

Nash, Charles W.



Nash, Charles W.

https://history.gmheritagecenter.com/wiki/index.php/Nash,_Charles_W.

Charles W. Nash was the fifth President of General Motors. He was elected to this position on November 19, 1912 and under his leadership, General Motors made immense gains in profits earned and vehicles produced.

Nash was born in January 28, 1864 on a farm in DeKalb County, Illinois. When he was six years old, his parents separated and his future was shaped by the courts. Under a guardianship court order, the young man was sent to live and work for farmer named Robert Lapworth near Flushing, Michigan. Nash was bound to work for Lapworth until he was 21 years old, earning only room and board during that time. Under this arrangement, he worked for about 50 cents a month. Within six years, Nash had had enough of his indenture to Lapworth and left the farm to make a new start.

Charles Nash was an industrious young man. He was able to make a living and accumulate a modest savings working on various farms in Michigan. With his savings Nash purchased a herd of sheep that continued to grow and provided him with a bit of financial security. In 1890, six years after marrying a young woman named Jessie Halleck, the young couple moved to Flint to be closer to medical aid when she took ill. It was in Flint that Nash's destiny would become entwined with Billy Durant and the fledgling automobile industry.

Upon moving to Flint, Charles Nash was quick to secure employment. He went to work as a clerk at W.C. Pierce grocery and hardware store and also did Sunday chores on a farm owned by carriage maker J. Dallas Dort. It was at the Pierce grocery and hardware store that Dort's partner William C. Durant noticed the hard-working Nash. Soon Nash was asked to join their business, the Flint Road Cart Company (soon to be the Durant-Dort Carriage Company). He began as a simple upholstery stuffer but within six months, his work ethic had earned him the position of plant superintendent. Within ten years, Nash had become vice president and general manager of Durant-Dort during which time he had developed the straight-line belt conveyor system of assembly that would later become standard practice within the automobile industry. His successes in the carriage business would eventually lead him to General Motors.

In 1910, two years after Billy Durant founded General Motors and the same year he was ousted from power by the controlling banking trust, Charles Nash was asked to take the presidency of the Buick Motor Company. It was at Durant's suggestion that the offer was tendered to him. Nash quickly impressed the bankers with his managerial style as he was the yin to Durant's yang. Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., future GM president and chairman, noted in his autobiography that Nash "was as steady and careful as Mr. Durant

was brilliant and daring – or reckless, as you may choose to call it." During his time at Buick, he and his hand-picked works manager Walter P. Chrysler returned glory to Billy Durant's first prominent automobile venture with net profits increasing from \$500,000 in 1911 to \$14,000,000 by 1914.



As a stabilizing force within General Motors, Charles Nash had earned the trust of the bankers who controlled the board of directors. As such, they elected him president of the General Motors Company in 1912 with the idea that his leadership would allow the company to regain the financial position it lost during Durant's period of rapid acquisitions. They were right. During the three plus years that Nash was president, General Motors saw a dramatic increase in profits. In fact, from 1914 to 1916 annual profits doubled each year and production had tripled.

Late 1915 and early 1916 was a tumultuous time for General Motors as Billy Durant attempted to reassert his control over the company. Nash found himself caught in the power struggle between Durant and bankers. As much as he admired Durant and felt indebted to him for his start in the carriage business, Nash knew that he could not lead General Motors if Durant was in the picture. When Durant announced he had once again controlled the majority of voting stock in General Motors in May 1916, Nash made a decision to move on from the company. On June 1st, he resigned his position despite offers made by Durant. About his resignation, Nash is quoted as saying "When Durant regained control, his policies and mine were so at variance that I resigned and started my own company. I hate to tell you the salary that was offered to me by Durant if I would stay. It was more than a man's worth. But I had wanted to for years to build my own car." In July of 1916, Charles Nash purchased the Thomas B. Jeffery Company of Kenosha, Wisconsin and changed its name to Nash Motors Company. One of the first major investors in Nash Motors was Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. Within ten years, Nash was producing more than 130,000 vehicles a year. Nash Motors had staying power. The company would outlast the majority of its contemporaries and would eventually be rolled into American Motors Corporation.

Charles Nash retired from his namesake company in 1936. He lived a life of quiet retirement until the death of his wife in 1947. He died shortly after in 1948 leaving behind a long legacy of automotive successes.

GentleMen of General Motors, Volume I (2000)

Billy Durant: Creator of General Motors by Lawrence R. Gustin

My Years With General Motors by Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. (1964)