

The Historic Carriage Barn at Ringwood Manor

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A crushing mill dating to 1765 was located where the far western end of the present carriage barn is now. Evidence of this earlier structure being incorporated in the new structure can be seen in the basement of the barn, with the hand-hewn beams typical of that era still present. When the Cooper & Hewitt families purchased the Ringwood Manor property in 1854 and began transforming it into a country estate, the building was remodeled for use as a carriage barn. The structure was enlarged by the family several times (c. 1860, 1875, 1885, and 1900). These additions brought the structure to its present size, an impressive 187 feet in length.



Horses & carriages were utilized for transportation purposes throughout the 19th century. But during the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, riding and coaching became leisure and sporting activities for the upper classes. Only those with expendable income could afford to own, care, and house horses whose sole purpose was to be used for fun outings driving around bucolic bridle paths and carriages roads. The added expense of having employees on staff to oversee the care of these prized animals, along with cost the riding and driving equipment, and equestrian sports could be an expensive pursuit! A carriage barn such as the one at

Ringwood Manor would only have been found at estates owned by wealthy families.

The sport of driving was something the entire Hewitt family and their guests could enjoy together. Jumping in a beautiful carriage and dashing about the winding bridle paths and drives in and around the rolling hills of Ringwood allowed people to socialize, enjoy the scenery, and feel the wind in their faces. From sizeable carriages like omnibuses and landaus that could hold large parties of riders, to small dog carts and gigs that were generally ridden by one person and were designed for speed, to broughams, phaetons, surreys, buggies, there was a different vehicle for every person, occasion, and style of driving!

While the entire Hewitt family enjoyed equestrian activities, daughter Sarah Cooper Hewitt (1859-1930), fell in love with the sport. While Sarah was an excellent equestrian, she was no slouch when it came to the sport of driving. Many of “Miss Sally’s” carriages were ordered from the Brewster Carriage Company, located at Broome Street in New York City. Brewster’s carriages were of an exceptionally high quality. Each could have customizations, from paint colors and leather upholstery to better suspension systems and larger wheels for smoother rides. The Hewitt family even had their coat-of-arms painted on the sides of the carriages. The orders Miss Sally placed show the various upgrades and changes she requested to be made to the standard vehicle. She knew exactly what each vehicle needed in order to ensure the carriage not only looked beautiful, but also functioned at its best. Between the years of 1889 and 1900, Sarah Hewitt placed no fewer than 11 orders for a variety of vehicles.



Utilizing decades of knowledge, research, and trial-and-error at Ringwood Manor, Sarah became an expert on the subject of driving, producing a scholarly article entitled, *Some Suggestions for the Repairs of Country Roads*. It was published in a variety of respected journals and magazines between 1893 and 1894, including *The US Journal of Agriculture*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *The Journal of Comparative Medicine and Veterinary Archives*. She wrote in the opening paragraph of the article:

REPAIRS OF COUNTRY ROADS

By SARAH COOPER HEWITT, in *Harper's Weekly*.

So much has been said about the difficulty of making good country roads without involving a great outlay of money that it seems rather presuming to take a contrary view of the subject, but I think the matter has been much exaggerated, and that in any part of the country where clay, hardpan gravel or disintegrated rock can be found it is quite easy to get excellent roads at comparatively little expense. I speak from some practical experience acquired in road-making in a very wild and hilly region of northern New Jersey, where we are accustomed to work out our taxes on 13 or more miles of public highway, and by adopting the following system we have found it easy to keep the roads in such good condition that they can be driven over at all times with speed, comfort, and pleasure.

The proper time to begin work or repairs is in the early spring, just after the frost comes out of the ground, so soon as the roads have thoroughly settled and dried out. Where the road is old, with a good solid bed, the first thing to be done is to cover it all over with a light dressing of gravelly material, and when possible finish it off with a top-coating of hardpan, but avoid putting it on too thickly, lest the going become heavy, as it is slow to dry out. Loam is worse than useless, because it never packs properly, and makes mud. Care must be taken to raise the road up toward the center, and give it a slight elevation at the crests, but only just enough to shed the water on either side into the gutters. On a level, straight road the crests should only be slightly convex, for rounding up a narrow road in the middle is objectionable, inasmuch as it has the immediate effect of forcing wheels of vehicles to run always in the same line and wear away the new material into deep ruts that quickly become water courses for the wash of the next rain, and assist the rapid destruction of the road by preventing the water from reaching the gutters. As fast as the new material can be laid on it should be very carefully raked over to remove all the large stones and so many of the smaller ones as possible; for where this precaution is neglected until the stuff packs down hard, which happens in a few days, the stones become so firmly embedded that they are not only difficult to remove, but soon cause the road to wear in lumps and bumps, and later

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Recognizing the historic value of her carriages and equestrian equipment, Sarah searched for a location that would accept all the items as a group to be displayed and enjoyed by the public. When the Museum of the City of New York declined her collection due to lack of space, she approached The Henry Ford Museum, located in Dearfield, Michigan. They gladly accepted. In August of 1930, Sarah had four railroad boxcars containing nearly 40 carriages, wagons, sleighs, and carts, along with saddles, blankets, clothing, and tack shipped to Michigan.

Over time, The Henry Ford Museum sold a portion of the collection, including several of Sarah's carriages. Ringwood Manor, through the help of its non-profit friends group the North Jersey Highlands Historical Society, has been fortunate to reacquire three of these carriages. Additionally, The Henry Ford Museum, along with the Cooper Union archives, have graciously loaned original Hewitt pieces for display. In the spring of 2016, using a generous grant from the Brotherton Foundation, restoration work began on the interior of the carriage barn on the property. The space was opened to the public in the summer of 2017 and showcases four original Hewitt carriages and a multitude of equestrian tack. The exhibit space is open to the public every weekend from the beginning of May through the end of October between 11am and 4pm.

