

## Charles Clifton

**Charles Clifton** (1853-1928) was a leading executive in the American automobile industry during its first quarter century, repeatedly elected president of industry associations and managing the Pierce-Arrow Motor Car Co., a leading manufacturer.

### Exemplary Buffalonian

Born into a well-respected local family on his mother's side, Charles Clifton was educated in the public schools in Buffalo, New York but had to begin his working career at the age of eighteen.[1] He was employed by several local businesses over the next decades and married Grace Gorham in January 1891. Bicycle building George N Pierce Co. of Buffalo hired Clifton in 1897 as its assistant treasurer.[4]

### Head of automobile industry associations

Less than two years later, following the decision by his employer to develop an automobile, he had become the company treasurer and its spokesman. He was also working together with other leaders in the new industry to expand its scope. [1] [5] In 1903 the group obtained control of what appeared to be the most important patent covering gasoline-powered cars and formed The Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers (ALAM) to administer it. [3] Within another year, Clifton was elected president of that organization. For the next 24 years he was re-elected president for this and the successor National Automobile Chamber of Commerce (NACC), which oversaw industry-wide policy making and interaction among nearly a hundred competing member automobile companies. [2] [9] Over those formative years of the American automobile industry, Clifton's policy remained focused on keeping each association a place where strong competition could be set aside, allowing industry-wide cooperation to solve difficult internal conflicts. Patent conflicts were the most widely publicized of the issues being worked through, starting with the Selden patent claim to the basic invention itself, which was eventually overturned by the courts, and the important cross-licensing agreement for patent sharing among the companies agreed to in 1914. [1] [5] [9]

Over those decades Clifton guided responses to the manufacturers' own concerns about standardization of parts and measurements, tax issues, transitions to and from wartime production shifts, [8] training of specialists for automobile engineering and construction and staging yearly automobile shows in New York City. For the most part a unified response was attained, enhancing stability within the industry and encouraging popular acceptance of the automobile. [5] [7]

When Clifton retired from this leadership near the end of his life, the NACC, later known as the Automobile Manufacturers Association, made him a lifetime honorary member of its board and honorary president in appreciation of his contributions. At the time, Alfred P. Sloan Jr., president of General Motors, remarked: "All his associates deeply regret his retirement and recognize that he has set an example and established principles which will be an abiding and permanent guide for this business." [9]

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## Guiding the Pierce-Arrow car company

Charles Clifton's other achievement in automobile history was his leadership of the Pierce-Arrow Motor Car Company. [2] This enterprise progressed from production of bicycles to a successful single cylinder 600 lb. two-passenger car called the "Motorette" by the George N. Pierce Co. in 1901, to a product, now bearing the new Pierce-Arrow name, that by 1909 was among the most respected American luxury cars. [3] That year the company furnished the first automobiles to be purchased by the U. S. Government for use at the White House, a role the marque continued to play for the next quarter century. [6] Clifton, as treasurer of the firm and in charge of sales, supervised that transaction. Having won many endurance runs in the early years, especially the Glidden Tours, the Pierce-Arrow car came to represent the ultimate in trouble free luxury on the indifferent roads of the World War I era. [1] [5] The firm then expanded its offerings to include heavy-duty, worm-drive trucks. These came into great world-wide demand during the First World War even before U. S. entry. [4][5] Demand through these years was high, as were the owners' profits. From the front office, Charles Clifton set the firm's expectations. [4]

When the company was transformed into a public corporation right before the American entry into the World War, Charles Clifton was elected the company president. [1] [2] As he had for the previous closed corporation, Clifton industriously oversaw its operations for the stockholders. Dividends were consistently paid throughout the war. [5]

Facing the changes brought about by the World War, Pierce-Arrow reorganized its whole management in 1919, and Clifton was elevated to the more prestigious, but less powerful position of Board Chairman at Pierce-Arrow.[2] This position he retained until his death in 1928.

## Years of public service

By the time of the Pierce-Arrow reorganization in 1919, Clifton was already deeply involved in other efforts of a largely charitable nature. He had been elected in 1915 to chair the Board of Trustees that governed the General Hospital in Buffalo. From that time on he used his financial accumulations and well-practiced persuasion to enlarge and reequip the institution while upgrading its operations. [2] [5]

In addition, Clifton employed his discerning appreciation for the fine arts by joining the board of lavish Albright-Knox Art Gallery in 1914. By 1919 he had become president and trustee of the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy and had underwritten a Charles Clifton Fund to purchase additions for its collection. These activities gave Clifton great stature as a public benefactor in his native city. [1][4]

There were international achievements as well. During the First World War Clifton headed the Allied War Relief of Buffalo and was president of the Buffalo chapter of the Fatherless Children of France. For these efforts the French Republic made him a *Chevalier* in its Legion of Honor. [1] [2]

Clifton's military title was earned in his twelve-year service to the New York State National Guard. [1]

Commented [KS2]:

Colonel Clifton was throughout his career a family man. He and his wife raised a son and a daughter to adulthood. [2]

## References

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3. Kimes, Beverly Rae. *Pioneers, Engineers and Scoundrels*, S.A.E. International, 2005
4. Hornaday, Hilton. "Industrial Tragedy—Pierce-Arrow's Path to the Auction Block..." *Buffalo Evening News*, Friday, May 7, 1938
5. Sherman, Roger J. *Charles Clifton of Pierce-Arrow*. McFarland & Co. 2019
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7. "Annual Dinner of the Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers," *The Automobile*, Vol. 25 No. 13, April 14, 1910
8. "Another War Committee," *Motor Age*, May 31, 1917
9. "Chapin Succeeds Clifton as N.A.C.C. Head," *Automotive Industries*, March 5, 1927

## Timeline of Charles Clifton

Born: September 20, 1853 at Buffalo, New York

Died: June 21, 1928 at Buffalo

Married: Emily Grace Gorham, January 22, 1891 at Buffalo

Employed by George N. Pierce Co., Buffalo, New York 1897

Treasurer at Pierce (now an automobile producer) and company spokesman 1901-16

President of Pierce-Arrow Motor Car Co., Buffalo New York 1916-19

Chairman Pierce-Arrow board of directors 1919-28

Elected president of Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers 1904-11

Elected to that position in its successor organizations

Automobile Board of Trade 1911-1

National Automobile Chamber of Commerce 1913-1927

President of Buffalo General Hospital Board of Trustees 1915-1928

Retired as president of the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce 1927

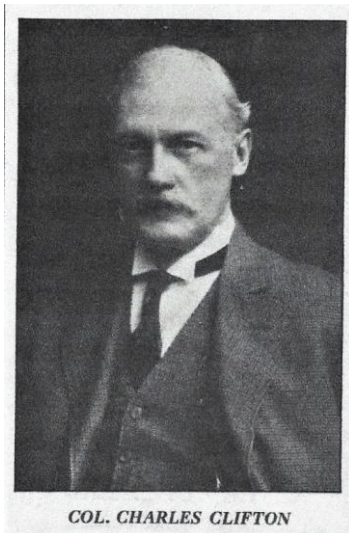


Photo of Col. Charles Clifton published in the July 20, 1920 issue of the Pierce company's *Convention Salesman* magazine.