

Race Week

Race Week in Charleston, as depicted in *The Demon of Unrest*, highlights a period of both festivity and underlying tension. On February 6, 1861, the city's social calendar was dominated by this grand event, which was met with a mix of excitement and fear as the nation teetered on the brink of war. Governor Pickens, aware of the delicate situation, chose to avoid direct confrontation with Fort Sumter, allowing the celebrations to unfold with little interference. The entire city seemed to halt its routine, with schools, businesses, and courts closing their doors to make way for the festivities. Crowds of spectators, breeders, and wealthy families arrived from across the South, even from as far as New York, to witness this significant occasion, a reflection of the importance that horse racing and social events held within Charleston's elite society.

Amid the exuberance of the racing events, Charleston's complex social structure became even more apparent. The plantation elite, accompanied by their enslaved workers, took part in lavish dinners and dances, while also engaging in the buying and selling of slaves, which often coincided with the events of Race Week. The horses, more than just competitors, represented the honor and pride of the South Carolina aristocracy. Success in the races was more than a sporting achievement; it was seen as a symbol of personal valor and a means to enhance one's status within Charleston's strict social hierarchy. The event became an arena for both public entertainment and private business, where horses symbolized a deep connection to Carolina's chivalric ideals and the prosperity of the planters.

The character of James Henry Hammond adds another layer to the story of Race Week. Seeking to cement his social standing, Hammond invested heavily in a thoroughbred named Argyle, recognizing the horse as an important asset in his pursuit of elite recognition. The thoroughbred served as a symbol of status, and Hammond's purchase of the horse would be crucial in his dealings at the Jockey Club's events. The Jockey

Club Ball, a pivotal social event during Race Week, was an exclusive gathering where marriage prospects and political alliances were often shaped. However, not all participants in the social events were impressed by the spectacle. Margaret Hunter Hall, a foreign observer, found the Charleston elite lacking in charm, criticizing the men's appearances and the women's unremarkable looks. Despite such opinions, the ball remained an influential gathering for Charleston's social elite, providing opportunities for networking and social climbing.

At the heart of Race Week was the Jockey Club Purse, the day's most anticipated event. On February 6, 1861, the race culminated in an unexpected victory for Albine, a horse that had been considered a poor investment until the race. The horse defeated the heavily favored Planet, a surprising outcome that reflected the unpredictable nature of horse racing. The victory was made possible by the skillful guidance of Hercules, an enslaved trainer hired by Albine's owner, Jack Cantey. This victory added an intriguing layer to the events, as it demonstrated the expertise of an enslaved individual, something rarely acknowledged in Charleston's rigid social structure. The success of Albine and the subsequent celebrations that followed emphasized the thrill of competition but also the complexities of the time.

While the victory provided jubilant moments for the attendees, the underlying reality of the Civil War loomed large. Unbeknownst to those at the racetrack, this would be Charleston's final Race Week for nearly twenty years, with the onset of war overshadowing future social events. As the Confederate States of America solidified their position, Charleston's society was about to undergo dramatic changes. The celebration of horse racing and social gatherings would take a backseat to the harsh realities of war. Race Week, with its display of affluence and old Southern traditions, became a final, fleeting moment of leisure before the nation was forever altered by conflict.