

# The Stagecoaches



Become part of the transportation enterprise in the **American West**

Long before there was a need for personal vehicular transportation in colonial America, there was the necessity of moving goods and raw materials. Pack animals were sometimes used, but they could not carry all materials, nor were they efficient, so the first real demand on the wheelwright was for the construction of work vehicles. Two such artisans were sent from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629. For over a century, the principal function of wheelwrights was to construct wheels for carts and wagons for the farm, for there was as yet little personal, industrial or commercial need for these vehicles. Exceptions could be found in such places as seaports, where cargoes had to be carried to and from ships, and in towns large enough to have substantial horse traffic, which necessitated the removal of manure from the streets. New York City, for example, had 20 licensed "car men" in 1676, their purpose being both to carry goods and remove manure.

Farm vehicles were often small and crude, sometimes with spoked wheels, but in other instances, with disk wheels that were either cut from logs or made from several flat pieces. Such vehicles could be readily constructed in any isolated area without the aid of a skilled mechanic, as reported by Johann David Schoepf, in "Travels in the Confederation", 1783-1784, on his trip through southern Pennsylvania: "they use, however, little wagons for farming purposes furnished only with block-wheels, and these every farmer can make for himself without great trouble, by sawing disks out of fairly round timbertrees, and boring a hole in the middle for the axle." Even the refinement of this primitive wheel was not always required, for the sledge was a common means of moving things, sometimes even in the summer.

By the mid-eighteenth century several types of commercial vehicles were becoming prominent. The Conestoga wagon was used to carry freight and produce in Pennsylvania; other areas had freight wagons but, lacking so distinctive a name, they are not as well known to us. For the movement of passengers, the stage wagon came into use. In its earliest form, it was nothing more than a covered wagon with benches inside. For freight movement within cities, there was the ubiquitous two-wheel dray. All of these vehicles retained their importance into the nineteenth century, the stage wagon evolving into the famous Troy and Concord coaches during the 1820s, the latter continuing to be manufactured and used into the early years of the twentieth century. The two-wheel dray was also used into the twentieth century, almost without change, because of the serviceability of its primitive design. Intracity freight movement was also facilitated by variations of the ordinary farm wagon and cart.

Little significant advancement occurred in the design of work vehicles during the early part of the nineteenth century, aside from the important changes in stages and the development, at about the same time, of the public omnibus. Several innovations in suspension, borrowed from the English and French, were soon applied to America's commercial carriers. Elliptic springs, platform springs and truck springs substantially altered both the design and the efficiency of all classes of vehicles, from the lightest to the heaviest, to serve the varying needs of

the nation's commerce and industry. Inventive American mechanics began to patent many new features, not only of vehicle components, but also of machines and tools that produced the components with greater speed, ease and accuracy. While this activity became increasingly evident from the 1830s and 1840s onward, the full effects of this gradual change were not seen until the final quarter of the century.

During the 1850s, the growth of the vehicle industry was reflected by the emergence of trade literature. In 1853, C. W. Saladee, of Columbus, Ohio, introduced his "Coach-makers' Guide", succeeded in 1855 by "The Coachmakers' Illustrated Magazine". In 1858 came Ezra Stratton's "New York Coachmakers Magazine", which in 1871 was absorbed into "The Hub", soon to become one of America's two leading carriage journals. The other leader started in 1865 under the title "Coach-maker's International Journal", acquiring the better known title "The Carriage Monthly" in 1873. Although the titles of these publications suggest that they were devoted exclusively to the carriage business, they also gave extensive coverage to all sorts of commercial vehicles. In addition, beginning in the sixties, trade catalogs were issued by some builders, so that we have a complete and accurate record of the many types of working vehicles that were in use from that time onward.



Cover from Philadelphia June 19, 1853 to San Francisco with cameo corner card of carriage manufacturer. Bennett Auction, 2003, George J. Kramer collection, \$900.

Top left **Concord coach**. Here is a typical Abbott, Downing stage that seated nine passengers (three each on three inside seats, including the jump seat) and carried four or five more passengers alongside and behind the driver. This was the size commonly used for road travel between cities and towns, used by the Wells Fargo. A large quantity of luggage could be carried on the roof, in the boat under the driver's seat and on the leather-covered rack in the rear. Most stage lines also had contracts to carry the mails and many offered parcel-express service as well. Photograph from National Postal Museum, Washington D.C.

Top right **Conestoga wagon** - One of the most colorful and fascinating vehicles of the early period was this wagon, which plied the roads of Pennsylvania (later of Maryland and Ohio) from about 1750 to 1860. Not a wagon used for Westward migration, as is commonly believed, this was a freighter, carrying goods west from such cities as Philadelphia and Baltimore, and carrying material back to the point of origin when drivers were fortunate enough to get a return load. Varying in size, they carried from one to five tons. This is a larger example in the Smithsonian Institution.