

Horseshoe Nails

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Rural Heritage

by Tom Berningstall

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost.
For want of a horse, the battle was lost.
From loss of the battle, a war was lost.

Or something like that. I'm sure you've heard it before. The importance of horseshoe nails is often overlooked or misunderstood. Can you imagine that first darn fool who tried to drive a nail into the foot of a horse to hold a shoe in place? I'd pay money to have seen that rodeo.

History varies on the origin of iron horseshoes and horseshoe nails. Most historians think they were introduced around 500 or 600 B.C. and came into common use around 1,000 A.D. At first they were probably used in war, rather than in agriculture. Historians differ on who the originators were. Some think they were the Romans, others think they were the Mongolians. Personally, I believe it was somebody who needed to make a truck payment.

For about 3,000 years horseshoers had to make each nail by hand, one at a time. In the mid-1800s Mr. Daniel Dodge, Mr. Silas Putnam, and Mr. George Capewell all patented nail-making machines to mass produce horseshoe nails. With mass-produced horseshoes invented at about the same time, the need for blacksmithing skills diminished.

The horseshoe nail has come a long way since it was invented, and today we have more types and sizes of nails than ever. Every possible use and need has a nail. Nails are somewhat standardized in shape and size, but the key word here is "somewhat."

A nail's number represents the size of the blade or shank, and the name represents the size and shape of the head. For a "5 city head," for example, "5" is the size of the shank and "city" is the type of head the nail has.

Nail sizes range from 3 (smallest) to 16, with some half sizes. Common types of head are:

- **City** — the most widely used shoeing nail in the U.S. (I assume it was originally designed for use on paved roads.)
- **Regular** — a little larger than city head.
- **Race** — designed to be used in lightweight racing plates.

Other head styles are: classic, slim, lite, thin, and combo. Each head style comes in an array of blade and head shapes and sizes. In the last few years a new type, the E-nail, has been getting more use in the U.S. No, this isn't some high-tech electronic nail, but the European-style of nail that has a wider square head offering more contact than the standard rectangular American head.

The horseshoe nail has these parts: beveled point, blade or shank, neck, head, and the crown or top. The head and point are beveled the same way so a nail driven into the hoof wall will turn outward and exit the wall, to be turned down and clinched.

When you drive a nail into a hoof, **take care not to quick the horse by nailing into the sensitive structure of the hoof.** The white line is the guide to nailing: never nail to the inside of the white line—the horse will not like the result, and you will not like what happens next. Line up the shoe holes with the white line on the hoof, and don't ever nail inside the white line.

The nail should exit about a thumb's width above the hoof bottom. If you use light taps, the nail will come out low. If you use harder blows, the nail will come out higher. Nails at the toe will come out lower than nails in the quarters. Getting nail pitch and hammer blows just right requires practice.

As soon as the nail exits the hoof wall, wring it off so you won't get stabbed in the hand, leg, or whatever. Put the nail at the bottom of the claw of your driving hammer and twist the hammer. The nail will twist right off.

After the shoe is nailed on, bring the foot out in front of the horse and put it on a stand or on your knee so you can clinch the nail. First notch under each nail with a rasp or a tool made to do this. Then use a pair of clinchers to bend each nail down and over. With your driving hammer set each nail by tapping it down into the hoof wall. Use a rasp to smooth off the clinches, being careful not to cut them off.

While there's more to this business of nailing on a horseshoe, this gives you a short look at the most important part of farrier work. No matter how nice the shoe or how neat the trim, nothing else counts without good nailing. 🐾

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