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Downtown is dotted with remnants of auto heritage



▲ Ford manufacturing once went on in Capitol Avenue building now occupied by Economy Plumbing.

BY CONNIE ZEIGLER

NEARLY EVERYONE KNOWS THAT INDIANAPOLIS'S claim to fame is car-related. The Indianapolis 500 is the *uber* expression of this city's obsession with automobiles.

But Indianapolis was once also famous for its car production.

The city's auto industry is a worthy subject for a column – but it's not exactly the subject of this column. What is especially fascinating for someone who works with historic architecture is that many of the grand buildings which housed car manufacturing plants remain a part of the built environment of this city. A tour of Downtown and environs can be a virtual step back in time, if you know where to look and what you're seeing out your windshield.

In no particular order, here is a quick and by no means exhaustive list and brief descriptions of some of these buildings and their former purposes.

Stutz Motor Car Co. The former Stutz car manufacturing plant at 1008 N. Capitol Ave. is now converted into trendy artists' studios and industrial chic office spaces. The Stutz Motor Car Co. began life in 1913. The company was housed in this location from 1914 until its demise in 1937. In 1919, former owner Harry C. Stutz formed the HCS Motor Co. and built another impressive Neoclassical-style building at 1402 North Capitol (also still existing). Although the Stutz Bearcat was as symbolic of the Roaring Twenties as the bathtub gin-drinking flapper girls who rode in it, the Great Depression put Stutz out of business. It closed in the mid-1930s after producing about 35,000 cars.

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Carl Fisher's role went far beyond founding Speedway

Frank Hatfield Co. Down the street from Stutz, in the 600 block of North Capitol Avenue, is the former location of the Frank Hatfield Co. Hatfield was a Ford distributor and manufac-



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urer. This beautiful Exotic Revival building with its white glazed tile exterior once housed sales rooms downstairs and upholstery and manufacturing floors upstairs. Those of us who grew up in Central Indiana still remember the “Hatfield Ford” commercials that were on-going until the mid-1970s; although the company by then had moved to suburban-sprawl space. Economy Plumbing now occupies the original Frank Hatfield Co. building on North Capitol Avenue. The words: “Ford, Trucks, Parts” are still visible impressed in the tile above the windows.



▲ As the Stutz Business Center, the former home of the glamorous Stutz automobile still plays a high-profile role -- as the home of many artists and art-related companies.

Cole Motor Car Co. Located at 730 East Washington St., the former Cole Motor Car Co. is the complex bifurcated by the on-ramp to I-65 south on Market Street. The next time you take the soon-to-be-demolished ramp, try to imagine the hum of conveyor belts and the ratcheting of industrial machinery which once took place below your car wheels. Joseph J. Cole started his business as a buggy company, a common early enterprise for car manufacturers.

The Cole Carriage Co. built its first cars around 1905. Cole formed the Cole Motor Co. in 1908 and began producing luxury cars to compete with Detroit’s Cadillac. Cole was a born public-relations man. He advertised with Cole Cigars, a Cole baseball team and even a Cole hot air balloon. His decision to produce an expensive, luxury car without offering a less-expensive alternative, however, was Cole’s downfall. Sales dropped and production ceased in 1925. The Chicago-style brick building serves today as part of the jail arrestee processing center and sports an odd *trompe l’oeil* mural of office windows on its eastern side.

Ford Motor Co. A few blocks east of the Cole buildings, the Ford Motor Co. factory is the tall, red-brick building with limestone trim on the south side of the street at 1315-

1325 East Washington St. Though Ford was based in Michigan, the company built this plant in Indianapolis in 1914 as a regional assembly, repair and sales center. Sales ended in 1916 and assembly stopped in 1932 when the Indianapolis Ford plant became another victim of depression era economics. Today the building is part of the IvyTech campus.

Marmon Motor Co. A bit removed from these other buildings, but still within an easy drive of Downtown, is the former Marmon Motor Car Co. in the 1500 block of South Drover St. just off White River Parkway. Although the modern office building at this complex incorporates a portion of the older Marmon offices, the old industrial buildings are the real historic stars of the complex. Barely visible over modern structures, these brick buildings rise several stories with an air of importance befitting the location where “the easiest riding car in the world” was once manufactured. Today, National Starch occupies both the old and new buildings at this out-of-the-way location.

Duesenberg Factory. Also slightly outside the city center, just east of the Indianapolis Zoo, IndyGo bus headquarters found a home in the former Duesenberg Factory Machine Shop at 1511 West Washington St.. The lovely brick buildings include “daylight shops” with windowed monitors that provided natural light for the workers, as well as the common industrial boxy buildings. Heralded as America’s most luxurious car, Duesenbergs were produced at this complex from the 1920s to 1937. In 1926 industrialist Errett Lobban Cord bought the company and produced the 265-horsepower engine for the Model J, which had a custom body and sold for \$14,000 to \$20,000 in the 1920s. The company counted movie stars and millionaires as customers, but produced only 480 cars between 1929 and 1937. Today, city buses are housed in the buildings that once produced millionaire’s cars.

These car-manufacturing buildings are just a handful of the many dozens of car-related structures in or near the city center. Former car dealerships on Meridian Street, the former Wheeler carburetor factory in Fountain Square, National Auto (mentioned elsewhere in this month’s Urban Times), the old Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co. (now Zesco) across the street from the Frank Hatfield Co. building on North Capitol Avenue, and many others also dot the landscape of this city. Their grand edifices serving as bricks and mortar representations of a car culture that began to define us in the 19th Century and continues to do so in the 21st Century. ■

Carl Fisher's role went far beyond founding Speedway

INDIANAPOLIS, IN THE MONTH OF May, is a one-note song – and the name of the tune is the Indianapolis 500. The race is encoded in our collective DNA and it's the one thing that someone not from Indianapolis knows about our city. Everyone knows about the 500 and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Most of us who live in this city are aware that Carl Fisher was one of the founders of the Speedway. In May, it is fitting that this column, normally devoted to downtown spaces, shares its focus on a person who is known primarily for his connection with the town that became one of Unigov's excluded cities.

If Fisher's only accomplishment had been to partner in building the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, he would be an important person in Indianapolis history. But for the indefatigable Fisher, the Speedway was but one of many ventures that were woven through the warp and weft of Indianapolis history. And through the broader history of our nation. His contributions were remarkable and lasting. They spread far wider than the Speedway and far beyond the boundaries of this city.

A native Hoosier, Carl Graham Fisher was born into poverty in Greensburg, Indiana, in 1874. At age 17, despite being 50-percent blind, he was a champion bicycle racer and stunt performer. He began to race cars before the turn of the century. In 1904 he set a world's record, driving at just over one minute per mile on a dirt race track.

Around 1902, Fisher moved to Indianapolis and opened his own automobile showroom at 330 North Illinois St. At that location, he sold and serviced Premiers (which were manufactured in Indianapolis) and Winton automobiles. Also in 1902, Fisher and a group of automobile enthusiasts organized the "Flat Tire Group," a driving club. The Flat Tire Group changed its name to the Hoosier Motor Club in 1911, and in 1917 the organization became an Indiana affiliate of AAA, the folks who will "jump" your battery on a cold winter morning.

In 1904, Fisher partnered with James A. Allison and P. C. "Fred" Avery in the Prest-O-Lite Storage Battery Co., a factory that produced acetylene cylinders were used to light automobile headlamps.

A few years later Fisher; his Prest-O-Lite partner,

Allison; and Frank Wheeler and Arthur Newby built the Indianapolis Motor Speedway near the Prest-O-Lite factory.

They planned to use the speedway as a place to test automobiles. But the first event held at the new speedway was a balloon race. Fisher, of course, piloted one of the balloons.

Fisher and his partners hired Lemon Trotter to plat a town around the race track in 1912. They called their town Speedway. In an era when the family automobile was still a rarity, they planned a "horseless" workers' city focused on the automobile industry.

In his spare time, Fisher dabbled in inventions and promotions. In 1906, he built a flying dirigible that became a regular attraction at one of Indianapolis's new amusement parks. The "Kann War Airship" made twice daily flights over the Wonderland Amusement Park on East Washington Street. Fisher also promoted a local radio station with a dirigible that he piloted over downtown Indianapolis; in its basket was a pianist playing a piano.

Carl Fisher married 15-year-old Jane Watt in 1909. The couple established their home on Cold Spring Road near his partner James Allison's mansion. Both the Fisher and the Allison mansions later became part of what is now the Marian College campus.

Fisher also played a key role in the development of the Indiana and national highway system. He promoted the Lincoln Highway, the first paved intercontinental highway, which traversed the country from east to west. Fisher highlighted the need for the Lincoln Highway with the "Hoosier Trail Blazer's Tour," traveling by car on muddy, rutted roads from Indianapolis to San Francisco in 1913.

The Dixie Highway was another Fisher project. It traveled across the county from north to south beginning at the Great Lakes and ending in Florida at Carl Fisher's new resort city, Miami Beach. There Fisher and his wife, Jane, built another mansion in the 1920s and Fisher developed the mangrove swamps into a thriving resort. He began plans for another resort in Long Island, N.Y., but in 1926 a hurricane destroyed his Florida development wiping out his collateral for the New York investment and most of his fortune.

Although his wife, Jane, divorced him, Fisher remarried within a year. But, with all the ups and downs, his fortune was dwindling. The never-say-die PR man, inventor, real estate developer, bicycle, auto and balloon racer suffered a gastric hemorrhage while in Miami Beach in 1939. There Carl G. Fisher died a poor man at age 65.

Fisher's many accomplishments made him an important person in cities and towns across the nation. But here in Indianapolis, especially in May, it's only proper that we lift the official beverage of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in honor of the man who made our city famous around the world.

– Connie Zeigler