

Saddlery in Loudoun

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Horse Head by Nic Fiddian Green, National Sporting Library and Museum. Middleburg, Va.

Although much of the information in this article deals with unique skills and tools used by the one remaining full-service saddler in Loudoun, it is also an homage to the network of independent artisans in the county's horse industry, all of whom collaborate.

Since Middleburg was established in 1787 by an Act of the Virginia General Assembly, the village's horse population has always exceeded the number of humans. As an example of their uses, public transportation for students in Virginia started as horse drawn wagons "school hacks" developed in the 1880s. The first recorded use of hacks in Loudoun was in 1911 in the Jefferson district used to transport white students to the Hillsboro school from the closed Salem and Edge Grove schools. When there was snow, the wagon wheels were replaced with skis.¹

Used for general transportation as well as farm work, the number of horses drastically increased at the turn of the century as wealthy investors moved here from the North to purchase large tracts of land for fox hunting. The area was already the home of America's oldest hunt Piedmont Fox Hounds (1840)² and was later joined by Orange County Hounds (1903)³ and Middleburg Hunt (1906).⁴ 1853 saw the beginning of the nearby Upperville Colt and

Horse Show, the oldest in America. Founded by Colonel Richard Henry Dulany, who also started the Piedmont Fox Hounds, the Upperville show was originally designed to

¹ Gene Scheel (historian and mapmaker), interviewed by Nathan Bailey, Loudoun County, VA , 14 August 2020. (Held in Notes, Edwin Washington Project Archives, Round Hill, Loudoun County, VA.)

² Heidi Baumstark, 2020. "The Oldest Hunt in America is in Middleburg ." *Middleburg Life and Hunt Country*. November. Accessed 3 September 2021. <https://www.middleburglife.com/the-oldest-hunt-in-america-is-in-middleburg/>.

³ R.A. Pearson, 2019. *The Orange County Hounds, the Plains, Virginia: A History*. Lanham, Md.: Derrydale Press.

⁴ 2013 "History." The Middleburg Hunt. <http://www.middleburghunt.com/>

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encourage better treatment of young horses and improve the local breeding stock. In 1905, Harry Worcester Smith staged a British-American Foxhound match in nearby Upperville, Fauquier County.⁵ There was also the inaugural Llangollen Race Meeting in 1931⁶ and in Unison-Bloomfield their annual Horse Show begun in 1923 to support the local high school. In 1929, the show even attracted national celebrities like General Billy Mitchell, whose horse Sweet Mint, won second in light and middleweight green hunters.⁷ Horse shows were also popular at Foxcroft School for girls near Middleburg during the Second World War.⁸

Known as the Nation's Hunt and Horse Capital, Middleburg's equestrian activities now include fox hunting, dressage,⁹ steeple chasing,¹⁰ driving,¹¹ polo, three-day eventing, (aka house trials), show hunters, grand prix jumpers, pony club, endurance and trail riding. Thousands attend these events in Loudoun every year, including at Glenwood Park, the Middleburg spring races which began in 1911 when Middleburg Hunt's Master of Fox Hounds, Daniel Cox Sands, organized the first Middleburg Hunt Race Meet.

Not as well known, because they are hidden behind the splendor of these activities, is a network of collaborative farriers, veterinarians, massage therapists, chiropractors, dentists, horse transporters, tack, and saddlers/repair shops - all here to take care of the horses. Horse care was also part of the public-school experience at



Special leather projects can be very unusual, as with this "stuffed" pig, which had to have its ear repaired.

⁵ Eugene Scheel, "Memories of Miss Charlotte Noland," *Loudoun Times Mirror*, Leesburg, VA, 10 February 1977, Pg. B4.

⁶ Dorothy Ours, 2015. *Inaugural Llangollen Race Meeting 1931 (Sketches by Paul Brown)*. Middleburg, VA: National Sporting Library and Museum.

⁷ Staff, "Horse Show is Held," *The Times Dispatch*, Richmond, VA, 15 May 1929, Pg. 10.

⁸ Nina Carter Tabb, "Warrenton School Horse Show to be Held at Bouligny Farm," *The Times Dispatch*, Richmond, VA, 30 April 1942, Pg. 13.

⁹ A French term describing a form of riding performed in exhibition or for competition, but also as an art form. The preferred horse breed is the Andalusian, established in the 1500's from the Iberian Peninsula.

¹⁰ This is a race involving riding horses jumping over fences, water, etc. Extremely popular in the Olympics.

¹¹ Horses are hitched to wagons, carriages, carts, sleighs, or other horse-drawn vehicles used in pleasure driving, harness racing, farm work, horse shows, and international competition.



This custom leather object took an entire day to execute by a craftsperson with over 30 years of experience.



The Author

times. Horse tethering rings are known to have been used at the Colored Training School in Leesburg. Horses were also expensive. A black farm horse for example in Lovettsville sold for \$120 in 1888, around \$3,000 in current valuation.¹² In 1915 at the Loudoun County School Fair white students competed for prizes in draft horses used on farms, which was then Loudoun's predominant industry.¹³ Those are tall, muscular animals with a conformation suited for pulling. They can reach a height of 76 inches and weigh up to 2,000 pounds. Prizes at the 1915 fair also were awarded for essays on preservation of barnyard manure.¹⁴ This was an important prize since manure is organic and can be used as fertilizer.

Manure adds nutrients like nitrogen to the soil and useful bacteria and fungi, if composted properly. Today, special trucks carry straw and manure to mushroom farms in Pennsylvania.

Whatever the purpose of the horse, whether for agriculture or sport, maintenance is required and 2021 marks the 45th year that Journeyman Saddlers has been keeping Middleburg's equestrian community in good repair. Originally part of The Tack Box

¹² Letter from John Camphor to John Rust, 21 June 1888. John Rust Archives. (Held in the archives of the Edwin Washington Project).

¹³ Oscar Emerick, 14 June 1915. *Spring 1915 Report on Loudoun County School Fair*. Purcellville, VA: Loudoun County Public Schools. (Held in Archives of the Edwin Washington Project. 15.21 Yr. 1915.) Leon Meek and John di Zerega of Lincoln won first and second prizes for their ability to judge draft horses.

¹⁴ Ibid. Henry Thomas and John Reid of Lincoln won first and second prizes for their essays on the value and preservation of barnyard manure.

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(now in its 76th year of selling quality tack ¹⁵ and supplies), Journeymen has had the privilege of serving Olympians, and its repairs have traveled the world. All of this sounds grand but tack repair as well as designing/making custom pieces is a skill developed over the years and is a step-by-step process. Emergency repair requests are also common just before a show. All of this requires fine motor skills and the eye of an artist, especially when intricate design work. One mistake with a cutting tool can ruin an entire day's effort.

In this image to the right, Blake is sitting on a special "stitching horse" that is around 40 – 50 years old. Antiques like this can cost \$300-400, if in good condition. It is mainly made of oak and designed to keep items in place. Stitching is also time consuming, so the pine seat is designed for comfort. Operated with a foot pedal, it comes with leather grips so that the item won't be scratched.

The Journeymen staff of four has a combined bank of knowledge and experience of over 125 years and learns something new every day. Every job that comes in requires all the accumulated trade experience of each person – somewhat like the ongoing stacking of building blocks that never ends – each job teaches something for the next job.

Replacing a seat in a saddle, making a keeper for a bridle, creating a pattern, and then making chaps, making a tidy patch for a pair of riding boots, to making a belt for an heirloom buckle, Journeymen's work is widespread. From a camel saddle to Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' riding boots,



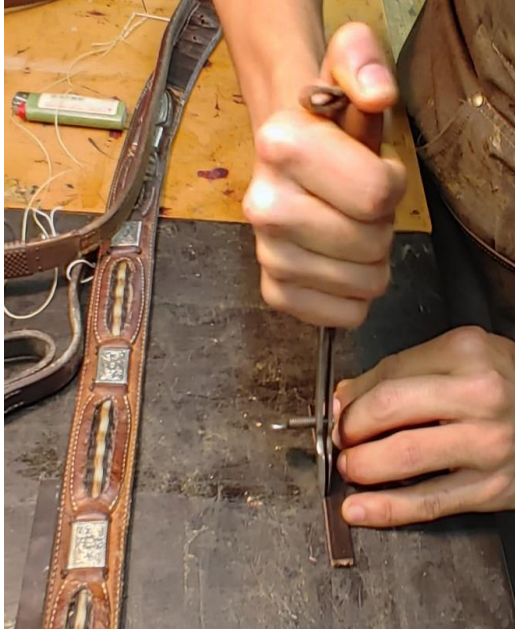
Blake on a Stitching Horse.



Edge Bevelers and Stitching Wheels

¹⁵ Tack means equipment or accessories such as saddles, stirrups, bridles, halters, reins, bits, harnesses, martingales, and breastplates, etc.

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Repairing a Navajo Belt.

this job requires dedication, skill, and imagination. Plus, it is very dirty work - not too many people bring in items that are all shiny, so there is usually a bit of time spent on cleaning before the repair is even started.

The edge bevelers on the left side of the above photo have very sharp blades used to remove the hard square corners from leather. The stitching wheels on the right side of the photo are known as awls or hole punchers and mark leather to indicate where stitching will take place. Like bevelers, they come in a variety of sizes. Unfortunately, working with such tools is becoming a dying art as not too many younger folks want to learn.

Blake Grant however is an example of the generation that could save the industry. He was born in Clarke County, Virginia and went to school at NYU; but returned during the COVID-19 epidemic. He also has a Loudoun connection in that his father owns Salon Aubrey in Middleburg. Blake wanted to work with his hands and so became a traditional apprentice, learning all the various skills needed in leather work. In the image to the left, Blake is using a hand creaser to slowly insert lines, which are guides for stitching. That way the final product will be straight. It can also be used to artistic designs. The repair is to a Navajo hand-made belt that has been used continuously for thirty years! Many of the tools like the creaser come from the pre-electrical era, often 100 years old, making shops like this one effectively a working industrial museum.



Because most of the work is custom, a wide range of nylon threads must be kept in stock.

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The image to the left shows a good example of how artisans help each other. The green machine is a standard cobbler's tool for refining boots, shoes, and other leather objects. The process creates a lot of leather bits. Rather than toss them, others take the bits, which are collected in the rear bag, and mix them with material to form a paste that moisturizes and conditions horse hooves.



1912 Landis No. 3 Harness Stitcher manufactured in St. Louis.

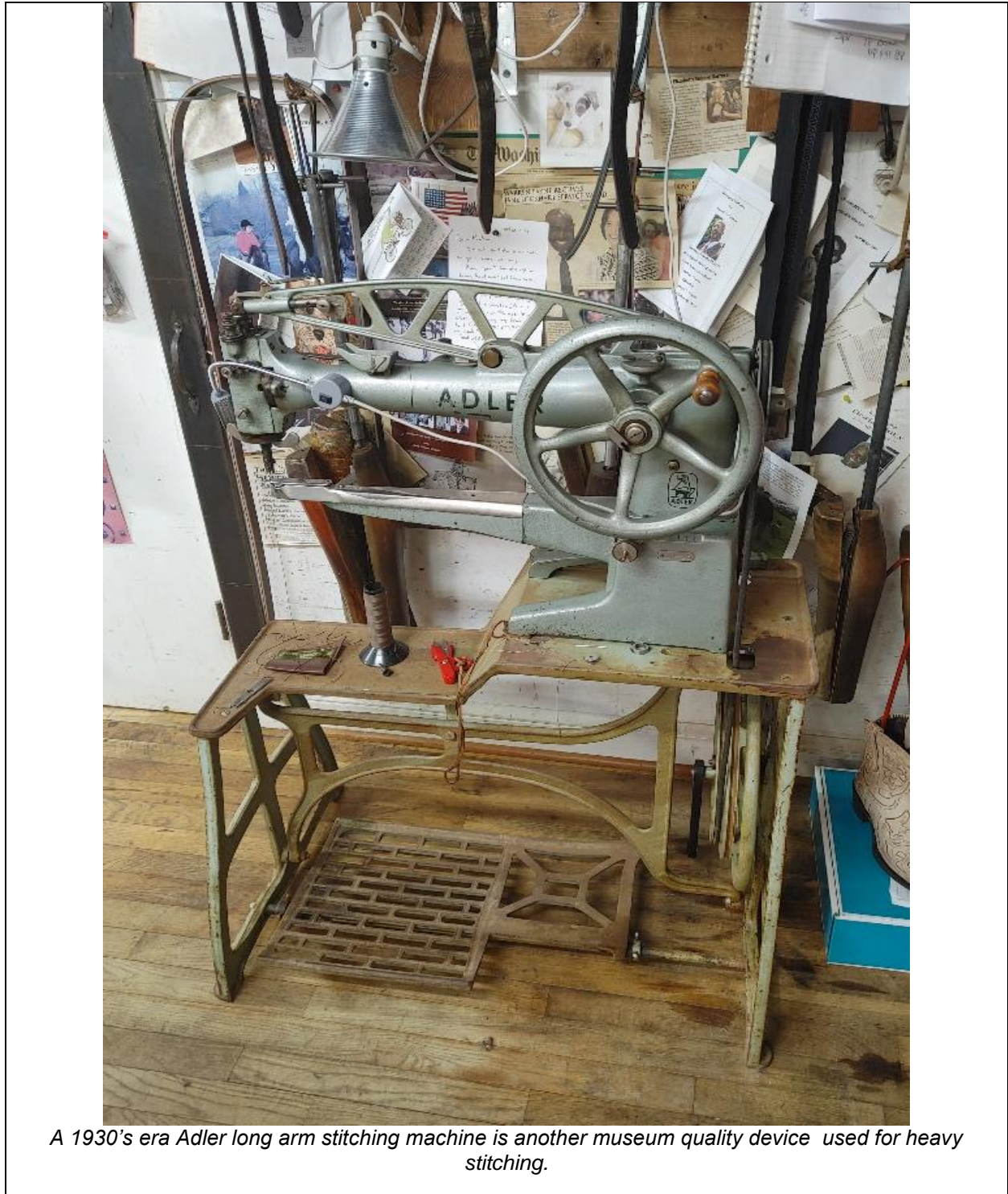
The Landis hand-run devices (see below and label above) are needed to manage accurate stitching on thick leather (up to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch) and can cost around \$4,000. Heavy 5 and 6 cord linen thread, lubricated with stitching wax is sometimes used as well to glue the stitch in place; but the main advantage is that if used slowly, the machine provides a steady, reliable line without scratches.



The 1912 Landis No. 3 Harness Stitcher



This 1867 C.C. Bellows Hand Crank Leather Creaser is used to mark where stitches go on leather straps and belts.



A 1930's era Adler long arm stitching machine is another museum quality device used for heavy stitching.

The Adler is often used by cobblers to repair or make horse riding boots. The machine was made in Germany is considered top of the time for (wallets, belts, etc. and especially for working in tight spaces up to 18 inches in depth such as with tall boots. These can cost nearly \$2000.



“Charlie” to the right above is demonstrating a method of creating custom chaps. A pattern is used and then the leather is cut accordingly with decorative features added (above). Charlie has over 32 years of experience, beginning in private service working on needlepoint in a dress shop before working full time in the horse industry

The reader is reminded that the craftspeople in this article are part of a large network of specialty experts throughout Loudoun and the region who readily share their expertise and equipment with each other. This makes sure that the entire horse community, whether for farm animals, pets or racing horses are taking care of. That community of experts effort also makes sure Loudoun is a leader in saddlery in northern Virginia.