



Marsh Tacky horses survived as a breed on isolated coastal islands in South Carolina. Marion Broach (wearing hat) and David Grant have been involved in breeding and preserving them.

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CAROLINA MARSH TACKY HORSES

Saving A Special Breed

JOHN CHRISTOPHER FINE LOOKS AT THE HISTORY OF A DISTINCT AND PURE EQUINE BREED THAT CAME TO THE AMERICAS WITH 16TH CENTURY SPANISH EXPLORERS

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“These are common nags,” Christopher Columbus proclaimed when he arrived at his ships ready to embark on his second voyage of discovery in 1493. What he purchased were Andalusians, a Spanish breed that was reserved for nobility. What was delivered and slung aboard his ships were Marismenos, horses of the swamps. To the Spaniards of the day, these common horses sold for a tenth of what Andalusians cost. They were solid, little horses used to foraging for themselves in the swamps and woodlands.

While Columbus thought he was swindled by horse traders, privations of the long sea journey to the New World, the lack of fresh water and food for crew and passengers let alone livestock, left the horses in dire condition. They were not let loose on deck, rather slung off their feet in rigging. Andalusians would not have survived the journey nor in the tropical climate and rough surroundings of the islands.

Every subsequent voyage of discovery brought more horses to Spanish colonies in the Americas. They established breeding farms and raised horses to ride, work and conquer. Only 27 years after Columbus and his men set foot in the New World and claimed it for Spain, Hernan Cortez set out from Cuba for Mexico. Cortez brought 16 horses with him. From diarists' notes, most horses were described as steadfast little steeds from the primitive Iberian breed of Sorraias or Marismenos. They were relatively small horses about 14.3 hands high. A hand measures four inches, thus the horses stood about five feet from the top of the withers to the ground.

In those days, Spaniards were not very tall. If a conquistador measured 5'6" then he would be considered relatively tall for the day. Thus the height of the horses was in proportion to the riders. Spanish brass stirrups recovered from sunken galleons are also telling about the size of riders of the period. Measured with a size eleven foot belonging to a six foot tall man, the stirrup is too small. A five foot tall person's size seven foot fits easily into the stirrup.

These horses of conquest had characteristics peculiar to the breed. They had a narrow 'A' framed chest. This accommodated large lungs. The lung capacity enabled the horse to endure, to breathe deeply and well during speed and endurance requirements and was perfectly suited for supporting circulation.

The Sorraia or Marismenos have a dorsal stripe down their backs. The stripe runs all the way from the neck to the croup. The croup is low slung with one less vertebra at the end than other breeds. The mane is bi-colored. The Sorraia or Marismeno have black bordered ears and a bi-colored tail. The horses are predominantly dun or grullo blue in color. Colors varied somewhat, but these primitive colors predominated. The horses generally have stripes on their legs, some have stripes on their shoulders. A convex nose is also a prominent feature.

What few understand of history is that there were no horses in North America until Columbus first brought them in 1493. The archaeological record reveals that small horses, forebears of Equus, no bigger than a dog, lived here.

*Horses died out on the
North American continent
8,000 to 10,000 years ago.*

Horses are thought to have migrated from North America across a land bridge that existed connecting what is now Alaska to Mongolia.

Spanish breeding farms were established in the New World. Horses were an important part of colonial life. When Cortez and his men landed in Mexico, the indigenous people believed that the



Marsh Tacky horses have a comfortable gait. Their even stride makes them excellent riding horses. *Myriam Moran copyright 2015*

horse and rider were one. They revered them as gods. Cortez wrote a letter to the King of Spain after his conquest of the Aztecs that read in part, "But for the grace of God and the horses", the conquest would not have been possible.

Spain organized a maritime highway from their colonies in South and Central America and Mexico, first to Cuba then back to Spain. Outward bound ships would carry cargoes of manufactured goods, iron, cannons, mercury to refine gold and horses. Returning convoys would bring spices, dyes, gold, silver and jewels. This golden highway continued for some 350 years, despite the vagaries of hurricanes, warfare and pirates. When ships wrecked, their cargoes were lost. Reports of Spanish ships wrecking off the outer islands of Virginia and the Carolinas are legend. History tells of Spanish steeds swimming ashore and remaining isolated on many outer banks islands. These horses ran wild in

their bands and succeeded as a breed with brackish water and limited forage.

Historians trace the South Carolina Marsh Tacky back to the 16th century when they were brought by Spanish explorers and traders. There is a rich folklore about the Marsh Tacky horse that was used by American colonists before and during the American Revolution. The little horses endured hardships, hard work and were perfectly adapted to the marshy swampland of Carolina coastal areas. The Marsh Tacky's presence in Carolina has been traced to trading expeditions by Spaniards from their settlement in St. Augustine, Florida to Charleston. Many of the horses were sold and traded in Charleston.

While not a glorious name, these horses of the marshland and swamp were called by the English name 'tacky'. It means what it says by definition since the horses were 'common' and 'cheap'. Their affinity to humans and their

sturdy constitution and mental attitude made them ideal for Revolutionary horse soldiers after America declared independence from Britain in 1776.

Brigadier General Francis Marion was born on his parents' plantation in 1732 at Berkeley County, South Carolina. He was educated in Georgetown and went to sea when he was fifteen. Young Francis Marion's seafaring career didn't last long. His ship wrecked in the Caribbean after hitting a whale. Adrift in a launch for a week, the young man returned home to South Carolina after they were rescued. This was about the time of the French and Indian War. Marion joined up with the South Carolina Militia and fought Cherokee Indians until about 1761, when he returned to the Eutaw Spring region along the Santee River. Francis Marion bought a plantation he named Pond Bluff, was elected to the provincial legislature and settled into the life of a planter.

The South Carolina Provincial Congress formed three military regiments to fight the British. Francis Marion was commissioned a Captain in the Second

Regiment. They were posted in Charleston to build a works for Fort Sullivan. Marion distinguished himself on 28 June 1776, when the British fleet was prevented from taking Fort Sullivan. Marion remained at the fort, training Continental troops for three more years.

Bored during a dinner party in Charleston, Marion jumped out a second floor window to escape. He broke his ankle. This was in March 1780. He was treated and returned to his plantation to recuperate. The broken ankle proved good luck since he was not captured when Charleston was attacked and taken by British troops.

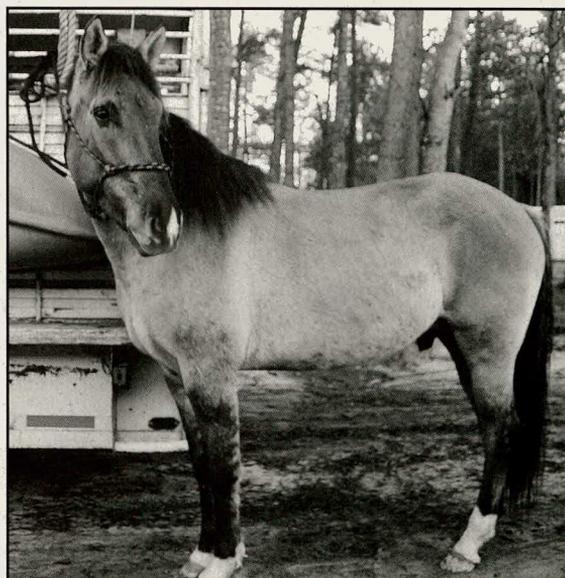
Marion organized a small force of militiamen. They were irregulars and mounted themselves on Carolina Marsh Tacky horses. These were the only sturdy steeds perfectly suited for the marshes and vast cedar swamps. Ordered to scout the Pee Dee River area by Major General Horatio Gates, Marion and his men evaded capture when Gates and his forces were defeated at the Battle of Camden on 16 August 1780. Marion and his men operated

independently as guerrillas, using tactics he learned fighting the Cherokees. They would ambush British forces and ride away into the swamps to escape pursuit.

In one attack Marion and his men attacked a British encampment and freed a large number of Continental prisoners of war. Mounted on their Marsh Tacky horses, Marion and his small band of men harassed the British by attacking their supply lines and camps. The continued success of Marion and his men provoked British commander Lieutenant General Lord Charles Cornwallis to order loyalists to seize these outlaw rebels. When all attempts to capture the Colonials failed, Cornwallis sent his best cavalry officer, Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, to seek and destroy Marion and his men.

Pee Dee Indians joined the colonists to fight against the British. These South Appalachian-Mississippian people spoke Iroquois language and became part of Marion's forces known as the Raccoon Company led by Captain John Alston.

Colonel Tarleton received information from spies as to Marion's



LEFT: Marsh Tacky owner and breeder David Grant with one of his stallions. He asserts that Marsh Tackies are easy keepers. Stallions make fine riding horses. *Myriam Moran copyright 2015* **RIGHT:** Marsh Tacky horses have that Spanish colonial horse look. They are intelligent, sturdy horses well suited for the marshes and swamps of South Carolina. *Myriam Moran copyright 2015*

headquarters camp in the swamps. He attacked with his cavalry mounted on fine, large European bred horses.

Marion and his men, mounted on their sturdy Marsh Tackies, rode off into the deep swamps and escaped pursuit.

The large European horses were out of their element in the swampy marshland and gave out while Marion and his men kept riding away on their 'common nags.'

Relating his seven hour ordeal in the swamps trying to catch Marion and his men, Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton said, "As for this damned old fox, the devil himself could not catch him". The moniker stuck. Francis Marion was promoted to Brigadier General in the South Carolina Militia and became known as the 'Swamp Fox'.

This cavalry officer and dedicated hero of the American Revolution raised public esteem for the little Spanish colonial horses. They became the symbol of independence and dependability. As for Brigadier Francis Marion, he retired to his plantation at Pond Bluff, was elected to the South Carolina Senate and died on 27 February 1795. His legacy is the enduring respect for Marsh Tacky horses that enabled irregular Colonial forces to so harass the British that it drew troops away from the north.

Today, David Grant and his friend Marion Broach maintain small herds of Marsh Tacky horses just outside Florence, South Carolina. "They are the best kept equine secret of this century,"



Marsh Tacky horse with its characteristic Spanish colonial features including a dorsal stripe, stripes on legs, a bi-colored mane, black bordered ears, low croup and bi-colored tail. Standing with his horse is David Grant and his friend Marion Broach (wearing hat). Myriam Moran copyright 2015

Grant said. "We discovered these horses about thirty years ago. Marion and I began breeding them about ten years ago."

David Grant and Marion Broach use their Marsh Tacky horses to hunt wild boar and hogs in South Carolina swamplands and marshy areas. They take them to Atlantic beaches and ride in the surf for pleasure and sport. Hunters pack out on the primitive breed and find that the horses never tire nor quit.

"I don't shoe them. I'll trim their hooves when it is necessary." Grant pointed out the sturdy, well-formed hooves of his Marsh Tackies. The hooves are so strong that they improve with use and do not require shoeing as do other breeds with less sturdy hooves. Strong hooves and legs are genetic traits that enabled the Marsh Tacky and closely related breeds of Spanish horses to survive in the wild.

In David Grant's herd, he sees two predominant colors, dun and grullo. "I'm breeding for that Spanish type," he said. "They are

easy keepers." That is Grant's way of describing the genetic characteristics that enabled these horses to survive. Natural selection eliminated horses that were unsuited to the harsh environments in which they lived – horses that survived and ran wild in their little bands on the outer banks islands and were well suited for the marshes.

One of Grant's stud horses came from Hilton Head and the outer banks islands. Local people, called Gullahs, would round them up and train them for local farmers and plantation owners. One of the herds of Marsh Tackies ran wild on Daufuskie Island where Grant and his friends hold a fun Marsh Tacky race along the beach in summertime.

John James Audubon's journal described these horses of the Carolina swamps to be "tough as pine nuts". The Marsh Tacky has recently been named South Carolina's Heritage Horse. In 2005, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy sent investigators to South Carolina. They

took DNA samples from horses and found that more than a hundred were confirmed to test back to original Spanish horses of conquest. In 2007, the Carolina Marsh Tacky Association was created and their registry lists 309 horses.

"Our horses have a job. We hunt deer and hogs off them. They are sensible. They see a tree stump or hole. These horses don't panic," David Grant said. Born in Monroe, North Carolina, Grant grew up in the Pee Dee River area of South Carolina. He loved horses growing up, but as he tells it, "I'm 58 years old. I didn't get back into horses until I was 45. We started a foundation to preserve the Marsh Tacky breed in 2009."

Marion Broach went riding with Grant and determined he would start his own herd of Marsh Tacky horses. When he

raised the subject with his friend and wanted to buy a horse to begin his own breeding program, he explained that "It took David a week or two to decide to sell me a horse. After I went hog hunting with him, I had to have them."

Laughing, David Grant averred the reaction when horse people hear the name Marsh Tacky. "They say, what is that, a disease?" It is certainly contagious, as Marsh Tacky lovers continue to preserve this special breed of Spanish colonial horse that has evolved through the centuries to become perfectly adapted to the cedar swamps, marshlands and maritime coastal areas of South Carolina.

With the continued interest of dedicated people like David Grant, Marion Broach, D. P. Lowder, a breeder from Ridge-land, South Carolina, and others,

the Marsh Tacky horse will remain a distinct, genetically pure breed for generations to come – steadfast symbols of American heritage. *Sm*

DR. JOHN CHRISTOPHER

FINE began riding horses as a kid on the farm and never stopped. He is President of the American Heritage Iberian Mustang Foundation and has been involved with conservancies trying to save the last of the Spanish mustangs in America. He is also a marine biologist and expert in marine and maritime affairs. He is a Master Scuba Instructor and Instructor Trainer. The author of 25 books, his articles appear in magazines and newspapers in the US and Europe.

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