

CONSUMER GUIDE®

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CLASSIC CAR SERIES

CARS OF THE 50s

An exciting look at the most flamboyant decade in automotive history. Full make-by-make coverage with hundreds of photos, model year production figures, and specifications on today's hottest collector cars.



**CARS OF
CANADA
SPECIAL
SECTION**

Fast, flashy, futuristic—the cars of the '50s were a special breed. The decade witnessed the rise of tailfins, the fall of the great independents, the horsepower race, and the kind of hotly competitive design innovation that captured the public imagination. Here's the complete make-by-make story of today's most sought-after collector cars—from the first Thunderbird and Corvette, to the last Packard and Kaiser. Plus a look at the distinctive 1950s models from Canada.



Rambler

Rambler Americans were registered for the 12 months.

Larger Ramblers received more than 100 changes for 1958, and were outwardly quite different from their predecessors. The grille was made more massive and square; dual headlamps were used; fashionable little fins appeared at the rear; and pedal-type parking brakes were adopted. The archetypal Rambler, the six-cylinder Super Cross Country wagon, was the top seller in '58. The Rebel name was retained, incidentally, to designate cars powered by the 250 cubic-inch V8. But Rambler did not revive the fancy, limited-edition Rebel hardtop. Instead, it created a new 117-inch wheelbase for a line of cars powered by the 327 V8 and dubbed the line Rambler Ambassador.

Actually, Ambassador styling had been predicted in mid-1957, when it was thought that these cars would bear separate Nash and Hudson identification. In essence, they were enlarged versions of the accepted Rambler theme: roomy, squarish bodies available as four-door sedans and wagons, with or without roof pillars. The Ambassador hardtop wagon was the only one in the 1958 Rambler line. Only 294 were sold. In fact, Ambassador sales were quite disappointing—just 1340 for the model year. Ambassadors were entering a field of heavy competition and decreasing demand, and AMC did much better with its smaller Ramblers. Registrations of all Ramblers for 1958 climbed to 186,227—in a year that was generally a disaster for other manufacturers. After four years of losses, AMC turned the corner, making a profit of \$26 million on sales of \$470 million.

For 1959, it was the same formula again. This time the company netted \$60 million in profits and built nearly 364,000 cars for an all-time record. The same models and power trains were offered, but horsepower wasn't raised. Unlike its competitors, AMC apparently decided enough was enough.



1959 Ambassador Custom four-door sedan



1959 Rebel V8 Custom Country Club hardtop sedan

The Rambler American DeLuxe and Super lines acquired a new station wagon, helping rack up 90,000 sales for the junior series. The 108-inch-wheelbase cars were again mildly face-lifted with thin "color sweep" side molding and simplified grilles. As in 1958, Rambler V8s were called Rebels, and used the 250 cubic-inch engine. The Ambassador Super and Custom continued as before, with the longer wheelbase and a more ornate grille.

Limited success with the large Ambassador should have told AMC something. Big cars—even though their wheelbases were a few inches shorter than those of standard-size automobiles—were not profitable for the company. In the later 1960s, AMC reverted to its early policy of competing with the larger manufacturers on many price and size levels, with unpleasant results.

RAMBLER AT A GLANCE 1950-1959

Model Year	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
Price Range, \$							1829-2494	1961-2786	1775-3116	1821-3116
Weight Range, Lbs.							2891-3110	2911-3409	2439-3586	2435-3591
Wheelbases, Ins.							108	108	100-117	100-117
6 Cyl Engines, BHP							120	125, 135	90-138	90-138
8 Cyl Engines, BHP								190, 255	215, 270	215, 270

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Studebaker

Studebaker Corp., South Bend, Indiana
Studebaker Division of Studebaker-Packard,
South Bend, Indiana

In 1950, Studebaker was the oldest auto manufacturer, having been in continuous operation since the days of horse-drawn carriages. The company was enjoying its best year ever in 1950, and many grand predictions were made about Studebaker's upcoming "second century." But the company's United States operations came to an end some 14 years later, and its Canadian branch built the last Studebaker automobile two years after that.

The story of how this happened is complex, but it can be summarized as follows: (1) Studebaker's productivity was lower than that of the rest of the industry, even though the company's work force was highly paid; (2) the firm's old South Bend plant had a high overhead and was more isolated from component suppliers than were the factories in Detroit; and (3) the Big Three, competing among themselves, caused casualties among the independents—when Ford and Chevy started price wars, Studebaker dealers could not keep pace because of their lower volume.

The product itself probably had less to do with the firm's failures than most people think. Though Studebaker styling was controversial, it was usually predictive of similar ideas to come from other manufacturers. The bullet-nosed 1950-51 models weren't really duplicated by anyone else, but they did suggest the strong central grille styling that was to appear later in different form on Edsels and Pontiacs.

The styling was the work of Raymond Loewy Associates, consultants to Studebaker since the late 1930s. The jet aircraft was Loewy's obvious inspiration. The frontal design of the 1950-51 Studebakers was radically different from that of the 1947-49 models, but from the cowl back they were all closely related. The '50 models also offered Studebaker's excellent automatic transmission, designed in cooperation with the Detroit Gear Division of Borg-Warner.

For 1950, Studebaker fielded a short-wheelbase Champion in three trim variations, powered by the 169.6 cubic-inch six with 85 horsepower. Commanders rode a longer wheelbase and used a 245.6 six of 102 hp. The long-wheelbase Land Cruiser was part of the Commander series, available as a four-door sedan only. The Champion engine continued for 1951, but the Commander received Studebaker's first V8.

Displacing 232.6 cubic inches, the new engine developed 120 hp at 4000 rpm. It was fairly conventional, though overhead cams and hemispherical combustion chambers had been considered. The 232 and its successors have been called heavy for their displacement. But such statements are unfair,

made on the basis of comparisons with designs that were developed much later, after significant improvements had been made in casting and foundry techniques. The Studebaker V8 was the first in a long line of robust, efficient power plants that displaced less than 300 cubic inches. Those that followed from Dodge, Ford, Chevrolet and Plymouth certainly benefited from the Studebaker's technology. Its greatest contribution, perhaps, was the elimination of the largest barrier between popular-priced cars and luxury machines. As a result, V8s would become the favored engines of Americans.

The '51 Studebakers were in essence the same line of cars that had been offered in 1950. As before, there was a six-cylinder Champion series in Custom, DeLuxe and Regal trim variations; and the larger, eight-cylinder Commander. The main difference in the lineup from '50 to '51 was that Studebaker had reduced the size of the larger body. Commanders for 1951 shared a 115-inch wheelbase with Champions, and the Land Cruiser's wheelbase



1950 Champion DeLuxe four-door sedan

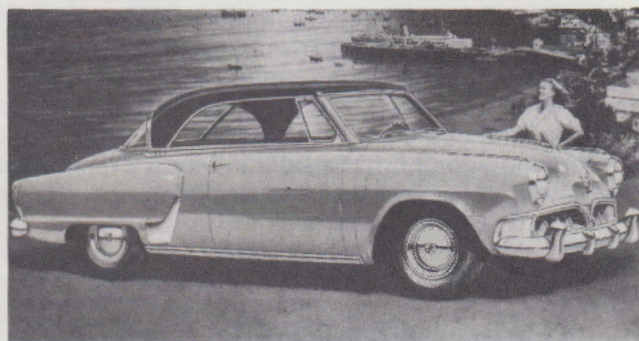


1951 Commander State four-door sedan

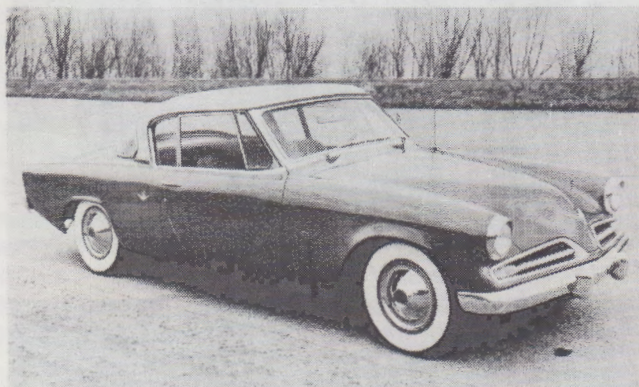
Studebaker

dropped from 124 to just 119 inches. Prices went up slightly, but buyers seemed happy to pay the difference for the livelier V8, and this increased the Commander's sales considerably. The V8 was not a powerhouse, but it did give Commanders 90-mph performance. As time would tell, the engine was capable of considerable additional displacement and horsepower.

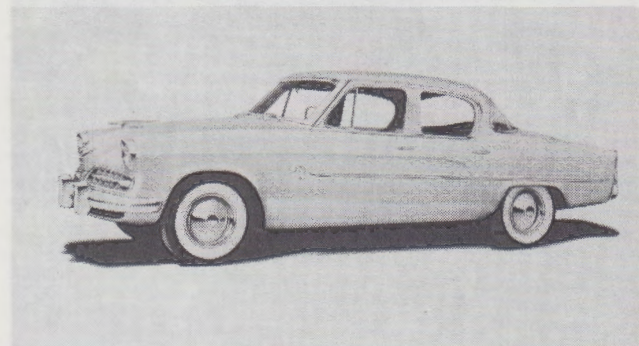
Styling changes for '51 were slight: the bullet nose was refined with a second chrome circle, and the prominent air vents above the grille were deleted. Model names were spelled out on the leading edge of the hood. Whatever can be said about its styling now, the bullet nose was apparently popular



1952 Commander State Starliner hardtop coupe



1953 Commander Regal Starliner hardtop



1954 Commander Regal four-door sedan

when new.

Selling 222,000 cars for calendar 1951, Studebaker fell far below its 1950 record; but this was more a result of Korean War restrictions than of decreased demand. Studebaker's share of the market actually increased in 1951, from 4.02 to 4.17 percent.

The company's centenary was marked in 1952. Though all-new styles weren't ready, the face lift was acceptably different. The bullet-nose was replaced by a low, toothy grille that some stylists called the "clam digger." The model lineup stayed the same, with the addition of the first Studebaker hardtop, the Starliner. But production was much lower throughout the industry and Studebaker built only about 168,000 cars. Optimistically, management looked upon the coming '53s with more enthusiasm.

The now-legendary "Loewy coupes"—Commander and Champion, Starliner hardtop and Starlight coupe—were actually designed by Robert E. Bourke, chief of the Loewy Studios at South Bend. Bourke had envisioned a special show model at first, but Loewy knew a good thing when he saw it, and sold the car to Studebaker's management. The sedans, which naturally had to adopt the same sort of styling, were somewhat less successful, but the coupes were truly magnificent. Mounted on the new 120.5-inch Land Cruiser wheelbase rather than the sedans' 116.5-inch wheelbase, the Starliner/Starlight was perfect from every angle. Not a line or a detail was out of place. It was hailed at the time as the "new European look." Today, it's considered by many the finest American automotive design of the entire decade.

Sadly, the changeover to these new cars delayed production, and Studebaker's output of 151,576 of its '53s was a disappointment compared to 1952. Further errors surfaced when demand for Bob Bourke's coupe began running four times higher than that for the sedans. Management had planned just the reverse. More time was lost in switching over.

The same series of cars were offered for 1954 (an egg-crate grille is the most obvious addition), but production was worse, at only 68,708. By now the weaknesses of the company were becoming apparent, and the cost of building a car was frightening. As an experiment, Bourke "priced out" a Commander Starliner using the General Motors cost structure, and found that Chevrolet could have sold it for about \$1900. Studebaker was selling it for \$2502. The Ford Blitz was on, as Ford waged a price war with GM. Neither giant damaged the other, but both wreaked havoc on the independents. Just when things looked blackest, Packard bought Studebaker and announced a bold new effort to create "the industry's Big Four."

Unable to justify new 1955 styling so soon, Studebaker hung a lot of chrome on the old bodies and in mid-year adopted a wraparound windshield.

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The model line was shaken up, with Champions (excluding the coupes) still based on the shorter wheelbase. The longer wheelbase now served two separate lines, the Commander and President. The Champion six was raised to 101 horsepower. Curiously, the firm shrank the Commander V8 to 224.3 cubic inches, while getting 140 horsepower out of it. Presidents, in turn, used a larger V8: 259.2 cubic inches; 175 hp. The top of the line was the wildly two-toned President Speedster hardtop. It offered a special quilted-vinyl interior; tooled metal dash; and color combinations like pink and black, or "lemon and lime." At \$3253, it was not a seller. Neither were its line mates. In a year when nearly every company was setting new sales records, Studebaker produced only about 116,000 cars. Soon it was determined that the company needed to sell about 250,000 cars just to break even.

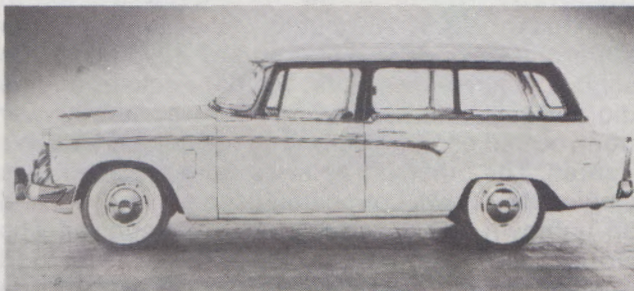
While Studebaker-Packard President James Nance shopped for finances (eventually leading to the Curtiss-Wright takeover), Studebaker gamely restyled for 1956. Retaining the old wheelbases, bodies became more upright and squared off, with larger, mesh-type grilles. A cheap two-door called the sedanet was offered in Commander and Champion lines. What was left of the long-wheelbase chassis was applied to the top-line President Classic sedan and the sporty new Hawks.

The Hawks were the last Studebakers of the 1950s that were designed by Loewy's team. The Hawks were good-looking cars. They were exciting to drive, competent on the curves and impressive on the straightaway. There were four altogether. Descendants of the pillar-type Starlight coupe were the Power (V8) and Flight (Six) Hawks. Based on the old Starliner hardtop were the Sky Hawk and Golden Hawk. The latter ran a big, 352 cubic-inch engine provided by Packard. Hawk styling was keyed to a square, classic-style grille; freestanding parking lights; and deluxe interiors with turned-metal dashes like those of the '55 Speedster. A Flight Hawk sold for less than \$2000, and the Golden Hawk listed at only \$3061, so they were good buys. Unfortunately, they were peripheral models that appealed only to enthusiasts, and Studebaker's bread-and-butter cars continued to sell only a few crumbs at a time. Only 69,593 vehicles were turned out in South Bend for '56, and things would get worse. In 1957 and 1958, Studebaker and Packard combined couldn't produce more than 73,000 cars a year.

These were dog days at South Bend—a time when none of the plant's employees knew from one day to the next whether they were working on their last model. Stuck with the 1956 restyling there wasn't anything to do but conduct a face lift. A full-width grille appeared for 1957. That grille grew more massive in 1958, when the cars also gained hastily developed quad headlight systems and ungainly tailfins to keep up with the times. The Scotsman—a naked, bargain-priced line of two- and four-door



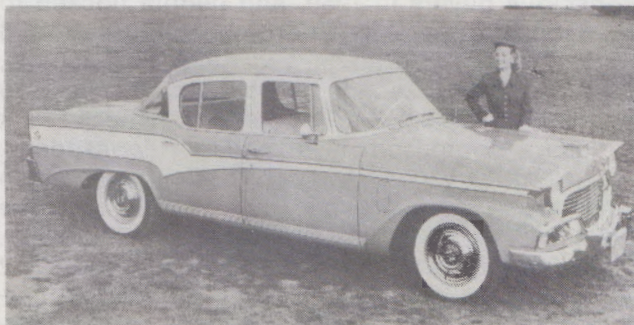
1955 President Speedster hardtop coupe



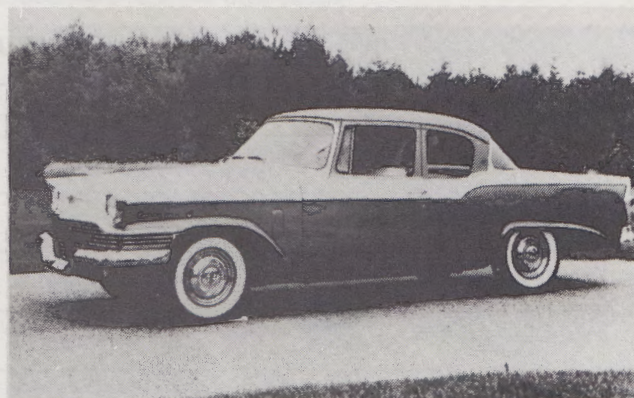
1955 Commander Regal Conestoga station wagon



1956 Golden Hawk hardtop coupe



1956 President Classic four-door sedan



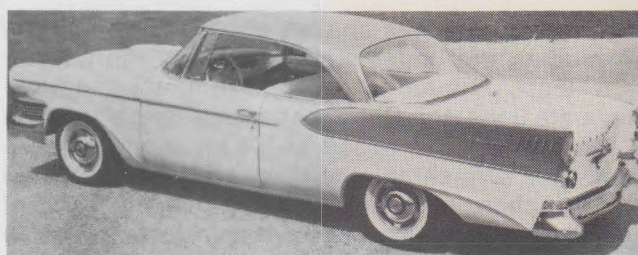
1957 Commander DeLuxe two-door club sedan

Studebaker

sedans and a station wagon—did not spark sales. Neither did the nice-looking Starlight hardtop, with its De Soto-like roof.

Mechanical changes were, however, beneficial. The '56 Golden Hawk's huge Packard engine made the car embarrassingly front-heavy. So for 1957-58 the pretty two-door hardtop used a Paxton Studebaker V8 of 289 cubic inches, with Paxton supercharger. This arrangement developed the same 275 horsepower that the old Packard engine did, but in a much more efficient way: the blower freewheeled economically until the accelerator was floored. The other 1956 Hawks were replaced by a single Silver Hawk coupe that used plainer trim and an unblown 289 developing 210 horsepower. The Golden Hawk and Silver Hawk were fine road machines, capable of carrying four people comfortably over long distances at high speed in the true *gran turismo* tradition. As "personal cars," their appeal was limited, especially in 1958 when Studebaker hit bottom. Fewer than 45,000 cars were built that year.

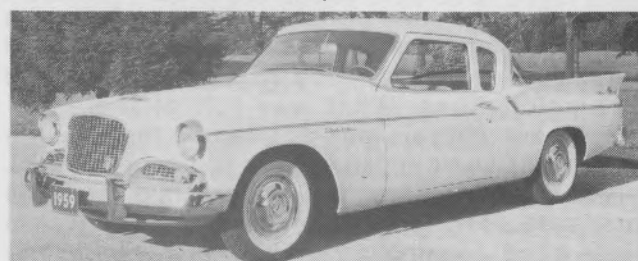
For Studebaker, the end might have come right there, but another chance appeared in the form of the compact Lark. Though it used several inner panels and mechanical components from previous models, stylist Duncan McRae had done enough to the exterior to make it look different. The boxy, practical styling found a market among compact-conscious buyers in 1959, and people flocked to Studebaker dealerships in droves. The turn-around was astounding. In model year 1958, for example, 18,850 four-door sedans had been built. The 1959 figure came to 48,459 four-door Larks. The '59 Lark series was composed of two- and four-door sedans, and two-door wagons and hardtops on a 108.5-inch wheelbase. The six-cylinder models still used the old L-head of 169.2 cubic inches, detuned to 90 hp. The V8-powered models were fitted with the 259.2 V8—rated at 180 hp, or 195 with four-barrel carburetor. In V8 form, Larks were lively and surpris-



1958 President Starlight hardtop coupe



1959 Lark Regal hardtop coupe



1959 Silver Hawk hardtop coupe

ingly easy on gas. The Hawk was also continued for 1959, but only the Silver Hawk model was issued.

Studebaker made its first profit in six years in 1959, building over 126,000 cars. The Lark had temporarily saved the company. Four years later, after limited resources had caused that same Lark to be offered for too long, Studebaker was back in trouble. Once again, limited-production personal cars, the Hawk and the Avanti, failed to solve the real problem: insufficient production of family cars. Thus the final Studebakers were built in 1966.

STUDEBAKER AT A GLANCE 1950-1959

Model Year	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
Price Range, \$	1419-2328	1561-2481	1735-2548	1735-2374	1758-2556	1741-3253	1844-3060	1776-3182	1795-3282	1925-2590
Weight Range, Lbs.	2620-3375	2585-3240	2655-3230	2690-3180	2705-3265	2740-3275	2780-3395	2725-3415	2695-3470	2577-3148
Wheelbases, Ins.	113-124	115, 119	115, 119	116.5, 120.5	116.5, 120.5	116.5, 120.5	116.5, 120.5	116.5, 120.5	116.5, 120.5	108.5-120.5
6 Cyl Engines, BHP	85, 102	85	85	85	85	101	101	101	101	90
8 Cyl Engines, BHP		120	120	120	120	140, 175	195-275	180-275	180-275	180, 195