

Cattle in Colonial North America

by Renae Lizarraga

While cattle weren't actually on the *Mayflower*, the Pilgrims did have cattle imported to the colony within three to four years after their arrival at Plymouth Rock in 1620. Early records indicate that cattle were in North America well before the Pilgrims arrival in Plymouth.

In fact, it was Columbus who brought a small number of cattle to the New World from Spain during his second voyage in 1493. In the years that followed, cattle shipments to the West Indies islands became quite common.

By the 1500s, the cattle industry was thriving in New Spain (present day Mexico) and cattle ranches prospered. In 1539, cattle were taken from New Spain into the present southeast boundaries of the United States.

As the years passed, the French brought cattle to their settlements in New France (present day Canada). The Dutch and the Swedes imported cattle into the New World as well. The livestock was proving to be an invaluable resource within the settlements.

By the time the first English colony was founded in 1607 at Jamestown, it was well stocked with poultry, swine, and sheep, but there weren't any cattle. Within a few short years, under the direction of Captain John Smith, cattle began to arrive in the present-day Virginia. By 1616, there were 144 head of cattle.

The Plymouth Colony, founded in 1620, began to receive cattle on the ship *Anne* in 1623, and more arrived on the ship *Jacob* in 1624 - not long after the very first thanksgiving feast in November of 1621. While the Plymouth Colony recorded these imported cows simply as "black cows", records also indicate that a red cow was owned by the poor of the colony that calved in 1625 and again in 1627. By this time, there were 16 head of cattle within the colony.

During the early years in colonial America, cattle were critically important for survival. Cattle were used for trade, meat, milk, leather, and even labor as they were trained to plow the fields. Over the next few years, at least 12 ships brought in cattle to the colonies. With this importation and raising of cattle, the colonies began to thrive.

Given the records that are available, it is believed that the cattle that were now widespread within the colonies were either from the Devonshire area of England or the mountainous region of Ireland. It is probable that these cows represent two breeds we now know as Devon cattle and Kerry cattle.



Devon cattle were native to Devonshire, England. The cows were large, red in color and had long, white horns with black tips. They were valued for their ability to provide labor, meat, and high butterfat milk. This breed was ideal for not only making butter and cheese, but as well as for their ability to forage and thrive even on poor pasture. They were gentle, active, intelligent, and relatively strong for their size, which made them popular as oxen.

Kerry cattle probably represent the breed recorded as "black cows" in the early Plymouth Colony. The Kerry was native to the hillsides of Ireland and is believed to be one of the oldest breeds in Europe. Their coat was almost entirely black, with a little white on the udder. Their horns were pale colored with dark tips. Their size was ideal, the milk was rich in butterfat, and they were hardy and able to thrive in marginal pastures.

Interestingly enough, it is a common assumption that in years that came, our very own beloved Irish Dexter cattle derived from the Kerry breed and another breed, perhaps the Devon. By the late 1800s, the Dexter breed was recognized in Ireland as a breed separate from the Kerry breed. Yet as cattle shipments continued to arrive in America, no distinction was made between Kerry and Dexter arrivals, and for this reason, it's unclear as to when the first Dexters arrived in America. According to records, we do know for fact that Dexters were imported to America between 1905 and 1915, though it is entirely likely that Dexters had arrived well before this record was made.

[The Introduction of Cattle into Colonial North America* \(journalofdairyscience.org\)](http://journalofdairyscience.org/)

[Livestock — MayflowerHistory.com](http://Livestock—MayflowerHistory.com)

Dexter History - American Dexter Cattle Association

Colonial America

Complete the crossword puzzle below



Created using the Crossword Maker on TheTeachersCorner.net

Across

2. The location of the first Thanksgiving
5. The process of gathering crops
8. A breed of cattle that was derived from Kerry cattle
9. The man who first brought cattle to the New World in 1493
10. The people who came to the New World from England

Down

1. An annual holiday that we celebrate every November
3. The ship that transported the Pilgrims to the New World
4. What the Pilgrims called the cattle that arrived at the Plymouth Colony
6. The ship that first brought cattle to the Plymouth Colony
7. Something that each of us receive daily

MANY
THANKS

