

Michigan Time Traveler

An educational supplement produced by Lansing Newspapers In Education, Inc. and the Michigan Historical Center.

KIDS' History



Reo automobiles are lined up in front of the Reo Motor Car Company offices on S. Washington Street (c. 1913-1917). The banner on each car reads *REO the 5th — Sold by Milliam & Nash — Kalamazoo.* (State Archives)

A Car Capital

R. E. Olds put Lansing on the automobile map when he manufactured his Curved Dash motor car here. Today's Time Traveler looks for auto history in the Capital City.

Signs of Lansing's Early Auto Industry

We've all seen the large automobile plant buildings in the greater Lansing area. But there are other signs of Lansing's early auto history all around us. Have you seen these?

Lansing has streets named Olds Avenue, Reo Avenue, Reo Road and Reo Court. At the end of Reo Court is Reo Elementary School. There are a Durant Street, a Verlinden Street (and school), a Motor Avenue and a Truck Court, too.

The Reo Motor Car Company was on South Washington Street. This Michigan Historical Marker marks the spot and tells about the plant and the Reo Clubhouse. A Michigan Historical Marker for R. E. Olds and the Curved Dash Olds is on Townsend Street near William Street.

In 1926 R. E. Olds and other investors built the Hotel Olds. The hotel closed in the 1970s. It now houses State of Michigan offices and is called the Romney Building. Olds also built the tallest building in Lansing. It was called the Olds Tower until the Michigan National Bank bought it in 1941 and named it the Michigan National Tower. Now it awaits a sign with a new name. Some people believe it should be named the Olds Tower again to honor Mr. Olds. What do you think?



Kelley, Alison and Tracey, visitors to the Michigan Historical Museum from Southfield, learn about the Curved Dash Olds.

At the Michigan Historical Museum

- See the Curved Dash Olds and other cars.
- "Create-A-Car" at the interactive computer touch-screens in the Early Auto exhibit.

The Michigan Historical Museum, 702 W. Kalamazoo Street, is located two blocks west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. Museum admission is free. Hours: Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.; Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m. The museum telephone hotline: (517) 373-3559. The museum is part of the Michigan Historical Center, Department of History, Arts and Libraries. Visit us on the Web at www.michiganhistory.org.

R. E. Olds and His Cars

- 1864 Ransom Eli Olds is born in Geneva, Ohio.
- 1880 The Olds family moves to Lansing. R. E. Olds is 16 years old. His father and older brother, Wallace, start a machinery repair business, P. F. Olds and Son, on the west side of River Street between Kalamazoo and Lenawee Streets.
- 1886 R. E. Olds builds his first car, a three-wheeled gasoline-fired steam-powered horseless carriage.
- 1890 Olds builds a four-wheeled gasoline-fired steam-powered vehicle. An article about the car in the *Scientific American* in 1892 gives Olds' invention national attention.
- 1897 Lansing investors and R. E. Olds form the Olds Motor Vehicle Company.
- 1900 Olds builds a factory in Detroit. Only a few cars have been built when it burns down in March 1901. Olds decides to build his new factory back in Lansing.
- 1904 Olds leaves the Olds Motor Works. He and other investors form the REO Motor Car Company.
- 1908 Oldsmobile joins W. C. Durant's General Motors Corporation.
- 1950 R. E. Olds dies in Lansing at the age of 86. His wife Metta dies one week later.
- 1975 REO goes out of business.



Carriage Houses to Garages

When R. E. Olds was growing up, the carriage house was a familiar backyard building. Families who could afford to buy a motor car turned the carriage house into a garage. R. E. Olds built a house in Lansing in 1903-04. Then he added a garage. Patricia Heyden tells about it in her book *Metta and R. E. Olds: Loves Lives Labors*:

As soon as the house was completed R. E. added a 1,000 square foot "automobile room," one of the first of its kind. A turntable installed in the middle of the structure allowed him to drive onto the turntable, rotate it, and never have to back his car down the long drive. . . .

One morning, the Olds' young grandson and a buddy were in the garage spinning the turntable around with their feet and caused a trailer in the room to crash into a nearby Pierce-Arrow (R. E. and Pierce were friends). Pale and frightened, the two youths ran to Mr. Olds' office to tell him what happened. Indulging them, Mr. Olds said, "If that's the worst trouble you two lads get into you won't have much to worry about."

This house, built at 720 S. Washington Street, was home to Mr. and Mrs. Olds until they died in 1950. In 1966 the house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its architecture and connection to history. However, the house was in the right-of-way for the I-496 highway. Plans to move the house failed, and it was demolished for the new road.



The Olds house, photographed around 1912. (State Archives)

Olds and His Community

Besides inventing cars, R. E. Olds invested in land and buildings. He also helped his community. When the Lansing Women's Clubs needed a meeting place in 1910, Mr. Olds pledged \$10,000 toward their building. The Women's Clubs had to raise the funds to buy the property. They raised money for three years. Then Mr. Olds surprised them by giving them the land for the clubhouse and saying that he would build it.

When the engineering school building burned down at Michigan State College (now M.S.U.) in 1916, college president Dr. Frank Kedzie called R. E. Olds. Olds remembered that Dr. Kedzie's father had loaned his father some money for his business. Olds donated \$100,000 to help rebuild the engineering school. In gratitude, the school named it the R. E. Olds Hall of Engineering.

In the summer of 1926, R. E. Olds donated land on the shore of a lake in Clare County to the Lansing YMCA. The YMCA built Mystic Lake Camp there. Its first campers were boys, but now both boys and girls participate in its programs.

Billy Durant

In 1920 auto pioneer William Crapo Durant, called the "Father of General Motors," built a factory in Lansing to assemble Durant and Star automobiles. He hired Edward Verlinden to manage the plant. Verlinden had worked for Henry Ford and had been the general manager of Oldsmobile. Durant Motor Cars went out of business during the Great Depression. General Motors bought the plant in 1935.



Durant Park on Saginaw St. between Washington and Capitol Avenues is a gift from Billy Durant. He bought the property in 1919 and paid a landscaper to design a park with trees, flowers and a 40-foot circular fountain. The Memorial Arch, built in 1924 to honor him for his gift to Lansing, marks the entrance.

Things to Do

- Using a map of Lansing, locate streets and places with a connection to the city's early automobile history.
- Find articles and ads in this newspaper that relate to Lansing's auto industry today and yesterday.
- Visit "Lansing 1897" on-line to learn what Lansing was like when R. E. Olds formed his first car company: www.sos.state.mi.us/history/museum/explore/museums/hismus/special/lans1897.

MotorCities - Automobile National Heritage Area

Do you know that you live in a National Heritage Area? Lansing is part of MotorCities-Automobile National Heritage Area. It is working with Flint, Detroit and lots of places in between to create tours for visitors, classroom materials for teachers and projects that save and interpret our automobile stories. For more information, visit autoheritage.org on the Web.



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