



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

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Innovation on the Roads

For any trip longer than that which could be accomplished by walking, Pittsburghers in the 19th century traveled by horseback, steamboat, and train. By the dawn of the 20th century, they were quick to trade up their carriage and wagon wheels to tires, or upgrade to a horseless carriage that incorporated the inventions of Harvey Firestone, Henry Ford, Karl Benz, Ransom Olds, David Buick, and Charles Nash. The new gasoline, steam, and electric engines enabled locomotion to evolve from two-wheeled vehicles to three and eventually four. Pioneers in this process were America's bicyclists, and chief among them were Pittsburgh's Banker brothers.

William H. Banker, a carriage maker, watched the cycling craze sweep the country in the 1880s, so he opened a bicycle store in the East End near the corner of Highland and Centre Avenues. His sons George and Arthur were avid cyclists; George regularly competed with other young men in the region, winning his first race in Brownsville in 1892. Unable to compete as a professional in the United States (where cyclists maintained strictly amateur status), George joined cycling phenomenon Arthur Zimmerman and moved to Europe to become a professional racer. There he won the Grand Prix de Paris, the Austrian Derby, and races in Antwerp, Roubaix, and Cologne.

George Banker on his French motorcycle in front of the Banker Brothers Automobile Palace, Penn Avenue at Highland.

HHC Detre L&A, Thomas Mellon Galey Collection, PSS#4.




Arthur Banker on a four-wheel DeDion Bouton Motorette at the entrance to Highland Park, 1901.

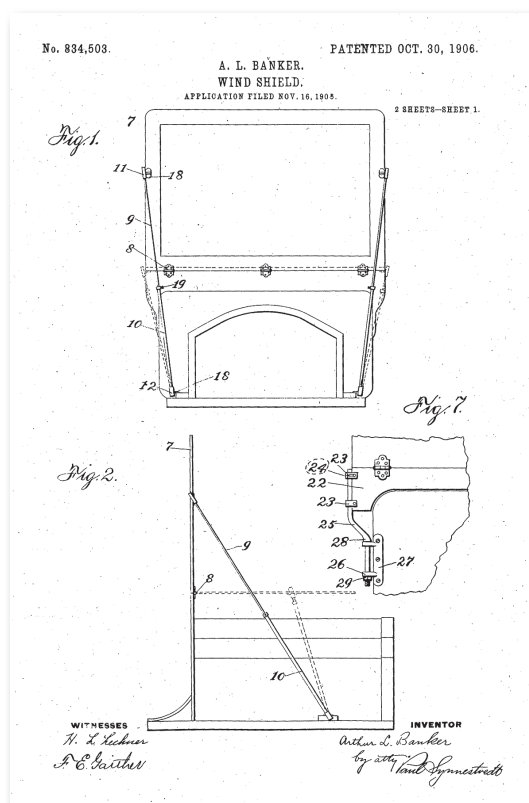
HHC Detre L&A, Thomas Mellon Galey Collection, PSS#4.





Enthralled by speed and the latest technology, George returned from Europe in 1900 with the latest thing in racing—a French three-wheeled motorcycle. Investing his European winnings, he and his brother Arthur transformed their bicycle shop into the Banker Brothers Company to sell early automobiles. By 1907, their “Automobile Palace,” in a new two-story brick building, contained a garage for 250 cars and an extensive parts room overseen by 75 workmen. The company sold the finest automobiles of the day—Pierce Great Arrow, Stevens-Duryea, Cadillac, Studebaker, and Pope Waverley models.

Arthur also went on to patent the “Banker Wind Shield,” which the company manufactured for both American and European auto makers. George continued in the automotive business until his death in 1917. Arthur turned his attention to the manufacture of windshields until his death in 1932. Both brothers are acknowledged as Pittsburgh pioneers in the automobile business. 



Above:
Banker Brothers
Automobile Palace.
HHC Detre L&A, Thomas Mellon Galey
Collection, PSS#4.

Left:
Patent drawing of the
Banker Wind Shield,
invented by Arthur
Banker, which allowed a
windshield to be lowered
when not in use.

U.S. Patent 834503.