

Poultry, especially chickens, is important to the social and economic well-being of the State of Delaware. The modern American broiler industry began in lower Delaware, and currently over half the agricultural income of the state is related to this industry. In addition, a chicken, the Delaware Blue Hen, has been designated as the state bird, and also serves as the mascot of the various athletic teams at the University of Delaware.

Delaware is not unique in having a chicken as the official state bird. The Rhode Island Red, a recognized breed of chicken listed in the American Poultry Standards of Perfections, is the state bird of Rhode Island. The Delaware Blue Hen, on the other hand, is not a recognized breed or strain. Rather, the term has evolved from a historical tradition, and refers to fighting gamecocks that gained fame during the Revolutionary War.

There are conflicting accounts regarding the origin of the Delaware Blue Hen, a tradition that began in 1775. On December 9 the Continental Congress resolved that a battalion was to be raised from the three lower counties along the Delaware River. Thus, the Delaware Regiment was born, composed of eight companies representing New Castle, Kent and Sussex counties. The 2nd Company was composed of men from Kent County under the command of Captain John Caldwell. It is said that Captain Caldwell, an avid fan and owner of gamecocks, carried two birds with him onto the battlefields. These birds were the male offspring of a certain blue-feathered hen, so Caldwell's men came to be known as Sons of the Blue Hen. One version of the story states that men from Caldwell's company rushed into battle screaming "We're sons of the Blue Hen and we're game to

The Delaware Blue Hen: Fact and Fancy



the end!" Another version suggests that Captain Caldwell said "No cock could be truly game unless he had a Blue Hen for a mother," although there is no proof of this.

A different account suggests that the company of militia from Kent County, under the command of Captain Jonathan Caldwell, amused themselves by staging cock fights among the progeny of a particular hen possessing blue plumage. Supposedly, the renown of these chickens spread rapidly during that time when cock fighting was a popular form of amusement, and the "Blue Hen's Chickens" quickly developed a reputation for ferocity and success. According to this account, Captain Caldwell's company earned the same reputation during the war and soon they, too, became affectionately known as the Blue Hen's Chickens. They were part of Colonel John Haslet's regiment which fought at Long Island, White Plains, Trenton and Princeton.

Not all historians agree with this version. For example, C. A. Weslager, author of "Blue Hen's Chickens" (*Delaware Today*, 1976), does not believe that Caldwell carried gamecocks with him into battle. To further burden one's self with gamecocks during a war would have been incredible, he says.

Instead, Weslager believes that the name "Blue Hen's Chickens" was given to the Delaware Regiment because of the men's appearance and conduct. The men of the Delaware Regiment, unlike most other regiments during the Revolutionary War, were completely and handsomely uniformed, and marched with great precision. They wore white breeches, waistcoat and stockings, blue coats and black shoes. Most important, they wore red feather plumes on the left side of black-jacketed leather hats with high peaks in the front, similar to a chicken's comb. Weslager suggests that in full regalia, the regiment surely conjured up the image of a flock of gamecocks. Since many of the men were from Kent County, where cock fighting was popular, the analogy was natural.

Over the years, these fighting cocks remained in the folklore of the state. During the Civil War another company of militia from Kent County was also known as the Blue Hen's Chickens. In 1845 a newspaper published in Wilmington by Francis Vincent carried the name, Blue Hen's Chicken. In 1870 the flagpole of the Delaware State Building at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia was topped with a model of a blue hen. Numerous political campaigns have also used the blue hen theme.

When the U.S.S. Delaware was commissioned in 1910, a pair of blue hen chickens was presented to the crew during

the formal flag ceremony. Finally, on April 14, 1939, a law was enacted by the Delaware General Assembly designating the "Blue Hen Chicken" as the official state bird, formalizing the tradition which began in 1775.

Some poultry fanciers maintain strains of birds identified as Delaware Blue Hen chickens, although they are not descended from the original Kent County Delaware Blue Hen. S. Hallock duPont was one such fancier, and the Department of Animal Science and Agricultural Biochemistry at the University of Delaware has received stock from his estate. Although the original Delaware Blue Hen chickens were fighting gamecocks, the current strains of Delaware Blue



Hens resemble Mediterranean breeds of chickens more than English gamecocks.

It is interesting to note that blue plumage in chickens is not a true breeding trait. Only half of the chicks produced by the mating of blue parents will have blue plumage. One fourth will be solid black, and one fourth will be white splashed with black.

The Delaware Blue Hen is a unique symbol representing The First State and a fine university. However, it often prompts questions among those unfamiliar with its history. So when someone asks, you can give credit to the men of the Delaware Regiment who fought in the Revolutionary War over two hundred years ago.

PREPARED BY
PAUL H. SAMMELWITZ, Ph.D.
DEPARTMENT OF ANIMAL SCIENCE
AND AGRICULTURAL BIOCHEMISTRY
UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE