

History

A Brief History of the Epagneul Breton: The Breed's Origins in France and More Recent Development in America

By C. Frederick Overby

The Breed's Origins in France



Commonly referenced in the western hemisphere as the "*French Brittany*," the Epagneul Breton goes back much earlier than the breed's official creation. In 1907, in Loudeac, France a lawyer named Arthur Enaud and other fanciers of the breed organized the first association which was created to nurture, develop and promote the breed. In the decades prior to 1907, the breed had begun to evolve and develop in France, but without any formal structure or organization among those who admired the early representatives of the

breed.

Many historians of the breed agree that the earliest origins of the Epagneul Breton breed are somewhat complicated and difficult to trace. Like other breeds of pointing dogs, much of the information about the earliest evolution of the breed has been lost to antiquity. This is because there was no apparent reason for those producing the earliest representatives of the breed to permanently record their lineage. After the original breed association was formed in France in 1907 by Mr. Enaud and other enthusiasts, the systematic recording of pedigrees began in earnest, and the history of the breed has since been well documented. Undoubtedly, the breed began its early evolution some decades prior to 1907 in the area of France known as Armorique. The region of France once commonly referenced as Armorique later became known as the Province of Bretagne (also commonly called "Brittany"). A former President of the Club Epagneul Breton-France, Gaston Pouchain, indicated based upon his extensive research that the early lineage of the breed definitely went back to the dogs of Oysel in the Armorique region now known as Brittany. Many of these early ancestors of the Epagneul Breton were native spaniels on the peninsula now known as Bretagne (Brittany). These native French spaniels were small dogs which often had a liver or black coat and carried a short tail.

It is also well established that in the latter part of the nineteenth century, British sportsmen went across the English Channel to France in pursuit of woodcock and other game. They often ventured to the Province of Bretagne (Brittany) to hunt the woodcock which were plentiful and relatively inexpensive to hunt. These British sportsmen were typically accompanied by their setters (English, Gordon and Irish) and they sometimes brought their Springer Spaniels, too. These British hunting dogs which went across the English Channel into France with their owners were by necessity left behind in the care of the French countrymen until the next hunting season. This was because their British owners faced the quarantine on canines which was enacted in 1901 and which prevented the dogs which left to go to France from returning back home to Great Britain. While sojourning in France,

these British dogs naturally encountered the French spaniels which were typically small dogs found on the farms and in the villages located across the French countryside around the Bretagne (Brittany) region. Such encounters resulted in casual and eventually intentional mixing of these separate bloodlines.

Additional folklore indicates that some of the earlier offspring produced by these canine unions were poacher's dogs utilized by French peasants to illegally bag game from large estates. The above information about the evolution of the Epagneul Breton breed seems to be generally accepted. However, other accounts differ, and additional theories exist in other writings about part of the breed's origin.

Regardless of the complicated and multifaceted origins of the breed, these initial ancestors of the Epagneul Breton distinguished themselves as hunting dogs in the field. The breed's foundational ancestors were hardy, athletic dogs which exhibited natural hunting acumen, along with considerable determination and courage. These traits were necessary to consistently produce game in the challenging environmental conditions and unforgiving terrain encountered in the Bretagne (Brittany) region, where the breed originated.

As these early representatives of the breed began to distinguish themselves in the field, they undoubtedly attracted the keen interest of a small group of French sportsmen who began to own, train and purposefully reproduce them. The breed evolved over a period of time and other researchers such as Mr. Kermadec, indicate that some of the early representatives of the breed made limited showings which were recorded as early as 1869. In 1896 the first known specific representative of the Epagneul Breton breed, known as Pincon Royale was formally exhibited at the Paris Exposition. Shortly thereafter in 1898, another Epagneul Breton named Myrrha d'Amorique won first place in a French field trial. The first Epagneul Bretons to be formally registered with the *Societe' Centrale Canine (French Kennel Club)* were "Boy" born in 1905 and "Marpha" born in 1903. Consequently, the founders of the original breed association led by Mr. Enaud in 1907 came together soon thereafter to devote themselves to the systematic development and improvement of these dogs as a distinct race (breed).

The first proposed conformation standard for the breed was drafted in 1907 and included black and white in the coat and required a natural short tail. However the French Kennel Club (known as the *Societe' Centrale Canine*) rejected that part of the proposed original conformation standard which allowed black in the coat when it actually approved and enacted the first official conformation standard for the breed in 1908. Subsequent modifications of the original breed conformation standard developed in France made slight changes from time to time, such as adjusting the acceptable height tolerances and permitting docked tails, until a landmark change in the breed's conformation standard took place in 1956. That year, due to the persistence of Gaston Pouchain, who served as a very influential president of the original breed club in France for many years, the official conformation standard for the Epagneul Breton was modified to accept black in the coat! This important modification had been reflected in the breed's genetics from the earliest days. Black in the coat and skin pigmentation remains completely acceptable today under FCI Standard No. 95, promulgated by the world canine organization known as

the *Federation Cynologique Internationale* (hereinafter referenced as "FCI") which is located in Belgium. (*The Societe Centrale Canine* -- or *French Kennel Club*, became a FCI constituent member country many years ago.) This conformation standard for the Epagneul Breton as historically promulgated by the FCI is rightfully relied upon worldwide as the most accurate and historically reliable official conformation standard for the Epagneul Breton breed. This is because the form and content of FCI Standard No. 95 constituting the official conformation standard for the Epagneul Breton was meticulously developed and sparingly fine tuned in the breed's country of origin by those who were devoted to the breed from the outset. Dedicated breeders of the Epagneul Breton in France have exercised considerable discipline and restraint to keep all acceptable modifications in conformation very close to the original breed standard, as they sparingly refined and updated the original conformation standard throughout the last century.

Originally prized as an outstanding breed with which to hunt woodcock, the French breed club strived to develop the Epagneul Breton into a pointing dog suitable for hunting all species of upland game. The grey partridge (also known as the Hungarian partridge) eventually became a popular game bird in Europe which is hunted with the Epagneul Breton. Virtually all modern spring field trials in France and other countries in Europe are now conducted with the grey partridge as the designated game. Epagneul Bretons also commonly hunt snipe, pheasant, red legged partridge and forest grouse in France and other European countries.. Due to the perseverance and due diligence of the Frenchmen who stewarded the early selection, breeding and development of the Epagneul Breton as a hunting dog and companion, the breed has enjoyed enormous success around the world. The devotion, due diligence and tireless efforts of the Frenchmen who revere this breed which was developed in their native country have produced the fine Continental pointing dog of handsome appearance, which is the very sociable companion we presently enjoy around the world as the Epagneul Breton.

In America as in other parts of the world, the Epagneul Breton is now recognized and accepted as a separate and distinct breed from its distant cousin, the American Brittany. Since the two breeds share common French ancestry it is impossible to provide an accurate history of the Epagneul Breton in the United States, without distinguishing the breed from what has become the Americanized version, now customarily referenced as the American Brittany. However, it should be observed at the outset that the Epagneul Breton is quite different in appearance from the American Brittany. There are also notable differences in the manner in which the two breeds are bred to typically perform in the field.



The official and formal separation of the Epagneul Breton into a distinct breed from the American Brittany breed in the United States was formally recognized and implemented by the *United Kennel Club, Inc.* (hereinafter referenced as the "UKC") in 2002. That year the official UKC registry and studbook for the Epagneul Breton breed in the United States which had been previously maintained by the *French Brittany Gun Dog Association of America, Inc.* (hereinafter referenced as "FBGDA") was assumed and became administered by the *United Kennel Club, Inc.*, which is the oldest canine registry in the United States dating back to 1898. Other well respected organizations in the United States which are involved in canine education, health and research, such as the *Orthopedic Foundation for Animals, Inc.* (commonly known as "OFA") and *The University of Pennsylvania Hip Improvement Program* (commonly known as "PennHip") also recognize the Epagneul Breton breed as separate and distinct from that of the American Brittany. This separation of the two breeds was achieved at the specific request of and due to the perseverance of the *French Brittany Gun Dog Association of America, Inc.* (also known as "FBGDA"); the parent breed club for the Epagneul Breton in the United States. FBGDA remains devoted to maintenance of the purity of the original Epagneul Breton as developed in France and now encountered in other areas of Europe. This organization serving as parent club for the Epagneul Breton in the United States has steadfastly devoted itself to keeping the Epagneul Breton separate and distinct in all respects from the American Brittany breed. FBGDA and its members who are devoted to the Epagneul Breton breed ardently oppose any crossbreeding (mixing of the Epagneul Breton's bloodlines with the American Brittany).

The Epagneul Breton is totally of French origin and a pure product of the early French foundation breed stock dating back to 1907 and beyond. In contrast, the American Brittany dog is a more recent American creation developed in the United States subsequent to World War I by American dog breeders who chose to move away from the original phenotype of the Epagneul Breton. By the time World War I had ended, the Epagneul Breton had been well established in France for several decades. Although the war had taken its toll, the breed was still intact in France. There were not a large number of the canine ancestors of what is now the American Brittany initially imported to the United States from France, after World War I. A few of the earliest offspring of the first imports, which were themselves bred to produce additional offspring after arriving in America, had a significant impact on the overall gene pool of what is now the American Brittany breed. A number of these representatives of the early generations of American Brittany offspring were themselves bred to further expand the gene pool in the United States. These dogs soon produced significant phenotypic variations of the original French dogs imported to America. The phenotypic variation is believed to have resulted when the original dogs imported in to the United States from France were selectively out crossed to other pointing breeds in order to create what has resulted in the present "Americanized" version of what the American Kennel Club eventually in 1982, officially named the "Brittany." While such out crosses are impossible to formally document in the registration records, no other logical scientific explanation exists for the notable change in phenotype which occurred in the American Brittany within a few short decades. These dogs appeared on the scene after the initial importations to America from France largely ceased for a significant period of time.

The ancestors of the American Brittany which were among the early imports from France prior to World War II were brought to America by sportsmen who had seen the dogs perform in the field in their country of origin. As ownership of these first imported dogs' offspring spread to other Americans, who had not observed the dogs hunting in their native surroundings, the progeny produced in subsequent generations by new owners did not stay true to type for very long. Some of the modifications in phenotype which soon emerged were due to natural selection, as Americans preferred and bred larger, longer dogs than the more compact, or "cobby" Epagneul Bretons, which originated from France. This American preference for a different type of dog resulted ostensibly because American sportsmen who were breeding dogs for upland bird hunting and field trialing were more accustomed to pointers and setters which dominated the American sporting landscape at that time in the history of the United States. While it is impossible to conclusively substantiate the practice decades later, it is theorized that other bloodlines were introduced by American breeders of bird dogs, in order to purposefully modify the look and build of the dogs which had been imported from France shortly after World War I. This is at least one, and possibly the only-- logical explanation why the obvious differences in appearance of the American Brittany and Epagneul Breton exist today. At any rate, one only need look at a cross section of the representatives of the two breeds to conclude that the French have consistently bred for a very different dog throughout the breed's century of existence, whereas the breeders of the American Brittany chose to go a decidedly different route in producing the American Brittany.

Due to those early modifications in genetic composition which took place in the United States, the American Brittany evolved over a few decades to be distinctly different in appearance from the Epagneul Breton. Such obvious physiological differences between the American Brittany and the Epagneul Breton are most often observed in the color of coat and in the color of skin pigmentation in the lips, eyelids and pads of the feet. Epagneul Bretons often, but not always, have black in the coat and pigmentation of the lips eyelids and pads of the feet. Many believe this black coloration in the pigment is increasingly desirable. However, some fine representatives of the Epagneul Breton breed have pigmentation which is lighter in color, which matches the color of their coats. Nevertheless, scientific research has demonstrated that Epagneul Bretons carry the "agouti" or "black" color gene. However, black in the coat or the nose has always been disallowed under the American Brittany breed's official conformation standard promulgated by the *American Kennel Club*. The *American Brittany Club* has steadfastly refused to request the *American Kennel Club* to modify its breed standard for the Brittany, so as to allow the color black in the coat or skin pigmentation, even after the change in the official conformation standard was made in France in 1956 and took hold throughout the rest of the world. The skin pigmentation of the Epagneul Breton in the lips, eyelids and pads of the feet is characteristically darker in appearance than that seen in the American Brittany, which usually exhibits skin pigmentation in shades of pink or a lighter shade of brown. However as previously noted, not all Epagneul Breton exhibit the color black in their skin pigmentation, and one will occasionally encounter an American Brittany dog that is near the size and general appearance of the Epagneul Breton.

The typical contrast in the two breeds is usually demonstrated in the size and the physical structure of various body components, such as the head, as well as overall general body appearance. The head of the classic Epagneul Breton is different in structure than the classic American Brittany head, with the Epagneul Breton possessing a more prominent slope in the forehead and a shorter muzzle and nose. These body components give the Epagneul Breton dog a distinctly different look or expression than an American Brittany dog, whose bone structure and shape of the head are decidedly different. American Brittany dogs are often lankier in appearance, by virtue of being somewhat longer in body from head to rear. In contrast, the classic Epagneul Breton is "cobby" with its height to the withers equal to its body length. This square or cobby look gives the Epagneul Breton the appearance of a dog which is more compact, and more muscular in appearance. In contrast to the American Brittany, the Epagneul Breton's desirable maximum height is 20.1 inches at the withers and a Breton rarely weighs over forty pounds (40 lbs.). Many American Brittany dogs are considerably larger than even their official conformation standard provides, while it is very rare to see an Epagneul Breton which is outside the size limit specified in the official breed conformation standard.

The *American Kennel Club's* official conformation standard for the Brittany deviates quite significantly from the official FCI Standard No. 95 employed in France and Europe for the Epagneul Breton and the official conformation standard implemented by the UKC in 2007, which mirrors the European version. Not only is the conformation standard for the Epagneul Breton as employed by the FCI and UKC different in form than the AKC standard for the American Brittany (which AKC designates as the "Brittany" breed), but the separate standards are inherently different in many important particulars regarding content. These differences range from the description of the general appearance of the dog, to differences in height tolerances, length of tail, description of gait/method of movement, description of various body components and the list of conformation faults.

Most notably, the color black in the coat and nose were disallowed when the first official breed standard was adopted by the American Kennel Club for the American Brittany and remains a disqualifying fault to the present day. The color black in the coat or skin pigment will disqualify a dog entered as a Brittany in a conformation show sanctioned under the rules of the *American Kennel Club*. This arbitrary disqualification based on color alone was retained by the *American Brittany Club* (which is the *American Kennel Club* parent club for the American Brittany breed), even after the French Kennel Club (*Societe' Centrale Canine*) in the breed's country of origin made it clear, in the official conformation standard for the breed which was decisively revised in the 1956, that the color black was specifically permitted and was not a disqualifying fault. It is largely for this reason that FBGDA has requested the *American Kennel Club* on more than one occasion to separate the Epagneul Breton from the American Brittany in the Brittany breed registry and studbook maintained by the AKC and which the AKC now denotes as simply the registry for the Brittany breed. The refusal of the American Brittany Club to request and support the *American Kennel Club* separating the breeds causes some confusion in the United States and abroad, as many Epagneul Bretons are dual registered with the AKC, which merely lumps the two breeds together under the "Brittany" designation per the AKC's stud book and registry.

However, as indicated above, thankfully, the UKC officially separated the breeds in 2002, so that a studbook for pure Epagneul Bretons can now be maintained for perpetuity in the United States. The original UKC Breed Standard for the Epagneul Breton which was originally published in 2002 was much closer to the FCI Standard for the breed, but was not entirely accurate. However, in 2007 at the request of FBGDA as the parent club for the Epagneul Breton breed, the *United Kennel Club, Inc.* (UKC) agreed to modify the official conformation standard for the Epagneul Breton as employed in the United States, so that it now accurately mirrors FCI Standard No. 95 for the Epagneul Breton. This was an important step, because it made the breed's conformation standard the same as that employed in France and throughout the world. This official UKC conformation standard effective as of 2007 now represents a proper and accurate conformation standard for the Epagneul Breton breed. It also contains various illustrations in the appendix to the standard to help the consumer understand various aspects of canine anatomy. These illustrations contained in the UKC conformation standard were specifically licensed for use by Jean Louvet, of France who composed them.

Regardless of the specific genetic formula employed by American breeders to modify the breed's body structure and overall appearance, it is well accepted that two separate sub-types of American Brittany eventually emerged in the United States between World War I and the 1970's. One type was bred for the show ring and another type for field trials and/or hunting. Both sub-types of American Brittany which were developed in the United States differed from the Epagneul Breton.

In the area of performance and working function, the American Brittany sub-type used for field trialing and hunting evolved into a dog which was developed for field trialing off horseback in America. Many of the American Brittany dogs used in the field consequently run bigger than the Epagneul Breton, which has always characteristically worked closer to the handler and foot hunter. The Epagneul Breton has retained the natural traits of a personal gun dog for the foot hunter, due to being hunted and field trialed exclusively on foot in the breed's country of origin.

In the area of conformation, the American Brittany appears only in orange and white or liver and white, with lighter colored skin pigmentation being typical. The American Brittany show type also frequently appears to be longer in body from head to rear, with a different shape of the head, and a finer bone structure. Some of the American Brittany's differences in appearance are exacerbated by grooming the coat for the AKC conformation show ring, whereas the Epagneul Breton is typically exhibited in the UKC shows in a more natural state, with little or no show grooming.

By the 1970's the American Brittany types which presently exist had clearly evolved in the United States and become the norm in this country. The American Brittany breed is highly centralized in the United States. However, some representatives of that breed have been exported from the United States and are found in Japan, Norway, Argentina, and the provinces of Canada with a British, rather than French heritage.

In the 1970's a few persons devoted to the concept of the original Epagneul Breton began

to renew importation of Epagneul Bretons from France into the United States. These importations from the country of origin have continued to the present, and include excellent specimens from other European countries. As the importations of Epagneul Bretons were first renewed in the United States, the ready temptation to crossbreed back to the American Brittany dogs soon presented itself. Among those strongly devoted to maintaining the purity of the original Epagneul Breton, a consensus began to form that there was a need for an organization to protect the breed and maintain its purity. The parent breed club formally known as the *Epagneul Breton Club, U.S.A. - French Brittany Gun Dog Association of America, Inc.* (or "FBGDA") formed in 1997 in Liberty, Missouri. FBGDA was formed with the essential purposes of preventing crossbreeding of Epagneul Bretons to American Brittannys and maintaining a registry and studbook of purebred Epagneul Bretons in the United States. However, FBGDA began working in earnest to gain official recognition of the Epagneul Breton as a separate and distinct breed from the American Brittany breed in the United States and North America. After the non-profit organization was begun by enthusiasts of the Epagneul Breton in the United States, FBGDA maintained its own studbook and registry to maintain the quality and purity of the gene pool in the United States. This practice continued until 2002, when the Epagneul Breton breed was officially recognized by the *United Kennel Club*(UKC). At the time the Epagneul Breton breed became officially recognized by the *United Kennel Club, Inc.*, the registry and studbook were transferred from FBGDA to UKC. UKC thus was assigned and assumed official registration responsibilities and took over the original FBGDA studbook to create the present official breed registry for the Epagneul Breton breed in the United States.

Also at the request of FBGDA, the *United Kennel Club, Inc.* agreed to establish a system of licensed field trial competitions and a test of natural ability (commonly known as the "TAN"), which events are modeled after those same field evaluations sanctioned by FCI and conducted in France and other parts of Europe. These natural ability tests and field trials are now conducted in America on foot, as they are in France and other European countries,--- with the exception that there is a separate UKC Gun Dog classification for field trials for less experienced handlers and dogs. The rules of performance for this beginning class known as the UKC GUN Dog Class are not quite as strict as the UKC Open Class which is conducted in the same manner as the traditional field trials in France, which are always conducted on foot. A system of conformation exhibitions/shows for the breed was also soon implemented through UKC, whereby the breed is now correctly evaluated under the UKC conformation standard which mirrors the present FCI conformation standard developed in the country of origin of the Epagneul Breton breed. With FBGDA's persistence, recent adoption of the official UKC conformation standard for the Epagneul Breton, as originally developed in France and as employed internationally on a worldwide scale by the *Federation Cynologique Internationale* (FCI) is believed to be a very important step in maintaining breed uniformity worldwide, as well as advocating proper conformation of the Epagneul Breton breed in the United States. Fanciers of the Epagneul Breton in the United States desire to take great care to see that the breed's conformation does not morph into a different type of dog, as is vividly illustrated by the evolution of the America Brittany breed in the United States.

Fanciers of the Epagneul Breton breed in the United States continue to strive to maintain and protect the breed as it has been developed, maintained and produced in France, the country of origin. In keeping with the French methods and tradition of breeding, selection and training, Bretonniers in America strive to meet the dual dog concept of producing a superior hunter which is attractive in appearance, sound in physical conformation and which makes an excellent companion for the family unit.

Today's Epagneul Breton



A slogan coined in France by the late former President of the *Club Epagneul Breton*, Gaston Pouchain stated that the Epagneul Breton provides "*un maximum of qualities pour un volume minimum*"-- which translated into English means that the Epagneul Breton provides a "*maximum of qualities in a minimum of volume.*" Another popular breed slogan provides that the Epagneul Breton is "*the smallest, but the best, of the pointing breeds*"! Many persons find the Epagneul Breton's varied coloration unique and their overall appearance pleasing

to the eye. The dogs are medium sized with a coat of white and orange, white and black, white and liver, or tricolor combinations in liver or black, mixed with the traditional white and orange. Pigmentation in the nose, feet, lips and eyelids of the Epagneul Breton is typically quite dark, approaching black; although some representatives possess a liver or orange pigmentation in the nose which is consistent with their coloration in the coat. Epagneul Bretons are sometimes born tailless, but usually have a short docked tail. Epagneul Bretons are sound, dynamic, athletic and efficient gun dogs for the foot hunter. Because of their intelligence, compact size and friendly, affectionate nature, the Epagneul Breton makes an outstanding companion for the family. The classic Breton is cobby in appearance, exhibiting a classic and unique Breton expression when the ears are raised. In the field, the Epagneul Breton moves with a distinct "rolling" gait which is easy, enduring, yet powerful - and which gives the appearance of rolling effortlessly as the dog gallops across the terrain, with head and nose held high, in search of upland game. The breed is characteristically intensely birdy, quite passionate in search of game and very stylish on point. The high head carriage, instinctive quartering in ground coverage and ease of movement makes the classic Epagneul Breton beautiful to watch perform in the field. Bretons are versatile dogs and make fine retrievers; often honoring a brace mate's point of upland game with little or no formal training. Compared to other breeds of pointing dogs, the Epagneul Breton matures early for field work and is usually easy to train, if given proper socialization and exposure to upland game.

*Credits

* *Credits*-The above condensed history was developed and written by the author for use by FBGDA as educational material. The historical information about the breed's origins in France was taken in part from the research, writings and lectures of historians of the Epagneul Breton breed. Specific credit and appreciation for the historical information is expressed to a number of Frenchmen who have tirelessly worked for betterment of the Epagneul Breton breed. They are Jacques-Francois Bordet, Henri Xavier

Guelou, Christian Gunther, Leon Le Louet, Jean Louvet, Pierre Willems and the late Gaston Pouchain whose contributions in the form of earlier writings made providing the historical information possible. The author also gratefully acknowledges R.L. Dalrymple, current FBGDA President, who reviewed the manuscript and offered many helpful suggestions.