

Scott R. Johnson, "The Trolley Car as a Social Factor: Springfield, Massachusetts" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 1, No 2 (Fall 1972).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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The Trolley Car as a Social Factor:  
- Springfield, Massachusetts

by

Scott R. Johnson

It has often been said that the American people are constantly on the move. Ingenious entrepreneurs have emerged to meet the challenge of improving transportation in the growing and developing nation. The trolley car was a profound social and economic factor in American history from 1895 to 1930, playing a major role in the development of countless cities and towns. This paper is a study of the effect of the streetcar in Springfield, Massachusetts.

The earliest form of transportation in the United States was by horse, and then by horse-drawn carriage. As time went on and the tastes of the public grew more extravagant, the stage coach was developed for commercial uses. As cities grew, however, it became apparent that the horse ultimately had to be replaced. The first step in that direction came with the use of horses to draw cars along railroad tracks. It was a natural next step to adapt technology to the problem, by moving the cars through steam and then electric power.

The village blacksmith, Thomas Davenport, of Branden,

Vermont, has been given the credit for the invention of the modern electric railway.<sup>1</sup> He brought the idea to Springfield, and it was there that "the feasibility of electric traction was demonstrated."<sup>2</sup> A few years later, in 1881, the two inventors Siemens and Halske exhibited at the Paris Exposition an electric car which operated on an overhead trolley system.<sup>3</sup> In less than a decade, these experiments were put into operation in American cities.<sup>4</sup>

There were certain advantages to riding the trolleys such as the fact that it was relatively inexpensive to operate, so inexpensive that the fare was a mere five cents. It became possible for many people to live in one part of the town and work in another. In addition, it had commercial uses. Farmers, for instance, shipped their produce by trolley to the city, and

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<sup>1</sup>Thorburn Reid, "Some Early Traction History," Cassiers Magazine, XVI (August, 1899), 357.

<sup>2</sup>Harold A. Wright, The Story of Western Massachusetts (New York, 1949), p. 561.

<sup>3</sup>J. G. White, "Overhead Construction," Cassiers Magazine, XVI (August, 1899), 320.

<sup>4</sup>"The Problem of the Trolley," The Independent, August 22, 1907, p. 467.

manufactured items were transported by trolley to rural areas. "The country trolley," one observer exclaimed, "has placed the farmer in immediate and continuous touch with the terminal town."<sup>5</sup> As a result, the farmer became more familiar with city life. "Trolleys were a pleasant way by which to explore unknown parts of a city—they were leisurely, cheap and afforded a fine car-window view of the neighborhoods through which they passed."<sup>6</sup>

The street car had an important effect upon the spread of urbanization, although urbanization determined the location of trolley lines. "The towns served by street railways in 1890 were in general, close to centers of population and the street railways probably accelerated a growth which was, in any case, inevitable."<sup>7</sup> The trolley lines were established where the people were living, and new urban development accompanied the construction of street car lines away from the central city. People tended to move where there was enough land and open spaces to raise a family away from the bustle of city life, yet near enough to the city to commute. Trolley development led to land-

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<sup>5</sup>Karl Edwin Harriman, "The Trolley Car as a Social Factor," World To-Day, X (August, 1897), 137.

<sup>6</sup>Frank Rowsome, Jr., Trolley Car Treasury (New York, 1956), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup>Edward S. Mason, The Street Car Railway in Massachusetts (Cambridge, 1932), p. 198.

booms in the outlying districts, as a great many citizens followed the trolley lines into the suburbs. In 1906 it was reported that "suburban land has gone up in value along practically all the lines, and hundreds of men doing business in the city have moved out to suburban farms or residence within convenient distance of the city."<sup>8</sup> This flight from the central city did not include many members of the working classes. "Street railway managers, real estate men, politicians, philanthropists, health officers, school teachers, and the middle class generally shared the attitude that open country surroundings and the small community were beneficent settings for family life."<sup>9</sup> The deterioration of old neighborhoods, the filth of the factories and the shops, and the crowding of the tenement areas coupled with the influx of immigrants to drive the middle classes to the suburbs.<sup>10</sup> The streetcar lines, then, encouraged class segregation; the wealthy and middle classes had the money to move to the suburbs, and the poor had to remain in the inner city.

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<sup>8</sup>"Interurban Electric Railway in Ohio," Journal of Political Economy, IV (December, 1906), 596.

<sup>9</sup>Samuel Bass Warner, Jr., Street Car Suburbs (Cambridge, 1962), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup>ibid., p. 33.

As the affluent escaped to the suburbs, they settled in patterns based on what geographers call the "sector theory" of urban structure. This is the idea that development spreads outward in long narrow bands from a central core; settlement along lines of transportation resembled beads on a string.<sup>11</sup> That was precisely the type of settlement which resulted from the introduction of the electric trolley.

Aside from allowing the middle classes to populate the suburbs, the trolley had many other benefits. As it provided cheap and easy transportation to the centers of learning, many new schools and more teachers were required in the city. To some extent the establishment of reliable service led to a transformation of family life on the farm. Children could now work on the farms in the morning before school, take the trolley to the city, and return home after school. Anyone living within six miles of a town or city could be close enough to take advantage of the educational opportunities of that town.<sup>12</sup>

Trolleys also provided a great impetus to the growth of business. By providing low cost, efficient transportation, the railway companies helped supply labor to the factory by transporting workers from the farm to the city, where they were needed. At the same time, the trolleys enabled rural folk to

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<sup>11</sup>James H. Johnson, Urban Geography (London, 1967), p. 166.

<sup>12</sup>Warner, Street Car Suburbs, p. 22.

shop in the cities, adding to the potential customers of every business in the region.

Springfield provides an interesting case study of the role of the trolley car in the process of urbanization. In 1889 the city's first trolley system was under construction, and trolley service was inaugurated on June 6, 1890 when four cars became operational. In the same month, the fare was reduced from the six cents previously charged on the horse drawn lines to the universal fare of five cents on the trolley.<sup>13</sup>

Actually, the trolley car was an outgrowth of a pre-existing system of mass transportation which had become inadequate to the increasing needs of the city. In 1863 the legislature chartered the Springfield Horse Railroad Company with authority to "construct and operate a horse railroad with single and double track from such points on Main Street as the City Council might determine, reserving to the City the privilege to purchase the road after the expiration of ten years."<sup>14</sup> Five years later the City Council established the Springfield Street Railway with headquarters at Main and Hooker Streets. The first line in

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<sup>13</sup>Wright, Story of Western Massachusetts, p. 568.

<sup>14</sup>Alfred M. Copeland, A History of Hampden County (Springfield, 1902), p. 249.

operation was the State Street line. "This first route extended from the stables at Hooker and Chicopee Streets, south along Chicopee and Main Streets, and up State to Oak Street, a distance of just 2.71 miles."<sup>15</sup> By 1888 additional lines provided service to West Springfield, and then to Chicopee four years later.

Springfield was one of the first cities to take advantage of technological advances in the transportation industry. "Electrification of the various lines was rapidly effected, until January 9, 1893, when the last Springfield Street Railway horse car rattled over the long familiar route from Main and Bridge Streets over the old Toll Bridge [Memorial Bridge] to West Springfield."<sup>16</sup>

Once the success of trolley cars had been demonstrated, the existing lines expanded and new ones were established. "In 1892 a line was extended to Indian Orchard; in 1895 to connect with Holyoke lines. . . . The Agawam line was completed in 1900."<sup>17</sup> By 1905 Springfield had 94 miles of track, more than New York

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<sup>15</sup>Donald E. Shaw, Notes on Local Transportation in Western Massachusetts, unpublished ms. In Local History room, Springfield Public Library, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup>ibid., p. 68.

<sup>17</sup>Rev. John H. Lockwood, Western Massachusetts, A History (New York, 1926), p. 889.



City at the time. By connecting with Indian Orchard, a section of Springfield, it was hoped that residents of Chicopee would soon join the large trolley system that was snaking through New England. The line that was built between Holyoke and Springfield was developed to expedite the handling of paper products produced in Holyoke and shipped to Springfield for distribution. "When the Springfield and Holyoke trolley systems were joined together at Riley Brook [Holyoke-West Springfield line] in July, 1895, the first interurban line in the western counties was born."<sup>18</sup>

In 1901, a line was laid parallel to the existing line between Holyoke and Springfield, for the transportation of mail and newspapers. While mail was on the way to its final destination, it could be sorted, postmarked and bagged. As a result, it was possible to mail a letter in Springfield in the morning and have someone receive it in Holyoke the same afternoon. Later, the success of this mail route spawned a line between Springfield and Greenfield that was called the "Green and Spring" line.<sup>19</sup>

Not to be outdone, the Westfield Street Railway Company tried to connect with the existing lines. In order to operate at

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<sup>18</sup>Wright, Story of Western Massachusetts, p. 576.

<sup>19</sup>Shaw, Notes on Local Transportation, p. 119.

a profit, the company was reorganized into a new firm, the Western Massachusetts Contracting Company. Owned by R. D. Gillett and managed by R. D. Robinson of Westfield, the company secured the contract to construct trolley lines from Huntington to Lee.<sup>20</sup> Construction began on December 13, 1913 in Huntington, where it was connected to the existing Westfield line. During the building of this line nearly one thousand Italian and Polish immigrants were employed.<sup>21</sup>

On Sundays and holidays, when the businesses were closed, the trolleys provided a social service to the community. They transported people to the most popular picnic and recreation areas available. A great many citizens took the trolley to clambakes at Riverside Park in Agawam or to the Methodist meeting center at Laurel Park in Hatfield.<sup>22</sup> Those who could not devote an entire day did what they could in Forest Park. The more daring would venture as far as Juniper Park in Westfield.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Stephen J. Pitoniak, Western Massachusetts History (Westfield, 1970), p. 70.

<sup>21</sup>ibid., p. 71.

<sup>22</sup>ibid., p. 125.

<sup>23</sup>George S. Graves, Springfield, Massachusetts Illustrated (Springfield, 1911), p. 12

Many of the county fairs also saw a great increase in attendance, with the Eastern States Exposition in Springfield providing the "heaviest concentrated traffic volume." During the 1920 Exposition for instance, the Springfield Street Railway carried 130,906 "revenue" and 43,990 "transfer passengers" to and from the Exposition grounds.<sup>24</sup> Many of those who took these trips were from a newly developing section of the city of Springfield, Forest Park.

Forest Park was given to Springfield by its owner, Everett Barney, who had introduced canoeing to America and who was a world famous manufacturer of ice skates. As the horse car had built up the McKnight area of the city, the trolley was to build up the Forest Park area.<sup>25</sup> The following table shows how the population increased and decreased during the period that the trolley lines came through the Forest Park area.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Shaw, Notes on Local Transportation, p. 126.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>26</sup>Figures taken from the Census of the United States, Population; 1890, vol. 1, p. 180; 1900, vol 1, p. 199; 1910, vol 1, p. 859; 1920, vol 1, p. 231; 1930, vol 1, p. 508.

Year	Raw Figures	Increase or Decrease	Percent Change
1890	2,476		
1900	10,161	+7685	+310%
1910	15,724	+5563	+ 55%
1920	22,709	+6985	+ 44%
1930	13,659	-9050	- 40%

The largest increase in population during the era of the trolley car occurred between 1890 and 1900, precisely the time when the trolley lines were extended into the region. It was in 1893 that electric traction came to the section.<sup>27</sup> "The construction of Springfield's first electric car line," one historian declared, "had been intended to provide convenient transportation to Forest Park, destined in future years to become one of the most beautiful parks in the country."<sup>28</sup> A great many people moved to the area, where they could live in a rural setting and still be close enough to work in the city. The success of the street car line in Forest Park led to the addition of other lines.

During the 1920's, the Forest Park section showed a forty percent decrease in population. One explanation is that in the

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<sup>27</sup>Shaw, Notes on Local Transportation, p. 83.

<sup>28</sup>Wright, Story of Western Massachusetts, p. 668.

middle of the decade of the twenties, a "Florida movement" developed. The residents of the area were mostly middle aged and fairly affluent, thus able to move to Florida when that state became a retirement attraction.<sup>29</sup> Also, the widespread use of the automobile during that decade provided easy and quick transportation to areas not yet served by the trolley lines, causing a population movement to the more outlying suburbs, Longmeadow, East Longmeadow, Wilbraham and Ludlow.

The heyday of the trolley was soon to pass. It was pushed aside for the more mobile and private means of transit provided by trucks and the automobile.<sup>30</sup> Some tears were shed when the last of the trolley lines disappeared. The last few cars in Springfield ran on the Dickinson Street line, the Belmont Avenue line, and the Sumner Avenue line, all major streets in the Forest Park section. The last run occurred on June 23, 1940.<sup>31</sup> An era had clearly ended!

As indicated, the period from 1890 to 1940 saw a great deal of urbanization in the Springfield area, much of it

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<sup>29</sup>Interview with John R. Jardine, lifetime resident of Springfield, April 28, 1972, age 68.

<sup>30</sup>Charles J. Finger, "The Passing of the Interurban," New Republic, August 20, 1919, p. 92.

<sup>31</sup>Shaw, Notes on Local Transportation, p. 192.

directly related to transportation developments. The migration of the population to developing suburbs began with the trolley, and continued with the development and use of the "horseless carriage." There was an immense building boom effecting contractors and real estate speculators as each phase of transportation developed. Sam Bass Warner, the historian of the "streetcar suburbs" noted that "the growth of the transportation system influenced not only the kinds of houses built, but also their placement."<sup>32</sup> This was also true of the Springfield experience. For instance, the large rambling homes of the Forest Park area were constructed to accomodate the middle and upper classes who were seeking to escape from the bustling city to the rustic elegance of the section.

The trolley was a profound social and economic factor in the period from 1890 to 1930, helping to improve the standard of living, promoting educational opportunity, and providing access to recreation that previously had been missing in the burgeoning city.

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<sup>32</sup>Warner, Street Car Suburbs, p. 58.