



Jeff Dufresne

MILTON'S *history with* HORSES

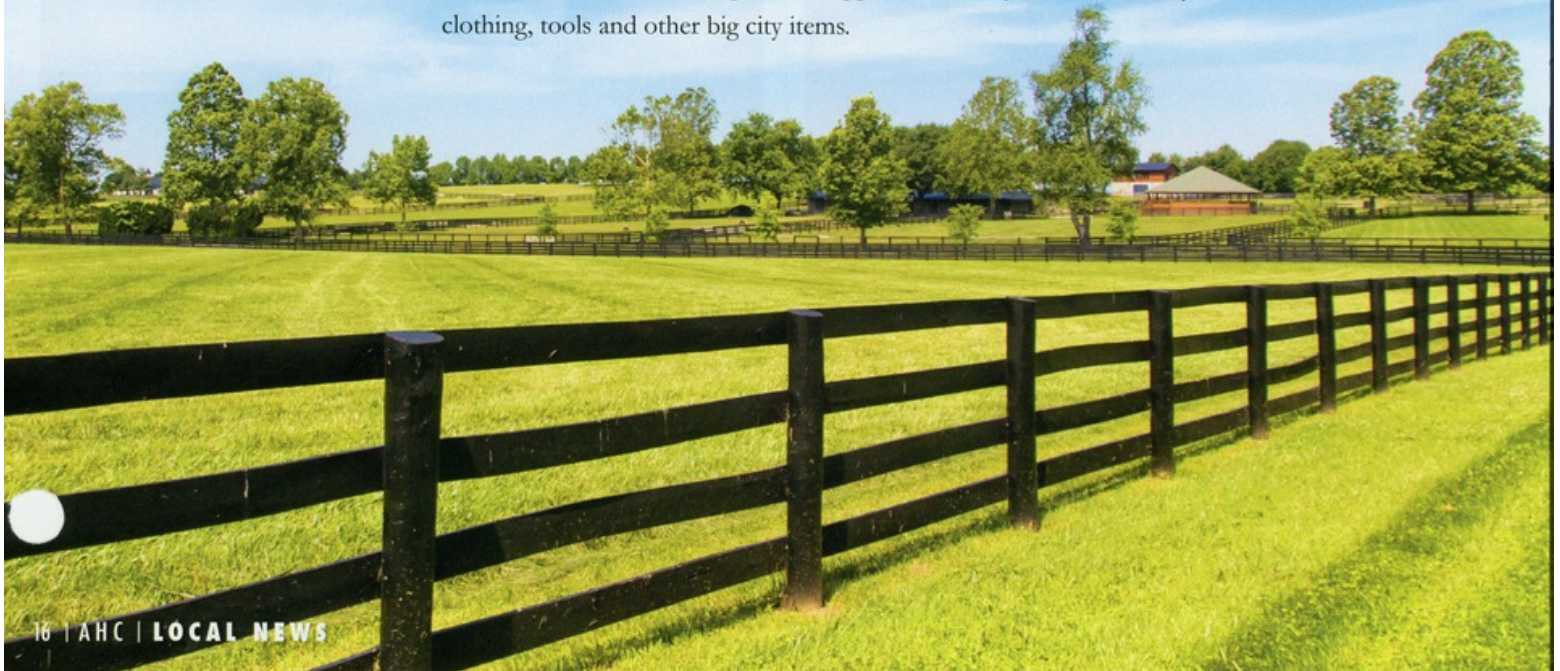
MILTON has a special history with horses.

When gold was discovered in North Georgia in 1829, horses were used to create about 500 mines in 37 different counties across the State. When the Georgia Gold Rush failed to “pan out”, agriculture became the area’s primary industry. In particular, cotton, corn, wheat, oats, potatoes, hay and peaches were grown on family farms. At the time, horses were working animals generally used for farming, transportation, communication, and commerce.

From
*Gold Rush to
Shakerag*

The area presently known as North Fulton County became a stopover for pioneers traveling between mountain communities to the railroad terminus – later named Atlanta. The time spent traveling was every bit the issue that it is today. In fact, Milton came about, “to allow a man to get to the court house in one day’s ride by horse,” It was not uncommon to see a countryman returning from the Atlanta market, fast asleep, slumped forward over his saddle bag while his horse plodded his own way home.

By 1858, this area became a thriving commercial center with gristmills, sawmills, cotton gins, post office and a general store. This area became the link (via ferry service) between the hill farmers in the north to markets south in Atlanta. In the spring and fall, local farmers on horseback would drive their livestock, potatoes, apples and honey to Atlanta. They would return home with clothing, tools and other big city items.



Cotton gins have long been replaced with development and horse farms but a few historic icons remain.



officially created. This new county was named after John Milton, Georgia's first secretary of state. At inception, Milton County's population was about 4,000 people. Milton County covered 147 square miles and Alpharetta was designated as the Milton County seat. Milton County encompassed the present day cities of Milton; Johns Creek; Mountain Park; as well as parts of Roswell and Sandy Springs.

From the start, Milton County faced adversity. Within 3 years, the American Civil War broke out. Although there was no fighting in Milton County, a total of 1.5 million horses were killed during the war... more than double the number of human casualties. The only thing worse than being a soldier from Milton during the Civil War was being a horse.

Milton County remained an agricultural economy for the next 60 years. Cotton farmers in the area were always at the mercy of fluctuating cotton prices, weather, and

later, the dreaded boll weevil. The boll weevil was a small beetle which feeds on cotton buds and flowers. It infested all U.S. cotton-growing areas by the late-1920s, adversely effecting the industry and people working in the American South.

While boll weevils devastated the Southern economy, the stock market crashed in 1929. The Great Depression further reduced the demand for horses in this area. By 1930, the average size of a farm in Georgia was 86 acres, down from 430 acres in 1860. Georgia cotton production, which peaked in 1910 – fell to almost nothing by 1945. Nearly destitute, Milton County merged into Fulton County in 1932.

At the time of the merger, Milton County's population had grown to 6,730 residents, which was almost double the County's population in 1860 when it was founded. Shortly after merger, former Milton County residents received more benefits than were expected, in terms of improved roads, new school buildings, and better equipped teachers. After World War II, Ford, General Motors and Lockheed opened manufacturing plants which offered more employment opportunities for local residents. With more discretionary money, horseback riding was becoming a popular recreational activity and competitive sport.

In the 1950's, local farmers with a nice ring would host one-day shows for saddle clubs, hunt clubs 4-H shows, western shows, and/or other multi-disciplined shows. As equestrian competitions grew in scale and popularity over the following decades, these "mom-and-pop" shows slowly disappeared.

In 1968, Wills Park was created in response to the community's desire for an equestrian facility. This one-ring facility was located in Alpharetta. The Wills Park Equestrian Center soon became a haven for horse enthusiasts and regional competitions. Thanks to Wills Park, this area became known as the "horse capital of the South". Today, Wills Park hosts over 50 horse shows a year, including jumping competitions and championship rodeo.

Shakerag is the oldest recognized hunt in Georgia and was located on the eastern edge of the former Milton County (near McGinnis Ferry and Medlock Bridge Roads). This hunt group just celebrated its 75th anniversary and like many equestrian organizations, the Shakerag Hounds are passionate about land conservation. Those who enjoy this sport usually have a great love for the outdoors.

From its humble beginnings as a beast of burden, the horse has become a source of pride and beauty throughout Milton's bucolic countryside. ■

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For details, visit www.MiltonGAHistoricalSociety.com*