

Made in Bronxville: H. Ward Leonard and the Knickerbocker Car

By Ray Geselbracht

In June 1897, a factory building in Hoboken, New Jersey, burned down. The owner of the business which had occupied the building, H. Ward Leonard, had to find a new home for his business, the Ward Leonard Electric Company. He discovered an old factory building in Bronxville that was just right for his needs. It was a stone structure sited on a gorge in the Bronx River where a grist mill had once been. Knives had once been made in the old building, and axles and screws. Leonard purchased the building on August 24, and he moved his business there in September.

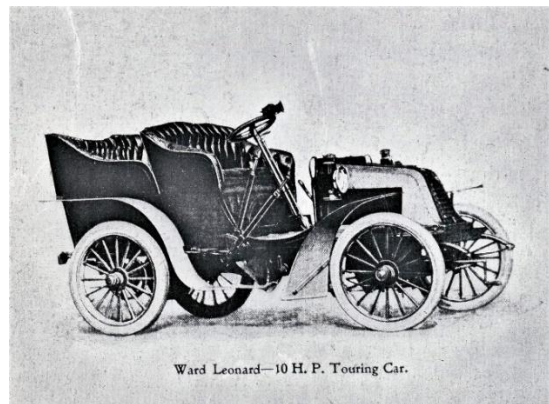


H. Ward Leonard's arrival in Bronxville was an event of great importance for a small but ambitious community which was engaged in creating a vision for itself as a suburban outgrowth of New York City that could match in small scale the creative dynamism of its bigger partner. Leonard was established by this time as a brilliant inventor and a capable entrepreneur who could create new products and also manufacture and sell them. Ward Leonard and Company was probably within a short time Bronxville's biggest employer, and it grew rapidly. By 1900, it had about 60 employees and sales of \$120,000.

That year—1900—was an important one for Leonard. He was in Paris most of the year, installing a “moving sidewalk” at the Paris Exposition. But he took advantage of being in France to explore a new interest of his—automobiles. He studied European automobiles, and became convinced that the cars being made in America were not as good as some of the European models, particularly the French ones. Most of the cars made in America were powered by either steam or electricity, but Leonard learned from the European cars he examined that gasoline-powered engines were the best option; and he also learned that the front of the car, not the middle or back, was the best place for the engine. When his work at the Paris Exposition was finished, Leonard left for home full of ideas about the car he wanted to make at his Bronxville factory.

He started design work on his car immediately after his return to the United States in late 1900. He announced his first model, the “Century Tourist,” in the February 1901 issue of *The Horseless Age*, and he began selling it in the spring of 1901.

His new car was, he said, “of French origin.” It was powered by a one-cylinder, 3.5 horsepower gasoline engine, and weighed 700 pounds. It had a two-speed transmission, with reverse, and was capable of 25 miles per hour. Its four-gallon gas tank would run the car 125 miles before refueling. It sat three people, two in front and one on a rear “spider seat” that appears, from the photographs and drawings of Leonard’s cars that survive, to be capable, on any good-size bump, of launching its occupant sailing into the air. The Century Tourist cost \$1,000 (about \$30,000 in 2021 dollars).



On the left, a three-seater, with the “spider seat” in the back, suitable only for the brave passenger who could hold on tight. On the right, either a Model 1 from 1902 or 1903, or one of the later “Touring Cars.” It has a “tonneau” seat in the back.

Later in the year, Leonard changed the name of his car to the “Knickerbocker,” and he produced new models, each one larger, more powerful and more expensive than the previous models. There were four Knickerbocker models in all. Model 2, at 950 pounds much heavier than the Model 1, had a 5 horsepower engine, and a three-speed transmission. It was available as a three-seater, priced at \$1,400 (\$45,000 in 2021), and as a four-seater, priced at \$1,700 (\$50,000 in 2021). Models 3 and 4 were introduced in 1902. The Model 3 had 24 horsepower and a four-speed transmission. The Model 4 was a single-seater, designed to be a race car. In 1903, Models 1 and 2 were given more powerful engines—10 horsepower and 15 horsepower, respectively—and Leonard introduced two new models, both called “Touring Cars.” One was the “Model 24,” which had a radically new frame, made of armored wood, and also came with a new spring design, a 16-horsepower, two-cylinder engine, and a four-speed transmission. The other was the remarkable “Ward Leonard Touring Car, which had a 30 horsepower, four-cylinder engine and a four-speed transmission with overdrive. This

fabulous car, only one of which was apparently manufactured, sold for \$5,000 (\$150,000 in 2021).

There was no assembly line at the Ward Leonard factory. Knickerbocker parts were made by hand and each car was hand-assembled. It took at least six months to make a car, and the factory produced no more than twenty Knickerbockers a year, and maybe fewer than that.



A new Knickerbocker being driven from the factory.

A Ward Leonard and Company advertisement for the Knickerbocker announced that the car “is claimed by its makers to be the best motor car in its class in the world today....” One satisfied customer, who bought one of Leonard’s cars during the first year of production, agreed with the company’s big claim. He was a doctor, and after driving his Knickerbocker over the hills of central Massachusetts for some months to visit his patients, he wrote Leonard a letter, saying, “In my use, and observation of various steam, gasoline and electric automobiles, during the past few years, for all round work I must place the Knickerbocker at the head.”

One day in 1903, Leonard’s sales manager came to him excitedly, holding an order from a corporation for twenty-five Knickerbocker cars—more than were made in a year. Leonard listened to his sales manager, and then gave him some disappointing news. “I’m going out of the automobile business...,” he said. “I have come to the point where I either have to concentrate exclusively and put a lot of money into the electrical business which I know thoroughly, or drop my electrical business, and concentrate on automobiles, which I do not know well and which would be a hazardous venture.”

Bronxville's adventure in automobile manufacturing ended in 1903. The Ward Leonard Electric Company remained in the village for another thirteen years, prospering and growing all the while. When the company left Bronxville in September 1916, it had 200 employees and annual sales of about \$500,000.

Leonard moved his family to Bronxville in 1902. He built two houses in Lawrence Park—3 Wellington Circle for his wife and himself, and 15 Park Avenue for his mother, sister, and two nephews. In 1902, he was elected president of the Village of Bronxville.

Beginning in 1910, he headed the company that developed Sagamore Park on a 50 acre parcel of land on the north side of Lawrence Park. He built a new house for himself in the development at 24 Avon Road.

On February 18, 1915, Leonard went with his mother and sister to the Hotel Astor in New York City to attend a dinner of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers. As he was taking off his overcoat in the hotel, he winced and said he had felt something snap in his head. He died about fifteen minutes later. He was fifty-three years old. Bronxville had lost one of the most interesting people ever to live in the village at much too young an age.



A Knickerbocker name plate—one of the few to survive.