



BILLINGS FARM & MUSEUM

DRAFT ANIMAL CELEBRATION: THE RISE OF DRAFT HORSES

Before the Agricultural Revolution in America, the ox was the preferred draft animal on most farms. However, in the mid 1800s, the rise of heavier farm equipment, public transport in growth cities, and westward expansion, made draft horses more of a necessity.

In the mid to late 19th century, farm and agricultural machinery evolved so drastically that farmers were able to do the work of 30 people with just one worker and a team of horses. Not all horses were able to withstand the kind of work that farmers demanded, and this led to the rise of the draft horse in America.



David Heisler of Dunbarton, NH, plowing at Billings Farm & Museum

New equipment like steel plows, double-wide harrows, and combines made farm work faster and more efficient. Farmers started buying breeding stock of larger, hardier breeds of horse like Belgians and Percherons. These stallions were used to increase the size of animals through crossbreeding and by 1900 at least six million horses in the US carried 10-50% draft horse genes.

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As horse-powered machinery became more and more popular, the size of farms started to grow. Between 1790 and 1850, farm acreage doubled from an average of 100 acres to over 200 acres. Larger plots of land required animals that could work longer and pull heavier equipment. In the Western part of the country, the soil was unworked and tough making it impossible to work without heavy animals.



Nine horses pull a combine



A horsecar in San Francisco

Today, draft horses are used far less for agricultural work and more often for showing and breeding. Some smaller farms continue to use draft horses for field work, logging, and pulling. The most common breeds found in the US are Belgian, Clydesdale, Suffolk, Shire, and Percheron. At Billings Farm we have a pair of Belgian geldings, a single Belgian mare, and a pair of Percheron geldings. They pull the wagon and sleigh rides year-round.

Draft horses aided in the expansion of American cities by providing cheaper transportation opening suburbs to the inner cities. Private carriages were not common for most people living in cities. Horsecar lines became the main mode of transportation for the majority of people living in and around cities. By 1880, there were over 100,000 horses and mules working in more than 300 American cities.



Max and Banner pull the Billings Farm wagon