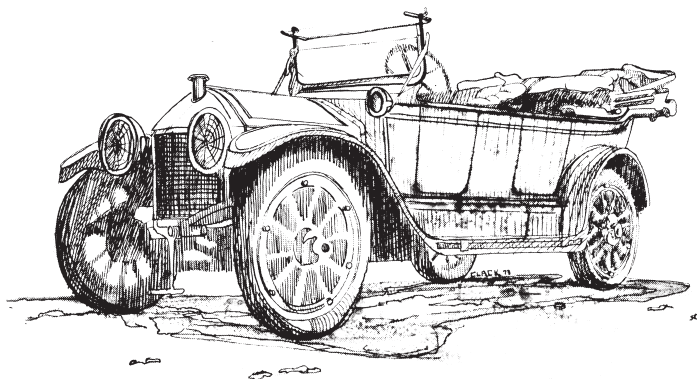


## Contents



*Update, 7*

*Foreword, 9*

*Prologue, 14*

One. The Road Cart, 17

Two. King of the Carriage Makers, 26

Three. The Horseless Carriage Comes to Flint, 49

Four. Buick: Rags to Riches, 67

Five. "I Must Have a Consolidation," 97

Six. "Never Mind, We're Still Running," 111

Seven. The Bankers Take Over, 133

Eight. Durant's "New Baby"—Chevrolet, 145

Nine. "I Took General Motors Back from the Bankers Today," 164

Ten. Durant's Rule—and Another Collapse, 181

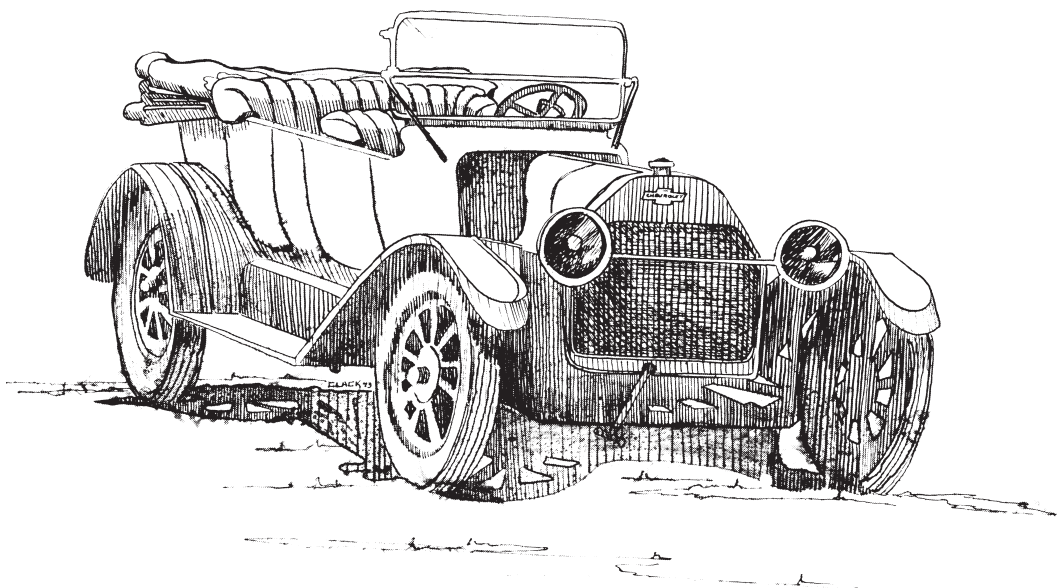
Eleven. A Last Empire Created and Lost, 223

*Epilogue, 262*

*Chapter Notes and Bibliography, 280*

*Index, 292*

Billy Durant: Creator of General Motors  
Lawrence R. Gustin  
[https://www.press.umich.edu/334291/billy\\_durant](https://www.press.umich.edu/334291/billy_durant)  
University of Michigan Press, 2008



## Update

A line in this book says the importance of William C. Durant's career will undoubtedly be appreciated more fully some day. And in the decades since *Billy Durant* was first published in 1973, that certainly has happened—particularly in Flint, Michigan, where his accomplishments were most obvious.

Six weeks after the first edition was published, Flint Mayor Paul C. Visser proclaimed the week of Durant's birthdate, December 8, as "William Crapo Durant Week" in Flint. Durant's widow, Catherine, was thrilled to receive the proclamation, which came just in time. She died in New York January 19, 1974.

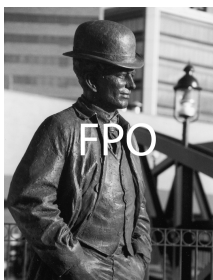
Some Durant-inspired initiatives were temporary. Billy's Pub in downtown Flint, decorated with pictures of Durant and his wife Catherine, opened in 1984 but closed a few years later. A downtown "Billy Durant Festival" came and went.

Some were permanent. The decrepit Durant-Dort Carriage Company office building—scheduled to be razed before a newspaper campaign helped save it—is today restored and a National Historic Landmark. This was where Durant had his Flint office before Buick came to town: It's considered virtually the birthplace of General Motors. The three-story brick building is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places and also adorned with a Michigan historical marker. Nearby, state historical markers in Flint's "Carriage Town" point out the restored Flint Road Cart Company factory and the home of Charles W. Nash when he was superintendent of Durant-Dort, before he became president of GM and then Nash Motors.

When Michigan sculptor Derek Wernher created a life-size bronze statue of Durant (later to be joined by one of his partner, Dallas Dort) and officials had it erected on his 127th birthday (December 8, 1988) within sight of the Durant-Dort headquarters, its unveiling was witnessed by a GM vice president, two Durant grandchildren, four Durant great-grandchildren, and the *New York Times*. Also, banker Robert J. Whaley's home near downtown Flint has been restored and holds the original Flint Road Cart Company bank book showing the 1886 deposits of \$1,000 each by Durant and Dort—the earliest document in GM's prehistory. Flint's Sloan Museum displays a mannequin of Durant; holds many of his papers and photos; and, in partnership with Buick, has opened a Buick Gallery and Research Center nearby. Across town, Durant papers used for the earlier editions of this book are housed at Kettering University. A horse barn that stood behind the Durants' Flint home (and was for years owned by the parents of the author's childhood friend Janet Gardner) has been saved and moved to nearby Historical Crossroads Village.

But much has been lost. By GM's centennial year, the "best monuments" to

## Update



*Durant's statue, erected in Flint in 1988, is a good likeness but Aristo Scrobogna, his last secretary, said he never would have loosened his collar in public.*

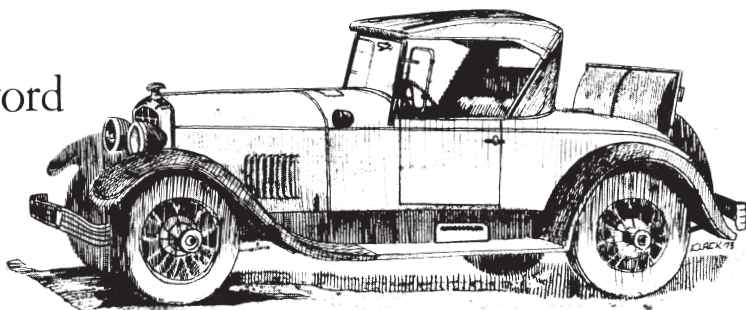
Durant in Flint, as listed in the main text, were mostly gone. No more Fisher Body. AC Spark Plug became a fading Delphi East. The huge Buick “home” complex—the foundation of GM’s creation in 1908—was closed in 1999 and most of its vast collection of factories virtually scraped away early in the new millennium. The last remaining significant activity at the site is final production of Buick 3800 V-6 engines (Buick engine production in Flint has surpassed 100 years). A complex of Chevrolet plants disappeared as well, though Chevy trucks still rolled off one local assembly line.

An attempt to tell Flint’s automobile story with a 1980s theme park named AutoWorld was artistically creative but financially a disaster and was soon ridiculed, imploded, and bulldozed. In 1978, about 78,000 people were employed by Flint-area GM plants. In 2008, it was under 9,000 and dropping.

But what Durant created or saved had legs on the larger stage. Buick and Cadillac have celebrated their centennials (and Oldsmobile did too before its poorly handled execution). Chevrolet is a dominant brand. GMC trucks live, as do the Pontiac cars that grew from Oakland Motor Car Company. General Motors is still at the top in sales—barely—of all the world automakers. It’s fitting that Durant’s name as GM’s founder is cast in bronze on a Michigan historical marker in front of the corporation’s new headquarters in downtown Detroit, because neither GM nor its most famous American marques would likely exist today had he not either created or saved them. No wonder the Society of Automotive Historians ranked William C. Durant No. 2, behind only Henry Ford, on its list of the 30 most significant auto pioneers.

*Billy Durant* appears here almost exactly as in the first and second editions, which means some references are dated. GM no longer occupies the GM Building mentioned in the Prologue, but has moved to Renaissance Center on the Detroit River downtown. General Motors Institute, or GMI, is now Kettering University. No Buicks are built in Flint; indeed more are built in China than in the entire United States. And one other change is worth noting: Billy Durant, as a historical figure, is no longer the forgotten man.

## Foreword



This account of the career of William Crapo Durant is based in part on unpublished manuscripts and documents and on interviews with his widow, two of his personal secretaries and others who knew him well.

Among the manuscripts used extensively are Durant's own autobiographical notes. This manuscript of seven short type-written chapters, plus scattered notes, is not always accurate—much of it was written in the 1930s and 1940s, decades after the events described—but it contains valuable information and some insights into Durant's motives. These notes, and numerous letters and other personal papers, were made available to the writer by Durant's widow, Mrs. Catherine Durant, with the cooperation of his last personal secretary, Aristo Scrobogna, who is the legal custodian of Durant's papers.

Durant is best remembered in Flint, Michigan, a city which owes practically all of its large industrial base—and its historical distinction of being the birthplace of General Motors—to his accomplishments. And the manuscript which really provided the basis for this account is a 600-page *Industrial History of Flint* which was compiled by Frank M. Rodolf in the early 1940s when he was a reporter and librarian for *The Flint Journal*. It is surely one of the best and most complete accounts of Durant's career ever compiled. Rodolf, who left *The Journal* shortly after the manuscript was completed, was located by the writer in New York City. With his permission, and that of *The*

*This is the foreword from the original edition of 1973.*

## Foreword

*Flint Journal*, which copyrighted his manuscript, some of his work is incorporated in this book. A copy of his manuscript is in the Flint Public Library. In some ways, it is a product of *Flint Journal* reporters over a period of more than half a century. Rodolf drew on the articles of his predecessors, and those who followed him also contributed to it. Portions of it were published in *The Journal's* GM Golden Milestone edition of August 14, 1958.

A great many persons gave various kinds of help. Clarence H. Young, assistant director of the Manufacturers Association of Flint, biographer of Charles Stewart Mott, and long considered one of the leading experts on Durant, provided initial interest and considerable guidance, along with a large amount of material from his files. An excellent speaker, Young has kept the memory of Durant's spirit alive in Flint, the starting point of most of Durant's successes. Much of the revived interest in Durant can be traced to Young.

Richard P. Scharchburg, associate professor of social science at General Motors Institute, has constantly been seeking new sources of information about Durant's career and has provided invaluable assistance with guidance, research assistance, and the checking of accuracy. There are periods in Durant's career which have still not been thoroughly cleared up to the satisfaction of either the writer or of Scharchburg, but the research goes on.

George S. May, author, historian and professor at Eastern Michigan University, encouraged the writer and offered research advice and assistance. Dr. May is now writing a comprehensive history of the origins of the automobile industry in Michigan, drawing on many original sources. He and his wife, Tish, spent weeks going through the voluminous records of John J. Carton, Durant's long-time attorney, and made copies of significant letters in this file available to the writer.

Dr. Roger Van Bolt, director of the Sloan Museum, provided much information from the museum's extensive collection of papers and photographs. Richard Crabb, author of *Birth of a Giant*, and Beverly Rae Kimes, who wrote an excellent histori-



cal account of Buick in *Automobile Quarterly* in 1968, encouraged the development of the book.

Alfred D. Chandler, coauthor with Stephen Salsbury of *Pierre S. du Pont and the Making of the Modern Corporation*, which is the most detailed account of the years of Durant's presidency of General Motors, read the portion of this account dealing with those years and offered suggestions.

Clark D. Tibbits of Columbiaville, Michigan, has made a personal project of seeking details about Durant's father, who disappeared when Durant was a youth. Late in 1972, he found the tombstone of William Clark Durant, the father, in a cemetery in his hometown of East Lempster, New Hampshire, with the date of his death—previously unknown to the Durant family and historians—1883.

Among those interviewed by the writer or associates were Charles Stewart Mott, who was the last of the pioneer leaders of the auto industry when he died at age ninety-seven in 1973; W. W. Murphy, Durant's personal secretary for more than thirty years, who was interviewed by Richard Scharchburg; Mrs. Jay (Frances Willson) Thompson, whose grandmother was a sister of Durant's mother; Mrs. Joyce S. Cook, former women's editor of *The Flint Journal*, who knew all of the early Flint automotive families; Gerry Fauth, a great fan of Durant's, who collected and thus preserved for the Flint Public Library a vast collection of automobile memorabilia; Carl W. Bonbright, whose father was Durant's sales manager in the carriage days and who, as a small child, rode in the first car built in Flint (Judge Charles Wisner's); Laverne Marshall, who as a teenager chauffeured Durant around Flint; Arthur H. Sarvis, who covered Durant's activities for *The Journal* back in 1910; William S. Ballenger, Jr., son of one of Durant's closest associates in the early days of Buick and Chevrolet; George H. Koskey, whose long and successful industrial career included associations with Walter Chrysler and Charles W. Nash at Buick; and Archie Campbell, a business associate of Durant's in his later years, who provided original material for this account.

Glen A. Boissonneault, editor of *The Flint Journal*, and Rudolph H. Pallotta, the city editor, provided both encourage-

## Foreword

ment and time. Editorial advice was given for various sections of this account by John R. Davis, S. Gordon Gapper, Colin McDonald, Roger Van Noord, and Ed Hayman. William D. Chase, *The Journal* librarian, provided research advice. *The Flint Journal*'s file of clippings and microfilm is one of the most important sources of Durant material. The newspaper's reporters were close to Durant and many early accounts appear to be based on "inside" information.

Persons who consented to read this manuscript for accuracy included Dr. David L. Lewis, professor of business history at the Graduate School of Business Administration at the University of Michigan; Dr. Alfred D. Chandler, who besides being an author is Straus Professor of Business History at the Graduate School of Business Administration at Harvard University; Dr. George S. May; Richard P. Scharchburg; Clarence H. Young; Richard Crabb; Mrs. Catherine L. Durant; Aristo Scrobogna; Gerry Fauth; and Archie R. Campbell.

Among others who provided assistance were Michael L. Kiefer, Bruce MacDonald, George Dammann, G. H. Rideout, Raymond J. Kelly, Jr., Robert W. Donovan, Merle Perry, David G. Gosler, Stanley T. Richards, Edward P. Joseph, and my wife Rose Mary and parents, Mr. and Mrs. Robert S. Gustin.

Most of the photographs used in this book are from *The Flint Journal* and the vast original historical collection of Kenneth Wallace of Flint, with the permission of *The Journal* and Mr. Wallace. Some are from the individual collections of other persons mentioned above, and some are from the files of General Motors.

Some important sources of information are confidential.

General Motors was not involved in any way with the development of this account, although a number of individuals within the corporation were helpful.

Mrs. Catherine Durant and Aristo Scrobogna were interviewed for several days in New York and New Jersey. Mrs. Durant is a gracious, intelligent, and attractive woman who has warm memories of her husband and who displays little bitterness about the events which robbed her and her husband of their fortune. Still, she sometimes finds it painful to discuss the past, and memories of her husband's last years can move her to



## Foreword

tears. Scrobogna not only gave the writer complete access to the files he holds but also provided research assistance during a period of more than a year.

Besides the papers and interviews listed above, some important information has come from papers which are available in libraries. The Michigan Historical Collections at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor contain the Henry H. Crapo papers, which shed light on Durant's mysterious father. The papers of John J. Carton, long-time Durant attorney, are also there. Durant's high school record is on file in the Flint School System administration building; his divorce papers in the Genesee County Courthouse; the handwritten minutes of the Durant-Dort Carriage Company are in the Sloan Museum, Flint.

A large amount of published material was also examined. A complete bibliography appears at the back of the book.

This account is an enlargement of a series, *Billy Durant and Flint: The Beginnings of General Motors*, published in *The Flint Journal* in March, 1972.

L. R. G.

Flint, Michigan