

History and the Horseshoe

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Regular, or keg, shoe

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Horseshoes are often found during archaeological excavations and are considered a common artifact on both colonial and post-colonial sites. Being able to identify the parts that make up a horseshoe, and the different forms horseshoes have taken through time, can facilitate functional analysis and period-dating of the artifact when enough of the shoe has been recovered.

Domestication of the horse exposed the animal's hooves to environmental conditions that caused excessive wear and breakage. When a horse is "employed on hard roads, broken ground, and in a humid climate", such as Virginia, "to carry and draw heavy loads at different

degrees of velocity, and forced to stand on stony pavements during resting hours, (hooves) are unable to meet the many severe demands imposed upon them.” (Fleming, 1875) To counteract and prevent the damage, shoes were applied, and their form and function evolved over time.

Parts of a horseshoe include the branches, the foot, the margin, the fuller, and the heel. The *branches* are the curved sides of the shoe, while the wider, flat section of a branch is called the *foot* or *ground surface*. *Margins* are the edges of the shoe and are where the indented channel containing nail holes, called the *fuller*, is located. At the open end of each branch is the *heel*. If the heel is thicker and turned down it is considered a *calkin*, or *calk*. The tab, when found at the junction of the branches, is called a *toe clip*.

According to Ivor Noel Hume (1969), fullered shoes appear in a Virginia context dating to no later than 1660. He also states that seventeenth-century shoes have “either three nail holes in each branch or three in one and four in the other.” Shoes made during the early seventeenth-century tended to have heels that turned inward, the turn inward becoming so prominent in the late-1600s as to have a “keyhole appearance”. This shape continued through the early eighteenth-century but is rarely seen in post-1740 contexts.

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Eighteenth-century shoes are known to have three to up-to-as-many-as ten holes per branch. The heels begin to turn outward, and by the late 1700s were wide enough to create the iconic U-shape we see today. The surface of the shoe became narrower and the shoe thicker as the horseshoe’s transformation continued into the early nineteenth-century.

The most common form of horseshoe is the *regular* u-shaped shoe. When this type of shoe is machine-made it is called a *keg* shoe. The regular, or keg shoe, would have been, and still is, used on riding and carriage horses.

The *rim* shoe is similar to the regular shoe except that it has a large groove that runs along its middle. The groove acts as a fuller and provides additional traction. This type of shoe is used for sporting horses where speed and quick turns are required, such as barrel racing (HG Horseshoeing 2015).

Calkins, or calks, the projections that appear at the heel and along the branches of the shoe, are used to prevent slipping. For frost and snow, the calks have a feathered edge that create a slight “spike” that grips icy surfaces (Fleming 1869). They also allow for the fuller to be raised off the ground for horses with diseased hooves or a sensitivity to shoeing nails.



The toe-clip indicates a shoe produced post-1850. A metal tab protrudes upward over the toe of the hoof. Its primary function is “to stabilize the shoe and in doing so better improve the union between the shoe and the hoof” (Poe 2010). A toe clip lessens twisting and rearward movement, or “slipping back” of the shoe. It allows the hoof to expand and contract normally. Farrier Mike Poe states that when a toe clip is used, “if a horse pulls a shoe, the chances of the hoof being damaged are lessened dramatically.”

Horseshoe with uneven calkins at heal



Horseshoe with toe clip, post-1850

Historically forged of iron by blacksmiths, the industrial age transformed horseshoe manufacturing and the materials they were made of. Today, a farrier is most likely to shoe a horse with machine-made shoes of steel or aluminum, although some owners still prefer to forge custom shoes of iron that they may apply themselves. There are many types of modern shoes, each having its own function. The shoes discussed above are the types of shoes that are most likely to be found during archaeological excavations.

And if you use a horseshoe for nothing more than to bring good luck, always hang the shoe heels-up...otherwise all the luck will fall out!

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