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Tilting Toward Freedom: African American Ring Tournaments in a Postbellum South

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Tilting Toward Freedom: African American Ring Tournaments in a Postbellum South

ABSTRACT. The ring tournament is an American version of the medieval jousting tradition that had been reserved for the white wealthy planter elite in America for generations. After the Civil War it became an African American cultural practice, whose history has been all but lost to time. Immediately following emancipation, ex-slaves across the South began hosting and participating in ring tournaments through which they asserted their agency while harnessing the sport's ability to empower the riders and their communities. The tournaments also influenced local politics and challenged power structures. In essence, the black tournaments became a symbol of freedom. The figure of a black man mounted on horseback wielding a dangerous lance, while magnificent in the eyes of African Americans and abolitionists, outraged many white tournament riders and intrigued spectators from every race and class. Nevertheless, black tournaments stamped an enduring impression on spectators across the South and the Union, as the events were reported on in the press nationwide. Even as the ex-Confederates in the New South grasped at the fragments of their shattered pride and its castle walls began to crumble, Black Knights and Black Queens rose as symbols of resistance that signaled imminent cultural shifts and power struggles in the South for generations to come.

LAUREN SEABROOK

HANSON is a non-traditional student who recently graduated from Upstate in December 2021 with a degree in History. This paper was borne from her Historical Methods course instructed by Dr.



Carmen Harris in the Fall of 2020, which was the first semester she had been back in college in sixteen years. Lauren was curious about the history of African Americans in the sport of Jousting, also called ring tournaments, since her own family history includes champion jousters from Maryland, her home state. An initial search revealed that African American participation in ring tournaments was practically unheard of, both in the past and contemporarily.

Lauren became obsessed with uncovering what seemed to be a lost piece of important African American history. Finding clues that had been buried for generations was her favorite part of the research process. It quickly became her mission to shed light on a fascinating piece of African American history that had tremendous cultural, social, and political implications during one of America's most tumultuous time periods. Dr. Harris's guidance and enthusiasm for the project helped Lauren to grow in leaps and bounds in her research skills.

Lauren plans to attend the Public History graduate program at the Columbia campus in the future. Her passion is bringing history and culture into public awareness in order to facilitate community understanding and compassion. Until graduate school, she hopes to find employment where she can continue

to research while serving the public in some capacity. She is the wife of a fellow Upstate graduate and together they have three teenage children. Lauren loves to travel, read, research, peruse antique malls, indulge in sci-fi/fantasy media, and explore the outdoors with her family and dogs.

CARMEN HARRIS

My field of research and publication is southern agricultural history focusing on the African American experience. I have presented at numerous professional association conferences. My body of work includes articles and book chapters including: "The Extension Service



is not an Integration Agency’: The Idea of Race in the Cooperative Extension Service” which is frequently cited by scholars of agricultural policy and “‘You’re just like mules, you don’t know your own strength.’ Rural South Carolina Blacks and the Emergence of the Civil Rights Struggle” in Debra A. Reid and Evan Bennett, eds., *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule: African American Landowning Families since Reconstruction*, University Press of Florida, June 2012. The chapter emphasizes the determined activism of rural Afro South Carolinians who lived under oppressive conditions (such as those in Clarendon County, South Carolina where the *Briggs’ v. Elliot* case was filed) in pursuing racial equality despite physical and economic reprisals. Currently, I am working on a book manuscript entitled *The Heart of White Supremacy: The Courtship of Benjamin Ryan Tillman and Sallie Starke Tillman*.

Lauren’s paper was written in my historical methods class in the fall of 2020. She is originally from Maryland where horse culture is significant. I was unfamiliar with the topic and was excited to learn more about it. She dove deeply into primary source research and would write me excitedly when she found something new. We worked to track down the provenance of the images that are in the appendix. She had never had an African American history class—not sure about southern history, but I used my scholarly background in both to help her with her interpretive frame. Once she was on track, she found other secondary sources on African Americans and horses that rounded out the paper. Among the students in the class, hers was one of the top three in applying the form and methods of historical study. Lauren’s original paper placed third in the IDS paper contest in Spring 2021.

Introduction

During the nineteenth century, the southern United States experienced the revival of a peculiar sporting tradition called the ring tournament, which had existed in America since the Colonial period. It was a competition that resurrected the pomp of knighthood, ladies in waiting, and horsemanship found in medieval lore and romantic literature. Already popular across Europe since the Middle Ages, tournaments took place in every southern state while both local and regional competitions abounded. The tournament was traditionally organized by wealthy, white southern men, particularly Planters. Ring tournaments and chivalric codes of honor blossomed hand in hand before the American Civil War as the tournament became a symbol of southern Planter values and status. The legendary *New York Tribune* editor and abolitionist Horace Greeley commented in 1870 that, “the tournament is a natural institution of the South as much as base-ball is of the North or cricket of England [2].”

The medieval sport requires the use of small rings hanging from a post that are speared with the tip of a lance while riding at breakneck speed on horseback. The champion then presents a ring on his outstretched lance to his chosen “Queen of Love and Beauty” who would be spectating with an assemblage of gushing maidens. The pastime, also known as “tilting” and “lancing”, originated from the jousting tournaments of feudal Europe wherein an armor-clad knight mounted on his decorated horse wielded a lance into the chest of a rival rider careening toward him from the opposite direction. The ring tournament is the much safer alternative to the European jousting of old, which resulted in the accidental death of King Henry II of France in 1559. After the King’s unexpected demise, jousting fell out of fashion, resulting in the ring tournament replacing the tradition. Tilting, though not as sensational as the martial game of jousting, is a competition of keen horsemanship, hand-eye coordination, and accuracy. Tournaments were part competition and part performance, replete with adoring maidens, boisterous music, fanciful costumes, and fantastic nicknames chosen by the competing Knights. Suppers and dancing balls were enjoyed after the tournament, where socializing and politicking enhanced the whimsical affairs.

The American events often attracted influential families and community members who acted as committees, officers, judges, marshals, riders, spectators, guests of honor, and their debutante daughters as fair maidens [1]. There was an uptick in politicking at larger tournaments after the

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Civil War. Many of them were organized, marshaled, judged, and competed in by ex-Confederate officers and soldiers, some of them being founding members of the Ku Klux Klan [20]. Central to the significance of the tournament, and perhaps the explanation for its resurgence in the South during the nineteenth century, was the region's veneration of Sir Walter Scott's famous historical novel *Ivanhoe: a Romance*, published in 1819. The sentiments of European medieval chivalry and romanticism espoused in *Ivanhoe* served as the backdrop for southern culture and social structures which endured well into the twentieth century. Mark Twain even lampooned the South for enduring, "the Sir Walter disease [3]."

The medieval system of feudalism, along with its precepts of a paternal, chivalric ruling class and grateful, servile lower class, remained romanticized by the southern elite after the war and even defined the South as a whole. A coronation address given at the beginning of a tournament in Maryland affirmed that, "if these tournaments, held under the eyes of those old veterans [of the Civil War], fail to cherish and preserve the old ideals of southern chivalry, then their mission is a failure [4]." From the perspective of those personally involved with ring tournaments, Confederate ideals of chivalry and the ring tournament were wed, both before and after the war.

Ring tournaments, and their romanticized notions of chivalry, were embraced as early as 1865 by an unexpected Southern sub-population that chose to advance the tournament tradition as an act of empowerment and freedom. When the American Civil War's bloody battles had finally settled and emancipation was established in the Southern states, ex-slaves organized and participated in ring tournaments for their own communities. Even as the Confederacy grasped at the fragments of its shattered pride and its castle walls began to crumble before the ignominious gaze of the Union, the Black Knights and Black Queens of Love and Beauty rose as symbols of resistance that signaled imminent cultural shifts and power struggles in the South for generations to come.

The available documentation portrays the African American tournaments as nearly identical in most respects to white tournaments in form and fashion [1]. Historic newspaper articles suggest that these tournaments took place with some regularity from roughly 1865 up until the end of the nineteenth century, predominantly in Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and the Carolinas, with the occasional tournament in other states. Certain towns within those states were more active than others, such as Alexandria in Virginia, Wilmington in North Carolina, and Darlington and Aiken in South Carolina. As in white tournaments, there were knightly nicknames, costumes, music, coronation speeches, suppers, and dancing balls [5]. This pageantry is depicted in a stereograph titled *Tournament Knights* taken by notable South Carolina photographer James A. Palmer. The stereograph features a row of African American knights perched atop their steeds with an African American band presenting their instruments in Image 1 below. Palmer characteristically photographed African American life in the South, especially around Aiken, South Carolina, which could very possibly be the site of this scene [6].

Aiken, South Carolina was home to its own Colored Tournament Club. An 1879 tournament was advertised in the *Aiken Courier Journal* in which the names of the club officers and the knights are listed, along with the prizes, as can be seen in Image 2 below. According to this snippet of ephemera, the Aiken Colored Tournament Club used the Aiken Polo Grounds for its competition and the Hayne Hall Plantation as the location of its evening ball [7]. Sisters Esther and Ruth Crooks' seminal work *The Ring Tournament in the United States* includes information about a tournament held by the, "colored young men," of the Wilmington Tournament Association in 1871. Crooks describes the competition taking place at the "old race track," with, "fifteen knights in full uniform," who paraded through the streets of Wilmington, North Carolina, both before and after the tournament. The first prize was a silver watch and chain, and second prize was a champagne supper [1].

Before Emancipation, African Americans would have experienced the tournaments in a variety of scenarios. From enslaved children observing white children practicing their tilting, to handling

and training their master's horses, to achieving notoriety as enslaved jockeys, to attending tournaments as spectators or servants, African Americans would have had many opportunities to experience the ring tournament without directly participating in white-only Tournaments [8], [4]. In a 1930's interview with Mr. George Johnson, a musician and ex-slave of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Johnson informs the interviewer that African Americans learned to conduct ring tournaments by watching the white tournaments and by working and observing at the racetrack [9]. An article, dated November 1869 from the *Charleston Daily News*, quotes a knightly rider outside the South Carolina town of Darlington stating, "we seed how de white people did, and den we jes did de sam (sic) [10]."

Another clue to the genesis of the African American ring tournament may be found in the oft-forgotten achievement in sporting memory of enslaved equestrian experts and the indelible imprint of their legacy on the sport. The racetrack, and famous champion horses as we know them, are a product of the rooted involvement of enslaved black jockeys, trainers, and grooms in great numbers from the Colonial period through the turn of the twentieth century. The history of African equestrian skill can be traced back to centuries of African horsemanship. African horsemen were selected for their expertise, brought to Colonial America as chattel, and continued to act as the primary horsemen for slave-owners in the South. Katherine C. Mooney in *Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack* recalls that, "horsemanship became a signature accomplishment, especially for northern West Africans. The [African] kings of the Yoruba and the Hausa boasted massive stable complexes, over which slaves presided. Such slaves were valued members of the royal household, supervisors of large staffs, intimates of princes." This elevated servile role continued in America under southern planters and established the pecking order and privileges of the enslaved on plantations. Mooney states that, "African and colonial-born slaves continued to bear the responsibility for the care of horses and other livestock. Men with such skills were among the most expensive slaves in island markets; white owners trusted them with extremely valuable four-footed assets [11]." Equestrian knowledge was certainly a vital aspect of the responsibilities of enslaved men on the plantation and very likely would have contributed to the development of ex-slave ring tournaments following the Civil War.

Press coverage, which is the source of most of the documentation on African American ring tournaments that can be found in a digitized format, is supportive as a general rule, albeit exhibiting some prejudiced tropes typical of white journalists of the time period. Several articles describe the electric anticipation of all who attended. The most thorough report on an African American ring tournament is an article in an 1875 issue of *Youth's Companion*, a popular children's magazine. The article states that, "the negro and mulatto girls, clad in extravagant calico colors and decked with showy flowers, walked up and down in groups laughing and tossing their heads, and the negro children were wild with delighted expectation [12]." Indeed, some of the articles report that possibly hundreds of community members of all ages, races, and social classes attended African American tournaments [13].

A Washington D.C. journalist correspondent for *The Chicago Tribune* writing about "The Negro Tournament at Alexandria" [VA] in 1865, what was likely the first public African American tournament, mentions that several members of the Freedmen's Bureau and Commissary Department were invited to attend and acted as judges and marshals. The presence of government officials highlights the political and social implications of these events. The article also hints that some disapproving groups may have attempted to impede the day's festivities, which is likely another reason members of the Freedmen's Bureau were present [5].

The correspondent writing about the 1865 Alexandria tournament questioned, "A negro tournament! Have any of your readers any idea what that means?" Such a thing had never been attempted. The reporter extolled that the event, "contained more fun, sarcasm, and poetic justice than any similar effort of the sons of the sacred soil [native born Americans]," and goes on that it was, "a most capital illustration of the effect of the emancipation proclamation. The "chivs" don't like it much, but I suspect they will have to stand it [5]." Similarly, a reporter with *The Capital* out

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of Washington D.C. in 1878 made sure to include the context of such an occasion for his readers when he exclaimed:

In a city noted once for its tobacco, its slavery, its wealth and its bull whips, where the boasted chivalry of the F. F. V. [First Families of Virginia] was nursed in the lap of the ancient planter aristocracy of the South, we behold today the former slave, enfranchised by the philanthropy of New England, couching his lance, knight-like, as a freeman and a gentleman; while surrounding the lists the fair of various shades, from coal black to delicate buff, smile on his deeds and with bright eyes inspire his prowess [14].

The *Youth's Companion* author prefaced that the riders,

instead of being from the most wealthy and aristocratic classes of the neighborhood, were negroes...of course the young [white] men who had ridden in previous tournaments felt indignant that their recent servants should usurp their noble pastime; but under the 15th Amendment and the Civil Rights Bill, there was no help for it and the joyous negroes went on unmolested with the preparations for their fete [12].

The “*chivs*”--the planter elite and their ilk--may not have liked African American tournaments, but we can infer from the documentation that the participants and organizers were acutely aware of the ring tournament’s implied satire, social implications, and political influence.

Several articles describe the tournaments in detail, allowing the reader’s senses to awaken to what a typical African American tournament may have been like. At a tournament in Baltimore County in 1890, according to an article published in *The Sun*, a smorgasbord of treats and refreshments were presided over by a, “cool, colored individual in a big white apron,” under a row of trees and covered by a, “tattered awning.” The stand was filled with, “sardines, jars of pickles, dishes of candy and bottles of tonic beer.” On a field near a row of willow trees at Tolly Worthington’s farm a few miles from Cockeysville in Baltimore County, the reporter describes that the wood used to erect the judges stand as rough, unplanned, and sitting atop fence posts, and that, “behind it was the dancing pavilion.” The African American band, which came from Lutherville by train and consisted of two fiddle players and an accordion player, erupted with a tune each time a ring was lanced and at every other opportunity [15]. The Crooks’ tournament history states that most African American tournament proceeds went to benefit their churches and charity societies. The African American congregation of St. Joseph’s and the Angel Wing Colored Society, both of Leonardtown, Maryland, hosted events in 1889. The gaiety included a baseball game, an expensive cake prize, and the sale of fresh ice cream and meats to finance the charitable organizations [1].

The Charleston Daily News reported on an 1869 tournament from which a participant told the reporter, “we all enjoyed ourselves splendid, and in the evening we had a fine supper, to which all the ladies was invited; it cost fifty cents a head.” The, “fortunate fair ones [the Queens] stepped from the stand, and were escorted by their knights to the dinner table, where an excellent collation was spread. The ceremony of the coronation was postponed to the hour of assembling at the ball, which took place at nine o’clock.” The interviewee was asked if there was dancing, to which he replied that there was no dancing because the women were the church going kind, but that they, “jes sot and talked, but we had a mighty good time (sic) [10].” In Danville, Virginia in 1878 the merry group danced until, “the wee sma’ hours anent the twal (sic) [14].” An 1883 issue of *The Baltimore Sun* reported on another tournament in St. Mary’s County in Maryland that after the crowning of the Maids, “the company returned to the village, and at night there was a ball [21].”

As with all ring tournaments, the African American Knights chose their nicknames with careful consideration and a dash of humor. Most of the nicknames reflected the hometown location of the rider, like the “the “Knight of Alexandria” for example. Many took the opportunity to make light of their endeavor with nicknames like the “Knight of Don’t Care if I Do”, the “Knight of Butler’s Silver Spoon”, and the “Knight of Pig Squeal” [21], [10]. Still others harkened back to the tales of Sir Walter Scott with more romantic titles like “Ivanhoe”, the “Knight of Rob Roy”, and the “Knight of Blooming Rose”. The Alexandria tournament of 1865 gave the crown to the victorious Knight of Arabia, Lewis Johnson, who the article states was of French descent, spoke French fluently, lived in Paris for ten years, played the piano, and was the servant of Major General Briggs [5].

Thorough reporting by J.A.W. on the initial Alexandria tournament in 1865, as well as a lengthy description in *Youth’s Companion* magazine, gives readers a rare glimpse of the knightly costumes. J.A.W. states, “One knight wore a red shirt, a yellow scarf, and white pantaloons; another a red blouse trimmed with white, and dotted with white spots in the form of a heart, and yellow pantaloons,” and the description goes on to include, “pantaloons of blue mosquito netting over white cotton [5].” Knights wore flashy costumes at the 1890 Baltimore County tournament as well. The Knight of Butler Hollow, riding a, “long necked bay horse,” donned a colorful array of, “a big black slouch hat, the brim of which was fastened back on four sides with pasteboard stars covered with tinfoil. An outing shirt, a pair of blue knee breeches, black stockings and tennis slippers, on one of which was a big brass spur, and a long black silk sash fashioned with a silk rosette, completed his attire [15].” The knights clearly did not lack in imagination. Yet, “even more impressive than their costumes,” describes *Youth’s Companion*, “was the lofty dignity with which these envied heroes bore themselves.” The author conveys the glory of the riders as they turned the corner onto the field: “Not a man or boy of them smiled. All sat stiffly erect and with a look of serene and complacent gravity on their faces as if they believed that a whole nation was gaping at them and coveting their places [12].”

Some historians posit that interpretations of honor and courtship would have been quite familiar to the enslaved population. Gallant behavior was so entrenched within the South that masters favored, and even demanded, chivalric qualities from their enslaved labor force. In the chapter she contributed to the anthology *Black and White Masculinity in the American South, 1800-2000* Rebecca Fraser argues that, “male honour was a key component of identity in several African societies from the fourteenth century onwards. Hence, whilst masters might have congratulated themselves for their seemingly invaluable lessons concerning proper conduct towards women in the slave quarters, enslaved men may have learnt these lessons of honour and integrity from within the slave quarters themselves [16].” The tournament, therefore, was easily embraced as a courting competition by individuals who sought to express cultural standards of honor upheld in their own black communities.

Matthew X. Vernon notes in *The Black Middle Ages: Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages* that, “the relevance of the Middle Ages redounded to fundamental questions about the construction of race, the production of social space within the nation, and the possibilities of a humanistic education.” Vernon cites the African American church periodical the *AME Church Review*, explaining that, “through its discussions of the Middle Ages, [it] acknowledged the significance of medieval tropes within American society but also harnessed them to challenge the racial sentiments they encouraged.” The ideas of medieval iconography were captured by African American activists, such as Frederick Douglass, before and after the war as a means to contextualize their complex position in American life. The African American ring tournament can be studied in like manner, as it upholds the concepts employed by influential African Americans to empower their communities. “During this crucial post-war period of promise and self-fashioning when African-Americans were seeking social equality, medievalia provided the means by which they could assert their place as citizens on equal terms with white Americans,” concludes Vernon [17].

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If there is any question as to how African Americans contextualized their role in engaging with medieval symbols through the ring tournament, perhaps allowing them to state it for themselves is best. At the 1878 tournament in Virginia, “a distinguished colored orator of the occasion said”:

Not only does it behoof you, Surknights, to see dat, as gentlemen, you maintains de honah, sah, ob de colored chibalry, but, sah, ‘dat you upholds de honah ob de far; not only to keep de high privilege ob de colored ballot, but to stop dese here owdacious poor white trash—white men—from insulting ob our wives, sisters and darters, and from invadin’ dere sacred chambers and disfranchisin’ dem ob dere virtue. Though, sah, no colored Brian de Boy Gullburt puts his lance ob oppression on de couch; though, sah, no Arthur, nor Lancelot, is nominated, sah, in de convention ob de round table, yet, sah, It is now, as ob old, de duty ob chibalry to defend de weak. To defend de week, sah; and, sah, Sunday, too, ef dey was to try to make you wuk on dat day (sic) [14].

The tournaments fared better in some areas than others. Darlington, South Carolina, and Wilmington, North Carolina were known for their African American judges, police forces, local politicians, and thriving businessmen [10]. Aiken County, South Carolina was co-founded by ex-slave, sergeant in the 33rd United States Colored Troops, and House Representative Prince Rivers, along with two other distinguished freemen [18]. Perhaps these areas provided a hospitable atmosphere in which the Black Knights and Queens were able to begin to assert personal and community freedom through the ring tournaments. Violent campaigns were launched by homicidal racists in two towns where the African American tournaments were prolific: the Hamburg Massacre of 1876 near Aiken and the Wilmington Insurrection of 1898. The tournaments did not cease in those areas because of the tragedies, but they are an example of the ongoing crusade by extremist groups to undermine all advancement of African Americans in the South after emancipation.

African American ring tournaments surfaced during a raw and tumultuous time for their communities and the nation. As the promising Reconstruction era gave way to the violent 1890’s Nadir of Race Relations era in a post-war South, the African American ring tournament mostly faded from newspaper headlines. Horrors like Jim Crow laws, the Ku Klux Klan, and systemic lynching continued to haunt southern African American communities well into the twentieth century [19]. The rise of Jim Crow laws were the reason black jockeys and horsemen had all but disappeared from racetrack stables by the turn of the century [11]. Likewise, Jim Crow laws would have made it nearly impossible for African Americans to continue to use white-owned venues for their tournaments and balls, or to be able to compete in peace. The war for liberty did not end in the Spring of 1865--in many ways, it was just the beginning. Nevertheless, what the Black Knights and Black Queens of Love and Beauty achieved during one of the most turbulent eras in America’s short history was nothing less than legendary.

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Image 1: (Left). James A. Palmer was known for depicting Southern (and very often Southern African American) life especially in Aiken, South Carolina.

James A. Palmer, "Tournament Knights," stereograph c. 1900, The International Center for Photography, Accession No. 483.1990.

<https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/tournament-knights>.

Image 2: (Right). "Grand Tournament Will Be Given by The Colored Tournament Club." The Aiken Courier Journal, Aiken, South Carolina. April 1879, N.P. An original copy exists at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania: Misc. Print Collection: Box 2, No. 4.

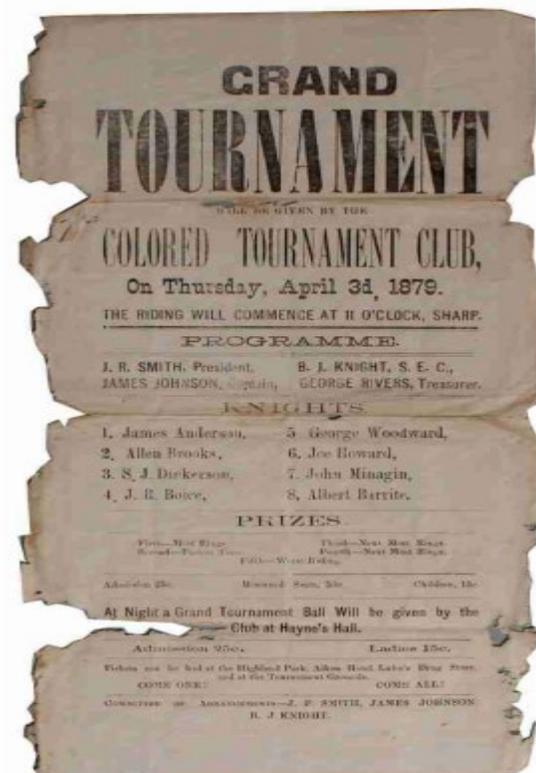




Image 3: (Left). The Youth's Companion story was accented with illustrations. Here we see a Black Knight on his horse having just lanced a ring with a crowd of spectators cheering him on in the background. N. Willis., "A Negro Gala Day," Youth's Companion, Vol. 48, University of Texas: 1875. Digitized 2019. https://www.google.com/books/edition/Youth_s_Companion/Hxi2BdH9yLEC?hl=en&gbpv=1,174.

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