

Streetcars and the Growth of Houston

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Houston is often cited as a prime example of suburban sprawl in the age of the automobile. But just as the growth of Houston since the 1930s has been inextricably linked with the private car, its growth prior to the Great Depression was closely tied with the streetcar, the dominant form of transportation during the period in which Houston rose from a muddy town to a city of national importance.

For the 50-odd years from the mid-1870s to the late 1920s, life in Houston was unimaginable without streetcars. Businessmen, factory workers, shoppers, and schoolchildren all relied on them as part of their daily routine and weekend recreation. Accounts of life in Houston during the decades surrounding the turn of the century are full of references to streetcar travel, for it was the primary mode of transportation for all but the richest citizens.¹ The horse and buggy, in most cases, were reserved for Sunday rides and special occasions, and even after the automobile began replacing the horse, most Houstonians continued to rely on public transit for everyday travel. Only in the 1920s did this pattern begin to change significantly, and when change came, it came swiftly.

In addition to being a public convenience, the streetcar system was an important factor in Houston's development. The role of the streetcar in the development of cities has been explored previously, often in the context of older cities in the East.² By tracing the growth of the streetcar system in Houston, a relatively young city, a similar role in urban and suburban

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¹Marguerite Johnston, *Houston, The Unknown City, 1836-1946* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 141, 152, 262, 267, and elsewhere.

²Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston 1870-1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978) is a landmark book on this topic.

development can be seen. Although there were a few scattered attempts at fringe development in Houston before the Civil War, significant suburban development does not appear to have begun until the 1870s, at about the time the first successful mule-drawn streetcars began operating. Large-scale suburbanization in the modern sense of the term began in the 1890s, when electric streetcars went into operation. Until the 1920s, virtually every significant land development was located on or near an existing or proposed streetcar line.

Street railways in Houston got off to a false start in 1868, when three lines were operated on Main, McKinney, and San Jacinto streets. These lines were too short, too poorly located, and too expensive to be successful, and all were gone by early in the next year. It was not until 1874 that another system, the Houston City Street Railway, was constructed, and it was destined for greater success than the earlier efforts. The four initial lines of the new company generally followed established patterns of development, including the important business thoroughfares of Congress Avenue and Main Street. However, the latter line was notable in that it extended to the extreme south end of the city, ending at the old Fairgrounds, which was then in the process of being developed as a residential addition. The Fairgrounds Addition was more than a mile from the city center, and, given the poor condition of Houston's streets and sidewalks at the time, walking was not an attractive option for prospective buyers of residential property.

While the 1874 system marked the first instance of a streetcar line serving as an aid to real estate development, it also marked the beginning of direct involvement of the streetcar company in land development, although for an indirect reason. The construction of the initial route had left the company precariously in debt; in order to collateralize a mortgage bond issue to raise funds to complete the system, the company acquired several tracts of land from local businessmen who were willing to take stock in return.³ Four of the tracts which lay close to the city were platted as Street Railway Additions #1 through #4, and sales to homebuilders began almost immediately, although it would not be until the late 1880s and 1890s that lots were sold in any appreciable number.⁴ Two of the tracts lay on either side of San Felipe Road

³Houston City Street Railway President William Brady offered land totaling \$30,700; T. W. House, J. F. Crosby, and E. W. Cave offered additional land totaling \$18,950. Company minutes found in *Miller v. Houston City St. Ry. Co.* (No. 53), U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, February 6, 1893. Land records in Harris County Deed Books, vol. 13, 280-284, Harris County Courthouse.

⁴The company owned more than 800 city lots by the 1890s, most of them in the Street Railway additions. The general trend of land sales can be seen in the index to Harris County Deed Books.

in the Fourth Ward; another was on the east side adjacent to the later Eastwood Addition.

For the rest of the 1870s, Houston's development continued at a modest pace within a relatively compact area. The streetcar system saw little change during this period, and, once the initial novelty wore off, it increasingly became the object of derision due to poor maintenance and the inherent drawbacks of animal-powered transit. Interestingly, when a competitor, the Bayou City Street Railway, was built in 1883, it chose to construct its single line on Texas Avenue, virtually paralleling the existing company's route on Congress Avenue to the International & Great Northern Railroad depot. The potential of quick profits on a busy commercial corridor apparently outweighed any consideration of building into less-populated residential territory.

The two companies were purchased and consolidated later in 1883 by William Sinclair and H. F. MacGregor of Galveston. Within the next two years, the pair poured \$75,000 into the system, more than doubling its size to 14.2 miles of track. The two most noteworthy improvements were new routes to the Third Ward, a residential area, and the Fifth Ward, a mixed industrial, railroad, and residential district. Up to this time, the street railway had been viewed mainly in the context of providing transportation between Houston's several railroad depots, a few industries, cemeteries, and the business district. With the expansion, its role in city development came to the fore, as noted in an 1886 newspaper description:

Since the present perfect system has been inaugurated the suburbs of the city have rapidly been built up, property has advanced, and rents are somewhat lower. The service is of incalculable benefit to the poorer and middle classes of the community. It has enabled them to reach in a few minutes time remote portions of the city, and consequently many of them have built themselves little homes some distance out from the business portion of the city, where they could secure ground at a reasonable figure.⁵

In 1889, another Bayou City Street Railway appeared on the scene. Like the 1883 company of the same name, it seemed more interested in competing head-to-head with the established company than in building track into fringe areas. As a result, it became involved in a protracted battle with the Houston City Street Railway, which began with a track-laying race on Congress Avenue (later described in court as a "melee") and ended weeks later in City Hall, where laissez-faire-minded councilmen voted to let the new company continue construction.⁶ The first of the competing company's new routes was to

⁵*Houston Daily Post*, September 19, 1886.

⁶*Ibid.*, March 19, 1889.

the Volkfest Grounds, not served by the older company, but the remainder of the Bayou City system served virtually the same territory as Houston City Street Railway, often on parallel streets. Once again, competition had done little to meaningfully extend transit service for Houstonians.

By the end of the 1880s, changes were occurring in Houston and nationally that would lead to an enhanced role for streetcars in city-building. Suitable residential land within close proximity to the business district was becoming scarce, and developers increasingly were turning their attention to tracts on the fringes. A concurrent development nationally was the rapid adoption of the newly developed electric streetcar as a replacement for animal-powered cars. Electricity meant larger, more comfortable cars, along with significantly higher speeds that made the concept of suburban commuting all the more practical and attractive.⁷

"Mule cars do very well as the first step in a city's progress, coeval with plank sidewalks and a frame court house, but they are too much like child's play in a real, live enterprising town."⁸ So said an anonymous writer in the *Houston Daily Post* in 1891, echoing the near-unanimous sentiment of Houston's citizenry. By 1890, Houston's ascendancy as an important commercial center—built on cotton, pine lumber, and railroads—had passed from the realm of wishful thinking to reality. Recognizing the potential value of the transit system, a group of investors led by Oscar M. Carter of Omaha, Nebraska, purchased it in 1890 and immediately set into motion plans to rebuild it for electric operation at an estimated cost of \$500,000.⁹

The first route to be operated with electric streetcars was "Fannin, Travis and Main," serving the heart of the business district and the Fairgrounds Addition; it began in June 1891 and followed the same routing as the former mulecar service. Construction work continued at a rapid pace; by November 1892, mulecar service had disappeared completely and 11 electric lines were being successfully operated, in several cases extending slightly beyond the terminals of the old mulecars.

The value of streetcars to Houston's development had been recognized during the mulecar era, but electricity magnified the effect. According to one contemporary account, "The rapid extension of these lines under present management has vastly expedited both urban and suburban growth."¹⁰ An

⁷Although several cities claim the distinction, it is generally accepted by historians that the first commercially successful, permanent electric streetcar system began public operations in 1888 in Richmond, Virginia. An extensive history is Carlton N. McKenney, *Rails in Richmond* (Glendale, Cal.: Interurban Press, 1986).

⁸*Houston Daily Post*, January 6, 1891.

⁹*Ibid.*, September 18, 1890.

¹⁰Andrew Morrison, *The City of Houston* (N.p., 1891), 20.

1893 pamphlet said, "Buildings are constantly going up along the lines of street railways as fast as they can be erected."¹¹ But a letter writer to the *Post*, who signed himself "A Poor Man," perhaps said it best:

The adoption of electricity as a motor by the streetcar company in Houston is a blessing to the poor people of this city, because it allows a man of limited means to rent a house or to build a home in the outskirts of the city, where rent is cheap or lots can be bought for a very small price, and live there and at the same time get into town early enough to attend to business. Rapid transit is the only thing that can enable a poor man to own his home.¹²

Late 1892 saw the opening of two important new electric streetcar routes, both reaching well beyond the 1½-mile circle (measured from the Harris County Courthouse) which had defined the general extent of the former mulecar system. Both served real estate developments on the northwest side. One was the Brunner shuttle, running on Washington Road from near Glenwood Cemetery and Chaneyville to the new residential suburb of Brunner. Early newspaper advertisements for the suburb guaranteed to land purchasers that electric streetcar service would run through the property.¹³ In later years, this would become part of the West End streetcar line to Camp Logan.

The other line to open at the end of 1892 was the Houston Heights route, constructed as an integral part of the ambitious new town of Houston Heights. Developed by Houston City Street Railway owner Oscar Carter, Houston Heights was a planned suburban community on a scale unprecedented in Houston, complete with businesses and industries. Because the Heights lay further from Houston than any previous suburb, electric streetcar service was considered as essential to the project as lumber and bricks.¹⁴ Tracks were laid on either side of the central esplanade of Houston Heights Boulevard, which was flanked by the most expensive and prestigious residential lots in the development. Carter's Omaha and South Texas Land Company, eager to show off the property to prospective investors, did not wait until the streetcar line was finished, but arranged for special Sunday excursions beginning in October 1892. The fact that the overhead electric wiring was still incomplete was no deterrent; the company leased a steam locomotive and

¹¹Charles F. Morse, *The City of Houston and Harris County, Texas, World's Columbian Exposition Souvenir* (Houston: Post Engraving Co., 1893).

¹²*Houston Daily Post*, July 4, 1891.

¹³Advertisement, *ibid.*, May 8, 1892.

¹⁴The street railway and a freight railroad branch line were the first utilities to be built in the Heights. The first extensive description of the development appeared in the *Houston Daily Post* of May 29, 1892.

used streetcars as passenger coaches. The first official inspection trip on the completed line was on November 22, 1892, with a capacity load of company officials and investors who marveled at the "remarkable" progress that had been made in the Heights in the course of only six months.¹⁵ The Heights line was the longest streetcar route in Houston at the time of its completion—more than three miles from Glenwood Cemetery to the Heights business district.

Carter and his associates built the Heights streetcar line by means of a new company chartered for the purpose instead of as part of the Houston City Street Railway. His reason for creating a separate Houston Heights Street Railway Company became evident a few years later, in 1895, when Houston City Street Railway went into receivership. In court, the bondholders alleged that the Houston Heights Street Railway Company was a device for channeling money away from Houston City Street Railway in order to prop up the development activities of the Omaha and South Texas Land Company.¹⁶ Evidently, Houston City Street Railway had paid a substantial part of the construction cost of the Heights streetcar line and the suburb in general, for which it received undeveloped land in return.¹⁷ Then, on top of having helped pay to build the Heights line, Houston City Street Railway agreed to lease it for \$8,000 per year and assume the expense of operating it. Whether the patronage could justify such a rent payment was highly questionable, since traffic at the time was confined mainly to weekend pleasure riding. Carter's financial dealings were not enough to save his land company, which had fallen on hard times in the panic of 1893. In addition, they appear to have contributed to the insolvency of Houston City Street Railway as well. Despite this, the bondholders planning the Houston City Street Railway reorganization expressly indicated that they did not wish to see the Heights line abandoned, recognizing its value to the real estate development.¹⁸ This proved prescient, for in later years, as the suburb developed, the Heights

¹⁵*Houston Daily Post*, November 23, 24, 1892.

¹⁶Allegations contained in *Parlin v. Houston City St. Ry. Co.* (no. 302 Equity), U.S. Circuit Court, Eastern District of Texas, 1895.

¹⁷To secure the debt, the land company in 1893 transferred to Houston City Street Railway the deed to 2½ blocks of undeveloped Heights property with a stated value of \$35,700, a figure that was probably greatly inflated. This property was put into the hands of H. F. MacGregor, serving as trustee. A year later, the land company issued Houston City Street Railway an interest-bearing promissory note for \$24,312 in settlement of the debt, which was due in three years; the deed held by trustee was to be returned to the land company upon payment of the note. With Carter controlling both companies at the time, such transactions apparently posed little problem to arrange. *Harris County Deed Books*, vol. 67, 509; *ibid.*, vol. 93, 440-442.

¹⁸Albert N. Parlin to John H. Kirby, July 26, 1895, John Henry Kirby Papers, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

streetcar line became one of the most heavily patronized and profitable in the city.

At least two other developers attempted to build street railways in the early 1890s in conjunction with land developments. In January 1891, the city council granted a franchise to the Houston and Irvington Electric Street Railway, to build a single line on Maury Street north from Conti, connecting with Houston City Street Railway's Fifth Ward route. The line was backed by businessmen who were building a jute bagging factory and were promoting other industrial and residential property in the Fifth Ward. The franchise required that at least one car be operating on one mile of track within a year. A year later, the council granted a six-month extension to the deadline, but the line was never built.¹⁹

Another group of real estate investors announced in 1891 that they would seek a franchise for an electric streetcar system to be called the Houston Rapid Transit Company. Denver banker F. K. Atkins and a group of Denver and Houston investors wanted a 35-year franchise to build a streetcar line to a proposed 3,000-lot "Denver Addition" suburban development on the north side of Buffalo Bayou. Atkins asserted that he had no desire to compete with the existing street railway, and only wanted to ensure that his property would be accessible and attractive to investors.²⁰ Had his proposal only been for the one suburban line, there would likely have been little controversy. But Atkins also proposed several other lines south of Buffalo Bayou passing through established neighborhoods; presumably, these lines had more immediate profit potential and would have subsidized the longer route to Denver Addition. After studying the proposal, the city council's ordinance committee concluded that at least 10 miles of the proposed 16-mile system would serve the same territory as the existing street railway and therefore should not be authorized.²¹ The issue was batted around the council for several weeks. Mayor Henry Scherffius and several members agreed with the committee report, while a larger group of councilmen backed the argument that any enterprise that wished to invest in Houston's growth should be encouraged to do so. It was this laissez-faire attitude that won out on May 11, when the council voted six to three to approve the Rapid Transit franchise. Scherffius cast a veto, only to have it overridden. Within weeks, engineers were at work surveying for the new line, but all that followed were vague promises that construction would soon begin.

In 1892, with the original deadline for construction nearly expired, the

¹⁹*Houston Daily Post*, January 13 and 27, 1891; *ibid.*, January 12, 1892.

²⁰*Ibid.*, April 7, 1891.

²¹*Ibid.*, April 21, 1891.

Rapid Transit promoters sought an eight-month extension, in which time they pledged to have an initial five miles of line in operation. Although modified slightly, their plan remained highly ambitious, calling for a citywide streetcar system that would serve not only the Denver Addition, but several other potential suburban developments proposed by other landowners.²² As before, the city council approved the franchise extension over the mayor's veto, and as before the streetcar project failed to materialize, although it caused considerable anxiety for the Houston City Street Railway management in the meantime. The Rapid Transit project would surface once again in 1895, with the same ultimate result.²³ As built, without streetcar transportation, Denver Addition was considerably less extensive than planned and did not see major growth until several years later.

Unfortunately for Houston City Street Railway, despite its auspicious start, development of the street railway system came to a virtual standstill after the 1890-1892 wave of track construction. The panic of 1893, the Houston Heights situation, and the heavy debt burden resulting from the electrification project combined to drive Houston City Street Railway into insolvency by 1895. A change of ownership in 1896 did little to reverse the fortunes of the company, and as a result it was not in a position to make improvements to its system other than essential maintenance.

Houston's population continued to experience significant growth during the decade, increasing from 27,557 in 1890 to 44,633 by the time of the 1900 census. Land developers continued to lobby the streetcar company to extend its lines, but they usually found themselves politely turned away. Nevertheless, Carter wrote to one developer, "It is the settled policy of the company to aid, as far as it can without actual loss, all legitimate efforts to develop suburban property."²⁴ While both sides may have had a common long-term goal in mind, the difficulty came in deciding who would act first. Land speculators knew that the assurance of streetcar transportation would add to the value of their property and help sell building lots, and thus hoped that streetcar construction would precede property development. The streetcar management, whose first loyalty was to the stockholders, preferred that a solid base of potential passengers exist before they undertook the expense of track construction.²⁵ Balancing this view was the realization that, if the company was

²²*Ibid.*, January 17, 1892.

²³*Ibid.*, April 2, 1895.

²⁴Oscar M. Carter to Emery A. Cobb, January 10, 1893, John Henry Kirby Papers.

²⁵By 1913, the company maintained a detailed map of the city containing a record of every house built, so that it could estimate the probable earnings of proposed streetcar lines. *Electric Railway Journal*, June 7, 1913, 1020.

perceived as hindering the development of the city, it could incur the wrath of the city government, which controlled franchise rights and could grant privileges to competitors, as it did in 1891.

The compromise that eventually grew out of this dilemma was the "bonus" policy. This was a cash subsidy, to be paid in advance by the owners of the land abutting the proposed extension, that was intended to defray the cost of construction and the probable operating loss the streetcar line would incur until the surrounding property had become well populated. These bonuses were individually negotiated and often amounted to several thousand dollars per track mile.²⁶ The only significant extension to the streetcar system to occur in the latter half of the 1890s involved such a bonus payment. In late 1899, landowners in the South End, beyond the Fairgrounds Addition, paid \$4,500 to the company to extend the track on Fannin Street from its former terminal at McGowen south to Berry Street.²⁷ Shortly after the extension was made, the prestigious Westmoreland Addition was established, with its entrance gates at the corner of Berry and Louisiana streets where the streetcars passed on their return journey.

Not all developers were willing to pay bonuses, proposing instead to build lines of their own. Virtually all of these schemes, including a line to Harrisburg proposed in 1893, came to nothing. One line that was built was the Houston & Fairview Street Railway, organized in early 1894 by developer William A. Wilson, Jr., and others. The Fairview suburb was one of the earliest projects in what is now known as the Montrose district. Wilson had no difficulty gaining a city franchise (on February 26, 1894) to operate streetcars along Tuam Street, from Louisiana Street to the city limits and beyond, but the operation was clearly on a tight budget. Although the franchise provided for the use of either electric or animal power, the company opted for the latter; as a result, regular mulecar service briefly returned to the streets of Houston.²⁸ Barely half a mile long, the route was not in direct competition with Houston City Street Railway and in fact served as a feeder to its Louisiana Street electric line. By the end of the decade, after the Fairview suburb was firmly established, the line was taken over by the citywide streetcar system and converted to electric power.²⁹

The turn of the century brought momentous changes for Houston, as both

²⁶One such proposal is detailed in the *Houston Daily Post*, June 11, 1892, and November 17, 1892.

²⁷H. F. MacGregor to Ennis Cargill, July 27, 1899, and September 29, 1899, John Henry Kirby Papers.

²⁸Houston City Council Minutes, February 26, 1894; *The Tangent*, February 1913, 15.

²⁹Harris County Deed Books, vol. 126, 413-414.

the 1900 Galveston Hurricane and the discovery of oil at Spindletop in 1901 turned the attention of investors toward the Bayou City. Despite the fact that it was struggling financially, the streetcar company was in the enviable position of holding a monopoly in a prosperous and growing city. It was estimated at this time that some two-thirds of Houston's working citizens were accustomed to riding streetcars to their workplaces.³⁰ For investors willing to put some money into it and manage it correctly, the railway held the potential of developing into a valuable property. The 1901 sale of the company for a total of \$800,000 was, in the long run, a fortuitous event for Houston, for the new investors had been working closely with Stone & Webster, a respected Boston-based engineering and management firm.³¹ Once the sale was transacted, Stone & Webster established the Houston Electric Company as the operator of the streetcar system and instituted a stable, progressive style of management which would endure for many decades.³²

One of Houston Electric Company's first orders of business was to secure a new franchise, motivated mainly by the desire to extend the term of the present franchise and to settle a long-standing legal fight with the city over unpaid assessments for paving of streets on which the company had tracks. As part of the compromise that led to the new franchise being granted in 1902, Houston Electric Company agreed to construct two miles of additional track within a year, and another three miles within three years, inside the city limits.³³ To meet these requirements, Houston Electric Company built major extensions in 1903 to the Houston Avenue and Montgomery routes on the north side of Buffalo Bayou. Because of the legal mandate behind these projects, apparently there were no developer bonuses or subsidies involved.

Improvements came to a halt in late 1903, when Houston Electric Company was faced with a boycott by black passengers protesting a new city-mandated Jim Crow segregation law. This was followed in June 1904 by a protracted strike by streetcar motormen and conductors, which was not settled until October. Track construction finally resumed in 1905 in a flurry of activity, which by the end of 1906 resulted in major extensions to four lines—Franklin, Highland Park, Louisiana, and South End.

The Franklin extension, reaching east as far as the corner of Engelke and Milby streets, was constructed in order to provide access to the site of a new

³⁰*Houston Daily Post*, December 3, 1902.

³¹The fact that Stone & Webster was involved before the purchase is shown in correspondence from Albert N. Parlin to John H. Kirby, January 23, 1902, John Henry Kirby Papers.

³²Despite the name, the Houston Electric Company was in no way related to Houston Lighting and Power Company, which supplied electricity to the city.

³³Houston City Council Minutes, December 15, 1902.

streetcar storage facility. There is no evidence of any bonus being paid in this case. The other three extensions served real estate developments and, in keeping with its predecessor's policy, Houston Electric Company proceeded with construction only after receiving bonuses or other concessions from the adjacent landowners to defray the cost. The Highland Park extension enabled service to be improved to the new suburb of Woodland Heights and a development along Montgomery Road. The extension of the Louisiana line (along Fairview Street) provided service to the new Hyde Park addition in the Montrose district. The South End extension was in step with the continued southward march of residential development along the Main Street corridor. Most of the \$4,000 bonus for this latter extension came from prominent landowners John Henry Kirby, H. F. MacGregor, and James House Bute. The Dominican Sisters of Houston contributed \$250, since the extension also would serve their new St. Agnes Academy, a school for girls located on Fannin Street.³⁴

Houston had long envisioned itself becoming a major port, and in 1908 Buffalo Bayou was dredged to a depth of 18½ feet between Galveston Bay and Harrisburg; Houstonians were already referring to the waterway as the "Houston Ship Channel." The project was viewed (correctly, in retrospect) as the most significant boon to Houston's economy since the coming of the railroads. Streetcar service to Harrisburg had been proposed many years before, but with deep water now assured, Houston Electric Company decided to go ahead with the project. The *Post* commented, "It will cause the opening up of many large tracts of land....This property has not been subdivided because the question of transportation is an item that means for or against the success of an offering of property for homes."³⁵ The first trip on the Harrisburg line was made on October 13, 1908:

The new trolley road has no equal in the state, nor in the South. It goes through a beautiful stretch of Harris County for the six miles that lie between Houston and Harrisburg. It is straight as an arrow for miles, and upon either side is a fine forest growth that makes it a scenic route. The run to the terminus at the Harrisburg bridge was made in 24 minutes. When the car arrived the whistles of all the manufacturing plants at Harrisburg gave a welcome sound.³⁶

Houston Electric Company manager David Daly later wrote, "Property values in and around Harrisburg have increased enormously, as the large warehouses and the manufacturing plants of our rapidly growing city are

³⁴John H. Kirby to H. F. MacGregor, July 6, 1905, John Henry Kirby Papers; MacGregor to Kirby, April 18, 1906, and November 25, 1906, John Henry Kirby Papers.

³⁵*Houston Daily Post*, January 16, 1908.

³⁶*Ibid.*, October 14, 1908.

expected to be located in this section."³⁷ No evidence has come to light of any payments by real estate developers toward construction of the line, although they certainly benefited. Houston Electric Company may have been willing to make the investment itself, based on the strong probability that the Ship Channel would become a major center of activity and generator of passenger traffic. Indeed, by the next year the Magnolia Park subdivision was well under development.

The next major extension to the system came in 1910, and represented another approach to the problem of funding streetcar service to speculative developments. When W. W. Baldwin founded Bellaire and the surrounding Westmoreland Farms in 1908, he envisioned a garden community of exclusive homes and small truck farms. But Baldwin also realized that the development of the outlying tract would be hampered by its great distance from the center of Houston. His solution was to charter the Westmoreland Railroad Company, which constructed a single-track streetcar line—dead straight and nearly four miles long—on the esplanade of what was to become Bellaire Boulevard. Since it did not connect at first with Houston Electric Company's network of tracks, the rails evidently sat idle for several months after construction.

Late in 1910, Houston Electric Company completed its "Fannin Extension," running 2.4 miles from the terminal of the South End line at Eagle Avenue to a connection with the Westmoreland Railroad's tracks. The extension also was intended to serve the new Rice Institute, then under construction. The Westmoreland Railroad then contracted with Houston Electric Company to operate its line, providing an operating subsidy in order to guarantee Houston Electric Company a revenue of at least 15 cents per car mile.³⁸ Since the idea behind the Westmoreland Railroad was to promote real estate, the company for a time handed out free tickets to prospective buyers.³⁹

Efficient management and Houston's growth led to steady improvements in ridership and profits during the first decade of the century, with the exception of 1904 when the company had faced the boycott and strike. Nearly 28 million riders were carried in 1911, more than quadruple the number of only a decade earlier. A booster magazine published by the city government calculated that 1,538 streetcars passed the corner of Main and Congress every 24 hours, an average of one car every 56.16 seconds.⁴⁰

³⁷Stone & Webster Public Service Journal, April 1908, 770.

³⁸John A. Beeler, *Report on Houston Street Railway Situation* (New York: John A. Beeler, 1923), 13.

³⁹Bellaire's Own Historical Cookbook (Bellaire, Tex.: Bellaire Women's Civic Club, 1969), 27.

⁴⁰Progressive Houston, September 1910.

In 1912, Houston Electric Company found itself involved in a legal tangle that clearly demonstrated the continuing importance that real estate developers placed on streetcar service. During 1906, the company had negotiated with H. F. MacGregor to acquire a right of way through some undeveloped land he owned adjacent to Montgomery Road, near Highland (later Woodland) Park. Under the agreement, MacGregor deeded a new street to the city, on which Houston Electric Company installed track, agreeing to operate it "continuously." For MacGregor, who still enjoyed close ties with the streetcar company, it was an opportunity to secure public transportation through a large tract that was ripe for residential development. MacGregor laid out streets and sold building lots, but passenger traffic failed to live up to expectations. In 1912, Houston Electric Company received permission from the city to abandon the track, but before it could do so, the Glen Park Company, which had recently bought the land from MacGregor, secured an injunction against the discontinuance of service. The land company argued in court that abandonment would reduce the value of its investment, inconvenience the residents of the area, and, most importantly from a legal standpoint, violate the contract made in 1906. The court agreed, and the line remained in operation until well into the 1930s.⁴¹

The years 1913 and 1914 were prosperous ones for Houston Electric Company and were marked by major track construction projects. Routes were rearranged and rationalized on the southeast side (Third Ward) as well as on the north side (Fifth Ward), where streetcars began operating over the new Main Street Viaduct. Houston Electric Company paid 20 percent of the construction cost for the half-million-dollar structure, enabling it to bypass a significant number of busy railroad grade crossings and discontinue operation over the ancient San Jacinto Street bridge. Referring to these traffic bottlenecks in reaching the Fifth Ward, Daly himself had admitted that "the service, as a whole, is poor."⁴² With the opening of the viaduct, long-suffering passengers in the Fifth Ward for the first time could feel that they were no longer cut off from the city's prosperity.

Five new routes were added to the system during this two-year period. Two of them—Pierce and Dowling—served existing, poorer neighborhoods in the Third Ward and required relatively little capital investment in new track. The other three were more ambitious and were closely tied with suburban property development.

⁴¹Appealed as *Houston Electric Co. v. Glen Park Co.*; Court of Civil Appeals of Texas, March 11, 1913.

⁴²Stone & Webster Public Service Journal, October 1907, 285.

The first of these three to open, in 1913, was the Central Park line, serving the large tract of land lying between Harrisburg Road and the Ship Channel's Turning Basin. In announcing the project, Daly stated, "We feel that the Houston Ship Channel is Houston's greatest asset and that every means of transportation should be offered to develop the same. It was on this basis that we originally made our Harrisburg extension, and we are now prepared...to go out ahead of the settlements in this district for the benefit of the future development of the city."⁴³ Shortly after his announcement, the Magnolia Park Land Company closed a deal valued at more than \$400,000 to acquire 460 acres of land in the area, destined to become the Central Park suburb.⁴⁴

Next to open was the Houston Harbor shuttle (later called the Lyons Avenue line) operating over nearly three miles of track to the new Houston Harbor suburban development on the north side of Buffalo Bayou. This route had originally been proposed as an independent street railway to be built by the real estate developer, with the intention that it would be operated by Houston Electric Company in the same manner as the Bellaire line, but it did not materialize in this form.⁴⁵ It is highly likely that a bonus was involved in this construction.

In 1914, the Studewood route opened to serve a largely undeveloped district lying between Woodland Heights and Houston Heights. This included the section originally known as Stude's Woods, then in the process of being subdivided by the Stude family, and a residential development called Sunset Heights. Like the Houston Harbor shuttle, this line was probably subsidized by developers. Unfortunately, firm evidence is lacking; transactions between developers and the streetcar company were not a matter of public record.⁴⁶

As it turned out, 1914 would be the last really prosperous year Houston Electric Company enjoyed. On an otherwise unremarkable November day of that year, an automobile pulled up to a corner on North Main Street where several people were waiting for a streetcar. Nothing seemed unusual, until the driver leaned out and offered to carry passengers for a nickel—or, in the slang of the time, a "jitney." It was a tempting offer—a ride in a private car for the same price as a streetcar ride. By early 1915, there were hundreds of cars in jitney service darting among the streetcars to pick up waiting passengers, and

⁴³Stone & Webster Public Service Journal, June 1912, 431.

⁴⁴Progressive Houston, April 1912.

⁴⁵Electric Railway Journal, April 1, 1911, 620; *ibid.*, January 4, 1913, 53. This route also served the Denver Addition.

⁴⁶The fact that the bonus policy was still in use was noted in *Electric Railway Journal*, June 7, 1913, 1020.

for the first time in nearly 25 years Houston had two competing citywide transit systems. What was happening in Houston was part of a national trend; the rapid growth of the nation's jitney car fleet was nothing short of phenomenal, and it was a major shock to the streetcar industry. Houston Electric Company eventually was successful in persuading the city to regulate the jitneys and confine them to specific routes, but they were not completely outlawed until 1924.

In the context of urban development, jitneys had little positive effect. Although they provided a service that was patronized by thousands of passengers each day, this service largely duplicated the street railway. Although some historians have contended that Houston's jitneys demonstrated the "flexibility" of rubber-tired public transit, this advantage was put to superficial use at best.⁴⁷ Examination of their routes reveals that they confined themselves almost entirely to established neighborhoods already served by streetcars, usually on the exact same streets; jitney drivers had little incentive to drive to new, sparsely populated suburbs when passengers could be found in abundance in areas already built up.⁴⁸ This point was underscored in 1923, when Houston Electric Company requested that the jitney routes be changed to eliminate the duplication of the streetcar lines. The city council accepted the idea in concept, but when the actual modified routes came up for approval, the jitney drivers complained that "they are utterly impracticable, and impossible to operate over successfully."⁴⁹

One clear effect of the jitney competition was that it had a significant negative impact on Houston Electric Company revenues and profits. As a direct result, the streetcar company ceased building new extensions after 1914, with the exception of an extension of the Brunner line in 1917 to serve the newly established Camp Logan. This extension was strictly war-related, as there was little residential development taking place in the area at that time. For a while, Camp Logan provided a steady stream of soldiers eager for rides downtown, including many blacks from the North, for whom the streetcars

⁴⁷The "flexibility" argument is cited in Peter C. Papademetriou, *Transportation and Urban Development in Houston, 1830-1980* (Houston: Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, 1982). Although routes were similar, in some cases jitney service was faster and more frequent, though not as reliable, as streetcars. Beeler, *Report on Houston Street Railway Situation*. For a discussion of the impact of jitney service in Houston's black community, see Frances Dressman, "Yes, We Have No Jitneys!" Transportation Issues in Houston's Black Community, 1914-1924," *The Houston Review* 9 (no. 2, 1987): 69-81.

⁴⁸Jitney routes were set by a city council ordinance dated July 29, 1915. Routes as they existed in 1923 are in Beeler, *Report on Houston Street Railway Situation*.

⁴⁹R. R. Tripp, secretary of the "Auto Bus Drivers Union," in *Houston Post*, May 15, 1923.

offered their first taste of Jim Crow segregation.⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, traffic on the line declined dramatically after the Armistice, and the route, now renamed West End, became a consistent money-loser.

The loss of revenues to jitney competition, combined with dramatically higher operating expenses caused by wartime inflation, led Houston Electric Company to seek a fare increase in 1918. This set into motion a series of city council actions, referenda, and civil court proceedings that dragged on for several years, forestalling any significant expansion of the transit system until early 1922, when the city council approved a franchise extension and a new fare ordinance. At the time, Houston Electric Company agreed to make \$1.2 million in improvements within two years. This pledge was persuasive, since despite the growth of the city, the streetcar system was virtually unchanged since 1914 (with the exception of the Camp Logan extension) and several neighborhoods were pressing for service.⁵¹

During 1922 and 1923, Houston Electric Company made significant improvements to several existing routes, and added three new branch lines to its systems: Chapman in the Fifth Ward, Mandell in the Montrose district, and Watson in Woodland Heights. None of the new routes were particularly long—Mandell, at one mile, was the longest—and Houston Electric Company evidently shouldered the entire construction cost itself. The rise of jitney competition and private automobile ownership meant that Houston Electric Company could no longer deal with land developers from a position of absolute power, and thus the policy of demanding bonus payments was no longer viable, although subsidies would reappear in modified form a few years later in connection with bus service.

Despite the appearance of alternate forms of transportation, the streetcar company could still make a case for its crucial role in suburban development, as it did in a 1924 advertisement:

There have been built in Woodland Heights alone, more than a hundred new homes since the Watson Street Car Line was built into that section a little less than a year ago....Streetcars Promote the Growth of Houston. New homes never fail to follow where transportation facilities are provided with consequent increases in property values. The streetcar makes it possible for people to live out where the air is pure and clean and

⁵⁰Resentment over segregation boiled over into several altercations with the streetcar crews, and contributed to the overall racial tensions that led to a disastrous riot in August 1917 in which 20 people were killed. Robert V. Haynes, *A Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 63-68.

⁵¹*Houston Electric Co. v. City of Houston et al.* (no. 110 Equity), U.S. District Court, Southern District of Texas, Houston; Houston City Council Minutes, January 20, 1922.

still be at his or her place of business promptly, without delay.⁵² Another measure of the continued importance of the streetcar for daily commuting can be found in real estate advertisements. Of the 65 classified real estate advertisements in a 1922 issue of the *Houston Post* that list specific properties for sale, 21 mention the proximity to a streetcar line as a selling point.⁵³

In the latter part of 1923, with its improvement program nearing completion and jitneys still cutting sharply into revenues, Houston Electric Company management again went before the city council asking relief.⁵⁴ At this point, the city hired a consultant to do an extensive study of Houston's transportation system.⁵⁵ The results of this study, combined with input from a "Citizen's Committee," formed the nucleus of an agreement by which the city pledged to outlaw all jitney operations in return for Houston Electric Company making \$1.5 million of capital improvements within the next three years. Chief among these were to be the creation of three bus lines and suburban extensions to eight existing streetcar lines, as well as a number of general operating improvements and new rolling stock.

Before the agreement was put before the voters in a January 1924 referendum, Houston Electric Company mounted a public relations campaign in an effort to build sympathetic opinion. It issued a pamphlet titled "That Houston May Fulfill Her Destiny," which listed \$1,558,749 of improvements made in the past three years. Among other things, it indicated the magnitude of the assessments the company was being forced, by city ordinance, to pay for the paving of the streets on which it had rails:

The largest portion of this sum was spent in the paving of Houston streets—thus benefiting Houston property owners and Houston automobilists. Out of these expenditures we have not received, and cannot hope to receive, any tangible returns. It is essentially an investment in a better Houston. It does not help us carry any more passengers. It does, on the other hand, help our competition by giving them good paved streets to operate over.⁵⁶

The agreement was approved by the voters by a nearly two-to-one margin.⁵⁷ On April 1, 1924, jitneys were banned from Houston's streets despite an

⁵²Advertisement, *Houston Post*, January 8, 1924.

⁵³*Houston Post*, August 19, 1922. This issue was selected at random.

⁵⁴While Houston Electric Company carried about 31 million paying passengers in 1923, the jitneys carried 8,710,000, or 22 percent of all revenue passengers. Beeler, *Report on Houston Street Railway Situation*, 162.

⁵⁵Beeler, *Report on Houston Street Railway Situation*.

⁵⁶*That Houston May Fulfill Her Destiny* (Houston: Houston Electric Company, 1923).

⁵⁷*Houston Chronicle*, January 20, 1924.

eleventh-hour court challenge by the drivers' association, and on the same day Houston Electric Company began operating motor bus service on Austin Street. This route, formerly operated by jitneys, had been identified by the consultant as the only jitney route he felt justified from a public service standpoint, as it did not duplicate any streetcar line. Two other bus routes, East End and West Webster, were instituted by the end of the year.

Houston's earliest bus services are worthy of discussion because they served to continue the suburban development role hitherto played exclusively by streetcars. Of the initial three routes, the Austin line was the most heavily patronized, running through an established residential area, parallel and to the east of the South End streetcar line; it turned a profit of \$13,000 in its first year. The other two lines, longer and serving a sparser population, attracted many riders but were initially unprofitable. However, Houston Electric Company was aware that if it failed to operate these bus services it was within the power of the city council to award competing franchises to other companies or individuals, which would undermine the company's goal of having a single unified transit system.⁵⁸

Houston's fourth bus route—the Textile line, which began in January of 1925—introduced the concept of the subsidized bus line. One coach made two trips daily from a point midway along the North Main streetcar line to an outlying cotton mill as a convenience for the mill workers. Houston Electric Company charged the mill 20 cents per mile to cover the deficit incurred by the operation. A similar line also operated briefly to the *Post-Dispatch* printing plant during 1925.

The success of the Textile line, a subsidized shuttle, set the stage for the subsidized express bus, an innovative concept that gained Houston Electric Company national attention.⁵⁹ The first of these express routes was the River Oaks line, running from downtown to River Oaks (originally known as Country Club Estates), a high-class residential district under development on the western fringe of the city—a section considered remote at that time. Service began November 8, 1925. In contracting for the service, the developers of the suburb stated, "The modern passenger bus represents the most flexible and up-to-date method of extending public transportation service."⁶⁰ Under the subsidy arrangement, Houston Electric Company provided the buses and drivers, while the developers agreed to cover any monthly loss incurred by the service. Houston Electric Company had the option to end the subsidy

⁵⁸*Electric Railway Journal*, May 31, 1924. Several proposals for private bus service are mentioned in Houston City Council Minutes during this period.

⁵⁹*Electric Railway Journal*, May 29, 1926, 929; *ibid.*, June 12, 1926, 1008.

⁶⁰*Houston Chronicle*, November 8, 1925.

arrangement and take over the line at any time, and was obligated to do so if the line showed a profit for six months. Subsidy contracts were renewed on an annual basis, and Houston Electric Company reserved the right not to renew if it was felt that the route had no hope of ever becoming self-supporting. A 10-cent fare was charged, compared to the seven-cent cash fare on the regular streetcar and bus lines.

The River Oaks express route and others like it had a significant effect on Houston's development in the late 1920s, as they opened up several fringe areas to residential construction that would have otherwise been considered too sparsely settled to justify the ever-increasing cost of streetcar construction.⁶¹ Other real estate developers soon jumped on the express bus bandwagon: the Southampton (Monticello-Rice Court) line opened in December 1925; the Riverside-Washington line in January 1926; the Plaza Warwick line in August 1926; the Bellaire line in September 1927; and the Temple Terrace line in April 1928. By 1930, all but the Monticello and Bellaire routes had become self-supporting.⁶²

Most of Houston's early bus lines were south of Buffalo Bayou, where the greatest residential expansion was taking place. In the 1920s, only four lines operated on the north side, and all were shuttles that served as feeders to streetcar lines rather than operating downtown. With the exception of the River Oaks bus line, where space was reserved for "colored servants," Houston's buses were for the exclusive use of white passengers until the 1930s, despite assertions by black leaders that the failure to carry blacks violated the "equal accommodation" ordinances.⁶³

Of the eight street railway extensions that had been promised in the 1924 referendum, by 1927 only three had been built. These were an extension to the Dowling line, the Brooke Smith extension to the Woodland Heights line, and the new Nance line in the Fifth Ward. The other five promised "extensions" came in the form of new shuttle bus lines, which served as feeders to the streetcar lines and involved much lower capital costs. Few seemed to mind the substitution, as long as transportation was provided.⁶⁴

⁶¹Track construction costs were considerably higher than in the pre-World War I period. The Mandell extension of 1923 had cost \$48,818. *That Houston May Fulfill Her Destiny*.

⁶²*Bus Transportation*, July 1931, 347.

⁶³*Houston Chronicle*, November 8, 1925. Also, C. F. Richardson in the *Houston Informer*, December 12, 1925, quoted in Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, eds., *Black Dixie: Afro-American History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 185.

⁶⁴In 1926, Houston Public Service Commissioner C. J. Kirk predicted, without any apparent reservations, that there would never be another streetcar extension in Houston. *Houston Chronicle*, September 1, 1926.

The year 1927 marked the high point of streetcar mileage in the city, with 24 routes operating on 90 miles of track. That year, Houston Electric Company carried more than 41 million revenue passengers, 90 percent of them on streetcars. Although this was a near-record amount, with an estimated population of 259,000 it amounted to just 159 rides per capita, significantly lower than other cities of comparable size, including Atlanta, Memphis, and Omaha.⁶⁵ However, a consultant would later note that "In spite of the rapid growth of the automobile as an individual means of transportation [in Houston], the bulk of the people traveling about the city still depend on public conveyances in the form of streetcars and buses."⁶⁶

Since their introduction in 1924, Houston's buses had always been used to supplement, rather than replace, the streetcars. This changed in September 1927, when the Bellaire streetcar line was abruptly replaced by bus service due to the poor condition of the track (which was maintained by the developer, not by Houston Electric Company). A more significant conversion occurred on February 1, 1928, when buses began operating on the Harrisburg line. This change was prompted by the recent annexation of Magnolia Park, which had experienced major population growth. The city planned to improve Harrisburg Road, meaning that Houston Electric Company would have had to rebuild its tracks at great expense. Whether buses could serve such a heavily patronized route was an uncertainty at first; permission to remove the track and overhead wires was not granted by the city council until September, and then only on the condition that they "will be reconstructed in the future if the city deems necessary."⁶⁷

At the start of 1929, Houston Electric Company was operating 16 bus routes. That year, General Manager Jeff Alexander summed up the company's attitude toward bus service in a letter to a trade publication:

As a supplement to street railway service the bus is fast finding a place in the public transportation field....The future will probably bring out a further expansion of the bus. In cities not large enough to support rapid transit facilities, buses very likely will be used to give fast express service to outlying communities, which in my opinion is the logical manner in which they should be co-ordinated with street railway service.⁶⁸

⁶⁵*Electric Railway Journal*, November 1929, 1032-1035. The peak per capita ridership was 228.7, a figure achieved in 1913.

⁶⁶Hare and Hare, consultants, in "The City Plan of Houston," 1929, quoted in Papademetriou, *Transportation and Urban Development*, 35.

⁶⁷It did not prove necessary, as the Harrisburg bus service was an immediate success. Houston City Council Minutes, September 25, 1928.

⁶⁸*Electric Railway Journal*, September 14, 1929, 924.

Clearly, the implication was that future outward expansion of the streetcar system was unlikely. Streetcars were still the backbone of the transit system, but no longer would they be considered essential to the further growth of the city. In addition, no evidence has surfaced of new subsidized bus lines being established after 1928, indicating that real estate developers must not have deemed public transportation absolutely essential to the success of their projects since they no longer went to the extra expense of providing it.

Houston began the new decade on a high note. The census revealed that, with a population of 292,352, Houston had finally passed San Antonio and Dallas to become Texas's largest city. The past few years had seen a tremendous building boom and the Ship Channel was now lined with oil refineries and other industries. But any celebration was tempered by the reality of the worsening depression. In later years, Houstonians would boast that the city weathered the Great Depression better than most others, but Houston Electric Company suffered badly, as did most transit systems nationwide. More than 42 million fare-paying passengers had used the streetcars and buses in 1929. In 1932, that figure had dropped to barely 26 million. Declines in revenues were only partially offset by cuts in operating expenses, and in 1932 Houston Electric Company posted a deficit of \$154,873 on revenues of \$2.1 million.⁶⁹ A few marginal streetcar lines were abandoned as a result during this period.

Houston Electric Company underwent financial reorganization in 1935-1936 along with its parent company, the Galveston-Houston Electric Company, and this effort, combined with its first ridership increase in five years, returned it to profitability in 1936. For the streetcars, though, 1936 marked the beginning of the end. In July, Houston Electric Company officials went before the city council and received permission to substitute bus service on six routes—Montrose, Dowling, San Felipe, Port Houston, and the through-routed Leeland-North Main service. "The move by the Houston Electric Company is said to be a step toward ultimate discard of streetcars for buses," the *Houston Chronicle* reported.⁷⁰

Economic realities dictated the decision to discontinue streetcar operation. The depression-related drop in ridership from 1930 to 1935 had resulted in few dollars being earmarked for capital improvements. By the time the financial picture began to improve and funds were available for expansion, the company found itself with a streetcar system whose development, both in terms of track and rolling stock, had been virtually arrested since 1927. While

⁶⁹*Moody's Manual of Investments*, 1934, 301.

⁷⁰*Houston Chronicle*, July 29, 1936.

the rail system was still adequate to serve the older, most densely populated portions of the city, company officials could see little economic sense in extending the rails to new suburbs when buses could provide adequate service at much lower initial cost. In addition, a major problem facing the existing routes was the mounting cost of track maintenance and reconstruction. As rails wore out and streets were scheduled for paving, it was deemed more cost-effective to substitute buses than to rebuild the tracks. Bus substitution also relieved Houston Electric Company of the burden of having to pay a portion of the street paving cost as required by the city. As a result, the city's paving program appears to have been the greatest single factor in determining the order in which the streetcar lines were abandoned during the latter half of the 1930s.⁷¹

The popularity of private automobiles, particularly for daily commuting, was a key factor faced by virtually all U.S. transit companies. Although most commuting to Houston's central business district in the 1920s was still by streetcar and bus, the appearance of outlying "strip" shopping centers and businesses during that decade signaled the emergence of the automobile as something more than just a machine for weekend pleasure driving.⁷² In 1927, 80 percent of the commuting population had used streetcars and buses to reach the downtown business district. By 1938, that figure had fallen to under 15 percent.⁷³ As population and automobile registrations soared and more commuters decided to drive to work, transit ridership remained relatively flat and actually declined on a per capita basis. Furthermore, Houston's population growth did not result in significant increases in population density, since the city limits were constantly being expanded to encompass the new automobile-oriented suburbs.⁷⁴ While public transportation was still considered important in Houston, it had become clear to Houston Electric Company officials that the bus, with its lower capital costs, was the best vehicle to serve the purpose.

The changing traffic patterns also doomed the affiliated Galveston-Houston Electric Railway, which had been operating high-speed interurban service between the two cities since 1911. Although the railway made its last run in 1936, the Park Place suburb, which owed its existence to the interurban line, had developed to such an extent that it was decided to maintain rail service

⁷¹This is revealed in the Houston City Council Minutes, in which virtually every request to abandon track was in connection with a paving project.

⁷²Papademetriou, *Transportation and Urban Development*, 42.

⁷³Earl J. Reeder, *Houston Traffic Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Works Progress Administration, 1939), 67.

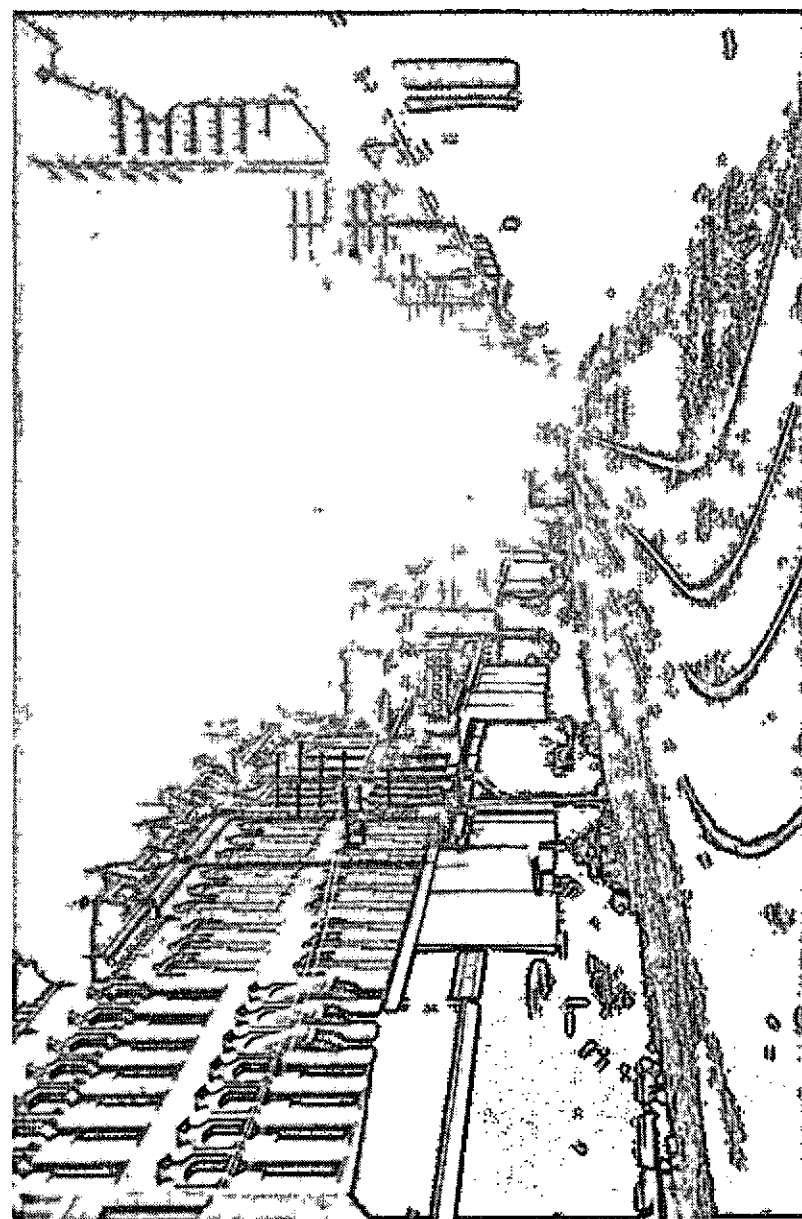
⁷⁴*Mass Transportation*, August 1942, 201.

to it. Since the interurban company was being liquidated, the trackage between the Houston city limits and Park Place was conveyed to Houston Electric Company, which operated the service as part of its system. On April 12, 1940, Mayor Oscar Holcombe announced that he and Houston Electric Company management had reached agreement on the abandonment of the last four remaining streetcar lines. Holcombe's chief motivation was the opportunity to acquire the old interurban right of way between the city limits and South Houston, most of which was still being used by the Park Place service. By gaining title to the property for the city, Holcombe was able to secure a key part of the route for a pet project, a proposed multilane highway to Galveston that would eventually become known as the Gulf Freeway. The death of Houston's streetcar system was thus, in a very real sense, tied with the birth of Houston's superhighway system.⁷⁵

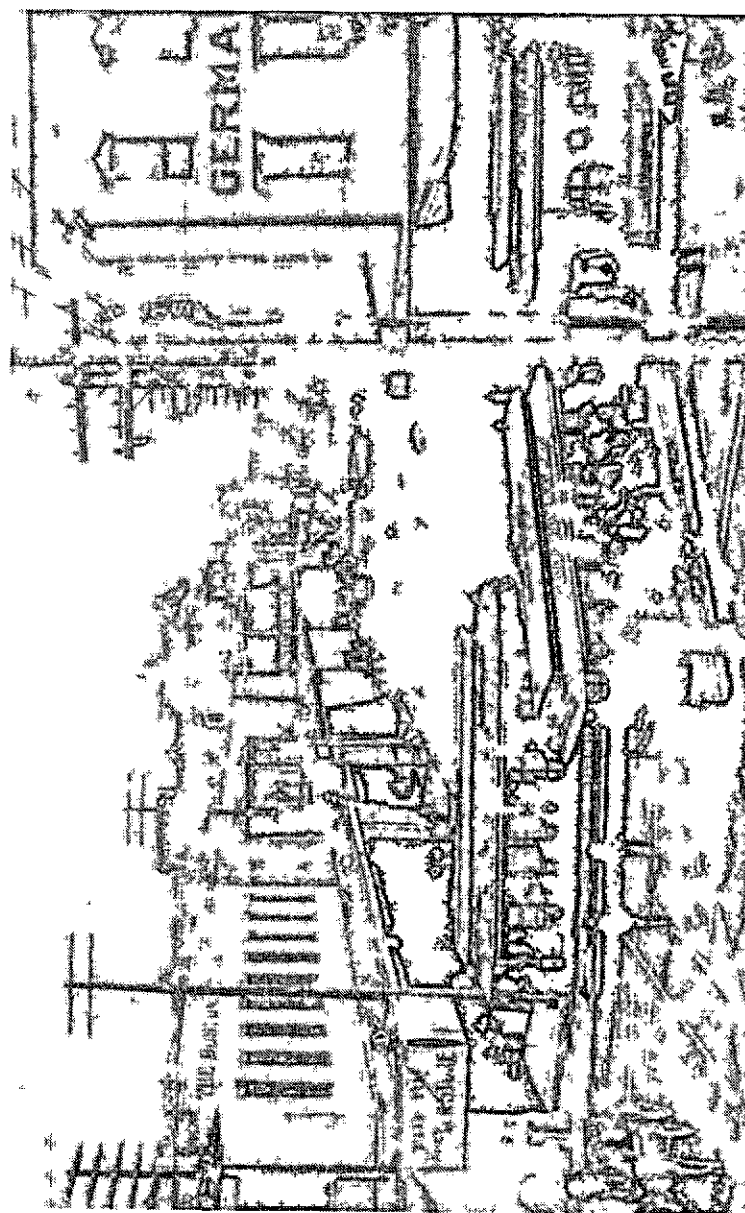
The final streetcars ran in the early morning hours of June 9, 1940. When Houston awoke later that morning, it had become the largest city in the nation without streetcar service. Ironically, many of the buses, touted for their "flexibility" in routing, followed routes nearly identical to the streetcars they had replaced. But Houston's citizens, looking optimistically toward the future, apparently had few regrets. The newspapers were full of advertisements for new housing developments, few of them making any mention of public transit facilities.

Given the integral role streetcars once played in the life of the city, it is ironic how little evidence of their existence has survived. The continued growth of Houston has obliterated virtually every physical trace of the system, and local history texts give it only passing mention, barely hinting at the important role it played during the city's formative years. But the most important legacy of the streetcar system is permanent and tangible—the neighborhoods it helped to create, such as Houston Heights, Montrose, Magnolia Park, Houston Harbor, and Woodland Heights.

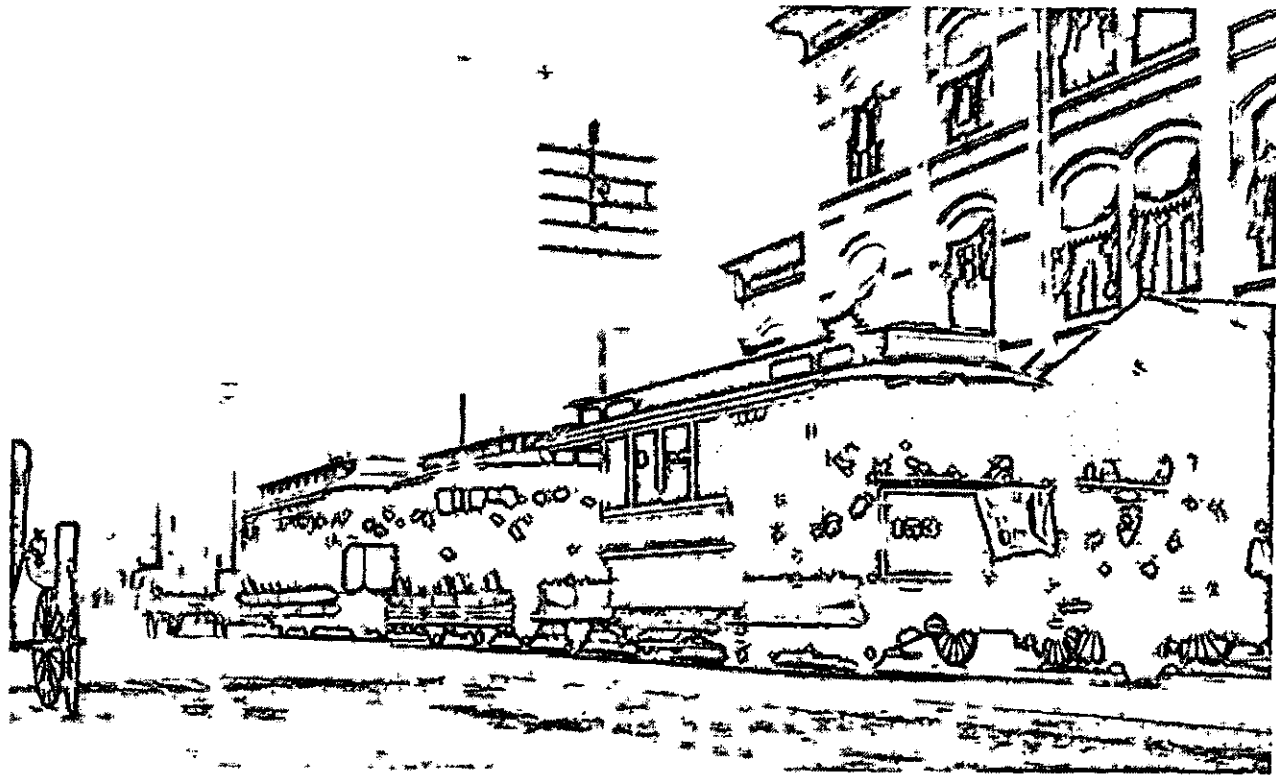
⁷⁵*Houston Chronicle*, April 12, 13, 1940.



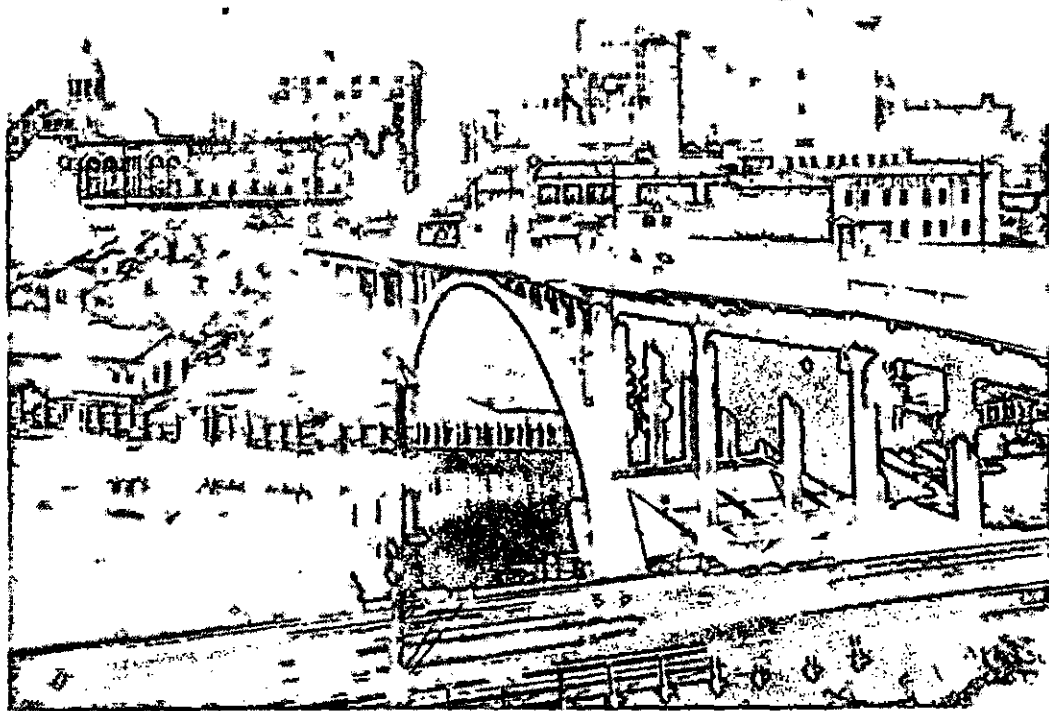
Two mule-drawn streetcars pass on Main Street in the late 1880s.



Open-bench streetcars comprised much of the early electric fleet, as seen in this 1890s view at the intersection of Travis and Congress.



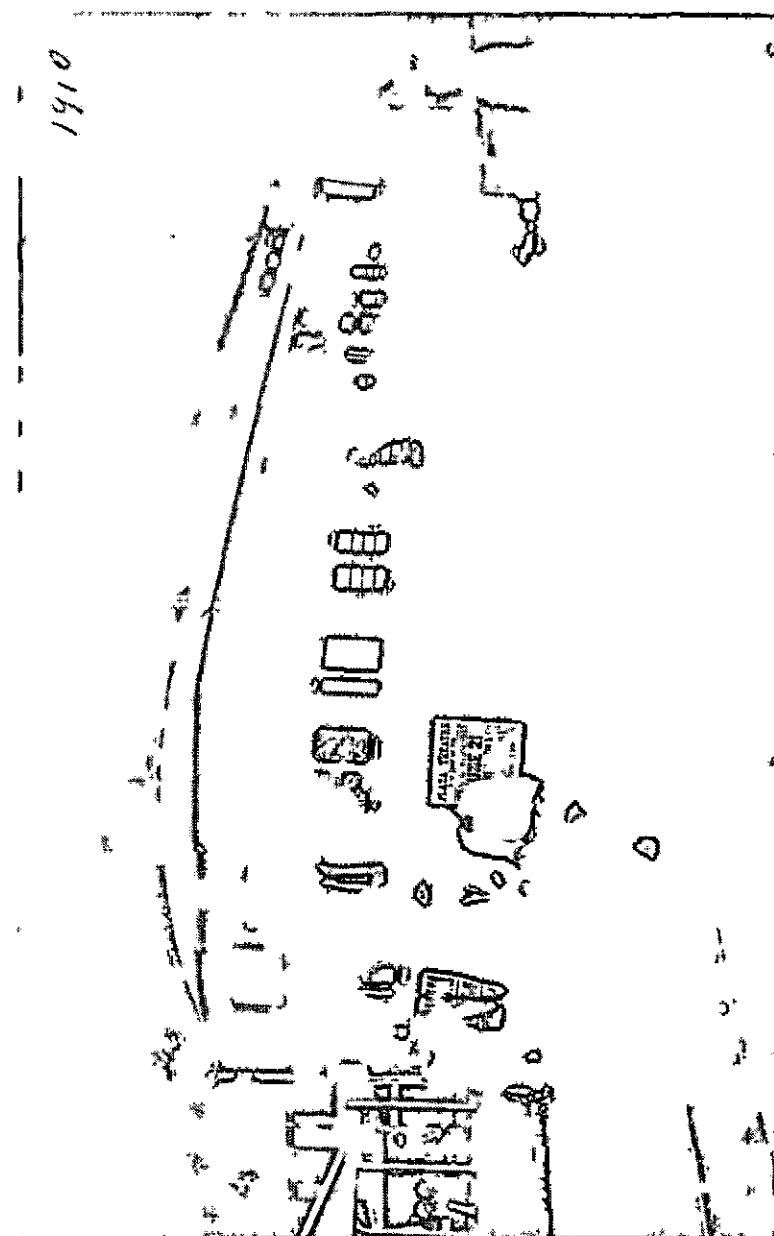
Brand-new Car 153 is in the foreground of this fine photograph dating from October 1902. A charter group has just boarded in front of the Grand Central Depot on Washington Street and is ready to depart on a tour of the city.



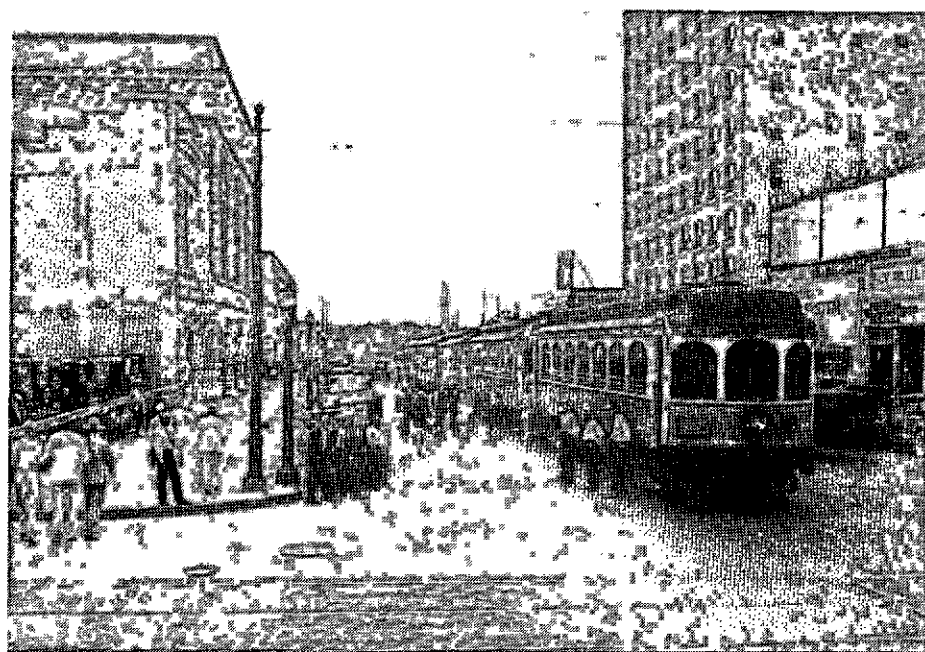
The Main Street Viaduct, constructed in 1913, was a major civic improvement of its era. The Houston Electric Company paid 20 percent of the construction bill so that it could provide better streetcar service to the Fifth Ward.



Houston Heights was a true "streetcar suburb." Two cars can be seen on Heights Boulevard in this early 1890s view.



Car 102, built in 1905, is typical of the larger streetcars that served on the Houston Heights route after the suburb became firmly established.



The Galveston-Houston Electric Railway operated interurban trains between its namesake cities from 1911 to 1936, and in the process helped create outlying suburbs such as Park Place and South Houston. Service to Park Place continued under Houston Electric Company management until 1940.

More than A Hundred Homes—

There have been built in Woodland Heights alone, more than a hundred new homes since the Watson Street Car Line was built into that section a little less than a year ago.

Homes for the family of moderate means have been provided in this section, where land may be purchased much cheaper than in the congested downtown districts.

This growth is coincident with that of several other outlying sections of the city that are served by street cars.

Street Cars Promote the Growth of Houston

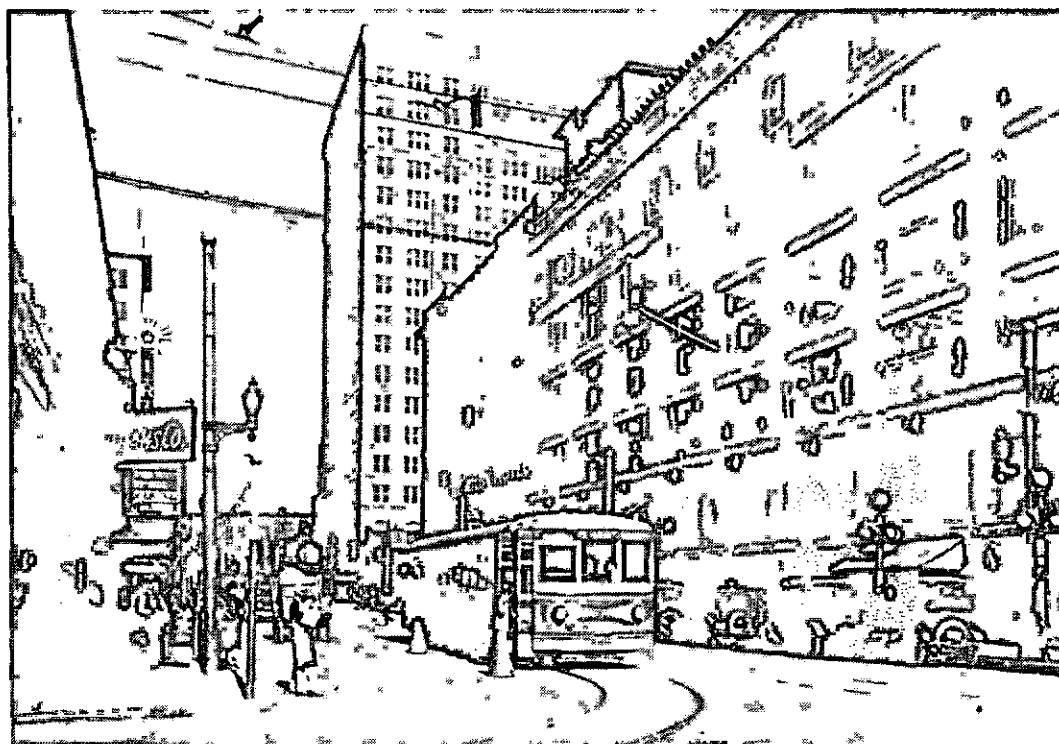
New homes never fail to follow where transportation facilities are provided with consequent increase in property values. The street car makes it possible for people to live out where the air is pure and clean and still be at his or her place of business promptly without delay.

Houston Electric Co.

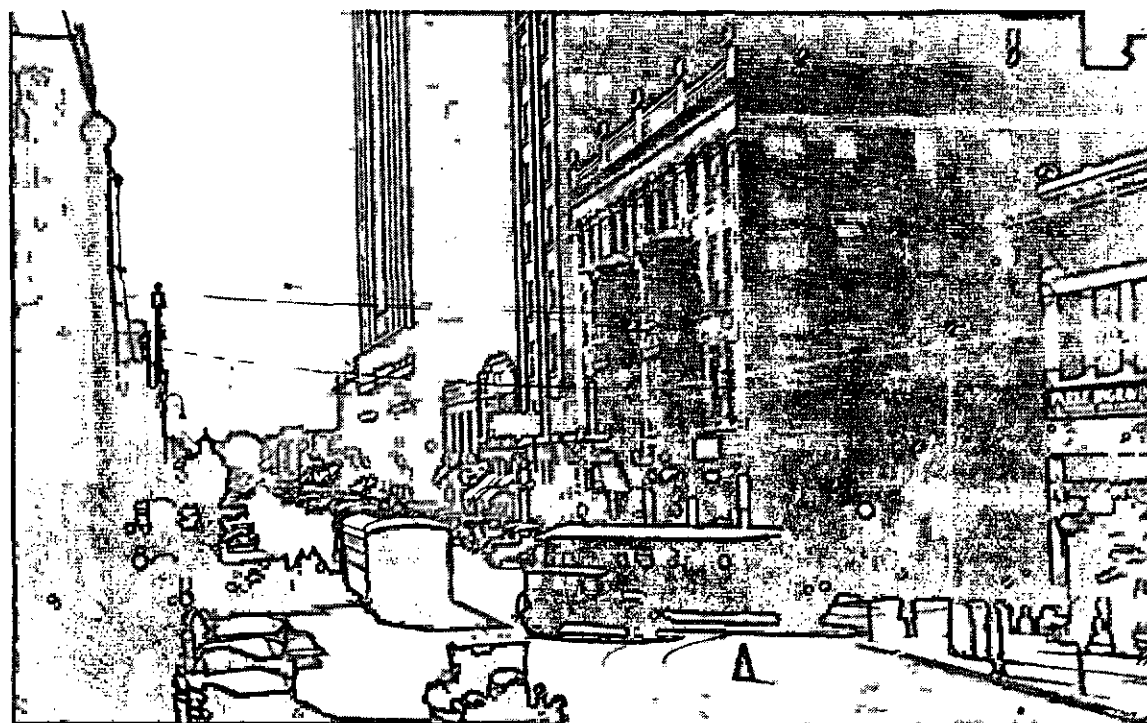
W. E. WOOD, Manager



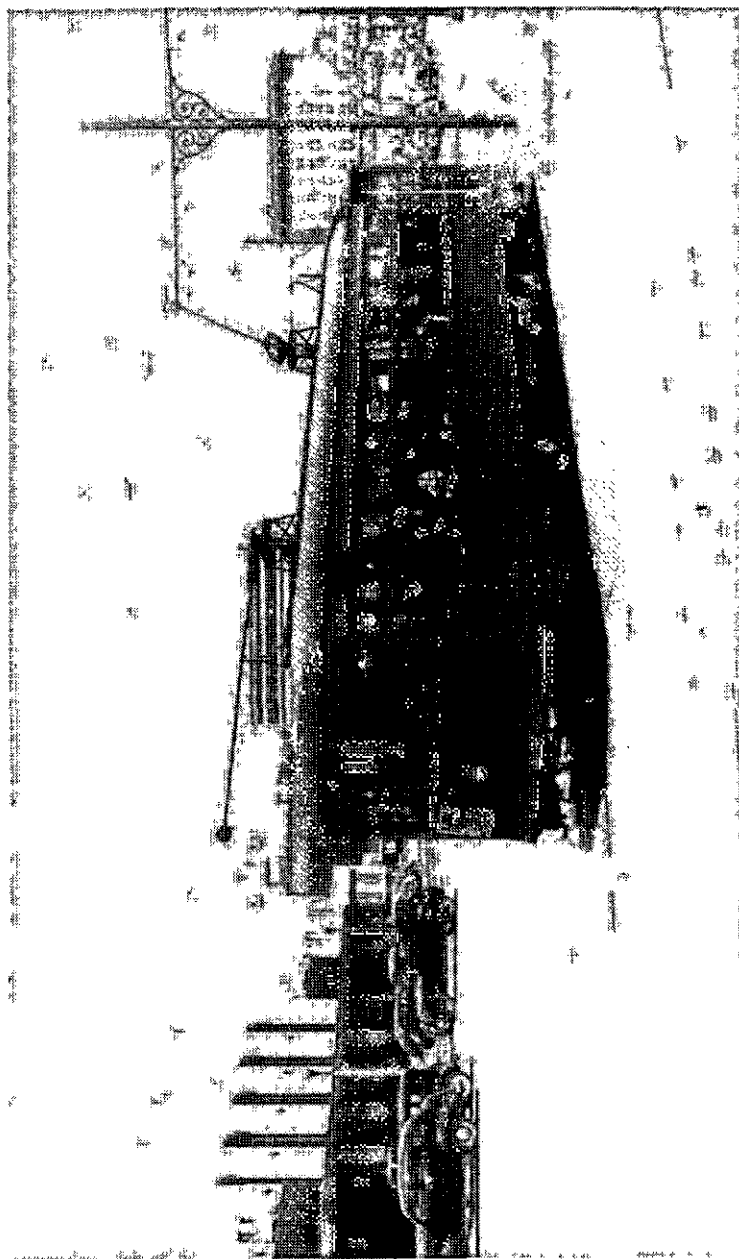
Advertisement in the *Houston Post*, January 8, 1924.



This late 1920s view shows one of Houston's most modern streetcars pausing for passengers on Travis Street. Iron traffic cones marked boarding places in the downtown district. The Rice Hotel is in the background. Courtesy W. C. Janssen/Steven M. Baron.



Buses began sharing the streets with trolleys in 1924. The newly erected Niels Esperson Building is a commanding presence in this circa-1928 photograph of Travis Street.



Near the end of the streetcar era in Houston, Car 404 passed by the Southern Pacific station on its way toward Houston Heights. The Central Post Office now occupies this site. Courtesy Steven M. Baron.

Jim Crow Safety

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