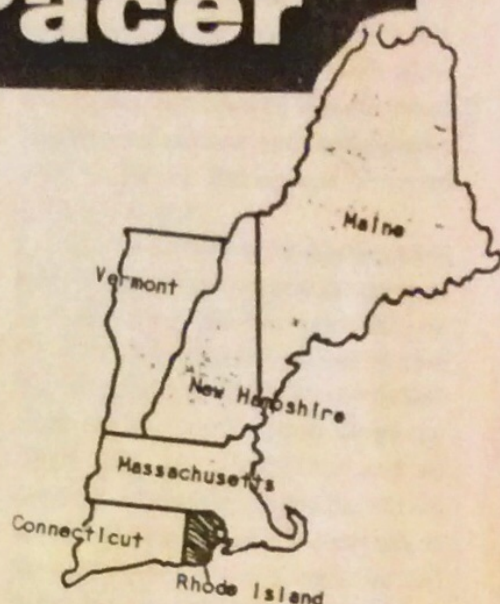
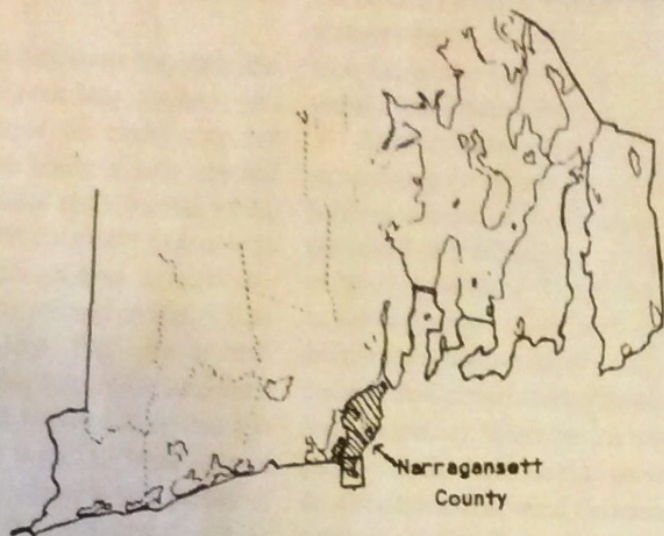


ARLENE B. CRANDALL

# The Origin of the Narragansett Pacer



**D**rive from Dale Carlia in Wakefield, south on Route 108 toward Narragansett Pier, and just after passing the Burger Chief, look to the right where a large cottage stands today on the shores of Silver Lake. This is almost the exact site of the one-time home of William H. Robinson, Deputy Governor of Rhode Island, affluent Narragansett planter and reputed original breeder of the famous Narragansett Pacer.

Like all the other Narragansett planters, Governor Robinson owned a large plantation which, in the early years of the 18th century, included a considerable part of Point Judith and extended to Narragansett Pier and westward to Sugar Loaf Hill. He had a mansion on this site near Silver Lake and on this vast area raised numerous cattle and sheep; and horses which were the pride and joy of all the county. The Narragansett country was noted for many things, but the region's

greatest achievement was the breeding of that famous horse, the Narragansett Pacer.

Just how the breed originated is not a matter of record and how they so completely disappeared has never really been known. It is said that Governor Robinson

---

How thrilling and picturesque it must have been, riding by on your own Narragansett Pacer on a sunny summer afternoon, to see perhaps a hundred or more of them quietly grazing on the green meadows near Silver Lake, soon to be sold and shipped to the Southern Isles.

imported the progenitor of the Narragansett Pacer from Andalusia, Spain early in the 1700's.

In the first place he was not a beautiful horse, by today's standards or those of the late 1700's. He was a small horse, scarcely fourteen hands (56 inches) high and would be classified as a pony today. But his gait was so comfortably suited to the saddle that they had no superior in cross country traveling.

There is little doubt it was of Arabian stock and soon colts were bred which, at the time, had no equal in the world for speed, endurance and easy gait. Described by a well known Rhode Island horseman, Mr. Benjamin L. Cook of Providence.

"They were a breed horse bred and raised in the Narragansett County of Rhode Island, the finest little saddle horse that have ever been known. Because of their unusual and ambling gait, and because of their tremendous stamina and sure-footedness, they were said to be able to



## THROUGH THE PAST

cover rough ground at a steady and rapid pace, totalling 30-40 miles (and sometimes more) in a day without fatigue."

No better description of this fabled horse exists than one written by Robert Livingston in the first American edition of the Edinburgh Encyclopedia which reads as follows:

"They have handsome foreheads, the head clean, the neck long, the arms and legs thin and taper; the hindquarters are narrow and the hocks a little crooked which is here called sickle hocked, which turns the hind feet out a little; their color is generally, though not always, bright sorrel; they are very spirited and carry both head and tail high. But what is most remarkable is that they amble with more speed than most horses trot, so that it is difficult to put some of them upon a gallop. Notwithstanding this facility of ambling, where the ground requires it, as when the roads are rough and stony, they have a fine, easy single footed trot. These circumstances together with their being very sure footed, render them the finest saddle horses in the world: they neither fatigue themselves nor their rider. It is generally to be lamented that this invaluable breed of horses is so almost lost by being mixed with those being imported from England and from other parts of the United States."

Although Livingston refers to a "single footed trot" it has been said repeatedly that the pure bloods could not trot at all, but maintained their own characteristic pacing gait which was unique in that the horse's backbone moved through the air in a straight line, quite different from the motion of the "pacer" of today or horses that have acquired a pacing gait by training. It was this movement of the animal's backbone that was the distinguishing feature of the Narragansett Pacer, a natural quality and not an acquired one.

J.H. Wallace, a somewhat more re-

cent writer (1897) and authority on the development of American horses, believed that they resulted solely from careful selection and breeding of common New England stock. The Robinson story that is commonly accepted as the explanation for the breed's origin is a plausible theory, although there was no absence of pacers in New England as early as 1684, some nine years before Governor Robinson was born.

Another theory which deserves consideration is the possibility that the Irish hobbles, a breed of small, hardy ponies possessed of a natural pacing gait were involved in the breed. There were greatly in demand, exported in large quantities from Ireland, and no doubt some of them came to the Colonies during the middle of the 17th century. While there is nothing to prove that the Irish Hobble contributed anything toward the breed, the remarkable similarity, the small size, the natural pacing gait, even the sorrel color is too striking to neglect and there is a distinct possibility that a careful selection and breeding of these Irish horses in New England (they are said to have become extinct in Ireland before the end of the 17th Century) may have produced a horse which breeders may have crossed with Spanish stock to produce ultimately the Narragansett Pacer.

Early in the life of Colonial New England, an increasing trade in horses developed with the West Indies. This trade continued to flourish until the outbreak of the Revolution, more than 100 years. Horses were traded for much of the rum, sugar and other commodities needed in the colonies and, at times, no vessels were allowed to trade in some of the Islands unless they had brought at least 60 of famous Narragansett Pacers. One record of the Secretary of Customs in London shows that in a single year, the New England colonies shipped 7130 horses to the British West India Islands alone.

These horses were mentioned in the

stories of James Fenimore Cooper, Dr. James McSparren and many other prominent persons of the day. Horse racing was a popular sport of the wealthy land owners on the long, smooth south shore beaches, especially at Narragansett Pier. At times, the sporting horsemen of Virginia would ship horses north to compete on the beaches with the Pacers. Betting was brisk and competition keen.

During and after the Revolution, trade with the Sugar Islands was no longer open to Yankee ships. Thrown upon their own resources, the Islanders learned to raise their own horses and soon the sturdy little Narragansett Pacer began to disappear. Their gait, so remarkable and so comfortably suited for the saddle, was not suited to driving in team or harness and, as the roads of the colonies improved and there was less and less rough ground to cover, travel was in wheeled vehicles rather than on horseback and the Pacer, better suited to frontier conditions than to the regions along the coast as they became more thickly settled, was dispersed to Canada and to Kentucky and Tennessee. Here, the pacing blood seems to have been preserved in the midst of the importation of English thoroughbred stock. But the end of New England's leadership in the raising of horses was at hand.

But their name and fame will always be a legend in the Narragansett Country. How thrilling and picturesque it must have been, riding by on your own Narragansett Pacer on a sunny summer afternoon, to see perhaps a hundred or more of them quietly grazing on the green meadows near Silver Lake, soon to be sold and shipped to the Southern Isles. The Narragansett Pacer brought pleasure, comfort, fame and fortune to Rhode Island many, many years ago. He remains in the lore of horsemen everywhere as a favored and fabled animal.