

SHAKER AGRICULTURE



SHAKER VILLAGE
OF PLEASANT HILL

The Shakers were noted agriculturalists, and the community of Shakers at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky were some of the best farmers of their day. As part of the daily interpretation from April through October, visitors the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill can enjoy special talks and demonstrations of 19th century agricultural practices.

The historic farm program at Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill also seeks to preserve historic livestock breeds especially significant to Shaker and rural Kentucky history. Currently, Shaker Village is developing its livestock program to include the Milking Shorthorn cattle, Percheron horses, Bakewell and Leicester sheep and various varieties of poultry including Dominique chickens.

Border Leicester Sheep

In 1869, the Border Leicester was recognized by the Highland and Agricultural Society. Before that time they were known by several other names including Cullies, New Leicesters, and Bakewells. They were imported to the United States and Canada before 1850. It is believed that the Shakers at Pleasant Hill were raising purebred Borders before the Civil War.

The modern Border Leicester is a typically white medium to long-wooled sheep. Both sexes are polled. Their faces and legs are white and free of wool. At maturity, rams weigh 200-275 and ewes from 150-200 pounds. A full grown Border Leicester will produce up to 15 pounds of wool annually. The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy recognizes the Border Leicester as a minor breed with less than 1,000 new registrations each year. However, they are common in Great Britain, New Zealand, and Australia.

The Leicester Longwool is a hardy breed, adapted to a wide variety of environmental conditions. It does not require specialized handling and is said to have some resistance to foot rot.

Bakewell or English Sheep

Aside from their part in the development of the Shorthorn cattle and improved breeds of hogs in Kentucky, the Shakers also deserve much credit for their improvements in sheep raising. The Shakers were among the first in the West to pioneer in the development of the Leicester or Bakewell sheep, named after Robert Bakewell who first improved the breed.

The first importations to America were in the late 1820s, and by the middle of the following decade the Mercer County Shakers had imported a foundation flock from eastern New York. The Leicester Longwool, also called the English Leicester, is a direct descendant of the Leicester improved by Robert Bakewell in the mid-18th century.

Bakewell, a Leicestershire County farmer, bred his sheep for early maturity and for improved mutton quality and quantity. Although at one time it was a very popular English breed, today it is quite rare in both Britain and North America. Leicester Longwool stock can still be imported from Australia, however.



Dominique Chickens

Chickens were an important part of the animal mix on the farm in 1850. Chickens served many purposes; meat (a change from pork), eggs for cooking and baking, feathers for bedding and a method of inexpensive pest control around the crops and garden.

The Dominique is a medium sized bird with black and white barring over the entire body. The rose comb is characteristic. A dual purpose breed, these birds were kept to produce brown eggs and chicken for the pot. The heavy plumage not only protected the birds in cold weather, but provided material for pillows and featherbeds. The plumage coloration also made them less conspicuous to predators. They were expected to make a part of their living by foraging and to raise a clutch or two of chicks each season.

Milking Shorthorn Cattle

The Milking Shorthorn were the most popular improved breed of cattle in the nineteenth century. Their size, strength and intelligence made them a prime breed for oxen. By 1850, although not as popular as they had been earlier, the Milking Devon was also widely raised and used for draft.

The Milking Shorthorn is recognized as a minor breed by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy. This classification means that the number of Shorthorn calves registered each year has been dropping and is currently less than 3,000 a year.

Percheron Horse

If the Belgian is the strongest and the Clydesdale the flashiest, then the Percheron is the most handsome of the draft horses. It is the only draft breed to carry some Arabian blood, which gives classic beauty, spirited action and an animated yet gentle disposition.

The Percheron was developed as a breed in the province of La Perche, near Normandy in France. Percheron horses were used in the Christian Crusades but by the 17th and 18th centuries had become general purpose riding, driving and farm horses. The sources put the date of first importation in the 1830s, while others place them in North America by the early 1850's. By the last half of the 19th century, they were the most popular of the draft breeds, and highly valued as carriage horses.