

The Early American Blacksmith



Blacksmith's Shop in Manheim, PA – ca 1907

Blacksmiths were numerous during the colonial period and the 19th century in America and they served the needs of the citizens to have iron items repaired and produced. The blacksmith shops were found in rural areas, in villages and in cities. Most think of blacksmiths as farriers, which is a person who is in the business of shoeing horses. The farrier's skills were much in demand but the citizens went to the blacksmith also to buy iron products which he manufactured, such as household utensils, agricultural implements, tools, and hardware.

Many of Lancaster County's blacksmiths became known for their superior skill and workmanship, for they were concerned with what was not only functional and practical but with what was pleasing in design as well. It was not unusual for a blacksmith to embellish his products with special motifs or designs.

Lancaster County had more than fifteen hundred blacksmiths between 1729 and 1840 "the early period" and this indicates the apparent need for the local blacksmith. The sheer number suggests that no one was really very far removed from a blacksmith. Lancaster County, even before its legal establishment in 1729, was settled by immigrants who were skilled in crafts and farming. These people pioneered the industrial development of the county and created a major impact on the economic development of the state of Pennsylvania. Many of these craftsmen, who earned their living from the soil, were skilled blacksmiths who built wagons, implements, tools, household utensils and many other practical items marked by good design.

The year 1840 marked the beginning of the period when various industrial changes began to emerge in Lancaster County. Not all parts of the county developed industrially in identical pattern but each township in Lancaster County contains records that indicate a period of industrial development within this major period.

The modern idea of the blacksmith is often a rather romanticized concept based vaguely on literature such as Longfellow's "The Village Blacksmith". Most people are quite sure that a smith's shop existed "somewhere" in the community.

Even though the first blacksmith was not officially recognized before 1750, these early inhabitants in the winter of 1736-1737 petitioned the county to build a road to connect Lancaster to the best known source of iron. This is the road which goes from Lancaster to Morgantown (the present Route 23) and on to the forge furnace (Hopewell Village) on French Creek.

Pictured below is a wagon jack dated 1759 made by a skilled blacksmith. Because of the 18th century date, this jack would have been use on a Conestoga Wagon that could have hauled freight to and from Philadelphia and around the counties. Also pictured is a set of button hole cutting tools made by 18th century Donegal Township blacksmith Michael Huber.

