



The Duryea Brothers produced America's first gasoline-powered automobile which could be built more than "one at a time." This image depicts that car—the Runabout—as it appeared in 1896.

The Henry Ford Museum, which owns the only surviving 1896 Duryea Runabout, provides more information about this important vehicle and the brothers who made it.

For one thing ... this was the first American car which had copies—not additional prototypes or special orders but identical cars—in a series-produced automobile. There were thirteen in all.

Like the Wright Brothers, who [used their bicycle-store knowledge](#) to invent the world's first powered-aircraft, the Duryea Brothers used their bike-store knowledge to invent America's first series-produced car. Matt Anderson, who is the Curator of Transportation at The Henry Ford, tells us [about their background](#):

Brothers Charles E. and J. Frank Duryea typified the mechanically-minded experimenters who built the first American automobiles. Charles entered the bicycle business in 1888, initially in St. Louis before moving to Peoria, Illinois, and then Washington, DC. The younger Frank joined his brother not long after graduating high school in 1888.

The brothers were bitten by the auto bug after reading an 1889 article in Scientific American on the pioneering work done in Germany by Karl Benz. After relocating to Springfield, Massachusetts, the Duryea brothers set out to build their own automobile.

Their first effort, at building a car, failed. It was 1892, and Charles—upset about the failure—went back to his bike-shop business in Peoria. Frank refused to give-up, however, and kept trying to make the prototype work. After improving the engine and transmission, he actually got the thing to run.

With Charles giving his brother ideas by mail, Frank started work on a second car. This second prototype had a water pump (to cool the engine), an electric starter (practically unheard of at the time) and pneumatic tires.

In November of 1895, Frank drove this new car 54 miles in a round-trip race between Chicago and Evanston. Despite really bad conditions (such as snow and very cold weather), the car performed well and Frank won the race.

Excited about their victory, and their future in the car-making business, Frank and Charles opened a new business in Springfield, Massachusetts. They called it the Duryea Motor Wagon Company.

Matt Anderson tells us [what happened next](#):

At a time when their contemporaries were still testing home-built contraptions the Duryea brothers initiated commercial production. Their 1896 Runabout was closely based on the Chicago racer. The horizontally-mounted two-cylinder engine produced six horsepower and the car topped out at a speed of about 20 miles per hour.

Leather belts transferred power from the engine to the rear wheels. The clever tiller combined the functions of a steering wheel, gearshift and throttle. The tiller even telescoped in and out to ease the driver's entry—an early version of today's tilt steering wheel.

Alas, however, the Duryea brothers did not build on the success of their first series-produced car. Among other issues, which led to ongoing personal disagreements, they battled over which brother deserved more credit. This led to [a complete rupture](#) of their business and personal relationships:

The 1896 Duryea, a decided "first" for the automobile industry, proved to be the last major contribution from the Duryea brothers. The Duryea Motor Wagon Company closed in 1898 and the brothers went their separate ways. Charles experimented with three-wheeled vehicles while Frank had some success with the up-market Stevens-Duryea automobile company.

Sadly, the brothers' long-simmering business quarrels boiled into a feud that never quite healed. Charles claimed full credit for building their first automobile until his death in 1938. Frank reestablished his claim to history starting in 1942, and he traded a few intergenerational barbs with Charles's son. When he died in 1967 at the ripe age of 97, J. Frank Duryea was the last survivor of America's pioneer automakers.

Before reading this story, maybe you thought that America's first series-produced cars were made in Detroit? Maybe you also thought that the auto industry itself began with Ford, or Buick or Oldsmobile?

Well ... the credit for that lies not in Michigan but in Massachusetts. And ... had a couple of brothers figured-out as much about solving personal problems as they had figured-out manufacturing problems, maybe America's auto industry would have been based near the country's East Coast instead of in the Midwest.

Who knew?

Credits:

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