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The American Automobile Shapes Its Country

The invention of the automobile can be traced from the 16th century when Leonardo de Vinci sketched a horseless, mechanized cart, to the 20th century when the automobile first entered American society through Henry Ford. It is clear that the production of the automobile in the 20th century was one of the most important and influential inventions in the history of the United States. Ford's assembly line made the car affordable for ordinary consumers nationwide, and the automobile transformed American life, specifically influencing family culture, the economy, the role of the government, and transportation.

Before the automobile took hold of the nation, "walking cities" and "streetcar cities" existed, where travel was highly inconvenient and limited to walking and streets were dense with pedestrians. As the automobile was introduced, suburbia formed and the population began to spread out, as the car provided easier mobility to a wider variety of places. The first of the suburbs developed in Levittown, New York. After World War II, a violent battle leaving America stunned and a prospect to economic growth, Bill Levitt, the man associated with the beginnings of the suburbs, was looking to expand cities into the farmlands: "Levitt realized they [farms] could be transformed into a suburb, a bedroom community for New York City" ("Levittown and the Rise of the American Suburb"). He designed the community carefully, reducing inflow from foreigners through a grid formation and spacing the houses appropriately. The suburbs became the American Dream, as it guaranteed safety and "allowed people to escape the cramped conditions of the city" ("Levittown and the Rise of the American Suburb"). Accompanying the prospect of more space, the suburbs presented a less integrated life for white

people who wanted to distance themselves from other races in the city. This mass influx of white people in the suburbs became known as white flight. More white people could afford a car, as the majority were of a higher economic status than other races, and through acts of discrimination by banking and property management known as “redlining,” the population became divided: white people most commonly found in the suburbs, and people of color most commonly found in the cities (“White Flight”). The suburbs was most importantly stimulated by the automobile, as the vehicle was honored for its practicality to the population.

The most significant impact made by the automobile was how it changed family life and offered prospects of new opportunities for more people. By the beginnings of the 1920s, suburbs had developed greatly with the influence of the automobile and a new lifestyle was born. The car was presumed to bring together families as the new travel machine would make car rides to church or a Sunday picnic more entertaining and convenient than it used to be. As automobile production rapidly inclined, though, the opposite began to happen: the car allowed more freedom to individuals, ultimately breaking the traditional family structure of inseparability. Researchers Robert and Helen Lynde performed a study of 1929 and concluded that “the extensive use of this new tool by the young has enormously extended their mobility and the range of alternatives before them” (Flink, 159). Cars provided new independence for adolescents and granted women opportunities to expand beyond their household duties. Ruth Schwartz Cowan speaks about the effect the automobile had on women: “The automobile had become, to the American housewife of the middle classes, what the cast iron stove in the kitchen would have been to her counterpart of 1850 - the vehicle through which she did much of her most significant work, and the work locale where she could be most often found” (Flink, 164). The new vehicle became a woman’s

counterpart as she gained greater rights in her country. As the automobile assisted in growing freedom for almost everyone, it began to contribute to a “consumer culture,” in which families spent less on necessities, such as food or utilities, and more on recreational products, including entertainment, clothes, and new appliances (Roark, 811). From the beginning of automobile production in the 1920s to the 1950s when the car was spread across the nation, the transformation in family structure and lifestyle is evident; independence took over family togetherness and a culture of entertainment took over everyone's lives.

As the automobile took hold of society, it was inevitable that the economy would be changed as well, and the car would become one of the key factors leading to the nation's business boom in the 1920s. On December 1 of 1913, Henry Ford came out with his famous assembly line, stating, “I will build a motor car for the great multitude” (“The Henry Ford”). He not only created an accessible and convenient machine for everyone as he promised, but he also created a market surrounding the use and production of the automobile; his assembly line produced an automobile industry that became a mainstream for jobs, decreasing the unemployment rate significantly. Fuel was necessary to run a car, as well as tools, oil, and batteries for its upkeep. “Initially, gasoline, had to be obtained at ‘bulk depots’ located outside of the cities,” but around 1905, the first gas station was established and a new line of employment was constructed (“The Automobile Shapes the City”). Similarly, a car needed a place for storage, and on road trips, a family needed somewhere to eat quickly or stay the night. By the 1920s, gas stations, garages, fast food restaurants, bed and breakfasts, and more dotted the land, providing more and more jobs for everyone. A study shows that “by 1929, one American in four found employment directly or indirectly in the automobile industry” (Roark, 688). The automobile, a

machine designed to transport a person from one place to the next, ultimately had an even larger meaning for the American individual, becoming a basis for economic growth and a contributor to the business boom throughout the 1900s.

The U.S. government began to regulate autotravel, particularly its involvement in the Interstate Highway Act of 1956. This act authorized the construction of a 41,000 mile network of interstate highways, funded by the federal government through increased fuel and vehicle taxes (Roark, 812). Previous projects were dealt with at a state or local level, but the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 was a federally funded project. President Dwight Eisenhower claimed the act to be “essential to national defense and an impotence to economic growth” (Roark, 812). Having a highway, on which cars could travel fast and frequently in one direction, was the most advantageous option for evacuation in national or warfare disasters. While this idea helped convince Congress and the American population to support it, the act increased sales of the automobile more than anything, as it helped make the automobile even more accessible and efficient to travel in. The automobile industry was not the only one that benefited from the government's support, though. “The new highways accelerated the mobility of Americans and the movement of goods and spurred suburban expansion, shopping malls, and growth in the fast-food and motel industries” (Roark, 812). Trucking and construction companies were highly involved in the campaigning for the act, and they also benefited from the new network of transportation and roadwork the legislation provided. Conversely, the highways did have a negative impact, contributing to “air pollution, energy consumption, declining railroads and mass transportation, and decay of central cities (Roark, 812). It is evident that the government’s

decision to promote and implement the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 proved to have many secondary outcomes.

As the automobile became more widespread and supported across the nation, the machine inevitably replaced other forms of transportation, most common, the streetcar and trains. The car became so popular by the mid-1900s that one commentator noted that the phrase “Give us our daily bread” was no longer addressed to the Almighty but to Detroit where Ford’s company was located (Roark, 688). This mass recognition stimulated a decrease in demand for trains and streetcars: “In Los Angeles, which boasted of the nations most extensive system of electronic trolleys, almost a thousand miles of track suffered a slow death at the hands of the automobile (Roark, 689). Instances like these grew more common as the automobile’s popularity spread across the country. Unlike trains and streetcars, which followed a schedule and ran on a track, automobiles could transport a person to a wide variety of places in efficiency and at a low cost. “If a single trolley got stalled on the tracks, the normal flow of traffic was halted” (Flink, 137). On top of that, the maintenance and the cost of electricity for the streetcar became more than reasonable, while the automobile offered a cheaper and more favored option. The car industry emerged as the leading form of transportation by the end of the century, as it surpassed any other form of transportation with its competence and affordability.

From the machine’s carefully designed features marketed towards the convenience of citizens to its practicality for the whole of the nation, the automobile held America in its palm throughout the 1900s. The Automobile was everywhere, influencing everyone: as an article published in the Los Angeles Herald in 1909 commented, “The observer has but to look about the streets of such a city as Los Angeles and see the noiselessness machines that are more

prominent in numbers today than horse-drawn vehicles..." ("For Hundreds of Years"). Women and adolescents received new opportunities, the economy prospered with more employment, the federal government got involved, and a new era of transportation was born because of the automobile.

Appendix



Works Cited

Flink, James J. *The Automobile Age*. MIT Press, 1993. This book provides insight on the ways the automobile developed suburbia, especially in cities such as Atlanta, and the city planning behind the growth of cars. It also studies the way the connections between the

automobile and railways and public transportation, as well as the environmental impact of the automobile. By covering a wide range of topics, this book will provide supporting arguments and history for my paper.

"Ford's Assembly Line Starts Rolling." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 13 Nov. 2009, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/fords-assembly-line-starts-rolling. This short article provides a summary of Ford's assembly line and what it meant for the production of cars. It is helpful to my paper, as it supplies background information and includes several quotes from Ford.

"Henry Ford Quotes." *The Henry Ford*, www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-resources/popular-topics/henry-ford-quotes/. This website includes many quotes from Henry Ford. It is useful to my paper, as it provides me with his perspective on the automobile and his actions in the 1900s.

"Highway History." U.S. Department of Transportation/Federal Highway Administration, www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/50interstate.cfm. This website provides an in depth study of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, explaining the context, its purpose, the government's role in enacting it, and its effects. This page is helpful to my paper, as it supplies a reputable background of the act, which I can reference.

"Levittown and the Rise of the American Suburb." *Public Radio International*, 4 Dec. 2017, www.pri.org/stories/2017-12-04/levittown-and-rise-americansuburb. This article describes suburbia, its causes effects, and specifically the first one in Levittown, New York. It is helpful to my paper, providing background information and research on the suburbia.

Lewis, David L., and Laurence Goldstein, editors. *The Automobile and American Culture*. U of Michigan P, 1983. This book explains how the Automobile served American citizens and their culture by examining the car's role in cities as well as rural areas. It introduces the idea of the automobile transforming the US as a country. This book is helpful to my paper, as it provides thorough background information on the production and impact of the automobile and the culture of America during that time period.

Melosi, Martin V. "The Automobile Shapes the City." *Automobile in American Life and Society*, U of Michigan-Dearborn / the Henry Ford, 1 Jan. 2005, www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Environment/E_Casestudy/E_casestudy12.htm. Accessed 10 Apr. 2019. This article thoroughly examines the impact the automobile has on cities in the way that it transforms the structure of labor, environment, gender, and culture, as well as the way it created a suburbia. Because this article includes specific data about the production of the automobile and arguments that provide perspective, this article is highly informative, it serves as a source to support the arguments and details of my paper.

National Endowment for the Humanities. "Los Angeles Herald. (Los Angeles [Calif.]) 1900-1911, September 12, 1909, Page 2, Image 34." News about Chronicling America RSS, Herald Pub. Co., chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042462/1909-09-12/ed-1/seq-34/. This is an archived newspaper article from 1909 in the Los Angeles Herald. It describes how popular the car industry has become and where it originated. As a primary document, I can use quotes from this to prove exactly the extent to which cars were spreading across the nation.

Roark, James L., et al. *The American Promise*. 5th ed., vol. 2, Bedford St. Martin's. 2 vols. This book covers from 1865 to present and includes several chapters on the automobile, family life, suburbs, and more. It provides an in depth study of both political and social history. This historic overview is perfect for my paper as it contains great knowledge on the automobile.

"Suburban Growth." *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association, www.ushistory.org/Us/53b.asp. This article is brief and focuses mainly on the growth of suburbia in the 1950s. It provides insight on American culture as society became more advanced. The article is helpful for my paper, as it gives background information I can reference.

Volti, R. (1996). A century of automobility. *Technology and Culture*, 37(4), 663-685. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/198420942?accountid=36629> This scholarly journal details how the automobile, technology, and culture intertwine and connects the production of the automobile with the creation of suburbia in America. It provides a basic yet highly informative history of the period of the automobile and its impacts on society.

"White Flight." *White Flight*, www.datacenterresearch.org/pre-katrina/tertiary/white.html. This article provides data and research on white flight and the beginnings of suburbia. It is helpful to my paper as it addresses several key points about the suburbs.