

## Labrador Retriever History



The history of the Labrador Retriever can be traced back to the late 1700's in Newfoundland. At that time there were two breeds, the Greater Newfoundland and the Lesser Newfoundland. These two breeds of Newfoundland's were also known as the Greater and Lesser St. John's dogs. The Greater Newfoundland was used primarily for draft work – working in a four-dog team, they would haul carts, including the driver, loaded with 200 to 300 pounds of fish. They were the larger of the two breeds and possessed a long thick coat. The Lesser Newfoundland was a smooth coated black dog, which was unrivaled for hardiness and stamina. These dogs were the constant companions of the fishermen of the Labrador Sea. After a hard day's work, which would sometimes last twenty hours, one could find these Lesser Newfoundland's playing with the children of the fishermen.

The Lesser Newfoundland had such a reputation for its loving devotion, loyalty, and hunting and retrieving abilities that there was established an importing of these dogs to Great Britain. In Great Britain, the Lesser Newfoundland had become very popular on the large estates, and a breeding program by the estate owners was put into place. The third Earl of Malmesbury wrote in 1887 to a friend, "We always called mine Labrador dogs, and I have kept the breed as pure as I could from the first I had from Poole (Harbour), at that time carrying on a brisk trade with Newfoundland. The real breed may be known by their having a close coat which turns the water off like oil, above all, and a tail like an otter."

Without written records from the earliest days, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to detail which dogs came from where and to whom they were bred, we can only speculate about the ancestors of these St. John's dogs. The black St. Hubert's hound from France, working water dogs from Portugal, old European pointer breeds and dogs belonging to the native Indians have all been suggested as possible predecessors. In England it has been suggested that pointers were bred with Lesser Newfoundland/St. John's dogs for a more versatile dog. They bred long coated and short coated dogs, as well as curly coated dogs. The Lab's gene pool is dominant to the point that when crossed with some other breed type, that Labrador quality and looks usually dominate the looks. Certainly some mixture of these or others is logical since tradesmen from around the world frequented Newfoundland for several centuries, plenty of time to develop breeds with the desired working traits. Two distinctly different breeds resulted, the larger longer haired dog used for hauling that became the Newfoundland we know today and the smaller shorter coated retriever that led to our present day labs.

It was a good thing they had established the breed in England because the Quarantine Act of 1885 stopped the further importation of the Lesser Newfoundland dog.

By 1903, the Lesser Newfoundland, now known as the Labrador Retriever, was established as a separate, true breeding strain, and it was granted a registration status by the English Kennel Club. Finally, in 1917, the American Kennel Club recognized the Labrador Retriever as a separate retriever breed.

The Labrador Retriever Club recognizes the importance of keeping the Lab true to its original purpose and therefore, requires that before the Club will recognize a confirmation championship, the lab must also have a Working Certificate, to prove that it meets minimum standards of field work. The AKC does not put any restriction and so the dual champions of the past have been greatly reduced.

The popularity of the Labrador Retriever can also be a hidden curse as well. People see the breeding and selling of puppies as a way to make money. So you end up having puppy mills that crank out hundreds of puppies that may or may not be sound of body or temperament. The puppy mills have no interest in the continuation of the health, intelligence or stamina of the breed. Their only interest is in the money they will make. Today's Labrador Retriever is prone to hip dysplasia, peripheral retinal atrophy, and retinal dysplasia. The medical conditions of the Lab is discussed further under our breed medical section. With the puppy mill's practices, these conditions have become more acute in the Lab bloodline and care must be taken by the new owner to insure that the dog he is purchasing is sound. The importance of finding a reputable breeder, not a puppy mill or backyard breeder, will help the new owner in getting the most healthy dog possible.

## Labrador History Timeline

Early 1800's – First St. John's dogs arrived in England, some imported by the 2nd Earl of Malmesbury to Heron (Hurn) Court, near Poole

1814 – First written reference to Labrador in "Instructions to Young Sportsmen..." by Colonel Peter Hawker who observed them on Newfoundland

1823 – Sporting artist Edward Landseer painted a black dog with white markings, entitled "Cora. A Labrador Bitch."

1835 – 5th Duke of Buccleuch started kennel of St. John's dogs in Scotland

1839 – 5th Duke of Buccleuch wrote a letter referring to his "Labrador" Moss as well as the "Labrador" Drake belonging to the 10th Lord Home

1870 – The name Labrador Retriever becomes common in England

## Lesser Newfoundland Dog

Little Newfoundlanders  
Newfoundland Water Dog  
Labrador Dogs  
St. John's Labrador Dogs  
Black Water Dog  
Lesser Labrador  
Smaller Labrador  
English Retriever  
English Labrador

## REFERENCES

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