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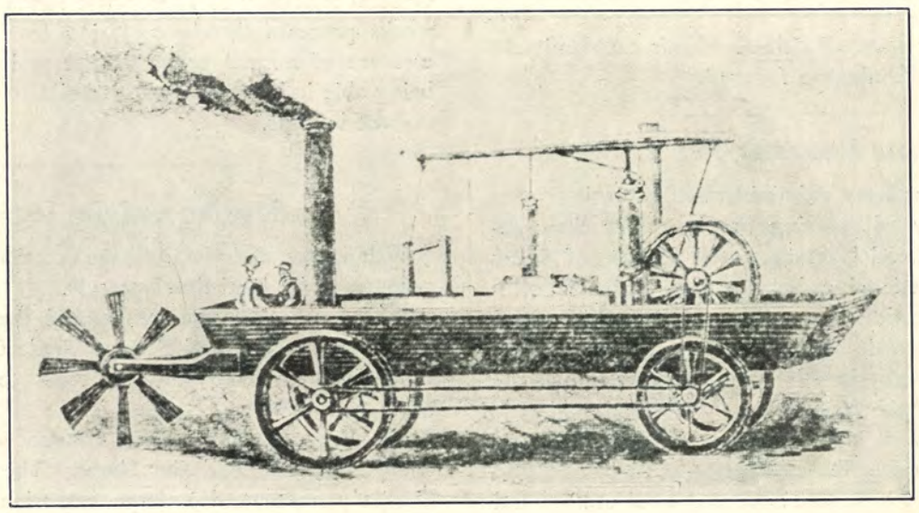
The First Automobile In America

By WILLIAM P. FRANK

OLIVER EVANS, father of this gigantic automotive industry, lies buried in a nameless grave in New York and his native State, Delaware, has forgotten.

Soldiers, authors and statesmen who laid the foundation of a nation have received their laurels and applause, but this dreamer who fashioned the keel of the greatest world industry is still more or less a legendary figure, stalking across the pages of history.

They laughed at him one bright July day of 1805 when he pushed his fantastically-shaped machine—classically called "Oruktor Amphibolis," onto the streets of Philadelphia; but they did not realize that the first page of industrial history was being written as the world's first "automobile" moved clumsily and heavily around Center Square, later Penn Square.



The first automobile in America, Oliver Evans' creation of 1804.

Some day, somewhere, when man will pause in his mad rush and seek to honor some one, perhaps it will be Oliver Evans, and then, perhaps, will his story become as well known and retold with as much repetion as that of Isaac Watt's tea kettle or Fulton's steamboat.

The story of Evans goes back to the dreamy village of Newport, Delaware, where he was born. It is Christmas, 1772. Oliver's brother rushes to him with a great story of how a gun had gone off without powder. A little water had been poured into an old musket barrel and a cork placed in the end. The musket was held over a fire. It got red hot in the middle and then—bang!—it exploded. The cork went clear across the room like a bullet.

Oliver Evans, aged 17 years, had an idea. Though dubbed crazy, he determined then and there to harness steam to a carriage so that the carriage could move without being pullel by a horse.

For twelve years, he worked on his idea before he could design to his own satisfaction a steam engine that would actually work. It was a slow business, for no one in America had yet attempted to build an engine of this sort. By 1784—one hundred and fifty years ago—he finally devised the plans of an engine that would use steam under high compression.

Evans applied to the Pennsylvania Legislature for a patent for propelling land carriages by steam, but the Pennsylvanians thought him so deranged and refused, but did grant a patent for a flour milling machine. Next, Evans applied to his native State and then to Maryland, which granted him exclusive right "because," said they, "it can injure no man and may cause him to produce something useful."

Evans was inventing machinery for mills, but it was his "horseless carriage" that had become his all-consuming idea.

The year 1801 saw the approach of Evans' realization of his mad dream. His engine plans were praised by Robert Patterson, of the University of Pennsylvania and he was lent $1,000 by a wealthy Trenton merchant to continue his work. Two years later, he constructed a foundry at the then northwest outskirts of Philadelphia, now Ninth and Vine Streets. This foundry he called "The Mars Works." Here, Evans built a large engine, using it to cut stone for mill stones. He was now on the eve of his great triumph.

In 1804, he was granted a patent for his high compression engine and in the following year, he published an advertisement—the first automobile advertisement in the country—setting forth that "the steam engine he has devised will answer well to drive a land carriage with a heavy burden, because the engine and fuel will not make one-eighth of the load."

With the first machine he built, the wheels and their axles were not sufficiently strong to bear the weight of the engine. But he continued to work and still intended to gratify the citizens of Philadelphia by sight of his mechanical curiosity. In his second attempt, he made the wheels heavier and on July 13, 1805, with his engine mounted in a paddle wheel scow, 30 feet long, he moved his queer "automobile" from his shop to Center Square, the favorite gathering place of crowds. Although called a "square" the place was really a circle, a half mile in circumference. Throughout the Revolutionary War, it was used as a parade ground, drill ground, and camp ground by the armies.

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With the fondness of people in those days of classical names, Evans named his machine, "Oruktor Amphobilis,"—Greek words, "oruktor" meaning digger and "amphibolis," being translated as "double acting." He had intended to use the machine to remove mud and refuse from the Schuylkill with a chain of buckets, operated by his steam engine, but on the way from his foundry to the river, he also intended to show the people of Philadelphia that his contraption could not only run by steam in the river but on land as well.

So, Evans announced to the public in his advertisement that his machine "is now to be seen moving around Center Square at the expense of the workmen, who expect 25 cents from every generous person who may come to see its operation."

This established the date—July 13, 1805—of the public operation of the first automotive vehicle in America and also the date of the first automobile show in America.

Having successfully given this exhibition of his wheeled vehicle, Evans drove the clumsy "Oruktor Amphibolis" to the Schuykill River about a mile and a half away. He then applied a paddle wheel in a temporary manner and propelled it down stream to the Delaware.

What eventually happened to this seagoing automobile, no one knows. No trace is left of the vehicle; no record of its final disposition.

Evans benefitted little from his invention, but in spite of discouragement, he never lost faith in steam carriages and predicted "the time will come when carriages propelled by steam will be in general use as well for the transportation of passengers as goods, travelling at the rate of fifteen miles an hour or 300 miles a day." Again people laughed at him and said he was crazy, but in less than 30 years later, the first railway was built in America.

On Friday, April 16, 1817, Evans died in a Bowery tavern. It is said he was buried on what is now the site of the New York City Hall. His body was disinterred when they built that structure. Where Oliver Evans is buried today—no one knows.