



PRESERVATION VIRGINIA

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WHAT'S THAT ARTIFACT?

Most people don't realize that baby walkers are not a 20th century invention but instead have a history dating back hundreds of years. As long ago as the medieval period, parents purchased or made contraptions of various shapes and designs, with and without wheels, to both support and train their toddling children. Wheeled versions, like this one, were believed to help promote walking skills while versions without wheels, often called "standing stools" helped the baby learn to stand upright while keeping it contained and safe while its mother was occupied elsewhere, somewhat like a modern playpen. In the 18th century and early 19th century, many wealthy children also wore padded "pudding caps" to protect their heads in case of accidental falls while learning to walk.

This mahogany walker from the collection at the John Marshall House in Richmond dates to about 1800-1810 and was made in England. Its proportions are different from that of a modern baby walker because the baby was suspended from its armpits rather than supported from below. A hinged section in the upper ring allowed parents to place their babies inside and the wheeled casters allow the baby to move around while supported by the structure of the walker itself.



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204 West Franklin Street • Richmond, Virginia 23220-5012 • 804.648.1889 • (f) 804.775.0802 • www.preservationvirginia.org