

## ILLINOIS HORSE FEATURE STORY

### The draft horse that made Normal famous

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According to Dillon family legend, one surefire way to calm a colicky infant was to walk outside to the nearest stable or pasture and show the child a full-blooded Percheron colt.

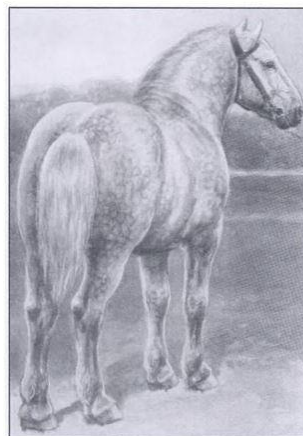
Whether true or not, this story makes "horse sense," for beginning in the late 1850s, the Dillons of Normal played an instrumental role in introducing French draft horses to America. Other local "horsemen" followed their lead, and in the years after the Civil War, Bloomington-Normal became a celebrated center for breeding, selling, and, perhaps most importantly, importing "Normans" (now known as Percherons).

In 1857, brothers Levi and Isaiah Dillon spent \$1,000 - which would be more than \$20,000 today for half-interest in Louis Napoleon, believed to be the first Norman imported from France to the Mississippi Valley.

The Dillons, who had raised large, compact "Dragon" horses from English draft stock, now bred their heavy mares to Louis Napoleon, producing exceptional mixed-blood drafters, including the mare Lady Hattie and the stallion Honest Abe.

In 1868, Ellis Dillon traveled to Ohio and brought back Napoleon Second, another full-blooded Norman. By breeding Louis Napoleon's mares with this new stallion, the Dillons were able to raise colts and fillies with three-quarters Norman blood.

Ellis Dillon eventually bought the remaining interest in Louis Napoleon, and the famed horse remained under Dillon family control until his death in the summer of 1871. When young, the stallion was dark dappled gray, but in his final years "Old" Louis Napoleon's coat had become a dignified snow white.



Louis Napoleon was perhaps the most successful breeding stallion of his day. He serviced record numbers of mares of which most, sadly, were of mixed breeding.

French draft horses were bred to pull heavy loads, such as steel plows on Central Illinois farms, timber in the North Woods, and "drays" overloaded with freight on the crowded streets of Manhattan. Though their practicality seems self-evident, early breeders and sellers faced old prejudices when it came to the unusual size of draft horses.

At the 1869 Illinois State Fair, the Dillons successfully exhibited Louis Napoleon and no less than 111 of his colts and "grandcolts," a dramatic display that did much to end the bias against what was once derided as "cattle without horns, and the popularity of Normans throughout the Midwest rested to a considerable extent on the bloodline of this one horse.

In 1865, patriarch Ellis Dillon and his nephews Isaiah and Levi formed E. Dillon & Co, and the two younger men later reorganized the business as Dillon Bros., which lasted until 1893.

Ellis and Levi Dillon traveled to France in the spring of 1870, bringing back four stallions. This proved to be the first of many trips to that country, and by the early 1880s, the Dillons were transporting an average of more than 100 horses a year across the Atlantic Ocean.

Now and again, special trains festooned with both Old Glory and the French Tricolor would transport imported Dillon horses from New York to Central Illinois. Crowds would gather at the "Big Four" Railroad station south of downtown Bloomington to gawk at these Old World leviathans.

The Dillons were among the first American horse breeders to establish contacts in Le Perche, an old French province that shares an indistinct border with Normandy. Both regions were celebrated for their exemplary draft horses, though the Dillons conducted the majority of their business in Le Perche.

In the mid-1870s, the Dillons played a role in the formation of the National Association of Importers and Breeders of Norman Horses. Within a few years, the organization altered its name from Norman to Percheron-Norman and then simply to Percheron.

The rise of the internal combustion engine doomed the horse both on the farmstead and city street. Yet the end was more gradual than commonly believed, and draft horses were still a common sight on McLean County farms as late as World War II.