

The Franklin Automobile of Syracuse, New York

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A Regional Solution to a Global Problem

The young men made a surely contrasting pair: the fastidious, soft-spoken businessman Herbert H. Franklin from Lisle, NY (50 miles south of Syracuse) and the thin, athletic engineer John Wilkinson, son of one of the oldest Syracuse families.ⁱ Born with the congenital defects of a hare lip and cleft palate, Franklin nonetheless became a successful printer and newspaper publisher under the guidance of a cousin in Cotsack, NY.ⁱⁱ Having bought patents for the process of die-casting metal parts, Franklin moved in 1893 to Syracuse to try to interest companies like L. C. Smith Typewriters in buying these products. By early 1895, sales of metal castings for many new high technology companies such as General Electric and Western Electric had begun. In the same year, the H.H. Franklin Manufacturing Company (HHFMC) was incorporated. Growing in size, the operation was moved in 1899 to the renowned Lipe Machine Shop on South Geddes St.ⁱⁱⁱ In Syracuse, Franklin, still (and forever after) a bachelor, engaged in activities at lakes, dance halls, and private parties. Wilkinson, on the other hand, had taken the academic path to success, enrolling in the Sibley School of Mechanical Engineering at Cornell University, where he studied under Robert Thurston, an expert on self-propelled vehicles.^{iv} In Thurston's laboratories, Wilkinson became familiar with both the Brayton and Otto cycle gasoline engines.^v After graduation and several entry-level jobs, Wilkinson built two prototype air-cooled 4-cylinder cars for a partnership that became incorporated as the New York Automobile Company (NYAC). The NYAC directors apparently lacked the funds, resolution, or vision to actually manufacture a car. Alexander T. Brown, an investor in both NYAC and HHFMC, arranged a meeting between H.H. Franklin and the NYAC directors. They accepted the idea of hiring Franklin as

manager provided he put up \$10000.^{vi} But the careful Franklin rejected this stipulation.





Three views of the Lipe Machine Shop, converted as of 2018 to a hardware store. (Photographed by the author.)

The stage was set for a meeting between Franklin and Wilkinson at the Lipe shop. After a test drive in one of Wilkinson's prototypes, Franklin was favorably impressed by the car and its young builder. Within a few days, John Wilkinson became the first employee in a partnership formed by Brown and Franklin to manufacture an air-cooled automobile for the consumer.^{vii} John immediately began design of this new 4-cylinder air-cooled product. When Wilkinson took the completed car on its first test run on October 1, 1901 it showed adequate power to operate in open country as well as on the hills of Syracuse.^{viii} Having expanded the definition of HHFMC to include automobile production, Franklin bought out Brown's part of the partnership for \$50,000 in stock. Brown retained the presidency of the expanded HHMFC, while Franklin assumed the role of treasurer and general manager. Wilkinson was allocated a substantial amount of

stock. By March 3, 1902, a further refined model, with engine moved up front and the tiller replaced by a steering wheel came out with excellent performance. It was put on sale as the Type A light roadster, first purchased by S. G. Averill of New York, a Wilkinson classmate at Cornell, who paid \$1200. The second went to Herman Casler, the pioneer inventor of movie projectors.^{ix} Clearly, Franklin was in business as a maker of tough, rugged air-cooled cars. The advantage of air-cooling an auto engine over water cooling is the absence of the added weight and complexity of the radiator, pumps, and tubing required for water-cooling.

As time went on, The Franklin evolved from a light weight runabout to larger, more commodious car.



(Author's photograph from the Northeast Classic Car Museum (NECCM), Norwich, NY)

By the early 1920's, however, the round or inverted horseshoe engine covering lacked the stylish chrome radiator housing which became the default front shape of the typical water-cooled car. Franklin owners began to object to the homely front end. The result was that Franklin hired a stylist named Frederick DeCausse to contemporize their design. The result was strikingly up-to-date with a fake radiator shell, which looked as follows:



(Author's photograph from the NECCM).

Having evolved into a luxury car, Franklin even developed a V-12 model to compete with Cadillac, Packard, and Lincoln. By 1933, however, the handmade-Franklin could not compete with lower-priced, massed produced cars and it went out of business. The Plant on Geddes St. was taken over by Carrier Air Conditioning. After Carrier moved to more modern quarters, the plant was razed in order to build today's Fowler Technical High School. There is only the large

bicycle painted on the side of the former Lipe Machine Shop to remind West Syracuse of its vehicular history. (See page 2).

Advertising the Air-Cooled Automobile

During the 30's, contemporary aircraft motors also made use of air as well as water cooling. To denote its connection with air-cooled airplane engines, Franklin had several models named Airman or Pursuit. When Charles Lindbergh flew nonstop from New York to Paris in 1927, his specially built Ryan monoplane, the Spirit of St. Louis, was powered by a Wright air-cooled engine. In order to link Franklin air-cooled cars to this feat, Franklin gifted one of its finest models to Charles Lindbergh.



Charles A. Lindbergh's Franklin (Author's photo from the Saratoga Antique Auto Museum).

In another stunt, an aircraft landed at a Syracuse airport and had its motor replaced by a Franklin auto motor, after which it took off again.

A New Beginning

After the car business ended, a group of engineers created a company called Air-Cooled Engines which produced genuine 4-cylinder engines for airplanes like the Piper Cub. The engine configuration was basically flat like a pancake. Versions with more cylinders were produced for military use in any situation where a flat reasonably powerful engine was needed. Franklin motors also powered the Bell Model 47 (i.e. MASH) helicopter and the Tucker automobile, not to mention models of the DIVCO stand-up milk delivery truck.



12-cylinder Franklin Aero engine similar to the 2 that powered the Northrop N-9M small-scale prototype of the XB-49 Flying Wing Bomber. (Author's photograph from the NECCM, Norwich, NY).

Summary

A chain of technology that began in Syracuse with an innovative light-weight auto spawned an aircraft engine that powered the antecedent of today's Northrup-Grumman B-2 and B-21 Stealth bombers as well as many other popular civilian aircraft like the Piper Cub. Syracuse can be proud of its technical achievements!

ⁱ Powell, Sinclair, The Franklin Automobile Company, Second Edition (Cazenovia, 2014), pp. 11-25.

ⁱⁱ These defects were not yet correctible by surgery in the late 1800's, and Franklin always wore a mustache to disguise them. He never let it affect his social life, double-dating on wagon rides and visiting girly shows like any other robust young man. See Powell, p.15-23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Powell p.22

^{iv} See Powell, p. 24. At Cornell, my sister lived as a freshman in Risley Dormitory located on Thurston Avenue.

^v Powell, p .25.

^{vi} Powell, p. 43

^{vii} Powell, p. 44

^{viii} Powell, p. 45-46.

^{ix} Powell, p. 50. Google Herman Casler for information on his career.