

Chrysler Brand Heritage Chronology

1875-1912: Kansas-born Walter Chrysler, son of a locomotive engineer, was connected to the transportation industries throughout his life. His love of machinery prompted him to forsake a college education for a machinist's apprenticeship, and his early career comprised numerous mechanical jobs in the railroad industry.

1912-1920: In 1912, Chrysler joined General Motors as manager of its Buick manufacturing plant, becoming president of the Buick division four years later. After parting ways with GM in 1919, Chrysler began a second career as a "doctor of ailing automakers," strengthening first Willys-Overland, then the Maxwell Motor Corporation.

1920-1924: Chrysler teamed up with three ex-Studebaker engineers, Fred Zeder, Owen Skelton and Carl Breer, to design a revolutionary new car. They defined what the products of the Chrysler brand would be – affordable "luxury" vehicles known for innovative, top-flight engineering.

1924: The first was the 1924 Chrysler Six, an all-new car priced at \$1,565 that featured two significant innovations – a light, powerful, high-compression six-cylinder engine and the first use of four-wheel hydraulic brakes in a moderately priced vehicle. The well-equipped Chrysler Six also featured aluminum pistons, replaceable oil and air filters, full-pressure lubrication, tubular front axles, shock absorbers and indirect interior lighting.

1925: After securing a \$5,000,000 loan to start production, Chrysler sold over 32,000 units of the Chrysler Six in its first year. The Maxwell company soon had a new name: Chrysler Corporation. In 1925, the firm boasted more than 3,800 dealers, sold over 100,000 cars and ranked fifth in the industry.

1925-1930: Some of Chrysler's early high-performance, high-style cars startled industry observers and customers alike, but mid-range pricing added value and assured the success of the brand. Model numbers told customers how fast each Chrysler would go; the Chrysler 72, for example, featured an optional "Red-Head" engine for better pickup and hill climbing.

Chryslers would also perform commendably in other period racing venues, winning the 1925 1,000-mile Stock Car Speed Trial at Los Angeles and placing second, third and sixth at the Belgian Twenty-Four Hour Grand Prix of 1928. They also did well in endurance competition, completing a 1926 Kansas City-Denver test at an average speed of 51.8 mph and a 1927 New York-Los Angeles round-trip speed run at an average speed of 40.2 mph.

The 1928 acquisition of Dodge Brothers made Chrysler the third of Detroit's Big Three automakers — and Walter Chrysler one of the most successful industrialists of his generation.

1930-1935: Within a decade of its founding, Chrysler Corporation's leadership in innovation had earned for it the label of Detroit's "engineering company." Chrysler's list of early automotive "firsts" included Floating Power (a new method of mounting engines to isolate vibration), replaceable oil filters, downdraft carburetors and one-piece curved windshields.

Chrysler entered a higher level of competition with its richly appointed Imperial series. With a custom-built body from LeBaron or Briggs, a 145-inch-wheelbase chassis, a 125-horsepower engine and a price tag of \$3,145, a typical Imperial of the early 1930s rivaled a Duesenberg in style, but cost only about a third as much!

In 1934, Chrysler, with advice from Orville Wright, built a wind tunnel to test body shapes that led to the first unit-body, aerodynamic car — the Airflow. The idea came from Carl Breer after he tested conventional car shapes in a wind tunnel and found they registered much less drag "tail first."

Chrysler's Airflow "streamliner" was dramatic and ahead of its time — the fluid design and pioneering unit-body construction offered improved handling and passenger comfort in a vehicle unlike any seen before.

The Chrysler Airflow also featured recessed headlights, a low step-up height, a standard in-line eight-cylinder engine,

automatic overdrive and good gas mileage (posting 21.4 miles per gallon on a coast-to-coast test trip). Unfortunately for Chrysler, the Airflow was a bit too different for most. Even though its design was soon widely copied, this first truly streamlined car was not a sales success.

1936-1937: Less-than-spectacular sales led to stronger promotion of cars like the \$925 DeLuxe Eight over the slow-selling, \$1,400 Airflow — and to more conservative Chrysler styling.

1938-1941: A new brand-defining model appeared: the New York Special, soon recast as the richly appointed Chrysler New Yorker. Its longstanding popularity would eventually make it America's longest-running automobile nameplate (1938-1996).

"Fluid Drive" became known as another of Chrysler's significant engineering innovations — it was an "almost automatic" transmission that virtually eliminated shifting. Others included Superfinish to reduce wear on contacting metal surfaces and Oilite self-lubricating bearings.

Gaining widespread notice in 1940, the Chrysler Thunderbolt show car was a huge two-seater with a retractable steel roof and streamlined cladding front to rear. Chrysler turned even more heads on Memorial Day that year when its exotic Newport Phaeton, one of only five built by LeBaron, served as pace car at the Indianapolis 500 Mile Race.

The most striking production-model Chrysler of the prewar years was the 1941-42 Town & Country, a "barrelback" sedan expanded into an aerodynamic station wagon and trimmed with ash-and-mahogany side panels — the company's elegant entry into autobody's "woody" era.

1942-1945: All civilian car production stopped for the duration of World War II. Chrysler was eighth among all manufacturers in producing materials for the war effort.

1946-1954: When peacetime returned, Chrysler and other automakers rushed back into production with new cars retaining many of the solid, reassuring features of the prewar models, such as the ash-and-mahogany trim of the new 1946 Chrysler Town & Country sedans and convertibles that succeed the pre-war T&C station wagons.

While many customers, especially Hollywood stars, loved those postwar "woodies," many others were ready for a change, not just from the style of Town & Country, but from all "high-and-wide" models that harkened back to prewar styles. But Chrysler stood steadfastly by its tall, stolid cars. Through the early '50s, it built "comforting" large cars; when Chryslers did eventually get a bit longer and lower, styling visibly trailed most rivals in the market.

The first indication of changing times at Chrysler came with the 1951 development, and enthusiastic reception, of the authoritative, hemispheric-head V-8 engine. The soon-to-be legendary HEMI® combined better combustion, higher compression and lower heat loss to create much more horsepower than previous V-8s. Close behind was the fully automatic Powerflite transmission.

Chrysler then reaffirmed its engineering reputation by commissioning a revolutionary gas turbine engine program. This 20-year campaign to apply an aircraft engine turbine's smooth power and low maintenance requirements to automobiles became part of the Chrysler brand's folklore.

In 1949, Chrysler hired Studebaker designer Virgil Exner to head an advanced styling section, a first step toward realigning the company's design priorities. Exner enlisted the aid of Italian coachbuilder Carrozzeria Ghia to begin building a remarkable series of so-called "idea cars," like the 1951 Chrysler K-310 five-passenger sport coupe, the 1952 C-200, which featured the "gunsight" taillight design later used on Imperials, and the 1953 Chrysler D'Elegance, a three-passenger sport coupe with hand-sewn, black-and-yellow leather upholstery and matching luggage.

The most extraordinary car in this series was the Chrysler Norseman, featuring cantilevered arches to support a roof without "A" pillars, all-aluminum body panels and a power-operated, 12-square-foot panel of glass that slid forward to expose the rear seat to the sky. Shipped to America by Ghia, the Norseman sank to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean on the ill-fated Italian steamship Andrea Doria.

1955-1962: Exner revived Chrysler production car design with the sleek, sculptured Forward Look designs of 1955 that transformed the product line overnight. The Forward Look flagship was the 1955 Chrysler 300, a striking automobile that combined smooth styling with brawny HEMI power. The 300, arguably the first muscle car, became a legend on and off the race track and set records throughout the 1950s, including a 143-mph performance at Daytona

Beach.

As the Fifties progressed, Chrysler products began to sprout distinctive tailfins, ostensibly to improve handling and stability above 70 miles per hour. The 1957 Chrysler brand standard-bearer, the 300C, was equipped with a standard 392-cubic-inch, 375-horsepower HEMI, two four-barrel carburetors, a high-output camshaft, Torsion-Aire suspension and the new Torqueflite transmission, making it the fastest, most powerful production car built in America that year and earning it the appellation "beautiful brute."

Throughout the postwar years, Chrysler engineering leadership paced new styling advances. The company's engineering "firsts" from that era include the first "safety cushion dashboard," the famous Chrysler push-button transmission (which became an icon of the '50s), power steering, torsion-bar suspension and the first practical alternator (introduced in 1960, it proved so successful it became standard equipment just one year later).

1963-1970: Chrysler entered the second phase of its gas turbine project, completing 50 smartly styled, Ghia-designed prototypes for testing by 200 customers. With its whooshing jet-aircraft sound, distinctive exterior and a space-age interior filled with a massive console, the Chrysler Turbine Car would not be confused with any other vehicle. But the realities of poor mileage [11.5 mpg] and high production costs brought the project to a quiet close.

Chrysler products evolved gracefully through '60s — fins disappeared, large cars became more refined — and ads for the 1963 New Yorker promised that there were "no junior editions to compromise your investment." The 1963 Chrysler 300-J maintained the brand's style-plus-speed image with standard leather interiors, heavy-duty torsion bars and Ram induction manifolds; a special-edition Pace Setter convertible version started the Indianapolis 500.

By 1965, Chrysler sales had increased 65 percent and the brand moved from 11th to ninth place in national rankings. Models ranged from the "affordable luxury" of the Newport line (with no fewer than 376 trim and color combinations), through the high-line New Yorker to the sporty 300 with its 440-cubic-inch V-8 engine.

1971-1979: Following a decade of considerable success, Chrysler made an ill-fated, \$450 million investment in new large cars just before the 1973 oil embargo. Public demand quickly turned from traditional large cars to mid-size and smaller vehicles, forcing Chrysler and its competitors to make expensive changes to their product lineups.

One design highlight in Chrysler's rapidly evolving 1970s lineup was the Cordoba — a 115-inch-wheelbase coupe billed as "Chrysler's new small car." With its Jaguar-like front end, formal roofline and one-of-a-kind rectangular taillamps, it became one of the era's most memorable cars — along with the TV commercials featuring actor Ricardo Montalban extolling the virtues of its "rich Corinthian leather" interior. Cordobas sold better than all other Chrysler models combined, inspiring other new, "smaller" Chrysler designs, like the LeBaron Medallion coupe.

1980-1987: In 1980, Chrysler — deep in its greatest financial crisis — turned to the all-new K-Car for salvation. While some called it "the metal brick," in many ways the functional, compact, front-wheel-drive K-Car was just the right car for the times.

This automotive "back to basics" era peaked with the 1984 introduction of the minivan. Chrysler Corporation's most practical vehicle proved to be its most popular and eventually led to the revival of the Chrysler Town & Country nameplate on an upmarket version.

The design highlight for the Chrysler brand during this period was unquestionably the LeBaron convertible, which reintroduced the convertible to the American market and enjoyed a nine-year run as it brought style and excitement back to the brand.

1988-1998: In the late 1980s, new leadership at Chrysler, determined to return the brand to its roots of engineering and design excellence, decided to create an entirely new line of "Euro-Japanese-ethic" cars — and developed platform teams to get the job done quickly and affordably. The new product philosophy was reflected in the development of concept cars like the 1988 Portofino and the 1989 Millennium.

Chrysler's renaissance began in earnest with the mid-size 1993 Concorde sedan, which was quickly followed by the full-size LHS and Chrysler 300M, the smaller Cirrus sedan, the companion Sebring luxury sports coupe and the separate Sebring convertible, and the next-generation Town & Country minivan.

1998-2007: Since the DaimlerChrysler merger in 1998, still more outstanding Chrysler vehicles have been developed,

including the new Chrysler 300C, the PT Cruiser and PT Cruiser convertible, the all-new Sebring sedan and Sebring convertible, the Pacifica crossover, the latest versions of the Town & Country minivan and the Crossfire sports car.

More than 80 years after the creation of the company, each of these vehicles continues to personify Walter P. Chrysler's original vision for the brand bearing his name: superb engineering, standout design and fun-to-drive performance — all at an affordable price.

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