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ISAAC MURPHY MEMORIAL ART GARDEN

NO LONGER



THE ISAAC MURPHY MEMORIAL
ART GARDEN PAYSTRIBUTE
TO LEXINGTON'S CELEBRATED JOCKEY
AND THE EARLY HORSE INDUSTRY

By Maryjean Wall
Photos by Mark Mahan



FORGOTTEN



Jim Embry (center) and Bruce Mundy (right), who spearheaded the Isaac Murphy Memorial Art Garden, talk with fellow community organizer David Coza

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ISAAC MURPHY MEMORIAL ART GARDEN



Jim Embry

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WO MEN DRIVING through the inner city slowed at every vacant lot, eyeing each one for its potential. Their names were Bruce Mundy and Jim Embry. They were community organizers in 2006 who were hunting for property where they could build an art garden honoring jockey Isaac Murphy and his fellow 19th century horsemen.

The men weren't precisely sure where the national champion had lived although they knew it was somewhere along East Third Street. They only knew this neighborhood, near where the Kentucky Association track had once stood at Fifth and Race, had been heavily populated by horse people. Jockeys, trainers, a Derby-winning horse owner, saddle-makers, makers of racing silks, horse doctors, caretakers of horses, and blacksmiths lived there, African Americans frequently alongside whites. Their jobs, not their ethnicity, defined them, with racing their common interest. If Mundy and Embry were going to share how Kentucky's \$3 billion horse industry got started, this surely was the proper neighborhood for unspooling their narrative.

Eventually they found their perfect spot: a weedy, half-acre lot where East Third begins its dogleg turn into Winchester Road. They did not know who owned the land or whether the owner would be willing to sell, but they could envision this plot memorializing Murphy and all the others, forgotten now, who worked in the early industry. They would call it the Isaac Murphy Memorial Art Garden.

What they did not realize was this land actually had been the front

Bruce Mundy





Although Embry and Mundy didn't know it at the time, the land that became the garden was once part of Isaac Murphy's estate.

portion of Murphy's estate. No one knew this until the art garden was well underway, when a newly published book revealed this information. Turns out the art garden lies at an entrance drive leading to the jockey's house. Call it providence; call it serendipity. Most would say they hit the bull's-eye.

The art garden has become iconic to East Third Street. It serves as the trailhead for a jogging, walking, and bicycling byway known as the Legacy Trail, which leads through the city to the Kentucky Horse Park on Ironworks Pike. Soon the garden will become the trailhead for a second pathway: the Town Branch Trail, scheduled for completion in 2022. The Town Branch trail will lead through downtown and the Lexington Historic Distillery District, winding up at Masterson Station Park.

The art garden has produced more spinoffs: festivals and presentations offered on-site, along with an Isaac Murphy bicycling club founded by Kentucky poet Frank X Walker. Children created the initial outdoor artwork, a series of tiles depicting the early racing industry. Holding pride of place on-site is a sculpture standing 16 feet tall honoring Murphy. The art garden's board of directors has installed a natural stone amphitheater. Soon, after the board obtains additional funding and donations, more artwork will appear in the form of wooden panels designed to tell more about the horsemen of this neighborhood.

Keeneland is a longtime supporter of the art garden, and the Keeneland Library supplied most of the resources featured on the art garden placards. This year's annual commemorative Maker's Mark bottle, released in partnership with Keeneland, features for

the first time three distinct bottles, each with its own label showcasing Thoroughbred racing via the work of artists Sandra Oppegard, Andre Pater, or Tyler Robertson. Proceeds from the bottle sales will go to LexArts, with funds earmarked to realize a permanent art installation by Lexington folk artist LaVon Van Williams Jr. at the art garden as well as future arts programming within the park.

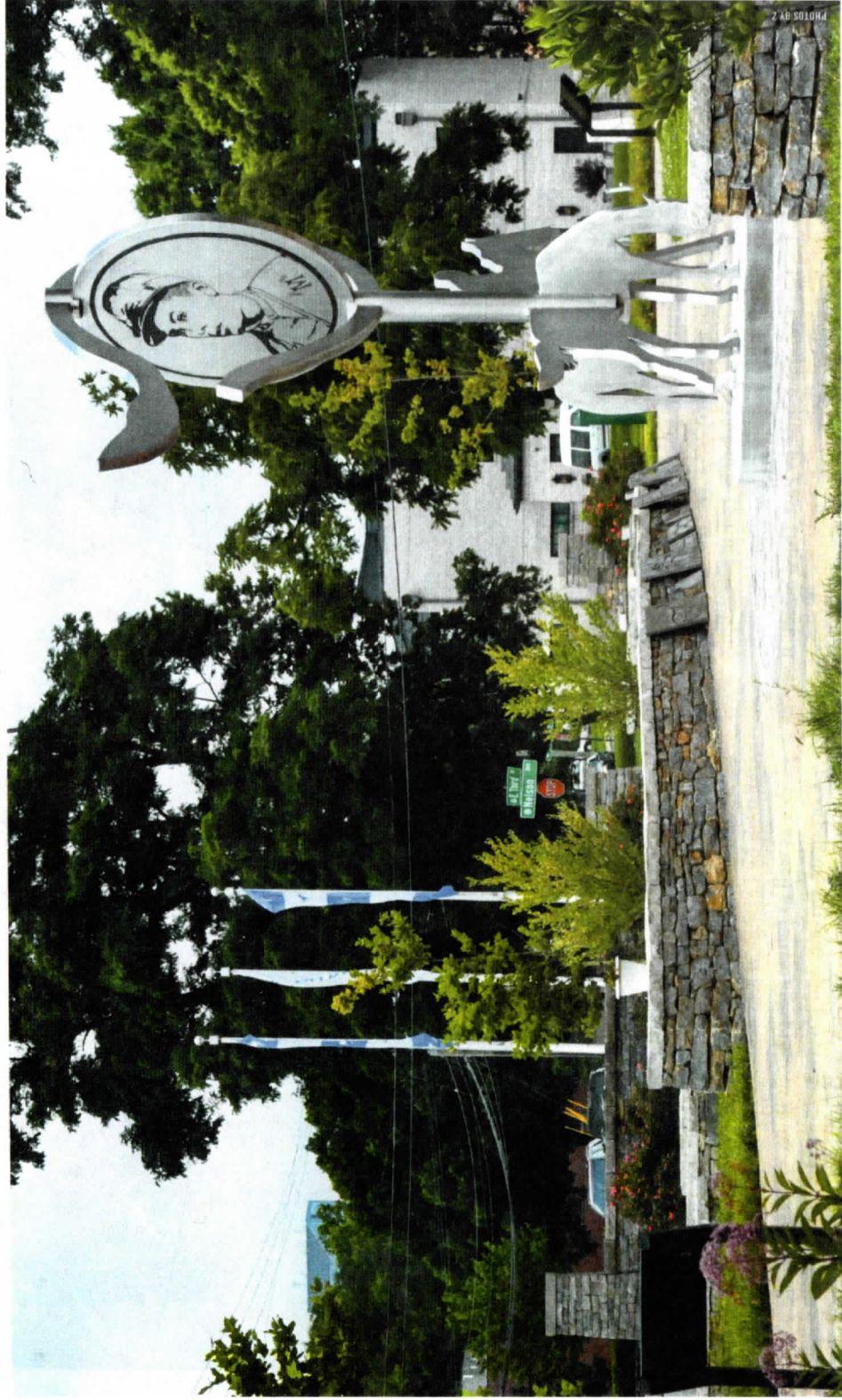
Corporate, private, and government entities joined with Mundy and Embry to develop this art garden into the gem it has become. The garden's evolving into a destination for all of Lexington is ironic, for in the beginning Mundy and Embry were merely attempting to replace an earlier art garden known only to inner city residents. That garden was named the Mary Britton Garden after Kentucky's first female African American physician who practiced in Lexington. Few could have dreamed at the start that the garden would involve so much of the community, with bigger plans to come once fundraising begins again after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

Part of a larger story

These days the Isaac Murphy Memorial Art Garden is a charming urban oasis filled with trees and other plantings. Visitors can trace the foundation of what the garden's founders believe was Isaac Murphy's house and see "My Home is a Horse and Track," the 16-foot, stainless-steel sculpture dedicated to Murphy that has at its base two intersecting horses, with one horse grazing and the other racing. Rising high on the sculpture's central mast is Murphy's portrait, surrounded by a horseshoe and topped with a horse's tail, fashioned in steel and presented as blowing in the wind. Tiffany

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ISAAC MURPHY MEMORIAL ART GARDEN



"My Home is a Horse and Track," a 16-foot, stainless-steel sculpture, pays tribute to Murphy and stands as a beacon in Lexington's East End.

and Neal Bociak of California designed the sculpture, which was fabricated in Lexington by sculptor Andrew Light of Material Alchemy Studios

Although the garden began as an effort to help revitalize the city's East End, it has evolved to serve all of Lexington. Its narrative about 19th century horse racing absolutely is a Lexington-wide story, as the horse business became a major economic driver for the entire city late in the 1800s and into the 20th century and up to modern times. For many years local residents suffered a memory lapse about the significant role the East End played in building the horse industry. But that is what the art garden is intended to correct. The horse

farms played their part and racing played its role, with the one side unable to flourish without the other. Racing at the Kentucky Association track could not have survived without the athletes and craftsmen who populated the East End and participated in a variety of ways in the sport.

Mundy and Embry wanted the art garden to do more than tell a story. They wanted East End youth to learn from the stories and hopefully realize a sense of pride in the neighborhood's origins. To know the stories is to feel pride in the past and envision a prideful way into a powerful future. Embry had seen amazing transformations in people when he worked establishing art gardens in Detroit from the 1990s up until 2005.

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— JIM EMBRY

Mundy shared Embry's vision. They were determined to get this done for Lexington. This was why the two were so excited to find a suitable plot in the old racetrack neighborhood where they could relate the rich narrative that unfolded here.

"But the story [the art garden] tells is bigger," said Ben Allen, an attorney who is co-chairman of the board of the Isaac Murphy Memorial Art Garden. He told how the art garden board is attempting to retell this neighborhood's narrative — as it relates to all of Lexington — through art, tours, and historic presentations at the art garden. Allen was not involved with the garden's early years but has embraced its purpose. He has a special appreciation of archaeology and was delighted with the discovery of a foundation that the garden's board of directors believes was Murphy's residence.

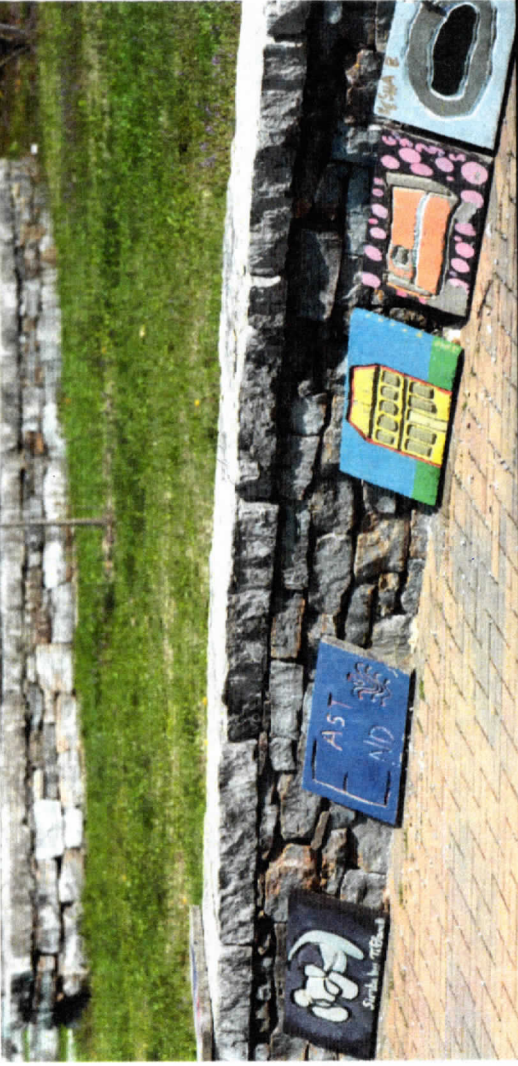
Forward movement for the project slowed at times but never stopped. Embry and Mundy learned the state owned the property. It had been intended for a road widening that never took place. Upon inquiring, the men learned the state would be willing to transfer the land to the city of Lexington to be used as a park, or in this case, an art garden. The city appeared willing to accept the property. Nonetheless, the garden really did not begin to come together until the Leadership Lexington class of 2007 took it on as the project for that year's class.

Leadership Lexington, sponsored by Commerce Lexington, has been active in leadership development for some 40 years. Each new yearlong class of emerging leaders takes on a project while learning about public issues and urban dynamics. The 2007 class was considering projects to enhance the East End as part of an internal push to racially diversify Leadership Lexington. Embry and Mundy invited the group to help get the art garden up and running.

Many more groups became involved, as creation of the art garden and its centerpiece sculpture turned into a community-wide effort. The effort became something of a pioneer project nationally, as the art garden is believed to be the first park in the United States to honor the earliest African American professional athletes: Thoroughbred jockeys.

Mundy and Embry consistently adhered to the notion anchoring

Children created a series of tiles depicting the early racing industry.



Proceeds from the sale of 2021 commemorative Maker's Mark bottles will help fund a permanent art installation.

their vision: that it takes a community of people to put a jockey on a horse. The community consists of horse trainers and saddle-makers and feed suppliers and horse doctors and whatnot. This remained the reason the men wanted the name of the garden to include the word "memorial," as the garden honors the memory of Murphy and many others.

Restoring historical memory

Murphy still remained the central figure, just as he remains today the only jockey to realize 44 percent winners from his mounts. All the same, Murphy seems an ironic choice for a park where the purpose is to restore lapsed historical memory. Murphy himself was lost to history following his 1896 death. Despite all his

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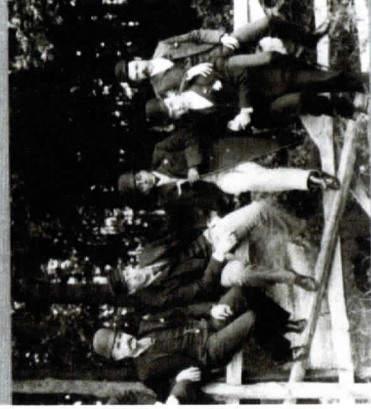
Murphy in racing silks

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Murphy aboard Tenny

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Murphy, third from right, at the *Salvator* clambake

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A MODEL CITIZEN

Isaac Murphy would not have seen it coming, this citywide effort to honor him and his neighbors.

By all accounts he was humble and reserved, so when he brought his wife, Lucy, to their new home in 1887 on this estate, he saw no further than a lovely residence revealing a vast improvement over their original neighborhood, on Megowan (now North Eastern) Street.

It was said you could see the racetrack across the fields if you stared hard from the widow's walk at the top of the Murphys' new house.

The location was ideal. The young, church-going couple had assumed an enviable position as civic and social leaders among Lexington's African American residents, and so this large house, partly in the country, affirmed their upward mobility. Murphy had also joined a Masonic Lodge, a statement affirming civic responsibility among African Americans during the latter 1800s.

In a career that spanned the 1870s into the 1890s, Murphy rode for some of the best racing stables in the nation. He was the highest-paid athlete in the United States, earning at least \$20,000 annually. He was proud of the reputation he held for extraordinary honesty, unusual for a jockey of his era. People looked up to him.

He stood out among the great numbers of African Americans across the nation who built successful careers in business, politics, the professions, and athletics. African Americans accomplished this with great energy and ambition after slaves attained freedom at the end of the Civil War and with the 13th Amendment outlawing slavery, both in 1865. Some 30 years of fluid times unrolled until a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1896 — *Plessy v. Ferguson* — legalized segregation, pushing back African Americans almost to the point of slavery. Had he lived, Murphy undoubtedly would have been dismayed to see the cadre of black jockeys consequently disappear.

Murphy lived a good life alongside Lucy, whom he married in 1883. Early in their marriage they lived in a two-story Italianate villa they purchased on Megowan Street. In less than a decade, however, their neighborhood had slipped into deep decline. Megowan had become the center of the red-light district. Brothel-keepers, white and African American, were setting

up shop along Megowan and neighboring streets. The Murphys wanted no part of this. They couldn't move soon enough, for in 1890 the notorious Belle Brez- ing opened her mansion for men only a few houses removed from the Murphys' villa.

And so, the Murphys moved to the semi-rural setting of East Third Street, which seemed like it was somewhat "out in the country" as it had not been developed. For the next nine years the couple enjoyed their new address. They rode about town in their private carriage pulled by handsome horses. Murphy engaged a valet, a white man, to assist him at home and to travel with him by railroad to the nation's premier racetracks. The couple gave many elegant parties at their residence, with at least two of these galas covered by a local newspaper.

Each year upon the close of the racing season, Murphy departed the nation's major racecourses in New Jersey and New York to spend the winter relaxing at home with Lucy. It was here, on East Third Street, that Murphy died in 1896, five years following his third time winning the Kentucky Derby. His three winning Derby rides were unmatched at that time.

Local newspapers devoted a great amount of coverage to Murphy's funeral. Among those who attended were Col. James E. Pepper, a distillery operator and horse farm owner in Lexington. Murphy's family sent out engraved invitations to the services. Jockeys, horse trainers, and horse owners sent floral arrangements. The Lincoln Lodge No. 10 of the Colored Masons, which included Murphy among its members, declared "the community has lost one of its best and most successful citizens."

Lucy eventually was forced to leave their residence after spending all of their savings. The house was sold at a master commissioner's sale. Eventually it was torn down. The city cut a new road, Nelson Street, through the estate while preparing the way for residential housing and commercial property on 31 lots all carved from the estate and auctioned in 1903. Historians lament that no photograph of Murphy's house ever has been found. But there does exist a plat drawing of the property, confirmation of where he lived and a linear representation of the property, including an outline of the house.



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Eugene Webster stands by Murphy's grave in a 1961 photograph.

achievements, people forgot about him until the early 1960s, when a former newsman and his wife, Frank and Betty Borries, brought his story back to life. Borries had come across Murphy's name when reading old sporting periodicals. He wanted to know more, but this was nearly impossible so many decades following Murphy's death.

Recollections of Murphy dimmed quickly following his death in 1896. Racism had begun a steep rise in the United States, and with this upswing, Black athletes dropped not only out of sight but also out of memory. Memory of Murphy became so lost to history that in 1906, a mere 13 years following his death, the whereabouts of his gravesite also had been lost to local knowledge. A small group of horsemen from the Kentucky Association wanted to replace a wooden marker with one poured in concrete but they could not find anyone who knew where he had been buried at African Cemetery No. 2. This seemed a strange development considering huge crowds had lined the streets to the graveyard when a horse-pulled conveyance took Murphy's casket there.

The horsemen eventually found the grave upon discovering Eugene Webster, a local man who was able to lead them to the precise spot. Webster's father, Richard Webster, had taken him to Murphy's



Groups such as Leadership Lexington meet at the garden's stone amphitheater.

gravesite when Eugene was a child and Eugene remembered the way. The horsemen accomplished their mission in 1906. But soon afterward, knowledge of the burial site's location became lost a second time.

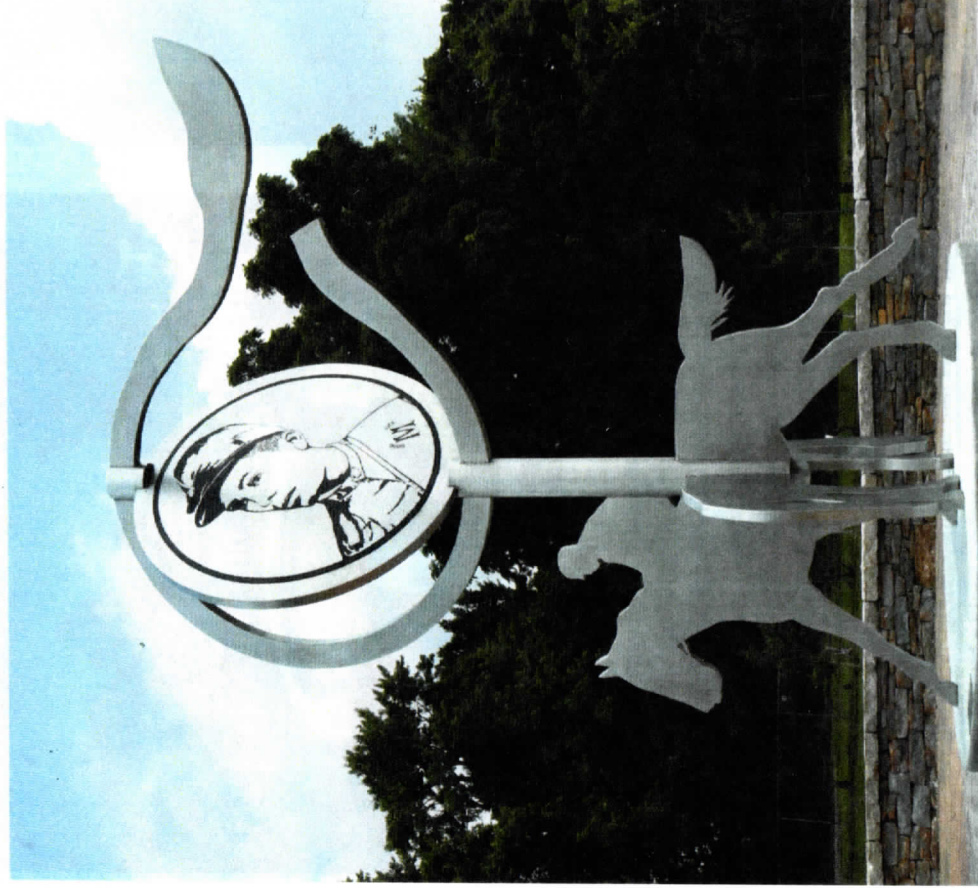
Borries became obsessed with Murphy early in the 1950s and '60s and began looking for the site in 1961. He, too, was unable to find the location. No one could tell him where it was — until he, too, found Webster and enlisted his help. A photo exists showing Webster at the gravesite alongside the concrete marker installed in 1906. But the fact that the site was lost to memory — twice — said a lot about loss of historical memory concerning the famous jockeys who had lived in Lexington's East End.

Murphy's gravesite finally received the nod from history it deserved, when his remains were moved in the 1960s to the site of Man o' War's former paddock on Huffman Mill Pike and later to the Kentucky Horse Park. At the Horse Park, visitors can view the grave when they visit the Man o' War memorial.

Much effort has gone into reversing forgotten memory of 19th century racing stars such as Murphy. The late Anne Butler and, presently, Yvonne Giles have researched much of the East End history as it relates to racing. A group called Phoenix Rising also has conducted research about the lives of Black horsemen whose contributions formed the backbone of the horse industry, especially in Lexington. The art garden's board works closely with Phoenix Rising, and the synergy between the two has brought a considerable amount of forgotten history back to life. The narrative growing out of this research is a story textured much more richly than the history of racing as it was previously understood. This will determine how history is told in the future.

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ISAAC MURPHY MEMORIAL ART GARDEN



The art garden is thought to be the first of its kind to honor African American athletes.



In addition to serving as a trailhead for the Legacy Trail, the art garden also will be a future trailhead for the Town Branch Trail.

For example, said David Cozart, another community organizer in Lexington, “We believe [the art garden] influenced awareness that led to the naming of Oliver Lewis Way.” Oliver Lewis won the inaugural Kentucky Derby on Aristides in 1875. For years racing fans heard only the name of Aristides and not that of his African American jockey. Now he has a road named for him connecting Newtown Pike with South Broadway.

Another way the history of the East End continues to come to life is through the Blue Grass Trust for Historic Preservation’s new East End Walking Tour. The tour may be taken either physically or virtually, with support from presenting sponsor Keeneland that enabled the creation of the “Tour the Historic Bluegrass” mobile app.

“It is in keeping with Keeneland’s mission to support initiatives such as the Isaac Murphy Memorial Art Garden and Phoenix Rising to help preserve this important history for our industry and our community,” Keeneland President and CEO Shannon Arvin said.

Plans at the art garden include continuing to keep young people involved in making art or planting additional landscaping. While they’re busy planting or drawing, young people will hear Murphy’s story and the stories of many others in Lexington’s East End who helped build the horse industry.

“The task now is to promote programming at the garden,” said Thomas Tolliver, an East End resident and art garden board member. “When things return to normal [after COVID-19 restrictions have cleared], we would love to see some sort of activity at the garden on a weekly, if not daily, basis. It’s the perfect outdoor classroom, what with its open space and amphitheater.”

“We claim to be the horse capital of the world, but we don’t teach it,” Embry said. “We ought to have tours every day because ‘horse capital’ goes back to that foundation: to the [Kentucky Association] racetrack, to riding style, to coming from off the pace and all these great contributions to the sport.”

Cozart marveled that the project had elements ranging from grassroots in the East End to business leaders and to government engagement. “To me, that’s one of the richest parts of the story,” he said.

“And it was serendipity,” Cozart added, “that it ended up being where Isaac Murphy lived.” **KM**

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