

Conestoga Wagons — a Fun (hi-)Story on an Amazing Wagon

Conestoga wagons are one of the coolest parts of our local history. In the 1750s, Lancaster County, especially the western portion where Elizabethtown is located, was the back woods of the colonial frontier. In a small town named Conestoga, a German-immigrant family made heavy-duty, rugged wagons for transporting freight over the rough colonial roads. The wagons travelled from the coastal ports of Philadelphia and Baltimore to farms, mills, and trading posts in this area. Once they made it to Elizabethtown, they would load up with local goods and transport them back to be taken aboard the waiting ships. These wagons were so useful and common, that they say 100s a day passed along the Lancaster-Philadelphia road.

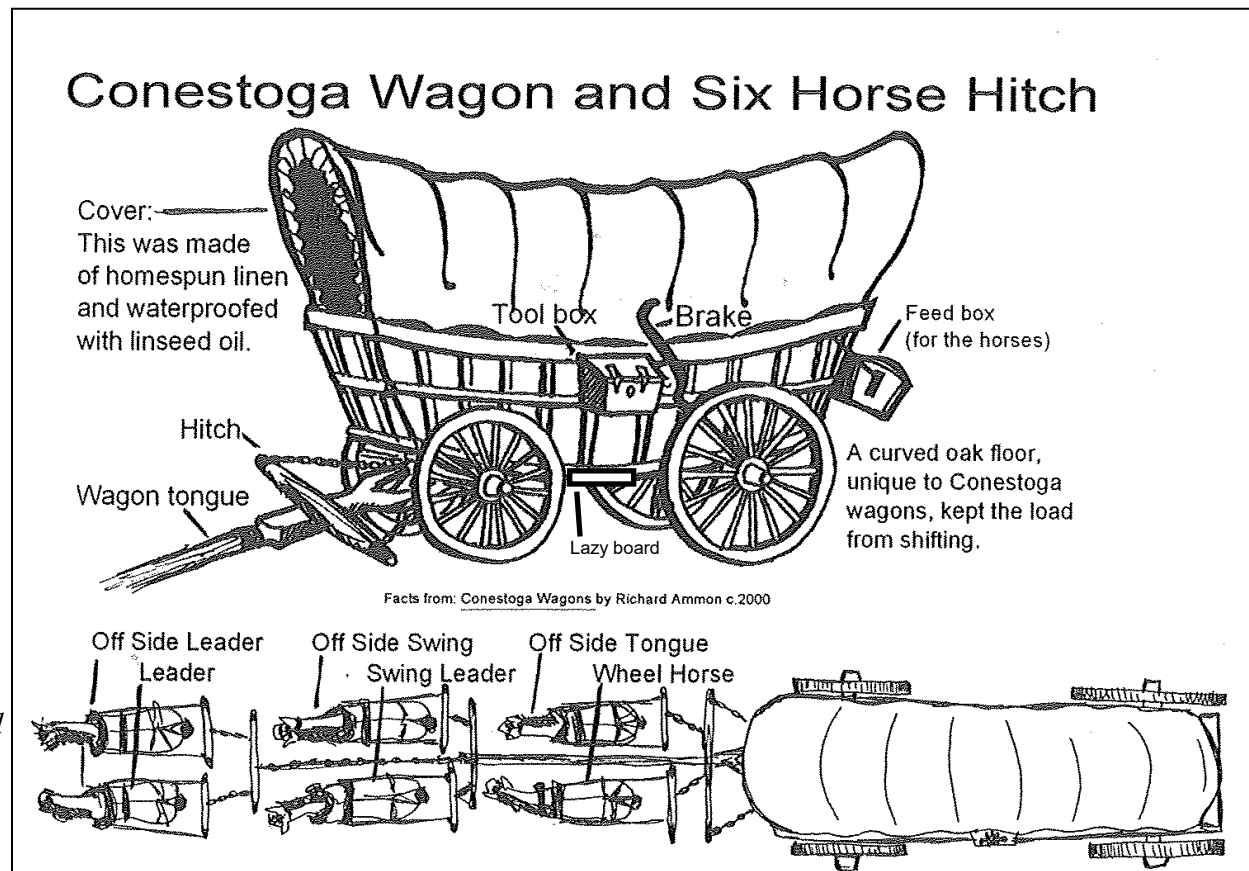
The wagons were the tractor trailer trucks of the colonial time. While they look similar to covered wagons that farmers and pioneers used, they were much bigger and heavier and required a team of 6 horses to pull them. When all six horses were hitched, the team and wagons were as long as a tractor trailer truck is today. There was no seat for the driver, who was called a teamster. (We still call truck drivers teamsters today!) The teamster had to either ride one of the horses, walk along beside the wagon, or sit on a small board, called the *lazy board*, that could be pulled out from the left side of the wagon. The floor of the wagon bed was curved—higher at the open ends, and lower in the middle — to keep barrels of freight from shifting and rolling around when going over hills and rough roads.

So, imagine you are a Conestoga Wagon teamster. Your job is to transport bags of flour and cornmeal from a mill in Elizabethtown to a ship that is waiting to sail out of Philadelphia. You have 6 horses to help pull the wagon, but in turn, they need to be fed and watered along the way and at the beginning and end of each day.

The loaded wagon is heavy, and the horses only walk, so you travel about 15 to 20 miles a day. It is roughly 100 miles from Elizabethtown to Philadelphia, and with luck and dry weather you should be able to get there in 5 days. From Elizabethtown to Lancaster is a one day journey.

At night, you unhitch the team, get them their evening feed and water, and then you tie each horse's lead line to a tree or the side of the wagon for the night. Next, you need to make your own dinner; maybe some beans and bacon, or if you saw a rabbit along the way and managed to shoot it, you could cook that for your meal. At bed time, you unroll your sleeping bag and sleep under the wagon.

The next day, you get up, feed and water the horses and hitch them up, each in their specific spot. The *leader horses* are the front two, and they know word commands for “go” “stop” “turn left” and “turn right”. The next two horses are the *swing team*. These two are really good at keeping a good pace, and making sure the horses all work together. The pair closest to the wagon are the *tongue and wheel horses*. These are the biggest and strongest, and also the ones that you can ride on if you get tired of walking.



Breakfast and hitching up takes about 2 hours of your day. Once you are off, you have to watch out for any trouble along the way...the wagons have great big wheels, so don't get stuck too often, but with no bridges to help cross most of the creeks, you will go through a lot of mud. If you do get stuck, you may be there until another wagon driver comes along to help pull you out. If you run into a wagon that is stuck, and you help him pull *his* wagon out, the teamster will give you a set of bells to tie to your horses. The more sets of bells a teamster has, means not only that he is helpful to others, but that he rarely gets stuck himself! Another thing to watch for are other wagons coming the other way. Colonial roads go through thick forests, and are narrow and rocky. It's important not to enter a narrow area when another wagon is already using that part of the road. Going backwards is not something Conestoga wagons do well! That's another reason for the bells! Other wagons can hear you coming and often will let you go through a narrow spot first.

A big problem for regular farm wagons is a steep hill. As you begin to descend a steep hill, a heavy wagon can very quickly start to roll too fast, and can roll right into the horses and cause a wreck. To solve that, farm wagon drivers have to stop at the top of a steep hill and chain the rear wagon wheels to the bed so that they cannot turn. The horses need to drag the wagon down the hill. This is more work for the poor horses, but is safer for everyone in the long run. The Conestoga wagon, however, has a brake system! This was a new technology for wagons in colonial times. The teamster can pull out his lazy board, and sit or stand on that. That gives him a good view of the road ahead, and the brake handle is right next to him. As the wagon starts down the hill, the teamster can simply pull on the brake handle to slow the wagon.

After several days of travel, you finally arrive in Philadelphia. The streets in the city are very narrow, and it's important to know exactly where you are going because turning around is not an option. If you go down a wrong alley, or run into someone coming the opposite direction in a narrow spot, you would need to unhitch your team, turn everyone around one at a time, and then take your wagon backwards. Unhitch and re-hitch everyone again until you're going forward once more. Not a good thing to have to do! You need to go straight to the dock that is expecting your wagon load of goods. Your horses can't drive the wagon backwards, but they do have another special skill. You can drive your team and wagon up alongside the loading dock, then, keeping the wagon still, swing the team of horses perpendicular to the wagon bed. Slowly, as the team keeps shifting to the side, the wagon will turn until the back of the bed is against the dock. Voila! You can now unload the flour and cornmeal. The sailors will use that for food as they take a ship full of furs, tobacco, lumber and maple syrup to England!

Next, you will load fabrics, rifles, pots and pans, and other goods from newly arrived British ships into your Conestoga wagon to take back to the trading post in Elizabethtown.

In 5 days or so, you and your horses can take a day off and relax in your home in Elizabethtown, in the frontier of the American colonies!



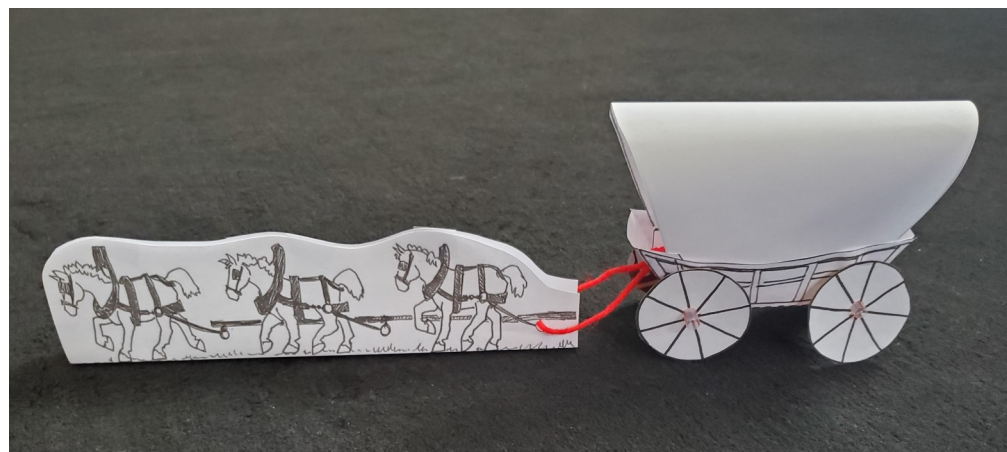
Conestoga Wagon Craft

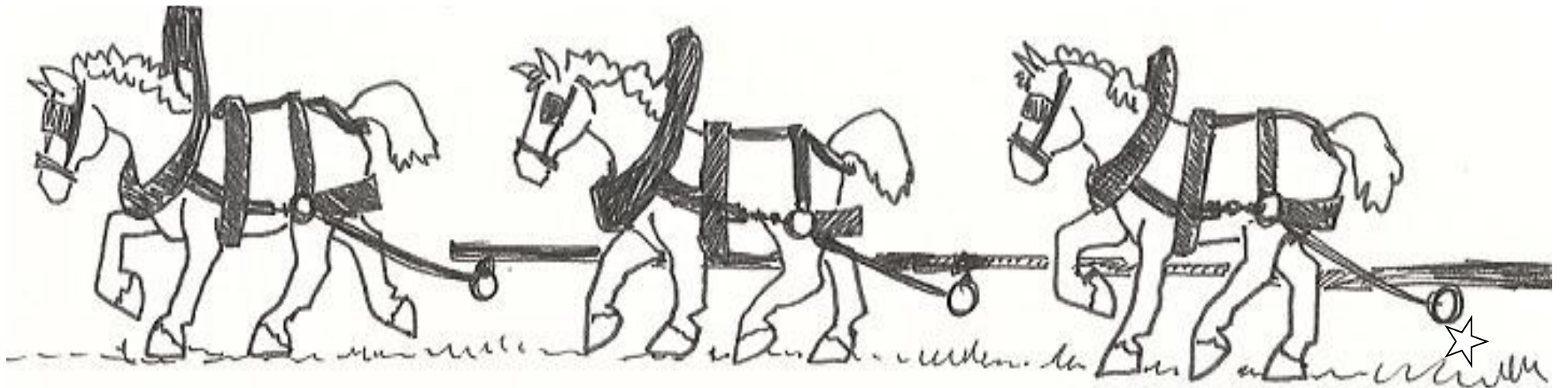
Winters Heritage House Museum, Elizabethtown, PA www.ElizabethtownHistory.org

To assemble your Conestoga Wagon you will need; Printed Conestoga Wagon (2 sheets), tape or glue, scissors, yarn, a straw, hole punch, and an empty cereal box or similar cardboard.

Skills; Scissors cutting, coloring, tying, clear taping. Concepts; Assembly creation, history learning, history play

1. If you want to color the pieces, it would be easiest to do that before step 3.
2. Cut the strip of wheels from the horses and tape or glue them to cereal box or cardboard.
3. Cut out the wagon, bonnet, wheels, and horses. (Small children may need some assistance). You should have a wagon, bonnet, four cardboard wheels and one piece with six horses on.
4. Punch a hole through the stars (☆) under the seat on the wagon, at the back of the tongue (horses are attached to the tongue), and through the center of each wheel.
5. Fold wagon piece along the dotted lines (- - - - - ·). Then matching the end of wagon side to fold line of tab tape or glue tab to inside of wagon, repeat on all four corners of wagon.
6. Cut 2 pieces of a straw approx. 2 3/4 inches. Insert straws into openings between wagon sides and bottom for axles.
7. Fold each horse-piece along the dotted lines (- - - - - ·) so they can stand up. Stand horse section up, be sure he's straight, then tape above each horse.
8. Tie a lead line of yarn through the holes from tongue to wagon so that the horses and wagon are connected.
9. Insert wheels onto straw axles tape end of axle to prevent wheels from falling off. Smaller wheels go in front.
10. Lastly tape or glue each rectangle side of bonnet to inner side wagon.

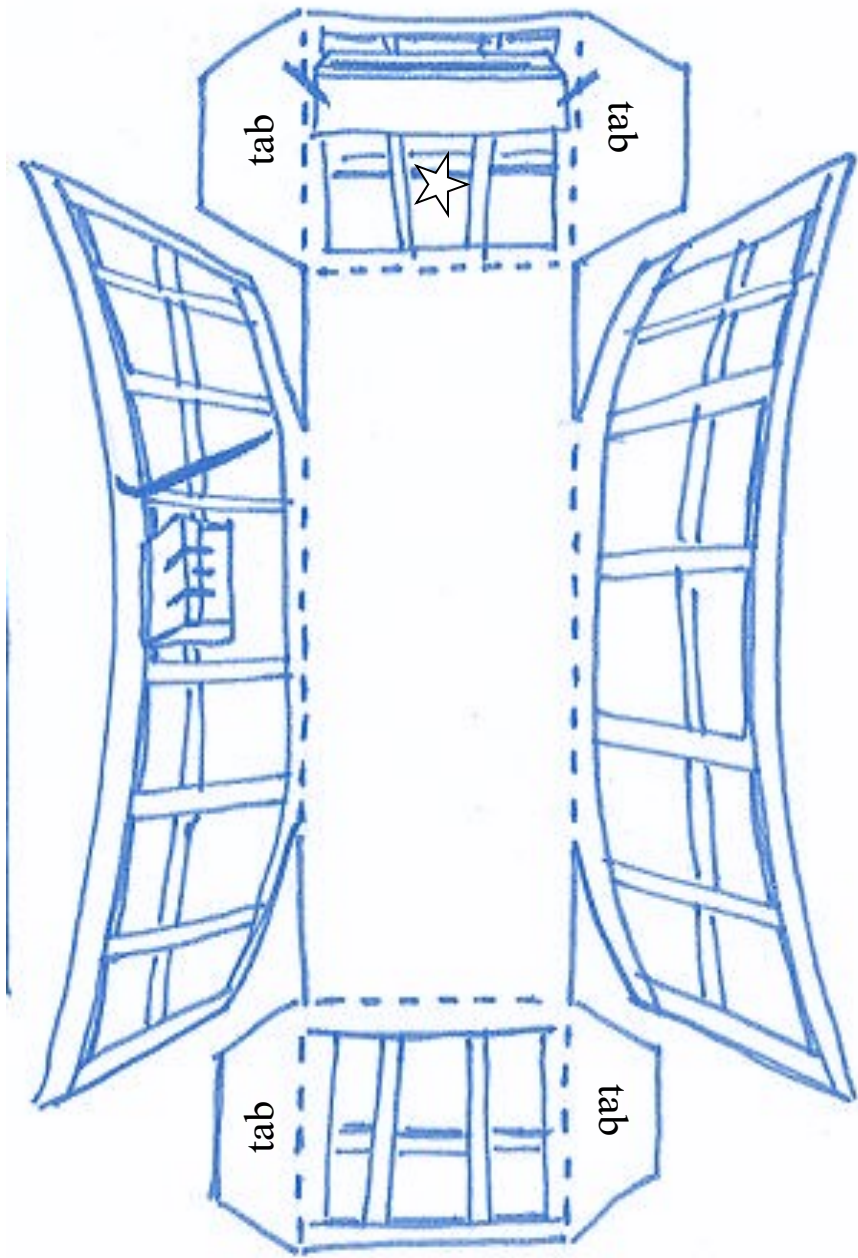




Wagon tongue and
6-horse team



wheels



Wagon bed

bonnet

