

FDR's Cars

Brad Bunnin

Although President Roosevelt loved the Potomac, he spent much more time in automobiles than aboard his presidential yacht. Fortunately, many photos of FDR in cars exist, and we can reconstruct his relationship with cars from them and other sources.

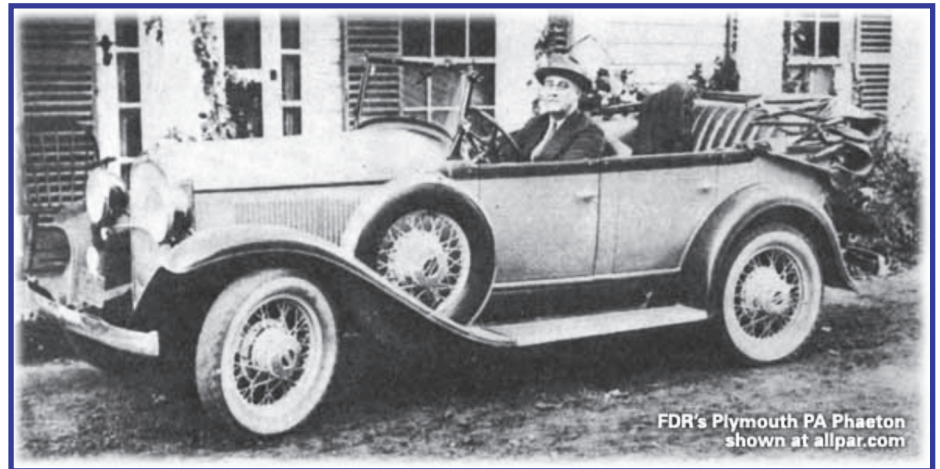
FDR's Personal Cars

In 1910 FDR made his first try for political office – the New York Senate seat from Dutchess County. A Republican stronghold, his campaign would need something to attract attention to a young, untried Democrat. As part of a vigorous campaign that would take him crisscrossing the county, he rented a red 1910 Maxwell touring car. Like the “Red Devil” – his name for it – its open top would be the pattern for most of the cars he bought in later years. Sitting or standing, the car would also serve as a mobile platform for a quick speech.



Red Devil

When he reentered politics after contracting Polio there was an additional reason for selecting open top cars. While the fact that he was disabled was not a secret, using such a car meant that he did not have to face the problem of getting in and out of a car and allowed his style of a close public approach to continue.



FDR's Plymouth PA Phaeton shown at allpar.com

Ford Phaeton



The President kept a sporty four-door convertible, a Plymouth PA Phaeton at Warm Springs, Georgia. It was modified with hand controls that allowed the President to drive at a high speed without the need for him to use his legs to shift, accelerate, or brake. The Stone Controls Company of Summit, New Jersey, built and installed the controls. One other noteworthy feature was the President's automatic cigarette dispenser. This ingenious device not only stored his cigarettes, but also delivered them into his hand already lit and ready to smoke!



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Sadly, the car's whereabouts are unknown. But another Phaeton, a Ford, now resides at the [Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum](#), at Hyde Park, NY. The car pictured to the right is the last car he drove and is kept in [Warm Springs](#), where it can still be seen.



1938 Ford at Warm Springs, GA.

FDR's Official Cars

The President's official limousines were various Packards, Lincolns, and Cadillacs, noted for their size, elegance—and only partial protection against assassination attempts, because the President preferred to ride in the open. The President's 1939 Lincoln V-12, for example, was purpose-built and fully armored, yet almost always driven with the top down even in the rain—thus its ironic nickname, the “Sunshine Special”.



Sunshine Special

Here are the impressions of a passenger who rode with FDR:

In 1933, I rode in the open limousine with President and Mrs. Roosevelt to the Memorial Day ceremonies at the [Tomb of the Unknown Soldier](#). On our way home, it began to rain lightly. The chauffeur stopped the car to raise the top so the occupants wouldn't get wet. The president said: “It won't be necessary -- we're not made of sugar and won't melt”. So we rode home in a light drizzle.

Fannie R. Lenkin, Silver Spring, Md.

Another noteworthy vehicle, Al Capone's 1928 Cadillac 341A Town Sedan, (pictured below), brought the President to Congress for the Date of Infamy speech immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor. See the last issue of *Potomac Currents* for more about the car.

A personal note: My grandfather was a Maxwell dealer first and then Chrysler-Plymouth from the mid 1920's through 1947. He might have sold the President the 1932 or 1933 Plymouth shown above. He might have, but he didn't. Although he didn't sell a car to the President, he did sell Chrysler touring cars to Mr. Capone.



Al Capone's Town Sedan