

The Nissen Wagon: A Short History

(Based on an article by Chester S. Davis published on August 23, 1953 in the Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel)

- The Nissen Wagon has a significant history in our county and state. And it has a special connection to the history of Lewisville.
- Tycho Nissen was born in Denmark in 1732. He knew wagons from “tongue to tail gate”. In 1770, he arrived in the New World by way of Charles Town.
- On his way to the Wachovia settlements, he rented a wagon in Salisbury. He drove his wagon into the water-swollen Yadkin even after having been warned by the folks living on the banks of the Trading Ford. The wagon went over and he and his companion spent 2 hours hollering for help. After it was all over, the son of their teamster and three horses had drowned.
- In 1771 he arrived in Bethania and worked as a wagon maker under Brother Transou.
- He built his first “crooked-bed” wagon between 1772 and 1774 while at Bethania.
- Tycho was a “jack of all trades”. Wagon making was just one of his crafts. He was also a gravestone carver, night watchman, keeper of God’s Acre in Salem, forester or bush ranger, clay pipe maker, and roadmaster. He kept working on wagons off and on all his life, mostly to repair them. He settled in the Broadbay area of Friedland and died in 1789.
- His son, Christian was a Broadbay farmer and left wagon making to the Transous of Bethania.
- Christian had a son, John Philip, who had a “mechanical turn of mind” and tinkered on his dad’s wagons, much like many sons do now on the family car. He built his first wagon when he was not much beyond grade school.
- In 1834, he went to Waughtown, and “high on the hill overlooking Salem, he built a log shed and went to making wagons”.
- The Nissen wagon was a special one.
- It was the “result of frontier needs rather than Nissen inventiveness”.
- The need to navigate the deeply rutted tracks through forests and swamps required large wheels. The Nissen’s wheels were 42 inches high in the front and 52 inches high behind.
- 15 miles a day was about the average traveling distance of one of the wagons in those days, so the farmer going to market used his wagon as his home on the trail. The only inns were few and many were flea bags.
- “Bows of split white oak were steamed and curved across the wagon bed”. Across the bows, canvas, called a “sheet”, was stretched. Over the top, a second half sheet, or “breaker” was stretched to keep out the wetness.
- Mr. Davis says, “A farmer coming down from Wilkes County to trade with the Moravians in Salem would put an iron skillet, a slab of bacon, some meal and a kettle in his provision box. He’d shovel some grain into the feed box that banged loose on the tail gate, slip his axe into its place along the houn and pile in his load.”
- The wagon was built to handle three 50 gallon barrels of whiskey, side by side, “from the end gate to the “vittle box”. Fruits and grains “carried easy” when they were concentrated into juice. Whiskey and brandy were popular in those times. Hay went over the barrels, then a quilt on top.
- The farmer sat on the provision box with his feet on the double tree.
- He would cluck to his team and start off. The team would be mules and sometimes horses in

the Piedmont, and oxen, called “bulls” or “steers”, in the mountains.

- The canvas sheet protected the teamster from the sun and the rain.
- When fording rivers, like the Yadkin at the Shallow Ford, “the curved boat body took the water easily, almost floating”. That’s why they had the name prairie schooners.
- J.P. Nissen insisted on quality materials for his wagons. The running gear—axles, double and single trees—were built of the finest cuts of “close and clear grained hickory”.
- The paneling was of “knot clear” forest pine.
- Most of the wagon was made of white oak. Only pieces from the “butt cut” of the log and free from knots and wind shakers would be used.
- All the iron parts even down to the rivets and nails—were forged in the Nissen shops.
- The running gear was painted bright red; the body green; all the iron parts were painted gleaming black; and the whole thing was topped off with white canvas.
- The Nissen wagon opened up Northwest North Carolina.
- The Moravians “sent caravans of crooked-bed wagons to Charles Town and ... Cross Creek (now Fayetteville) in the spring and fall.”
- They were loaded with hides, tallow, cured meat, honey and beeswax, roots and herbs (ginseng, penny royal oil, sassafras, flax seed, buck wheat), peas, firkins of butter, chestnuts, whiskey and brandy.
- Beginning in the 1820s, many people took their wagons and headed west looking for new land, and later, after 1849, for the gold fields of California.
- During the Civil War, John Philip Nissen worked for the Confederacy. His wagon plant was taken over by the government and produced wagons and gun carts for Lee and Johnson.
- By the end of the war, Nissen wagons were sold from Washington south and east from the Mississippi River.
- The Nissen wagon was highly thought of. It was a Cadillac among wagons.
- Even after the railway arrived in Winston in the early 1870s the wagons were used.
- Farmers from the North Carolina and Virginia mountains continued to pack their canvas-topped Nissen wagons, drive from campground to campground, and on to Winston and the rail line. Many were loaded with tobacco.
- Nissen wagons were used especially to bring tobacco to the warehouses in Winston. In 1891, there were 37 tobacco plants in Winston.
- The campgrounds in and around Lewisville were favorite stopover locations.
- Farmers carrying their tobacco to market from Salisbury and beyond would cross the Shallow Ford and stop over in Lewisville. There was a tavern, a trading post, a blacksmith and an inn, all in the vicinity of where the Baptist and Methodist Churches are now.
- J.P.’s sons, George E. and William M. took over the business after the Civil War.
- George Elias Nissen and his brother Will ran the business from 1874-1913.
- The Wagon Works was called the George E Nissen Wagon Works during that time.
- George built a large home in Lewisville around 1876.
- George, the elder of the two, was an important industrial leader in the Piedmont. He also ran a sawmill and a grist mill in the Lewisville area. The grist mill was the 4th largest employing business in the 1870s.
- Will Nissen, who took over after the death of his brother in 1913, developed the business even more and made the Nissen wagon a family tradition in North Carolina.
- Under his guidance the Nissen Wagon Works produced 50 wagons a day, and some 15,000 per year at its peak.

- Six feet tall, Will was even tempered, temperate, soft-spoken. He was not much educated, but he was a moral man who cared for his men in the hard times.
- In 1919, the Wagon Works burned to the ground. Instead of laying off his men while the new building was constructed, he hired a construction boss and had his men work to build the new structure.
- He was a shrewd trader, also. In 1925, after a stint of declining health, Will sold the business for 1.1 million dollars.
- He poured the money into the Nissen building which still stands in downtown Winston-Salem, and is an historic landmark.
- Will recognized that the automobile was here to stay and wagons would last only until good roads could be built.
- The family dynasty spanned three centuries, from 1770-1925.
- The business set a precedent in the transportation industry throughout the United States and the world.
- The great times of the Nissen wagon were the “colorful tobacco years that Will Nissen” and George Nissen lived through during their lifetimes. The wagon was essential in the marketing of tobacco in the early years of the development of the industry.
- Even though the wagons continued to be made up until 1948, the Nissen family was no longer involved.
- The Nissen wagon has another connection to Lewisville.
- The founder of our town, Lewis Case Laugenour, as a young man, worked for John Philip Nissen in the Wagon Works. They both lived in Friedland, and that was Lewis’s first job.
- In 1849, he and two of his brothers, caught gold fever, and set out for California in a Nissen wagon with 5 yoke of oxen. They had modified the wagon so it was waterproof and could truly float over the rivers on their way.
- When he returned in 1857, a rich man, Lewis married John Philip’s daughter Mary Elizabeth--whom everyone called Bettie--like he promised he would before he left.
- Lewis was 17 years older than his bride. A local legend has it that, when he was working for the Nissens, he “rocked little Mary Elizabeth in her cradle” as a baby.
- Bettie was Will’s sister, and strong moral character ran in the family. Bettie Laugenour was a mentor of many organizations and institutions in our town. She was involved with the founding of the Lewisville Baptist Church and was a member until her death at age 90.
- The “brave sight of the Nissen wagon” and the rattle and clatter of “iron bound wheels on rutted roads”, the “Gee” and “Whoa” of the farmer is gone now.
- We hope it will live on in our memories with our new Nissen Wagon Museum that we are dedicating today.
- It is a key part of our heritage and played an important role in the development of our town, Lewisville, North Carolina.

Merrickay Brown

On the occasion of the Dedication of the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road Marker and the Nissen Wagon Museum, Lewisville Town Square, Lewisville, NC.

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Lewisville Historical Society