



~ BLACK HISTORY MONTH ~

Joe Parker

VISION OF THE PROMISED LAND

Commemorating Black History Month with one of our breed's first African-American trainers.

By Helen Herold, Director, National Museum Of The Morgan Horse

At the same time the twentieth century civil rights movement altered history in America, an impressive piece of history was being carved out in the Morgan show ring. Joe Parker was among the first to represent his race in competition as a horseman and he forever influenced the way Morgans were shown.

In 1992 Joe Parker's oldest son, Joe Parker Jr. wrote:

"Martin Luther King's voice has echoed across the nearly 25 years since his death. 'I have a dream,' he said, 'that one day this great nation will rise up and live out it's creed, that all men are created equal....' My brother Bill was there that day at the Lincoln Memorial, and my family heard that voice rolling across the land.

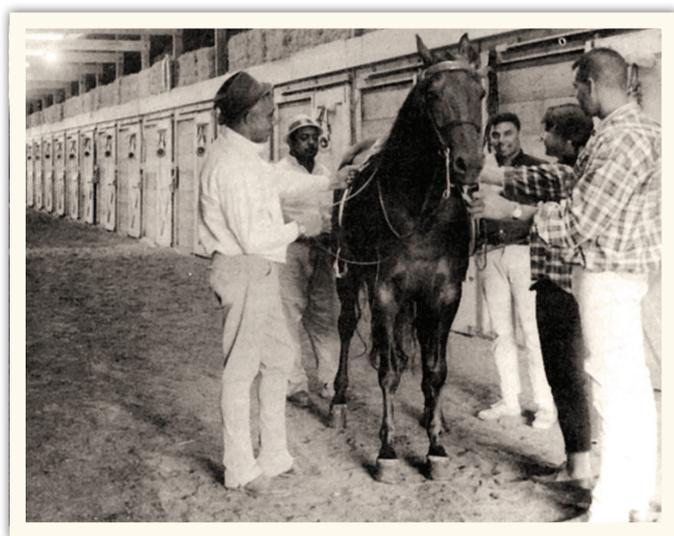
"The Morgan horse gave our father a chance to live out the dream of the nation's creed. It was the Morgan who let Joe Parker ride in the show ring, allowed him to compete, as though he were actually equal. It was Bay State

Gallant who carried my father to his dream of equality. Bay State, where Paul Revere rode toward another dream of freedom. What a gallant horse he was.

"Sometimes, on the roads of America, with the Morgans riding behind us, we talk, late at night, my brothers and I. We begin to see ourselves as part of history, as the miles roll by, and we look back at the years.... The spirit of Figure rides behind us in that truck. He was the freedom horse at Gettysburg, and in my brother's heart the day he stood at the Lincoln Memorial. That spirit was in my father's hands in Northampton in the Bay State in 1964, and in the truck on long nights as we roll across the nation with his descendants.

"... The Parkers know the Morgan means something about the history of our family—he gave Joe Parker and his sons a chance to compete for equal opportunity. For us the Morgan has truly been our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Joe Parker; Joe driving Bay State Gallant in 1964 and Westwold Dona Resa in 1966.



THE PARKER FAMILY

TOP TO BOTTOM: Joe and his five sons (left to right): Bernard, Leslie, Hugh, Bill, Joe Jr. and Joe Parker; Bernard, Leslie, Hugh, Bill, and Joe Jr.; Joe Parker, Uncle Robert, Bill, Bobbie Parrillo, Hugh, and Windcrest Ann.

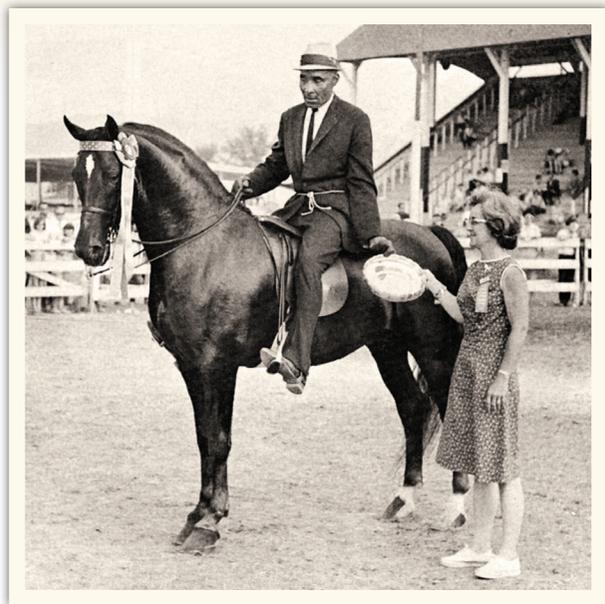
Joseph E. Parker was born on November 14, 1917 in Maryland. He was an only child. His mother owned property in the Glenburnie area. He hauled pulpwood before becoming a full time horseman. In 1935 Joe married the love of his life—Marie Hicks, whose nickname was “Ebbie.” Marie’s family also had a connection to horses. Her uncle Johnny had a riding school in Baltimore, and his brother Robert Hicks traveled the race horse circuit working as a groom at many of the Eastern racetracks. Robert became Joe’s right hand man and one of his closest friends through life. We all knew him as Uncle Robert.

After Joe and Marie married, Joe worked in an inner city Baltimore stable in Druid Hill Park (also known as Dru Hill Park) and the family started growing. They had six children in all—five sons (Joe Jr., Bill, Hugh, Leslie, and Bernard) and one daughter (Dorthea). Russell Law eventually hired Joe to work at his Boxwood Manor Farm in Towson, a rural area outside Baltimore, where he bred and showed American Saddlebreds. Joe lived there during the week and came home on weekends. In 1946, Mr. Law broke with tradition and invited the Parker family to live at Boxwood Manor. Son Les was a toddler, and Bernard had not yet been born. Segregation was still a part of everyday life. Only a handful of black people had ever been given the chance to show a horse.

Mr. Law died around 1955, and Joe needed a new direction. Joe’s large family was often not welcomed by potential employers. Bill recollected recently, “The Saddlehorse business in the 1950s was still so ‘Southern’ oriented and we could not buck the system.” The Parkers moved north. In 1956, Joe accepted a position at Col. Rodger Young’s Trotwood Farm in Dutchess County, New York, a 585 acre property built in 1954, which included a stable of gaited horses that were exhibited at the National Horse Show at Madison Square Garden, 40 broodmares, and a couple of stallions. (Note—this property was listed for sale in 2013 for \$15,000,000). When Trotwood changed directions in 1959, Joe and Marie took a big step. They bought their own farm not far from Trotwood, which they called The Promised Land, otherwise known as Rottenwood.

Enter—Stage Right: the Morgan horse. Up until this point, Joe Parker’s life had been filled with American Saddlebreds, and he had worked many of the top performers of the era. An entire second article could be written about just the Saddlebred greats of his career. It stands to reason that in this part of eastern New York state bordering New England, the Parkers would eventually cross paths with owners of Morgan horses. As Sue Brander said in her 1991 article, “The Brothers,” “Joe had never seen a Morgan, and these blocky close-coupled horses were not exactly Saddlebreds. He was not sure what he was going to do with them, and the informality of early Morgan shows was a shock.”

In 1963, the trajectory of the next 20 years was put in motion. That year, Bill and Hugh took a couple of Morgans to Northampton and left with only sixth and seventh place ribbons, but were noticed, and Joe Parker Stables opened at a new farm in Amenia, New York. JPS is still there 52 years later with Les and Bernard in residence.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Joe Parker and Chasley Superman in 1967 and driving Bennfield's Ace in 1972 (Photo © Warren Patriquin).

Enter—Stage Left: John May and Bay State Gallant (Orland Leader x Narcissa), foaled 1959. Mr. May put Gallant in training at Joe Parker Stables, and in 1964, Joe and Uncle Robert took him to New England as a five-year-old. The dream was coming true. They left with five blue ribbons—the park saddle class and championship, the park harness class and championship and he was presented with a sibling and his dam Narcissa, winning the Dam and Produce class.

Next up were Joe Parker and Chasley Superman (Orland Leader x Rena), who tore it up at The National in 1965. Bay State Gallant was slated to show back to defend his Park Saddle Championship from the previous year. As was chronicled in Sue Brander's 1991 article "The Brothers," Gallant was protested after the qualifier due to a shoeing issue and disqualified. One door closed and another one opened. Chasley Superman was pulled out of the aisle to show back in Gallant's place, and won the Park Saddle Championship in 1965. "He was fine as frog hair," was how Joe used to describe him. Bill Parker described him as "exotic—ahead of his time, with so much heart he would bury the others in a workout." Chasley Superman became one of the legendary Morgan stallions of the twentieth century, and under Joe Parker's banner won 28 grand championships in park saddle and park harness and sold for the highest price a Morgan had ever brought at public auction.

Between 1964 and 1968, Joe Parker won the Park Saddle Championship in Northampton in four of those five years—1964 with Bay State Gallant, 1965 and 1967 with Chasley Superman, and in 1968 with the big and bold mare Paramount's Delight (the great Gladgay's Pride won in 1966). Joe Parker, the humble Southern gentleman with the "velvet hands" and the "soft seat," attracted top Morgans and their owners to the family's stable in Amenia. The '60s, '70s, and early '80s were high times with large show strings traveling to Mid-A, Gold Cup, Syracuse, Harrisburg,

Southern States, Quentin, the New England Circuit, and, starting in 1973, Grand National. Joe's sons were significant partners in the operation and clients were bringing horses specifically to them as well. Uncle Robert finally stayed at Joe Parker Stables full time and his leg and soundness experience from the track along with his down to earth perspective became a valuable addition to the team. All the pieces were in place and the dream that Joe and Marie had imagined for years had come true.

Conky Price shared many fond memories of the collaboration between her parents, Dr. and Mrs. Ernie Paquette, owners of Paramount Morgan Farm in Richmond, Vermont, and Joe Parker. She recalled how Dr. Paquette had been impressed when he saw Joe showing Gallant and Superman and appreciated the subtlety and softness of his riding. She called his style "equitation-esque" and remembered how their horses loved him. "Joe could really get them in gear and their back ends worked like pistons. He was welcoming to everyone. Joe was way ahead of his time," she said. Two of the most memorable horses from Paramount Farm that Joe competed with were Paramount Delight (mentioned above), a big stretchy chestnut mare nicknamed Big D, and Paramount's Highness, (known as "Natural High" at JPS) a lovely bay with exceptional refinement, who was the World Park Saddle Champion at the first Grand National Morgan Show in 1973 in Detroit. Joe and Marie traveled to the Royal Winter Fair in Toronto most years and always stopped at Paramount for a visit on the way home. Conky recalled how much her mother and Marie enjoyed each other's company.

Enter—Center Stage: Bennfield's Ace, Edna Avery, Joe Parker and Bill Parker—one of the all times greatest and transformative partnerships of the Morgan breed. Edna Avery has been quoted many times as having said she sent horses to Joe because she, "wanted those hands for my horses."



LEFT TO RIGHT: Joe Parker and Paramount's Highness at the 1973 Grand National (Photo © Gloria Axt) and Paramount's Delight in 1968 (Photo © Warren Patriquin).

Katy Bennfield (Bennfield x Cathy Serenity) was the first to arrive. In-hand championships ensued. Legend says that she wore Superman's bridle when shown in-hand, an example of the importance of tradition and a little superstition that was present in the Parker family. Katy Bennfield was bred to Chasley Superman and produced the famous stallion Courage Of Equinox, owned by East of Equinox Farm in Manchester, Vermont, who in 1984, was the leader of the Morgan Sire Rating ahead of all Morgan stallions, living or deceased. This same cross produced the great mare Special Kay.

Ace is often remembered for his undefeated in-hand career and the great performances with Bill under saddle. Not everyone remembers that Ace began one of the greatest show careers of all time by being driven in park harness by Daddy Joe. Ace and Joe participated in some of the greatest rivalries and workouts that ever happened in Morgan park harness competition—in Detroit between Ace and UVM Promise and at the Syracuse International between Ace, Beamington, and Wynakee Kristin were a couple of the loudest and most memorable. Joe used to say that it meant trouble when Doris Ryan showed up in the red dress to drive Beamington!

The roster of numerous Morgans trained and shown successfully by Joe Parker would fill many more pages than there is room for.

Joe Parker dreamed of the perfect Morgan horse, and he was talented and gifted enough to know that other people made nice horses too. Joe had a vision and was lucky enough to have people around him who shared his vision. His goal was to present the horse at its very best and he knew there were no good shortcuts. Immediate gratification was not reality.

A great performance horse needed to be naturally gifted but also needed an artist's eye to put all the little pieces together, helping that horse to look even more beautiful and gifted. One example is

the use of the straightaways in the show ring, and how they are used in the training process. Joe's philosophy was, "The show ring is a stage, and the turns are used to get from one side of the stage to the other via the corners. The turns are the transition points between the sides of the stage, where you could catch a breath and prepare to make the best pass down the straightaway." And, oh, the beautiful tails that trailed on and on!

What did this man give to the Morgan horse industry? He left a large family of gifted horsemen to pass down his knowledge. He left behind the philosophy that Morgans could look better than they did because they had the natural talent and beauty to be presented differently. Joe Parker's legacy is complex—he was from the South, with Saddlebred methods, showing Morgans in their heartland. At the same time his legacy is very simple—what he and his sons did with their many memorable achievements had an undeniable influence on the way Morgans are shown.

Bill said recently, "Joe Parker left the complete footprint for presenting exciting Morgan performance horses. He left us the gift of entertainment, in competition and horsemanship."

Joe Parker left this world on December 29, 1983. His dear friend "Uncle" Robert Hicks followed him two weeks later. Marie "Ebbie" Parker joined her uncle and her husband of 48 years on January 31, 2009. ■

RESOURCES

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