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1973 Ford Mustang Restoration Guide

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RESTORATIONESSENTIALS

1973 Ford Mustang Restoration Guide

Model Year 1973 — The Final First-Generation Year

The complete factory-correct restoration reference for the last year of the first-generation Mustang: VIN and door-label decoding, every engine including the Q-code 351 Cobra Jet, the 5-mph bumper changes, transmissions, axles, paint and trim codes, production data, casting and date codes, torque specs, rust-prone areas, and a step-by-step restoration sequence.

KEY SPECS AT A GLANCE

Wheelbase	109.0 inches (1971–1973 body generation)
Bodies	Hardtop, SportsRoof, Convertible, Grande, Mach 1
Engines	250 I6, 302-2V, 351C-2V, 351C-4V Cobra Jet
Ratings	SAE net; EGR and 5-mph bumpers new
Total built	134,867
Milestone	Final year of the first-generation Mustang

A factory-correct restoration reference — specifications verified against period Ford documentation and established marque references.

1. Ford in 1973: Bumpers, EGR, and the End of an Era

By 1973 the American performance car was living on borrowed time and everyone at Ford knew it. Federal bumper standards took effect for the 1973 model year — 5 mph in front, 2.5 mph in back — and exhaust-gas recirculation (EGR) arrived to cut nitrogen-oxide emissions. Compression ratios, already cut for 1972, stayed low; horsepower was now advertised exclusively in SAE net terms; and the insurance surcharges that had begun in the late 1960s had settled permanently over anything with a performance badge.

Inside Ford, planning had already moved on. The Mustang's replacement — the smaller, lighter Mustang II — was deep in development for 1974, a response to the fuel-economy pressures that would detonate with the OPEC oil embargo that fall. The 1973 Mustang was therefore a lame-duck flagship: still the biggest and most comfortable Mustang ever built, but visibly at the end of its era. That end-of-era status is precisely what makes 1973 cars collectible today — the final first-generation year, the last Mustang convertible until 1983, and the last V8 Mustang of the big-body generation.

Henry Ford II still chaired the company and Lee Iacocca was president, but the Total Performance marketing machine was a memory. Ford's 1973 Mustang advertising sold comfort, luxury options, and the Grande's quiet ride. The Q-code 351 Cobra Jet carried the performance banner alone — the Boss program dead two years, the 429 gone, the 351 H.O. a one-year 1972 experiment.

2. Mustang History: Nine Years, One Last Season

The 1973 Mustang closed a nine-year first generation that began with the 1964½ phenomenon. The arc is worth keeping in mind when judging values: the 1964½–1966 cars created the pony-car segment on a 108-inch wheelbase; the 1967–1968 cars grew and added big-blocks; the 1969–1970 cars went wide with the Boss program; and the 1971–1973 cars — the generation this guide covers — became the largest Mustangs ever, at 109 inches of wheelbase and 189.5 inches of length, aimed at the personal-luxury buyer.

1973 production of 134,867 cars was up from 1972's 125,093 — the run-out-year bump, driven partly by buyers who knew the big Mustang and the convertible were disappearing. Convertible production nearly doubled to 11,853, the highest since 1969, as buyers grabbed the last open first-generation cars. The Mach 1 remained the volume performance model at 35,440 units.

The 1973 changes were concentrated where the law required them: the front bumper grew into a body-color urethane unit meeting the 5-mph standard, and EGR plumbing appeared on the engines. Detail changes — grille, taillight panel, interior trim, stripe packages — kept the car fresh

for its final season without new tooling for a platform Ford was about to retire.

3. What Makes 1973 Unique

The 1973 Mustang is the last of the first generation, and final years carry their own restoration logic: one-year-only parts, run-out production quirks, and collector interest concentrated on the 'last of' cars. What defines 1973:

1. The 5-mph bumpers

Federal standards required 1973 cars to survive 5-mph front and 2.5-mph rear impacts without damage to safety equipment. Ford's solution was a color-keyed urethane front bumper — the big, soft-looking nose that is the 1973's most recognizable feature — and a revised rear bumper. The urethane cover is a 1973-only part; reproductions exist but fit and grain matching take work, and an original undamaged cover is a genuine find.

2. The last first-generation Mustang — and the last convertible for a decade

When 1973 production ended, the first-generation Mustang ended with it, and the convertible would not return until 1983. That makes the 1973 convertible (11,853 built) the natural collector focus of the year — the last open car of the classic era. Documented, correct convertibles carry the strongest 1973 premiums.

3. The Q-code 351 Cobra Jet, final year

The Q-code 351CJ continued as the top 1973 engine: 248 net horsepower at 5,400 rpm, 299 lb-ft at 3,400 rpm, 8.0:1 compression, Autolite 4300D four-barrel. It was the last year for the Cobra Jet in the Mustang and the last year for any Cleveland 4V in the Mustang. Note the rating carefully: some references print 266 net for the 1973 CJ, but that figure belongs to 1972 — the 1973 engine, with EGR and revised tuning, is rated 248 net. This guide uses the year-correct figure.

4. EGR arrives

Exhaust-gas recirculation appeared on 1973 engines — the EGR valve, spacer plate, and associated vacuum plumbing are 1973-specific details that concurs judging checks. Removing EGR for 'performance' is the most common originality deletion on these cars; the parts are year-specific and worth keeping.

5. Medium Bright Yellow and the 1973 palette