

It was McMeekin, already gaining a reputation in Lexington for the handsome homes he was building of stone, who softened the hard lines of Keene's



Charlie Westerfield

This shot was taken in the summer of 2006 while Keeneland was undergoing its latest round of improvements, including reconfiguring the main track to widen the turns and installing Polytrack.

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castle with gabled roofs, a wooden porch, and a front portico. He also designed the 2,500-seat grandstand, built of wood as Beard had demanded.

But even with Bishop and his crews working from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., seven days a week, with days off only for Thanksgiving and Christmas, the deadline became an unreachable one as an unusually bitter winter slowed work.

As with any building project, there were problems and the condition of Keene's racetrack was a big one. Although the track was generously wide, it was nowhere near level. Tons of dirt had to be scraped, shifted, and hauled to iron it out.

There was also the issue of repurposing Keene's plans. Much of what Keene

had built had to be dismantled, and much of the demolition was done as he watched.

As part of the sale, he had been granted quarters in the large stone edifice (and a lifetime membership to the Keeneland clubhouse). He had also kept the other half of his family farm, next to Keeneland, where he would

eventually build another barn and home, both of stone, of course.

As Bishop and his crews feverishly worked to ready Keeneland for opening, Keene observed, much as he had for the past twenty years when he owned the place. He didn't much care for what he saw, as crews dynamited stone pillars that seemed to have no purpose and demolished the interior walls of his indoor training track.

Bishop remembered, "He stood up there under the old clubhouse roof and watched my men who were at work out there and, with solid tears in his eyes, the old man really was crying over the fact that we were destroying what he had built in there and what he had planned."

And so work continued at Keeneland in preparation for opening day on October 15, 1936. 🐾



Keene's stable became the foundation of the clubhouse and grandstand.



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The road to Keeneland: A timeline

1638: John Keen becomes first Keene family member to arrive in America. (For a time, the family's last name did not contain the third "e.")

1780s: Descendent Francis Keen of Virginia settles his family in the Lexington area and develops an estate that includes Thoroughbred breeding.

1805: The Keen/Keene family builds a home on 1,000 acres on Versailles Pike. (In 2003, Keeneland purchases the house on 15 acres, which had been privately owned, and restores it to host public and private functions. The home is called Keene Place.)



1828: Racing begins at the Kentucky Association track, located at Fifth and Race streets in Lexington.

1870: Perhaps the most famous member of the Keene family, J.O. "Jack" Keene, is born. He will achieve worldwide acclaim as a horseman and begin construction on a private training center at his Lexington farm in the early 20th century.

1911: The Blue Grass Stakes is first run at the Kentucky Association track. The race is run there until 1914 and again from 1919-1926. (The Blue Grass is first held at Keeneland in the spring of 1937 and is now a Grade 1, \$750,000 race sponsored by Toyota.)

1926: Bubbling Over becomes the first Blue Grass winner to capture the Kentucky Derby.

1933: The Kentucky Association track, the oldest racetrack in North America, closes, leaving Lexington without a Thoroughbred racetrack.



1935

April 17: Articles of incorporation are filed for Keeneland Association. Hal Price Headley is elected president of Keeneland Association. Other officers are Jack Young, first vice president; A.B. Gay, second vice president, Brownell Combs, secretary; and W.H. Courtney, treasurer. Headley will serve as president until 1951.

August 29: Keeneland Association purchases Keeneland Stud Farm, 148 acres of J.O. "Jack" Keene's property on Versailles Pike, for \$130,000 in cash and \$10,000 in preferred stock at par value. Farm includes private racetrack, combination limestone castle and barn and 100,000-gallon water tank.

A 13-month construction project begins, and Keene's private farm is transformed into a racetrack. At the Kentucky Association track dispersal, Headley buys framing and roofing for five barns, 1,500 grandstand seats and a cast-iron post bearing the letters KA, for Kentucky Association, to serve as an entrance marker for the new racecourse.



1936

October 15: Keeneland opens its inaugural race meeting of nine days.

Sources: *Keeneland: A Thoroughbred Legacy*, Keeneland Media Guide, Keeneland program



Bob and John

Seeking the Gold – Minister's Melody,
by Deputy Minister

Broken Vow

Unbridled – Wedding Vow,
by Nijinsky II

Cowboy Cal

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