

Race Week

In the chapter titled "Race Week" from "The Demon of Unrest," we delve into a vibrant yet tumultuous period in Charleston, timed with the social spectacle of Race Week. Governor Pickens, looking to avoid conflict with Fort Sumter, embraced the occasion as ordinary life halted—schools, courts, and many businesses closed. Witnesses noted that Charleston was abuzz with discussions about horses, as breeders and spectators flocked from around the South and even as far as New York, arriving on chartered vessels.

This week was marked by lavish dances and banquets attended by planters, who brought along their families and enslaved servants, selling or acquiring more slaves between races. The presence of slaves extended to the jockeys and trainers, reflecting the deep-rooted social hierarchy. The stakes went beyond mere racing; as articulated by a biographer of the South Carolina Jockey Club, horses represented Carolina's chivalry and honor, with successful planters equating their victories to personal valor and societal prestige.

Amidst the festivities, key figures in agriculture sought to solidify their status. James Henry Hammond, aiming for elite recognition, invested heavily in a thoroughbred named Argyle—a decision that demonstrated the horse's significance as a ticket to social standing and networking opportunities during the week's slate of events, particularly the renowned Jockey Club Ball.

The ball, a pinnacle social event, was exclusive to high-class attendees, where matchmaking was commonplace. However, some foreign observers, like Margaret Hunter Hall, criticized the attendees' appearances, finding the gentlemen lackluster and the women unattractive.

Yet, all eyes were ultimately on the Jockey Club Purse race, a main attraction of Race Week on February 6, 1861. Albine, a horse initially deemed a poor investment, triumphed against Planet under the guidance of Hercules, an enslaved expert trainer hired by Albine's owner, Jack Cantey. The race culminated in record-breaking times and celebratory gatherings. Unbeknownst to the attendees, this marked Charleston's final Race Week for almost twenty years, overshadowing the festivities with the looming uncertainties of the Civil War.