● THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

interpreter

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Horses of the Colonial Period

Victor Shone, manager of coach and livestock operations, describes basic types of horses used in colonial Virginia, their characteristics, and uses.

"Indeed nothing can be more elegant and beautiful than the horses bred here, either for the turf, the field, the road, or the coach; and they have always fine long, full, flowing tails; but their carriage horses are seldom possessed of that weight and power, which distinguish those of the same kind in England." So wrote J. F. D. Smyth, an English visitor to Virginia in 1770. What did he mean by his description of horses bred for the turf, the field, and so forth, and how were those horses different from one another?

Horses bred for the "turf" were the gentlemen's thoroughbreds (racehorses, of course) and were considered by many visitors to the colonies to be some of the finest horseflesh they had viewed on either side of the Atlantic. They were imported in great numbers from England to Virginia and the Carolinas. Most were quite small, many measuring only thirteen or fourteen hands—a hand being four inches. All horses are measured from the ground to the withers. By today's international standards, if a horse is not over fourteen hands, two inches, it is considered a pony. Most thoroughbreds now are over fifteen hands, but we have few references to fifteen-hand horses in eighteenth-century documentation.

Horses intended for the "field" were the farm, cart, or draught horses of the period. How the original stock developed, I believe, is still questionable. They could have been shipped over, although we have found no indication of their importation. Although we have no eighteenth-century Virginia graphic proof, nineteenth-century descriptions portrayed this type of animal as a rather poor specimen. This appearance might have been caused in part by breeding, but I believe poor care and overwork contributed.

Horses used for the "road" were the fast riding horses, which, apart from racehorses, had to be the most popular animals in the colonies. Quotes from contemporary sources indicate that they were also abused, however. According to a Swiss traveler in 1702, "Horses, which are hardly used for anything else but riding . . . run always in a fast gallop." The gallop is a most exhausting gait. The most

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Fire Protection and the Fire Engine

Williamsburg inhabitants must have been pleased with the arrival in town of its first fire engine—a marvelous piece of technology—by 1756, after a fire threatened the recently completed second Capitol. Until that time, fire fighting in Williamsburg was a haphazard effort using buckets either owned by individuals or purchased for public buildings. A description of the 1754 fire that destroyed the Palmer House close to the Capitol was written by Daniel Fisher, who was furious over what was, in his view, mismanaged fire fighting. He listed the tools necessary for the job: pails, buckets, tubs, axes, spades, ladders, and, of course, a nearby well. Wet bags and blankets could be used to cover buildings close to the fire. Willing hands and orderly management, grumbled Fisher, were additional requirements for containing and extinguishing fires.

The new fire engine was not only a first for Williamsburg, it was also an improvement over earlier English models, because it could produce a continuous stream of water instead of intermittent spurts. A double-acting pump system patented by Richard Newsham in the 1720s made this possible. It is probable that this innovative engine was the type purchased for Williamsburg. We know such an engine was used by the City of London from the first quarter of the eighteenth century until about

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Horses, *continued*

critical comment I have found was written by Isaac Weld, who was in Virginia in 1795–1796:

> The horses in common use in Virginia are all of a light description, chiefly adapted for the saddle; some of them are handsome, but they are for the most part spoiled by the false gaits which they are taught. The Virginians are wretched horsemen, as indeed are all the Americans I ever met with, excepting some few in the neighbourhood of New York. They sit with their toes just under the horse's nose, their stirrups being left extremely long, and the saddle put about three or four inches forward on the mane. As for the management of the reins, it is what they have no conception of. A trot is odious to them, and they express the utmost astonishment at a person who can like that uneasy gait, as they call it. [The trot is easiest on the horse but hardest on the rider.] The favourite gaits which all their horses are taught, are a pace and a *wrack*. In the first, the animal moves his two feet on one side at the same time. . . In the wrack, the horse gallops with his fore feet, and trots with those behind.

Long-distance travel done mostly at a gallop had to be hard on these small horses. Ironically, travel at a gallop resulted in less mileage per day because long rest periods were needed.

Coach horses were a combination of thoroughbreds and farm mares. They were still small but with a little more substance. They were, of course, considered draught horses because they had to pull weight, but they had to do it at a speed of about eight to nine miles an hour—and with style. To give some idea of the size of colonial horses in relation to the carriages and other wheeled vehicles used, consider that it took four horses to draw a sociable, while today we use two; and for a two-wheeled vehicle such as a market cart or hay cart, colonists usually used two horses—we use one.

According to reports, Virginians were not overly concerned about matching horses, sometimes using blacks, bays, and chestnuts in the same team. Maybe that's one of the reasons Lord Botetourt's team of six gray horses made such an impression.

One final point should be made with regard to an observation in the first quotation. Why would the author think it noteworthy that "they have always fine long, full, flowing tails"? Don't all horses have long, full, flowing tails? In those days not all horses did. Certainly this was true in England. The fad of docking horses' tails (cutting off a large portion of the "dock" or vertebrae of the tail) had been practiced for many years in England and finally caught on in America. Originally docking was done to reduce grooming duties and also to protect an inexperienced driver from the problems of a kicking horse if the reins got caught under its tail. Docking developed into a fashionable practice. It was outlawed in England in 1946 but is still legal in some states in the United States. This act is no less cruel today than it was in the eighteenth century, although modern methods and anesthesia have made the surgery less barbaric.

I must add, in defense of the early horsemen, that their horses were looked upon quite differently from today's animals. They were either gentlemen's toys and received the best care known, or they were somewhat neglected beasts of burden. People have not changed much, really—we all know how we treat a fine set of golf clubs or a boat compared to an old work truck or a battered car.

Most of these comments and observations are based on "Wheeled Carriages in Eighteenth-Century Virginia" by Mary R. M. Goodwin. We hope, in the future, we will have more information for interpreters about livestock.

Roads in Colonial Virginia

A French officer touring Virginia after the Battle of Yorktown observed that in some places there were too many roads and in others not enough. This curious inconsistency resulted from the fact that each county was responsible for the construction and maintenance of roads within its bounds. The road laws, first enacted in 1632, required counties to establish roads between every place of importance within the county—to the courthouse, churches, ferries, and mills, as well as to the capital of the colony.

Virginia's many rivers, both in the east and the west, remained busy highways throughout the colonial period, but land travel was also necessary, and Virginians enjoyed traveling

on horseback and by horse-drawn vehicles. Lord Adam Gordon, an English traveler in 1765, commented that the Virginians' "breed of horses [is] extremely good, and in particular those they run in their carriages, which are mostly from thoroughbred horses and country mares—they all drive six horses and travel generally from eight to nine miles an hour, going frequently sixty miles to dinner—you may conclude from this their roads are extremely good." Another newcomer to the colony in 1756 noted that most traveled "with six horses" and footmen and postilions. For such widespread use of wheeled vehicles the roads had to be fairly well built and maintained.

The counties were required to construct roads at least forty feet wide to accommodate wheeled vehicles. In general the roads were apparently good, for visitors commented on their fine condition. A Southampton County merchant wrote his brother in England in 1755 that "ten or Twenty Mile is acounted nothing to ride here the roads are so good"—the implication being that roads in England were not. In fact, another visitor said "the roads are . . . some of the best I ever saw, and infinitely superior to most in England." In 1780, a British officer crossed the Blue Ridge at Wood's Gap and observed that he didn't realize until he looked down from the summit that he had gained "an eminence, much less one that is of such a prodigious height, owing to the judicious manner that the inhabitants have made the road, which, by its winding, renders the ascent extremely easy." It appears that the only problems in traveling in colonial Virginia were encountered at ferries and fords when the water was high and in the winter when many roads became impassable. (Of course, there was no efficient snow-removal equipment.)

The major north-south road ran from Alexandria to Williamsburg roughly along the present route of US 1 to Fredericksburg and from there by US 301 to Hanover Court House. From Hanover it followed the south side of the Pamunkey River by State Routes 605 and 606 to US 33 until it joined US 60 near Toano and from Toano into Williamsburg by what we call Richmond Road that follows the old Indian trail through Middle Plantation. The present Penniman Road in Williamsburg has been well traveled since the early seventeenth century.

The principal east-west road, the famous "Three-Chopt" Road, followed closely US 250 from Richmond to Waynesboro. That highway is still known to many as "Three-Chopt" Road, the name derived from the three marks chopped on trees to indicate the route.

The Great Wagon Road that conveyed so many settlers from Pennsylvania into western North Carolina and Tennessee followed fairly closely the route of US 11 through the Shenandoah Valley. The Wilderness Road ran through Cumberland Gap and provided an important entrance into Kentucky.

That so many old roads became modern highways shows how practical the early planning was.

—HG

Occurrences

Occurrences? In the dead of winter?

You bet. For one, don't forget the next lectures in the series being put on by the Research Department. On January 28, John Hemphill speaks on "Lord Botetourt as the King's Representative in Virginia." Harold Gill follows on February 16 with "Storekeeping in Eighteenth-century Virginia." Mr. Hemphill returns on March 18 to talk on "Governor Robert Dinwiddie: A Scottish Bureaucrat in Virginia Politics, 1738–1758." All the lectures are at 8:00 P.M. at the Botetourt Theater in Swem Library at the College of William and Mary.

There is also George Washington to commemorate. The Foundation will do so with a Capitol Evening on Friday, February 12, "Washington In Williamsburg Tours" from February 13 through February 22, a Washington's Birthday Tattoo at 5:15 P.M. on the 13th, an eighteenth-century play that night, and, the climactic event, Washington's Birthday Review at 4:30 P.M. on Monday, February 15.

Our visitors may want to know that there is much to do at Colonial Williamsburg to remember and to celebrate the birth of America's greatest great man.

Fire Engine, *continued*

1832 and was highly regarded. Furthermore, Newsham-type engines were ordered for cities in other colonies: Philadelphia, New York, and Salem, Massachusetts.

The arrival of the new engine did not solve all the problems of fire protection, however. Strategically placed wells with pumps in good repair were needed. Some citizens complained that Williamsburg should have more than one fire engine, and there are indications that the first engine had maintenance problems. A campaign to hire night watchmen finally resulted in a 1772 Williamsburg City Council decision to provide "a watch, to consist of four sober and discreet People," who were to patrol the streets to detect fires and deter robbers. They were also to care for the "fire engines" (it is possible that another one had been purchased by 1772) and to assist in extinguishing fires.

Fire insurance was already available in other colonies before the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia was established in 1795. Fire insurance policies were decorated with elaborate engravings intended, no doubt, to inspire confidence—it's not surprising that the Newsham engine was featured in policyheads for many years.

—Dan Berg, Jim Curtis, Irvin Diehl, Wright Horne, Peter Ross, Dan Stebbins, and George Wilson are teaming up (and tooling up) to make a working reproduction of the Newsham-type fire engine in our collection. The antique engine was purchased in 1960; it came from Gloucestershire, England, where it had apparently been in the same family since 1830. The reproduction project has been funded by the chairman and chief executive officer of Figgie International, Mr. Harry E. Figgie, Jr., and should be completed early next summer. Bill Hammes has done research and is the coordinator for the project.

Dan Berg and his staff are excited by the challenge of these large and complicated castings, which are a far cry from the small, delicately detailed pieces usually made at the foundry. Pouring one hundred pounds of molten brass (at 2000° F.) at one time is an awesome undertaking. Special equipment must be used—for example, a very large crucible and devices to support it. George Wilson is creating the patterns to use in constructing sand molds for the castings. He talks about allowing for shrinkage as the metal cools and trying to design patterns so that the cyclinders are true enough to give the pump a smooth, finished bore. All are concerned about how critical tolerances become when pieces must fit and work together well enough to create pressure to pump water. Jim Curtis is making the air chamber of heavy-gauge copper. Peter Ross and his staff are doing the ironwork for the engine, as well as making the special tools and equipment needed by the other shops. Wright Horne is constructing the carriage, and Dan Stebbins has already "tyred" the wheels. Painting will be done by the C & M paint shop. Irvin Diehl (CWF's "Honorary Fire Chief") will make the hard sleeves needed to draw water from the well, flexible leather hoses, and about twenty-five buckets.

Now if we can just find four sober and discreet people to run the thing.

—BB

The King's English

Draught—applied to animals, used for drawing a weight.

Hard sleeve—a tin insert to keep leather hose from collapsing.

Landau—a four-wheeled carriage with a convertible top; named for the town in Germany where it originated.

Sociable—an open, four-wheeled carriage in which the occupants face each other.

Tyre or Tire—the iron rim on the wheel of any vehicle.

Withers—the juncture of the shoulder bones of a horse or other animal, forming the highest part of the back.

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