



Oldsmobile®





# Oldsmobile

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<b>Fate</b>	Dissolved
<b>Founded</b>	August 21, 1897
<b>Defunct</b>	April 29, 2004
<b>Headquarters</b>	Lansing, Michigan, United States
<b>Key people</b>	Ransom E. Olds, founder
<b>Industry</b>	Automotive
<b>Products</b>	Luxury vehicles Mainstream vehicles, Muscle Cars
<b>Parent</b>	General Motors

**Oldsmobile** was a brand of automobile produced for most of its existence by General Motors. It was founded by Ransom E. Olds in 1897. In its 107-year history, it produced 35.2 million cars, including at least 14 million built at its Lansing, Michigan factory. When it was phased out, Oldsmobile was the oldest surviving American automobile marque, and one of the oldest in the world, after Daimler and Peugeot. It is GM's first brand to be phased out in the 21st century, since the phaseout of the Geo and Asuna (which was sold only in Canada) in the 1990s.

# History

## Early history

Oldsmobiles were first manufactured by the **Olds Motor Works** in Lansing, Michigan, a company founded by Ransom E. Olds in 1897. In 1901, the company produced 425 cars, making it the first high-volume automobile manufacturer of the day. Olds became the top selling car company in the United States for a few years. Ransom Olds left the company in financial difficulties and formed the REO Motor Car Company. The last Curved Dash Olds was made in 1907. General Motors purchased the company in 1908.

The 1901 to 1904 Curved Dash was the first mass-produced car, made from the first automotive assembly line, an invention that is often miscredited to Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Company. After Olds sold the company in 1899, it was renamed Olds Motor Works and moved to a new plant in Detroit. By March 1901, the company had a whole line of models ready for mass production. Unfortunately, a mistake by a worker caused the factory to catch fire, and it burned to the ground, with all of the prototypes destroyed. The only car that survived the fire was a Curved Dash prototype, which was wheeled out of the factory by two workers while escaping the fire. A new factory was built, and production of the Curved Dash commenced.

Officially, the cars were called "Olds automobiles," colloquially referred to as "Oldsmobiles." It was this moniker, as applied especially to the Curved Dash Olds, that was popularized in the lyrics and title of the 1905 hit song "In My Merry Oldsmobile." From then on, the company and its products were known as Oldsmobile. Some two decades later, it was apparently the reputation of the vehicles that spawned a revival of the song for another round of popularity, essentially "returning the favor."

The 1910 Limited Touring was a high point for the company. Riding atop 42-inch wheels, and equipped with factory "white" tires, the Limited was the prestige model in Oldsmobile's two model lineup. The Limited retailed for US\$4,600, an amount greater than the purchase of a new, no-frills three bedroom house. Buyers received goatskin upholstery, a 60 hp (45 kW) 707 CID (11.6 L) straight-6 engine, Bosch Magneto starter, running boards and room for five. Options included a speedometer, clock, and a full glass windshield. A limousine version was priced at \$5,800. While Oldsmobile only sold 725 Limiteds in its three years of production, the car is best remembered for winning a race against the famed 20th Century Limited train, an event immortalized in the painting "Setting the Pace" by William Hardner Foster.

## 1930s

In the 1930s through the 1990s, Oldsmobile used a two digit model designation. As originally implemented, the first digit signified the body size while the second represents the number of cylinders. Body sizes were 6, 7, 8, and 9, and 6- and 8-cylinder engines were offered. Thus, Oldsmobiles were named 66 through 98.



In 1937, Oldsmobile was a pioneer in introducing a four-speed semi-automatic transmission called the "Automatic Safety Transmission", although this accessory was actually built by Buick, which would offer it in its own cars in 1938. This transmission featured a conventional clutch pedal, which the driver pressed before selecting either "low" or "high" range. In "low", the car shifted between first and second gears. In "high", the car shifted between first, third and fourth gears.

## **1940s**

For the 1940 model, Oldsmobile was the first auto manufacturer to offer a fully automatic transmission, called the Hydramatic, which featured four forward speeds.

The last pre-war Oldsmobile rolled off the assembly line on February 5, 1942. During World War II, Oldsmobile produced numerous kinds of material for the war effort, including large-caliber guns and shells.

Production resumed on October 15, 1945 with a warmed-over 1942 model serving as the offering for 1946.

Oldsmobile once again was a pioneer when, for the 1949 model, they introduced their Rocket engine, which used an overhead valve V8 design rather than the flathead "straight-8" design which prevailed at the time. This engine produced far more power than the engines that were popular during that era, and found favor with hot-rodders and stock car racers. The basic design, with few minor changes, endured until Oldsmobile redesigned their V8 engines in the mid-1960s.

## **1950s**

Oldsmobile entered the 1950s following a divisional image campaign centered on its 'Rocket' engines and its cars' appearance followed suit. Oldsmobile's Rocket V8 engine was the leader in performance, generally considered the fastest cars on the market and by the mid 1950s their styling was among the first to offer a wide, "open maw" grille, suggestive of jet propulsion. Oldsmobile adopted a ringed-globe emblem to stress what marketers felt was its universal appeal. Throughout the 1950s, the make used twin jet pod-styled taillights as a nod to its "Rocket" theme. Oldsmobile was among the first of GM's divisions to receive a true hardtop in 1949, and it was also the among the first divisions (along with Buick and Cadillac) to receive a wraparound windshield, a trend that eventually all American makes would share at sometime between 1953 and 1964.

In the 1950s the nomenclature changed again, and trim levels also received names that were then mated with the model numbers. This resulted in the Oldsmobile 88 emerging as base Dynamic 88 and the highline Super 88. Other full-size model names included the "Holiday" used on hardtops, and "Fiesta" used on its station wagons. When the 88 was retired in 1999 (with a Fiftieth Anniversary Edition), its length of service was the longest model name used on American cars after the Chrysler New Yorker.

GM styling as a whole lost its frontrunner status in 1957 when Chrysler introduced Virgil Exner's "Forward Look" designs. When compared side to side, Oldsmobile looked dated next to its price-point competitor DeSoto. Compounding the problem for Oldsmobile and Buick was a styling mistake which GM called the "Strato Roof". Both makes had models which contained the heavily framed rear window, but Detroit had been working with large curved backlights for almost a decade. Consumers disliked the roof and its blind spots, forcing GM to rush a redesign into production on some of its models.

Oldsmobile's only off year in the 1950s was 1958. The nation was beginning to feel the results of its first significant post war recession, and US automobile sales were down for the model year. Oldsmobile, Buick and Cadillac received a heavy handed makeover of the 1957 GM designs. The Oldsmobile that emerged in 1958 bore little resemblance to the design of its forerunners; instead the car emerged as a large, over-decorated "chromemobile".

Up front, all 1958 Oldsmobiles received one of GM's heavily styled front fascias and quad-headlights. Streaking back from the edge of the headlights was a broad belt consisting of two strips of chrome on regular 88s, three strips on Super 88s, and three strips (top and bottom thin, inside thick) on 98s that ended in a point at mid-body. The bottom of the rear fender featured a thick stamping of a half tube that pointed forward, atop which was a chrome assembly of four horizontal chrome speed-lines that terminated into a vertical bar. The tail of the car featured massive vertical chrome taillight housings. Two chrome stars were fitted to the trunklid.

Ford styling consultant Alex Tremulis (designer of the 1948 Tucker Sedan) mocked the 1958 Oldsmobile by drawing cartoons of the car, and placing musical notes in the rear trim assembly. Another Detroit stylist employed by Ford bought a used 1958 Oldsmobile in the early 1960s, driving it daily to work. He detached and rearranged the *OLDSMOBILE* lettering above the grille to spell out *SLOBMODEL* as a reminder to himself and co-workers of what "bad" auto design meant to their business.

## **1960s**

In the 1960s Oldsmobile's position between Pontiac and Buick in GM's hierarchy began to dissolve. Notable achievements included the introduction of the first turbocharged engine in 1962 (the *Turbo Jetfire*), the first modern front-wheel drive car produced in the United States (the 1966 Toronado), the Vista Cruiser station wagon (noted for its roof glass), and the upscale 442 muscle car. Olds briefly used the names Jetstar 88 (1964-1966) and Delmont 88 (1967-1968) on its least expensive full size models in the 1960s.

## **1970s-1980s**

Oldsmobile sales soared in the 1970s and 1980s (for an all-time high of 1,066,122 in 1985) based on popular designs, positive reviews from critics and the perceived quality and reliability of the Rocket V8 engine, with the Cutlass series becoming North America's top selling car by 1976. By this time, Olds had displaced Pontiac and Plymouth as the #3 best selling brand in the U.S. behind Chevrolet and Ford. In the early 1980s, model-year production topped one million units on several occasions, something only Chevrolet and Ford had achieved.

The soaring popularity of Oldsmobile vehicles resulted in a major issue in the late 1970s. At that time, each General Motors division produced its own V8 engines, and in 1977, Oldsmobile, Chevrolet, Pontiac and Buick each produced a unique 350 cubic inch displacement V8.

It was during the 1977 model year that demand exceeded production capacity for the Oldsmobile V8, and as a result Oldsmobile quietly began equipping some full size Delta 88 models and the very popular Cutlass/Cutlass Supreme with the Chevrolet 350 engine instead. Although it was widely debated whether there was a difference in quality or performance between the two engines, there was no question that the engines were different from one another. Many customers were loyal Oldsmobile buyers who specifically wanted the Rocket V8, and did not discover that their vehicle had the Chevrolet engine until they performed maintenance and discovered that purchased parts did not fit. This became a public relations nightmare for GM.

Following this debacle, disclaimers stating that "Oldsmobiles are equipped with engines produced by various GM divisions" were tacked on to advertisements and sales literature; all other GM divisions followed suit. In addition, GM quickly stopped associating engines with particular divisions, and to this day all GM engines are produced by "GM Powertrain" (GMPT) and are called GM "Corporate" engines instead of GM "Division" engines. Although it was the popularity of the Oldsmobile division vehicles that prompted this change, declining sales of V8 engines would have made this change inevitable as all but the Chevrolet (and, later, Cadillac's Northstar) versions were eventually dropped.

## 1990s

1980s, things changed quickly for Oldsmobile, and by 1990 the brand had lost its place in the market, squeezed between the resurgent Pontiac and Buick divisions. Oldsmobile's signature cars gave way to rebadged models of other GM cars, and GM shifted the performance mantle to Chevrolet and Pontiac. GM continued to use Oldsmobile sporadically to showcase futuristic designs and as a "guinea pig" for testing new technology, with Oldsmobile offering the Toronado Trofeo, which included a visual instrument system with a calendar, datebook, and climate controls. For 1995, Oldsmobile introduced the Aurora, which would be the inspiration for the design of its cars from the mid-1990s onward. The introduction of the Aurora marked as GM's catalyst to reposition Oldsmobile as an upscale import fighter. Accordingly, Oldsmobile received a new logo based on the familiar "rocket" theme. Nearly all the existing model names were gradually phased out: the Cutlass Calais in 1991, the Toronado and Custom Cruiser in 1992, the Ninety-Eight and Ciera (formerly Cutlass Ciera) in 1996, Cutlass Supreme in 1997, and finally the Eighty-Eight and Cutlass (which had only been around since '97) in 1999. They were replaced with newer, more modern models with designs inspired by the Aurora.

## 2000s

In spite of Oldsmobile's critical successes since the mid-1990s, a reported shortfall in sales and overall profitability prompted General Motors to announce in December 2000 their plans to phase out the Oldsmobile brand. The announcement took place just two days after Oldsmobile unveiled what would be its last new model ever, the Bravada SUV - which became, somewhat ironically, another critical hit for the division. Although the Oldsmobile Bravada was a rebadged Chevrolet Trailblazer or GMC Envoy, it was the only model in this line up to offer AWD (all wheel drive) system.

The phaseout was conducted on the following schedule:

- Mid-2001: The 2002 **Bravada**, the company's last new model, hits Oldsmobile showrooms
- June 2002: Production ends for **Intrigue** and the **Aurora V6** sedans
- May 2003: **Aurora V8** sedan production ends
- January 2004: **Bravada** SUV production ends
- March 2004: **Silhouette** minivan production ends
- April 2004: **Alero** compact car production ends

The final 500 Aleros, Auroras, Bravadas, Silhouettes and Intrigues produced received special Oldsmobile heritage emblems and markings which signified 'Final 500'. All featured a unique Dark Cherry Metallic paint scheme. Auroras and Intrigues would be accompanied by special Final 500 literature.

The final production day for Oldsmobile was April 29, 2004. The division's last car built was an Alero GLS 4-door sedan, which was signed by all of the Olds assembly line workers. It is on display at the R.E. Olds Transportation Museum located in Lansing, Michigan.



## Oldsmobile models

- Oldsmobile Curved Dash (1901-1907)
- Oldsmobile Limited Touring
- Oldsmobile 40
- Oldsmobile 53
- Oldsmobile 66 (1940s)
- Oldsmobile 88 (1949-1999)
- Oldsmobile 98 (1941-1996)
- Oldsmobile Series 60 (1939-1948)
- Oldsmobile Series 70 (1946-1950)
- Oldsmobile Series 90 (1941-1996)
- Oldsmobile 442 (1968-1971)
- Oldsmobile Cutlass (1964-1999)
- Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme (1970-1997)
- Oldsmobile Cutlass Salon
- Oldsmobile Cutlass Calais (1985-1991)
- Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera (1982-1996)
- Oldsmobile Custom Cruiser (1971-1992)
- Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser (1964-1977)
- Oldsmobile F-85 (1961-1963)
- Oldsmobile Toronado (1966-1992)
- Oldsmobile Starfire (1975-1980)
- Oldsmobile Firenza (1982-1988)
- Oldsmobile Aerotech (1987-1992)
- Oldsmobile Achieva (1992-1998)
- Oldsmobile Alero (1999-2004)
- Oldsmobile Aurora (1995-2003)
- Oldsmobile Bravada (1991-2004)
- Oldsmobile Intrigue (1998-2002)
- Oldsmobile Silhouette (1990-2004)























