

Peerless Motor Car Company
E. 93rd St. and Quincey Avenue
Cuyahoga County
Cleveland
Ohio

HAER,
OHIO
18-CLEV
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Formerly
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Photographs and Written
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ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS

The Peerless Manufacturing Company
The Peerless Motor Car Company
The Peerless Truck and Motor Corporation
HAER OH-11D

NAME: Peerless Motor Car Company

LOCATION: Cleveland, Ohio

DATE OF SETTLEMENT: 1869

PRESENT OWNER: C. Schmidt and Sons

PRESENT USE: warehouse space

SIGNIFICANCE: Factory foreshadowed the best in modern architectural trends; manufacturing methods outdated. Illustrates the large role that industrial buildings and processes played in the decline of the Cleveland auto industry.

HISTORIAN: Tom Fisher

The Peerless Manufacturing Company
The Peerless Motor Car Company
The Peerless Truck and Motor Corporation

The Peerless Motor Car Company remains something of an enigma in the Cleveland automobile industry. While the Peerless car ranked among the nation's most expensive, its production outlasted most of Cleveland's medium-priced automobiles. While the Peerless factory "foreshadow(ed) the best in modern architectural trends," the plant's manufacturing methods were twenty¹ years behind the times when the company folded in 1931.

The Peerless Motor Car Company began in 1869 as The Peerless Wringer and Manufacturing Company. It became The Peerless Manufacturing Company in 1891 when it added bicycles to its line of wringer washing machines. The plant on Lisbon Street, adjacent to the Cleveland and Pittsburgh Railroad tracks, had a rectangular, two-story office. The Cleveland Rubber Company, whose general manager L. K. McClymonds presided over The Peerless Manufacturing² Company, stood next door.

In the early part of 1900, The Peerless Manufacturing Company became a parts supplier for the DeDion-Bouton Motorette, a French³ automobile manufactured in Brooklyn, New York. When that company ceased production late in 1900, Peerless began manufacturing its own Motorette automobile as well as offering general machining⁴ and brass foundry services.

In 1902, the company reorganized as The Peerless Motor Car⁵ Company with a capitalization of \$600,000. The company maintained

L.K. McClymonds as president and appointed Lewis H. Kittredge as its general manager and Lewis D. Mooers as its mechanical engineer.⁶ Mooers "designed a range of cars which were very advanced for their time," with shaft drive, bevel gears, and pressed steel-frame construction.⁷

The Peerless Motor Car Company produced 90 automobiles in 1902, rising that total to 400 in 1903.⁸ The company manufactured many of its own components, becoming one of the first Cleveland automobile plants to achieve a degree of self-sufficiency. That self-sufficiency did not lower the cost of the company's automobiles. Ranging in price from \$2,800 to \$11,000, the Peerless was, in 1903, "the most costly touring car built in America."⁹

Yet, Peerless automobiles sold well. By 1906, the company had outgrown its Lisbon Street facility. It purchased, as a site for a new plant, a former farm at the corner of Quincy Avenue and Oakdale Street (E. 93rd Street) abutting the New York and St. Louis Railroad tracks. That same year, 1906, Lewis Kittredge became president; Edwin Parkhurst, vice-president; and Charles Schmidt, chief engineer.¹⁰

The Peerless Motor Car Company hired the Cleveland engineer, Ernest McGeorge, to design its new factory. With the Winton plant as a possible model, McGeorge housed Peerless' various departments in two-story gable-roof buildings, arranged in three parallel rows, and separated by 30 foot roadways. A 1906 company brochure describes the "entirely new plant."¹¹ The plant comprises a group of four

buildings, containing about 90,000 square feet of floor space and covering almost 5 1/2 acres of ground. In the large assembly building (270 feet by 100 feet) the motor parts and the cars are assembled, and the bodies are painted, trimmed, and finished. Another building (430 feet by 50 feet) contains the machine shop, power plant, stock room, experimental room, pattern shop, drafting room, and office. The foundry and blacksmith shop occupy a building (150 feet by 40 feet), while the motor testing, nickel-plating, and repairing are done in a fourth building (270 feet by 30 feet.)" The factory employed a unified architectural vocabulary. Most of the buildings had wooden double-hung windows, brick buttresses with a corbeled cornice, stepped brick parapets used as sign-boards, and gabled roofs with central skylights and clerestory spaces. The plant also had a common structural system with concrete floors, steel columns and girders, brick bearing walls, and wooden-truss roofs. The steel-framed, iron-clad foundry at the rear of the site remained the only exception to that system. Although not specified in the 1906 brochure, the manufacturing methods of the new plant probably used sawhorses for the stationary assembly process, standard belt-driven equipment in the machining of parts, and much hand labor in the moving of materials on carts among the various buildings.

In 1907, the Peerless Motor Car Company added a second story to the motor testing and repair building, increasing its width to 53 feet. In addition, the company added a water tower and second

level bridge between the assembly and machining buildings and constructed a two-story, 50 foot square office structure north of the machine shop. This administration building repeated the factory's architectural format with a corbeled brick cornice and a gabled parapet over the center bay. The north end of the site contained a test track and storage area.

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Peerless finished those buildings in the summer of 1908. Yet, the new plant proved inadequate as the company continued to prosper. The newspapers, on August 28, 1908, announced that "The Peerless Motor Car Company had authorized the McGeorge Engineering Company to proceed with the drawing of plans for the first of a group of buildings that will amount to a duplicate of the present plant." The two-year building program would include a repair shop, an erecting and assembling building, a machine shop, and an administration building whose "front will be of attractive design." The whole complex would cost \$350,000 - or \$750,000, including machinery.

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For that plant expansion, Ernest McGeorge maintained the three row format of the earlier factory, separating the new three-story structures from the older plant with a 48 foot roadway. In October, 1908, construction began on a three-story auto frame shop, 131 feet by 53 feet. It stood north of the repair building. On May, 1909, the D. C. Griese and Walker Company began construction of a similar building, 213 feet by 53 feet. Situated north of the

existing machine shop, this structure contained additional machining areas on the upper two floors and a factory office and showroom on the ground floor. These new buildings differed from the earlier plant in their use of steel-framed flat-roofs.¹⁴

Cleveland architect J. Milton Dyer designed the Peerless office building. Dyer's firm refaced McGeorge's new machine shop to match a symmetrical three-story, 82 feet by 53 feet structure adjoining the auto frame assembly building. Those two wings flanked the central four-story administration building. Its "front of attractive design" showed the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright in its geometric stone ornament and globe-capped pylons and of the Art Nouveau in its metal and glass entrance canopy and doors.¹⁵ Architecturally, the office building was "25 years ahead of its day."¹⁶

In April, 1909, The Peerless Motor Car Company increased its capitalization from \$600,000 to \$3,000,000.¹⁷ By December of that year, construction had begun on a 106 foot by 90 foot building designed by Ernest McGeorge for the rubbing and varnishing of auto bodies. The structure had a central skylit court, three-stories tall, with a system of blowers along its roof-ridge to handle fumes. In 1909, Peerless also began constructing a 106 foot by 24 foot, third-floor addition to the assembly building and a 53 foot by 48 foot, two-story addition to the repair building.¹⁸

Although those structures completed Peerless' plant north of the New York and St. Louis tracks, the company's building program

continued. In 1909, it hired Ernest McGeorge to prepare a site lay-out and building designs for a second plant south of the tracks, on a site extending 822 feet along E 93rd Street and 125 feet along Woodland Avenue.¹⁹ McGeorge placed seven buildings, each 53 feet wide, at the perimeter of the site, forming a nearly continuous wall along the street. Within that wall, he arranged 15 additional buildings in regular rows, separated by 38 foot, 40 foot, and 50 foot roadways. The buildings stood either one-story tall and 120 feet wide or three-stories tall and 53 feet wide. A 110 foot wide power plant and an another building 45 feet wide, both at the northeast edge of the site, were the only exceptions to the pattern.²⁰

Ernest McGeorge's lay-out for Peerless' plant #2 repeated the organization of the company's earlier facility, with each department located in a separate building. The plant proved to be much less efficient than the single-roofed, one-story automobile factories then being built by other Cleveland companies. When compared with the company's 1909 administration building, the 1910 plant also embodied the enigma of The Peerless Motor Car Company, its progressive face hiding a conservative heart.

In February, 1910, Peerless began constructing the first building in plant #2. Designed with bays, 16 feet square, the structure stood 179 feet long and 53 feet wide, with a central elevator, corner stairway, and offices, lavatories, and locker rooms at one end. Used as brass foundry, the building had sand

bins and metal storage rooms on the first floor and a melting room with a brick floor on the third floor. The building's architectural features set the pattern for plant #2. It had a gable roof with a central skylight, three-story pilasters with brick capitals, double-hung windows set in groups of three, and a herring-bone brick parapet with a stepped section over the central end bay. In March, 1910, the company began a nearly identical 161 foot by 53 foot, three-story body assembly building, situated at a right angle to the brass foundry.

In April, 1910, Peetless began constructing a 43 foot by 38 foot dry kiln at the north end of the site, servicing the nearby body building. One-story tall, the kiln had a concrete floor and roof, steel reinforced tile walls and a brick facing. Ernest McGeorge designed the kiln and the D. C. Giese and Walker Company built it. The company authorized the same engineer and contractor in September, 1912, to build a 48 foot by 40 foot wood-frame, iron-clad boiler house with a low-pressure steam boiler. That temporary structure stood north of the brass foundry. A test tract encircled
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the four buildings at plant #2.

That ended construction at the Peerless factory for six years. The company, by speeding-up operations and lengthening hours, managed to increase its production to 1,700 vehicles in 1912 and
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3,000 in 1913. Peerless also increased its authorized capital-
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ization to \$7,000,000 in January, 1913.

Despite that confidence, the company's sales dropped to 647

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in 1914. While the outbreak of World War I may have contributed to that drop, the decline of the high-priced automobile market also had an effect. The Peerless Motor Car Company, in response, came out with its "All Purpose Line" of medium-priced cars in 1915. Production increased to 7,400 vehicles in that
25
year.

As if preparing for war, The Peerless Motor Car Company merged in November, 1915, with The General Vehicle Company of Long Island City, New York, a manufacturer of electric and gasoline trucks. The merger increased the new Peerless Truck
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and Motor Corporation's capitalization to \$20,000,000. The merger also allowed New York interests to gain financial control of the company.

In October, 1916, Peerless began adding to its plant #2. Following the designs of Ernest McGeorge, the Mastera and Mullen Company built three new structures. Two were additions: a three-story, 270 foot by 60 foot building connected at a right angle to the brass foundry and a three-story 161 foot by 53 foot building extending from the south end of the body assembly building. Those Parallel additions followed the architectural format of the earlier structures. They differed in their use of steel-framed windows and of reinforced concrete flat-slab construction supported by either square or mushroom columns. The third addition to plant #2 served as a final assembly, storage, and shipping building. Begun

skylight spanning the rectangular court formed by his additions. Planned to enclose three stories, the skylit arcade, when built, covered only the first floor. Later in 1919, Carter designed a sawtooth roofed arcade, 33 feet square, between the body building and the one-story shipping building. At the same time he completed plans for a three-story, 120 foot by 40 foot wood shop and auto body building attached to the north face of the brass foundry.

Peerless, in those 1919 additions, made an attempt at improving operational flow and simplifying materials handling by connecting its separate buildings with bridges and arcades. Although the resulting ell-shaped building had little relation to McGeorge's 1910 lay-out, it did allow the company to install some moving assembly lines and gravity chutes. Yet, Peerless' efforts at efficiency were too little and came too late.

In December, 1921, Detroit interests bought The Peerless Motor Car Company for \$4,000,000, placing Richard H. Collins, formerly with the Cadillac and Oldsmobile companies, as president. Collins reaped a \$1,000,000 profit in 1922 and a \$2,000,000 in 1923. At the same time, he managed to alienate, with his \$150,000 yearly salary, the company's stockholders. They brought legal action against him and he resigned on December 26, 1923.

D. A. Burke succeeded Collins in 1924, presiding over a \$1,000,000 deficit. Edward VerLinden, former president of

Oldsmobile, succeeded Burke in 1925, achieving a \$3,000,000 profit that year. VerLinden resigned in January, 1928, when Cleveland investors regained financial control of the company and appointed VerLinden's assistant, Leon German, as president. ³⁴

By 1929, Peerless had a new president, James A. Bohannon, former president of The Marmon Motor Car Company. As sales improved during the first few months of his presidency, Bohannon hired Ernest McGeorge to enclose the roadways that separated the buildings in the original Peerless Motor Car plant. Only one, 200 foot by 30 foot section was constructed. ³⁵ The October, 1929, stock market crash had virtually eliminated the demand for the costly Peerless car. The Peerless company tried to revive that market with advertising gimmicks, hiring a Russian noble, Count Alexis de Sakhnoffsky, to design its 1930 models. ³⁶ That effort brought little response. ³⁷

In April, 1930, The Peerless Motor Car Company borrowed \$1,400,000 for operating expenses, ending the year with a \$73,000 profit. ³⁸ In 1931, the company's advertising initiatives continued. It built, in conjunction with The Aluminum Company of America, a mostly aluminum automobile. That prototype never went into production, for, on November 4, 1931, The Peerless Motor Car Company decided to cease operations, having sold 1,145 automobiles that year. ³⁹

In 1932, James Bohannon negotiated with The Carling Brewing Company in London, Ontario for rights to a Carling brewery in the

Peerless plant. The Carling company approved of Bohannon's idea and hired the Buffalo engineer, J. C. Schultz and Son, to convert the factory into a brewery. ⁴⁰ The project was "the largest single piece of construction work in Cleveland in 1933." ⁴¹ Schultz added two floors to one wing of the Peerless office building and greatly altered the adjoining factory. The Carling company and, after 1971, the C. Schmidt and Sons brewing company demolished most of the first Peerless plant except for the front office building and a small section of the former repair building.

The Peerless Motor Car Company sold its plant #2 in 1932. Now leased as warehouse space, the building has had several steel-framed additions to its north and east side. Except for the dry kilns, demolished in 1979, plant #2 remains largely intact, although stripped of its original machinery and equipment.

In 1934, a writer described "The Peerless Motor Car Company - whose heart was sound but whose further usefulness faced a dead wall of price non-acceptance (sic)." ⁴² More recently, commentators have written about the company's failure in much the same way. ⁴³ "Peerless had a plant, cash, and organization without a business." Yet, Peerless' heart was not sound. Its plant, despite the modern facade, utilized an outdated lay-out that crippled the company after World War I. If nothing else, The Peerless Motor Car Company shows how large a role industrial buildings and processes played in the decline of the Cleveland automobile industry.

(Peerless) Footnotes

1. "Praise Old Factory for Modernity," Cleveland Plain Dealer, June 17, 1934, p 2.
2. Water, Golden Wheels, p 71; Cleveland Atlas, 1898.
3. Ibid.
4. Cleveland City Directory, 1901.
5. Water, Golden Wheels, p 71.
6. Cleveland City Directory, 1902.
7. Maurice A. Harrison, "Peerless in Name and Reputation," Veteran and Vintage Magazine, April 1972, p 228.
8. Wager, Golden Wheels, p 72.
9. Ibid.
10. Robert E. Murphy, comp., Progressive Men of Northern Ohio, Plain Dealer Publishing Company, Cleveland, 1906, p 153.
11. The Peerless Motor Car Company Sales Brochure, Crawford Auto-Aviation Museum Library, Cleveland, 1906.
12. Ibid., 1907.
13. Cleveland Plain Dealer, August 28, 1908, p 2B
14. Cleveland Building Permits, Cleveland City Hall.
15. Cleveland Permanent Plans, Cleveland City Hall.
16. "Praise Old Factory," Plain Dealer, 1934, p 2.
17. Wager, Golden Wheels, p 75.
18. Cleveland Building Permits, Cleveland City Hall.
19. Cleveland Atlas, 1912.
20. Cleveland Permanent Plans, Cleveland City Hall.
21. Cleveland Building Permits, Cleveland City Hall.
22. Wager, Golden Wheels, p 76.
23. Ibid., p 75.
24. Ibid., p 76.
25. Ibid., p 78.
26. Ibid.
27. Cleveland Building Permits, Cleveland City Hall.
28. Wager, Golden Wheels, p 78.
29. Ibid.
30. Cleveland Building Permits, Cleveland City Hall.
31. Wager, Golden Wheels, p 78.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., p 80.
35. Ibid., p 83.
36. Cleveland Building Permits, Cleveland City Hall.
37. Wager, Golden Wheels, p 83.
38. Ibid., p 85.
39. Ibid.
40. Henry W. Smith "Makes Ale Plant Fit Ideal as Automobile Factory is Remodeled into Brewery," Cleveland Plain Dealer,

June 17, 1934, p 1.

41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Richard Wager, "When the Automobile was Young"
Cleveland Plain Dealer, March 19, 1951.

Addendum to

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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