

## The Origin of NYC's Nickname *The Big Apple*

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The expression "The Big Apple," meaning "something special, out of the ordinary, world class" is traced from its adoption as the nickname of New York City in 1971 back through time, to the jazz culture of the 1930s and ultimately to its apparent origins in racing jargon in the early decades of the 20th century.

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My topic is the origin of New York City's nickname *The Big Apple*, and my particular purpose is to pay tribute to two people whose work is connected with this nickname. The first is Charles Gillett, who in 1971, as president of the New York Convention and Visitors' Bureau, revived the name *The Big Apple*. Previously the term had been largely unknown, even to most New Yorkers.

The second honoree is Barry Popik, who is an attorney by vocation and a word buff by avocation. Mr. Popik did some excellent research on *The Big Apple*, specifically on the horseracing aspect of the term.

In treating *The Big Apple* now I will work backwards chronologically, starting in 1971. At that time Mr. Gillett had been seeking a device to publicize New York City favorably, to give a sense of the city's excitement and vibrancy and to counteract the negative publicity about New York City's being a place of violence and bankruptcy. Mr. Gillett rose to the challenge by reaching back to the jazz era of the 1930s and selecting the expression *The Big Apple*. Jazz musicians used the term to refer to New York City in

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general and Harlem in particular as the place where the greatest jazz in the world was played. Mr. Gillett has been interviewed several times about his role in reviving *The Big Apple*, and he readily acknowledges the 1930's jazz scene as the source of his use of the term.

Two points now need to be emphasized. First, Mr. Gillett's selection of *The Big Apple* for his public relations campaign was not a fluke. By 1971 Mr. Gillett was one of the most experienced public relations men in the business, with an extraordinary resume that he shared with me at my request. It was this background that permitted him to hit just the right chord in selecting *The Big Apple*. This nickname turned out to be a public relations bonanza and succeeded far beyond even Mr. Gillett's expectations. The name gained almost instant national and international recognition.

Second, I should emphasize that *The Big Apple* simply was not generally known to New Yorkers prior to Mr. Gillett's 1971 campaign. To cite just my own experience, I was born and raised in New York City and attended graduate school at Columbia University from 1963-1968. At that time I was already interested in etymology and all sorts of linguistic oddities. But I have no recollection of ever hearing *The Big Apple* then. In 1968 I moved to Missouri, and a few years later there was suddenly a burst of *The Big Apple* in all the newspapers and magazines. And I remember thinking: "*The Big Apple* for New York City? How could New York City have this nickname without my ever having heard it before?"

Also, even though Mr. Gillett made it clear that he had taken *The Big Apple* from his remembrance of the jazz scene of the 1930s, the question remains: In what way is Harlem or New York City like a big apple? The answers provided by even such jazz legends as Cab Calloway turned out to be mere groping and unsatisfactory attempts at an explanation.

I will now continue working backwards in time. There are no attestations of *The Big Apple* in its jazz context prior to the 1930s, but there are numerous instances of *the big apple* (written without capitalization) used in a horseracing context and going back to 1921. It is here that we come to the research contributions of Barry Popik, but first some background is necessary.

In 1988, the Dear Abby column ran a query about the origin of

the expression *The Big Apple*. Stimulated by this query I wrote to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, held at Columbia, Missouri. Randy Roberts is the manuscript specialist there assigned to the Peter Tamony Collection of Americanisms, and I asked Mr. Roberts to please send me everything Tamony had collected on *The Big Apple*. I soon received a thick packet of photocopies.

The most interesting parts of this packet were numerous attestations of *the big apple* in a horseracing context, where it usually meant the New York City racetracks but was also sometimes used to mean big-time racing in general. There were attestations going back to 1929 in a turf newspaper called the *New York Press*, and I visited New York City to read through its issues. While reading them I noticed mention of another turf newspaper, *The Morning Telegraph*, and soon found attestations of *the big apple* there going back to 1921. The key figure in the turf usage of *the big apple* was a turf reporter named John J. Fitz Gerald (always "Fitz Gerald," never "FitzGerald"), and interestingly, from 1921 to about 1926 he tended to use *the big apple* only once a year in his columns, namely, at the start of the New York racing season. Fitz Gerald singlehandedly won acceptance for this new nickname for the New York racetracks.

I began sharing my information with the readers of my series of working papers, entitled *Comments on Etymology*, and various readers provided input, which I then also printed with due credit. The research into the origin of *The Big Apple* is best viewed as a team effort.

The next step was to publish all this material formally, and in 1991 I put everything of importance I had on the subject into my monograph entitled *Origin of New York City's Nickname, The Big Apple*, published by Peter Lang. By this time I had pretty much exhausted myself on the topic, but fresh troops then arrived in the person of Barry Popik.

I had met Mr. Popik at the New York City Public Library and sent him copies of the *Comments on Etymology* issues concerning *The Big Apple*. He then piled into the subject, and his most important contribution was to show just how and when John J. Fitz Gerald became acquainted with the expression *the big apple*.

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Mr. Popik sent me numerous letters – all helpful – but two are of special importance. In the first of the two letters he sent me a copy of an article by Fitz Gerald from the *Morning Telegraph* of December 1, 1926 (p. 11).

The article has the dateline 'New Orleans,' and in it Fitz Gerald writes:

So many people have asked the writer about the derivation of his phrase 'the big apple' that he is forced to make another explanation. New Orleans called it to his mind again.

A number of years back, when racing a few horses at the Fair Grounds with Jack Byer, he was watching a couple of stable hands cool out a pair of 'hots' in a circle outside the stable.

A boy from an adjoining barn called over, 'Where are you shipping after the meeting?'

To this one of the lads replied, 'Why we ain't no bull ring stable; we's goin' to the big apple.' [*bull ring stable* means a stable with third-rate horses. *Bull* is one of many derogatory terms for a horse in turf jargon GC].

The reply came back bright and snappy:

'Boy, I don't know why you're goin' to that apple with those hides for. All you'll get is the rind.'

This article gives us the following information:

(1) John J. Fitz Gerald learned of the expression *the big apple* from a stable hand in New Orleans.

(2) That stable hand was almost certainly an African-American, judging by his use of *we's goin'* instead of *we're going*. So the African-American influence on *The Big Apple* goes deeper than just the jazz use of the 1930s.

(3) Fitz Gerald was in New Orleans with a man named Jack Byer. And Jack Byer figures in the second very important article that Mr. Popik drew to my attention.

That article appeared in the *Morning Telegraph* on January 15, 1920; it contains the following brief note at the end of the New Orleans racing story:

'J. J. Fitz Gerald has sold the 3-year-old colt Dunsandel to J.

Byer.”

Mr. Popik writes:

This special cable was wired January 14, which means that we can date 'we's goin' to the big apple' quote at J. Byer's stable almost to the exact day – January 13 or 14, 1920.

Mr. Popik then proceeds to nail down the date:

Fitz Gerald tells us that he was in New Orleans before the war and that he started his love of jazz music there. But racing was abolished in Louisiana in 1908 before returning in 1915. At that time, Fitz Gerald was serving in the armed forces. He didn't rejoin the *Morning Telegraph* until 1919. We have no reason to doubt the January 13-14, 1920 date for the origin of the big apple.

I will now conclude with a few observations:

(1) Even when we get to the start of Fitz Gerald's familiarity with *the big apple*, we still don't know why the New York City racetracks were likened to an apple. I believe I can fill in this gap, however. We must remember that throughout history an apple was not just another fruit, but a special one. To take just one example, there is the quote from the Bible, in the Song of Solomon, in which the bride says: "Comfort me with apples, for I am faint with love."

The big red delicious apples were developed in Iowa in the 1870s and were regarded as very special. Jockeys and trainers then apparently used food imagery to describe making it to the big time. All their early racing, say, at the county fairs of Idaho or South Dakota was recognized in effect as the main part of the meal. But the super-duper treat, the equivalent of three scoops of a child's favorite ice-cream, was the dessert, namely the big apple. That's what the jockeys and trainers all looked forward to. And that's why *Big Apple* is attested in some slang with the meaning "big shot," "someone who thinks he's very important." For a parallel to this latter use there's *the big cheese*, which also originally referred to a dessert that everyone looked forward to.

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(2) On a general note, the etymology of slang is a field to which both scholars and laymen can contribute, and it is a field in which the fruits of scholarly research can be understood and enjoyed by everyone. *The Big Apple* serves as a good illustration. Charles Gillett has enriched the English lexicon by drawing *The Big Apple* from its previous obscurity, and Barry Popik has provided etymology with one of its genuine highs – the feeling that comes from unexpectedly witnessing the discovery of a very important piece of a puzzle, a piece whose existence was previously not even suspected. John J. Fitz Gerald acquired the expression *The Big Apple* from two stable hands in New Orleans, January 13 or 14, 1920.

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