

The Spanish Horse in the East

by Beverley J. Davis

Almost twelve thousand years ago the native horses of America became extinct. Why is anybody's guess, although severe climate change, a pandemic and over hunting are given as possible reasons. And it's hard to imagine a world where horses once lived being suddenly void of them, but that's the way it was when Columbus arrived in the Caribbean looking for a route to China. In the land of their origin, horses were missing.

The Conquistadors

Making his base of operations on the island of Hispaniola, Columbus brought the first horses back to North America in 1494. Records state he had 24 stallions and 10 mares with him on his second voyage. The next year 14 mares arrived, and they are soon joined by 106 more from Seville and other regions in Spain. This fits in with Columbus' request to Ferdinand and Isabella that every ship from Spain ought to be carrying broodmares. In 1498 on Columbus' third voyage, 40 horsemen and their mounts arrive, so that by 1500 there is an imperial stud on Hispaniola with 50 broodmares.

What kind of horses were these? Regal Andalusians? Sturdy Sorraias? Fancy gaited riding horses? In likelihood, all were present. Seville was the seat of the imperial stud where only the finest Andalusians and Spanish Barbs were kept. William Cavendish, Lord of Newcastle, at this time described the Andalusian as the most regal of horses and the Spanish Barb as an excellent racehorse. His painting of them are most interesting because the Spanish Barb is portrayed as a very loud overo,

a color not found in the African horse with the same name. But Spain was historically legendary for the quality of its racehorses, and pintos had been a part of the breed since ancient Egyptian times. So in all likelihood a few Andalusians and Spanish Barbs made the trip. But what of the other horses?

From Portugal there was the dun Sorraia, whose image is among the paintings of the first horses in Mexico's national museum, the Museo de Americas. The Austurcon of Northern Spain with its long mane and tail and legendary gait certainly made the trip. Although predominantly bay now, the ancient Austurian and its Basque cousin, the Pottok, carried the tobiano gene. Andalusians with the LP pattern certainly made the trip and appear in the Mexico City paintings along with palominos, overos and sabinos.

The city the ship sailed out of decided what type of horse made the passage over, and if the horses were privately owned or destined for the imperial stud on Hispaniola. Ships leaving northern Spain had access to the Garrano, Austurian and the Basque pony. Sorraias, Lusitanos and Andalusians would be found in Southern Spain. Columbus we know sailed out of the north; Cortez and his group sailed out of the south. Pizarro, when he conquered the Incans, took horses from Hispaniola and Jamaica that had originated in the north with some crossings to the Andalusian.

In 1502 a man who would play an important role in the eastern Spanish horse arrived on Hispaniola to act as a judge. He was Lucas Vazquez de Ayllon, a native of Toledo, born in 1475. A member of the Superior Council of San Domingo, he is more remembered for judging a dispute between Hernan Cortez and Diego Velazquez, both former mayors of Cuba, in Mexico in 1520 then his attempted

colonization of the east coast US.

But he lived at a time of exploration and great adventure. The Moors had been driven out of Spain and Columbus had discovered a New World. Hispaniola was the starting point for all new adventures. And horses were arriving there with every ship by the Royal Decree of 1493, when the Spanish crown ordered that every ship to the New World had to carry at least two broodmares. In fact there was a royal ranch on Hispaniola when Ayllon arrived. Fifty broodmares were in residence along with stallions and geldings.

In 1521, de Ayllon decided to send an expedition up the eastern coast of the US to see what was there. The Spanish were at this time looking for Native American Slaves, and the man he sent, Francisco Gordillo and Pedro de Qiejo, were noted traders. Landing near Cape Fear, NC, they captured sixty people but only a few survived the trip to Cuba, their ultimate destination. Although it is not recorded as to how many horses were lost or how many had even been taken on the expedition, some were left behind. The reason for this is that Giovanni da Verrazano, sailing for the King of France, reported seeing horses running loose on the Banks.

Between 1523 and 1524 de Ayllon led his own expedition from Hispaniola to Winyaw Bay, SC up to the James River and the Chesapeake Bay, depending on whether the historical article is from Virginia or North Carolina. Taking a Catawba Indian as a prisoner, he returned to Spain with the desire to colonize the area. Getting a Royal Grant to start a colony in 1526, he led 600 settlers along with 89 horses from Puerto de la Plata, Hispaniola up to Cape Fear in North Carolina. Because of a leadership dispute and his own illness that led to his death on October 18th, the colony failed. Leaving the horses behind, Francisco Gomez took the survivors south to Winyaw Bay. They did not stay there long, and a little over a year

after it began Gomez returned with only 150 humans. One ship had run aground on the shoals near Cape Feare when they first arrived, and another sank on the way home. It had not been a successful adventure. There is no record that the horses on the ship that ran aground died, and with horses being good swimmers, it is likely the legend of the horses swimming ashore began here.

Not like the Peruvian expedition that Francisco Pizarro initiated a few years later with 180 men and 37 horses. The conquest of the Incas would be remembered.

Ponce de Leon was another adventurer. Arriving on Hispaniola with Columbus on his second voyage, he colonized Puerto Rico and took the first Spanish horses there. Hearing of wonderful things in South Florida, he explored the coast in 1513 and went ashore in 1521 with 200 men and 50 Puerto Rican horses. Carrying a royal decree to colonize the area, he started building a fort when he wasn't looking for the Fountain of Youth, but like most conquistadors, he quickly antagonized the local Natives who attacked in force. With many of his men killed and himself wounded, de Leon retreated to his ship and sailed to Cuba where he died. The surviving horses were left behind to fend for themselves.

In 1528 another conquistador who tried to conquer Florida was Pamphilio de Narvaez. An interesting fellow, he was described as a great burly man with red hair and a missing eye, courtesy of a fight with Hernan Cortez, who without a doubt was the luckiest conquistador in the Americas.

Leaving Cuba with 400 men and 100 horses, he landed at Tampa Bay in April. Brutal to the Native peoples, even cutting the nose off one chief and letting his Cuban bloodhounds tear into his other captives, he quickly turned the locals against him. Forced to eat some of his horses to ward off starvation in a world of tangled

forests and deadly swamps, he was driven back to the coast by hostile natives. Every sort of pestilence plagued them, but some of them did make it back to the coast. Seeing no ships, they attempted to sail westward towards the Mississippi River. A storm drowned De Narvaez, and when it was over, the only survivors were Alvar Nunez Cabez de Vaca, Alonso Castillo Maldonado, and Estevanico. One can only imagine their joy when they arrived in Mexico City eight years after the expedition began. Although some of the horses were eaten, many were abandoned when the terrain became too hard for them to follow or ride.

Another conquistador worth mentioning is Hernando de Soto, whose prior claim to fame was helping Pizzaro destroy the Incan Empire. But his failure was not due to a lack of preparation. Made the governor of Cuba, he and 600 adventurers took a year preparing their trip to Florida. In 1539 he was ready to go.

When the expedition left, it was with great fanfare and an enormous amount of livestock. Hogs, cattle, mules and 350 Spanish horses were also taken along. But De Soto changed his plans and rather than exploring the coast of Florida, he went inland and lost everything. Before his death on the banks of the Mississippi River, DeSoto only had one horse left, the others eaten by the starving wood-be conquerors. It is possible some escaped during his constant warfare with the Natives he encountered, but it is certain that one poor lonely horse was turned loose on the banks of the great river.

In 1559 Tristan de Luna y Arellano tried to settle Pensacola Bay, Florida, but a hurricane convinced him two years later to abandon the sight. His horses and cattle, freed by the storm watched him sail away.

Pedro Menendez de Aviles may rightly be called the man who succeeded where the others failed. He also left behind a number of horses in South Carolina that were still going strong when the Revolutionary War was going on, if we are to believe Francis Marrion's (the Swamp Fox) native horse was as good as he claimed it was.

Aviles was from the land of the Basques and was a sailor first and foremost. He was brutal and efficient, and in July of 1565, he left Spain with 11 ships and 2,000 men. He was going to settle Florida, and it was important to Spain that he succeeded because France was already there. In the holds of his ships were horses, cattle, swine and enough supplies to succeed. On August 28th he landed on the Bay of St. Augustine and founded the fort that would give the bay its name. One month and eight days later, he attacked and utterly destroyed Ft. Caroline, founded by the French explorer Ribault, putting to death every man, woman and child. Only one man escaped the slaughter and his name was Laudonniere. His excuse for such brutality was that they were Lutherans. But an English privateer named Hawkins had also been in the area and had stopped by the French settlement earlier in the month. And the French themselves had attempted a raid on San Augustine and had wrecked on the shoals of Anastasia island. With a force half as large, Menendez hunted the French down and killed them, including Capt. Ribault. Typical of the Spanish, he left a garrison there to oversee things.

But it was not safe. Chevalier Dominique de Gourges of Gascony returned to the New World and with the help of the much abused Native Americans, he attacked the garrison and destroyed it. He said he did it not because they were Spaniards and Maranes (Moors) but because they were traitors, robbers and murderers. He did not attack St. Augustine because he was too weak and returned to France.

Undaunted and determined to carry out his mission, Menendez explored

the coast of South Carolina and a year later founds St. Elena on Parris Island. Soldiers, builders, farmers, cattle, swine and horses make the trip up from St. Augustine.

Although there are a number of mistakes, by 1780 the colony is thriving. One man named Gutierre de Miranda has a sizable estate with cattle and wellbred horses on it.

But politics and war in Europe doom the colony. Phillip II becomes monarch of both Spain and Portugal, and Elizabeth I sends out Capt. Francis Drake to wreck havoc on all the Spanish settlements on the Atlantic. By 1586 he has his sights on St.

Augustine. Destroying the town but not the man, Drake sails northwards to the Roanoke Colony, which had only recently purchased Spanish horses from some local Indians. Picking up the governor, who promised to return, Drake sailed back to England with his report and captured treasure.

But Aviles was not defeated. He quickly recalled the settlers at St. Elena and set about reinforcing St. Augustine. Many horses and cattle were left behind. In time arriving English colonists would pick them up for their own use. In fact 30 years earlier it was reported that there were wild horses running free in Virginia as far north as Pennsylvania. Perhaps some were descended from Menendez' one failure at colonizing, the Fort of St. Michael on the Chesapeake Bay. Started by some Spanish priests, it was doomed from the start, when one of their Indian converts decided his people didn't need to change. All were slain and a year later Menendez arrived and hunted the betrayer down. No further attempts were made to colonize any farther north than South Carolina. And the explorers that Menendez did send inland to explore the land did little more than turn the Native peoples against the Spanish.

But Spain's time in the eastern United States was almost over. In 1650 the British founded Charleston, SC and by 1740 the English colonists in Georgia were in

an out and out war with Spanish Florida. Spain was losing its more remote colonies in the New World to the English. When the British captured Havana, Spain gave them Florida for the return of the important city.

In the north Spanish horses were being shipped by the British colonists to the West Indies under the name Narragansett Pacer. Although pure Spanish at first, over time it became a mixed breed as individuals tried to make it larger, less wilder in some cases, faster in others. Old Snip, the most famous Narragansett stallion, was found running wild on Pt. Judith. The entire herd was sold along with some other local horses that year by Capt. Hutton in Barbados. Only when the wild horses were gone did the Pacer become extinct, and no amount of cross breeding could save it. It was only in the western United States, which was rich in the Spanish tradition, did a few men and women realize the value of the Spanish horse as a race unto itself. It didn't need to be bigger, to give gait to Thoroughbred descendants or give Morgans a smoother ride.

De Ayllon's and Menendez's horses still run free on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, grazing in small protected herds in South Carolina and herding cattle in Florida, but there were some who made it into the hands of the Native peoples and survived to become foundation stock for the modern Colonial Spanish horse.

The Native peoples

Because of their close proximity to the Spanish, the Tuscarora in all likelihood were the first native peoples to receive the horse in the eastern United States. John Lawson, an English explorer (1700 – 1711) sailed the coast of North Carolina and reported that the native people in the area around Cape Fear, the Tuscarora

homeland, were feeding horses maize and using them as pack animals . But as Spanish allies, they were preyed upon mercilessly by English slave traders, and the Tuscarora War of 1710-1713 severely wounded these proud people. Although some stayed in North Carolina, others moved north and joined the Iroquois Conference. They became known as The Little Brothers of the Oneida. And the horses that weren't taken by the English went with them.

The Chatot Indians, Christianized by the Spanish in 1674 at a mission west of the Apalachicola River in Florida, lived in little settlements and were preyed upon by English slave traders and Creek Indians. The Chatot were related to the Choctaw, who refused to be Christianized, and kept Spanish horses and cattle via the mission. But English slave traders and their Creek allies preyed upon the Chatot in the years between 1696-1705, carrying off the Christian Indians and their livestock.

Seeing this brutality, the Choctaw allied themselves with the French for the next 65 years. Spanish horses were obtained by the Choctaw from the French and from their own raids on Spanish missions. The Chickasaw were also getting Spanish horses from the Caddo of East Texas and the French, who were getting them from the Comanche and other plains tribes. It is recorded that the Chickasaw got their first horses in 1750 in the Carolinas from the Shawnee. And who did the Shawnee get their horses from? The French who got them from the Texas Indians. In fact it was the French who negotiated a peace treaty between the Caddo and the Comanche and the Caddo and the Chickasaw. And if one looks hard enough, he see that many plains Indians got their first horses from the French not the Spanish. But the French were traders not breeders. Often reluctantly, the Spanish wound up supplying their horses directly to the Native peoples.

Where were the Spanish horses left behind by the first Spanish settlers in

the East? The best were being used on the new English plantations or sold to the West Indies. In 1687 William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, passed a law saying that all stallions under 13 hands at 18 months had to be gelded. And in Maryland a 1718 law said all stray or wild horses had to be shot. In Mississippi and Alabama it wasn't so drastic, but the good gaited mares of Spanish breeding were crossed with newly imported Thoroughbreds to create the Plantation Walker, the original idea for the Tennessee Walker, although the two breeds were not directly related at first.

It is not recorded when the Cherokee get their first horses, but one must conclude that it was around the same time as the Choctaw, Shawnee and Chickasaw. But by 1790, all the Southeaster tribes had Spanish horses. And Philip Nolan was riding into Texas to bring Spanish horses back East to sell. One group of fine horses was even sold in Lexington, Kentucky, the birthplace of the American Saddlebred, while another group was sold at auction in Natchez, Mississippi, where cotton was king. Thomas Jefferson even wrote to Philip Nolan asking him about the horses he was bringing out of Texas, but the trepid adventurer made one trip too many to Texas and was killed in 1802 near Nacogdoches.

President Jackson, the hero of New Orleans and one time friend of Chief Pushmataha of the Choctaw, gave in to the complaints of English land grabbers, and ordered the removal of all Native peoples in the Southeast to Oklahoma. It was the Trail of Tears and many Native peoples, the old and the very young, died on their way West. The Chatot, surviving as best as they could in western Louisiana caught up with the Choctaw moving towards Southeastern Oklahoma. Peace was not easily obtained by these desperate people. The Cherokee in particular were hounded by Miraneau Lamar, who drove them out of Georgia, and then Texas. Lamar, the governor of Georgia, went on to be a hero at San Jacinto, leading the Texas cavalry, and became

the second president of Texas. His treatment of the Cherokee rates as his one great shame and mars an otherwise illustrious life. It also earned the dislike of Sam Houston, who admired the Cherokee.

The fate of the eastern Spanish horses in Native hands now became a part of the West. Spanish blood still flowed easily into their veins but the lines were different, not the old blood from Northern Spain. But the blood is still present and shows itself in the unique coloring and wonderful gait of that family of old Spanish horses.