

Der Deutsch Wagen

The first known reference to a “Conestoga wagon” was recorded by James Logan of Philadelphia in his account book under December 31, 1717. Although the wagon that Logan was referring to was known in the community in which it was built as a “Deutsch wagen” or German wagon, the English settlers had come to associate it with the locality of the German community- the Conestoga River Valley of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Thus a Native American term would evermore be associated with a wagon that had its origins in the Rhineland of the Palatinate, present day Germany.

The Conestoga River Valley and Lancaster County with their sizable German communities first formed the identity of the new American icon, but Conestoga wagons were built across the eastern seaboard colonies where ever there were substantial enough German communities to support blacksmiths and wagon makers skilled in the construction of the wagons they had known in the “Motherland”. These artisans, through long apprenticeships to Master Craftsmen, had gleaned centuries of wagon building technology dating back to the Romans. The emigration of German farmers, merchants and craftsmen to the colonies, particularly Pennsylvania, transferred centuries of wagon construction technology to the New World as well.

Each Conestoga wagon was originally custom made to order based on the intent of the purchaser and the depth of their pocketbook. Varying types of transportation duties required different approaches to how the wagon was designed. Two major types of wagons developed over time, known as the freighter and the farm Conestoga wagons. The freighter wagons were built for the freighting of goods from point-to-point under contract. The owner and wagoner, or teamster, made their principal livelihood from the freighting of goods, many times over long distances. These wagons typically had high wheels creating an easier pull for the team and greater ground clearance for poor roads. Since the vast majority of finished goods were transported in casks or barrels in the 18th and 19th Centuries, freighters normally incorporated deeply curved box beds to stabilize layers of round-sided casks and barrels stacked sideways within the wagon.

The other major form of Conestoga wagons were the farm wagons. These were designed for general farm work and the local hauling of both raw and finished goods. Greater design emphasis was placed on maneuverability, adaptability, and the ease of loading and unloading the wagon. Wheels tended to be shorter reducing the lifting distance to the bed from the ground, and creating a shorter turning radius for maneuverability in small farm fields. The box beds typically had only a slight curvature of the floor to improve loading and unloading of the wagon from the lowered rear gate, and to better suit the wagon for hauling goods or items not contained in casks or barrels. Still, some curvature was retained for those times when the owner might be transporting casks or barrels.

Conestoga wagons were also designed to accommodate the number and type of draft animals that would be hitched to the completed wagon. Oxen required a different tongue

design than did horses or mules due to the manner in which they were hitched to the wagon. The number of draft animals being hitched also determined the maximum load weight to be transported, and thus the proportions of the wagon itself. A one horse wagon did not need to be built to the same carrying capacity and strength requirements as a six horse wagon. Then as now, "horse power" was a defining element of proper design and construction.

The wagon used in interpretive programs by members of Historic Museum Programs is a partially restored original six-horse farm Conestoga wagon owned by Mr. Art Snyder of Fairfield, Pennsylvania. The wagon was previously owned by a Mr. Henry Hoke, a neighbor who had kept it stored away in his bank barn disassembled until his death. The wagon had been placed in the hay mow sometime in the past for good keeping by a previous unknown owner, who never retrieved it. Mr. Sam Osbourne and Mr. Snyder purchased the wagon parts at a farm sale in 1975 and restored it to working order for the American Bicentennial Wagon Train in 1976.

The wagon today consists of approximately 85 percent of the original fabric that emerged from Mr. Hoke's bank barn in 1975. Items such as the wagon tongue, feed trough, bows and tool box are replacements of the originals that were either too damaged to reuse, or were missing. The Prussian blue painted wagon box and reddish-orange running gear and sideboards are matched to the original paint colors on the wagon, and are typical for Conestoga wagons and in German culture. The original linen canvas top that was used to cover the load is long since missing, but is intended to be replicated and replaced.

During restoration, no identification marks were discovered to disclose either the original wagon maker or its date of construction. This is typical of early wagons, especially farm wagons; that were viewed during the time as a tool for accomplishing work and earning a livelihood. The only method of dating the wagon is through its unique construction details, which possibly dates it sometime to the second half of the 18th Century.

Following the American Bicentennial, the wagon was used infrequently for local celebrations and programs by Mr. Snyder. Mr. Mark Dubin, a state historical interpreter, arranged for Mr. Snyder to provide an historical interpretation of the wagon as part of a larger public program at Fort Frederick State Park near Big Pool, Maryland. This proved the humble beginning of a partnership that would eventually create Historic Museum Programs, a dedicated group of living historians providing civilian historic interpretative programs throughout the Mid-Atlantic region for federal, state and local historic sites and organizations.

The wagon you see before you today was likely specifically ordered by a moderately wealthy landowner, or a group of neighboring landowners, from a small private German wagon maker's shop. Larger than the average farm wagons of the period, it represented a considerable investment of time and money. Though intended for work, the wagon design incorporated practical construction elements embellished with details which were added to create a defining statement of the purchaser(s) status and worth. We may never know the

exact who and when, but it still serves as a living ambassador of a time long past and our shared ancestral rural heritage.

*Mark Dubin
Historic Museum Programs
705 Pecher Road
Fairfield, Pennsylvania 17320
717-357-3231*