



## The nearly forgotten story of the Mercedes from Long Island

**E**ven Mercedes enthusiasts barely remember, but when Vance, Alabama, was just a newly renamed speck on the map of our agrarian south, Astoria in the rural borough of Queens, across the East River from Manhattan in New York, became the home of the Daimler Motor Company (DMC), followed by the Daimler Manufacturing Company (DMFG) and the American Mercedes.

Mercedes-Benz and Steinway are two of the world's most recognized and respected trademarks. Just as the three-pointed star adorns the grille or hood of every Mercedes, similarly, on the fallboard and right side of the case of most concert pianos is an equally recognized and respected trademark: Steinway & Sons. Steinway, older even than Mercedes, has

been making pianos since 1853 in New York. These are two companies with long histories as leaders in their fields. Automotive engineering and piano manufacturing are seemingly diametrically opposed industries. Yet more than a century ago, the principals behind these firms, Gottlieb Daimler and William Steinway, became partners, with the vision of bringing Daimler's products to the new world.

History often gets misinterpreted as it is abridged. There is a romantic story, really somewhat of a fantasy, that Steinway & Sons built Mercedes cars in New York at the turn of the 20th century. This whimsical assessment is only directionally correct. Steinway & Sons the company never built cars, only pianos. Further, neither William Steinway nor Gottlieb Daimler lived to see an American

# The American MERCEDES



Mercedes. Following is the story of these complex, illustrious but short-lived ventures.

To appreciate the story, one must understand what late-19th-century America was like. Heat engines were large, fixed, cantankerous contraptions created during the industrial revolution. They powered steamships and factory machines and impressed millions of people in then-popular exhibitions. Chicago in 1851 and 1892, Philadelphia in 1876, and cities in Europe provided venues to display and view

products of the industrial age. These exhibitions displayed everything, and attracted everyone. Nine million people attended the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876, when our nation's population was only 46 million.

Our roads were little more than meandering horse paths, barely suited for the carriages that used them and definitely unsuited for the automobiles that were to come. Often unmarked, they were passable when bone-dry or free of snow. The railroads were the main form of intercity transportation. By contrast, Europe had a reasonably good road system for the time.

Despite aggregate growth, our economy enjoyed no stability: busts followed booms, and when severe were deemed "panics." Entertainment as we know it did not exist – no movies, television, or radio. Live music performance was only coming into vogue, as was vaudeville theater, getting its start in the early 1880s. Aside from reading books by gas lamp or candlelight, what did people do for fun? They played music, and at the heart of it all was the piano. With pianos a popular household item, their manufacture was a prominent American industry in the latter half of the 19th century.

It is hard to imagine today just how important and popular the piano was then. It even drew presidential notice. In an 1890 speech, President Grover Cleveland said:

*Throughout our land in every home the piano has gathered about it the most sacred and tender associations. The Christmas that brought it into the household is a red-letter day in the family annals.*

When Heinrich Steinweg emigrated from Germany to New York with his sons in 1850, he quickly established a *pianofabrik* of good repute and began a practice of innovation. With their



The original emblem on the radiator summarizes the entire story.



**Most of the characteristics of this automobile would be familiar to mechanics today. Steering is by tie rods from the kingpin-mounted wheels to a steering box connected by a column to the steering wheel. The 4-cylinder engine comprises two blocks that share an oil sump, and the air-fuel mixture is supplied by a carburetor. Ignition was by spark plugs, but the style of these is admittedly an anachronism, updated to the type used in the 1920s. Fuel pressure was created by the brass pump on the left of the dashboard, and oil supply to each component could be monitored by the driver watching the tubes on the right, with pressure supplied from the exhaust.**

name Americanized to Steinway, the sons developed talents and took their appropriate place in the bustling family business. Steinway & Sons pioneered many of the fundamentals still used today in piano designs. William emerged as the visionary scion for this growing family business. Success led to money, power, and the ability to execute his visions and interests, which varied tremendously. Mr. Steinway's various visions and endeavors – including his partnership with Gottlieb Daimler – were not those of the company or his family; they were his alone.

Mr. Steinway cruised the waters of New York in his private motor yacht, the Mozart. He purchased land and founded a mixed-use community in Astoria, dubbing it Steinway. Visit today and there are streets, parks, libraries, and more bearing the Steinway name. He bought gas companies and horse-drawn trolley companies; he built amusement parks and beaches to serve his community. When John Roebling was finishing the Brooklyn Bridge, Steinway was constructing a tunnel under the same river. He foresaw subways, rather than

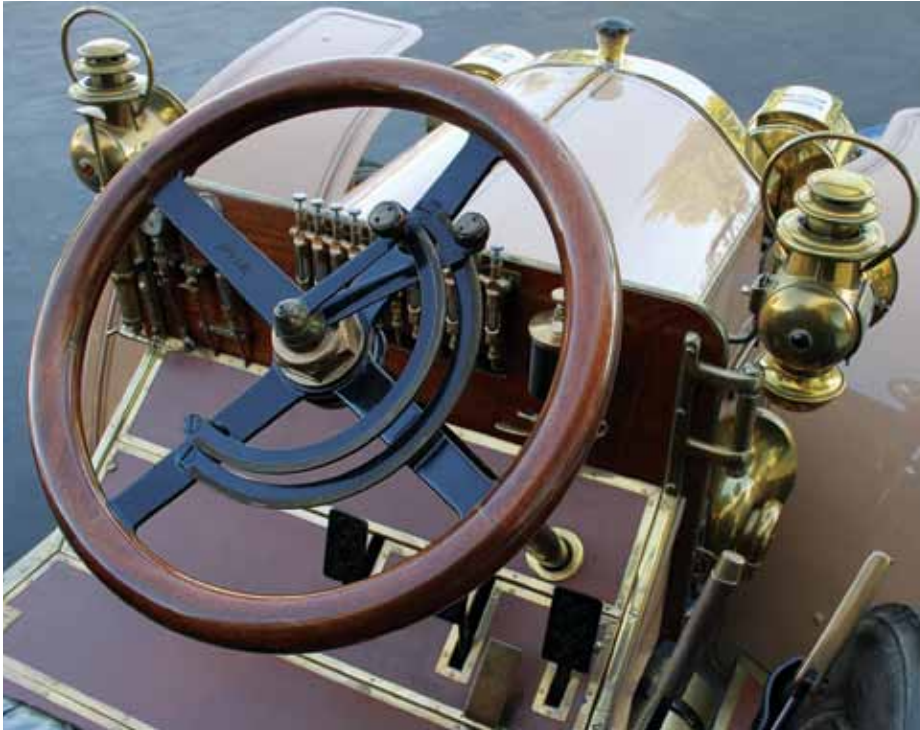
elevated or street railways, as mass transit. He served as the first transit commissioner of New York City and championed the transition from private to publicly owned rapid transit. Therefore, while Fulton envisioned steamboats, Whitney the cotton gin, Daimler and Benz engines and cars, and Roebling bridges, William Steinway saw, above all, the 20th century. He was, sadly, a bit ahead of his time. Aside from the family piano business, most of his endeavors, while not abject failures, fell short of resounding success. His visions became reality, just not in his lifetime. Timing, they say, is everything.

Mr. Steinway's first thoughts of motorized transportation most likely occurred not at an exposition, but by being confounded by the equine influenza epidemic of 1872. With everything moving by horse, this sickness brought transit to a standstill. Consummate businessman that he was, he was saddled with sick "employees" (the horses) that could not work but still needed care and feeding. As he saw engines operate his factory and power his

yacht, surely his thoughts drifted to replacing those unreliable horses. Later, of course, while attending exhibitions, he did indeed observe engines and motors in operation. This was, after all, the Gilded Age in American history.

There are two unsubstantiated tales of how Steinway met Daimler. One is that on a trip to Germany, where he still had family, his sister Doretta made the introduction. The other is that Wilhelm Maybach (then an engineer working for Daimler) had a brother who worked at Steinway & Sons in New York. No matter: They met, forged a common if not uncertain bond, and signed partnership papers in September 1888 forming the Daimler Motor Company. The first director's meeting was held February 2, 1889. DMC had access to, and license for, all of Daimler's work. At the beginning of this venture, DMC rented space at one of the Steinway & Sons buildings in Astoria, paying \$30 per month.

Blueprints came from Daimler in Germany, but with no factory yet, the firm



Fuel richness and ignition timing were controlled from the steering wheel. Pedals were similar to today, except for two brake pedals, one to the wheels and one to the transmission. A hand brake was connected by cable to the rear wheels. Even the transmission has a recognizable H-pattern. The car even had to be registered with the state.

contracted manufacturing to the National Machine Company of Hartford, Connecticut. Eventually DMC began manufacturing Daimler engines in its own factory in Astoria. These were physically large engines, more than three feet tall and weighing hundreds of pounds. They were single and 2-cylinder V configurations, ranging from 1 to 12 horsepower, wholly unsuited for wheeled transport.

However, with long experience in the use of wood as a building material, and a ready supply of it culled from the piano factory's rejects and sources, William Steinway set a course for boat manufacturing. Soon DMC had in its catalog a variety of wooden boats powered by Daimler engines, ranging from 16-foot to 50-foot, powered by combinations of DMC engines of the buyer's choosing.



Other uses for the DMC engines included typical stationary applications such as hoisting, pumping, generators, and fixed machinery. They did not power vehicles in the United States. William Steinway's telling diaries reveal that DMC consumed much of his personal capital; they also tell of less-than-perfect relations with Herr Daimler, who apparently failed to infuse DMC with his capital investment as he had promised and as Steinway was doing. This was not a venture with a future as it was presently operating.

William Steinway passed away in 1896, leaving DMC in turmoil. His nephews

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had begun to assume a larger role in the piano business and often disagreed with their uncle; further, no one in the Steinway family showed any interest in this particular DMC venture. Within months of his death, the heirs sold Steinway's full interest and stock to General Electric, ending entirely any association between Daimler and Steinway. After fewer than 10 years as a business, making only boats and engines, DMC was destined for reorganization.

During those 10 years, in Germany Daimler-Motoren-Gesellschaft was making engines that powered trams (streetcars) and boats, as well as cars and trucks, of its own manufacture. The engines were also employed on Panhard and Levassor cars from Paris. Karl Benz was enjoying some success nearby, and the European automobile industry was clearly well ahead of that in the United States. The roads ensured that advantage.

In 1898, a new company was formed in New York, the Daimler Manufacturing Company. Former DMC manager Frederick Kuebler was president, and DMFG acquired all the assets and physical plant of the old DMC. General Electric appeared to be a major shareholder, but not for long: America's leading street-railway developers, Peter A. B. Widener and William Lukens Elkins of Pennsylvania, bought controlling interest for \$200,000. These were extremely wealthy men, industrial statesmen, seemingly interested in getting in on the ground floor of a nascent industry, with the hopes of controlling it. This was an opportunity. While DMC never made cars, it was clear that DMFG was poised to do so, as were many others.

## Specifications of the American Mercedes

Years manufactured: 1905-1907  
 Total production: Unknown; thought to be fewer than 100 units  
 Price (1905): \$7,500  
 Engine: T-Head, 4-cylinder  
 Bore x Stroke: 120mm x 150mm  
 Displacement: 6,785cc (6.7L; 414 CID)  
 45 hp @ 1,100 rpm  
 Three main bearings  
 Mechanical valves  
 Simms-Bosch Low-tension magneto for make/break ignition  
 Exhaust-pressure oil feed for lubrication with sight gauges and manual backup  
 4-speed transmission, aluminum case  
 Sliding gears  
 Ball bearing shafts  
 Chain Drive  
 Water-cooled brakes  
 Coil and leaf spring suspension.  
 Road clearance 9.6 in.  
 (7.6 in. for German Mercedes)  
 Wheelbase: 122 in.  
 Tires: Continental, 4 in. front, 4.5 in. rear  
 Wood spoke wheels  
 Total weight: 2,000 lbs.;  
 engine alone: 580 lbs.  
 Body style: Standard, side-entrance tonneau  
 Body: Aluminum over wood frame  
 Body weight: 300 pounds  
 Upholstery, painting, trim, detailing by Brewster & Company, Long Island City.  
 Lighting: Solar acetylene (carbide) head lamps, brass [US], oil sidelamps  
 Top speed guaranteed to reach 60 mph with four passengers  
 All parts guaranteed to be interchangeable with German Mercedes

The late historian and author Beverly Rae Kimes said that automobile companies were springing up “like weeds” at the time. Indeed, even in Manhattan, there were 334 automobile “manufacturers” listed in this early era – a number that does not include the other boroughs or surrounding areas.

The new firm moved rapidly, and by 1899 was already planning production of cars and trucks. Daimler died in 1900 with little effect on DMFG. In addition to having what appeared to be a continuation of the licenses to produce Daimler products, it also secured rights and patents to produce Panhard and Levassor products. And produce it did. DMFG manufactured a line of buses and trucks, including the Daimler Model B22, a 3,000-pound truck with a capacity of 1,500 pounds, as well as the B23 and B24. DMFG was now a vehicle manufacturer, with products, catalogs, showrooms, and even some customers.

After the turn of the century, a car to be reckoned with appeared in Europe: the Mercedes. You can read that history in any number of places, but of note here is the Mercedes 45-horsepower, 122-inch wheelbase touring car. That would be the car DMFG would manufacture in New York. The first model, the Mercedes Simplex, was amazing in that it illustrated how rapidly innovation had followed innovation. In fewer than 20 years, the automobile had gone from barely meeting the minimal requirements of motorized transportation to a vehicle incorporating most of the features we recognize today.

Here is where the story gets complex.

The German Mercedes sold for \$7,500 in Europe, an astonishing \$175,000 in today's currency. Clearly, this was a product for only extremely wealthy individuals in this pre-income-tax era. While DMFG was formulating plans for manufacturing this car for the U.S. market (also priced at \$7,500), others were already importing the German version into the United States. When the first American Mercedes was produced in 1905, its biggest competition was the same car made in Germany. The German cars were even modified for the U.S. market by DMFG, while it was making its own cars.

The importation began with a mysterious and devious man named Charles Lehmann, a former German bicycle racer. He affected a French accent and legally changed his name to “Monsieur Charley.” He started the import company, cleverly negotiating a deal with Smith & Mabley, a well-connected importer of fine products to those on the social register. Smith & Mabley was already making a car of its own, the S&M Simplex, in New York, and importing Renault, Panhard, and Fiat as well.

One of the selling points was that the buyer need not pay the \$3,000 import duty on the New York product. However, to the well-heeled buyers, money was apparently irrelevant – the import duty was a non-issue – and the German car was preferred to the American. To counter this, DMFG emphasized the use of German steel and imported parts – and claimed that the car was identical. Articles on this story over the years repeat this, but a noted metallurgist consulted today stated that Carnegie Steel, later U.S. Steel, had all the same product and processes as the German steelmakers at that time.

William Steinway had fought this same battle years earlier with the press and public over the Steinway pianos originating from the factory in Hamburg, Germany. Despite being of identical design and manufacture, “German quality” was not yet accepted, and the German pianos were seen as inferior to those from Steinway's New York factory. This piano quality issue was as unlikely as the iron and steel issue; it was perceptions seen as reality.

The importers also executed another gambit. The “Selden Patent” is a sordid detail of American automobile history, with the monopoly created by its owners and licensees, who claimed they had invented the concept of the automobile. DMFG did not have the license and



The relationship of components to one another was established by this time, with the radiator in front of the forward-mounted engine, and the transmission behind it. The Mercedes was still chain-driven to the rear wheels, but this system would be replaced by a single driveshaft in 1908. The driver was mounted in front of the passengers, steering with a wheel connected to the front wheels, with all controls within reach.

did not pay the royalty. The importers of the German car, however, had the Selden license for their Simplex and could pay the royalties for all their imports. Therefore, the German car was legal; the American version was considered an outlaw that left buyers with potential legal liability. No matter that the Selden patent was eventually overturned in 1911 – this was 1905.

Victories in the marketplace of automobiles are frequently tied to victories on the race-track, even then. The German Mercedes was winning in European races, such as Nice in 1901. It was also winning in the United States, with the Vanderbilt Cup on Long Island. This was good press – and led to demand. Not to be outdone, the American Mercedes won a race at Daytona in January 1907.

That victory might have been the jump-start for growth. However, just a few weeks later in February 1907, a horrific fire consumed the Astoria factory. While fully covered by insurance, the fire destroyed nearly everything. The plant and operating personnel wanted to rebuild and continue; directors and management did not. Shortly thereafter, the “Panic of 1907” set in and DMFG’s financiers lost all interest.

Interestingly, the company languished until dissolved in 1913. There was inventory in the Manhattan showroom to sell, and the company was sporadically receiving royalties on the imported German Mercedes. Shortly after dissolution, shots were fired in Sarajevo, and thoughts of manufacturing a German car in the United States were quietly put to rest for generations.

The structure consisted of a body mounted on a lengthwise frame, a structure still used on many vehicles today. Leaf springs were installed between the frame and the wheels to cushion the ride, though shock absorbers were still very rudimentary, consisting of counter springs. The car even had a trunk, or basket, for cargo. The major differences between the American Mercedes and the German-built original reflected American road conditions, requiring a longer wheelbase and an additional two inches of ground clearance.



For driving after dark, the Mercedes had two acetylene headlights, plus two oil-fueled running lights and one taillight.



However, one more interesting detail ends this story. A former engineer at DMFG, one John McMulkin, moved to the seaside village of Huntington in 1905, approximately 40 miles east of New York City. It is uncertain how his story precisely unfolded, but apparently he connected with an existing machine shop called the Huntington Automobile Company, which had been advertising automobile repair and machine-shop services for some time.

McMulkin secured financing from August Heckscher and announced their intention to build automobiles. Heckscher was well-known, well-connected, and very wealthy, earning his fortune as head of the Zinc Trust. His name today precedes many things on Long Island, a legacy to his philanthropy.

Reports that some automobiles were manufactured have not been substantiated. Only the announcement of the intent to do so appeared in the March 31, 1905, issue of the *Islander* newspaper. Many advertisements for services continued to appear, but nothing of actual car manufacture. One would think that the first car manufactured would garner some local press, or perhaps an advertisement. What passed for news at this time were the reports of McMulkin’s wife’s vacations. There was nothing about any actual cars. In July, they took a Ford dealership. In November, they announced a shutdown of a few days. In December 1907, Heckscher and his attorneys put the firm into receivership.

History tells us that the intent of the Huntington Automobile Company was yet another copy of the acclaimed German Mercedes, but with a 70-horsepower engine. In what might have been some kind of homage to – or, more likely, attempt to get around – patents and licensing, the car was to be called the Merciless. Indeed, this was a merciful but bizarre end to a long and complex story.

*Note: The car pictured on these pages is in the collection of the Mercedes-Benz Classic Center in Irvine, California, and is the only known surviving example of the American Mercedes automobile.* 🚗

