

The Streetcar in Houston

by Stephanie Fuglaar

If you want to spark a conversation with anyone in the Bayou City, just mention congestion, long commutes and flooding. Everyone has a story or an opinion on what to do, when and where. As with most cities, transportation is an ongoing problem in Houston absorbing our tax dollars and our energy, and it is a source of frustration for all concerned. Traffic in modern Houston consists of automobiles, gridlock, and streetlights, but this is just an updated version of an age-old urban problem. Since World War II, the focus on managing the flow of transportation in Houston has been highway building. Beginning with the Gulf Freeway in the late 1940s, Houston zealously adopted the idea of highways,

creating a sprawling metropolis covering over 630 square miles. In the 1990s, an alternate strategy emerged. The Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County introduced METRORail, urban light rail, to Houston. The existing rail that runs from the Medical Center to downtown is part of an extensive transportation plan that might someday include light rail, heavy commuter rail and buses merging at a central downtown location.¹

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Houston City Street Railway on Texas Avenue late 1890s.
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Mules often pulled Houston City Street Railway streetcars before they were electrified.

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Strange as it may seem for Houstonians to give up their cars and use public transportation, passenger rail in Houston is not a new concept. Houston had streetcars from 1868 to 1940. The streetcars, wires, tracks, car barns and electricity generating facilities are gone, but you can still see the imprint of the system in the landscape around downtown and down the Gulf Freeway. After the Civil War, Houstonians attempted to integrate passenger rail in the city as an alternate to walking and horse-drawn vehicles. The streetcar gained popularity slowly and by the 1890s, streetcars were an important part of the city. With the introduction of interurban rail service, Houstonians

could get to Galveston in less than two hours. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the flexibility offered by the motor vehicle and the availability of cheap gas stole the streetcar's patronage. Streetcars ceased to exist and motor vehicles became the only form of passenger transportation in Houston, changing the landscape and committing citizens to petroleum.

Streetcars rose in late nineteenth century Houston as an alternative to transportation options in the city. From its beginning, the commercial city had problems with transportation. Trade flowed through the city on wagons and railroads as traders and vendors came to the town from farms in the fertile Brazos River Valley

to conduct business. However, the shoddy state of roads to and through the city complicated and hindered the flow of trade. Most roads were merely ruts worn into the Gulf Coast soil by wagons' repetitive use of particular routes. The growth of railroads before and after the Civil War increased the ease by which people could transport freight, but getting around inside the city remained difficult.²

Road paving was generally poor across America until the twentieth century, especially outside cities. Lack of capital in cities made it less of a necessity than fundamental services, like clean drinking water; and lack of jurisdiction and funding made it impossible for most rural areas. The rise

of railroads in the nineteenth century hampered the development of road building because Americans became dependent on railroads to haul freight, reducing the economic imperative to develop good road systems outside cities. During the twentieth century, the explosive growth of automobiles and the trucking industry encouraged the development of the highway system. Within the city, good roads were a sign of urban prosperity. From these conditions emerged the horse drawn streetcar and the first urban passenger rail in America.³

Implemented in New York in the late 1830s, the horsecar combined greater efficiency, economy and comfort than any other public transportation

available in the city at the time. Other forms of public transportation in existence, the omnibus, the cabriolet, and the hack, were expensive and uncomfortable rides usually restricted to the wealthy. Since the only affordable means of transit for many was by foot, the scale of most cities remained small enough for citizens to walk.⁴

Immigration and emigration increased urban populations in the late nineteenth century, and greater urban density, the number of people living in a square mile, created social problems. Poverty and tight living quarters spread disease, creating epidemics. Investors and advocates of the horsecar saw the new form of transportation as a way to relieve overcrowded cities

because affluent citizens could move out of the city to live and still come back daily to work. In large cities, the streetcar helped create middle-class suburbs and the rise of commuting.⁵

In 1868, the Houston City Railroad Company ran its first horsecar down McKinney Street. Pulled by mules and made in Houston, the early streetcars were modified horse carts on rails. At the time, Houston was barely even a city with a total population of about 4,800 people living within its three square mile boundaries. Unlike the large cities in which the horsecar emerged, in Houston it was a novelty more than a form of mass transit. The simple design of the horsecar meant that locals could produce the first



Street maintenance around streetcar track. Streetcars had to pay a portion of paving costs to Houston for streets on which they operated. This became very costly at the turn of the century when the city began to pave all streets.

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horsecars in Houston, reducing capital costs, and encouraging community pride. But, the first rail experiment in Houston failed because the company built the line on the wrong street. The main commercial thoroughfares were Travis, Main, and Congress because they led to Allen's landing on Buffalo Bayou. Building the line on McKinney was too far for people to walk in a small town. Additionally, at a top speed of six miles per hour, the streetcar moved no faster than people could walk.⁶

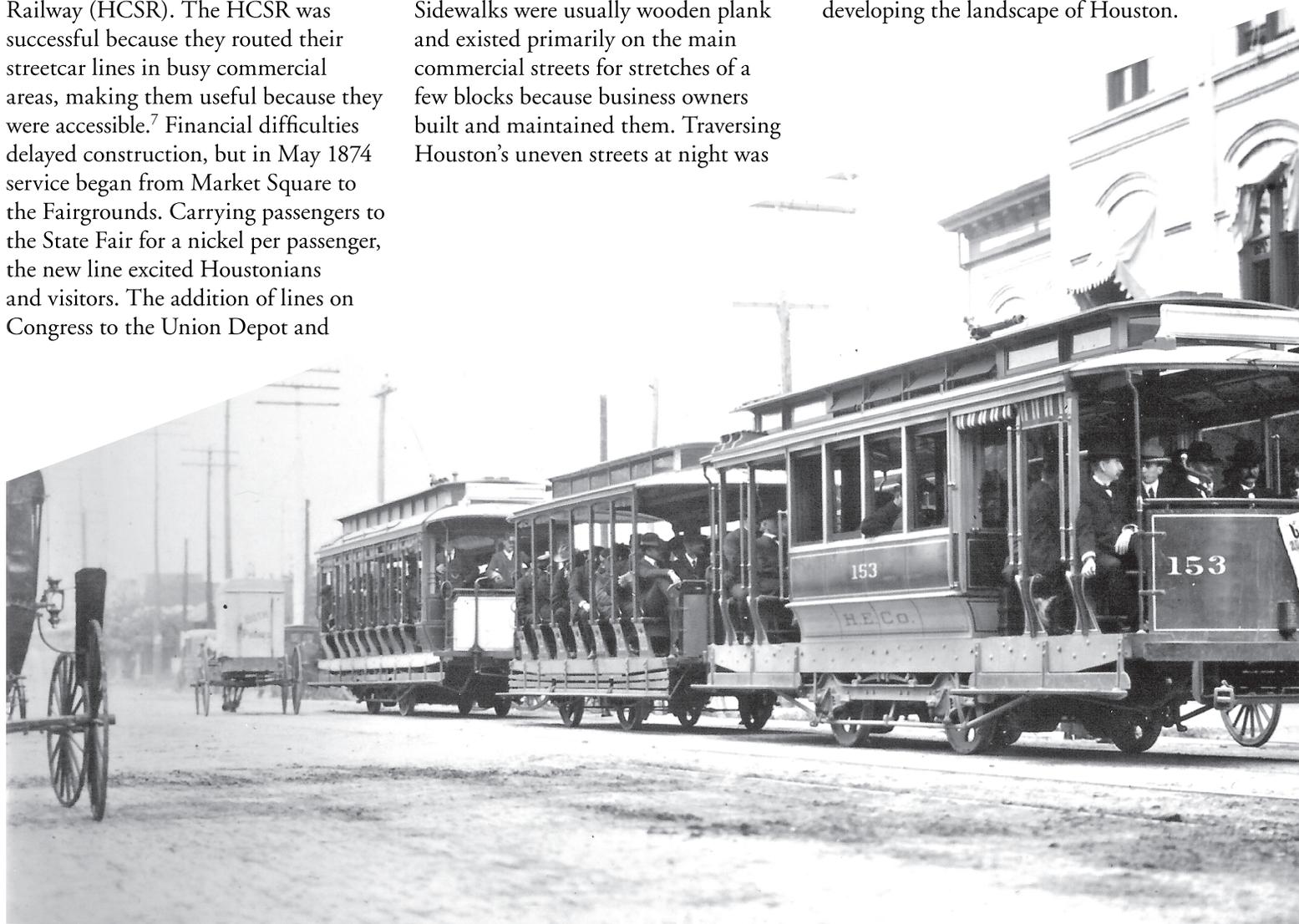
Despite the failure of the first streetcar venture, more successful streetcar companies soon followed. In 1870, a group of local entrepreneurs including Thomas W. House, a local banker and highly influential citizen, incorporated the Houston City Street Railway (HCSR). The HCSR was successful because they routed their streetcar lines in busy commercial areas, making them useful because they were accessible.⁷ Financial difficulties delayed construction, but in May 1874 service began from Market Square to the Fairgrounds. Carrying passengers to the State Fair for a nickel per passenger, the new line excited Houstonians and visitors. The addition of lines on Congress to the Union Depot and

on Washington from downtown to Glenwood Cemetery increased service throughout the city. Unlike many streetcar companies, they also carried freight. This service was a valuable asset in a commercial city with undeveloped roads, but it only lasted for a few years.⁸

Houston in the 1870s was a small commercial town with a population of 9,000 competing for dominance in the flow of regional commerce. A primary concern for citizens and city council was transit. The majority of the streets were packed dirt, although builders continued to experiment with other materials, like Galveston shell. Heavy rain turned the streets into mud or small rivers. Dry weather created dust combined with manure that blew around in the wind. Sidewalks were usually wooden plank and existed primarily on the main commercial streets for stretches of a few blocks because business owners built and maintained them. Traversing Houston's uneven streets at night was

dangerous because there was little street lighting. The city installed gaslights shortly after the Civil War, but the service was not always reliable.⁹

The lines built by HCSR by the 1870s were not too far for most people to walk in an era when most people walked everywhere they went. They really did not extend the periphery of the city or create suburbs, as they were doing in America's largest cities. During this decade, HCSR provided Houstonians a cheaper alternative to existing transit services to get out of the mud, dust, and trash in the street. As the city attracted more citizens and business in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the streetcar became one of the tools for city council and real estate developers to use in developing the landscape of Houston.



Examples of open and closed cars. The open car was used during the hot humid Houston summers to catch a breeze through the car. Shades could be pulled down to keep out rain if necessary.

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In the 1870s and 1880s, the City of Houston granted charters to four different streetcar companies to spur competition and better service. One company, the People's City Street Railway (PCSR), never built any track and forfeited its franchise. Despite PCSR's failure, the creation of the new company encouraged HCSR to order new streetcars to stay competitive. City council continued to encourage competition among streetcar companies to achieve the level of service it wanted. Because streetcar company charters were not precise in defining the routes assigned to each company, heated debates



arose among the streetcar companies and city council over where each company built track. One of these disputes led to a track war involving the Bayou City Street Railway (BCSR), which ended in the destruction of several streets.¹⁰

The purchase of HCSR and BCSR by Oscar Carter of Omaha, Nebraska, ended the era of streetcar company competition. Carter, a land speculator and developer who created the Houston Heights, owned the streetcar company for less than a decade. It floundered financially under his management, ending in a protracted legal settlement. But Carter did convert the streetcar system to electricity. In 1891, the electric streetcar arrived in Houston to the pride of its citizens.¹¹ The nickname for the electric streetcar is a trolley, after the rolling connection that attaches the car to the overhead electric wire. Electrifying the streetcars increased speed and allowed people to live farther from the central business district, creating new suburban neighborhoods.¹²

By 1900, Houston was the eighty-fifth largest city in the United States with a population of almost 45,000. Land developers were building neighborhoods more than a mile away from downtown, which was farther than someone could plausibly walk to the commercial center of the city. These new neighborhoods were farther from downtown than current development and skipped over undeveloped land creating gaps in Houston's development and stretching its periphery. Instead of expanding on existing dense settlement providing continuous development, Houstonians often built further from the city's core because of the availability of cheap land and transportation. This trend continues to the present, with highways now facilitating what began with the streetcar.¹³

In the early 1890s, Carter built the Houston Heights several miles away from the core of Houston. What made the Houston Heights unique as an early suburb is that its location required streetcar service. Land

developers purchased the entire section of land in advance and squared off lots from the central paved esplanade, Heights Boulevard, before any future residents purchased property. The streetcar ran from Franklin Street, downtown and near Buffalo Bayou, to Washington Avenue then up Heights Boulevard. The line then ran up Heights Boulevard to Nineteenth Street at the Houston Heights Hotel and back down the esplanade.¹⁴

While the Heights is the best-known streetcar suburb in Houston, other streetcar suburbs and neighborhoods developed quickly in the following decades. The Brunner subdivision, located on Washington Avenue past The Heights and near what became Camp Logan, was the farthest west the streetcar lines ever extended. Also north of Buffalo Bayou and on the east side was an older development connected to downtown by the North Side line. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the neighborhoods of Studewood, Norhill, and Woodland Heights, located around Houston Avenue and Studewood, developed east of Houston Heights on the Woodland Heights streetcar line and closed the gap between downtown and Houston Heights.¹⁵

In the early twentieth century, streetcar lines encouraged growth southwest of downtown, creating the neighborhoods of Montrose, Hyde Park, Westmoreland, and Avondale. Following shortly were West University, Southhampton, and Shadyside located near the fledgling Rice Institute, which is now Rice University. To the east were neighborhoods that grew up around the Port of Houston, the Houston Country Club, and the Galveston-Houston Interurban connection, namely Magnolia Park and Park Place.

One reason for the extension of the streetcar lines was the purchase in 1901 of HCSR by a new company founded with East Coast capital. The new company was Houston Electric and its professional management company was Stone & Webster, a

Boston based electrical engineering company. Stone & Webster had already entered the streetcar industry in other regions because streetcars were one of the highest users of electricity at that time. In the next few years, Houston Electric became part of the Galveston-Houston Electric Company, which also owned the Galveston-Houston Interurban and Galveston Electric, Galveston's streetcar company. Houston was Stone & Webster's first network in Texas, but the company soon expanded to Dallas, El Paso, and Galveston.¹⁶ Galveston-Houston Electric Company became one of the highest grossing companies managed by Stone & Webster.¹⁷ The new corporate owners and management poured almost a million dollars into Houston's streetcar network in track and wiring improvements and line extensions spearheaded by manager David Daly. Twenty new high quality cars joined the existing cars in the system. Houston Electric built a new car barn and car sheds to house and repair them.¹⁸

Houston Electric and Galveston-Houston Electric Company had the capital to build streetcar lines to other cities. From 1912 to 1936, one could ride a trolley from a home in Houston to the streetcar depot, take a streetcar to Galveston, and get on another streetcar to tour the Island City—all for less than fifty cents. The Galveston-Houston Interurban ran along what is now I-45 from its depot at the southeast end of Texas Street in a straight line for thirty-four miles to Galveston's depot on 21st street. Its tracks ran on a platform made of concrete and steel, and builders boasted it had almost no grade except over the Santa Fe Railroad Tracks. Galveston-Houston Electric helped pay one quarter of the costs for the construction of the Galveston causeway to build their interurban to Galveston. The main power plant for the interurban was at Clear Creek, with substations in South Houston and LaMarque. Promoted as a modern train, the exterior of the interurban's fifty-three foot cars were Pullman

green. The elegantly finished interiors contained art glass transoms, brass fittings, leather upholstery, Honduras mahogany and bright lighting. The cars traveled up to 55-60 miles per hour and made the trip between Houston and Galveston in about an hour and a half.¹⁹

The interurban service promoted neighborhood development between Houston and Galveston and Galveston tourism. *The Tangent* magazine was the mouthpiece for Galveston-Houston Electric, with articles promoting neighborhoods, like Brookline and Park Place, that had "the advantages of the city, yet the wholesome blessings of the country." It encouraged parents to use the interurban trains to send their kids to school in the city and bring them home to the country. Day trips to Galveston became a popular activity. Parties could rent an interurban car for travel between the cities. According to *The Tangent*, oyster resorts were a popular destination.²⁰

Throughout the South, Jim Crow laws required the separation of races in almost every aspect of life. Segregation extended to Houston streetcars through city ordinances passed in 1903 and 1904, ten years after segregation on Texas railroads. Segregation was a constant reminder of the humiliation and hardship caused by legal enforcement of white supremacy. In protest, Houston's African-American community, which was about one third of the city's population, boycotted Houston Electric from 1903-1905. Instead of streetcar service, they used wagons or carriages, often driven by African-Americans. Usually, these vehicles were more expensive than streetcars, but during the boycott, the drivers lowered their prices to the streetcar fare of five cents. In addition to providing other forms of transportation, drivers refused to pick up white passengers. During 1904, the boycott was strong enough to force whites out of all vehicular transportation for days. To mock the city's requirement of screens to create a white section in the front of the streetcar, the owners

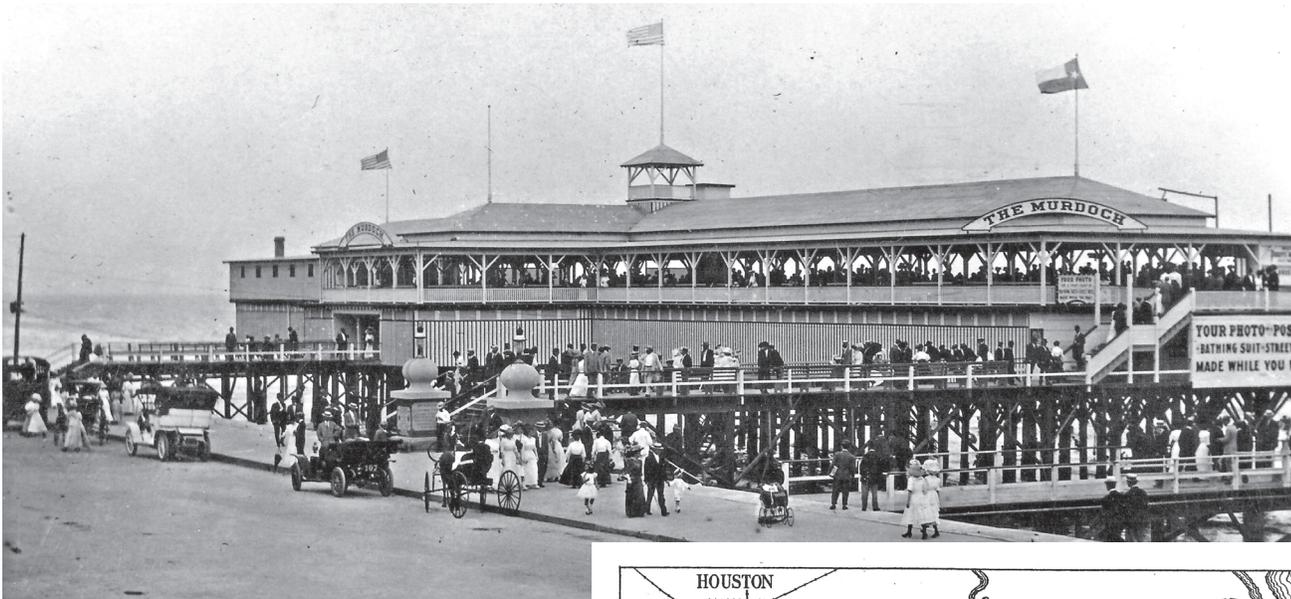
of these wagons at times added large signs creating *whites only* areas in the back of their wagons. Despite such boycotts by the black community, however, segregation laws continued.²¹

From Houston Electric's point of view, the new segregation ordinances upset 14 percent of their patrons. The company lobbied city council to repeal the ordinance, but did not win. It then put screens in its cars to separate the races as required by the ordinance and later replaced the screens with small signs. Streetcar companies across the South faced the same problems carrying out segregation in their cars. Many protested against the states and cities that passed the laws for the same reasons as Houston Electric.²²

Segregation sometimes resulted in physical violence. During World War I, the streetcar line to Camp Logan was the West End. The streetcar trip to the city gave soldiers their first impressions of Houston. Sadly, the first impression of Houston for many Northern soldiers included segregation. Enforcement of segregation on this line caused altercations between soldiers and motormen. In 1919, the implementation of streetcars with one door caused problems for those who felt different races should not use the same door.²³

In the first decades of the twentieth century, three events marked the beginning of a new chapter for the streetcar industry. Urban paving programs, the discovery of oil in the region, and the production of affordable automobiles provided viable competition for rail and changed the dynamic of the struggle for passenger rail across America. As the world changed, streetcar owners lost the power to negotiate effectively with cities.

Automobiles provided a measure of freedom in transportation that streetcars could not. Cheap gasoline and results of the city's paving programs gave them fuel and space to operate. In 1907, Houston's first automobile ordinances went into effect, requiring registration for all vehicles and all

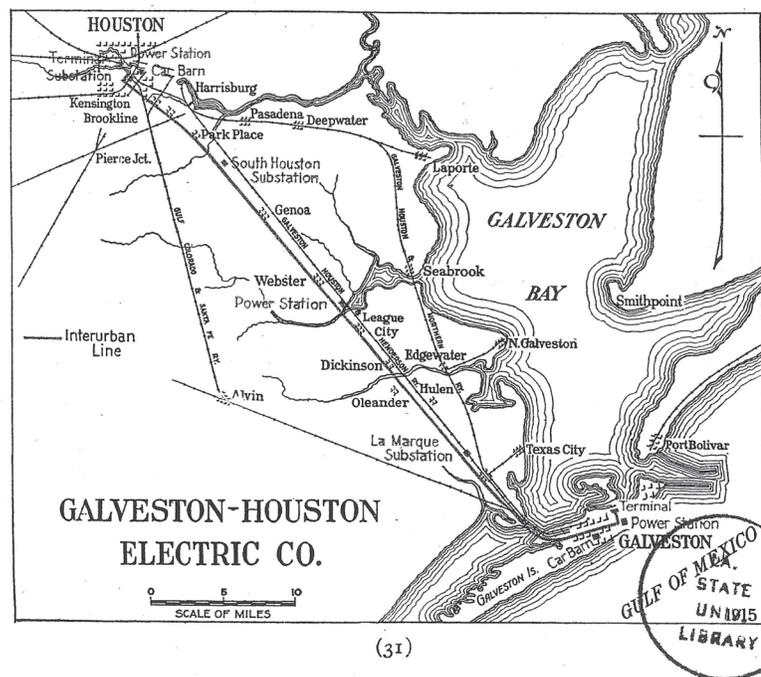


Murdoch Bath House in Galveston was on the Sea Wall and accessible to Houstonians for weekend getaways by the Galveston-Houston Interurban. Murdoch's is still open today. The 1915 Stone & Webster map shows the location of the Interurban route that connected Houston and Galveston's citizens and streetcar systems.

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drivers to be over eighteen. The speed limit was set at eight miles per hour in the central business district and fifteen miles per hour elsewhere. City Council also began pushing sidewalk construction to remove pedestrians from the streets. By 1913, Houston had almost 111 miles of paved streets. Houstonians loved cars and they quickly filled the streets of Houston. Garages, mechanics, dealerships and fuel stations dotted the city streets.²⁴

Increased traffic and urban population made it harder for Houston Electric. In the ten years after it purchased Houston's streetcar system, the population had almost doubled. In 1912, the company created a complaint department to follow up on customer complaints. *The Tangent* ran articles titled "Why Delays Sometimes Occur," "Many Delays to Streetcars" and "Why Cars 'Pass You Up'" to explain streetcar delays and scheduling issues. They argued that street traffic in various forms often put the streetcars behind schedule. The descriptions of the many delays illustrated that while Houston Electric had the right to operate, it did



not always have the right of way. One of the most time-consuming delays Houston Electric cars encountered was railroad cars stopped on their tracks at intersections. In 1912, one such occurrence caused a five-hour blockage of a streetcar line and Houston Electric passengers had to walk the rest of their journey. The most frequent delay was freight delivery drivers riding or parking on the streetcar tracks because street congestion left them nowhere else to go. Rain and flooding also caused delays when city sewers backed up on streets putting the rails under water and leading to derailment of streetcars on the slippery tracks. At times, large

building materials, such as a boiler for the Rice Hotel or even entire houses, moved through Houston and blocked streets and tracks completely.²⁵

Initially, the influx of automobiles into Houston also affected the streetcar in terms of traffic congestion. In 1915, Houston Electric faced direct competition from the automobile in the form of the jitney, a privately owned automobile and precursor to the modern taxicab. The difference between the modern taxicab and the jitney was that the latter ran on fixed routes similar to other forms of vehicular transportation like the omnibus. The term "jitney" derives



Houston Electric promoted any new purchases of rolling stock to prove its benefit to the community and maintain its franchise with the city. This 15 car purchase was one of the last major streetcar purchases because automobiles were already taking over Houston's streets.

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from the slang for a nickel, which was the common fare for streetcars. The increased production of cars by the automobile industry in the first decade of the twentieth century provided a variety of cars suitable as use for jitneys. The Sprong-Roberts Auto Company located on Main Street advertised used cars with prices starting at two hundred dollars suitable for jitney use.²⁶

The jitney could be dangerous. Drivers picked up more passengers than could fit in the cars, allowing them to ride on the exterior of the car in order to increase their revenue. One jitney driver loaded sixteen passengers in his seven-passenger car by allowing passengers to ride on the running boards. A slippery road caused the driver to lose control and run into the curb at Washington and Heights Boulevard. The car rolled over, but, fortunately, no one was seriously injured. According to the *Houston Post*, there were at least

eighty jitneys operating by 1915, with new operators emerging daily.²⁷

The competition provided by the jitney helped solve the public transportation problem for Houston's African-American community. The independently owned vehicles provided a rare entrepreneurial opportunity and a form of public transportation free of Jim Crow segregation. Of the nine legal jitney lines, the San Felipe jitney line catered to black Houstonians. As the jitneys began losing their fight to exist in the market place, the San Felipe line was the first to go.²⁸

Houston Electric used two main points in their arguments to ban the jitney. First, the jitney was untaxed. Houston Electric, and its predecessors, had to make payments to the City of Houston to maintain roads. They were also restricted in routing by city council and their franchise. The jitneys used the roads that streetcars helped maintain and traveled along streetcar routes for

revenue. Houston Electric felt this was unfair and that their franchise agreement and cooperation with the city entitled them to a degree of monopoly over public transit.

Mayor Ben Campbell did not rush to eliminate jitneys. He felt that the jitneys serviced a legitimate market that the streetcars were not and argued that the streetcars did not have monopoly rights. The compromise was to license and regulate the jitney by a city ordinance passed in March 1915 that separated jitney routes and fares. Houston Electric continued the fight and Houston banned jitneys in 1923.²⁹

In response to jitney competition, Houston Electric introduced a number of measures on streetcars to improve efficiency. They added Birney Safety cars, which were significantly lighter and faster. Houston Electric started skipping stops where there were no waiting passengers in response to fuel shortages in World War I. They kept the policy after the war allowing the streetcars to run more efficiently. To protect passengers, they installed safety platforms at busy intersections because streetcars ran in the middle of the street and sometimes automobiles collided with passengers trying to board the streetcar. They also installed iron cones in the street to delineate streetcar space from automobile space on the street to prevent cars from running into the streetcars.³⁰

The improvements were still not enough for Houston. The city council sponsored a professional analysis of Houston Electric by John A. Beeler, a transportation engineer. His 1923 report explained that the streetcar system was too slow and not economically run. Overall, the system

routing was outdated because it had grown piecemeal since 1868 while the city had undergone major changes in structure and composition. The suburbs and institutions, like Rice Institute and the Ship Channel, had thinned the population density and spread residential settlement to the very edges

of Houston's borders. Beeler advocated a comprehensive transportation plan for the city that included rail and motor vehicles. After analyzing the streetcar system and the jitney as transportation systems, he suggested streamlining the streetcar system to work in coordination with regulated jitney

routes. Beeler's suggestions went largely unheeded by the streetcar company or city council. This may be because Houston's city council was wavering with the planning and zoning issue at this time. Implementing Beeler's plan would have added pressure to create a city planning department. Houston

An Excerpt from: *The City Book of Houston, 1925.*

Traffic: One of the finest achievements of the last two years was the removal of street car tracks from Main Street. The City secured the removal by an agreement with the Street Car Company, by which the latter also agreed to spend \$1,200,000 in improving service. The removal of Main Street car tracks greatly relieves traffic congestion in the business district of the City.

Another great relief to traffic was the installation of the traffic signal system. Its benefits may be seen at a glance at these figures. In 1921, before it was installed, there were 189 accidents, with two deaths and twenty-

eight persons injured in the congested traffic district. In 1922, after its installation, accidents dropped to 102, with one death and only 12 persons injured.

The City Council has recently adopted a new code to regulate traffic, greatly simplifying the old system and containing numerous new and modern regulations expected to greatly reduce accidents. One feature is the further extension of the traffic signal lights to several other streets.

Norman Henry Beard, editor, *The City Book Of Houston, 1925* (Houston: Hercules Printing and Book Company, 1925).



Mayor Oscar Holcombe, standing in front of the door, with city council.

COURTESY: STORY SLOANE'S GALLERY

Electric instead implemented buses. This choice was decisive for the end of the streetcars. Instead of the city and streetcar company working together to create a comprehensive transportation plan, they opted to support motor vehicles exclusively. As the city council and city boosters eagerly looked to the future of Houston, they did not integrate mass transit into their plans.³¹

Houston Electric had begun using buses on some of its lines in coordination with streetcars in the early 1920s. In order to reach new passengers without costly line extensions, the buses brought passengers to existing streetcar lines. Then, they began using buses on streetcar lines under repair. The new and modern bus attracted riders over the older common streetcars. Houston Electric benefited from the bus because fuel and repairs were cheaper than they were for streetcars. The biggest selling point was that bus lines did not have any track and were easy to reroute as the city grew and changed. After 1927, Houston Electric did not extend any of its streetcar track.³²

In 1936 at the cost of almost two million dollars, Houston Electric converted the Leeland-North Main,

Dowling, San Felipe, Montrose and Port of Houston streetcar lines to bus lines. Rumors circulated about a complete conversion to buses and an end of streetcars. The rumors came true in April 1940 when Mayor Oscar Holcombe and Houston Electric announced their agreement to remove the last of the streetcar lines and sell the old Galveston-Houston Interurban right of way to the City of Houston. The valuable right of way became the Gulf Freeway.³³

The last run of a streetcar in Houston occurred on June 9, 1940. At 1:32 that Sunday morning, Car 434 finished its Park Place route and pulled into the car barn on Milby with the last load of passengers to ride a Houston streetcar. By this time, Houston was the twenty-first largest city in the United States covering seventy-eight square miles. Its population had increased by almost 380,000 people since the first horsecar's run down McKinney Street. The streetcar saw the transition of Houston from frontier town to metropolis. During the run of the streetcar, Houston became the major regional commercial center of which its founding fathers originally boasted

and was becoming an important city in America and around the world.

Eventually, Houston Electric removed all the streetcar rails. The steel contributed to World War II mobilization and gas and rubber rationing during the war brought many passengers to the buses. World War II ridership numbers were the peak for Houston Electric's buses. A housing boom and creation of suburbs after the war led to continually declining ridership. At the same time, the number of privately owned automobiles and streets increased yearly.³⁴

Today, Houston's streetcars are a romantic and nostalgic reminder of a different time in the city's history. During their lifetime, the streetcars faced many of the same problems that Houston's METRORail faces today with routing, traffic, and citizen complaints. In 1940, Houstonians thought private automobiles and highways were the solution to transportation problems. As congestion, pollution, and the price of oil increase, we find ourselves looking again at passenger rail as a traffic solution. ★



Houston's streetcar companies maintained their cars locally at car barns, like the Milby Car barn.

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