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Encyclopedia of Cleveland History (<https://case.edu/ech/>)

WILLARD STORAGE BATTERY CO.

The **WILLARD STORAGE BATTERY CO.**, an early leader in the development and manufacture of automobile batteries, was founded by Theodore A. Willard as the Willard Electric & Battery Co. at 33 Sheriff (E. 4th) St. in 1896, relocating to 49 Wood (E. 3rd) St. the following year. Willard reorganized the company as the Willard Storage Battery Co. in 1902. The company produced batteries for use by dentists and physicians, in Edison phonographs, and for lighting railroad cars, and made its first battery for automobile ignition in 1908. Beginning in 1910 Willard produced batteries and electric lighting accessories and sold them directly to individual automobile owners, unable to convince the manufacturers of their viability until 1912. Business then grew quickly; the company built a 15-acre plant at 274 E. 131 St. in 1915 and had contracts to supply batteries to 85% of the automobile factories in the U.S. by 1918.

The company grew with the automobile industry and after several years of experimental broadcasting, Willard bought station WEAR from Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co. and combined it with its own operation to create WTAM, a 1,500-watt, clear-channel radio station in Cleveland in 1923 (see **WTAM** (</ech/articles/w/wtam/>)). In Nov. 1930 Willard had more than 2,500 employees, additional plants in Toronto and Los Angeles, and distributors in 89 countries. The company produced batteries for submarines during World War II and was a pioneer in the development of small, hand-sized batteries. In 1952 employment had fallen to 1,500 and the firm was owned by the Electric Storage Battery Co. of Philadelphia. In Aug. 1959 Electric Storage Battery announced it would close its Cleveland manufacturing operations, and by 1961 the E. 131 St. plant was vacant. The offices at 1717 E. 9th St. were vacated in subsequent years.

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