



CORD 812 SUPERCHARGED

A long list of firsts came together to immortalize the Cord as one of America's most spectacular prewar cars.

Not only was the supercharged Cord 812 (as was its 810 predecessor) one of the most extravagant, luxuriously appointed cars in America, but it looked like nothing else. Its squared-off “coffin” nose, horizontally raked with thin strips of chrome, was designer Gordon Buehrig's successful attempt to turn staid, conventional luxury car styling on its head. Coupled with the first-ever implementation of hidden headlights, it remains a fusion of American luxury, groundbreaking design, and engineering ingenuity.

As early as 1929, Errett Lobban Cord had a vision for the cars that would come from his eponymous company. The first Cord of that year, the L-29, was also the first American car to employ front-wheel drive—four years before Citroën popularized the concept with the Traction Avant. The Cord Corporation owned over 150 manufacturing and transportation companies, including Stinson, which built airplanes, and Lycoming, which built supercharged airplane engines. The latter's supercharging technology had already been incorporated into other Cord brands, fueling higher-power outputs for Duesenberg and Auburn, so it was only a matter of time before the next Cord automobile got a similar speed boost.

The 812 Supercharged was the result. Distinguished from naturally aspirated models by a pair of massive, chrome-plated exhaust pipes extending from the middle of the hood, the 812 was rated at 170 horsepower but likely produced closer to 200. This was more than enough to establish a stock car speed record at the Bonneville Salt Flats that stood for nearly two decades. In an attempt to prove the supercharged 812's reliability, another stock

Cord covered nearly 2,500 miles (4,000 kilometers) in 24 hours, averaging 101mph (163 km/h), stopping only for the usual tires and gasoline.

For Cord, front-wheel drive wasn't just a technical exercise. By eliminating the room needed by the drive-shaft and transmission tunnel, the Cord's body sat lower, increasing its visual presence, and did away with running boards. The rear-hinged doors were unadorned with filigree, and the rear fenders blended into the body with a sharp crease. Phaetons (aka convertibles) had a smooth and rounded fastback tail, while sedans sported a bulky hump for luggage. The Cord's influence is more than the sum of its firsts: everything from the mundane (variable-speed windshield wipers) to performance and handling enhancements (such as the first independent front suspension in an American car) came together to form a cohesive whole. Even its standard radio wouldn't be adopted by the industry until well into the 1950s.

By the end of the decade of the Great Depression, two other fabulous creations by Buehrig within the Cord Corporation had fallen out of production. The Auburn “Boattail” Speedster had its last and most glamorous iteration, and the Duesenberg marque, the most expensive car built in America, wound up a victim of its own elegance. So too was the fate of the Cord 812. Its influence going unsung and seemingly lost to automotive history, a new appreciation was felt in the halls of General Motors. In 1963, the Buick Riviera debuted with hidden headlights, and in 1966, the Oldsmobile Toronado employed front-wheel drive—the first Americans to do so, respectively, since the innovative Cord, 30 years their senior.