



*The battle of Cowpens occurred in January, 1781; this painting, done by William Ranney in 1845, shows an unnamed black soldier on a Marsh Tacky (left) firing his pistol, thus saving the life of Colonel William Washington (George Washington's second cousin, on white horse in center). Note the comparative sizes of the horses.*

## The Marsh Tacky in History

Small-boned, sure-footed in the marshes, and often described as thoughtful, the Marsh Tacky has played a definite role in South Carolina history. Even now, a bill is pending in the South Carolina legislature to make the Marsh Tacky the state's official horse.

Descendants of horses left here by Spanish colonists in the 1500s, Marsh Tackies survived as feral or semi-feral horses, but were said to be so gentle-natured they could be tamed by simply placing a saddle on them.

During the Revolutionary War, these savvy horses helped Francis Marion elude his English pursuers in swampy country. British Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton gave Marion his nickname, "Swamp Fox." Following a fruitless 26-mile, seven-hour, chase of Marion, Tarleton swore, "As for this damned old fox, the Devil himself could not catch him." The Marsh Tacky could go where the larger, British mounts could not or would not.

An anecdote about the Battle of Cowpens led painter William Ranney to immortalize the Marsh Tacky, shown in the painting above.

The Marsh Tacky also was present in another battle during the Revolution. According to Jackie Macfadden of the Carolina Marsh Tacky Association, General Tarleton impressed Marsh Tackies into service when he took Charleston. Many of the English horses had been

lost during a storm at sea, and the soldiers took Marsh Tackies from the locals for their own use.

After the Civil War, they were commonly used by members of the Gullah community on the Sea Islands off the South Carolina shore for use in fields and gardens. The "tacky" part of its name from the English word meaning "common" in the sense of everyday, as these horses were the most common breed in their area of the country for most of their history. During the height of their popularity they ranged from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina to St. Simon's Island in Georgia. During World War II, when the Coast Guard patrolled the beaches of Hilton Head watching for Nazi U-boats, the Tackies were often called into service when those patrolling brought their own horses. During the 1960s, Marsh Tackies were used in races on the beaches of Hilton Head, a tradition that has recently been revived.

Caroline Maffry, writing in *Equitrekking*, says the Marsh Tacky is "more than a horse. [It] represents a connection to the land and culture for South Carolinians and a way of living, surviving, and adapting to conditions that ultimately became home." Even today, the Marsh Tacky is used to traverse the swamps and rough terrain hunting and trail riding, continuing to work and live as it has for the last 500 years.

It is estimated that only about 150 Tackies remain today, but the Carolina Marsh Tacky Association and the American Livestock Breeds conservancy are hoping to preserve these gentle, thoughtful horses.



*This photo of a Marsh Tacky mare and foal is from the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, an organization devoted to preserving rare breeds and genetic diversity in livestock.*