

Autos, Airplanes and Armistice

Before developing Sea Island, the resort's founder engineered American transportation and helped pave the way for victory during World War I.

By Paul F. Brown



Council of National Defense and Advisory Commission, seated left to right: Secy. David F. Houston (Agriculture), Secy. Josephus Daniels (Navy), Secy. Newton D. Baker (War), Secy. Franklin K. Lane (Interior), Secy. Wm. B. Wilson (Labor); standing: Grosvenor B. Clarkson, Secy. Julius Rosenwald, Bernard N. Baruch, Daniel Willard, Dr. F.H. Martin, Dr. Hollis Godfrey, Howard E. Coffin and Director W. S. Gifford

Anyone familiar with Sea Island's history knows the name Howard E. Coffin. The affable businessman opened The Cloister and its original nine-hole golf course in 1928, and entertained dignitaries at his Sapelo Island mansion. But one story that friends of Sea Island may not have heard is how Coffin's multifaceted career started—or how essential he was to national defense during World War I.

Father of Standardization

Coffin studied mechanical engineering at the University of Michigan. One semester before he graduated, the Olds Motor Vehicle Co. hired him as head of experimental engineering, and later made him chief engineer. His designs were both innovative and affordable and, by 1907, Coffin knew he could produce a lower-priced automobile than his employer. He left the company in favor of a new job

at E.R. Thomas-Detroit Co. (later Chalmers Motor Co.) before forming Hudson Motor Car Co. in 1909.

“His cars at Hudson were under \$1,000, but were far more technical than other cars in the same price point,” says Wheeler Bryan Jr., Sea Island historian. That first year with Hudson, Coffin designed the popular Model 20 Roadster; the company’s subsequent success made him a millionaire.

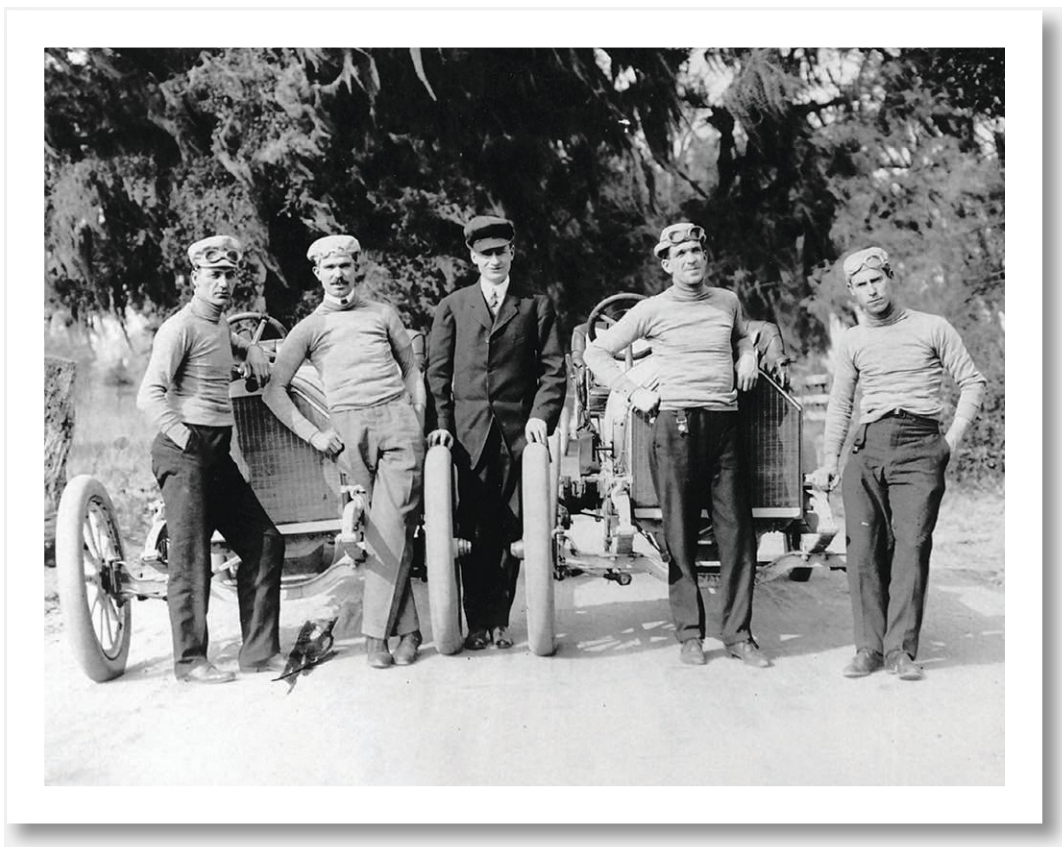
While his vehicles were special, Coffin’s greatest contribution to automobile manufacturing came during his term as president of the Society of Automotive Engineers. He pushed automakers to implement standards and pool patents across the industry to decrease manufacturing costs.

“Coffin actually had a bigger gift to the auto industry than Henry Ford’s assembly line,” Bryan says. “Prior to Coffin, every manufacturer made its own parts. Coffin said, ‘Why are we costing each other money? Why don’t we standardize the parts so we can focus on things that make the car better? We can all make the same size bolt.’ ” Because of this, Coffin is regarded in the automotive realm as the “father of standardization.”

Wartime Adviser

War erupted in Europe in 1914. Although America initially remained neutral, President Woodrow Wilson and others wondered whether the country would be ready to fight, if necessary. The government sought input from industry leaders like Coffin. “He was too old to serve on the battlefield, but he still wanted to be part of the war effort,” Bryan explains.

In 1915, Coffin was summoned to Washington, D.C., as one of 24 advisers on the Naval Consulting Board, headed by Thomas Edison. President Wilson appointed Coffin as chairman of the Committee on Industrial Preparedness, and assigned him an unprecedented task. “Coffin was asked to survey American industries to determine whether they could retool for war production,” says Mimi Rogers, curator of the Coastal Georgia Historical Society. “What was America’s capacity for producing the materials needed for war? This was the first nationwide preparedness survey that had been undertaken in the country’s history.” Coffin’s committee digested data from 30,000 U.S. factories. “He was well-suited to directing the inventory because of his leadership role in the automobile industry,” she says.



Coffin (middle) at a Savannah automobile race in 1908

He also served on the seven-person advisory commission of the Council of National Defense, which functioned as Wilson’s war cabinet. In 1916, Secretary of War Newton Baker publicly stated that Coffin had probably done more to serve his country than “any private citizen in the last 50 years.”

Liberty Engineer

Once America entered the war in April 1917, it became clear that our airplanes were no match for Europe’s. As a result, the Council of National Defense created the Aircraft Production Board. With Coffin again selected as chairman, the board oversaw the development of a powerful aircraft motor that could be mass-produced quickly in U.S. automobile factories. This would later become known as the Liberty engine, an invention that greatly advanced the country’s air presence during the war. “That switch from automobiles to aircraft was a natural progression for him,” Rogers says. “He became very much involved in developing airplane engines. Again, he was looking into the future. He could visualize how transportation would change in the United States.”

Coffin was still a Hudson executive when he became president of the newly formed National Aeronautic Association in 1922. “We stand today on the threshold of a new realm of navigation and travel—the uncharted ocean of the air,” Coffin declared in a Dec. 14 article published in a manufacturing newsletter. “The war gave a tremendous impetus to this newest and fastest and most luxurious means of transit, but it remains for the civilian element of our population to put America, the birthplace of aviation, in her deserved place in the development of this art.”

Coffin also helped establish National Air Transport Co. (it eventually became United Airlines) and invested in Transcontinental Air Transport, which promised cross-country transportation in 48 hours and later merged into Trans World Airlines.

By the end of his remarkable life, Coffin had added tourism, seafood canning, textiles and paper to his long list of industrial enterprises. Yet, despite his many achievements, he has remained relatively unknown as a historical figure. “I think he’s one of the most underestimated individuals in U.S. history,” Bryan says. ○