

The most valued trotters in metropolitan New York descended from Cornelius Van Ranst’s imported stallion Messenger, the maternal grandfather of American Eclipse. Messenger’s English racing career had been good but not great. He won 10 of 16 starts, including a coveted King’s Plate, but most of his matches were unimportant races at short distances. He left the race course in 1785 and a Pennsylvania gentleman bought him and shipped him to America in 1788. Messenger stood in Philadelphia, Bucks County, and nearby New Jersey until 1793, when Henry Astor, a successful butcher and a brother of John Jacob Astor, bought him and moved him to Long Island. Three years later Van Ranst and his partners bought him, stood him at Van Ranst’s estate in Dutchess County, then moved him to Townsend Cock’s stables at Oyster Bay.¹

Messenger was one of the English thoroughbreds imported to restore an American stock that had been killed, stolen, or otherwise lost in the Revolutionary war. Contemporaries and turf historians condemned the imports as worse than useless. English thoroughbred racing and breeding was transformed in the late-eighteenth century. Beginning in the 1760s British turfmen dropped the heat races of three and four miles in favor of single-heat dashes over much shorter distances. They also reduced the weights that race horses had to carry. The British now bred their horses for speed, while the Americans persisted in the quest

for heroic combinations of speed and bottom. Few English stallions could provide that, and in any event the British tended to sell cast-offs and failed stud horses to the Americans.ⁱⁱ

Messenger looked like one of the mistakes. He was a dappled gray, and in old age he turned white. (Van Ranst seems to have liked that, and had him powdered once a week.) Messenger's head was course and heavy, his bones were thick, and his rubbery nostrils and the windpipe that bulged from his short neck were outlandishly large. He was not a good-looking horse, and some doubted his thoroughbred ancestry. But others noticed his high spirits and the way he became beautiful when he moved. They also noted his perfect hind quarters, and guessed that his big (but, on close inspection, perfectly formed) bones and his massive nostrils and windpipe might be signs of endurance and strength that had not been tested in the English dashes. Finally they noted, as the horsemen put it, that Messenger was "prepotent:" regardless of the mare, he passed his good qualities and bad looks on to his sons and daughters. New Yorkers with an eye for horses could recognize Messenger's great-grandchildren on sight. Messenger's progeny were big, strong, and lasting, and they trained well to the trotting gait. His sons and grandsons stood at stud in the villages of New York, western and northern New England, New Jersey, and eastern Pennsylvania, establishing a regional line that was prized and remarkably widespread. Cornelius Van Ranst boasted that Messenger's progeny "for all purposes, whether of use or pleasure, proved to be the best of any horse ever imported to America. Besides a great many excellent racers, he produced an immense number of fine animals for the road; and even to

this day [1831], a traveler, in this section of the union, requires no better recommendation for a horse than that he is of the ‘Messenger Breed.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

The “Messenger Breed” was not as well-defined as the term might imply. Messenger’s pedigree was always in doubt. No one could name his English breeder with certainty, and there were persistent rumors about the purity of his mother’s blood. Yet, despite the scarcity of thoroughbred mares in the North, he sired good race horses. His son Potowmac was the best Long Island horse of the early-nineteenth century. Another son, Bright Phoebus, made a small legend of himself when he beat the great Sir Archy for the Washington Jockey Club purse in 1808. His daughter Miller’s Damsel raced successfully for many years, then outdid herself as a brood mare. She is officially credited with five foals, including American Eclipse. Each of her children became a winning racehorse, a batting average that most breeders would think impossible.^{iv}

Messenger’s long-term reputation, however, rested on his legions of road horses. Messenger’s handlers were in the business of breeding and selling horses, and most of his liaisons were with mares whose pedigrees were unknowable, but whose conformation and temperament promised good working horses. Such mares were brought not only to Messenger but to his descendants--American Eclipse among them. New York horsemen soon noted that Messenger horses outperformed all others. Messenger spent the 1801 breeding season, for instance, in Goshen, New York. Over the next few years locals noticed that his progeny walked with a long, swinging step and trotted naturally with “an open, raking stride....Even those from common mares could pull the plow all week, and then

on Saturday out-race all other horses in the county.” Similar discoveries were made in other towns .As the roads improved and consumers learned to demand Messenger horses, breeders and farmers rushed to find his male and female descendants and to mate them with each other. By 1820 intensive inbreeding had created Van Ranst’s “Messenger Breed,” an immense herd of fast, strong, durable harness horses, the best of whom out-raced the fastest trotters in the world. By 1823, when American Eclipse carried it against Virginia’s best, the Messenger breed was a respected and widely known brand name.^v

Messenger horses participated in the everyday lives and fondest aspirations of New Yorkers, Recognizable on city streets and country roads, they were emblems of progress, efficiency, and prosperity. They were emblems of New York toughness and plainness as well. New Yorkers told stories about Messenger horses, and those that have survived tend to dwell on a few points. First, even the most famous of Messenger’s progeny were often of doubtful ancestry. The trotting champion Paul Pry was touted a son of Messenger, though he was foaled years after Messenger’s death. (A friendly expert guessed that Paul Pry was “either by one of Messenger’s sons or out of one of his daughters....”) Lady Suffolk—the Old Grey Mare of song and story—was a verifiable descendant of Messenger on both sides. Her owner, however, did not know that when he purchased her from a Long Island butcher. Another early trotting hero was Topgallant. “Of his earlier years,” said a contemporary horseman, “but little is known, though he is generally believed to belong to the stock of the famous Old Messenger.”^{vi}

Breeding records or even records of ownership were unavailable for many of the best of Messenger's reputed progeny, and recruiters for the trotting turf often found them working at menial jobs. Lady Suffolk pulled an oyster cart on Long Island. Dutchman, another champion trotter, worked in a Philadelphia brickyard. Topgallant had been a big-city hackney horse, though writers could not agree whether that had been in New York or Philadelphia. (It turns out to have been both.) New Yorkers learned that Messenger horses tended to emerge from obscure histories, and that they were workers. They also learned to judge trotting horses by their performances rather than their pedigrees. When they closed the breed of racing trotters in 186-, American horsemen declared any horse who had trotted a mile in 2:30 to be "Standardbred," regardless of pedigree. The figure is unknowable, but it is certain that most horses that made the cut were in some way descendants of Messenger.^{vii}

Messenger horses possessed legendary strength and endurance, pulling heavy loads at speed over long distances. Kennebec Messenger, a son who lived in Maine, joined a half-mile trotting match in sleighs with neighborhood horses, and lost. His owner then challenged the neighborhood to an uphill race pulling sleds loaded with with six men. He won easily. Lady Suffolk, according to a trotting insider, "inherited in great perfection the hardy constitution, unflinching game, and enormous stamina with which her grandsire, Messenger, was so eminently gifted." In Goshen, New York, a farmer named Seeley owned a Messenger mare named Silvertail. Seeley drove cattle to New York City in 1806, and he decided to make the trip home in a hurry. Silvertail, with Seeley and a boy

on her back, traveled the 75 miles in one long day. Such feats were common. Frederick Marryat marveled that New Yorkers “think nothing of trotting [their horses] seventy or eighty miles in a day, at the speed of twelve miles an hour; I have seen the horses come in, and they did not appear to suffer from the fatigue.”^{viii}

A related characteristic of the Messengers—one that recommended them to the market in working horses--was their long working lives. Messenger horses worked into their twenties and sometimes their thirties, and they seldom suffered sickness or injury. Messenger himself serviced mares until his death at the age of twenty-eight. Lady Suffolk raced successfully for fifteen years. Topgallant (“Old Top,” or simply “The Old Horse”) was nearly unbeatable on the trotting turf. Known for uncommon bottom, he ran his best races after the age of twenty. His greatest showing came in 1829, when he trotted (and won) four four-mile heats, averaging less than three minutes per mile for the whole sixteen miles. At that time, Topgallant was twenty-two years old.^{ix}

Messenger horses moved with striking efficiency, but they did not look good standing still. Messenger passed on his inelegance through many generations. John Hervey, the best of American turf historians, claimed that it took nearly 100 years to breed the coarseness out of Messenger’s descendants. Mambrino, one of the best of Messenger’s sons, was noted for “his course and cart-horse appearance.” The great trotter Hambletonian 10 had three lines back to Messenger (i.e. Messenger was three of his four great-grandfathers), and he possessed “a remarkably course head.” Frederick Marryat saw the champion

trotter Paul Pry and said: “to look at, he would not fetch £10—the English omnibuses would refuse him.” Similarly, the magazine writer N.P. Willis declared that Lady Suffolk “would not sell, standing still, at a country market for one hundred dollars.” In 1829 an Englishman pronounced the New York trotters who competed (successfully) in England “common looking horses.” But one of them, Tom Thumb, won praise from a British journalist. “At full speed,” he wrote, “his action is particularly beautiful,” but “his appearance, when standing still, [is] rough and uncouth.” A nineteenth-century trotting turfman, noting that Messenger horses lacked the long neck, concave Arab nose, and aristocratic carriage of the thoroughbred, provided a New York response: “experience shows that for stock purposes you want a horse with masculine head and neck.”^x

A final characteristic: Messenger horses were spirited, and many of them were bad-tempered. The legend of Messenger’s meanness began with the horse’s arrival in the United States. The ship docked at Philadelphia, and grooms helped three other horses, weakened and dispirited after weeks at sea, down the gang plank. When it was Messenger’s turn, he strode onto the dock and, with two grooms hanging on and fighting him all the way, trotted powerfully and unstopably through the streets of the city. In subsequent years stories had him killing half a dozen of his keepers. Messenger’s grandson Abdullah (the sire of Hambletonian 10) possessed “an unconquerable will of his own, which he passed on to his offspring.” Lady Suffolk’s “nervous organization was very high,” according to a nineteenth-century horseman, and locals in Goshen remembered that Silvertail had “the excess of spirits characteristic of the line.” American

Eclipse himself, recalled a man who knew him, “was as ill-natured, cross-grained, quarrelsome a beast, as ever ran.” Coarse and of uncertain ancestry, carrying themselves with pride and businesslike efficiency, capable of stupendous bouts of hard work without failing, complaining, or slowing down, spirited and prone to be bad-tempered: the Messenger breed was New York’s horse.^{xi}

ⁱ John Hervey, *Messenger: The Great Progenitor* (New York, 1935), 1-14.

ⁱⁱ Hervey, *Racing in America*, 1:246. On English racing and breeding in these years, see Mike Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society, 1790-1914: A Social and Economic History* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); W. Vamplew, *The Turf: A Social and Economic History of Horse Racing* (1976).

³⁸ Fullest descriptions: Hervey, *Messenger*, 53-54; Wallace, *The Horse of America*, 226-28 [Cornelius W. Van Ranst], “Some Account of the Bred Horses which have been Owned by C.W. Van Ranst,” *American Turf Register* 3 (October 1831); PAGE? Gabriel Furman, *The Customs, amusements, style of living, and manners of the people of the United States from the first settlement of the country to the present time* [ca. 1844], Manuscripts Division, New-York Historical Society.

^{iv} Hervey, *Messenger*, 25-38; burial: Akers, *Drivers Up*, 33.

^v Stud notices for Potowmac, a winning racehorse sired by Messenger, insisted that “his stock has proved as good for the turf, saddle or harness, as any horse’s ever bred in America.” (*Trenton Federalist*, 23 April 1810 and 13 May 1811.) Sharts, *Cradle of the Trotter*, 23; Woodruff, *The Trotting Horse of America*, xviii; Busbey, *The Trotting and the Pacing Horse in America*, 10; Wallace, *The Horse of America*, 245.

^{vi} Paul Pry: Woodruff, *The Trotting Horse of America*, 123-24. Lady Suffolk: Akers, *Drivers Up!*, 52 (check.) For a full discussion of these and other Messenger pedigrees, see Wallace, *The Horse of America*, 232-66.

vii Akers, *Drivers Up!*, 52 (?), 45-48; “An Account of the Celebrated Trotting Horse Topgallant,” 278; Busbey, *The Trotting and the Pacing Horse*, 145-51.

viii Wallace, *The Horse of America*, 239; Woodruff, *The Trotting Horse of America*, 213; Sharts, *Cradle of the Trotter*, 25-28; Frederick Marryat, *Second Series of a Diary in America, with Remarks on its Institutions* (Philadelphia, 1840), PAGE?

ix Akers, *Drivers Up!*, 45-48. (*lady Suffolk? Messenger?*)

x Mambrino and Hambletonian: Wallace, *The Horse of America*, 275, 269. Skinner, “The American Trotting Horse,” 52-54; Hiram Woodruff, *The Trotting Horse of America: How to Train and Drive Him, with Reminiscences of the Trotting Turf* (New York, 1868), 123-24, 128; “An Account of the Celebrated Trotting Horse Top Gallant,” *American Turf Register* 3 (February 1832), 278-80; Elizabeth Sharts, *Cradle of the Trotter: Goshen in the History of the American Turf* (Goshen, N.Y., 1946), 8-11, 22-28; Frederick Marryat, *Second Series of a Diary in America, with Remarks on its Institutions* (Philadelphia, 1840), PAGE?; Lady Suffolk: Adelman, *A Sporting Time*, 62-63; Willis quoted: “Akers, *Drivers Up*, 52. Simeon Dewitt Bloodgood, *An Englishman’s Sketchbook; or, Letters from New York* (New York, 1828), 45; “Tom Thumb’s Celebrated Trotting Match,” *American Turf Register* 2 (November 1830), 138. Masculine neck: Busbey, *The Trotting and the Pacing Horse*, 146.

xi Wallace, *The Horse of America*, 225, 229, 255. Marryat, *Second Series*, PAGE?; Busbey, *The Trotting and the Pacing Horse*. 41 (Lady Suffolk); John Elderkin, “The Turf and the Trotting Horse in America,” *Atlantic Monthly* 21 (May 1868), 513. Furman, “Customs, Amusements” (on meanness).