

## A Special Addition to the

# THRASHER CARRIAGE MUSEUM

Written by: **Shelby Calhoun**



PHOTO BY LANCE C. BELL

## THE PHAETON CARRIAGE – FAST AND FURIOUS, BUT ELEGANT

The Thrasher Carriage collection is a rare and extensive collection of horse-drawn vehicles dating to the late 1800s and early 1900s. The collection is unsurpassed in its breadth and depth and includes everything from milkman carts to luxurious sleighs used by the Vanderbilt family, funeral hearses, and President Teddy Roosevelt's inauguration coach. Accessories such as hitches, saddles, bearskin lap robes, charcoal foot warmers, lanterns, and more, offer a glimpse into America's transportation lifestyle before the advent of the automobile.

Jim Steele has been the manager of Shamrock Farm in Woodbine, Maryland, for 45 years. As an amateur carriage driver, Jim frequently attends the carriage auctions held by Martin Auctioneers, Inc. in New Holland, Pennsylvania. Over time, Jim has purchased several items for use by his family, a wagonette to give rides around their farm and a high gig for his limited combined driving events. Jim's attendance at the auctions enables him to keep an eye out for his favorite vehicle, an Irish Jaunting Cart, while

looking for other special carriages. At the fall 2019 sale, Jim came across a spectacular Phaeton. Jim noted, "I was impressed with the meticulous restoration and paint job, and because the price was right, I purchased it. To my dismay, the history on the vehicle was unavailable, except that it came from an anonymous estate, and that it had been professionally restored to its original condition."

After transporting the Phaeton back to the farm, and consulting with his wife, Christie, they decided that the Phaeton was just too special to be used on the farm and should be showcased in a museum. Having visited the Thrasher Carriage Museum in Frostburg, Maryland, many times while two of their sons attended Frostburg State University, the Steeles decided to donate the Phaeton to the museum in the name of their two FSU graduates, Christopher and Timothy.

Jim mentions, "I remember being so impressed with Gary Bartik and the quality of the exhibits of historic carriages

at the Thrasher. We are happy that many more people will be able to enjoy the Phaeton.”

Phaeton carriages were sporty with four large wheels and a collapsible top. The seat was quite high and sometimes required a ladder to access. Phaetons were fast, but had a high center of gravity leaving them vulnerable to tipping. The sides were open and that exposed a gentleman's trousers or a lady's skirt to flying mud.

With open seating, the Phaeton was both fast and dangerous, giving meaning to its name, drawn from the mythical Phaethon, son of Helios, who nearly set the Earth on fire while attempting to drive the chariot of the Sun.

A Spider Phaeton, of American origin and made for gentlemen drivers, was a high and lightly constructed carriage with a covered seat in front, and a footman's seat behind. The term footman originally applied to servants who ran in front or alongside their masters who were on horseback—servants who were literally on foot. But by the end of the eighteenth century, coaches and carriages could travel faster because roads had greatly improved, making a seat for the servant tending the carriage necessary.

At the end of the nineteenth century, an affluent Victorian lady took a great interest in the appointments and accessories of her horse carriage. Horse carriage manufacturers catered to this attention by providing a variety of linings and extravagant fittings to help the society woman through her day of calling, shopping, and other engagements. Horse carriages used for every day purposes were generally lined with a dark color. Some women carried out the color of their livery and carriages in the lining. For instance, if the livery was dark blue with light trimmings, the carriage-linings were of dark blue. Red was not used very often in the late nineteenth century. Leather, cloth, felt, and sometimes corduroy were used — of course, of the best quality. Many of the smaller horse carriages were designed in light



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cloths because fashion dictated that light gowns with the light cloths looked particularly well.

The Phaeton donated by the Steele's was manufactured by Joubert & White of Glens Falls, N.Y. The deluxe Phaeton interior features Bradford Broadcloth upholstery of light slate. The body and carriage parts are painted hunter green with yellow ochre striping, and the 'bonnet' is of black leather. The Phaeton also features a footman's seat.

The Thrasher Carriage Museum is located at the terminus of the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad and is a stopping place on the Great Allegheny Passage.

**Thrasher Carriage Museum**  
19 Depot St., Frostburg, MD 21532  
Call for hours or special appointments – 301-777-7200  
[Alleganymuseummd.org/thrasher-carriage-collection](http://Alleganymuseummd.org/thrasher-carriage-collection)