

## Carriages and Other Wheeled Vehicles

On a recent “Rock School Day” the students took a step back in time and relived a day in the lives of their ancestors and predecessors; in this case the year chosen was 1858.

In her opening dialogue, teacher Mrs. Susan Hooker warned of the dangers of venturing out onto the highway, as the majority of cars and trucks, especially during the summer months, greatly exceed the speed limit on that relatively straight stretch of road between the Center and North Colebrook. She told them that this road was once a turnpike, and as such, would have had a larger than average volume of traffic. She was referring to the Waterbury River Turnpike, in operation from 1801-1850. One of the students asked if stagecoaches traveled past the school. Indeed they did, and an assortment of other rigs as well. Let’s take a look at some of the types of vehicles that were in use during the turnpike era. Our source here is a rare volume entitled The Turnpikes of New England by Frederick J. Wood, which contains a chapter entitled *Carriages and Other Wheeled Vehicles*. Winchester’s Municipal Historian, Dr. Benjamin Thomas, with whom we are fortunate to have a close working relationship, loaned this volume to the Colebrook Historical Society. This is a graphic example of why it is so essential for all towns in a region to work closely together. The old Colonial expression “Unite or Die” takes on added meaning when put in a modern setting.

“The volume of business done by American carriage manufacturers in 1795 was exceedingly small. The know-how was there, as occasionally fine carriages were made, and imported vehicles repaired, but business remained slow. The hard times that followed the War of Independence made simplicity a virtue, and the luxury of a carriage was not suited to the domestic habits of the citizenry of those times. All parts of the largest towns were within walking distance of each other, and there was little incentive to visit other places.”

“As the country grew prosperous, a demand arose for vehicles for business, pleasure and travel, and several varieties developed. Among them the principal were the *chaise, curricule, chair, chariot, phaeton, whisky*, or *gig, coach, landau*, and many other types of wagons and carts for working purposes.

The chaise early on was in great demand, and down to 1840 had no real challenger. The earlier forms had enormously high wheels and had stationary tops, being supported on iron posts. Curtains and painted canvas or leather covered the sides and back. The vehicles often did not have a dasher, or apron to keep mud and water from the horse’s hooves from splashing back onto the passengers.”

“The origin for the word is French for ‘chair’, and was initially used to describe a wheeled vehicle as opposed to the earlier ‘sedan-chair’, which was carried on men’s shoulders. A model called a ‘post-chaise’ was the fast-traveling carriage of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was closed and four-wheeled and was drawn by two or four horses. The driver sat upon a high seat.

The chair, commonly pronounced ‘cheer’, was the only traveling vehicle seen in rural regions in 1800, although the cost of one was no inconsiderable sum. It had wooden springs and was enclosed by painted cloth curtains.

The whisky or gig, has been perpetuated in the gig or racing sulky of the present time.”

The vast majority of vehicles in Colebrook would have been working wagons for use on farms or in hauling logs and lumber. There were some passenger vehicles traveling through town, of course, but it would have been of small volume, as Colebrook never was situated between any two major geographical points. This activity extended well into the period of popular camera use, as one such photo in particular comes to mind that shows Arthur Wilber, grandfather of Colebrook's George Wilber, and father of Ethel (Mrs. Burton) Millard, on the Robertsville Bridge over Sandy Brook, transporting two loads of lumber from Colebrook River to Tiffany and Picket in Winsted. This photo best represents the type of highway traffic that we would have been likely to see one hundred or more years ago.

We don't know the number of wagons that existed in town in those early years, as they weren't taxed. There were three chaises owned by Colebrook residents in 1812, one by Reuben Rockwell, one by his brother Martin, the third by Harvey Marshall, all of which were valued at \$30.00. To give today's reader something to base a value upon, horses and oxen that year were valued (for tax purposes) at \$10.00; cows carried a value of \$7.00 and sheep .75¢. No other wheeled vehicles were mentioned that year. Twenty-five years later, in 1837, the categories and taxable value of wheeled vehicles in Colebrook increased to wagons (\$50.00), pleasure wagons (\$35-\$60.00), gigs (\$100.00) and one-horse wagons (\$40.00). Oxen were valued at from \$80.00-\$100.00, horses at from \$45.00-\$60.00. No differentiation was made between a riding horse and a workhorse.


Twenty-one years after that, in 1858 (presumably these were what the students at the Rock School would have watched going past), there were in town 33 wagons, 16 carriages, 2 top wagons and 1 gig.

Today a person could count the number of horse-drawn vehicles in town on the fingers of one hand, but on the other side of the coin, the ratio of vehicle ownership has dramatically increased, as there are very few households that do not have a car or truck, with many having multiple vehicles – a graphic example of how our impact on the environment has increased over time.

Below is a carriage ad from the Winsted Herald dated March, 1853.

WM. D. BISHOP, Vice Pres and Sup't.

**CARRIAGES ! CARRIAGES !!**

 ONCE more we would invite the attention of our numerous patrons and friends to call and examine the best and latest improved stock of manufactured CARRIAGES ever before offered in Winsted or Litchfield County. We hesitate not to guarantee that all work manufactured by us to order, will meet the highest expectations of our customers and friends.— Our stock consists of LIGHT CARRIAGES, and BUGGIES of nearly every style and description, made expressly for home market, and warranted in every respect what they are represented to be.

GENTLEMEN, give us a call! we have reasons to believe you will buy, as we are practical mechanics, and all work being done under our close inspection, has gained the reputation we now have as Carriage Manufacturers.

In conclusion, we would here express our sincere thanks to those of our old and well tried customers for the influence they have exerted in our behalf, and would ask a continuance of their helping hand.

Particular attention is given to Repairing in all parts.

WALTER & BROTHER.  
Winsted March, 1853. 1f-47

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