



The Thomas Jefferson

Carriage at Poplar Forest

by Richard Nicoll



Thomas Jefferson's lifelong interest in architecture, is visible in many forms both at his private homes and in the various public buildings which he influenced. One such residence is Poplar Forest located in Virginia approximately 90 miles south of Charlottesville. During his life this home set on more than 4,000 acres was used by Jefferson as a retreat from public scrutiny. The property had been passed down to him and his wife Martha from her father. Though he had owned Poplar Forest for many years, construction of the octagonal brick house did not begin until 1806. He visited the home from 1809 until three years before his death in 1826.

One unique design feature at Poplar Forest Jefferson planned and carried out was the building of a carriage turnaround in front of the house. It was executed so that a carriage with six horses could comfortably turn at the front of the house. We know that Jefferson had a Landau, drawn by four horses ridden by postillions. Due to unfavorable road conditions, six horses to a vehicle were common during the era. After archaeological evidence confirmed the layout reconstruction work began. It was recently completed in 2020.

A friend of Poplar Forest on seeing the plans and construction of the turnaround decided a natural complement would be an 18th century carriage of a type Jefferson could well have driven at the home. A carriage that would be available for use by Poplar Forest both as a static interpretive exhibit but also a vehicle that could be horsed and driven.

The benefactor approached me at the start of 2020, asking if I would be interested in helping design and facilitate the building of such carriage. I enthusiastically accepted. Drawing on past experience, where I had researched and had an 18th century style phaeton built for the Colonial

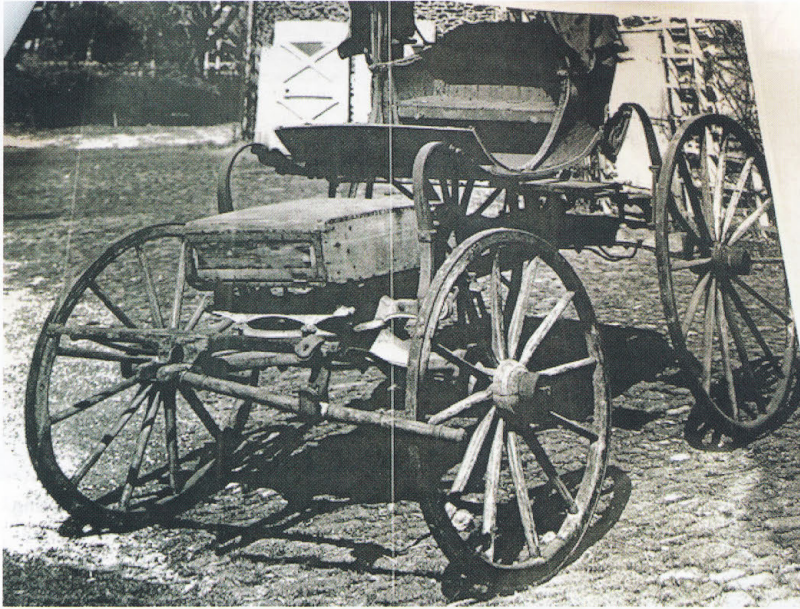
Williamsburg Foundation, the planning for a Poplar Forest vehicle began.

I suggested that a phaeton would be an appropriate vehicle to build, knowing that Jefferson had a great interest in this kind of vehicle, even designing and building one. One of which, it was said, he had taken to Paris when there as Minister to France in 1784. In his time as President while residing at the White House he had two phaetons at his disposal.

There are few existing examples of late 18th century or early 19th century phaetons existing in the United States. One known carriage was "Chew Phaeton". This carriage had been owned in the 1890s by Chief Justice Benjamin Chew of Pennsylvania. Chew also was a friend of Jefferson. In 1970 this vehicle, sadly, was destroyed in a fire. Photographs of the vehicle and most of the metalwork are still in existence. We decided that the Chew Phaeton would be our basis from which to design a vehicle for Poplar Forest.

Jack Alvarez and the Glinkowski Carriage Company in Poland were the team I approached to build the vehicle. I had worked with the team before and knew they would create what was needed in a timely manner at a price that would be reasonable. I decided that it would be beneficial if the design could accommodate use as a single horse or pair horse vehicle.

I sent the Glinkowski company, through Jack Alvarez, as many details of the original vehicle as possible. This included the box in front of the body. Some parts were altered to make the carriage more useable from a practical point, such as roller bearings on the axles, steps to get into and out of the carriage, and synthetic materials for the hood



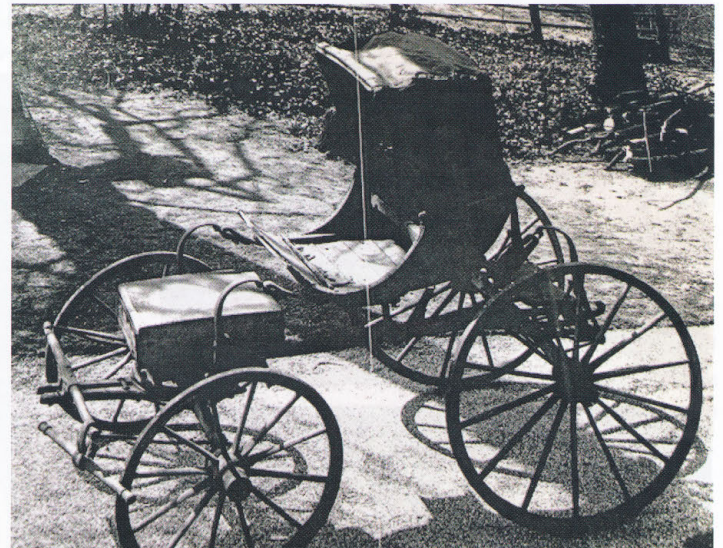
“We are incredibly grateful for this wonderful gift and sincerely appreciate the thoughtfulness of the donor who commissioned its construction for us. The phaeton will be a tremendous aid in the interpretation of the newly restored carriage turnaround in front of Thomas Jefferson's octagonal retreat, generously funded by the Garden Club of Virginia. The phaeton will also add a new dimension to our tours and programs on special occasions.”

and seats. For the body and running gear popular colors of the time were chosen. The decision was made to also use a simple cypher of Jefferson's initials, as seen on his personally designed watch seal, on the side panels. Some selected paint elements of the carriage were based on the middle-sized Gansevort Phaeton standing in the collection of the Museums at Stoneybrook, in particular the stripping on the running gear, as seen on the wheels, reach and hounds.

Work began in the Spring of 2020, just as the Covid pandemic was becoming more established worldwide. I had planned to travel to Poland with Jack Alvarez to oversee the development. This plan had to be cancelled so we resorted to doing Zoom meetings with the Glinkowski staff going around the carriage with a phone camera and myself commenting on details that I liked or wanted changed. Also we carried out much of our correspondence through the use of e-mail and digital photos of details I wanted incorporated.

Finally, the work was finished in late summer of 2020 and the vehicle shipped to the states. The carriage finally arrived at its new home in October. The phaeton was received by Alyson Ramsey the President and CEO of Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest with much excitement.

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The first inaugural drive was achieved by well-known Jefferson historical actor – interpreter Bill Barker, who declared the phaeton “perfect and very comfortable”.

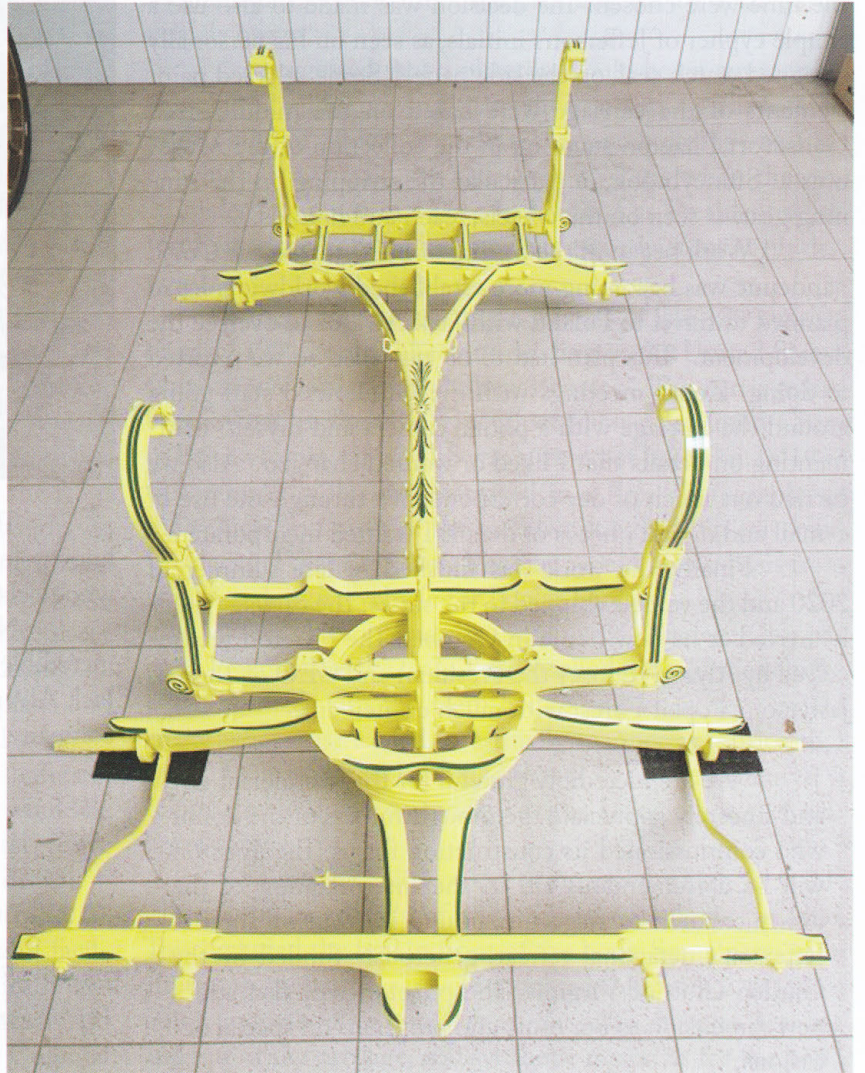
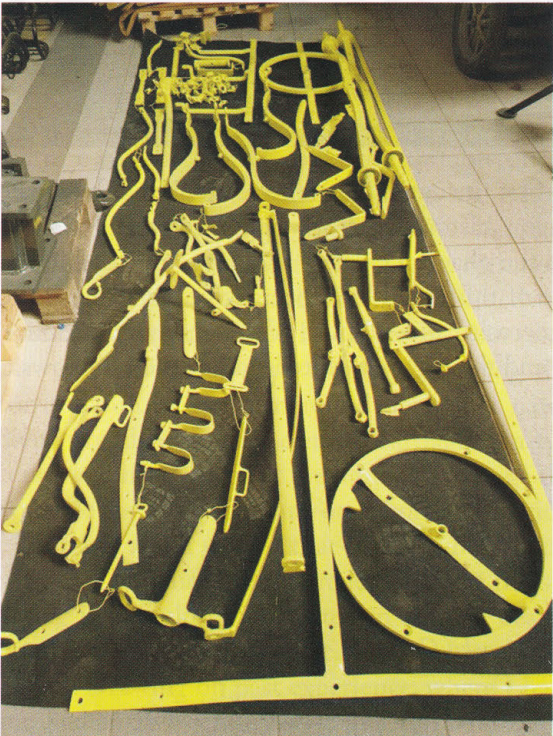
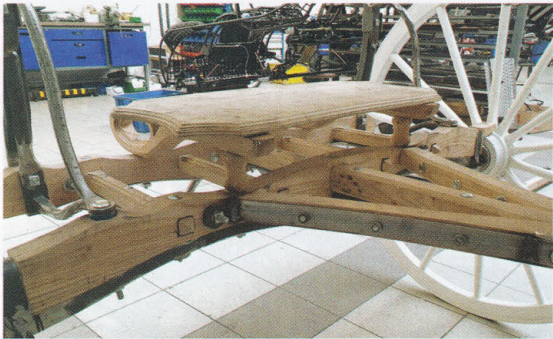
None of this could have been achieved without the incredible generosity and support of the anonymous donor, Jack Alvarez and the highly talented staff at the Glinkowski company. ~

Photos by Glinkowski Carriage Company, Jack Alvarez and Poplar Forest



The Jefferson Carriage at Glinkowski Carriage Company in Poland during production.

Below: The perch (the pole connecting the back and front axle) is decorated similar to the Gansevort Phaeton. Many phaeton bodies ride high, allowing passerbys a fuller view of the undercarriage.





The completed Jefferson Carriage arrived at Poplar Forest in the fall of 2020. Several features are unique to this vehicle including the simple cypher of Jefferson's initials, as seen on his personally designed watch seal. The steps on the original would have folded out, for modern safety different steps were added as was the entry handle. The box in the front was common and carried supplies, clothing, and other necessities. Luggage could also be added to the back of the carriage.

