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Rare Breeds Exhibits Backgrounder 2013

Although Plimoth Plantation's Rare Breeds Animals look very similar to the livestock found on contemporary farms, Plimoth's animals are actually historic breeds, and in many cases are critically endangered animals. Over 60 years ago Plimoth Plantation made a commitment to historic preservation, which since 1981 has also included a dedication to animal breed conservation.

Plimoth Plantation chose animal varieties that closely resembled the breeds that inhabited the English Village of Plimoth Colony in the 1620s. For the past 30 years, Plimoth Plantation's Agriculture Department has been managing a breeding program that is part of a global effort to save the genetic diversity of these endangered breeds.

Some of these older breeds of livestock—Kerry and Milking Devon cattle, San Clemente Island goats, Wiltshire Horn sheep, and Tamworth hogs—are classified by the American Livestock Breed Conservancy as having critically low breeding populations. This means there are fewer than 200 animals annually registered in the US and an estimated global population of less than 2,000 animals worldwide.

Plimoth Plantation's Rare Breed livestock are regularly part of the guest experience in the 17th-Century English Village. The majority of the animals cared for at the living history site are on display in pens, where colonial interpreters speak about the animals from a historical perspective.

Many Plimoth Plantation guests have questions about the animals that cannot be adequately answered in the period setting of the English Village. To fulfill these inquiries the museum created a public exhibition space where guests can get a modern day perspective of Rare Breeds Animals. Thanks to the generosity of Grace S. and Alfred G. Nye, long-time supporters of Plimoth Plantation's educational mission, the Nye Barn was opened in the spring of 1995. The exhibit rotates in order to showcase a variety of the Museum's Rare Breeds Animals and offers visitors information about the Rare Breeds program. The barn also provides specifics on each of the individual breeds through text panels and photographs relating their history, their importance to Plimoth Plantation's programs and their enormous value in global conservation efforts.

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