Isaac Murphy: The Gentle Jockey

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for

The Chronicle of African Americans in the Horse Industry

www.AfricanAmericanHorseStories.org



Isaac Burns Murphy (1861-1896)

Image Credit: *Isaac Murphy, head-and-shoulders portrait, in jockey uniform, facing left,* c1895, photographic print, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005690025/>.

### **Summary**

Students will learn about the prominent African American jockey Isaac Burns Murphy who lived in Kentucky. The main purpose of this lesson is for students to recognize the impact that African Americans who worked in the horse industry had on their community and the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

### **Grade Level**

2nd

### **Subjects**

English Language Arts (Reading/Writing), Social Studies

### **Standards**

**KY Academic Standards / Reading Standards for Informational Text / Grade 2**

Key Ideas and Details - RI.2.1; RI.2.3

Craft and Structure - RI.2.6

Integration of Knowledge Ideas - RI.2.9

Text Types and Purposes - C.2.1

Research to Build and Present Knowledge - C.2.5; C.2.6

Production and Distribution - C.2.4

**National Academic Standards / Social Studies / Grade 2**

Ask compelling questions about the communities found in North America - 2.I.Q.1

Identify supporting questions that help answer compelling questions about communities found in North America - 2.I.Q.2

Describe events in North America that illustrate how people from diverse cultural groups attempted to work through conflicts to solve a problem - 2.H.CO.1

Construct an argument with reasons and details to address a civic issue on a community in North America - 2.I.CC.2

### **Chronicle Resources**

Isaac Burns Murphy Person Profile

### **Chronicle Theme**

Legacy Lives On

### **Time Requirements**

1 week; 30 minutes/day

### **Goals**

Students will be able to:

* Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how, related to Isaac Burns Murphy and make and support logical inferences to construct meaning from the text;
* Describe the connection between Isaac Murphy and other notable African American individuals from recommended texts;
* Identify the main purpose of an informational text on Isaac Murphy;
* Describe the relationship between two texts on the same topic or theme: the informational text about Isaac Murphy presented in Chronicle of African Americans in the Horse Industry and the literary portrait of Isaac Murphy presented in Frank X Walker’s poem;
* Compose writing piece about Isaac Murphy using a combination of digital and literary resources, vocabulary words and character description chart;

### **Guiding Questions and Key Concepts**

How did African American jockey Isaac Burns Murphy impact horse racing in Kentucky and what was his legacy?

### **Vocabulary Words and Key Terms**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **vocabulary words in context** | **definition** |
| jockey | someone who rides horses in races |
| apprenticeship | the position in a company |
| thoroughbred | a pure breed of a horse |
| breeder | a person who breeds racehorses |
| trainer | a person who trains horses |
| watchful | watching or observing someone closely |
| talent | natural aptitude or skill |
| affinity | a spontaneous liking for something or someone |
| mount | get up on a horse in order to ride |
| induct | admit someone formally to an organization |
| nigger | an offensive term for a dark-skin person |

### **Teaching Module Overview**

After reading the informational texts presented in this module and/or visiting / virtual touring the Black Horsemen of the Kentucky Turf exhibit at the International Museum of the Horse, teachers and students will read Frank X Walker’s poem Murphy’s Secret to expand their knowledge about Isaac Murphy with his literary portrait. Students will develop the character traits chart of Isaac Murphy, a 19th century African American jockey considered the most recognizable jockey in the USA. Students will also learn and practice the vocabulary words, and finally write a paragraph about Isaac Murphy's contribution to the horse industry in Kentucky. The prerequisite for the assignment is the social studies knowledge on other notable African Americans and their contributions to society, as well as some knowledge about the living circumstances of African Americans in the USA. Teachers are encouraged to read to the students the books from the list of recommended children’s books.

### **Background Information on Isaac Burns Murphy and Frank X Walker**

Isaac Burns Murphy was born on January 2nd, 1861 in Bourbon County, Kentucky. He lost his father when he was three years old. When Isaac was 10, his mother fell so sick that she could not take care of her boy. She asked her friends Eli Jordan and his wife to resume care of Isaac and teach him a skill. Since Jordan has worked as a horse trainer, he involved young Isaac as an exercise rider. After years of hard work, Isaac Burns Murphy became a notable jockey, winning many horse races. He is the only jockey in Kentucky Derby history who won the Kentucky Derby three times, in 1884, 1890, and 1891.

Isaac Burns Murphy person profile on Chronicle of African Americans in the Horse Industry, **https://africanamericanhorsestories.org/**

See also attached PDF of museum exhibit panels on Isaac Murphy and Eli Jordan.

About 120 years later, in 2010, Frank X Walker, author and educator, wrote a book of poems dedicated to Isaac Murphy and his wife Lucy, giving us another look into Isaac’s life - a literary one. The poem Murphy’s Secret inspired me to learn more about Isaac Murphy and to develop this module and titled it Isaac Murphy: The Gentle Jockey.

### **Murphy’s Secret**

**By Frank X Walker**

**Reprinted with permission from the author**

Isaac Murphy

When folks find out I’m *him*

They always want to know what I say to ‘em.

If they be white I tell ‘em I say

‘Run and run quick

or they gone feed you to the niggers.’

An they usually laugh an leave me be.

If they be black I tell ‘em the truth.

I tell ‘em how I cup my hand to a horse’s ear

How I let it catch some wind so they remember

what it sound like to run full out,

to know you not just a field hand or a work horse

but beautiful an strong an smart.

I don’t never have to ask ‘em to honor somethin’

you can’t really see just feel.

I just nudge ‘em like they exhausted mammals do

soon as they are born an licked dry

until they unfold them wobbly legs an stand.

When I’m up there I rub my hands against they neck

lean into they ear, pretend I’m the wind an whisper

‘Find yo purpose. Find yo purpose’ an hold on.

### **Recommended Books**

Poetry Book: Walker, Frank X. *Isaac Murphy: I Dedicate This Ride*. Old Cove Press, 2010.

Featured Poem: Murphy’s Secret

[www.frankxwalker.com](http://www.frankxwalker.com)

To purchase the classroom set of the book, visit:

<http://oldcove.com/portfolio/books/>

Teachers can use these books to introduce students to some other unique examples of African Americans’ contribution to the society, as well as the origins and living circumstances of African Americans:

• *Love Twelve Miles Long* by Glenda Armand, illustrated by Colin Bootman

This is the story of separation of African American family and a mother's love for her son.

• *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave* by Laban Carrick Hill, illustrated by Bryan Collier

This is the story of an extraordinery African American artist, poet, and potter who lived in the 1800s.

• *Brick by Brick* by Charles R. Smith, Jr., illustrated by Floyd Cooper

This is the story of African American contribution in building the White House.

• *Henry’s Freedom Box: A True Story From the Underground Railroad* by Ellen Levine, illustrated by Kadir Nelson

This is the story of Henry “Box” Brown, an African American and one of the most famous Underground Railroad’s runaway slaves.

### **Additional Resources**

The following excerpt is from: Steven A. Riess, “The American Jockey, 1865-1910”, *Transatlantica*, 2/2011, accessed on June 2, 2020. http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/5480

The preeminent African American jockey in the 1880s, if not the best jockey in the United States was Isaac Burns Murphy. According to L.P. Tarelton, the former owner of the Fleetwood Stables, “I have seen all the great jockeys of England and this country for years back, but all in all Isaac Murphy is the greatest of them all.” (136). Son of a bricklayer who fought with the union army, Murphy started racing at 12 under his given name of Isaac Burns. He soon became known as the “colored Archer,” after the great British rider Fred Archer. By 1882 he was earning $20,000 a year, including a $10,000 retainer from horseman Lucky Baldwin, retainer fees from other leading horsemen like Ed Corrigan and James Ben Ali Haggin, plus $25 for winning any race and $15 for losing. In 1884, Murphy won the first American Derby in Chicago and captured three more American Derbies in the next four years. Murphy won his first Kentucky Derby in 1884, and was the first to win two straight Kentucky Derbies in 1891 and 1892 (Wiggins 21-33; *Trenton Daily True American*, 4 June 1890; Hotaling, 1999, 239-75).

Murphy claimed to have won 44 percent of his races (628 out of 1,412), although a recent review puts the record at 34 percent (530 out of 1,538), still an outstanding achievement. Murphy earned $250,000 over his career, leaving at least $30,000 when he died of pneumonia in 1896 at the age of thirty-five. Murphy’s early demise was possibly a product of his constant efforts to keep off weight through crash dieting, sweat baths, and intense exercising (Hotaling, 1999, 272). When Murphy, West or Tony Hamilton was substituted for some other jockey, the betting odds tumbled (*Spirit of the Times*, 113, June 25, 1887, 729; “All the Best Jockeys of the West are Colored”).

Teachers are also encouraged to visit the following websites:

<https://www.socialstudies.org/standards/execsummary>

<https://www.tolerance.org/frameworks/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery/k-5-framework#key-concepts>

<https://www.tolerance.org/learning-plan/ela-2nd-grade>

<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/a-j-mcelveen-letter-to-the-slaver-ziba-b-oakes-19-january-1854>

# Analysis and Assignments

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **vocabulary words in context** | **definition** | **type of word** | **synonym** |
| jockey | someone who rides horses in races | noun | rider  horseman |
| apprenticeship | the position in a company | noun | studentship  training period |
| thoroughbred | a pure breed of a horse | adjective | pure-bred |
| breeder | a person who breeds racehorses | noun | N/A |
| trainer | a person who trains horses | noun | instructor  coach |
| watchful | watching or observing someone closely | adjective | observant  alert |
| talent | natural aptitude or skill | noun | flair |
| affinity | a spontaneous liking for something or someone | noun | empathy |
| mount | get up on a horse in order to ride | verb | get up |
| induct | admit someone formally to an organization | verb | admit to |
| nigger | an offensive term for a dark-skin person | noun | We do not use this word, it may be found in literature |

Modification for English Language Learners (ELLs):

Write one sentence for first 8 vocabulary words, not found in the text, e.g.: Ms. Smith is a watchful teacher.

## Answer the questions:

1. Who was Isaac Murphy?
2. When did he live?
3. Why is he famous?
4. When did he win the Kentucky Derby?
5. Who was Isaac’s trainer?
6. What did L.P. Tarelton, the former owner of the Fleetwood Stables, think of Isaac Murphy?
7. Who wrote a poem about Isaac Murphy?
8. What did Isaac Murphy, according to the poem, use to make his horse run faster?
9. Who are some other famous African Americans?

## Character Observation and Analysis: Isaac B. Murphy

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| I learned this character trait of Isaac Murphy by reading the Chronicle web page | I learned this character trait of Isaac Murphy from the other people words | I learned this character trait of Isaac Murphy by reading Frank X Walker’s poem about Isaac Murphy |
| **talented** | **greatest** | **gentle** |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

### **Modification for English Language Learners (ELLs):**

Based on the chart, what are the adjectives (attributes) to describe Isaac Murphy (choose three from the list)?

What other words do you know that are adjectives? Identify adjectives in the following sentences:

The tree in front of our school is very tall.

The red door is always locked.

I love my big sister.

My best friend is Lucy.

My younger brother wants a soccer ball for his next birthday.

**Compose a paragraph about Isaac Burns Murphy using the vocabulary words, your answers to the questions 1-9 and the character observation and analysis chart.**