

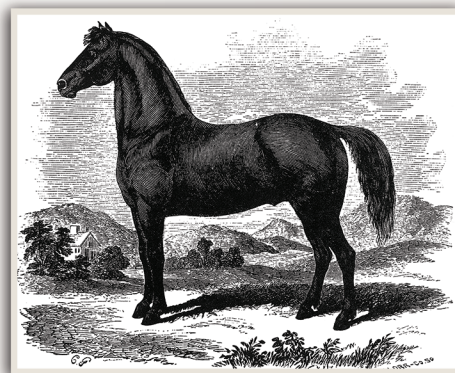
THE MORGAN HORSE'S ROLE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Compiled by Stephen Kinney with research by Brenda Tippin

The American Morgan horse is the stuff of both equine legend and American folklore. Not only is the Morgan our nation's oldest indigenous horse, but the breed is inextricably entwined with the history of the United States.

◆ A COLORFUL BEGINNING

The colt "Figure," born in West Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1789, was awarded in settlement of a debt to a Vermont music teacher. Though already an experienced horse breeder, Justin Morgan could not have known the influence his newly acquired horse would exert when he set out in the days before highways and bridges to bring the young stallion home to Randolph, Vermont. Eventually the heart, stamina, and hardiness of the "Justin Morgan horse," his prominent breeding sons Sherman, Bulrush, and Woodbury, and their descendants would make them invaluable for farming, transportation, and commerce in New England and beyond in the still young nation.



A likeness of the foundation stallion Figure —also known as the Justin Morgan Horse.

◆ WHEN HORSES WERE CELEBRITIES

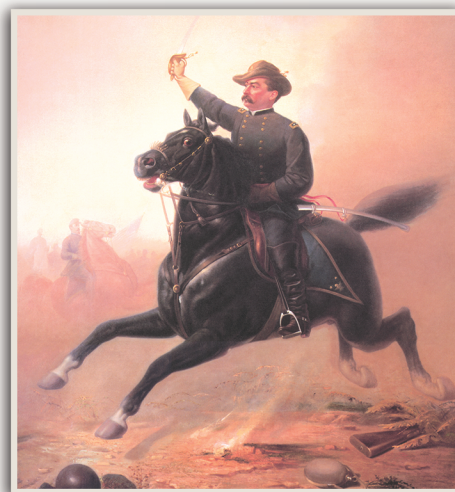
In the days when trotting races were a national sport, the Morgan stallion Ethan Allen set world records for trotting speeds earning thousands of dollars in purses. Breed historian Brenda Tippin refers to the stallion as "America's First Equine Celebrity" and has written, "Ethan Allen, foaled in 1849, was perhaps the first horse who, during his lifetime, had the distinction of being hailed as the darling of the American public, and was named Trotting Champion of the World when four years old. It was a time when trotting races were an immensely popular sport in many ways more so even than Thoroughbred racing."



The Morgan Ethan Allen was champion trotting horse of the world in his day.

◆ AMERICA'S WAR HORSE

The Morgan horse was essential as a cavalry mount in the 19th century American military. Carloads of Morgans left New England as mounts for Civil War officers. Captain Miles Keogh, an officer in General George Custer's ill-fated company rode a Morgan horse, Comanche, in that final infamous campaign, The Battle of the Little Big Horn, in 1876. Although badly wounded, Comanche, is often referred to as "the only survivor of Custer's Last Stand." Comanche was found weak and dazed after wandering off, but recovered and was retired, never to be ridden again. Though not in the main battle, Custer's personal favorite Morgan was Dandy, who was also wounded that day. He recovered and was given to Custer's father who lost all three of his sons in the battle.



Civil War Army General Philip Henry Sheridan and his Morgan horse Rienzi.

◆ THE MORGAN HORSE REGISTRY

About a century after the birth of "Figure," Vermont publisher and philanthropist Joseph Battell painstakingly tracked and recorded known descendants of the horse Justin Morgan, giving the world the 1,200 page volume *The Morgan Horse and Register* in 1894. In so doing he began the breed registry continued today by the American Morgan Horse Association.



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◆ THE GOVERNMENT'S HORSE

Battell donated land and buildings, including the magnificent Victorian style barn in Weybridge, Vermont, as well as Morgan horses to the U. S. Government Morgan Horse Farm in the early 1900s. The Government Farm would perpetuate carefully evaluated horses for all purposes in the era when horses were essential to travel, farming, and military use until 1951. Today the program is carried on as the University of Vermont Morgan Horse Farm, a popular tourist attraction. Most Morgan horses born today trace to foundation stock bred by Battell and the U.S. Government Farm. Many of our nation's indigenous breeds and registries—the American Quarter Horse, the American Saddlebred, and the American Standardbred racehorse—started with major infusions of Morgan horse blood. Battell is often credited with saving the Morgan breed.



The historic statue and Victorian style barn at the University of Vermont Morgan Horse Farm (formerly the U. S. Government Morgan Horse Farm).

◆ TELEVISION LEGEND

The story of the stallion and the breed he founded became the subject of a popular children's book, *Justin Morgan Had a Horse*, by Marguerite Henry published in 1945. In 1972, that book became an indelible part of American lore when it was turned into a Walt Disney movie of the same name. Early in 2022, Denny Emerson, Gold Medal Event rider, now 80, wrote of watching the movie for the first time with his "Morgan obsessed 12-year-old granddaughter Abby." Emerson reflects, "Everything about Figure convinces me that he was precisely the right horse in the right place for that exact time."



The movie Justin Morgan Had a Horse; The big screen, singing cowboy Gene Autry and his Morgan horse Champion.

◆ MORGANS IN MOVIES

Being quick learners and trusting companions made Morgans a mainstay of old Western movies. Big screen cowboys such as Tom Mix, Roy Rogers, and Gene Autry relied on Morgan horses as part of their cowboy images and as trustworthy partners in elaborate stunts. One such was a registered Morgan, Casey Jones, born in 1915 and named after an American folk hero. He became known as "Rex, The Wild Horse" in movies of the 1920s. In the era of the singing cowboys, Morgans were called upon to play Roy Roger's horse Trigger and Gene Autry's horse Champion.



The Morgan has been a mainstay on American ranches.

◆ WINNING THE WEST

Many real working cowboys valued the Morgan for its trainability, endurance, and easy keeping. The Morgan's upright necks and buoyant gaits were so familiar to the Spanish Vaquero horsemen that the breed became the horse of choice on ranches in Texas and California and the American heartland. Owners of large ranches bred Morgans specifically for their day-to-day work, and the bloodlines forged by those demanding equestrian tasks influence breeding and competition today.

◆ THE MORGAN TODAY

Some horse breeds tend to be specialists—for racing, reining, dressage or jumping. The Morgan is known for its versatility and diverse talents. Today, it is a popular family show horse, the number one American breed competing in carriage and combined driving, is still bred for ranch work, and proves itself daily as trail and companion horses, including in therapeutic riding programs.



A family horse and show horse today.

Spend time with Morgan history at the National Museum of the Morgan Horse at Pineland Farm Equestrian Center. Learn more about America's oldest breed at morganhorse.com.



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