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The Grand Old Man of Detroit

Of all the automotive giants of the early 20th century, undoubtedly the most underestimated has been Henry Leland.

Long before Detroit became the Motor City, it was a tinkerer's paradise. Inventive minds, skilled technical workers, flamboyant promoters and risk-taking entrepreneurs met, joined forces, and disengaged at dizzying speed.

In 1902, after three years of turmoil, Henry Ford and his investors agreed to part ways. Ford's share of the Henry Ford Company (successor to the failed Detroit Automobile Company) was \$900 and the plans for a new car he was working on. Everything else – a factory at 1343 Cass, tools, equipment, and the rights to a completed Ford design – remained with the company. In August 1902, two discouraged investors approached Henry Leland to appraise the assets for liquidation.

Henry Leland was an expert machinist. Born in 1843 in Vermont, Leland made guns during the Civil War at a federal arsenal in Massachusetts, and then at a Colt factory in Connecticut. Later, he found work at a Rhode Island company that made machine tools and micrometers. Leland's early work as a machinist introduced him to the idea of precision manufacturing. Restless, Leland struck out on his own, and he eventually settled in Detroit.



Henry M. Leland

With the financial backing of Robert C. Faulconer, the two established Leland, Faulconer, and Norton in 1890 (it became Leland & Faulconer in 1894). Their main work was gear grinding and the design and building of special tools and business boomed. Eventually, the firm began to move towards the design and production of steam and internal combustion engines. In 1901, Leland & Faulconer was awarded a contract to make 2,000 engines for Oldsmobile. But, Leland was a man of exacting standards and he had his team improve their original engine which now developed 10.25 horsepower. Leland presented this engine to Olds, but they were selling so many cars that they didn't have a need for a new engine, especially one that would increase cost and delay production. This was disappointing for Leland, but it wouldn't be long before his engine got some use.

Enter the Ford Motor Company investors in August 1902. The investors, now trying to just get out, asked Leland to appraise the factory and equipment for sale, but Leland had a better idea. . . he arrived at a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Henry Ford Company carrying his engine, demonstrating that it was as light as it was powerful. Duly impressed, the investors agreed to keep the company going. On August 22, 1902, the company reformed as the Cadillac Automobile Company - a name chosen to honor the 17th century French explorer Antoine Laumet de La Mothe, sieur de Cadillac, who founded Detroit in 1701.

The Cadillac Automotive Company set up operations in the former Ford factory at Cass and Amsterdam, with Leland as general manager. In October 1902, the first three prototype cars were completed (some historians say they were built at the Leland & Faulconer plant; others claim that distinction for the Cass Avenue assembly plant). On one the cars' maiden test drives, engineer Alanson P. Brush drove it right up the steps of the Wayne County Building just to prove it could be done. The powerful little car was ready to take on all comers.



Alanson P. Brush driving up the steps of the Wayne County Building in a prototype Cadillac, 1903

The prototypes made a splash at the January 1903 New York Auto Show, where super salesman William Metzger sold all three and took \$10 deposits for 2,286 more before declaring mid-week that the Cadillac was "sold out." The Cadillac's biggest selling point was precision manufacturing and, therefore, reliability - it was simply a better made vehicle than its competition. The first production car was built in March of 1903, and by the end of the year, 2,418 runabouts had been assembled at the Cass Avenue plant - and sold and delivered to boot. Cadillac did not start out in the luxury car market. Indeed the company's single product was priced at \$750, which was moderate when compared with other cars of its day.



1903 Cadillac

On April 13, 1904, a fire destroyed the assembly plant and part of the finishing building. Precious tools, dies, and patterns were spared, along with a warehouse where several hundred finished cars and 2,000 Leland & Faulconer engines were stored. Leland moved fast, converting the warehouse into a makeshift assembly plant while suppliers swung into action to replace bodies, tires and other damaged parts. Within six weeks, Cadillac was up and running around the clock in its temporary facility.

In October 1905, the Cadillac and Leland & Faulconer operations were merged into the Cadillac Motor Car Company with Henry Leland, now in his sixties, as general manager.

The year 1908 was destined to be the most important in Cadillac's history. It was during this year that the slogan "Standard in the world" first appeared in Cadillac's advertising. But the major event affecting the Cadillac that year took place not in the United States but thousands of miles away, in England. As judges from the Royal Automobile Club looked on, technicians disassembled three randomly chosen Cadillacs into a jumble of 2,163 parts, reassembled the cars using only hand tools, and followed up with a 500-mile demonstration run. With this convincing proof of interchangeability, Cadillac became the first American car company to win the Club's coveted Dewar Trophy which established Cadillac as a quality automobile nameplate for evermore.



Using interchangeable parts meant that the three Cadillacs could be taken apart, jumbled together and then assembled back into three cars



On March 5, 1908, three Cadillac Model Ks won the Dewar Trophy for engineering and racing by pioneering the use of interchangeable parts in auto production

Cadillac helped to define advanced engineering, luxury and style early in automotive history and would come to be known as one of the world's finest-made vehicles. Cadillac was the first manufacturer to release cars with a fully enclosed cab as factory equipment in 1910. In 1912, Cadillac incorporated electric starters on their cars equipped with gasoline internal combustion engines, replacing the hand starting crank. The device was developed by Charles Kettering and was marketed as a convenience device for female drivers. Cadillac became the only company to win a second Dewar Trophy for their revolutionary system of electric starting and lighting.

Leland sold Cadillac to General Motors on July 29, 1909 for \$5.6 million but remained as an executive until 1917. He left in dispute over General Motors' involvement in the war effort and formed the Lincoln Motor Company.

During the war, Lincoln Motor Company built Liberty aircraft engines. Later, the company's factories were retooled to manufacture luxury automobiles. Again shunning the use of his own name, Leland named the new car after a longtime hero of his, a man the young Leland voted for in the first presidential election he was eligible to vote in.

The Lincoln was introduced in 1920 just as a post-World War I recession was getting under way. The company fell into financial disarray and Leland's new enterprise was auctioned in a bankruptcy sale. Henry Ford bought it in one of the great bargains of automotive history and Leland's second great automobile became part of Ford Motor Company. In 1923, Leland left Lincoln and automobile manufacturing for good.

By the time Leland died in 1932, Lincoln was firmly ensconced as Ford's luxury division and competed with Cadillac and Packard in the luxury car market.

It is virtually impossible to overstate Henry Leland's contributions to the automotive industry, yet his name never appeared on a car's nameplate. For more information about early automotive pioneers, visit MotorCities National Heritage Area at www.motorcities.org.