

CELEBRATING THE AGE OF "WHEN THE HORSE WAS KING"



BRINGING THE PAST TO PRESENT TO CREATE THE FUTURE

CHARLES HORACE NELSON (1843 TO 1915)

NOMINATION TO THE NATIONAL HARNESS RACING MUSEUM'S  
HALL OF IMMORTALS

A STORY OF FAME & GLORY -- DISGRACE & REDEMPTION

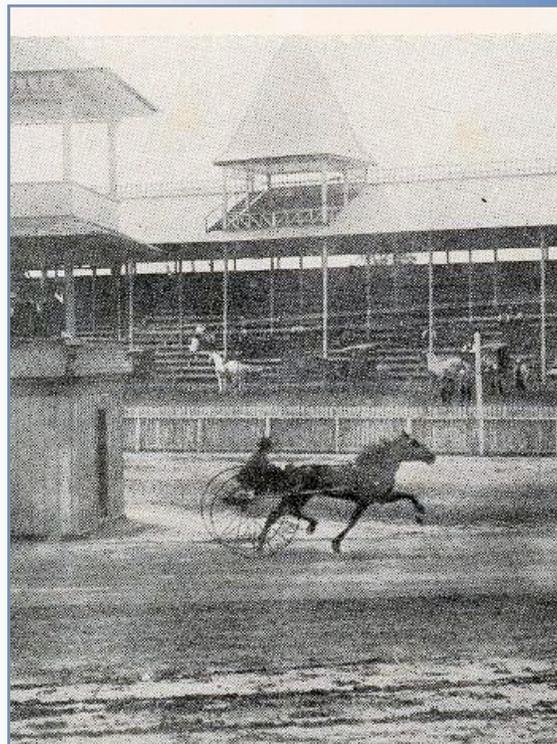
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C. H. NELSON



NELSON 2:09

in a time trial over the Independence, Iowa, Kite Track in 1891



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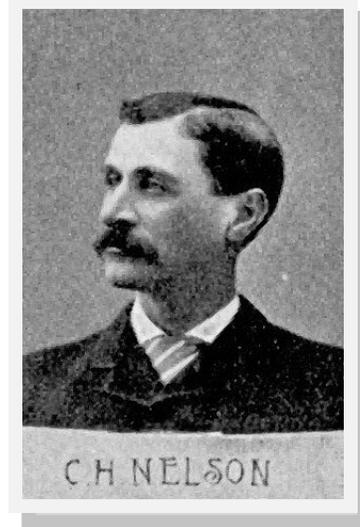
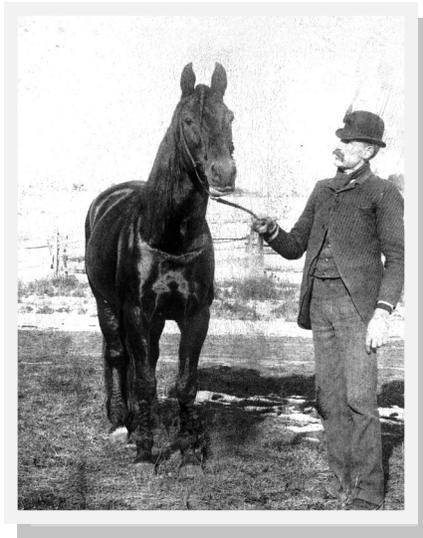
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CHARLES HORACE NELSON (1843 TO 1915)  
HIS FAMOUS TROTTING STALLION, NELSON 4209  
A STORY OF FAME & GLORY -- DISGRACE & REDEMPTION  
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It is said that some of us seek fifteen minutes of fame -- a few moments of glory. Others of us make decisions that will lead to overwhelming disgrace. If fortunate, those who are Disgraced may find redemption. Charles Horace Nelson, born in 1843 in Palermo, Maine, in his career as Maine's most famous horseman experienced all: fame, glory, Disgrace, and finally redemption.

### **Early Life**

Known as Hod by his many friends, Nelson grew up in Palermo, a small country town twenty miles from Waterville, Maine. Hod's father, Benjamin ran a country store. Little is known of Hod's developmental years. Historical documents indicate that Hod attended public school and his family attended the Baptist Church in town of China. It was through a church building committee that Hod's father Benjamin worked with Francis Jones, the father of Hod's future wife, Emma Pinkham Jones.

Although this narrative tells the story of C.H. Nelson, his lifework was tied to his world champion trotting stallion Nelson by Young Rolfe out of Gretchen foaled in the nearby town of Winslow, Maine in 1882. According to his own account in a letter to the Clark Review, Hod first admired the dam of Gretchen at his father's store hitched to a wagon. Even at a young age Hod had an



In 1893 Nelson (top row) was included in this group photograph representing trotting horse breeders.

interest and an eye for a good horse. The driver of that wagon was A.K. Jones of Vassalboro.

### Civil War

At the age of nineteen, Hod enlisted in the Maine 12th Infantry, Company F and became disabled. However, In 1865 after he recovered, he re-enlisted in 19th Infantry, Company G and on March 3, 1866 at Savannah, Georgia, he was honorably discharged, but suffered from lifelong health issues. Some years after the Civil War, Nelson became the commander of the Waterville Grand Army of the Republic. On November 7, 1867, he married Emma Aubine Jones.

In the 1870s Hod owned land in China, Maine. His early equine acquisitions included Suzie Owen and Knox Girl.

In 1882 the same year that Nelson 4209 was foaled, Hod Nelson purchased 69 acres of land on the Oakland Road in Waterville, Maine. This land became his main base, the home to Nelson 4209, and eventually became known as Sunnyside Farm.

Between 1882 and 1888 Hod Nelson's reputation as a horseman and breeder solidified his status as the leading horseman in the State of Maine. Nelson 4209 was recognized as Maine's premiere three-year old stallion trotter. During this time period Nelson's land holdings increased

Maine Farmer -- May 27, 1886

## Horse Department.

### A Maine Horse Breeder's Establishment.

**Sunnyside Stock Farm.**

Not many years ago a gentleman moved to Waterville and purchased a farm of one hundred acres, about one mile and a half from the center of this rapidly growing town. In a small way he commenced handling horses and breeding. The character of the horses selected, and skill and good judgment of the breeder, soon attracted wide attention, and the high average of the stock bred at Sunnyside Farm, all combining together, placed this farm among the first in eastern New England.

In the proprietor, C. H. Nelson, Esq., one finds a rare combination for a horse-man. An enthusiastic admirer of any good horse, an easy, rapid talker, with ability to illustrate a point in a manner not to be forgotten by the listener, possessing a thorough knowledge of the principles of breeding, genial, kind-hearted and obliging; and to these we find added a high ideal, in which all essential qualities combine to produce a perfect horse. Such a man is Mr. Nelson, and, to those who know him, it is no wonder that whenever he appears on the track, or about the stalls, with whip tucked under his arm, he should have a large following; for wit and pleasantry, with caustic criticisms, flow from his lips, as he shows his well bred horses and colts, and predicts their future. In all his labors he is ably seconded by an interested superintendent, A. H. McFarlan, a thorough-going horseman by nature and inherited tendencies.



**Nelson 4209 by Young Rolfe, Dam Gretchen**

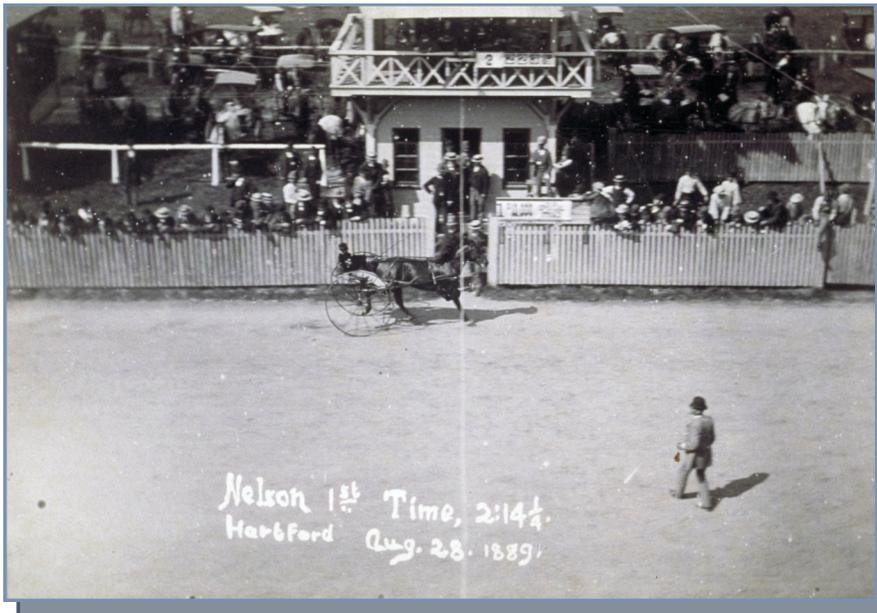
1888 Painting by W. A. Treat -- Painting said to be commissioned by Hod Nelson  
This painting includes the only known images of the Sunnyside Farm buildings.

to 540 acres. This included a 300 acre farm in Fairfield Centre, the former fairgrounds and trotting park of the North Kennebec Agricultural and Horticultural Society, and other land in Waterville and Winslow. In the spring of 1888 John Wallace journeyed by boat and train to Waterville and interviewed Hod and his wife Emma at the Elmwood Hotel. For ten years, Hod and Emma made their home at the Elmwood Hotel. In his article, Wallace describes Hod Nelson's development as a horseman and breeder.

Newspaper articles from the *Lewiston Sun Journal*, the *Kennebec Journal*, and the *Waterville Sentinel* provide accounts of Hod Nelson's life on the farm, on the track and traveling throughout the United States. Nelson purchased a train car for his horse as he traveled by rail. When traveling Nelson would place mattresses around his horse and stay with him in the rail car. From 1882 to 1891, Nelson experienced the fame and glory of the horseman with a champion trotter. As illustrated in many articles Nelson had many fine qualities yet his temperament of being quick to anger resulted in polarizing his relationships into those who were his loyal friends and those who were his enemies. As Nelson's reputation grew, Sunnyside Farm became the destination for hundreds of people who wanted to see Nelson's operation, his stallions, and to listen to Nelson talk about his horses. Nelson was recognized as Maine's premiere horseman. In a race at the old Lewiston Raceway, Nelson 4209 became the fastest three-year old in the United States. In 1890, Nelson 4209 set the stallion world's record on a half-mile track at Maplewood Park in Bangor, Maine.

### **Disgrace -- Charter Oak Park Stakes Race, August 28, 1889**

During this period, Hod Nelson began his travels that led to the two year suspension of Nelson and Nelson 4209 from tracks sanctioned by the National Trotting Association. Newspaper reports tell of the possible sale of Nelson 4209 pursuant to Nelson 4209 breaking the world's record in his next race. This race may have been the race against Alcryon at Charter Oaks Park in Hartford, Connecticut in 1889. According to newspaper accounts Nelson purchased a starting position in the race and then chose not to pay the fee. The race did take place and Nelson 4209 driven by Ira F.



Nelson wins the first heat by ten lengths.

1889 -- Nelson wins the first heat at Charter Oaks Park by ten lengths. Fails to win another heat. Alcryon wins! C.H. Nelson could be man in foreground.

Photograph by Frank G. Warner  
The copyrights for Charter Oak Park images are owned by the Connecticut Historical Society. Permission for use granted by the Society.

Woodbury won the first heat by ten lengths. This heat was the only heat won by Nelson. Alcryon won the remaining heats. Hod Nelson attributed the loss to his horse not being in the best of shape. However, a later article in a Hartford newspaper reported excessive starts and further stated that the starter was known to be biased for his favorite horses. A letter in one of Maine's newspapers from Samuel Currier of Hallowell, Maine, addressed the possibility that Nelson's driver sold the race. The result of the Charter Oak Park race may have set the stage for the fix of the Balch Race in Boston, Massachusetts on September 23, 1889.

**2:20 CLASS.—Charter Oak Stakes of \$10,000.**

Alcryon, by Alcryon.....	(Robens)	3	1	1	1
Nelson.....	(Woodbury)	1	2	3	3
Geneva S.....	(McCarthy)	2	4	2	2
Jack.....	(Doble)	4	3	4	4
Sensation.....	(Keating)	6	5	5	5
Perica.....	(Spian)	7	6	6	6
Graying.....	(Goldsmith)	5	dis.		

Time—2:14½; 2:16½; 2:17½; 2:19½.

August 28th results published in the New York Times, August 29, 1889



Alcryon wins the second heat.



**Nelson, the Northern King**

### **The Balch National Stallion Race**

The Balch Race was to be the rematch between Nelson and Alcryon. An article in a Hallowell newspaper prior to the race indicated that many Mainers would be in attendance and that fortunes would be made and lost on this race. Rumors swirled the night before the race -- the fix was on. For the win, Nelson would pay F.L. Noble, Alcryon's manager, \$5,000 which was the amount of the winning purse. Plus Noble would be able to keep any winnings. Nelson did not want to drive Nelson 4209. He had secured the services of Budd Doble, but Doble back out at the last moment. Nelson attempted to secure the services of John Splan. Oddly, Splan had been paid \$500.00 just to walk about the grounds on the day of the race. A news article published after the race reported that Alcryon had been shod with heavier shoes that would result in breaking throughout the race. Nelson won the race.

During an evening of libation it was reported that Noble's driver told others of the fix. An investigation ensued and the National Trotting Association secured Nelson's check to Noble. Nelson continued racing Nelson 4209. However, in an affidavit to the NTA Nelson confessed that he was party to a fraud. Nelson had told others that he had been approached the day before to fix the race, but declined. However, Nelson reported in his affidavit that a close business associate without his knowledge set the fix and that he was not in a position to undo what had been done. Splan in his testimony reported that he had been paid to not drive, but also stated that he saw nothing in the performances of the horses that indicated any wrongdoing. Nelson refused to identify his business associate. Nelson and his famous stallion were barred from all NTA tracks. Initially, Noble, Alcryon's manager, refused to cooperate, but eventually admitted the fraud. Balch, a horse trader and promoter of the race, committed suicide due to his financial difficulties .

KEY DATES  
NELSON'S RUN TO BECOMING  
KING OF STALLIONS

Nelson loses to Alcryon at the Charter Oaks Stakes ,  
Hartford, Connecticut -- 8/28/1889

Nelson wins the Balch National Stallion Race at Beacon  
Park, Boston Race, MA in three straight heats --  
9/23/1889

Nelson sets world's record on half-mile oval track with a  
high wheel sulky, Maplewood Park, Bangor, Maine --  
9/6/1890

**Nelson's Champion Run  
on Regulation Mile Tracks**

Kankakee, Illinois -- T. 2.12 -- 9/24/1890

Kankakee, Illinois -- T. 2.11 1/4 -- 9/26/1890

Terre Haute, Indiana -- T. 2.11 1/4 -- 10/9/1890

Cambridge, Indiana -- T. 2.10 3/4 -- 10/21/1890 *Record*

Grand Rapids, Michigan -- T. 2.10 -- 9/17/1891

Both Nelsons, man and horse, suspended as reported in  
New York Times on December 7, 1890.

**Other Times**

Bangor, Maine -- T. 2.11 3/4 h/m -- 8/6/1893

Trenton, New Jersey -- T. 2.11 3/4 m -- 10/6/1893

Nelson reinstated  
by the National Trotting Association  
on 11/21/1892

BALCH NATIONAL STALLION RACE  
TOOK PLACE SEPTEMBER 23, 1889

**BALCH NATIONAL  
STALLION RACE**

**BEACON PARK,  
Boston, September 18!**

EVERYBODY SHOULD SEE

**NELSON!**

IN THIS GREAT RACE.

THE

**MAINE CENTRAL RAILROAD**

proposes to sell excursion tickets from all stations  
by night trains of the 16th and all trains of the 17th,  
good for a return until September 21st at low rates  
of fare.

From Brunswick, Bath, Auburn and Lewiston,	\$4.00
Gardiner, Hallowell, Augusta, Winthrop and Hearfield,	5.00
Oakland,	6.75
Waterville and Farmington,	6.00
Howhagan, Pittsfield and Belfast,	7.00
Dexter and Bangor,	8.00
Ellsworth and Bar Harbor,	8.00

(Other stations in proportion.)  
Best train for people from Augusta and the Ken-  
necob is the first one in the morning.

PAYSON TUCKER,  
General Manager.

F. E. SCOTTNEY,  
General Pass and Ticket Agent.  
Portland, Sept. 8, 1889. cop11dtd

NELSON WON IN THREE STRAIGHT HEATS.

**BOUGHT A RACE**

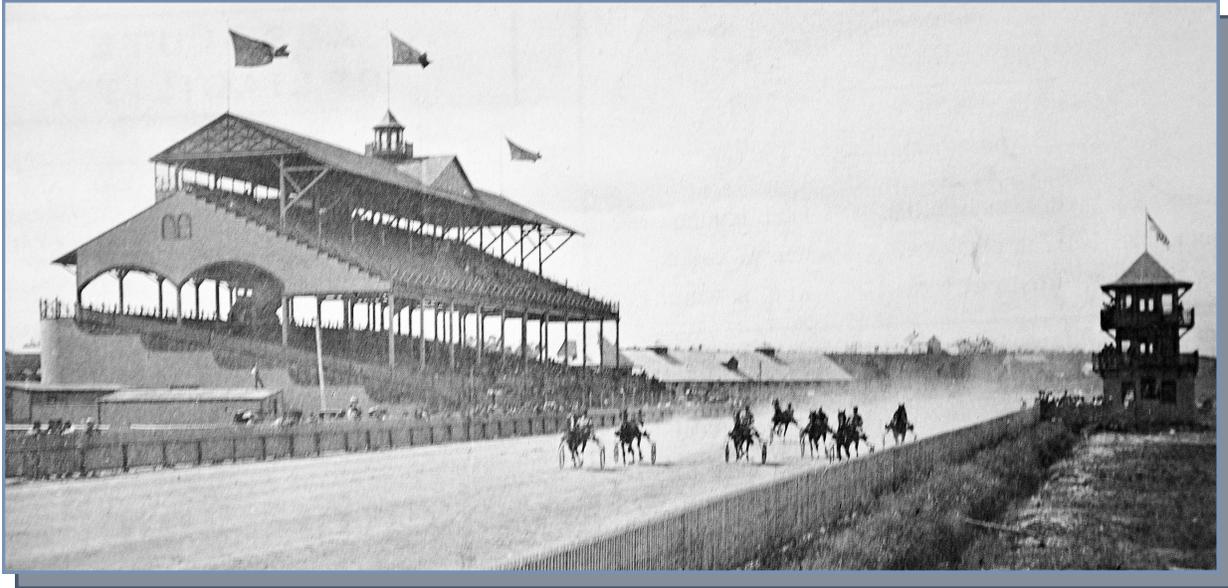
**Written Confession of the Owner of a Famous  
Stallion.**

CHICAGO, Dec. 6. — A Bangor (Maine)  
special says: It is no secret here that in the  
great stallion race of the famous Nelson-  
Alcryon—the case now under consideration  
by the National Association—C. H. Nelson  
bought and paid for three heats which gave  
his stallion the championship in the stallion  
world. He paid the day before the race to  
Noble, the owner of Alcryon, \$1000 in cash  
and two checks of \$200 each—\$5000 in all—  
which amount he got back as winner of the

race, Noble getting \$2500 additional as win-  
ner of the second money. Alcryon was  
taken the night before the race to a shop  
near the track, his racing shoes were pulled  
off and he was shod with heavy shoes, to  
which he was not accustomed. The fraud  
was discovered, and as is well known, both  
men and horses were expelled. Nelson  
made a clean breast of the whole matter,  
and the association is in possession of his  
confession in writing and has also the  
checks paid and returned to Nelson.

From *The Morning Call*, San Francisco, California  
December 7, 1890 -- Nelson confesses.  
NTA renders decision.

**CHARLES HORACE NELSON (1843 TO 1915)**  
**A STORY OF FAME & GLORY -- DISGRACE & REDEMPTION**



**Rigby Park -- Nelson's Best Time 2.09 -- Match Race with Directum**  
**This image of Rigby Park may depict John R. Gentry's attempt at breaking the 2:00 minute mile.**

### **World Record**

By delaying his admission of guilt, Nelson set off on a course that allowed his stallion to make history. It was the series of races in September and October of 1890 that Nelson and his horse set the world's stallion record on a regulation oval mile track with a high wheel sulky. Nelson 4209, called the Northern King, was now the King of Stallions.

Given his NTA suspension, Nelson sought and gained membership in the American Trotting Association. Nelson's ATA membership was a subject of great debate among NTA directors. Some speculated that a powerful NTA member influenced the decisions made by the NTA regarding the Nelson-Alcryn Case.

In November of 1891, the *Waterville Sentinel* reported that Nelson had completed all land negotiations and that work had begun on a mile track in Waterville, Maine. By the end of November, the *Sentinel* reported that Nelson had abandoned his Waterville mile track. Oddly, he had just learned that the City of Waterville had planned to build a road through the center of his proposed track. At this point, Nelson became a member of the Maine Mile Track Association and invested his money in the building of Rigby Park located in South Portland, Maine.

In 1892, Rigby Park became the site of Nelson 4209's best time of 2.09. In 1894, Nelson 4209's best recorded time of 2.07 3/4 was recorded at the Moosepath Trotting Park in St. John, New Brunswick. This record time remained Moosepath's track record for more than ten years. This time was never published in the United States.

In all probability, Nelson 4209's last significant competitive race occurred in September of 1894 against a five-year old named Directum. Nelson 4209 was twelve years old. Directum won all three heats.



**Nelson at Maplewood Park, Bangor, Maine**

In the third heat, Directum was so far ahead that Nelson slowed his horse down and slowly trotted to the finish line. From this point forward Nelson may have driven Nelson 4209 as part of exhibitions.

At some point between 1889 and 1893, Nelson partnered with Samuel Currier of Hallowell with the opening of the Pine Grove Stock Farm. This farm was once owned by Benjamin Vaughan and Governor Joseph Bodwell. Newspaper ads and catalogs indicated that this farm was operated by Nelson and Currier between 1893 and 1897. Around 1900 the farm was sold back to the Vaughan family. William Vaughan operated the farm for one year as the Pine Grove Stock Farm.

After 1894 Nelson continued breeding and selling horses. His famous stallion was still in service. In the early 1900s ads can be found in various newspapers offering stallions for service that were Nelson's get. Other newspapers present newspaper articles speaking of Nelson's continued reputation as a horseman and as an authority on identifying excellent horses. Never again did Nelson breed a horse with the qualities and abilities of Nelson 4209. There must have been the right magic in the breeding of Young Rolfe and Gretchen. Sadly, Nelson sold Young Rolfe. He attempted to buy Young Rolfe back, however, the horse died being pushed too hard by his driver on a track out of state.

### **The Nelson 4209 Bloodline**

Nelson's historic bloodline still exists through the maternal bloodlines originating with his daughters Suzette Nelson and Gertrude Nelson. In the 1890's and as late as 1901, Nelson 4209 was bred with horses from other states. Both Suzette Nelson and Gertrude Nelson raced and were bred as broodmares. Suzette Nelson was bred with Baron Wilkes -- the result, Suzette Baron who was bred with Bingen. Their foal

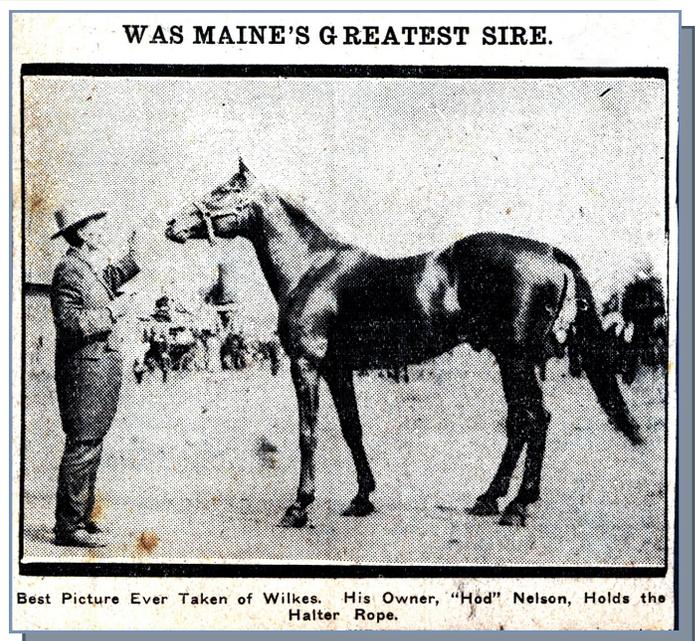
Their foal Nelson Bingen was one of New Zealand's and Australia's greatest sires. Suzette Baron was exported to Austria. According to John Peck, editor of Harness Racing International and Classicfamilies.net, Nelson's bloodline through its mares still existing in Australia, New Zealand, Slovenia, and Canada. Telephone conversations with current owners of the bloodline indicate that other horses may exist in New York, New Jersey, and North Carolina. No research had been conducted to see if there are any Maine descendants of Nelson 4209. Today the descendants of Gertrude Nelson include Gravel Gertie, Gravel Crusher, Spirit of Fire and Cenalta Fireworks. Gravel Crusher raced at the Meadowlands in 2010. These horses are in the sire line of Smokey Direct, a direct descendant of Gertrude Nelson. In a telephone conversation with Janet Terhume who works for the United States Trotting Association, an additional maternal bloodline has been identified. Gertrude Axwell, sister to Dorothy De Lopez, both daughters of Bertha Hall and granddaughters of Gertrude Nelson, foaled three daughters, Queenie Riggs (1939), Nancy Hall (1943) and Rhonda M Guy (1951). Queenie Riggs' descendant Connie Bruiser was living in 1992. Nancy Hall had five daughters and Rhonda M Guy had two daughters. Additional research may prove that a true maternal bloodline is still intact.

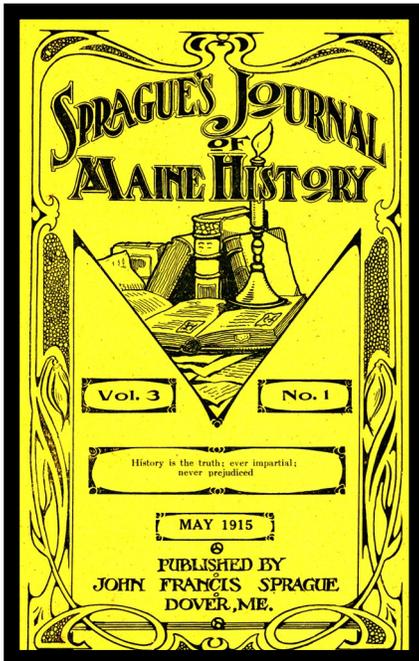
### Redemption

Nelson 4209 died on December 4, 1909. In September two years earlier, Hod Nelson found redemption. Although we know that Nelson continued to operate Sunnyside Farm and race a few horses, writers of articles for the horse periodicals or books related to trotting history seemed to leave C.H. Nelson and his famous stallion out of the historical record -- pay back for past behaviors. However, in 1907 Nelson was asked by the organizers of the Central Maine Fair to put together a display that would be called "Nelson Day." Nelson agreed to create the display. Nelson called all over New England and asked purchasers of the get of Nelson and his other stallion Wilkes to participate in a parade of horses at the Central Maine Fair in Waterville, Maine.

Here Nelson found redemption. On Nelson Day sixty of Nelson's and Wilkes' get paraded on the track at the Central Maine Fairground. Afterwards, newspaper accounts applauded the grandeur of such a magnificent parade and doubted if such an event would ever be repeated. Nelson spoke to an audience of more than 2000 Mainers on his work and his horses. Trophies, paintings, and photographs were on display in the Grand Coliseum. Nelson 4209 had hundreds of visitors in his stall.

In 1893 Nelson, along with two other Mainers, E.L. Norcross, and George H. Bailey, were recognized in a group photo of superior horsemen from across the country. From 1882 through 1888, Nelson was at the top of his game. Between 1888 and 1892 Nelson and his famous stallion set world stallion records on both regulation half mile tracks and mile tracks. He played the hand dealt him as a result of the Balch Race the best he could. Given the disbelief on the part of John W. Thompson, publisher of the Maine Horse Breeders' Monthly and others regarding Nelson being party to a fraud, it just might be that Nelson got caught up in an event beyond his control. Some writers proposed that Nelson was duped by Noble and his boys. Nelson never identified his business partner who agreed to the fix.





Tribute to Nelson written shortly after his death.

Charles Horace Nelson of Waterville was born in Palermo, Maine, in 1833, and died at Togus, March 30, 1915. He was long known among his friends and the fraternity of "horse men" generally as "Hod" Nelson.

Before the State became noted for producing immense crops of potatoes and its dairying industry there was a period in the agricultural history of the State, (1880-1895) when Maine enjoyed a veritable horse-breeding boom, and for a decade at least Maine's fast trotting horses had a world-wide fame. Very much of this condition was due to Mr. Nelson and his horse Nelson.

The respective careers of Nelson the man, owner, breeder, driver and race track habitue; and Nelson the horse, a superb beast that was the world's champion trotting stallion for a time added greatly to the fame of the Pine Tree State as a great horse breeding section of the country.

He was a unique character, positive in his nature, forceful, and in some ways eccentric. His life was more or less a checkered one; he had served as a soldier in the Union Army in two Maine regiments and was a member of the G. A. R.

Probably no human being ever loved a speechless animal more fervently than did Hod Nelson love the horse that bore his name.

He will long be remembered for sterling qualities and this deep and somewhat remarkable affection for, and devotion to his horse, is among the most beautiful of them.

Upon the death of his horse, Nelson the man was never the same. He was in ill health, said to be feeble and almost blind. He had made few public appearances. Nelson's wife Emma, who had been caring for him at Sunnyside Farm, suffered from a stroke and was unable to continue. In March of 1915 Nelson died at the Soldiers' Home in Togus, Maine. An interesting note: Nelson's Togus medical records reported that he could not read or write. Emma died in an apartment on Silver Street in August of 1916.

His obituary in the Waterville Sentinel used the phrase, "**a once famous horseman.**" In his day, Nelson was criticized for his handling of and driving of Nelson 4209. However, Charles Horace Nelson brought fame and glory to his name and to the State of Maine. He traveled by train all over the United States, throughout Maine, and Canada to race and exhibit his horse. In Maine after Nelson 4209 gained his reputation for speed, Maine horsemen would not enter their horses into competition with Nelson. Therefore, Nelson 4209 was mostly exhibited at fairgrounds and tracks throughout Maine. In his day, in his moment, Nelson was a famous horseman and his horse Nelson 4209 was recognized as the King of Stallions. 100 years have passed since the death of Nelson 4209 and 2015 will be the 100th anniversary of the death of Maine's most famous horseman, Charles Horace Nelson, a man of humble origins from the town of Palermo. The story of C.H. Nelson is unique -- a story of accomplishment, a story of perseverance, a story filled with great moments of success, fame, and glory, and an irreversible moment that brought disgrace, and finally his day of redemption.

**It is this story, Hod Nelson's story, that speaks of immortality. That is -- only if we choose not to ignore it.**

**I, hereby, nominate Charles Horace Nelson to the National Harness Racing Museum's Hall of Immortals.**

**Stephen D. Thompson, February 2011**