

Wheel Cover Design Changes for the 1953-1955 Corvette

By: Bill Mulder

Recently, an ad appeared for 'original' 1954 Corvette wheel covers on EBay and the wheel covers did not have the traditional flippers which prompted this summary. There were essentially 3 different versions of the wheel cover and what wheel cover belongs on what car depends on what time period the car was created.

Temporary Belair passenger car wheel cover (cars 1-20?)

This was placed on the first approximately 20 cars until flipper wheel covers came available. We know this because of an early photo of the 10 early Corvettes lined up for view, photographing and driving by journalists and the cars had passenger car wheel covers.



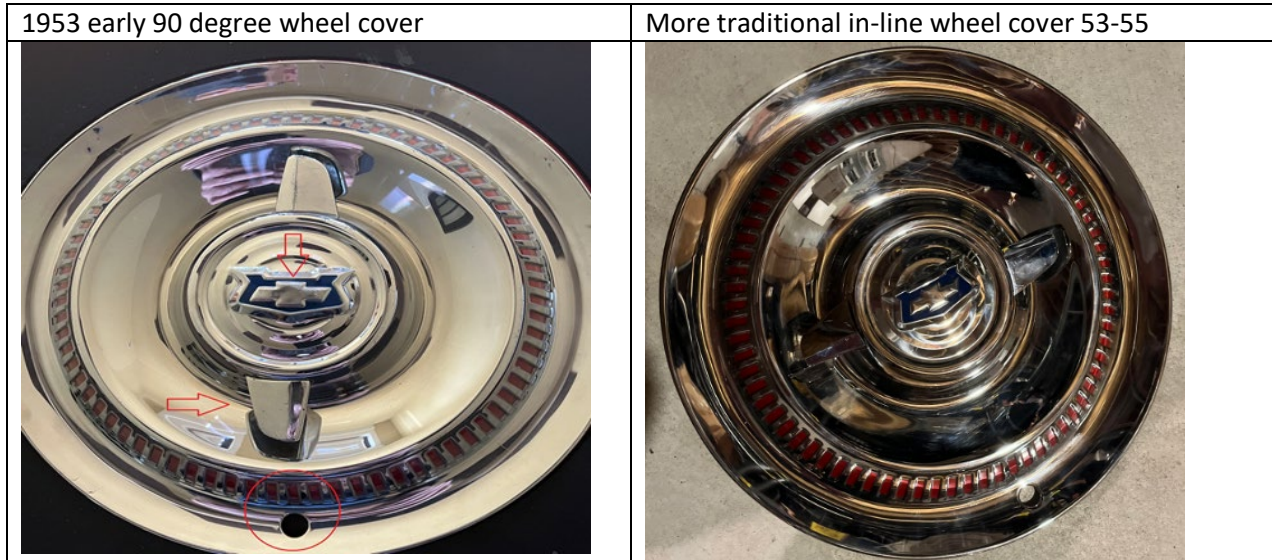
Version 1 the 90 degree flipper

The very first version was a wheel cover with the Chevrolet Bowtie at 90 degrees from the flippers which was on the two Motorama cars. Below you can see this is a Motorama car as it has an external door 'pushbutton' that was not placed into production as well as the door missing its side trim, the front fender trim is mounted upside down and the fender vent that did not come until 1956. If you look close, you can see the 90 degree flippers.



We do know that the Motorama wheel cover with the 90 degree flipper was placed into production but we do not know when it stopped. Russ Howay has car #68 and it has the 90 degree flippers so likely sometime after car 68 the wheel cover changed.

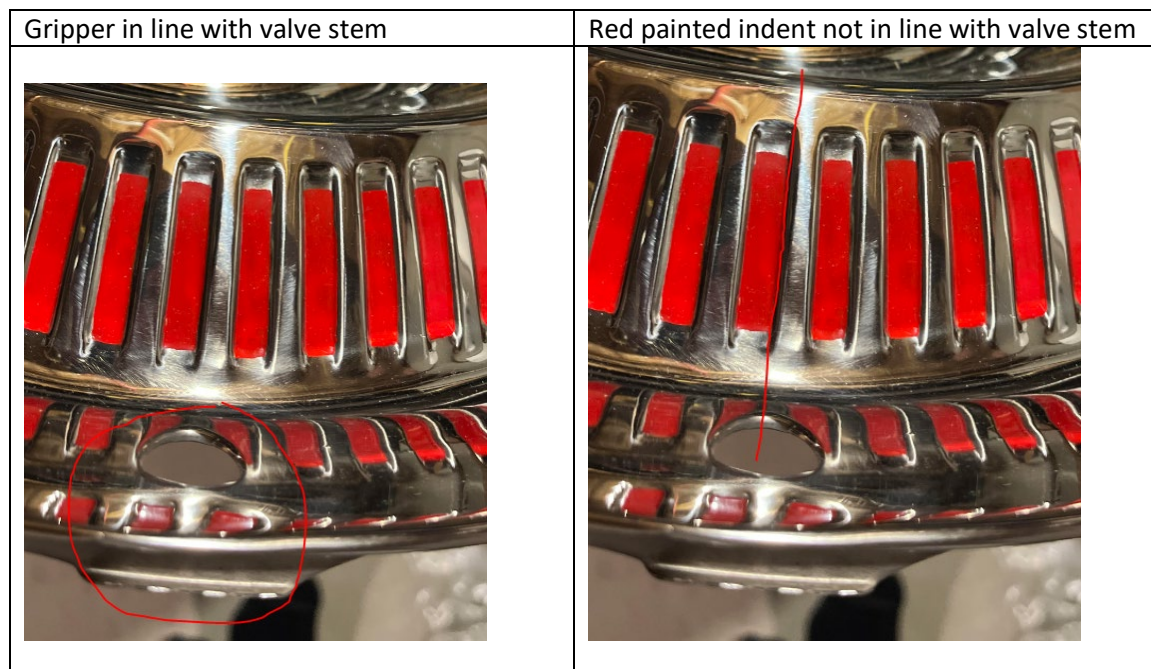
Below is an original 90 degree flipper wheel cover made by the Lyon manufacturing company. Note the flippers are not lined up with the bowtie emblem. Also, for later reference, note that the red painted indentation lines up with the valve stem.



Version 2 production (cars 70-300 in 53 and some in 54).

The wheel cover was changed from the 90 degree flipper to the wheel cover with the flipper in line with the Chevrolet Bowtie. This wheel cover has the 'grippers' that held the wheel cover onto the wheel in-line with the valve stem causing some problems which resulted in a change. Also, for some odd reason the red painted indentation does not line up with the valve stem as it did with the original 90 degree flipper wheel cover.

Below is a typical '53' wheel cover with the 'gripper' and valve stem in line and red indent not in line.



Version 3 late 54 and all of 55

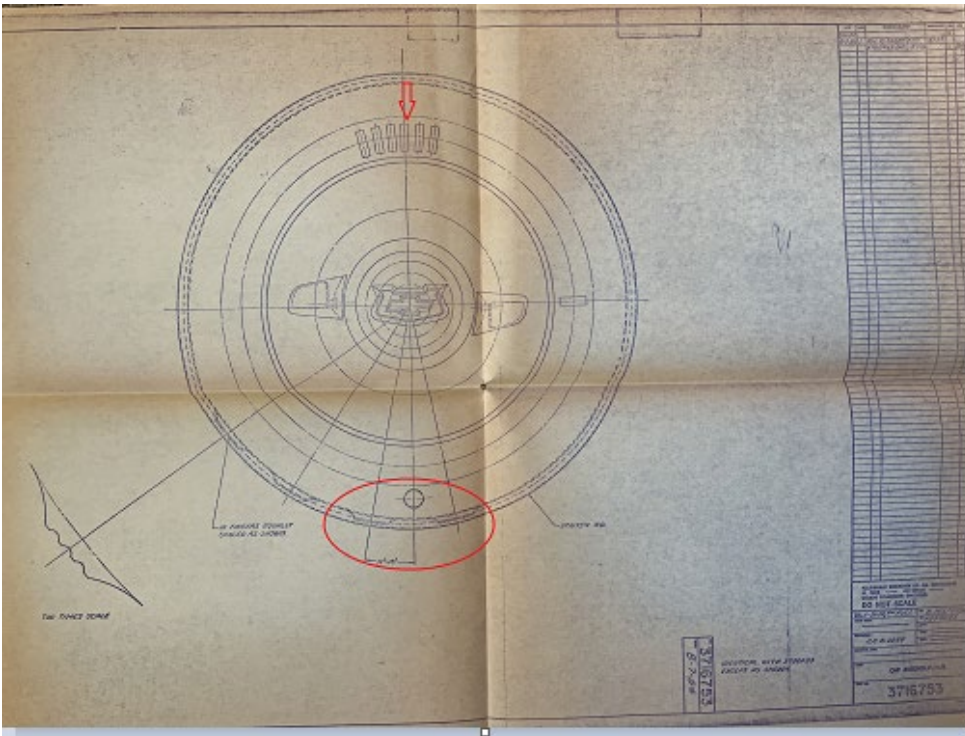
Gripper moved to not be in line with valve stem and the red painted indent lined up with valve stem.

Eventually, the design was changed and the gripper was moved to not be in line with the valve stem. Also, the red painted indent was lined up with the valve stem.



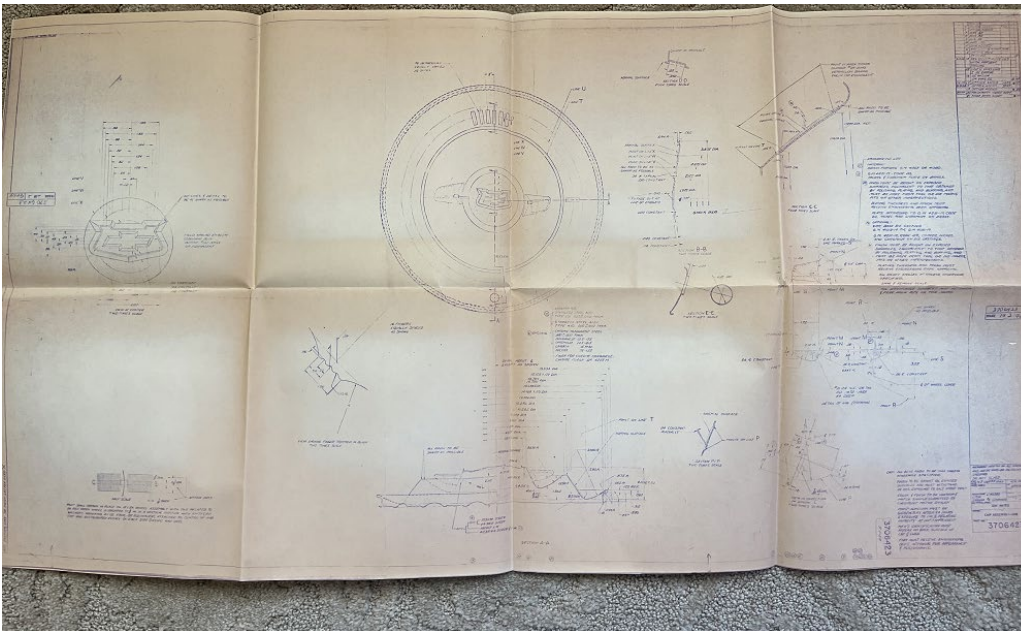
When did the change occur?

I have an original set of plans dated 8/7/54 and states it is the same as plan 3706423 except as shown. This is the first plan that shows the red painted indentation in line with the valve stem and the gripper not in line with the valve stem.





Note that the plan refers to the predecessor plan below which is a much larger and detailed plan refers to initial drawings in March of 1953 and states there are 5 changes. It appears there were other changes from 53 to fall of 54 when these versions were approved.

The fall of 1954 plans indicate there is a 3rd intermediate step wheel cover between what most people consider to be the 53 wheel cover and the 54-55 wheel cover.



The NCRS judging manual which states there are only two primary designs. First, the 53 wheel cover with the gripper in line with the valve stem and the red painted indentation is not lined up with the valve stem. The second design is the 54-55 wheel cover that has the red painted indentation and the valve stem in line and the gripper moved offset from the valve stem.

However, there may be a 3rd group of wheel covers out there with a mix of 53 and 54-55 attributes. Below is an example of what should not exist. Note the gripper lines up with the value stem (53 design) and the red painted indentation lines up with the valve stem (54-55 design).

Note red indent line points straight at valve stem	Note valve stem and gripper are in line also (which should not occur)
	

This is an example of what is likely a short lived change as the wheel cover evolved with the car.

Why did the grippers get moved?

Corey Peterson provided the following photos to support his belief that the change to move the grippers was because GM knew in the fall of 54 that the new 55 wheel was coming out and the new wheel had nubs on the rim for the new passenger car wheel cover. He believes the location of the grippers would hit the nubs making it difficult to remove the wheel cover. As proof, note the new 1955 wheel with tape marking the location of the nubs:



Note that with a 1953 through fall of 1954 style wheel cover, the grippers do hit the newly created nubs for the 1955 wheel.




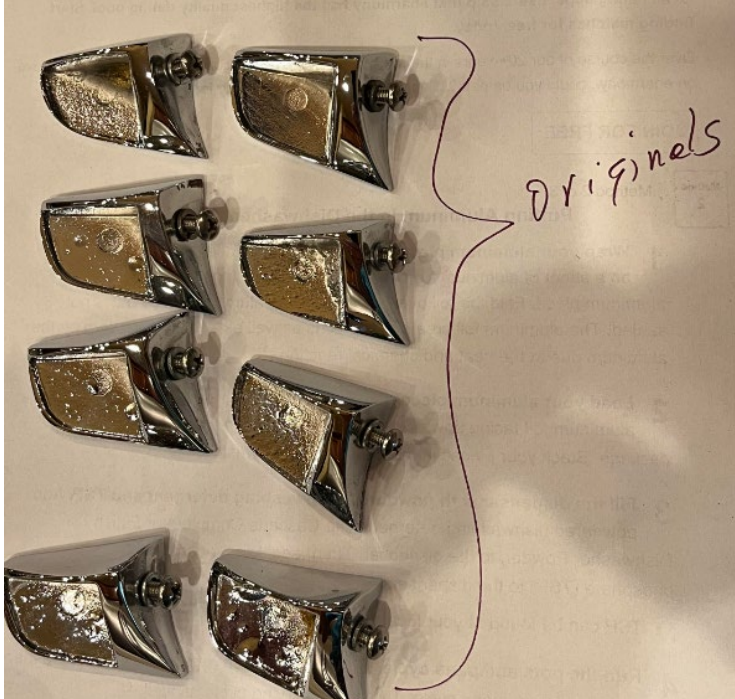
By changing the location of the grippers, they do not hit the nubs for the new 1955 wheel cover.



It seems much more likely that the grippers were moved in the fall of 1954 to accommodate the new 1955 wheel that had newly added nubs. If there was a problem with the valve stem, a change would likely have occurred earlier than fall of 1954. Also, Lyons Manufacturing was the world’s largest manufacturer of wheel covers having started making them in the 1930s. It is unlikely they would have made a rookie mistake and located the grippers in such a way to affect the valve stem.

Real or reproduction flippers?

On the left is a reproduction flipper that has the Corvette Central logo ever so faint on it. The round ‘mold mark’ appears on original and reproduction flippers.

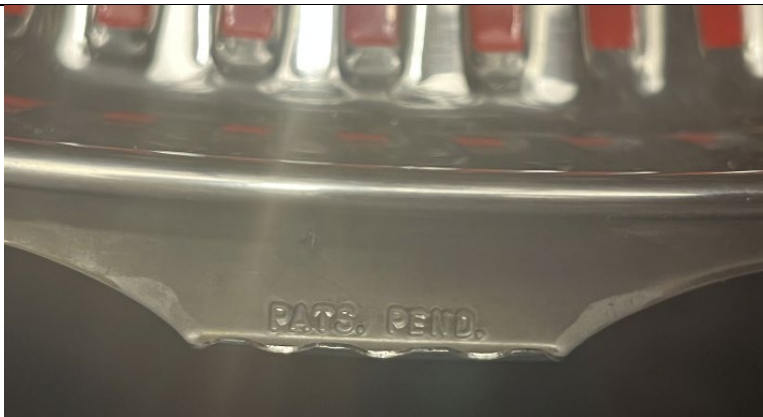
Corvette Central Reproduction	Originals
	

Original or re-issue hub caps

The seller on EBay states these are new and original 1953-55 wheel covers but they have no flippers or any indentation to install the flippers. This is because GM re-issued these in the 1970s but because of Ralf Nader and safety, GM did not place flippers on the wheel covers. So, they would be service replacements.



There are experts that will indent these wheel covers to make a 90 degree flipper or to make the more traditional wheel cover with the flippers in line with the Chevrolet Bowtie. However, they are different from the originals as the originals have indented on the rim the words “PAT PEND”, “PATENTED”, “LYON” (the manufacturer) and “WHEEL COVER”. The GM replacements do not have these marks.



Conclusion

The car went through a lot of changes and this is just one example of the amount of change. To date a wheel cover by determining if the red painted indentation lines up with the valve stem may be harder than one thinks as there were several design changes. And if you find a 90 degree flipper wheel cover, you can determine if it is original by looking for the manufacturer's name on it.