

The Horse in Virginia: An Illustrated History

By Julie A Campbell

Reviewed by Aggie Sterrett

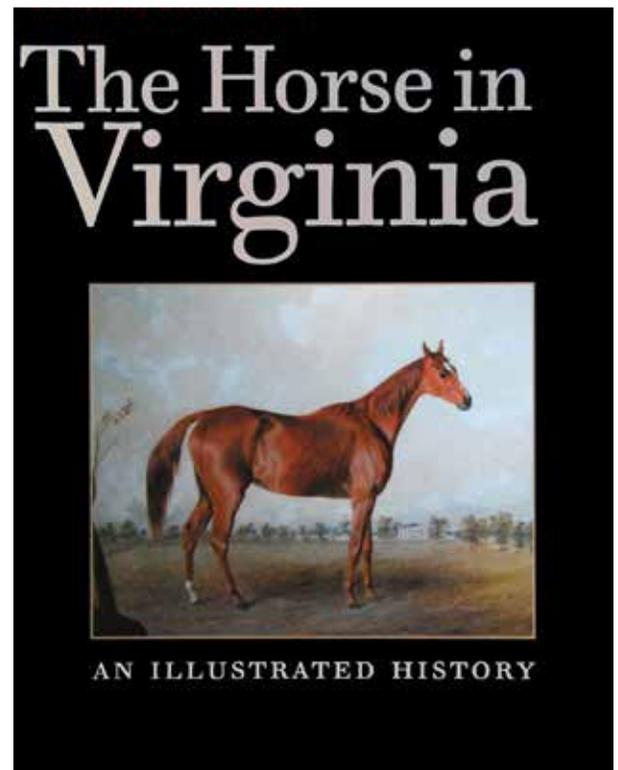
Virginia's horse tradition goes back to an August day in 1609 when the first British horses stepped off the ship bound for the New World and made their way to Jamestown. As Julie A. Campbell writes in her book *The Horse in Virginia: An Illustrated History*, after those humble beginnings the horses' place in society developed and changed over the next 400 years, but the bond between Virginians and their horses has never wavered.

The book divides the history of the horse in the Old Dominion into four sections, each focusing on the role of horses during different time periods. Interspersed with the historical information are tidbits about horses in general: a section on gaits, colors, and different modes of horse-drawn vehicles to name a few.

Campbell titles the first 175 years "The Admirable Little Virginia Horse" and she dedicates a large portion of the text to early horse racing – a favorite entertainment of rich and poor alike. What Fairfax Harrison dubbed "the admirable little Virginia horse" was actually a cross between the British horses, mostly Irish Hobbies and Scottish Galloways, and their Spanish cousins who had arrived in Florida in 1539. This cross produced a small muscular animal that was adept at quarter racing and equally at home pulling a carriage or carrying a rider. Campbell also devotes a significant portion of this section to founding fathers George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and their special bond with the horse.

1784 – 1865 saw a shift in the horse world as the center of racing and breeding moved away from Virginia and into Tennessee and Kentucky, but racing was far from gone in the Old Dominion. Stallions Diomed and Sir Archy sired many top racehorses in the early 19th century, and fox hunting, steeplechases and horse shows became more and more popular. But again the role of the horse changed when the Civil War erupted in 1861. Known for its good horses, the state became a vital supplier of horses to pull artillery and supplies, and to transport cavalrymen and officers. Few are better known than General Robert E. Lee's beloved Traveller and Stonewall Jackson's warhorse Little Sorrel, both featured along with their riders in the book.

1866 – 1945 proved to be a time of great change for the horse in Virginia, and Campbell categorizes this section of the book "Horse at a Crossroads". During the Civil War, the equine population was decimated in the state, and anyone who possessed a horse or mule at the end of the war considered themselves lucky. But it wasn't long before the numbers began to bounce back. For the rest of the 1880's, and well into the 1900's, the horse continued to be the most common mode of transportation, its only competition the train. With the advent of the motorcar and farm machinery, the role of the horse in society evolved again. Equine sporting events grew to include polo and Standardbred racing. But the end of World War II in 1945 signaled the end of an era and by the 1950's the US horse population dwindled to a fraction of what it had been in the early part of the century.



“The Romance of the Horse” is what Campbell dubs the modern era, when the horse transitioned in her words, from “being a necessary part of society – vital to warfare, transportation, and agriculture – to being an objet d’art, an athlete, a friend”. Harness racing, show jumping, dressage, and eventing grew in popularity during this period.

And no book about the horse in Virginia would be complete without a nod to Misty of Chincoteague, or to Triple Crown champion Secretariat, who was born in the Old Dominion, but Campbell doesn’t stop there: she highlights other horses such as Lady Wonder, a Petersburg mare thought by some to predict the future. Also featured are famed equestrians such as David and Karen O’Connor who represented their state and their country in the Olympics; and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, a well-known participant in the Virginia foxhunting field.

This beautifully illustrated book is a must in the library of anyone who has a love of horses, history or Virginia, and it includes detailed footnotes that are rich with other sources for research and further reading.

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