

Ellis Dillon (1816-1899) and Martha Fisher Dillon (1827-1910)

Ellis Dillon was born on March 25, 1816, in Clinton County, Ohio, to Jesse and Hannah Pugh Dillon. His father, Jesse, was one of seven brothers who moved to Illinois between 1824 and 1825. They settled in what became Dillon Township in Tazewell County, near Tremont, Illinois. Ellis and his family made the long journey from Ohio to Illinois in 1825 when Ellis was about 9 years old. They traveled by wagon for three weeks and when they arrived, his father built a simple cabin for their first winter. They made cornmeal by hauling corn from Elkhart, Illinois, and used hunting and fishing to help provide food.

Ellis had a limited education in local schools, and he worked in a sawmill and later farmed for about seven years. On September 8, 1836, Ellis married Mary J. Fisher, and they had one daughter, Malinda, who sadly passed away at age 11. Mary died in 1840. A few years later, Ellis married Mary Hudson, and they had two children who died in infancy. Mary Hudson also passed away in 1845. In 1845, Ellis married his third wife, Martha Fisher, who was the sister of his first wife. They had five children, though one died in infancy, and two of Ellis's nephews, Levi and Isaiah, were raised by them after their parents died.

Ellis was passionate about horses and in the 1840s began breeding them. He started by importing English draft horses, including one named Old Sampson in 1843. This helped improve their horses and establish a reputation for breeding the best horses. In 1857, Ellis and his family focused almost entirely on horse breeding. They became well-known for breeding a type of horse called the Percheron-Norman, which was strong, durable, and perfect for farm work.

One of the most important horses Ellis owned was a stallion named Old Louis Napoleon, the first Norman horse in Illinois. Ellis and his nephews made it their goal to improve their horses, so they traveled to France many times to buy more horses to breed. Their business grew, and by 1865, Ellis moved to Normal, Illinois, where his company, E. Dillon and Company, became famous for producing some of the best horses in the country. They sold horses across the United States, and people paid high prices for them because of their quality.

Ellis's horses won many awards, and Old Louis Napoleon, one of his best stallions, became very famous. Ellis and his nephews worked hard to improve their horses and traveled regularly to France to find the best horses to breed with. They were even part of founding the American Percheron-Norman Association, and Ellis was its first president.

Though his horse breeding business was very successful, Ellis decided to retire in 1882, and his nephews took over the business. They continued to breed horses until 1893, when the company closed. The Dillon family sold their last Norman horse in 1919.

In addition to his work with horses, Ellis was involved in his community. He served as a supervisor for Dillon Township, a school director, and was a member of various local committees. He was also very active in the Christian church and strongly supported the Republican Party, believing in the abolition of slavery. Ellis and his family helped African Americans during and after the Civil War, including supporting the establishment of an all-African American church in Normal, Illinois.

Ellis Dillon passed away on April 3, 1899, at his home in Normal. His funeral was held at First Christian Church in Normal. His obituary said that the African American community in Normal had lost its best friend. Martha lived for another 11 years, passing away on February 15, 1910. They were both buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.