

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberely

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Automotive pioneer
Preston Thomas Tucker born in Capac

Preston Thomas Tucker's obsession with automobiles came at an early age, but he took a roundabout route to founding a car company. Although his venture into the automobile industry ultimately failed, perhaps due to the meddling of established car companies, he was the first to introduce many innovations that are standard on cars today. Tucker was born in Capac, between Flint and Port Huron, and worked at a variety of jobs before he developed his first car. Tucker managed a brewery, worked at a Cadillac dealership and was a police officer in Lincoln Park. Tucker's desire to become a police officer may have been motivated by the fast cars officers drove, but Tucker put himself in the thick of law enforcement, taking a job in the Detroit area during Prohibition.

However, Tucker's love of cars won out over his police career and he was drawn to the Indianapolis 500, where he developed a relationship with racecar designer Harry Miller. By 1941, Tucker worked with his mother at an Ypsilanti business. Ypsilanti Machine, that attempted to sell an armored car to the government for use in World War 2. The military was only impressed with the vehicle's gun turret, however, which it appropriated for use in the Navy

Although Tucker's attempts to run a successful wartime company met with little success, after the war Tucker was ready to start a car company. And he had a lot of good ideas. Tucker drew up plans for the Tucker Torpedo, a radical vehicle for its time. The vehicle, which Tucker called "The car of tomorrow," would include a padded dash, a pop-out safety windshield and center headlight that turned with the car. Tucker found a factory in Chicago to manufacture his car. He raised approximately \$17 million through stock and sale and in June, 1947, unveiled a prototype of his 1948 model to great public fanfare. Orders for the car poured in and dealerships were organized. But building a successful car company in the shadow of the Big Three automakers was not so simple. Tucker openly complained that the auto industry used its political power to harass his business at every turn, sent spies into his company, bribed his employees and prevented him from securing needed materials. Whatever chance the company had was lost when the Securities and Exchange Commission launched an investigation into the company and word leaked out to the press. By the time of his trial in 1949 on charges related to the sale of stock, it was clear that the government case was weak and Tucker was acquitted. But by then, irreparable damage had been done to the company. Only 51 Tucker sedans were ever built and Tucker died in 1956 of pneumonia in Ypsilanti.