

GILBERT FRANK

JETHRO WOOD,
INVENTOR OF THE
MODERN PLOW.

Frank Gilbert

**Jethro Wood, Inventor
of the Modern Plow.**

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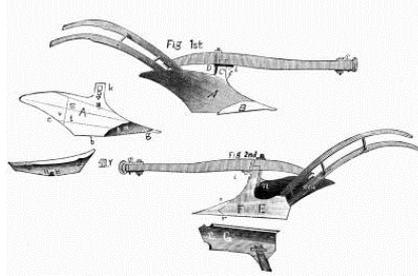
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Jethro Wood, Inventor of the Modern Plow. / A Brief Account of His Life, Services, and Trials; Together with Facts Subsequent to his Death, and Incident to His Great Invention



FAC-SIMILE OF THE ORIGINAL WOOD PLOW.

EXPLANATION OF THE FOREGOING FAC-SIMILE

Side view of Plough. *A* Mould-board, the form of which is claimed as new. *B* Share claimed. *C* Standard claimed. *DD* Screw-bolt, and not confining the beam to the Standard. *a, b, c, d, e,* the 1st, 2d, 3d, 4th and 5th sides mentioned in the specification. *g, g.* Excavation at the fore part of the mould-board to receive the share which fills it up and forms an even surface. *h* Hole to receive the knob or head cast on the under side of the share, which, on being shoved up to its place, nooks under the mould-board at the upper side of the hole, and is held in its place by a wooden wedge driven between the knob and the lower side of the hole. *f* Notches in the Standard to receive the latch *i* in elevating or depressing the beam. *s, t, v.* Straight diagonal lines touching the mould-board the whole distance. *u* Vertical or plumb line touching the mould-board from top to bottom. *H* Reverse side of the share. *x* Knob to hold it fast to the mould-board. *y* Side view of knob. *zz* Shiplaps fitting under the point and edge of the mould-board. *k* Another form of standard keyed on top of beam. Fig. 2d, landside view: *E* The "landside". *F* part of landside cast with mould-board. *mm* Cast loops to hold the handles claimed. *n* Head of screw-bolt held by a shoulder made by a projection from the mould-board and standard, through which the bolt passes up to the beam. *o* Share claimed. *p* Shiplap claimed. *G* Inside view of landside. *r* Tennon at forward end to fit into a dovetailed mortice on the inside of that part which is cast with the mould-board.

PREFACE

The immediate occasion of this little volume was a malignant misrepresentation from the pen of Ben: Perley Poore. With slight variation from the original text, the words of Thomas Jefferson about Benjamin Franklin and his maligners, quoted in the body of this monograph, apply to this case: I have seen with extreme indignation the blasphemies lately vended against the memory of the father of the American plow. But his memory will be venerated as long as furrows are turned and soil tilled. The present object, however, is not so much to refute falsehood as to establish the truth, and make it a part of the permanent knowledge of the public. To the extent that this object shall be attained, will these labors be rewarded.

It is not the design of this publication to disparage any one; on the contrary, it is desired to give ample credit to all who contributed to the solution of the plow problem. If only brief mention is made of others, it is because they really deserved but little credit, or their merits are forever buried in obscurity. It is proposed to set forth without exaggeration, the claims of the supreme inventor in this line to the grateful remembrance of the public. And by the public is meant not only the American people, but all who are fed from the ample granaries of this country, or share the benefits of the improved tillage, whether on this continent or in Europe, made possible and actual by the inventive genius of Jethro Wood.

JETHRO WOOD; INVENTOR OF THE MODERN PLOW

The last words ever penned by John Quincy Adams were these, written in the peculiarly tremulous hand of “the Old Man Eloquent:” “Mr. J. Q. Adams presents his compliments to the Misses Wood, and will be happy to see them at his house, at their convenience, any morning between 10 and 11 o’clock.” This note was found upon his desk when he was stricken down with paralysis, February 21, 1848, in his seat in the House of Representatives. The Misses Wood here referred to were the daughters of Jethro Wood, then deceased. They were at that time engaged in a labor of love, and the venerable Ex-President was their friend therein. Prompted more by filial affection than by hope of gain, they were making a final effort to secure from Congress a proper recognition of their father’s claim as an inventor. It is entirely safe to say that if Mr. Adams had been spared to the end of the Congress then in session, that claim would have been then duly recognized, and the name, services and genius of Jethro Wood become familiar to the American public.

Jethro Wood was born at Dartmouth, Massachusetts, on the sixteenth day of the third month of 1774. His parents were members of the Society of Friends. His mother, Dinah Hussey Wood, was a niece of Ann Starbuck, a woman of remarkable ability and high standing in colonial annals. Ann Starbuck was virtually governor of Nantucket. The niece was a woman of excellent intellect, and most winsome character. Her conversation sparkled with genial wit and good cheer. Her husband, John Wood, was a man of sterling worth, calm, self-poised, strong willed, and eminently influential. Jethro was their only son. On New Years Day, 1793, he was married to Sylvia Howland, at White Creek, Washington County, New York. The fruit of this marriage, every way a happy one, was a family of six children, namely: Benjamin; John; Maria, wife of Jeremiah Foote; Phoebe; Sarah, wife of Robert R. Underhill; Sylvia Ann, wife of Benjamin Gould. Of these children the only survivor is Mrs. Gould, who with her sister, Phoebe, were the Misses Wood of the Adams note. So much for the domestic setting of this diamond of inventive genius.

Even as a boy, Jethro Wood showed plainly the drift and trend of his mind. The child was indeed “father of the man,” and almost from the cradle to the grave, he was an inventor. In his childish plays he seemed busied with the idea which he ultimately perfected. Many curious incidents and memories are treasured among the traditions of his neighbors and friends. “When only a few years old,” writes a venerable man whose recollection spans two generations, “he moulded a little plow from metal, which he obtained by melting a pewter cup. Then, cutting the buckles from a set of braces, he made a miniature harness with which he fastened the family cat to his tiny plow, and endeavored to drive her about the flower-garden. The good old-fashioned whipping he received for this ‘mischief,’ was such as to drive all desire for repeating the experiment out of his juvenile head.”

Such innate and ruling passion might be suppressed, but could not be subdued. As his mind matured, his thoughts took definite shape. His home was always upon a farm, but he was never a farmer, in the sense of Poor Richard’s homely couplet:

“He who by the plow would thrive,
Himself must either hold or drive.”

Born in comparative affluence, blessed with a good education, an ample library and a well equipped workshop, enjoying the correspondence of such men as Thomas Jefferson and David Thomas, he was unremitting in his endeavor to realize his ideal. “His chief desire,” to quote further from our venerable correspondent, “was to invent a new mold-board, which, from its form, should meet the least resistance from the soil, and which could be made with share and standard, entirely of cast iron.” To hit upon the exact shape for the mold-board he whittled away, day after day, until his neighbors, who thought him mad on the subject, gave him the soubriquet of the “whittling Yankee.”

His custom was to take a large oblong potato which was easy for the knife, and cut it till he obtained what he fancied was the exact curve.

The manhood home of Jethro Wood was at Scipio, Cayuga County, New York, a purely agricultural town, with nothing in its later history to distinguish it; but in its palmier early days of the present century, it must have been a nursery of invention. Roswell Toulsoy, Horace Pease, and John Swan, of that town, each took out letters patent for improvements in plows, and that prior to the issuance of any patent to Mr. Wood. Their improvements were of no practical value, and played no part in the development of this branch of mechanism, but their efforts serve to show the state of the intellectual atmosphere breathed by the man who was destined to solve the knotty problem which underlies the very foundation of scientific agriculture.

Of the cotemporaries of Mr. Wood, who wrought at the solution of this problem, the most illustrious was Thomas Jefferson, statesman, philosopher and farmer.

In one of his letters to Jethro Wood, Mr. Jefferson spoke of his own labors in that direction, as the experiments of one whiling away a few idle hours, but herein he did himself injustice. His efforts, however, were far from exhaustive in their results, and it was with good reason that he urged Mr. Wood to go forward in his undertaking, and no doubt he was perfectly sincere in wishing him success. His correspondence, as published in nine large volumes, attests his long and deep interest in the problem, which it was reserved for Jethro Wood to solve. Having carefully examined those volumes, to glean all there is in them on this subject, I herewith append the observations found, for besides being in themselves interesting, in view of their authorship, they throw important light upon the general subject.

Under date of July 3, 1796, Mr. Jefferson wrote to Jonathan Williams: "You wish me to present to the Philosophical Society the result of my philosophical researches since my retirement. But, my good Sir, I have made researches into nothing but what is connected with agriculture. In this way I have a little matter to communicate, and will do it ere long. It is the form of a mould-board of *least resistance*. I had some years ago conceived the principle of it, and I explained it then to Mr. Rittenhouse. I have since reduced the thing to practice, and have reason to believe the theory fully confirmed. I only wish for one of those instruments used in England for measuring force exerted in the drafts of different ploughs, etc., that I might compare the resistance of my mould-board with that of others. But these instruments are not to be had here. In a letter of this date to Mr. Rittenhouse I mention a discovery in animal history, very signal indeed, of which I shall lay before the society the best account I can, as soon as I shall have received some other materials collecting for me.

"I have seen, with extreme indignation, the blasphemies lately vended against the memory of the father of American philosophy. But his memory will be venerated as long as the thunder of heaven shall be heard or feared."

March 27, 1798, Jefferson wrote to Mr. Patterson: "In the life time of Mr. Rittenhouse, I communicated to him the description of a mould-board of a plough, which I had constructed, and supposed to be what we might term the *mould-board of least resistance*. I asked not only his opinion, but that he would submit it to you also. After he had considered it he gave me his own opinion that it was demonstratively what I had supposed, and I think he said he had communicated it to you. Of that however, I am not sure, and therefore, now take the liberty of sending you a description of it, and a model which I have prepared for the Board of Agriculture of England, at their request. Mr. Strickland, one of their members, had seen the model, also the thing itself in use on my farm, and thinking favorably of it, had mentioned it to them. My purpose in troubling you with it is to ask you to examine the description rigorously, and suggest to me any corrections or alterations which you may think necessary. I would wish to have the idea go as correctly as possible out of my hands. I had sometimes thought of giving it into the Philosophical Society, but I doubted whether it was worthy of their notice, and supposed it not exactly in the line of their publications. I had therefore contemplated sending it to some of our agricultural societies, in whose way it was more particularly,

when I received the request of the English board. The papers I enclose you are the latter part of a letter to Sir John Sinclair, their president. It is to go off by packet, wherefore I wish to ask the favor of you to return them with the model in the course of the present week, with any observations you will be so good as to favor me with.”

Writing from Washington, July 15, 1808, to Mr. Sylvestre, in acknowledgment of a plow received from the Agricultural Society of the Seine (France), he adds: “I shall with great pleasure attend to the construction and transmission to the society of a plough with my mould-board. This is the only part of that useful instrument to which I have paid any particular attention. But knowing how much the perfection of the plough must depend, 1st, on the line of traction; 2d, on the direction of the share; 3d, on the angle of the wing; 4th, on the form of the mould-board; and persuaded that I shall find the three first advantages eminently exemplified in that which the society sends me, I am anxious to see combined with these a mould-board of my form, in the hope it will still advance the perfection of that machine. But for this I must ask time till I am relieved from the cares which have more right to all my time – that is to say, till next spring;” *i. e.* until after the expiration of his second term as President of the United States.

The importance of any step in civilization can be understood only in its relations, antecedent causes and actual results.

The *Scientific American*, which is certainly good authority in such matters, ranks Jethro Wood with Benjamin Franklin, Eli Whitney, Robert Fulton, Charles Goodyear, Samuel B. Morse, Elias Howe, and Cyrus H. McCormick, and these are certainly the great names and this a just classification. Each in his way laid the foundation on which all inventors in his respective line have built, and must continue to build, and none of them all came so near perfecting his grand idea as Mr. Wood. His now venerable daughter stated the exact truth when she remarked in a letter not designed for publication: “My father patented the shape and construction of the plow. He took the iron and shaped the plow that turns the furrow for every product of the soil in America. His plow has never been improved. It came from his hand simple and perfect, as it now is, and there is no other plow now in use.” It was not the use of cast iron that he invented, although the use of “pot metal” by him occasioned a great deal of hostility to the original Wood plow.

Jethro Wood took out two plow patents, and those who wish to belittle his work, descant upon the first as if it were his only claim to credit. That first patent was issued in 1814. It fell far short of satisfying the patentee’s ambition. The plows made under it must have been a great improvement on any then in use, for although he abandoned it almost from the first, a great many of them were sold during the period between the first and the second patents. The second patent dates from 1819. The natal day of the modern plow may be fairly set down as September 1, 1819. The original specifications in this plow deserve to be given in full, and may well be inserted in this connection. The document was the handiwork of Mr. Wood himself, and runs thus:

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