

The South, the Valley, and the Horse

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Adapting to the emergence of new technologies has become an integral part of the American identity. When a new industry comes about, making a previous one obsolete, there is often an extended period of overlap in which one must make its claim over another, while the latter slowly fades away. There are very few abrupt changes. A prime example of this is horse power being overtaken by automotive and machine power. Before cars and other machinery, America was run by horses. The horse is a critical element in understanding the history of this nation, and especially important in Southern history, since the South has such a strong base in agriculture, an area once dominated by horses.

The majority of the South before the Civil War was made up of large plantations, harvesting mainly labor-intensive crops, such as cotton and tobacco. Slave labor and horse labor were the dominant forces allowing for this type of existence. Horses in the South were not only important in crop production, but also commercial hauling, construction, and transportation. Between 1840 and 1900 the horse population in America multiplied six-fold.¹ During the Civil War, horses provided a means transportation, hauling power, and were a key element in battle. However, the end of the Civil War marked America entering a new era. As the South reeled and the North recovered, changes were bound to occur.

The South experienced a severe drop in overall capital—landowners were unable to harvest their crops due to the abolition of slavery, as well as experiencing a glut in

¹ Anne Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

world cotton prices with the emergence of the Egyptian cotton market.² The absence of slaves consequently meant the absence of labor to work with the plantation horses to get the crops harvested, shipped out, and sold. Having land, but no cash to pay for labor, landowners developed a method of sharecropping in which an individual or family would work a plot of land, and the landowner would receive a share of the profit. With the smaller crops being harvested, mass horse power was already becoming less needed. This method, however, only led to increasing Southern debt. The laborers had to buy tools and raw materials on credit, yet were never able to repay the merchant in full. They were trapped in a constant cycle that only dug them further into debt. But despite Southern poverty, horses still played a prominent role in daily life, mainly for personal transportation, as well as agriculture. However, the lack of money in the South would ultimately be what changed the place and purpose of the horse forever.

As the South struggled to survive in the antebellum years, the North had been experiencing a period of accelerated industrial growth known as the Industrial Revolution. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Northern industrialists began to look at the South as an opportunity to gain a cheap labor force. The South offered not only cheap labor, but also an abundance of raw materials, such as steel, iron, lumber, and various minerals. The lumber industry had notable involvement with horses. Since trains could not climb their way up the steep mountain paths to reach the lumber, and humans were incapable of maneuvering the extraordinarily heavy loads of timber, the use of

² The discussion of industrialization, labor, and the South in the following paragraphs is based on course readings in Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (Hill and Wang, 1982); Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); James C. Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984* (University Press of Kentucky, 1984)

horses was the obvious answer. The lumber itself was used for various types of construction and crafts, but the bark was also an important factor. Tree bark was a key ingredient in the tanning of leather, and many tanneries operated in the South at this time. Horses were the dominant source of power during this time of industrialization, so they needed to be easily accommodated and readily accessible to many people, regardless of where they lived. Thus the livery stable emerged, a building where many horses could be stabled, rented out to people around the area, and also board visitors' horses while they stayed in town or conducted their business.

Even though the South had many of its own exclusive industries, it never gained the same industrial velocity as the North. The South lagged behind the North not only because of its late start in industry, but also due to the cheap labor and the sheer abundance of that cheap labor. This labor surplus did not allow for labor scarcities—the driving issue that pushed the North to increase capital investment. The South was less attractive to skilled immigrants because of extremely low wages, so there was a significantly lower, more homogeneous population. Wealthy landowners also played a role: though they were supportive of the wealth industry may bring, they were also wary of it. They were hesitant to disrupt the already established social and political order, of which they were currently at the top.

Northern businessmen offered incentives for industrialists to move southward with the use of municipal bonds. The industrialists would come to a Southern town with the promise of wealth and prosperity. However, if that town did not comply with the standards and requirements of the factory, the business owner would simply move his establishment elsewhere. Many Southern towns desperately needed to increase their

wealth, so they would agree to any terms set out by the factory. In this way many Northern industrialists were able to exploit Southern towns. Whenever there was talk of a railroad coming through an area, different communities would always scramble to get the railway to build a stop in their town. When the railroad did come to town, horses were much less needed for long distance hauling and transportation. However, they were needed more than ever for short distance hauling. Once the materials were loaded off the train, they still needed to get to various parts of the town.³ Even though the South was becoming more industrialized, most of the Southern industries still had a strong base in agriculture of some form. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, some farm machinery was in use, such as huge steam-powered tractors. But these machines were too heavy to move easily and were difficult to work with in rough ground. And even with the invention of one of the first modern tractors in 1892, work horses remained the driving power behind agricultural production.

One of the key themes in the story of Southern industrialization was the mercantilist economy of the South. They were utterly dependent on the North. The North provided them with much of their business, and the use of railroads only enhanced this dependency. The North was the main source of Southern capital. The South was not self-sufficient—without Northern interest, it would collapse. The Southern condition can be seen as a “quasi-colonial” one; they were, in a sense, owned by the North. Although the South made up thirty percent of the country’s population, they only contributed ten percent of the country’s industrial output.⁴ Industry was still a mostly Northern venture. The Northern horse at this time was also playing a significantly different role than the

³ Greene, *Horses at Work*.

⁴ Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society*

Southern horse. Horses in cities were being used primarily for mass transit, whereas Southern horses were still rooted in agriculture, as well as transportation. The United States horse population steadily rose from 1840 all the way up to 1920 before starting to taper off at the approach of the middle of the twentieth century. In 1840 there was a little less than 5 million horses in the country. By 1920 there were roughly 27 million horses.⁵ Horses held such a strong place in the country, they were able to prosper alongside the automobile for about 20 years, until the automobile became a necessity rather than a luxury. For two decades horses and cars shared the roads of both the North and the majority of the South.

However, a small place existed within the “Greater South” that didn’t fit the traditional postbellum Southern mold. The Shenandoah Valley of Virginia is a geographically isolated area, settled by immigrants from Pennsylvania and German Anabaptists. These people’s geographic isolation contributed greatly to their cultural isolation from the rest of the South. The Valley has been described as only “ambiguously Southern.”⁶ This was not only because of cultural and economic ties to the North; the Valley exhibited a strong ability in self-sufficiency. Rather than growing the cotton that dominated the rest of the South, the people of the Valley practiced a mixed agriculture, with an especially strong wheat economy. Slavery did not play a significant role in the Valley. Though it did exist, the Valley did not require the gang labor force that cotton harvesting did. Families ran most of the farms, and a strong sense of community existed here. Many farmers would help their neighbor with his crop, and lend out horses or, if he

⁵ Greene, *Horses at Work*.

⁶ Kenneth E. Koons and Warren R. Hofstra, eds., *After the Backcountry: Rural Life in the Great Valley of Virginia, 1800-1900* (University of Tennessee Press, 2000).

had them, slaves. The people here were not only neighborly, but versatile with their work. If wheat wasn't in season, it wasn't unusual for a farmer to head out to the mountains for a season and work for his friend or neighbor who stripped bark for a living.

The Valley was described as existing in a “happy state of mediocrity.”⁷ The people didn't produce in large amounts because they didn't need to. Farmers grew what they needed to for their families and sold the surplus. The debt from sharecropping wasn't present in the Valley because there was very little, if any, sharecropping, and family run farms were little affected by the absence of slave labor. Yet interestingly, this little pocket of Virginia which had little to do with the rest of the South stood out in one area more so than any other place in the entire state: draft horses. Draft horses have a much bulkier, heavier build than carriage or riding horses. They are fairly great in size, typically standing anywhere from 60 to 70 inches at the withers, or shoulder, which makes them the ideal choice for farm work, since they have the muscle mass and sheer bulk to pull extremely heavy loads. Their large, broad hooves prevent them from sinking too deeply in soft soil, something that would cause a smaller, less bulky horse much trouble. Their massive build is stunning, and they radiate sheer power. They were the true work horses of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

Water Street in Harrisonburg was the center of the Virginia horse market from the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. It's close proximity to the railroad depot and access to the water of Black's Run made it the ideal location for horse and livestock stables. On Court Days, the entire street became a showroom for various horsemen to present their stock of horses. People came from all over the state to

⁷ Koons and Hofstra, *After the Backcountry*.

participate in the horse market here. A *Rockingham Register* article from 1890 recalls a day when over one hundred horsemen came from Washington, Baltimore, Pennsylvania, and Richmond to buy horses.⁸ Harrisonburg journalists wrote about the horse market in town with beaming pride. Each court day was followed by an article recounting what an excellent day it was for the horse market and reminded everyone what a grand place Harrisonburg held in the draft horse business. Even local drug stores catered to the prosperous horse market: in 1903 Avis' Drug Store placed an ad in *The Daily News Record* advertising "condition powders for work horses," supplements said to improve the horse's health in preparation for the upcoming spring work.⁹ A few hundred horses were usually sold on court days, an astounding number for such a small place. A February 1903 *Daily News Record* article discussed the quality and profit of the horse market over the previous year, and stated that an average of 6 carloads of horses were shipped out by train each month. With 20 horses per carload, that averaged out to 1,440 horses shipped annually, bringing in an annual receipt of \$158,400.¹⁰ In 1902, 6 carloads monthly was the average; however, in March 1889 the *Rockingham Register* stated that 15 carloads were shipped after Court Day, representing a peak time for the Harrisonburg horse market.¹¹ A 1949 *Daily News Record* article was published giving a brief history of Harrisonburg, and it stated that until the close of World War I, Harrisonburg was one of the principal draft horse markets of the East.¹² Besides draft horses, Harrisonburg was also very proud of other breeds of horses they sold, such as the smaller stature hackney

⁸ *Rockingham Register*, 21 March 1890

⁹ *Daily News Record*, 14 March 1903

¹⁰ *Daily News Record*, 14 March 1903

¹¹ *Rockingham Register*, 21 March 1889

¹² *Daily News Record*, 15 July 1949

colts, which were said to be the very best coach horses at the time—“No other such horses are known in the country, and these are favorably spoken of everywhere.” Saddle horses, the lightweight horses bred and schooled for riding, were also sold abundantly, and said to have “a reputation which is equal to that of any of the Virginia horses.”¹³

The legacy of Harrisonburg draft horses has not disappeared into the distant and forgotten past just yet. There is one building, a monument to this piece of American life, still standing on East Water Street. The Hirsch Brothers Stable is large brick building, now housing [the Bella Luna Restaurant below and high-end residential units above]¹⁴, that is wrought with history all its own. A large sign on the front of the building proudly declares “Established by Ludwig Hirsch 1871.” Ludwig Hirsch came to Harrisonburg from Austria in 1867 with hopes of going into business for himself. He dealt in all kinds of livestock, both buying and selling. Before the building became Hirsch Brothers, it was a livery under the name of Crabill, and then Warren. An 1882 *Old Commonwealth* article stated that Crabill and Warren planned to open a stable that would surpass all others in the area.¹⁵ After Crabill and Warren, it went by the name of Pankey’s, until Ludwig Hirsch’s sons incorporated the business and named it Hirsch Brothers. It could accommodate 300 animals, and they advertised horses of all grades, as well as cattle and cows. They could do all kinds of hauling, and stated that baggage was their specialty.¹⁶ The phrase “baggage a specialty” is fairly vague, but it is likely that they conducted much business by transporting travelers’ luggage from the railroad station to their lodging, much like a modern day shuttle service. J.C. Staples, a livery stable next door, advertised

¹³ *The Daily News Record*, 14 March 1903

¹⁴ Text edited in 2016 to reflect changes to the building’s use since 2007.

¹⁵ *Old Commonwealth*, 16 March 1882

¹⁶ *Harrisonburg Daily News*, c.1910

a form of tourism, offering not only to take visitors to and from the trains, but also anywhere in the entire city.¹⁷ The Hirsch building stood right in the heart of the Harrisonburg horse bazaar, as it came to be known, and did much for the community, in both horse sales and services. In 1903, Hirsch supplied a team of horses to carry a water pump to extinguish the largest fire in the history of Dayton at the time.¹⁸ In 1881 the Hirsch building (at the time it was still under the name of Crabill) was also home to quite a celebrity of the time, Sam Purdy, a champion trotting stallion of the Pacific coast. Trotting horses are a very specialized kind of racehorse with a distinct gait, and this stallion was among the very best of his kind. Sam Purdy was housed in the building's "first class apartments" and was visited by hundreds in a very elaborate reception.¹⁹

Automobiles were introduced to the Valley right around 1900, and by 1917 the horse market has begun to suffer the effects of a changing industry. Though horses were still numerous, their Court Day sales were dropping steadily. The high price of feed and the labor involved in raising a colt didn't allow farmers to lower prices to regain their customers, and the market continued to suffer as a result.²⁰ Newspaper headlines read "Autos Are Gaining In Favor" and "Horse Market Not Good." A visiting horse buyer who had been in the business for a number of years was questioned about the stagnant horse market.

If somebody would take a sledge hammer and work on Henry Ford, the people might have a chance. But what can we do against the automobiles and auto trucks? Down in my hometown it is next to impossible to sell a

¹⁷ *Rockingham Register*, 14 February 1884

¹⁸ Kirby S. Bassford, "Sketches of Harrisonburg Schools and Firemen's Organizations."

¹⁹ *Old Commonwealth*, 10 March 1881

²⁰ *The Daily News Record*, 20 February 1917

driving horse. I know people there who are going about in automobiles that couldn't afford a good set of Sunday harness a few years ago.²¹

The price of automobiles grew lower by the year, while the price of buying and raising horses climbed steadily higher. Farmers were unable to profitably sell young horses for a mere \$150, which was the very most many people were prepared to pay. A larger profit was needed if they wanted to have enough money to stay in business. By 1919 the headlines were reading "Livery Stable Days Numbered" and "This Is an Age of Automobiles."²² Many stables were either closing down or converting to auto garages, such as the L.J. Golden Carriage Company which was located just a few buildings away from Hirsch Brothers. A 1912 map of Harrisonburg marks the Hirsch building as "Sale Stable," but by 1918 it is merely labeled "Sales." The automobile had begun to take charge not only for technological reasons, but ideological ones as well. Horses were beginning to no longer be viewed as living machines.

The Hirsch building serves as a physical reminder of the history of Harrisonburg, and its peculiar little niche in the South. The general isolation and self-sufficiency of this community was countered by the horse market, which was a major business all throughout the East. Ambiguously Southern and now ambiguously isolated, this place will not settle with a single identity. It has multiple identities, and all tell a unique story about this little piece of the Shenandoah Valley.

²¹ *The Daily News Record*, 20 February 1917

²² *The Daily News Record*, 15 March 1919