

DOG COUNTRY

Whether protecting, hunting or herding, dogs for two centuries were essential to settlers making new homes in the American wilderness.

By Gregory LeFever



English Pointers©
by Joseph Sulkowski

The small wolf-like animal known as the Indian dog must have stared in awe from the forested Atlantic shoreline at the dawn of the 17th century as the dogs of Europe—the powerful mastiffs, greyhounds and bloodhounds—first bounded down the gangplanks of sailing ships and onto the New World’s sandy shores.

The fate of these two types of dogs would mirror those of their human counterparts as the Europeans and their descendants pushed westward toward another ocean—conquering frontier after frontier—while Native Americans nearly vanished from the landscape. It would take two hundred years at the hands of the new settlers, but eventually the little Indian dog would be deemed extinct.

Meanwhile, dozens of new breeds of dog derived mostly from European strains excelling at hunting and herding would establish themselves in America and prove vital to every major exploration and homesteading venture from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

The stories of dogs in the settling of America tell of the same uncompromising bravery, loyalty and companionship that dog lovers cherish today. Surely, European immigrants could have settled America without dogs, but it’s difficult to imagine how.

LONG TREK TO A NEW LAND

No one knows for sure where dogs originated or how they first came to America. Best guesses

are that the earliest dogs were from southern China about 40,000 years ago and that dogs crossed the Bering land bridge from Siberia to North America some 17,000 years ago. Generations of early Native Americans then migrated down the Pacific coast, across the Rockies and the Great Plains to reach the Atlantic seaboard about 10,000 years ago, using dogs as pack animals nearly every mile of the way.

For millennia throughout North America, the typical Indian dog resembled a small wolf. It displayed several colors and textures of coat, with some variation in muzzle shape, and by all accounts was a loyal and hard-working animal. Early European explorers were stunned to find some tribes who put a higher value on their dogs than on their women and children.

Even the first English attempts to colonize North America were aided by strong breeds known as superb hunters and protectors, most notably the mastiff. But the terrible hardships colonists in the Virginia Colony experienced both on Roanoke Island in 1585 and in Jamestown fourteen years later resulted in their dogs being sacrificed to the stewpot as the English attempted—with terrifyingly little success—to fend off starvation.

Then, a dozen years later and six hundred miles to the north, the arrival of the Pilgrims in New England signaled better times for man and his canine friend.

PROTECTIVE INSTINCTS

Dogs began saving the lives of Englishmen just weeks after the Mayflower landed. In January of 1621, Pilgrims John Goodman and Peter Brown went for a winter stroll with their mastiff and spaniel. The dogs took flight after a deer and the two men got lost. The dogs eventually found their masters as a bitter cold night was falling. The two men clutched the mastiff for both warmth and protection as wildcats howled nearby throughout the long night. Next day, they all found their way back to the Mayflower. As Goodman hobbled toward the ship on frostbitten feet, two wolves charged at the little Spaniel, who ran between Goodman's legs. He picked up a stick to club them, and the wolves sat "grinning at him, a good while" before finally loping away.

In 1644, after English Puritans had established the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Governor John Winthrop recorded an incident regarding a colonist named Dalkin and his wife returning home in Medford from Sabbath services. It was pouring down rain when Dalkin forded a rushing waterway near his house. He turned and told his wife to wait, the tide was still too high and the current too strong. She stepped into the water anyway, fell, and was swept downriver. Desperate, Dalkin cried out for help. The couple's dog ran from the house and "seeing something in the water, swam to her, and she caught hold of the dog's tail, so he drew her to the shore and saved her life."

Some years later, as settlers migrated farther inland to what is now New York state, comes the account of a woman picking garden beans in front of her cabin. Her little dog began barking behind her and the woman turned in horror to see the dog situated between her infant on the ground and a cougar growling several feet away. She grabbed her baby and ran into the cabin. Her husband soon returned home with his larger dog and immediately set out in pursuit of the cougar. He found the wild cat, shot it, and in the cat's belly found the remains of the courageous little dog.



English Setters in the Mist ©
by Joseph Sulkowski



HUNTERS AND HERDERS

Throughout America's early colonial years, settlers depended on their dogs to guard homes and livestock, to drive away wolves, wildcats, rats and the occasional band of marauding warriors. Barking remained one of the dog's greatest assets as pioneers continued to push the frontier westward, alerting explorers and homesteaders alike to countless unseen dangers.

Aside from protection, dogs performed considerable labor. They pulled carts and sleds and ran on wheels that powered blacksmith bellows, spits, cotton-spinners and other machines. But among the most valuable services they performed were hunting and herding, both of which led to importing more breeds from Europe.

Hunting was indispensable in early America—on both farm and frontier—and dogs were essential to it. George Washington was an avid sports hunter and arranged for the importing of several European breeds to participate in the gentry's foxhunts. Legendary frontier hunters such as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett praised the abilities of their hounds to track and trap deer, rabbits, opossums, raccoons, wildcats and wolves, and especially the black bear. Crockett credited his dogs for helping him kill a record one hundred bears during the winter of 1825.

Herding also was crucial. While George Washington was seeking breeds skilled at hunting, his farmer friend Thomas Jefferson was importing herding dogs from Europe. These breeds served well into the 19th century as great packs of livestock were driven from farm to market in cities across the land. Raising sheep for wool and food expanded dramatically as the western plains were settled, with farmers relying on an assortment of collies, sheepdogs and shepherd dogs to tend gigantic herds.

SPREAD OF THE CUR AND FEIST

Pedigree has always been important to certain dog owners. As early as 1619, the Virginia Assembly outlawed selling "English dogs of quality" to the Indians. They didn't want the local tribes to gain the advantage of the superior hunting talents of the "mastive (mastiff), greyhound, bloodhounde, lande or water spaniel, or any other dog or bitche whatsoever, of the English race."

But America was a wilderness, and pedigree often succumbed to survival. Pioneers' dogs intermingled with several European breeds and even Indian dogs to produce the dog commonly known as the cur. Weighing thirty pounds or more, the cur's coat tended toward shades of yellow and the eyes often were light. "They were mutts with attitude," writes historian Mark Derr

King Charles Cavalier Puppy©
by Joseph Sulkowski



in *A Dog's History of America*. "Their descendants are still around, fragmented into various breeds and types—yellow blackmouth curs, leopard curs and the like."

Somewhat smaller was an offshoot of the cur, called the feist. Excelling at hunting squirrels and raccoons, and especially valued on farms, its temperament is summed up by the term "feisty."

A FAMED EXPEDITION'S DOG

Large, strong dogs were essential to blazing trails through the wilderness and across mountainous regions. One of the most detailed accounts comes from the epic Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-6, from the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers in modern-day Illinois, to Oregon's Pacific Coast and back again.

"My dog was of the Newfoundland breed, very active, strong, and docile," Meriwether Lewis wrote in his journal of his dog Seaman. The dog helped the men hunt, one time even catching a pronghorn antelope "which he overtook by superior fleetness." He patrolled the nighttime camps and barked to keep bears at bay.

In May of 1805, Seaman nearly died when a beaver attacked him. "Capt. Lewis's dog was badly bitten by a wounded beaver and near bleeding to death," William Clark wrote. Seaman recovered enough so that two weeks later he saved a handful of important lives. One night a huge bull buffalo rampaged through the group's encampment and charged directly at the tepee where slept Lewis, Clark, their Indian guide Sacagawea and her husband. Seaman leaped in front of the tepee, faced the stampeding beast and then deflected it around the side of the tepee, saving the occupants.

Nearly a year later, on the trip home, three Indians stole Seaman. Lewis was furious. Though deep in Indian territory and seriously outnumbered, he ordered a small group of his men to pursue the culprits and kill them if necessary. The fleeing thieves saw their pursuers and quickly released Seaman, who—though the journals make no mention of him after July 14, 1806—is believed to have made it safely back to civilization at the expedition's conclusion.



Springer Spaniel©
by Joseph Sulkowski

SETTLING THE WEST

Following trails early explorers had marked, large numbers of Americans set out in wagon convoys over the Great Plains, the Rockies and beyond. Many of these families had dogs to help guard the wagon trains, hunt for food, herd the families' livestock and serve as companions through the unfamiliar land.

But not everyone appreciated the presence of dogs, who also sometimes stole food and killed livestock and, worst of all, stampeded the convoy's oxen, mules and horses far across the prairie. Conflicting opinions over dogs caused considerable trouble in May of 1842 for a 160-person

wagon train on the Oregon Trail. Just a few days into the 2,000-mile journey, a majority of the men—believing the barking of the train’s several dogs would attract hostile Indians—voted to have all of the dogs slaughtered. Others said no, the dogs would be good guards. But the dog-haters began killing several until several dog owners raised their firearms and vowed to kill anyone who tried to harm any more dogs. Another vote was quickly taken and the original decision was repealed. The dogs would live to see the West.

Yet another massive migration westward occurred with the Gold Rush of 1849, with 300,000 prospectors swarming into California’s gold fields, many of them bringing their dogs. To many of the gold-seekers—especially those who had left families thousands of miles back home—dogs were their sole companions. The dogs ably performed chores related to prospecting, especially hauling equipment and supplies on carts and sledges, along with their more common hunting and guard duties.

A FITTING EULOGY

By the mid 19th century most of America was tamed. As the West was settled, the dog population rapidly expanded. Los Angeles, for example had a population in 1847 of 1,600 people and more than 3,000 dogs. In time, matters of pedigree again became important. By the 1850s the mixed breeds such as the cur and the feist that had helped conquer the land fell out of favor, becoming known as “miserable mongrels.” Meanwhile, the more refined breeds that had been steadily arriving in America for more than a hundred years—the spaniels, terriers, pointers, sheepdogs, greyhounds and Newfoundlanders—continued to gain in popularity and prestige.

In closing, there is probably no better story to tell than that of an 1870 jury trial in Johnson County, Missouri. A man named Charles Burden owned a hound named Old Drum. Burden’s brother-in-law, Leonidas Hornsby, shot and killed Old Drum on grounds the dog may have been a sheep killer. Burden sued for damages and the matter went through three jury trials and on to the Missouri

Supreme Court, with Burden prevailing and finally being awarded \$50 for his murdered dog.

But what’s memorable is the closing argument Burden’s attorney—a former four-term U.S. senator from Missouri named George Graham Vest—delivered at the end of the third jury trial. His statement was brief and its key point was this: “... The one absolute, unselfish friend that man can have in this selfish world—the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous—is his dog.

“Gentlemen of the jury,” Vest went on, “a man’s dog stands by him in prosperity and poverty, in health and sickness. He will sleep on the cold ground, where the wintry winds blow, and the snow drives fiercely, if only he can be near his master’s side. He will kiss the hand that has no food to offer; he will lick the wounds and sores that come in encounter with the roughness of the world. He guards the sleep of his pauper master as if he were a prince. When all other friends desert, he remains.”

Much of the rest of Vest’s speech has been lost. But the part remembered is credited with giving birth to the familiar phrase, “Man’s best friend.”



“Mutts with attitude.”

****Gregory LeFever writes on historical topics and is a contributing editor to Early American Life magazine.*

Joseph Sulkowski, American Artist

Born Pittsburgh, PA December 10, 1951
Current residence: Franklin, Tennessee

Joseph Sulkowski knew from the age of five that he would be an artist. His early skills in drawing and painting enabled him to begin a path toward fulfilling his passion.

Following graduation from Canon-McMillan High School, he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, founded in 1809 and the oldest art school in the U.S. Later he met his greatest influence and mentor, Frank Mason, the foremost authority on the principles and techniques of the Old Masters at the Art Students League of New York.

Sulkowski became an apprentice to Mason from 1974-1979 learning the traditional principles of painting in the 17th century Flemish and Italian techniques. He also learned how to prepare his paints, mediums and oils using recipes developed in the studios of Rubens and Rembrandt.

Joseph Sulkowski refers to his style of painting as "poetic realism," an interpretive form inspired by the natural world. He values his freedom to view the world as a poetic vision and then to express that vision in rich impastos and luminous transparent shadows on canvas.

The animals, figures and landscape of the sporting life are the subjects that continually draw Sulkowski's attention. His love for sporting dogs, terriers and foxhounds inform many of his most illustrious canvases. At the same time, he is inspired by the intimacy of companionship of "man's best friend," the feeling of which is expressed in his privately commissioned pet portraits.

Sulkowski's trips to places afield, from the quail hunting plantations of south Georgia to the grouse moors of the Scottish Highlands, continue to be sources for inspiration. The artist has also often returned to one of his favorite subjects, the horse, to capture this animal's grace and beauty.

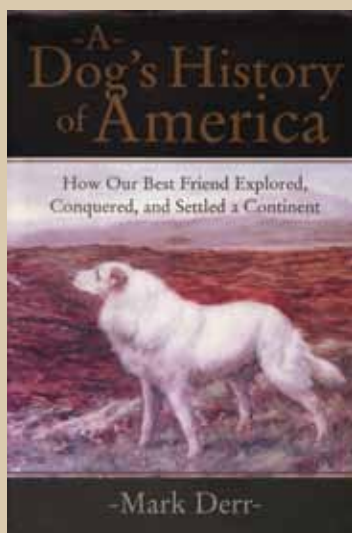
Joseph Sulkowski's work is represented in public and private collections worldwide. His two murals of Saudi Arabian history reside in the King Abdul Aziz Museum in Saudi Arabia. Other collectors include Rolex, the Duke of Bedford, Marshall Field IV, George Michael and the Tennessee State Museum, to name a few.

He has received numerous awards including the AAPL Grand National Award, the Grumbacher Gold Medallion Award and the Best in Show award at the Art in the Mountains exhibition sponsored by Southwest Art magazine. He is a signature member of the prestigious Society of Animal Artists, the National Society of Mural Painters, the National Arts Club, the American Artists Professional League and he is a Life Member of the Art Students League of New York.

Sulkowski is currently represented by Halcyon Gallery in London, England; the Edgartown Art Gallery in Martha's Vineyard; Whistle Pik Galleries in Fredericksburg, Texas; Dog & Horse in Charleston, S.C.; and Peter L. Villa Fine Art in New York. He may be contacted through his website at: www.josephsulkowski.com.

Joseph Sulkowski lives in Franklin, Tennessee with his artist wife, Elizabeth Brandon. Their two children, Katie, a writer, poet and managing editor of Nashville Arts magazine and James, a classical animator and manufacturer of artists panels at MasterPanels.com, live nearby in Nashville.

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Want to Know More?

If you want to know more about the history of dogs in America, we suggest [A Dog's History of America: How Our Best Friend Explored, Conquered, and Settled a Continent](#). Author Mark Derr provides good historical context for the events he discusses. He has written several other works of social history, including [Dog's Best Friend](#).

For information focusing on dogs in North and South America before European settlement, Yale anthropologist Marion Schwartz provides plenty of detail in [A History of Dogs in the Early Americas](#). And for a worldwide perspective from ancient to modern times, Stanley Coren's [The Pawprints of History: Dogs and the Course of Human Events](#) has received excellent reviews.