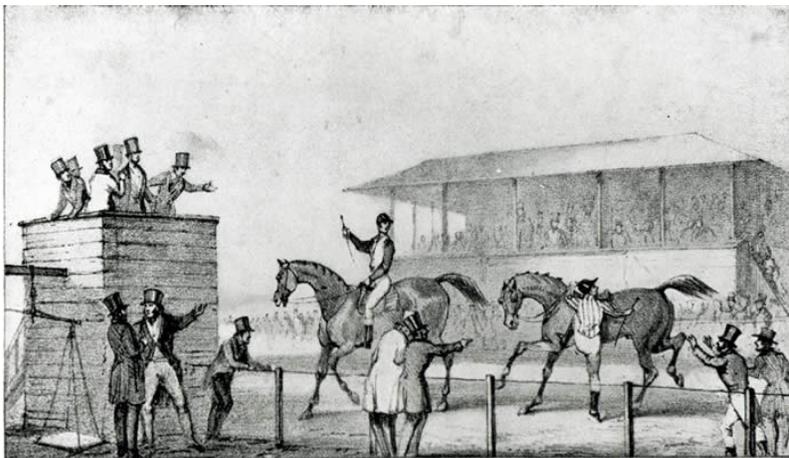


Horseracing

A pursuit of English gentlemen originating in the 16th century, horseracing was one of the first sports brought to Quebec City by the British. It was heartily endorsed by the authorities, who saw the essentiality of breeding and raising horses for the troops of the Empire.

One of the first horse races on record took place in 1767 on the “Heights of Abraham” and was organized by the soldiers of the Quebec City garrison. In what is considered to be the first sporting horserace advertised in Canada, the prize of \$40 was won by a Captain Prescott riding a mare named “Modesty.”

A few races were held on the Plains by the Quebec Turf Club, founded in 1789, but regular races did not take place until the early 19th century. At that time the race track was situated on the western edge of the Plains, the site of what is today the playing field, in front of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. This field, which was leased to the military by the Ursulines, was one of Canada’s premier race tracks, attracting the best horses from the United States and across Canada. The races were attended by thousands of spectators; unruly behaviour, the result of sporting enthusiasm combined with excessive drinking, was not uncommon.



Horses racing on the Plains of Abraham in the nineteenth century.

Credit: Royal Ontario Museum.

A major competition was held in the summer of 1808, attracting some thousands of spectators, including Governor James Craig. With their sophisticated and complex system of rules, the races were nothing like the more conventional ones held by the Canadians. Since the latter had nothing in their stables that could run with the English thoroughbreds, the Governor, in a gesture of conciliation, put up a purse of 15 guineas to the winner of what would be a race for Canadian horses only. Not many Canadians participated even in this race, since it was to be run in the strictest

British tradition, whereas the Canadians generally preferred harness racing. In 1829-1830, the Club organized the Jean-Baptiste Plate, another exclusively Canadian race, with a prize of \$20, the monthly wage of a working man.

The Quebec Turf Club organized at least one race day per year until 1830, when growing tension between Anglophones and French-Canadians and the volatile political situation put an end to the practice. Canadian nationalists and the population at large denounced this English gentleman's sport. Although horseracing continued to be the private preserve of Anglophones, the number of French Canadian participants gradually increased after the 1837-1838 Rebellion and in the second part of the century. In 1847, in an effort to curtail unruly behaviour, the Quebec Turf Club moved the racetrack to l'Ancienne-Lorette, in the hope that the distance would discourage attendance by members of the working class.

Horseracing had become more democratic by the turn of the century and Quebec had four tracks with a variety of programs, including harness racing. With the departure of the British garrison in 1871 and the drop in the city's Anglophone population, the Quebec Turf Club lost its traditional clientele and discontinued its activities in 1887.

A few events reminiscent of the first horse races on the Plains have since taken place. Buffalo Bill staged his Wild West extravaganza on the racetrack in 1897. The track was also used for the Tricentennial celebration in 1908. Finally, Canada's best horses were featured at the Quebec City Horse Show in the 1990s and until the early 2000s.