Pierre Samuel du Pont Biography

Pierre Samuel du Pont

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Biography

The American industrialist Pierre Samuel du Pont (1870-1954), as chairman of the board of E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company, was among those responsible for its phenomenal success in the 20th century.

Pierre Samuel du Pont was born in Wilmington, Del., on Jan. 15, 1870. After receiving a bachelor of science degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1890, he became a chemist in the family firm. He pursued a variety of business activities until 1902, when he and two cousins purchased and reorganized the family company. He became president of the firm in 1915, an office he held until he became chairman of the board in 1919. He remained in the latter post until 1940.

Du Pont guided the company through its enormous expansion during World War I and its later product diversification program outside the explosives industry. He emphasized competence rather than family membership: the company made a successful transition from a family operation to one run by professional managers. The new company structure stressed division of authority between central management and the operating departments; the former concentrated on long-run policy decision making while the latter focused on day-to-day problems. In adapting his company's organizational structure to its new marketing strategy, Du Pont was an industrial and administrative innovator.

The company first invested in the General Motors Company in 1917, with massive investment 3 years later. In 1920 William C. Durant, president of General Motors, found himself in financial difficulty. Because possible failure of General Motors might have jeopardized Du Pont's investment, a Du Pont syndicate rescued Durant, but the price was his holdings in General Motors. Reluctantly, Pierre du Pont became president of General Motors and occupied that office until 1923, when Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., replaced him.

Du Pont was also active in public affairs. He held numerous offices in the state government of Delaware, including tax commissioner. Initially a supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Du Pont strongly opposed governmental intervention in business affairs and so opposed Roosevelt's reelection in 1936. He was one of the founders of the American Liberty League, which unsuccessfully appealed to voters to defeat the New Deal because it seemed to represent an infringement on individual liberties.

Du Pont died in Wilmington on April 5, 1954. As much as any other man, he can be credited with the success of the Du Pont Company in the 20th century.