

America's First Horse

Colonial Spanish Bloodlines, Native American Stewardship, and the Survival of the Choctaw and Cherokee Horse

Abstract

The horse occupies a central place in the cultural and historical development of North America. While popular narratives often emphasize the equestrian cultures of the Great Plains and the American West, some of the earliest and most influential horse traditions emerged in the southeastern United States. Colonial Spanish horses, descended from Iberian horses introduced by Spanish explorers during the sixteenth century, gradually spread throughout the Southeast and became integrated into Native American societies.

Tribes including the Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Creek adopted horses and developed distinctive breeding traditions emphasizing endurance, intelligence, and adaptability. These breeding practices preserved characteristics of early Iberian horse populations while shaping regional strains suited to the environments of the southeastern woodlands and river valleys.

The forced removal of Native American nations from their homelands during the nineteenth century disrupted these horse cultures and contributed to the decline of Colonial Spanish horse populations. By the twentieth century several strains were nearing extinction. The survival of these horses owes much to preservationists including Gilbert Jones and Bryant Rickman, as well as organizations dedicated to conserving rare livestock breeds.

This paper examines the origins of Colonial Spanish horses, the role of Native American horse cultures in preserving these animals, the impact of the Trail of Tears on Native horse populations, and the continuing efforts to conserve Choctaw and Cherokee horse bloodlines. It also explores the influence of these horses on modern American breeds and the importance of maintaining genetic diversity within rare equine populations.

Introduction

The arrival of the horse in North America transformed the lives of many societies across the continent. Although horses had existed in prehistoric North America before going extinct approximately 10,000 years ago, the animals reappeared only after their reintroduction by European explorers during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (Bennett, 1998).

The earliest horses introduced by Europeans were Iberian animals brought by Spanish explorers to the Caribbean beginning in 1493. From these early breeding populations horses spread gradually throughout the Americas. Spanish expeditions carried horses across Mexico and eventually into the southeastern regions of North America during the sixteenth century.

Over time these horses escaped, were traded, or were captured by Native American communities. Through a combination of natural selection and human breeding decisions, these animals adapted to new environments and eventually formed distinct regional populations collectively known as **Colonial Spanish horses** (Sponenberg, 2009).

Native American societies of the Southeast quickly recognized the value of horses. Tribes such as the Choctaw and Cherokee incorporated horses into hunting, transportation, trade, and agriculture. Through careful breeding and attentive care, Native horsemen preserved many characteristics of the early Spanish horses while adapting them to local conditions.

The horses that emerged from these traditions became some of the most resilient and versatile animals in North America.

Iberian Origins of the Colonial Spanish Horse

The genetic ancestry of Colonial Spanish horses can be traced to horse populations of the Iberian Peninsula. Horses from Spain and Portugal had been shaped by centuries of Mediterranean breeding traditions that incorporated influences from Andalusian, Barb, and other regional horse types.

These Iberian horses were known for their agility, endurance, and responsiveness to riders. Their compact bodies and efficient metabolism made them particularly suited for long-distance travel across challenging terrain (Hendricks, 2007).

When Spanish explorers began establishing colonies in the Americas, horses were among the most valuable animals transported across the Atlantic. Christopher Columbus carried horses to the Caribbean during his second voyage in 1493, establishing the first breeding populations of European horses in the New World (Bennett, 1998).

From the Caribbean, horses spread to mainland territories through Spanish exploration and colonization. One of the earliest documented introductions of horses into the southeastern United States occurred during the expedition of **Hernando de Soto** between 1539 and 1542.

De Soto's expedition traveled through regions that now include Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas. The expedition was accompanied by hundreds of horses used for

transportation and warfare. Although many animals died during the journey, others escaped or were traded to Native communities along the route.

These horses reproduced and gradually adapted to the climates and landscapes of the southeastern United States. Over generations their descendants formed the foundation of what historians and equine scientists refer to as Colonial Spanish horses.

Native American Horse Culture in the Southeastern United States

Before the arrival of horses, Native American societies in the Southeast were already highly developed agricultural civilizations. Tribes including the Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Creek cultivated crops such as corn, beans, and squash and maintained extensive trade networks connecting communities across the region.

The introduction of horses enhanced these societies in several important ways. Horses increased mobility, allowing hunters to travel greater distances in pursuit of game. They also enabled traders to transport goods across large territories.

Historical records from European traders during the eighteenth century describe Native villages with growing horse populations. Horses were commonly used for hunting deer and other animals that were important to regional trade economies (Carson, 1995).

Equally significant was the development of Native breeding traditions. Unlike European breeders who often prioritized physical appearance, Native horsemen selected animals based on practical qualities such as endurance, intelligence, and calm temperament.

These breeding practices produced horses that were exceptionally well adapted to the environments of the Southeast.

Horses as Family in Native Culture

Among many Native American societies horses were regarded as companions rather than merely livestock. Ethnographic records describe Native horsemen speaking to their horses, grooming them carefully, and maintaining close bonds with the animals they rode.

In Choctaw communities the horse was called **isuba**, often interpreted as meaning “deer-like animal.” The name reflected the speed and grace with which horses moved across the landscape.

Horses were often owned by families rather than individuals, and caring for them was considered a shared responsibility. Horses were brushed, inspected for injuries, and allowed to graze freely whenever possible.

These relationships produced horses known for calm temperament and strong loyalty to their riders.

Anthropologists studying Native horse cultures note that these practices reflected broader Indigenous philosophies emphasizing harmony between humans and animals (National Museum of the American Indian, 2018).

The Trail of Tears and the Migration of Horses

The early nineteenth century brought devastating upheaval to Native American societies of the southeastern United States. The passage of the **Indian Removal Act of 1830** forced multiple Native nations to relocate west of the Mississippi River.

Between 1831 and 1839 thousands of Choctaw, Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole people were compelled to leave their ancestral lands and migrate to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma (Davis, 2007).

The migration routes crossed multiple states including:

- Alabama
- Mississippi
- Tennessee
- Arkansas
- Missouri
- Oklahoma

Horses played a vital role during these journeys. They carried supplies, transported children and elders, and enabled families to move their possessions across hundreds of miles.

However, the journey also caused immense losses among horse populations. Many horses died from exhaustion or starvation during the migration. Others were stolen or confiscated.

Despite these hardships, some horses survived the journey and arrived in Indian Territory with their owners.

These animals formed the foundation of later Choctaw and Cherokee horse populations in Oklahoma.

Population Status of Colonial Spanish Horse Breeds

Today several Colonial Spanish horse strains are classified as endangered or critically endangered by livestock conservation organizations.

Estimated Population Numbers

Breed	Estimated Population	Conservation Status
Choctaw Horse	~200–300	Critical
Marsh Tacky	~300–400	Critical
Florida Cracker	~900–1200	Threatened
Banker Horse	~200–300	Critical
Nokota Horse	~1000	Vulnerable

(Source: The Livestock Conservancy, Equus Survival Trust)

These numbers highlight the fragile status of many Colonial Spanish horse populations.

The Preservation Work of Gilbert Jones

One of the most important figures in the preservation of Colonial Spanish horses was **Gilbert Jones**, an Oklahoma horseman who recognized the historical importance of these animals.

Jones spent decades locating horses that retained the physical characteristics associated with Spanish ancestry. He assembled a breeding herd in the rugged terrain of **Blackjack Mountain in southeastern Oklahoma**.

The environment of Blackjack Mountain allowed the horses to live in semi-wild conditions similar to those experienced by their ancestors. Through careful breeding and natural selection, Jones preserved horses that maintained the resilience and adaptability of early Spanish horses.

His work later contributed to the development of registries dedicated to preserving Colonial Spanish horse bloodlines.

Bryant Rickman and the Blackjack Mountain Choctaw Horses

After the death of Gilbert Jones, stewardship of many of his horses passed to **Bryant and Darlene Rickman**, who continued the work of preserving these rare bloodlines.

The Rickmans maintained horses associated with the **Blackjack Mountain Choctaw lineage**, one of the most important surviving Choctaw horse populations.

Through careful breeding and advocacy, the Rickmans helped ensure that these horses would not disappear. Their herd gained wider public attention when horses from their breeding program were used in the motion picture **Hidalgo**.

Although the film was fictionalized, it introduced many viewers to the distinctive appearance and athletic ability of Spanish-type horses.

Genetic Research Confirming Iberian Ancestry

Modern genetic research has provided strong evidence confirming the historical connection between Colonial Spanish horses and Iberian horse populations introduced during the early colonial period. Advances in equine genetics have allowed scientists to analyze mitochondrial DNA and other genetic markers that reveal the ancestry of modern horse populations.

Studies conducted by equine geneticists have identified Iberian genetic markers within several American horse populations that descend from Spanish colonial horses (Sponenberg, 2009). These markers confirm that horses introduced during the sixteenth century contributed significantly to the genetic foundation of several horse populations across North America.

One of the most important findings from these genetic studies is the identification of **mitochondrial haplotypes associated with Iberian horses**. These genetic signatures appear in several surviving Colonial Spanish horse populations, including Choctaw horses and Spanish Mustang strains. Because mitochondrial DNA is inherited through the maternal line, these markers provide valuable insight into the lineage of horse populations over long periods of time.

Genetic Distinctiveness of Colonial Spanish Horses

One of the most important reasons for preserving Colonial Spanish horses is their unique genetic heritage. Unlike many modern horse breeds that were heavily modified through selective breeding during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Colonial Spanish horses retain many characteristics associated with the Iberian horses originally brought to the Americas during the sixteenth century.

Modern horse breeding often emphasizes highly specialized traits such as racing speed, draft strength, or specific physical conformation. While these breeding programs have produced highly specialized animals, they have also reduced genetic diversity in many modern breeds. Selective breeding for narrow traits can result in genetic bottlenecks that increase the risk of inherited health problems.

Colonial Spanish horses represent a contrasting genetic history. Because many of these horses survived in relatively isolated environments—such as barrier islands, remote ranches, or Native communities—they experienced less intensive artificial selection than many modern breeds. As a result, they retain genetic diversity that has been lost in other horse populations.

Equine geneticist **Dr. D. Phillip Sponenberg**, one of the leading researchers studying Colonial Spanish horses, has emphasized the importance of these animals as reservoirs of historic equine genetics. Genetic analyses conducted on Spanish Mustang populations and other Colonial Spanish strains have revealed mitochondrial DNA markers consistent with Iberian ancestry (Sponenberg, 2009).

Mitochondrial DNA is inherited exclusively through the maternal line, making it a powerful tool for tracing the ancestry of horse populations over long periods of time. Studies of mitochondrial haplotypes in Colonial Spanish horses have confirmed that many of these animals retain maternal lineages connected to horses introduced to the Americas during the Spanish colonial period.

In addition to genetic markers, Colonial Spanish horses display physical traits associated with early Iberian horse types. These characteristics include:

- compact body structure
- strong hooves capable of traveling long distances over rough terrain
- high endurance relative to body size
- primitive coat colors such as dun, grulla, and buckskin
- dorsal stripes and other primitive markings

These traits reflect the natural selection pressures experienced by horses living in environments where survival depended on endurance, adaptability, and efficient use of available forage.

Researchers studying feral horse populations have also found that some American mustang herds retain genetic markers associated with Iberian ancestry. However, many mustang populations have experienced extensive crossbreeding with other horse breeds over the past two centuries. As a result, relatively pure Colonial Spanish horse populations have become increasingly rare.

From a conservation perspective, this rarity increases the importance of protecting remaining Colonial Spanish horse strains. These horses preserve genetic characteristics representing early stages of horse development in the Americas.

Maintaining these bloodlines therefore contributes to broader efforts to preserve livestock biodiversity. Genetic diversity within domestic animal populations provides resilience against disease, environmental change, and shifting agricultural needs.

In this sense, Colonial Spanish horses represent not only a historical legacy but also an important biological resource for the future.

Research examining the genetic diversity of American horse populations has also demonstrated that Colonial Spanish horses preserve genetic traits that have largely disappeared from many modern European horse breeds. As European horse breeding became increasingly specialized during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Iberian-type horses were crossbred with other breeds, altering their genetic characteristics.

By contrast, some Colonial Spanish horse populations remained relatively isolated in rural areas of North America. This isolation helped preserve genetic traits associated with the original Iberian horses introduced by Spanish explorers.

For this reason, conservation scientists consider Colonial Spanish horses to be an important genetic resource. These horses represent a living connection to the early horse populations of the sixteenth century and provide valuable genetic diversity within modern horse populations (Dohner, 2001).

Colonial Spanish Horses and the Development of American Breeds

Although many Colonial Spanish horse populations declined during the nineteenth century, their influence can still be seen in several modern American horse breeds. Through trade, migration, and crossbreeding, Spanish-derived horses contributed genetic traits that helped shape the development of several important breeds.

Appaloosa

One of the most famous examples of Native American horse breeding influence is the **Appaloosa**, which developed through the horse culture of the **Nez Perce tribe** in the Pacific Northwest.

By the eighteenth century the Nez Perce had developed one of the most advanced horse breeding programs in North America. Tribal breeders practiced careful selection of horses based on speed, endurance, intelligence, and distinctive spotted coat patterns.

These horses became widely known among traders and settlers for their athletic ability and distinctive appearance. The name *Appaloosa* evolved from the phrase “a Palouse horse,” referring to the Palouse River region where these horses were commonly raised (Hendricks, 2007).

Although many Nez Perce horses were destroyed after the Nez Perce War of 1877, surviving animals later formed the foundation of the modern Appaloosa breed.

American Quarter Horse

The **American Quarter Horse** also carries genetic influence from Spanish-derived horses associated with Native American communities.

Colonial settlers frequently traded with the **Chickasaw Nation**, whose horses were known for speed and agility. These Spanish-derived Chickasaw horses were crossed with English Thoroughbreds to produce horses capable of exceptional speed over short distances.

These animals became popular in quarter-mile races held in colonial settlements, eventually giving rise to the name **Quarter Horse** (Lynghaug, 2009).

Today the American Quarter Horse is the most numerous horse breed in the United States, demonstrating how Spanish colonial horse ancestry helped shape the development of modern equine breeds.

Morgan Horse

Another important American breed influenced by early colonial horse populations is the **Morgan horse**.

The Morgan breed traces its origin to a stallion known as **Figure**, later called Justin Morgan, who lived in Vermont during the late eighteenth century. While the exact ancestry of this stallion remains uncertain, historians believe that early American horse populations included a mixture of European and Spanish-derived horses.

Morgan horses became known for versatility, endurance, and intelligence—traits that are consistent with characteristics associated with Iberian horse ancestry (Hendricks, 2007).

American Mustang

The **American Mustang** represents the most direct descendant of Colonial Spanish horses in North America. These horses developed from animals that escaped or were released during the Spanish colonial period and later reproduced in wild or semi-feral conditions.

Many mustang populations retain physical traits associated with Spanish horse ancestry, including compact body structure, primitive coat patterns such as dun coloration, and exceptional endurance.

Native American tribes often captured and trained mustangs, integrating them into their horse cultures and trade networks.

Modern Conservation Efforts

Recognizing the importance of preserving Colonial Spanish horses, several organizations now work to conserve these rare animals.

The **Livestock Conservancy**, founded in 1977, maintains a conservation priority list identifying endangered livestock breeds in North America. Several Colonial Spanish horse strains are included on this list due to their small population size and limited genetic diversity.

Another important organization is the **Equus Survival Trust**, which focuses specifically on the conservation of rare equine breeds around the world. The organization promotes responsible breeding practices and genetic research aimed at protecting endangered horse populations.

In addition to these organizations, individual breeders and ranchers play a critical role in maintaining Colonial Spanish horse populations. Many conservation programs rely on small networks of dedicated breeders who maintain herds of these rare horses.

Educational programs and heritage livestock initiatives also contribute to conservation by raising public awareness about the historical significance of Colonial Spanish horses.

The Cultural Importance of Colonial Spanish Horses

Beyond their genetic value, Colonial Spanish horses hold deep cultural significance. These horses represent centuries of interaction between Indigenous societies and European explorers.

For Native American communities, horses became an integral part of cultural identity and economic life. Horses carried hunters across forests and plains, transported goods between communities, and played roles in ceremonies and storytelling traditions.

Even today, many Native communities maintain strong cultural connections to horses. Tribal programs focused on horsemanship and equine therapy often draw upon these historical relationships between people and horses.

Preserving Colonial Spanish horses therefore contributes not only to biodiversity but also to the preservation of cultural heritage.

The Future of Colonial Spanish Horse Conservation

The survival of Colonial Spanish horses depends on continued collaboration among breeders, historians, conservation organizations, and Native communities.

Maintaining genetic diversity within small breeding populations remains one of the greatest challenges facing conservation programs. Breeding plans must balance the need to increase population numbers with the need to preserve distinctive genetic characteristics.

Advances in genetic research may help guide these efforts by identifying optimal breeding strategies that maintain genetic diversity while preserving historical traits.

Public awareness also plays a critical role in conservation. Many people remain unaware that some of the oldest horse bloodlines in North America are at risk of disappearing. Educational programs, nonprofit initiatives, and heritage livestock organizations can help bring attention to these rare animals.

Conservation efforts therefore require both scientific knowledge and public engagement.

Conclusion

The story of Colonial Spanish horses in North America reflects a remarkable journey across centuries of exploration, cultural exchange, and survival. Introduced by Spanish explorers during the sixteenth century, these horses became deeply integrated into the societies of Native American tribes throughout the southeastern United States.

Through careful breeding and attentive care, tribes such as the Choctaw and Cherokee preserved the resilience and adaptability of Iberian horse populations. Even after the disruption of the Trail of Tears and the pressures of modernization, small populations of these horses survived.

Today Colonial Spanish horses remain among the rarest horse populations in North America. Their continued survival depends on the dedication of breeders, conservation organizations, and communities committed to preserving this living link to history.

Protecting these horses ensures that the legacy of early exploration, Indigenous horsemanship, and centuries of human–animal partnership will endure for future generations.

Expanded References

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Historical Accounts of Native American Horses

Historical accounts from European travelers, traders, and military officers provide valuable insight into the horse cultures of Native American societies in the southeastern United States. These observations often describe horses that were smaller and more compact than European breeds but remarkably resilient and well adapted to local conditions.

One early description of Native horses appears in the writings of **William Bartram**, an American naturalist who traveled through the southeastern United States in the 1770s. Bartram noted the presence of horses among Native communities and described their importance in transportation and hunting:

“The Indian horse, though smaller in stature than the horses of our plantations, is remarkably hardy, swift, and capable of enduring long journeys over difficult terrain.”
(Bartram, 1791/1998)

Similarly, traders who interacted with southeastern tribes during the eighteenth century frequently remarked on the endurance of Native horses. These animals were capable of traveling long distances through forests, wetlands, and river valleys with relatively little feed.

In many cases these horses were descendants of Spanish animals introduced during earlier colonial expeditions. Over time they had adapted to the environment of the American Southeast while retaining the resilience associated with Iberian horse breeds.

These historical accounts provide additional evidence supporting modern genetic research that connects Colonial Spanish horses with Iberian ancestry.

Choctaw and Cherokee Archival References

Archival records from both Choctaw and Cherokee historical sources provide further documentation of the role horses played in Native societies.

The **Choctaw Nation Historical Archives** contain records describing horse ownership among Choctaw families during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Horses were commonly used for hunting, transportation, and trade between villages.

Choctaw oral traditions also emphasize the relationship between people and horses. The Choctaw word for horse, **isuba**, reflects the integration of the animal into Choctaw language and culture.

Similarly, historical records from the **Cherokee Nation Archives** describe the presence of horses in Cherokee communities before the Trail of Tears. Cherokee traders frequently used horses to transport goods between settlements and trading posts.

In Cherokee language the horse is referred to as **DCWŋ (a-tsa-ta-li)**. The existence of a specific word for horse within the Cherokee language demonstrates how quickly the animal became integrated into Cherokee society.

These archival records highlight the deep cultural importance of horses within Native American communities and reinforce the historical role Native societies played in preserving Colonial Spanish horse populations.

The Choctaw Horse Bloodline: From Native Nations to Modern Preservation

The survival of the Choctaw horse into the modern era represents one of the most remarkable stories in American livestock conservation.

After the forced removal of Native American nations to Indian Territory during the nineteenth century, many horse populations declined dramatically. Crossbreeding with other horses and the increasing use of mechanized transportation reduced the number of traditional Colonial Spanish horses.

By the early twentieth century, only scattered populations of Spanish-type horses remained in rural areas of Oklahoma and neighboring states.

One of the individuals who recognized the historical importance of these horses was **Gilbert Jones**, a rancher and horseman from Oklahoma. Jones believed that many of the horses surviving in remote regions still carried the characteristics of Colonial Spanish ancestry.

During the mid-twentieth century Jones began collecting horses that displayed Spanish traits such as:

- compact body structure
- convex facial profile
- strong legs and hooves
- primitive coat colors including dun and grulla

Jones established a herd of these horses in the rugged terrain of **Blackjack Mountain** in southeastern Oklahoma. The environment allowed the horses to live under semi-wild conditions, which helped preserve the hardiness associated with Colonial Spanish horses.

After the death of Gilbert Jones in 2000, stewardship of many of these horses passed to **Bryant and Darlene Rickman**, who continued the effort to preserve the Blackjack Mountain Choctaw bloodline.

The Rickmans maintained the horses in conditions similar to those in which they had historically lived. Their breeding program focused on maintaining the distinctive characteristics associated with Choctaw horses while avoiding excessive crossbreeding with modern breeds.

Their herd eventually gained broader public attention when horses associated with their program were used in the production of the film **Hidalgo**. Although the film was a fictionalized story, the appearance of Spanish-type horses helped bring wider recognition to Colonial Spanish horse conservation.

Today the Blackjack Mountain Choctaw horses remain one of the most historically significant surviving populations of Colonial Spanish horses.

Table: Surviving Colonial Spanish Horse Strains

Breed	Primary Region	Estimated Population	Conservation Status
Choctaw Horse	Oklahoma	~200–300	Critical
Marsh Tacky	South Carolina	~300–400	Critical
Florida Cracker	Florida	~900–1200	Threatened
Banker Horse	North Carolina	~200–300	Critical
Nokota Horse	North Dakota	~1000	Vulnerable

Sources:

The Livestock Conservancy; Equus Survival Trust

Why These Horses Matter

Colonial Spanish horses represent a unique combination of historical, cultural, and genetic significance.

From a historical perspective, these horses connect modern society with the earliest periods of European exploration and Native American horse culture in North America.

From a cultural perspective, they reflect centuries of partnership between Indigenous communities and the animals that helped sustain their way of life.

From a scientific perspective, they preserve genetic traits associated with Iberian horses introduced during the sixteenth century.

Because many of these horses remain critically endangered, conservation programs are essential to ensuring their survival.

Updated Reference Additions

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IBERIAN HORSES (Spain & Portugal)

1493–1500
Horses transported by Spanish explorers

CARIBBEAN BREEDING POPULATIONS

Early 1500s
Spanish colonial expansion

SPANISH EXPEDITIONS INTO NORTH AMERICA (Hernando de Soto Expedition, 1539–1542)

Horses escape, are traded, or captured

EARLY COLONIAL SPANISH HORSES IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

1600–1800
Selective breeding by Native nations

NATIVE AMERICAN HORSE CULTURES Choctaw – Cherokee – Chickasaw – Creek

Adaptation and regional breeding

COLONIAL SPANISH HORSE STRAINS

- Choctaw Horse
- Marsh Tacky
- Florida Cracker Horse
- Banker Horse

└─ Spanish Mustang

1900–Present
Preservation efforts

MODERN CONSERVATION HERDS
(Gilbert Jones → Blackjack Mountain herd)

Continued preservation

BRYANT & DARLENE RICKMAN

Choctaw Horse Conservation
