

Elijah Gregory: The Village Blacksmith

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New England, especially in autumn, is a very beautiful land that could inspire both adventure and peace at any given moment. A small community nestled among the rolling hills was a typical scene through-out New England in the early eighteenth century. Danbury, Connecticut, located in northern Fairfield county near the New York state line, was one of these small communities. It was alive with activity and excitement and many interesting people. This is an attempt to portray a small portion of one man's life who lived in Danbury during the early eighteenth century. His name was Elijah Gregory.

Elijah Gregory was a very important man in the town of Danbury. Excluding the fact that he was the grandson of one of the original eight men that settled Danbury in 1684, namely Judah Gregory, Elijah was a very prominent man. He performed an indispensable service to the citizens of this small colonial settlement. Elijah Gregory was the village blacksmith. Elijah and his family made their home on the north side of West Street very close to Main Street. Their large frame house, typical of the period, stood away from the road while Elijah's "smithy-shop" was located in the corner of the lot. Access to it was quick and convenient.

When one thinks of blacksmithing one invariably thinks of shoeing horses. These terms have been used interchangeably at times, nothing could be farther from the truth. Though it is true that Elijah Gregory shod many a horse's feet with custom fitted horseshoes, this was only one of the many tasks that he performed. It may even be classified as one of his lesser jobs.

Broken farm tools or a piece of household hardware in need of mending was always taken to the blacksmith. Elijah Gregory was faced with a never ending cycle of work that lasted the entire year. Danbury residents respected Elijah because of the useful service that he provided and because of the courteous smile with which he greeted each of his neighbors. As each season arrived there were a number of new tools that needed to be fixed or replaced. The blacksmith always tried to patch up an old tool to spare his customer the expense of a new one. If all attempts failed at restoration, Elijah would use bits of iron rod imported from England and pieces of scrap iron to fashion a new tool that was as good or better than the old one. Elijah, like most smithys, imported most of his wrought iron from England which made it quite expensive. A blacksmith used it only when absolutely necessary. However, the growth of iron works in New England in the 1740's allowed some iron to be bought directly from each state. Subsequently, most wrought iron used after this period was extracted from iron ore deposits within the colonies.



With the dawn of each day, Elijah made his way out to his shop to begin his days work. He is greeted by a young man in his early twenties named Jeremy Taylor. Jeremy is Elijah's striker or helper. He has gotten all the tools layed out ready to become precision instruments in the hands of his employer. Everything is ready for use except one thing - the fire. The job of building and lighting the fire is reserved for the blacksmith because he alone has the skill required to build a useful and effective fire in the forge. When the fire is glowing brightly, Jeremy need only give the large, accordian-like bellows an occasional stroke in order to keep the coals hot.

Jeremy Taylor was an essential part of this blacksmith shop. He had to be alert and intelligent in order to perform all of the tasks that would be asked of him. Jeremy stood opposite Elijah at the anvil waiting for the signal to hammer the piece of iron being worked on in the specified spot and with the proper force required. This job was very important and required a great amount of skill and accuracy. Jeremy had hopes of owning his own blacksmith shop someday and being a striker under the supervision of Elijah Gregory gave him the necessary experience and skill to perform his trade expertly. The striker in a typical blacksmith shop was also required to split wood, assemble all the tools and occasionally take over the anvil if the blacksmith had to step out.

There was a third person present in the shop. He was thirteen year old Samuel Gregory, Elijah's son. He swept the shop, turned the grindstone, and ran errands for his father. In this way he would learn the trade from his father and become a striker someday. Apprenticeship through these steps was common in many trades through-out the colonies.

The blacksmith shop was a place of noisy construction. As the people passed by on nearby Main Street, they could hear the clanging of hammer against anvil and they knew that Elijah was either mending Miss Parson's cooking pot or Doc Adams' carriage wheel or perhaps he was sharpening Jessie Hoyt's plowshare. It could have been almost anything.

Elijah's anvil and tools used were very important. The two hundred and fifty pound anvil was mounted on an upended post that had been buried five feet into the ground. It was positioned next to the forge so that Elijah only needed to make a quarter of a turn between the two. His anvil was five inches across and twenty inches long with a sixteen inch horn on the end. It was equipped with a square "hardy hole" that was used to fit square shanks of iron and a round "pritchel hole" that was used for punching holes. A hickern, or a smaller anvil, was located in back by the bellows and it was used for rounding and hollowing work.

A horse or two might be found tied up outside waiting to have their shoes changed. Every set of horse shoes had to be custom



fitted to each horse in order to protect the horse's feet when walking on cobblestone or when carrying a heavy load. In the winter special shoes were put on to prevent the horse from slipping on the snow and ice. The horseshoes are made by cutting certain lengths of iron and then custom shaping it. Elijah uses the pritchel hole to make the holes in the shoes so that they can be nailed onto the hoof of the horse. Though the shoe is fitted while hot, it causes no pain to the horse while guaranteeing a secure fit.

When autumn arrived many people brought their sleighs and sleds to the blacksmith so that they could be repaired before the first snowfall. When spring arrived the sleds were stored away and the buggies were dragged out. Many parts of these buggies needed repair or replacement after the several months of use in the previous year. The wheel more than anything else caused problems and needed constant repair. Elijah would have to take the entire wheel apart and construct new iron plates that connected each of the individual spokes. Occasionally he would be asked to repair a broken leather harness. Though leather was not his line of work, he often accepted it because the nearest leatherworker might be as far away as Hartford or Boston.

Elijah taught Jeremy the eight techniques of forging that every blacksmith must know. Some of them are: cutting the iron(which can only be done when it is red hot), fullering or stretching the iron by flattening it, and upsetting or making a bulge to create a thicker piece of iron. Bending, welding, riveting, and punching are other techniques used by the blacksmith. Tempering the iron is the most important technique used. By a process of heating and cooling, the hardness of iron can be reduced. A trained eye can tell by the color of the heated iron when it is correctly tempered for any particular tool.

Elijah Gregory was a man of great service to Danbury. He made hinges, latches, hooks, ladles, knives, pots, and other household items. He also made hammers, pincers, punchers, tongs, swages, and other specialized tools for his shop. In addition he made or repaired tools for butchering, wood cutting, ice cutting, sugaring, plowing, haying, and harvesting. He kept the horses of Danbury well shod while keeping the buggies and sleds in good working order. He was a very busy man and rarely had time to add any decorative flair to his work. Most of what he made was quite plain and simple.

Elijah Gregory will be long remembered by the people of Danbury as a man of concern and helpfulness. It was his skill in repairing farm tools that saved many farmer's crops, and his expertise in repairing broken wheels that enabled the buggies of Danbury to be utilized.