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Poplar Forest gifted a phaeton carriage

Dec 1, 2020

The corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest recently announced that an anonymous donor has gifted the historic home with a phaeton carriage.

"We are incredibly grateful for this wonderful gift and sincerely appreciate the thoughtfulness of the donor who commissioned its construction for us," said Alyson M. Ramsey, president and CEO of Poplar Forest. "Earlier this year, we were pleased to announce the completed restoration of the carriage turnaround in front of Thomas Jefferson's octagonal retreat, thanks to the generosity of the Garden Club of Virginia. The phaeton will be a tremendous aid in the interpretation of the turnaround in addition to adding a new dimension to our tours and programs on special occasions."

Phaetons were sporty, open carriages popular in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Drawn by one or two horses, this style of carriage was designed with a minimal, lightly sprung body atop four large wheels.

The Poplar Forest phaeton was made by carriage makers and restorers at the Glinkowski Carriage Factory in Poland, and facilitated through Richard Nicoll, the former director of the Coach and Livestock Department at Colonial Williamsburg, and Jack Alvarez of Driving Essentials, Inc., in New Holland, Pennsylvania. Nicoll helped to create how a Jefferson-era phaeton may have looked. The donation includes two carriage shafts, one for a one-horse hitch and the other for two horses, just as Jefferson had for his own "chariot."

The design of the Poplar Forest phaeton was inspired by the Benjamin Chew phaeton. Benjamin Chew was chief justice of Pennsylvania in the 1790s when the federal government was located in Philadelphia, and was a contemporary of Jefferson. It is thought that the Chew phaeton was most probably familiar to Jefferson, as there were only about 80 to 90 carriages in all of Philadelphia at the time.

The newly constructed phaeton bears a striking likeness to the Chew phaeton, known only through photographs as all but the iron elements were lost during a 20th-century barn fire.

“Jefferson liked to drive himself, and of all his vehicles, he preferred the phaeton,” Ramsey said. “The phaeton was the sports car of its day. It was lightweight, stable and fast, and represents the type of vehicle Jefferson and his contemporaries would have used in the early 19th century when Jefferson was creating his Poplar Forest retreat. We look forward to sharing this beautiful and elegant vehicle with the public on special occasions while also working toward the best solution for permanent housing and display.”

- Submitted by Susan Morgan
