

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

For NPS use only

received

date entered

1. Name

historic Churchill Downs

and or common Same

2. Location

street & number 700 Central Avenue not for publication

city, town Louisville vicinity of

state Kentucky code 021 county Jefferson code 111

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial <input type="checkbox"/> park
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational <input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment <input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government <input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial <input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: Race Track

4. Owner of Property

name Churchill Downs

street & number 700 Central Avenue

city, town Louisville vicinity of state Kentucky

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Jefferson County Courthouse

street & number 527 West Jefferson Street

city, town Louisville state Kentucky

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title See continuation sheet has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date federal state county local

depository for survey records

city, town state

7. Description

Condition

☒ excellent
☐ good
☐ fair

☐ deteriorated
☐ ruins
☐ unexposed

Check one

☒ unaltered
☐ altered

Check one

☒ original site
☐ moved date

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Summary

Churchill Downs occupies 147 acres in a primarily residential section of south central Louisville.¹ The grandstand and clubhouse are situated on the northwest side of the track while the barns are on the opposite side to the southeast. The infield is sodded. Opposite the grandstand's central section in the infield are formal gardens.

The original grandstand and clubhouse (1875) were replaced in 1895-96 by the central portion of the present grandstand, which is easily identifiable by the twin spires atop it. The grandstand and clubhouse were expanded in the 1920s and additions to the complex occurred in the 1960s. The major additions to the grandstand and clubhouse have been lateral expansions to make additional seating possible. These have, however, been subdued changes, the intent being to retain emphasis on the twin spires of the original section.

The Original Churchill Downs (1874-94)

The track was founded in 1874 as the Louisville Jockey Club and modeled after the track at Epsom Downs in England. The original clubhouse, erected in 1875, was designed by the Louisville city architect, John Andrewartha. It was "a picturesque confection of intersecting polygons, multiple porches or verandas, and unexpected gables. There was much 'Carpenter's Gothic' bric-a-brac under the eaves and along the pinnacles."² The original grandstand, built at the same time, just west of the clubhouse, was also Gothic in design. At each end were two large towers, used as observation posts, with a smaller tower in the grandstand's center. The placement of the grandstand, however, proved to be a mistake because it caused the racing fans to face the afternoon sun.

Present Churchill Downs (1894-95)

In 1894-95, the central portion of the current grandstand was constructed on the track's northwest side, following a design by Joseph D. Baldez, a young draftsman in the Louisville firm of D.X. Murphy. Intersecting the lateral roof are two gable projections, whose ends are treated with pilasters. Each is surmounted by an octagonal cupola crowned by an eight-sided spire in the shape of an elongated bell. These twin spires "have since become the trademark of Churchill Downs and are synonymous with the Kentucky Derby."³ Visually, the spires are more than symbols, for their verticality provides a welcome relief from what would otherwise be a strictly horizontal composition due to the grandstand's periodic expansions.

The rear of the grandstand's original section is of brick and incorporates two roundels containing horses' heads on each projection. In addition, each is also treated with three arched openings framed by voussoirs at the heads and Ionic pilasters at the sides. Much of the 1895 grandstand's interior remains, including the brick-floored "bullring" where trainers congregate.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below				
prehistoric	archeology-prehistoric	community planning	landscape architecture	religion	
1400-1499	archeology-historic	conservation	law	science	
1500-1599	agriculture	economics	literature	sculpture	
1600-1699	architecture	education	military	social	
1700-1799	art	engineering	music	humanitarian	
X 1800-1899	commerce	exploration settlement	philosophy	theater	
X 1900-	communications	industry	politics government	transportation	
		invention		X other (specify)	
				Recreation	
				(horseracing)	
Specific dates	1875-date	Builder Architect	D.X. Murphy and Co.--		
			grandstand & clubhouse (1895-96)		

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Summary

Churchill Downs, which features the largest racing grandstand in North America, has attained significance primarily as the home, since 1875, of the annual Kentucky Derby, the internationally renowned race for 3-year-old thoroughbred horses, which serves as the first phase of the "Triple Crown," racing's "most sought after distinction."¹ The Preakness (since 1873), at Pimlico, in Baltimore, and the Belmont Stakes (since 1867), in New York, complete the equine triathlon.*

The track at Churchill Downs was constructed in 1874 by Col. Meriwether Lewis Clark, a prominent Louisville thoroughbred breeder, in an attempt to stimulate the thoroughbred industry, which was then in a period of decline. It was modeled after Epsom Downs in England. The Derby rapidly acquired prominence in racing and has now for 111 years attracted racing's greatest horses, jockeys, and trainers. The Downs is also the scene of other important races.

Historically, the horse industry has been a vital element in the economy of the Commonwealth of Kentucky. It remains a significant factor today. Churchill Downs epitomizes the importance of the industry to the State, and the State's universal identification with thoroughbred horse racing.

Finally, although the Derby's "Run for the Roses" is but a 2-minute horse race over 1-1/4 miles on the first Saturday in May, it is "the most glamorous race in the United States"² and certainly 2 of the most exciting minutes in the world of sports. It has also become enveloped with added significance as a great local festival with a national reputation. It is invested with traditions and ritual that bring it to a par with the Mardi Gras of New Orleans and the Tournament of Roses in Pasadena.

*The Belmont Stakes have been run at several New York tracks: Jerome Park (1867-89), Morris Park (1890-1904), Belmont Park (1905-63), and Aqueduct (1963-date). Belmont has no basic historic integrity; Jerome and Morris Parks no longer exist. Pimlico is extremely altered.

9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

10. Geographical Data

Acree of nominated property 115

Quadrangle name Louisville West

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

A

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Zone Easting Northing

B

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Zone Easting Northing

C

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D

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E

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F

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G

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H

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Verbal boundary description and justification

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code
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state	code	county	code
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11. Form Prepared By

name title James H. Charleton, Historian

organization History Division, National Park Service date March 1985

street & number 1100 L Street, NW telephone (202) 343-8165

city or town Washington state DC 20013-7127

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

 national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature _____

title _____ date _____

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date _____

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date _____

Chief of Registration

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

6

Page

1

Representation in existing surveys

Title: Survey of Historic Sites in Kentucky

Date: 1971

State

Depository for Survey Records: Kentucky Heritage Commission

City, Town: Frankfort

State: Kentucky

Title: National Register of Historic Places

Date: 1977

Federal

Depository for Survey Records: National Register of Historic Places

City, Town: Washington

State: DC

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

7

Page

2

Additions to the grandstand at this popular racecourse have brought its seating capacity to more than 42,000. The additions have included: expansions to the grandstand in 1920, 1960, and 1962-63; clubhouse expansions in 1924, 1962-63, and 1972; the installation of infield tote boards in 1970 and 1972; the erection of the Churchill Downs Kentucky Derby Museum in 1961; infield mutuel and restroom facilities in 1962-63; jockeys' quarters, press boxes, and glass-doored roof boxes in 1966-67; and the current conversion of the barns from wood to concrete block. Some of the additions have made use of Neo-Georgian features such as Palladian windows, decks with turned spindles, and denticulated cornices. These elements are not harmful to the overall composition and provide an interesting contrast to the Gothic spires. In 1972, the spires and roof were retiled with slate in the original style, and the entire structure is painted annually.

The barns are being converted from wood to concrete block, a step which serves as a safeguard against fire; they are simple 1-story lateral structures with gabled roofs. Their roofs extend slightly to provide shelter for narrow ground-level walkways extending across their fronts. The facades are broken by numerous entries that give access to individual stalls.

One of Churchill Downs' trademarks is the series of gardens and floral displays throughout the grounds. Their colorful variety produces a brilliant contrast to the stark whiteness of the Downs' structures. In the spring, a large quantity of tulips are imported from the Netherlands, and 60,000 other plants are grown each year in greenhouses operated on the southwest of the Downs' property. Numerous flower-filled urns are placed throughout the grounds, including several in the infield from the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition. (At one time, a band platform was opposite the grandstand in the infield and a training track was inside the main one.) Appropriately, the infield is sodded with Kentucky bluegrass in tribute to the area of the State that is internationally known for its thoroughbred farms.

Footnotes

¹This description is an edited version of the description of Churchill Downs in the National Register of Historic Places nomination form prepared by the Kentucky Heritage Commission in 1977.

²Walter E. Langsam, Preservation Louisville (Louisville: Falls of the Ohio Metropolitan Council of Governments, 1973), p. 165.

³Robert Gorham, Churchill Downs -- 100th Kentucky Derby (Louisville: Churchill Downs, 1973), p. 54.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

8

Page

2

History

The horse industry has always been vital to Kentucky's economy, first as the only means of transportation and then as a breeding business and sport. Organized racing took place in Kentucky as early as 1789. From then until 1874, when Churchill Downs was constructed, there were several tracks in the State. In 1873, however, horse racing in Kentucky was at a low ebb and many horse breeders were considering closing their stock farms, since they could not get good prices for their thoroughbred yearlings. Col. Meriwether Lewis Clark established Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Derby in an attempt to alleviate this depressed situation.

Colonel Clark was born in Louisville, a few miles northeast of the present track, on his family's estate, Blenheim. He was the grandson of William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition and the namesake of Clark's partner in that great venture. Meriwether Lewis Clark's maternal great-grandfather, Armstead Churchill, had come to Kentucky from Virginia in 1787 and settled on the large tract of land, south of the Forks of the Ohio, which he dubbed Blenheim. It was on part of this estate that his great-grandson built his racetrack.

Meriwether Lewis Clark had long been interested in the breeding and racing of horses and, in 1873, traveled to Europe in search of ideas for the racetrack he hoped to build on the Churchill land. Among the famous tracks he visited in France and England was Epsom Downs in England, where the Epsom Derby and the Oaks are run. Clark was so impressed he decided to model his track after it. Inspired by the success of the English system, he chose to employ the concepts of organizing clubs and designating races for the various ages and classes of thoroughbreds. In addition, the sizable purses, he felt, would insure a continuing demand for good quality racehorses.

Clark called his track Churchill Downs, since it was built on Churchill land. Continuing the emulation of English models, he chose to name his principal race the Kentucky Derby and modeled the Clark Handicap after the St. Leger Handicap.

To raise money to sponsor his project, Clark formed the Louisville Jockey Club, and served as its first president. Clark's uncles, John and Henry Churchill, were principals in the club; John served as the first treasurer and Henry was on the board of directors, as was Luke Blackburn, who soon thereafter (1879) became Governor of Kentucky. The 320 original members of the club each subscribed \$100. The land was leased from John and Henry Churchill. Each year until 1906 the lease was renewed; in that year it was purchased from the Churchill heirs.

Not only did Clark form the Jockey Club and construct Churchill Downs, he was the first to introduce pari-mutuel betting to the United States from France. He also supported the State legislation, passed in 1878, which legalized the practice at recognized racetracks.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 3

After the track was built there was no money left for either a grandstand or stables. The Jockey Club borrowed money from a wealthy Louisvillian, W.H. Thomas, and a clubhouse, designed by John Andrewartha, and grandstand were constructed in what is now the backstretch across from the present grandstand. Living quarters were built in the clubhouse for Colonel Clark, who entertained lavishly during the racing season.

The first Kentucky Derby was run on Monday, May 17, 1875, over a distance of a mile and a half. (In 1896 the length was reduced to the present-day mile and a quarter. The Derby is now held on the first Saturday in May.) The Spirit of the Times, a New York City periodical devoted exclusively to sporting events, gave this lively and prophetic account of the first Derby:

The inaugural meeting of the newly organized Louisville Jockey Club commenced today and continues over six days. A more brilliant opening was never witnessed, and the anticipations of the most sanguine and enthusiastic Kentuckian were more than realized. Fully ten thousand people witnessed the sport, and the spacious grandstand was crowded to its utmost capacity. Delightful weather favored the Jockey Club on its opening day, and the presence of a dazzling array of female loveliness, representatives of Kentucky's proverbially beautiful daughters, enhanced the attractiveness of the occasion. The track was in superb order for fast running, and betokened the care and attention bestowed on its preparation this spring. The result of the first day of the meeting assures the future success of the Louisville Jockey Club, and it will now take its place as the great racing centre of a State so distinguished in the turf annals of America.³

Many names might be invoked in a chronicle of the Derby's history since that day -- horses, jockeys, trainers, and owners. The winners of the Triple Crown surely bear mentioning, among the many great horses that have raced in Louisville. They have included: Sir Barton (1919), Gallant Fox (1930), Omaha (1935), War Admiral (1937), Whirlaway (1941), Count Fleet (1943), Assault (1946), Citation (1948), Secretariat (1973), Seattle Slew (1977), and Affirmed (1978).⁴

Oliver Lewis, a black, won the first running of the Derby (1875), aboard Aristides. Of the other great jockeys, Isaac Murphy, another black, is regarded as perhaps the greatest of all; his record of three Derby victories was not surpassed until 1948, when Eddie Arcaro won the fourth of his five (1938, 1941, 1945, 1948, and 1952). Earle Sande (1923, 1925, and 1930), Bill Hartack (1957, 1960, 1962, 1964, and 1969), and Willie Shoemaker (1955, 1959, and 1965) are other multiple winners. Ben A. Jones and his son Horace ("Jimmy") were two of the leading trainers who have worked the Derby, saddling six winners for Calumet Farms; James ("Sunny Jim") Fitzsimmons, an ex-jockey who trained Triple Crown winners Gallant Fox and Omaha, was another.⁵

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 4

Other important races have been run at Churchill Downs. They include: the Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes (for 2-year-olds); the Clark Handicap (earlier the Clark Stakes) (for 3-year-olds and over); and the Kentucky Oaks (for 3-year-old fillies).

Finally, mention should be made of an important figure in the history of Churchill Downs, Col. Matt J. Winn, a Louisville tailor who had a flair for promotion. Winn took over management of the organization when it was nearly bankrupt in 1902. He enhanced the track's status and was in major part responsible for the Kentucky Derby's worldwide popularity and prestige.

Footnotes

¹Keith W. Jennison, ed., "Horse Racing," in The Concise Encyclopedia of Sports (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1970), p. 78. Except where attribution is, as here, otherwise noted, this statement of significance is an edited version of the National Register of Historic Places nomination form prepared by the Kentucky Heritage Commission in 1977.

²Jennison, op. cit., p. 77.

³Cited in National Register form.

⁴The World Almanac, 1982, p. 861; Jennison, op. cit., p. 78.

⁵Ibid., pp. 79-80.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number 9

Page 1

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Menke, Frank G. The Story of Churchill Downs, 1875-1939, and the Kentucky Derby 1940. (Pamphlet.)

Morton, Thurston B. "The Centennial of the Kentucky Derby, 1875-1974," Antiques Magazine, April 1974, pp. 181-183.

Robertson, William H.P. The History of Thoroughbred Racing in America. New York: Bonanza Books.

Thomas, Samuel W., ed. Views of Louisville since 1766. Louisville: Courier-Journal Lithographing Co., 1971.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered

Continuation sheet

Item number

10

Page

1

UTM References: A. 16/608060/4228890
B. 16/608020/4228580
C. 16/607840/4228370
D. 16/607200/4228370
E. 16/607180/4228430
F. 16/607450/4228540
G. 16/607280/4228770
H. 16/607310/4228880
I. 16/607530/4229150
J. 16/607980/4229080

Verbal Boundary

Beginning on the south side of Central Avenue (point J on USGS map) approximately 200 feet east of South Fifth Street, the boundary runs in a southeasterly direction for approximately 700 feet to a point on the west side of South Fourth Street approximately 600 feet south of the intersection of South Fourth and Central Avenue. The line continues southwest along South Fourth for approximately 1800 feet to the intersection of South Fourth and Longfield Avenue. The boundary follows the north side of Longfield for approximately 2100 feet in a westwardly direction, and then turns northwest for approximately 200 feet along a service road. Next, the line turns northeast following the north side of the racetrack chute for approximately 1000 feet before turning northwest for approximately 900 feet to a point southwest of the clubhouse/grandstand structure (point G on USGS map). The boundary then runs northeast along the rear of the structure for approximately 300 feet (to point H on USGS map) and then continues in a northeasterly direction for approximately 1200 feet until it meets Central Avenue. Turning east, the line follows the south side of Central Avenue approximately 1200 feet to the point of origin.

The nominated acreage includes the track, the clubhouse, the grandstand, garden areas, the barns, and the historic brick wall that bounds a portion of the track. These are all vital elements in the historic physical complex of Churchill Downs. The main parking areas have not been included.