The Rise of Modern Richmond and the Fall of Electric Transit

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The Rise of Modern Richmond and the Fall of Electric Transit

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of History

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Master of Arts

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Approved by the Committee, December, 2008

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This thesis seeks to understand why Richmond, Virginia’s electric streetcar system, which was the first electric streetcar system in the world when it started in 1888, spent so many of its earliest years in bankruptcy and why it remained a bad investment even as it profoundly transformed the city. This thesis argues that the profound separation between ownership and management, with New York City bankers funding companies run by Richmond managers, led locals to operate the electric railways with their own interests, rather than those of the distant shareholders, in mind. Owners of local real estate sat on the electric railway boards and overbuilt lines to increase the value of their newly subdivided suburban property, and they overbuilt amusement parks to increase property values rather than railway receipts. The perceived foreignness of the owners also subjected the electric railway companies to political attacks and unprofitable demands, such as the demand for racial segregation on the streetcars, that hurt profits and ultimately undermined the companies.

These local real estate interests and politicians succeeded in transforming Richmond. By the 1920s, the city was ringed by amusement parks and new suburbs, even as it increasingly segregated blacks in an inner city surrounding a newly resurgent downtown. Yet this transformation of the city was ultimately built on the street railways’ bankruptcies, and would not have been possible without the misuse of public transit funding.
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I dedicate this thesis to two Wiedemans. One who put me up and one who put up with me.
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Before all else, I would like to thank my parents, without whose continual support and understanding, not just over the past year but over many years, this would have been impossible. I will never be able to truly express my gratitude to them. I would also like to thank my thesis advisor Scott Nelson, who inspired me to pursue my interest in history and has helped nurture and support that interest every subsequent step of the way. Many thanks are also due to Carol Sheriff and Philip Daileader, whose comments and suggestions have improved and shaped this thesis.

As with many historical works, a good deal of the credit for this one goes to the archivists who have pointed me towards numerous illuminating sources, and who have, almost universally, been incredibly helpful. The archivists at the Library of Virginia, the Valentine Richmond History Center, the Virginia Historical Society, and the Richmond Public Library have all played a part in finishing this thesis.

And finally, I would like to thank my classmates from the past year. They made the year enjoyable, and I will miss them.
America’s first electric streetcar was born prematurely. In May 1887 Frank Julian Sprague, the pioneering inventor and erstwhile Edison assistant, agreed to a deal he believed “in the knave or fool class.” He signed a contract with New York investor Maurice B. Flynn to complete a Richmond streetcar line “having about twelve miles of track...a complete steam and electric central-station plant...and the furnishing of 40 cars,” all with motors using his still untested system of electrical propulsion, and all within the impossible timeframe of 90 days.¹ He did not come close. An early test car jumped the tracks in November and crashed into the marble pillar of the St. James Hotel, another had to be pushed by hand up Seventh Street Hill.² By the end of January newspapers were still reporting that “no passengers are yet taken,” even though “the conductors will be glad to welcome the public.”³ All forty cars were not in place until almost a year after the contract was signed, and Sprague lost over $75,000 on his “fool class” deal.⁴

Engineering problems were not the only obstacle the new electric line faced. The Richmond Union Passenger Railway’s New York investors had the ninety day time limit foisted upon them (after which they foisted it upon Sprague) because the Workingmen’s Reform Party in control of the city council hoped that the line could

² *Richmond Dispatch*, August 8, 1887, January 10, 1888.
³ *Richmond Dispatch*, January 31, 1888. Due to the systems’ numerous false starts, many secondary sources present conflicting claims for the date of “the first electric streetcar.” It seems that January 9, 1888 was the date of the first paying customer, but regular service did not start until February 3, 1888, and the entire contracted system was not completed until May 4, 1888. See *Richmond Dispatch*, and Herbert Tobias Ezekiel, *The Recollections of a Virginia Newspaperman* (Richmond: Herbert T. Ezekiel Printer, 1921), 13.
be completed before the next municipal election in November.\(^5\) The same party also demanded a line into the unprofitable Jackson Ward district with the hope of securing the “Negro vote” in that election.\(^6\) Suspiciously, John E. Parrish, who submitted the franchise to the city council for consideration, lived only a block from the newly proposed line, the most favored position for a potential streetcar rider.\(^7\) Local real estate interests, which controlled the management of the company, also pushed it into what were certainly less than ideal routes. J. Thompson Brown was elected president of the line by the New York stockholders, but he would use that position to become the most successful real estate agent in Richmond. During his presidency, Brown held a “Grand Auction Sale of Fifty First Class Western Lots…entirely surrounded by the largest public improvements in the city, such as the City and Electric street-car lines.”\(^8\) The sale made the front page of the paper and helped establish the far West End as the fastest growing area of the city, its first “streetcar suburb.”\(^9\) Shortly afterwards though, Brown resigned the presidency, possibly forced out by the company’s New York investors, stating that “other business engagements occupy his

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\(^6\) W. Earl Long, “Dawn of the Electric Streetcar Era,” 7, Folder: Transportation – Land – Streetcars. Valentine Richmond History Center Archives. The story given to the newspapers, however, was that the Jackson Ward extension “was first contemplated by J. Thompson Brown, now president of the company, who, together with the other Richmond directors, associated with them some railroad experts from the North, and after the field was carefully scanned, they found that other extensions of this road not only be made with profit to its projectors, but to the comfort and advantage of the citizens.” Richmond Dispatch, August 5, 1887.


\(^8\) Richmond Dispatch, June 6, 1888.

\(^9\) Richmond Dispatch, June 13, 1888. Within the first year Thompson advertised and sold a myriad of properties near his new line, often explicitly emphasizing his connection to the streetcar company in his ads. One example was a J. Thompson Brown advertisement for a “Beautiful Suburban cottage, corner of Main and Meadow streets, only three blocks from terminal of the old horse line and his new electric line.” Richmond Dispatch, April 3, 1888. [Emphasis added.]
time exclusively."\textsuperscript{10} Other competing interests hurt the line’s profitability. At the end of the 1889 the company’s new general manager, Andrew Pizzini, claimed that the company’s principle New York investor, Maurice Flynn, who was also president of a prominent New York bank, was “more interested in the Sprague Motor Company” than Richmond’s streetcars, and he went to New York and “struck him a blow in the face,” knocking him out in the lobby of the Commercial Hotel. It was the “talk of the town.”\textsuperscript{11} The world’s first electric line was soon proclaimed “a failure.” It defaulted on its debt and went into a factious receivership.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Richmond Dispatch}, June 14, 1888.
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{New York Times}, October 6, 1889. Pizzini himself already had myriad of conflicting interests. He was a prominent city councilman, as well as the former president of the local electric plant, the Virginia Underground Electrical Conduit Company, and the competing horse-car line, which was bought up by Maurice Flynn as well. Pizzini even previously submitted a bill in the city council which attempted to prevent the Richmond Union Passenger Railway from using its own electricity to light its cars, presumably so his electric company would get the contract. \textit{Richmond Dispatch}, June 1, 1887, Feb. 3, 1888; VEPCO, “A Half Century of Progress - A picture history of the Virginia Electric and Power Company 1909-1959,” Library of Virginia Archives.
Although streetcars quickly established themselves as a vital part of Richmond’s urban fabric, the earliest line floundered on account of a multitude of unreasonable hopes and demands. The lofty dreams of political success and corporate dividends it inspired were ultimately built on the slender reed of a simple public utility. In one sense the earliest line did succeed in transforming Richmond: it spurred the development of the West End suburbs, it built a line into the emergent black district of Jackson Ward (long after the Workingmen’s Reform Party had lost the municipal election), and it even assisted in the development of a new park at the site of the New Reservoir which opened new avenues for leisure. Yet the company itself broke under the strain of this transformation. This story would be repeated again and again during the short history of Richmond streetcars. In Richmond,

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13 Richmond Dispatch, July 9, 1887.
streetcar companies were political orphans. Owned by Northerners, they were easy prey for local politicians and local directors who often did not have the companies’ best interests at heart. Public animosity against the companies made them yet easier targets. One Richmond paper excoriated the streetcar concerns for their lack of service and claimed ominously that “Vengeance will demand punishment.” It often did, and punishment came in the form of demands the streetcar companies could not fulfill. Long before the automobile came and swept away any lingering potential for survival, the byzantine series of intersecting local interests that dominated the companies, the foremost of which was real estate, combined with politicians who were responding to various public demands succeeded in destroying the very companies that allowed the transformation of the city. The streetcars helped create a Richmond characterized by distant amusement parks, far-flung suburbs, increased racial segregation, and a downtown focused singularly on business; a new kind of city. But this city was built on a series of successive transit company bankruptcies. It set a legacy for the misuse of Richmond’s public transportation that would last at least into the next century.

Those politicians and promoters who used and abused the streetcar companies could only do so because the streetcar once inspired such fervid dreams on the part of a wide variety of citizens. In contrast to most new products of that or any era, the streetcar offered the promise of a genuine social revolution: a cleaner and more democratic city, freedom and mobility, and the already emergent American dream of

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14 John S. Williams Scrapbook, Virginia Historical Society Archives. This scrapbook is signed April 1900, and contains Richmond newspaper clippings which mainly cover the next ten years of the city’s history.
a home for every man and woman. These hopes, whose lineaments were first
glimpsed in Richmond, would reverberate throughout the country.

Within a few years even engineers looked up from their slide rules to consider
the profound ramifications of their invention. T.C. Martin gave a speech before the
New York Electrical Society in 1890 entitled “The Social Side of the Electric
Railway,” where he proclaimed that “there can be no doubt that electricity is a direct
boon to the urban population that clings to the city [and] loves city life.”15 The urban
reformer Frederick Howe thought that street-cars, ideally run by the city itself, could
restore that “sense of intimacy with the city that we most lack in America,”
something that “can only come through constant physical touch with the
community.”16 Delos Wilcox, a streetcar reformer, said that “the streetcar is a
democratic vehicle. In it all classes and conditions of people ride together…”17 The
pioneering “race” journalist Ray Stannard Baker even praised the new technology in
the same spirit: “The street car is an excellent place for observing the points of human
contact between the races…In almost no other relationship do the races come
together, physically, on anything like a common footing. In their homes and in
ordinary employment they meet as master and servant; but in the street cars they
touch as free citizens.”18

Others were considerably more alarmed by those same possibilities and that
same intimate and physical touch. One Richmond memoirist discussed the shocking

15 T.C. Martin, “The Social Side of the Electric Railway” (Paper presented before the New York
Electric Society, New York, April 1890), 6.
17 Paul Barrett, The Automobile and Urban Transit: the formation of public policy in Chicago, 1900-
18 Roy Stannard Baker, Following the Color Line: An Account of Negro Citizenship in the American
co-mingling of a streetcar: “I have seen in a Southern street car all blacks sitting and all whites standing; have seen a big black woman enter a car and flounce herself down almost in the lap of a white man.” Of course she claimed that, the Southerners’ “interest and affection for the Negro made these manners more obnoxious.”

These conflicting hopes and fears all helped shape the city of Richmond, and, along with the real estate promoters and politicians who aimed to satisfy them, they imposed impossible demands on the agent of that change.

PAST STUDIES

Sam Bass Warner’s book *Streetcar Suburbs: The Progress of Growth in Boston 1870-1900*, written in 1962, inaugurated the study of urban transit’s impact on urban form. This work analyzed the expansion of Boston through the horse car and (briefly) electric car eras and discovered that fin-de-siecle Boston neighborhoods spontaneously segregated by use, class, and race without the imposition of zoning or regulation. The streetcar afforded different land uses, be they Italian residential districts or manufactories or aristocratic enclaves, the opportunity to form their own

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19 Myrta Avary. *Dixie After the War: An Exposition of Social Conditions Existing in the South During the Twelve Years Succeeding the Fall of Richmond* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906), 194. (Although there is some discussion of the book of events up to the “present day,” this description may well be of an older horse-car. Due to the high cost and low-speed, however, the experience of such co-mingling would have been rarer than in the electric era.)

districts within the city. The reasons and impetus for the streetcar expansion, however, were not discussed, and the machinations of such infamous streetcar and real estate promoters as Henry M. Whitney remained largely unexplored. The streetcar lines were depicted as growing naturally, like roots almost, penetrating and sustaining the self-segregating suburbs around old Boston.21

Clay McShane’s *Technology and Reform: Street Railways and the Growth of Milwaukee, 1887-1900* opened with a tribute to Warner’s “fine book,” but focused more on the streetcar companies themselves, and on the seemingly omnipotent promoter and real estate man Henry Clay Payne. McShane laid the blame for the eventual downfall of these companies at the feet of Payne and claimed “the failure of the street railway industry was primarily one of obsolescence compounded by [poor] management.” Although McShane’s understanding of street railway failure would quickly become the conventional wisdom, it appears odd today that such a revolutionary technology seemed to obsolesce so quickly and to attract, universally, such supposedly atrocious management.22 In fact, Milwaukee’s largest electric street railway company already had gone bankrupt by 1895, just a few years after opening, and two subsidiary ones went bankrupt in the early 90s and in 1896, long before “obsolescence” had caught up with the industry. And the managers themselves seem,

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22 Clay McShane, *Technology and Reform: Street Railways and the Growth of Milwaukee, 1887-1900* (Madison, W.I.: University of Wisconsin, 1975), 39. For instance, McShane thought that an 1895 bankruptcy was a scam to reorganize the city’s largest company, since it completed an extension to a wealthy suburb while in receivership. He seemed surprised that it could create the extension merely to compete with another real estate syndicate threatening to create their own streetcar lines. McShane, *Technology and Reform*, 104, 96, 112. These actions seem more explicable when real estate promoters are put at the heart of streetcar management.
in retrospect, to have done fairly well for themselves, if not for their streetcar companies.\(^\text{23}\)

In 1982 Robert Carson asked *What ever Happened to the Trolley?* and answered that “even before the auto and bus destroyed street railroads, they had a common habit of falling into bankruptcy due to their excessive capitalization.” This approached nearer to heart of early street railway problems, but misidentified the kind of and reasons for “overcapitalization.”\(^\text{24}\) Like McShane and other commentators, Carson blamed *financial* overcapitalization, the now antiquated notion of “stock watering,” meaning the selling of stock for less than its printed “par value.” He typically ignored physical overexpansion and the reasons for such, even though one of the first railway lines in his studied Syracuse was built out to a real estate project and went bankrupt three times in almost as many years.\(^\text{25}\)

Some research efforts used a wider lens. Charles Cheape, in his monumental study of the New York, Philadelphia, and Boston streetcar systems, *Moving the Masses*, portrayed the streetcar industry as following the typical arc of competitive chaos followed by rationalization and then consolidation, yet he ended his story before the industry suffers its inevitable decline.\(^\text{26}\) He credits Alfred Chandler’s work on the *Visible Hand* with inspiring his research. Paul Barrett’s *The Automobile and Urban Transit* took the well-worn story of automotive triumph and expanded it by

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demonstrating the different legal statuses of the two modes of transit, and why ingrained preconceptions allowed the auto to bury its competition.27

Other studies of urban form in the era pointed to reasons besides electric transit for the creation of the distinctive Progressive Era city. Thomas W. Hanchett’s *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975*, discussed the racial and economic “sorting” that rearranged a previously homogenous Charlotte after the political disturbances of the 1890s. In Hanchett’s telling, streetcars themselves did not cause segregation by building type, and residents only became more isolated, culturally and physically, from one another due to rising tensions in the *fin-de-siècle* South.28 Kenneth Jackson’s seminal work *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, found the roots of suburbanization in the early nineteenth century ideology of hearth and home, and saw technology as a means to fulfill that end.29

And despite Richmond’s fame as the putative originator of the electric streetcar, most studies of the city’s development in that era have focused on other factors. Steven J. Hoffman’s dissertation *Behind the Façade: The constraining influence of*

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27 Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban*.
29 Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Jackson spends more time focusing on the effect of the trolley than any other technology save the automobile yet he sees the trolley as “tying the city together,” unlike this analysis which sees it as driving the city further apart. This is perhaps because Jackson focused on Northern cities which did not have to deal as much with the overwhelming influence of race. Almost none had double-digit percentages of African-Americans before the First World War, while Richmond was 40% black at the beginning of the trolley era in 1890. Steven J. Hoffman, “Progressive Public Health Administration in the Jim Crow South: A Case Study of Richmond, Virginia, 1907-1920,” *Journal of Social History* (Fall 2001): 18.
race, class and power on elites in the city-building process, Richmond, Virginia, 1870-1920, focused on the efforts of the chamber of commerce to connect Richmond to a larger world through positive publicity and the lobbying for federal funding of such mega-projects as the James and Kanawha Canal. Richmond's streetcars found their chronicler in Carlton Norris McKenney, an electric engineer who focused on the technical aspects behind Richmond's streetcars in *Richmond on Rails*. McKenney also exhaustively compiled information on the routes and organizational charts of Richmond's byzantine electric railway industry. His work was a useful reference for this study.  

Previous studies have focused on either the effects of the streetcar on urban form or on those companies which operated the streetcars, giving a myriad of reasons for their rise and eventual fall. In contrast, this study aims to examine the intersection of the social transformation of city with the politics and profits of the owners of the streetcar companies, and explain why the dramatic changes wrought by the streetcar were ultimately tied to its failure.

**END OF THE LINE: RICHMOND'S DISTANT AMUSEMENTS**

Looking back from the 1970s, a nonagenarian Richmond socialite named John A. Cutchins remembered fondly the coming of the electric streetcar. "Perhaps no event in our earliest years was so important as the coming of the streetcar... it

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31 Carlton McKenney, *Rails in Richmond* (Glendale, C.A.: Interurban Press, 1986). This study would have been immensely more helpful if it contained footnotes or citations. He also seems to have confused a few dates.
brought about changes in social customs and daily living as striking as did the automobile a few years later.” He did not, however, begin his discussion by relating the suddenly ubiquitous wires or the streetcars’ speed or the growth of the western residential areas, but by discussing the new opportunities for entertainment. “The open cars, in summer afforded opportunities to take one’s best girl on car rides to the Old Reservoir, Forest Hill Park and other outlying districts.” He admitted that “from a more material standpoint it brought about the development of the suburbs,” but his memory focused instead on the “great day for boys when the streetcar made possible the discovery of hitherto unknown lands on the outskirts of the city.”

Before the electric streetcar recreation was a much less commercial and much more pedestrian affair. An 1870 guidebook to Richmond, appropriately titled “Walks about Richmond,” demonstrated the recreations common at the time. In this book, “Frank,” a shockingly inquisitive child, takes several walks around town guided by his well-informed relatives. On each trip only a select few sites of interest are pointed out before the company turns around and returns home. On one of these trips, Frank becomes tired of the perpetual perambulation and tells his garrulous uncle, “I would advise any one going to walk with you to ride.” But to ride at that time meant to take a horse, and the emphasis given shows it was rarely a plausible option. When Frank and his cousin Virginia took a break after Sunday school they “walked out to one of the flower gardens at the upper end of the street on which they lived,” then

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33 C. McCarthy, *Walks about Richmond* (Richmond: McCarthy & Ellyson 1870), 77.
came back quickly for tea. This was typical for the time. Recreational destinations were still easily accessible and often on the very same street. For many kids the recreation was the street itself.

Yet during Frank’s tours another, more street-savvy, child, Ned, introduces him to a new technology. After becoming bored at the Old Market they “decided to take the next horse-car, and ride out to the ‘Reservoir.’” Ned, comfortable with this new device, “stopped the car, they jumped in, and, in fifteen minutes, alighted at the terminus of the road, and within a stone’s throw of the entrance to the enclosure of the Reservoir.” But this terminus was not a place of mass amusement. “Ned hammered away at the gate with his fists until the watchmen opened it, and enquired into his business.” After the pitifully lonely watchman gave them an extensive tour of the premises, they walked home. The horse-car was at best an occasional conveyance, allowing ease of transportation, not a change of routes or destinations. Its slow and expensive meanderings catered to few passengers, especially in hilly Richmond, and it did not open up places like the Reservoir to the masses.

Robert Beverley Munford, a memoirist and local historian, also remembered the character of pre-street-car amusements. “Our Sunday afternoon routine, after all religious duties had been duly performed, generally included a long walk.” His and his friends’ favorite destination was Belle Isle, “where we were offered the pleasure of looking over the Old Dominion Iron and Nail Works.” On the way there they dodged local children’s street-gangs, famed for their “prowess...in many rock

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34 McCarthy, Walks, 99.
35 McCarthy, Walks, 104-105.
36 Robert Beverley Munford, Jr. Richmond Homes and Memories (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, Inc. 1936), 68.
battles,” and, after surveying the incontestably fascinating nail works, they walked to Reedy Creek before returning, “with weary feet,” to a family friend’s house to enjoy their hospitality.\

A later Richmond guidebook, from 1928, demonstrates the changes wrought in entertainment by the street car. It contained a wider array of choices than would have been conceivable to Cutchins, Munford, or young Frank: Maymont, Lakeside, Chimborazo, Libby Hill, Gamble’s Hill, Forest Hill, the Jefferson, Monroe Park, and William Byrd Park were all listed as options for the discerning traveler. The guidebook did not organize them according to a fictional perambulation around the city, with sites arranged in order of proximity, but instead listed them categorically, showcasing parks entirely open to prospective travelers, and each was discussed in relation to trolley lines. Lakeside was “reached by trolley from First and Broad Streets...Ginter Park is on the same line.” Forest Hills Park, old site of Reedy Creek, was on “the trolley from Broad and Seventh Street.” William Byrd Park, site of the city reservoir visited by Frank, which at one point was reorganized with new rides and amusements, was “reached by Main Street and Broad and Main street cars running west,” and was still the “terminus of [those] car lines.” Throughout the guidebook no other feature of the city was so intimately and explicitly related to the streetcar as were the parks. In another guidebook, from the Chamber of Commerce,

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37 Munford, Richmond Homes, 68.
the only mention of electric cars is to suggest them as a convenient means of traveling to the parks.39

Other recreations accommodated themselves to the new rhythm of the streetcar as well. When dances for the “Richmond German” were held on Broad Street in the pre-streetcar era, “the couples came in hacks and hansom cabs” and at the end of the evening, “after the strains of Home, Sweet Home had died out” came “the search for one’s hack. The vehicles would be stretched out for blocks, and the search of the proper vehicle was quite an event in itself.”40 After streetcars had opened up room for a Country Club in the West End of Richmond, every participant traveling to his or her Saturday Night Dance “knew accurately the schedule for the Westhampton cars [where] practically all the passengers were friends.” Before the last car left the club at 11:40, though, the conductor would appear at the door of the club and announce the time for the patrons. “No matter what the orchestra was playing, it would promptly switch to Home, Sweet Home and after a few bars of that, the rush to the streetcar would begin.”41 Even formal society dinners obeyed the dictates of the streetcar schedule now.

The most curious aspect of these stories to modern readers is that the much vaunted change in commuting patterns went largely unmentioned by writers like Cutchins. While he knew and remembered the exact time for country club cars, he did not know and could not remember the schedule of the cars for the trip downtown to

39 Richmond, Virginia: Yesterday and Today (Richmond: The Municipality and Chamber of Commerce of Richmond, 1912), 34.
40 Cutchins, Memories of Old, 182.
41 Cutchins, Memories of Old, 178.
his job. He usually still walked. In the minds of the city’s citizens, suburban recreation was the preeminent purpose of the new electric street-car.

And it was not only in their minds. Originally, streetcar companies portrayed themselves predominantly as facilitators of leisure. Only months after Sprague signed the initial contract, the Richmond Times focused on the line to the New Reservoir Park, and called it “one of the greatest enterprises in the history of the city,” since it was “an opportunity at a nominal cost for our people to get needed fresh air and a little recreation. The price of a ride is so low as to place it within the reach of the humblest of our citizens.”42 Trips to work went unmentioned. The Richmond Dispatch said that one of the greatest benefits of the streetcars would be the “line to

42 Richmond Times, July 7, 1887.
the New Reservoir” which would allow outdoor recreation, and would certainly “pour money in [the company’s] pockets on summer afternoons.”

Although many aspects of the streetcars’ operation were unprofitable or excoriated by the public, its contribution to recreation was at both profitable and publicly celebrated. From the inception of the streetcar industry, investors and managers understood the benefits of recreational travel. They quickly tore through the old greensward parks and constructed the modern American “amusement park” as an inducement to riders. The first known use of the term, in fact, is in the street railway trade papers. Just three years after the first electric streetcar, they intoned that “Public Parks are coming to be recognized as valuable agencies for the promotion of traffic by managers of street-railway companies in many of our medium sized cities and villages.” These parks created a fundamentally new kind of entertainment and leisure. While old urban parks may have been on the end of a street and were always and everywhere composed of picturesque pathways and gardens, new parks were past the ends of the city and were parks in name only. Despite being further in the country than ever before, they were filled with all the amusements of the city.

Magazines like the Street Railway Review were packed with descriptions of amusement park rides and intricate disquisitions on traffic management for park

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43 Richmond Dispatch, July 30, 1887.
44 The Oxford English Dictionary cites the first use of the term “amusement park” in 1909, but earlier examples are found in the street railway literature here, at least from 1906.
45 Street Railway Review 8, No. 9 (September, 1892): 544. Most early parks were “public” in that they did not charge for general admission, but individual rides, often operated by individuals who contracted with the streetcar company, had a price.
46 The earlier 1880 Census Survey of Richmond referred to only two “principal places of amusement...the Richmond theater and Mozart hall,” and this section was notably placed after the section on “Public Parks and Pleasure Grounds.” Nobody had yet connected the terms “amusement” and “park.” Bureau of the Census, Social Statistics of Cities. The Tenth Census, 1880. (Washington, D.C., 1886), 80-88.
goers. There were articles on “The increasing popularity of roller skates” and “The Circle Swing,” and on an apparently inexplicable ride known as the “Gee-Whiz.”47 One article described “A New Attraction for Amusement Parks...the high diving horses, known as ‘King and Queen,’” who walked up the gangway of “their own accord,” and dived into a wading pool “purely for the fun of it.”48 Street railway magnates who perused these pages kept up to date on the newest designs for amusement parks like “The White City” (modeled of course after Chicago’s), and on new entertainment fads, all circulating around the burgeoning industry of the theme parks.49 In Richmond, a variety of parks sprung up around the outskirts of the city. In 1902 the Virginia Passenger & Power Company constructed a massive new amusement park, the West End Electrical Park, which featured entertainments literally undreamt of a generation before. There was a roller-coaster, a concrete-bottomed swimming pool, a batting cage with mechanically thrown pitches, and even an electrically powered shooting gallery.50 Maymont was another new kind of park, a historical one. Originally a sprawling mansion constructed by ex-Mayor, Richmond Passenger and Power Company director, and real estate promoter, James Dooley, after his death it functioned as a 100-acre museum, with tables owned Queen Victoria, a “sideboard of Jefferson,” “the Henry Clay teapot,” and “a plate used by

47 Street Railway Review 16, No. 1 (1906): 56, Street Railway Review 16, No. 3 (1906): 121-122
49 It is interesting to note here that although Daniel Burnham’s “White City,” which he dreamed as an antidote to a myriad of urban ills, could never be implemented as a reality, it continued to live on as fantasy for tourists and amusement park patrons nationwide. The Street Railway Review said “The World’s Columbian Exposition opened the eyes of the people, who since then are not content to go to parks that hold out for them no attraction other than suburban scenery and rural surroundings. The people desire to visit the more exciting amusements.” Street Railway Review 16, No. 2 (1906): 58.
50 McKenney, Rails in Richmond, 114.
Napoleon,” as well as “real Japanese” pagodas and a “five hundred varieties of shrubbery.” It was reached by the Riverview trolley and was “open to the public.”

The Richmond streetcar companies were perfectly positioned to exploit the opportunity opened by these parks; not only did they control the means to bring people to the park, but they used their own excess electricity to power the new rides. As stated in the Electric Railway Review, “It is safe to assume that without electricity the summer park as we know it, would never have been evolved or brought to its present state of development.”

There are many indications that until very late in their history recreation was the primary source of profit for streetcar companies. The peak electric loads of an anonymous electric railway company serving a “mid-sized” town studied by the Street Railway Review were not in the blistering winter from five to six, when returning clerks or factory workers might desire a break from a long walk home, but “occur during the summer season, and particularly on Sundays and holidays.” This recreational travel was even more beneficial because it helped even out the transit loads throughout the day, keeping the cars, or rolling stock, employed long past the morning and evening rush hours for workers. One consultant noted that “on any system which operates many extra cars in the afternoon rush hours there is very little reason why plenty of rolling stock cannot be available at ten or ten-thirty or whenever the park closes.” Providing for these park riders was especially profitable because “the great majority of afternoon patrons at street railway parks are women and

51 Kernodle, Guide Book, 103-104.
52 Electric Railway Review 17, No. 16 (1907): 516.
53 “The Annual Meeting of the Northwestern Electrical Association” Street Railway Review 16, No. 2 (1906): 112-113. These were also, fortunately, “the months of least activity in the lighting department.”
children, and a more moderate movement of the rolling stock was permissible than as though the facilities were demanded by men."54 Women and children were presumably less demanding then men, and therefore the companies could provide for them in a more leisurely, and lucrative, manner.

Recreational travel remained the chief source of profit for Richmond streetcar companies, and they worked diligently to encourage as much of this travel as they could. In 1897 the Richmond Baseball and Athletic Association, which played at the Broad Street Park baseball diamond, had been “a significant source of revenue” for the Broad Street Line for some time. But the competing Richmond Traction Company thought the teams’ streetcar receipts valuable enough that they built their own West End Park baseball diamond and took out long term contract with the team to play there.55 Even in tough times the companies continued to invest in recreational travel. In 1904, after two years in which the newly consolidated Virginia Passenger and Power Company had seen deficits and declining revenues, it managed to pay for the “rearrangement of the tracks at the Reservoir” as well as new facilities “for handling the increased traffic at this point.” In a time when other lines were failing, the president of the company told its predominately Northern stockholders, that it was “a most valuable source of revenue.”56

Urban reformers and newspapermen vigorously touted the benefits of the new leisure afforded by the streetcar. Examining the streetcar from a “sociological point

54 Electric Railway Review 16, No. 2 (Feb. 1906): 76.
55 In other cities there was an equally tight relationship between baseball teams and street railway companies. W. Harrison Daniel and Scott P. Mayer, Baseball and Richmond: A History of the Professional Game, 1884-2000 (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2003), 41-43. See also Richmond Traction Company, Minutes of the Board of Directors. (VEPCO Records, Accession Number 37345, Library of Virginia Archives) where the building of the new baseball diamond is discussed.
56 Virginia Passenger and Power Company: Annual Report of the President to the Board of Directors and Stockholders for the year ending Dec. 31st, 1903. Library of Virginia Archives.
of view,” one analyst mentioned that while most old technologies had been “devoted to the increase of production, not to the increase in leisure,” this would change with the electric-street cars, whose speed would save workers, not factory owners, “16,000 man-days per day.” He said that riding the car itself was no longer a chore but a new kind of leisure: “we have the indefinite but large value resulting from the more pleasurable sensation which we are all familiar from riding on electric cars.” The streetcar companies played to this demand, and emphasized that “the low fares and quick schedules on the electric line make it possible for the city worker to camp [at a local park] all summer, coming out to camp in the afternoon or evening and returning to the city early in the morning.”

To facilitate such pleasures, all Richmond streetcar companies absorbed the expense of two sets of cars: “closed cars” to retain heat in winter (which also retained smoke and tobacco juice), and “open cars,” for the easy enjoyment of nature in the summer.

Different kinds of amusement, however, became more difficult to enjoy. John A. Cutchins remembered playing in the street as a boy. “We played in the streets as there was very little traffic and we were always interested in what went on.” According to him, street baseball games, played right on Franklin street in what is now the central business district, were only occasionally interrupted by a “doctor’s buggy on the way to a house call.”

But the electric streetcar first came by his house in 1897, interrupting any future games, and, within 6 years, the family had moved out

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57 “The Electric Railway from a Sociological Point of View” published in Street Railway Review 16, No. 11, 613 (1906): 104. The analyst also mentioned an oft-discussed benefit of electric travel over horse-cars: “the relief that comes from seeing that sentient organisms are no longer suffering in our service, and before our eyes.”


59 Cutchins, Memories, 17.
west, into the area known as “the Fan” being developed by the streetcar, with new fields for leisure in the undeveloped hinterlands.

WESTWARD HO: THE STREETCAR AND THE RICHMOND SUBURBS

“The Electric Railway is the one indispensable factor in suburban development.” – Public Service News

Before the creation of the streetcar network, real estate development in Richmond was somnolent. As late as 1889, when erratic streetcar service reached no more than a few old city neighborhoods, a celebratory guide to Richmond explicitly stated “there is no boom prevailing in real estate, nor any sign of one.” Amidst a general laudation of the real estate industry and Richmond industry generally, the booster pamphlet was forced to admit that “the fact is, speculative transactions are not numerous in any sort of Richmond realty.” But the opening up of the suburbs by the electric streetcar changed that. Soon suburban development became one of Richmond’s most rapid growth industries, and Richmonders everywhere rushed to be part of the new cities being built on the purlieus. By the 1890s one visitor noted that Richmond and its environs was a “place where you are likely to get mortar on you.”

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60 Public Service News, May 27, 1915.
62 Morrison, Richmond, 71.
An impressive array of interest groups from across the political spectrum began to advocate strenuously for the creation of new streetcar suburbs, presenting them as an emblem of progress and a cure for every conceivable urban ill. Their collective effort helped create the cultural and legal foundations for the new Richmond.

In a guidebook about Richmond written for the purpose of “encouraging business,” the Chamber of Commerce enthused that “SUBURBAN GROWTH presents...a phase of progress especially to be remarked on. Since 1890, or thereabouts, new residence boroughs have sprung up, girdle like, over all the nearest environment of the city.” Suburbs were not only delightful for locals, they were enticing to prospective investors even outside of real-estate. They represented progress. And although such suburbs were partially explained by the “press of population,” the Chamber’s book said the suburbs had been “furthered very much by the facilities afforded by urban and suburban car lines. These lines ramify all quarters and all outlying parts.” The streetcar lines were discussed even before the Richmond railroads. On the opposite side of the political spectrum, the Society for the Betterment of Housing and Living Conditions adopted a similar mindset, and in a report written in 1912 they recommended expanding the borders of Richmond to encompass “cheap land,” and then to expand onto that land the “advantages of municipal government,” including, of course, “street railway service.” Such would allow the construction of model houses for workers and be “an immense benefit from

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64 Richmond Chamber of Commerce. *Richmond Virginia: City on the James 1902-1903* (Richmond: George W. Englehardt, 1903), 8.
a housing point of view.” Even electric engineers saw the advantages of their own product for suburbanization: “Rapid transit of this sort opens up a number of districts that before were practically inaccessible for residential purposes.”

By far though, the most significant encouragement to suburbanization came from Richmond’s newspapers and magazines, whose owners were invariably involved in both streetcar management and suburban property. Lewis Ginter, who would go on to found the Ginter Park subdivision, started the *Richmond Daily Times* in 1886, which he then handed to suburban real estate developer and soon-to-be Richmond Railway and Electric Company board member Joseph Bryan. The competing *Richmond Dispatch* was bought in 1900 by John L. Williams, “developer of many valuable properties in the city of Richmond,” and the second listed board member on the Richmond Traction Company’s 1895 city franchise agreement. After some legerdemain and backroom machinations, Bryan’s son, John Stewart Bryan, who was also a significant real estate developer (he donated “Joseph Bryan Park” to the city near his subdivided property) obtained control of both major papers.

Not surprisingly, the new *Richmond News Leader*, said that its “policy for a long time

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68 Dabney, *Richmond: Story*, 244.
has been to encourage building in the suburbs.”

A Richmond real estate broker looking back from 1929 exclaimed that although new forms of transportation opened up the suburbs for development, there had also been “in addition to this...a long campaign of education on the part of various magazines and exhibitions in the country urging and encouraging people to own a home with a little ground in it for gardening and flowers.”

Real estate brokers, of course, also touted the benefit of streetcar suburbanization. J. Thompson Brown, the first electric railway president and West End real estate promoter, strategically placed his office directly “opposite the Dispatch office.” He would give the press such precious bon mots as his claim that “Westward the Star of Empire must go, and westward the progress of Richmond is tending, as sure as the needle points to the pole.” One measure of these br’okers rising influence was the proliferation real estate advertisements and brochures for streetcar suburbs. The “popular suburb of Barton Heights,” put out a pamphlet offering friendly advice to couples entering the real-estate market, which claimed that a buyer should select a site “far enough removed from the noise and dirt of the city to avoid the annoyances incident thereto,” and “let it be not far from some of the streetcar lines.” It so happened that Barton Heights itself fit the bill. It was right across Bacon’s Creek Branch and its streetcar lines were mentioned on the title page and

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70 Richmond News Leader. circa 1920 (undated clipping) Folder: Real Estate. Valentine Richmond History Center Archives.
71 Official Convention Program of Virginia Real Estate Association. October 23-25th , 1929 Ninth Annual Convention, Richmond, VA. Valentine Richmond History Center Archives.
72 Morrison, Richmond, Virginia, 73.

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were the first item discussed in the text.74 Another real estate advertising pamphlet, entitled *Suburban Reflections*, emphasized the suburbs’ connection to leisure and entertainment, and treated the suburbs themselves as a kind of amusement park. It said that “to explain how these suburbs are reached would be to repeat an oft-told story. Many visit them daily in spring, summer and autumn, nor does the number diminish much in winter, especially when the skating season is on.” It was “oft-told” and easy because, as the pamphlet said, “there is hardly a foot of this property which is not within 200 yards of the electric car line, while by far the greater part of it abuts the roads traversed by the tracks.”75 The new streetcar suburbs were not just homes, they were destinations, and a source of wonderment to those still trapped in the city. The Ginter Park subdivision advertised in the pamphlet of course had its own park, Lakeside Park, designed to attract prospective buyers to the end of the line: “thousands of people visit the spot on the electric cars, which put one at the very gates of the park.”76 The parks themselves were often advertisements for the suburbs (which, as will be seen, often led to their overbuilding), and the suburbs were treated at the same time as kinds of parks. Richmonders often paid good money to spend their time admiring from the outside what was fast becoming a corollary of the American dream.

These groups, from the Chamber of Commerce to the engineers and the reformers, saw a panacea in streetcar suburbs, and their collective efforts helped create them. The foremost fruit of their broad-based advocacy, and the foundational

74 *Barton Heights: The Popular Suburb of Richmond* (Richmond: Taylor and Taylor, 1894 [?]), 1-3, 10.
76 Taylor, *Suburban*, 12.
bedrock for Richmond’s streetcar suburbs, was the municipally mandated five cent fare. This “universal fare” was written into all streetcar franchises since the horse-car era and was kept in place long after cost inflation had made it a dangerous anachronism. By making distance irrelevant to payment, the five cent fare did what the few commuter railroads of the time could never do, it encouraged travel as a savings instead of a cost. Since land was cheaper in the hinterland, and, with the “universal fare,” the only extra cost of commuting was time, suburbanites enjoyed their rides below cost. Inner city travelers subsidized suburban commuters. 77

Boosterish contemporaries viewed it differently. Boston real estate promoter Henry M. Whitney contrasted the Berlin, Germany and Boston, Massachusetts streetcar franchises. “The system in Berlin is two cents and a half for every mile and a half. What is the system of transportation in the city of Boston? Do we discriminate against the suburbs? Not at all.” 78 In this formulation, a universal fare did not mean subsidies to far flung subdivisions, it meant universal access.

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77 Since the “opportunity cost of time” (the potential foregone earnings of time spent outside work) is lower for poorer workers, “spending” time to save money, as the reformers expected, should encourage the poor to locate farther away. While this effect is occasionally visible in Richmond, the needs of the poor, whose employment was more variable, for flexibility in transportation forced them to the center of the streetcar system. One commentator noted that although the fare was cheap “yet it is not good enough and cheap enough to enable the rank and file, who have least to spend and work long hours, to have the same advantages [for entertainments and shopping].” Graham R. Taylor Satellite Cities (1915), 1-20, in The American City: A Documentary History, ed. Charles N. Glaab (Homewood, I.L.: The Dorsey Press, Inc. 1963), 446. Contemporary research also indicates that access to public transportation is a predominant cause for the concentration of the lower classes in dense, center cities. See Edward L. Glaeser, et al. “Why do the poor live in cities? The role of public transportation,” Journal of Urban Economics 63 (2008): 1-24.

78 Street Railway Review 7, No. 6 (June 1891): 48.
The interest group that was most ambivalent about the five cent fare, and the streetcar suburbs it encouraged, was the streetcar companies themselves. Due to the universal fare the vast majority of streetcar lines to the suburbs were costly and unremunerative. The Virginia Passenger and Power Company explicitly stated that “the ability to maintain and extend the long haul and suburban service - nearly always conducted at a loss - is directly dependent upon the preservation of the profitable short haul business,” or what they called “the health of the traffic heart.”

Figure 3. New Subdivision Advertisement, Courtesy Valentine Museum.

One study by the Street Railway Review found the operating costs of an electric railway, mainly power and motor repairs, to be about 5 and 3/10 cents per “car mile,” meaning that suburban cars going four or five miles into the country needed to contain a significant number of passengers just to break even on the operating costs, even without paying the capital costs and interest on those extended railways. Especially in the early years when lines were driven out to suburban greenfields, and when cars came and went at ten minute intervals at all hours of the day, this level of ridership was rarely practicable. The Street Railway Review even said that “the increased value of property along the line of a street railway is the true fund on which to draw to fund the plant” and mentioned one streetcar company which failed.

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80 Street Railway Review 6, No. 1 (1890): 19.
“because it depended alone upon fares for financial support,” which, at five cents, did not cover costs.\textsuperscript{81}

In Richmond, however, where the owners of real estate and the investors in streetcar companies were typically divided, streetcar companies could not draw on increased real estate valuations to pay for under-performing suburban lines. Lines to the suburbs benefited only the real estate investors who had a seat on the transit company’s boards, but not the company itself. Those real estate owners without a seat on transit boards occasionally paid the streetcar companies to extend tracks to suburban property, demonstrating exactly how unprofitable these lines were, but even then streetcar companies tried to avoid the onus of unprofitable lines.\textsuperscript{82} One lawsuit from the “River View Improvement Company,” which was constructing a subdivision in South Richmond at the time, was brought in Richmond Chancery Court “for damages alleged to have been sustained by the plaintiff in the failure of the defendant [streetcar] company to comply with an agreement for the extension of their tracks.”\textsuperscript{83}

Still, the universal five cent fare which encouraged this suburbanization was cemented in law and celebrated by city fathers, and became as unshakeable a part of the urban landscape as the streets and sewers. When the Virginia Railway and Power Company gingerly brought up the subject of “regulating the fare by the distance traveled” before the Richmond city council, it admitted that this scheme was “subject to the objection that….it tends to prevent the development of suburban communities” and it also unfortunately tended “to induce the concentration of population in a small

\textsuperscript{81} Street Railway Review 8, No. 9 (1892): 545.
\textsuperscript{82} Streetcar promoter Henry Clay Payne in Milwaukee actively encouraged such subsidies. McShane, Technology and Reform, 90.
\textsuperscript{83} New York Times, May 1, 1890.
area.” In their conclusion they ignored their own earlier suggestion, and recommended a slight increase in the universal fare. But even that was impossible. The five cent fare was so sacrosanct, both in Richmond and nationwide, that the first such fare ever paid to an electric street-car (by William A. Boswell in Richmond back in 1888) was then “on exhibit in a public museum in the city of New York,” a permanent memorial to cheap access to the suburbs.

Yet this does not explain why the streetcar companies themselves built so many supposedly unprofitable lines. In a hearing before the Federal Electric Railways Commission, conducted to investigate streetcar lines bankrupt by the inflation after World War I, streetcar executives gave a hint. They vigorously fulminated against the “the flat fare,” and pointed to the reasons why so many companies expanded their tracks despite its disincentives. They said that “if it [the five cent fare] is carried to too great an extent, [it] just merely caters to the real-estate speculators, and it is well known that many of the street-railway systems of this country have been overbuilt by reason of the pressure brought upon the companies by people interested in outside real estate [and] sometimes the owners of the companies themselves.”

Another executive was even more vituperative: “The realty man in

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84 In the Matter of Modification of the Street Railway Franchises in Richmond – Argument presented to the Sub-Committee on Streets of the Richmond City Council on January 10, 1910 by the Virginia Railway & Power Company. (Richmond: Richmond Press Inc. 1910), 20.
85 Public Service News, June 14, 1923. An article in the Richmond News Leader confirms this and even confirms that the conductor who took that nickel was indeed the same W.B. Eubank mentioned in the Richmond Dispatch of 1888. He would apparently imbibe the full draught of his fame and run out his years giving speaking engagements to streetcar aficionados. Richmond News Leader, September 9, 1928. Richmond Public Library Archives.
the United States has been a parasite on the electric railway and he has been a parasite so long that he regards that [a uniform fare] as a God-given right or privilege.\textsuperscript{87}

It was local real estate investor dominance over Richmond’s streetcar boards and the city council that pressured companies into making so many unprofitable investments in suburban lines, and it was the lobbying of political reformers, newspapermen, and even worker’s groups that kept these lines operating far below their true cost. This sacrificed the funds of streetcar company investors, typically northerners, to the demands of local agents of those streetcar companies who operated in real estate. The result was often the polar opposite of the omnipresent carpetbagging story. Time and again in Richmond, rich New York investors were liquidated in streetcar bankruptcies while the savvy local managers they appointed to oversee those investments reaped great rewards from their own real estate holdings. In the case of the first electric railway company, the Union Passenger Railway Company, J. Thompson Brown made a killing on his West End real estate while New York Banker Maurice Flynn lost almost his entire investment in the bankruptcy proceedings within just two years of the company’s inauguration. The outlines of the story would be repeated again for other streetcar companies.

The Woodland Heights neighborhood represents a perfect example of the unprofitable nature of suburban lines for streetcar companies. Today a tony subdivision featuring a lush greensward park in the South of Richmond, it was created in 1890 by the Southside Land & Improvement Company, which also built a streetcar line out to the site with the usual amusement park featuring a merry-go-

round, a roller coaster, a shooting gallery, and a bowling alley. Richmonders who came to the amusement park on Sundays therefore drove through the enticing prospect of cheap, open land for housing. Woodland Heights consequently boomed, and remains a viable subdivision even today. Yet the streetcar line itself was troubled from the beginning. As early as 1896 the city engineer was bringing complaints to the president of the Southside Railway Company that the tracks demanded maintenance, complaints that were repeated again a year later, apparently without result. In 1897 the manager of the line, G.E. Fisher, wrote to one of his superintendents that “the track…continues to show such as loss over the last year and the year previous that we shall be obliged to take ten cents per day off the wages of the conductors as well as the motormen.” As in many other cases, once the homes had been sold, there was not enough incentive for the streetcar company to maintain streetcar line, the conductors, or even the park. The line and the park continued to operate intermittently at a loss, until the city declared the roller coaster unsafe and the park was shuttered in 1931. The line was closed soon after.

Even though travel to amusement parks and campgrounds were among the most profitable aspects of the railway business, and remained so until the end of the streetcar era, amusement parks themselves were often overbuilt to service real estate interests. One typical example had a railway company buy a forty-five acre track a “few miles from the city for $9,000” in order to construct an “amusement park.”

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88 Public Service News, July 22, 1915. The paper asked “Have you ever been at a loss what to do on one of those sultry midsummer evenings when the spirits rebelled against incarceration within brick walls?”


91 Kenney, Rails in Richmond, 124.
individuals or “interests” who were in “control of the road also operated in real estate and, forming a real estate corporation, bought at about the same price per acre an unimproved tract fronting on a lake. Owing to the popularity of the resort and the new railway facilities, values were enhanced. The real estate company subdivided its tract and sold lots at the enhanced valuation, or about double the original cost.” It seems clear that the amusement park and spur line were not intended primarily for the benefit of streetcar company itself, since “the same parties being in control of the railway company considered it proper to appreciate the value of the park property and did so on the books of the company, thus adding 10,000 to the valuation of the asset.” This increased the value of adjoining real estate to prospective purchasers, but it also increased the tax burden on the streetcar company. Other streetcar officers found ways to profit from the recreations encouraged by the companies. When the Richmond Traction Company built a baseball diamond for the local team, the president of the company, John Skelton Williams, bought the entire team himself and reaped the rewards. Recreations for the elite were oriented to real estate investments as well. The Commonwealth Club was organized in 1890 by “members of the famous old Richmond club, who felt the need of a more comfortable home in the rapidly growing West End,” but of course “it naturally hastened the development of that area.” Some of its young members who forced the move, however, were interested in West End real estate. Later, when John Cutchins came into the club, in the 1910s, he hoped he and some of his young associates would use to the club as a

92 Street Railway Review 16, No. 6 (June, 15, 1906): 338.
93 Street Railway Review 16, No. 6 (June 15, 1906): 338.
94 Daniel, Baseball and Richmond, 42.
base to “show the old fogies how a subdivision should be laid out,” but the sales were poorly executed and their land development company operated at a loss.\textsuperscript{95}

The net result of the intersection of real estate interests and recreation was a vast overbuilding of recreational resorts. Although precise numbers are not available for Richmond, in a similar situation around Boston some forty-five streetcar funded parks in 1890 were reduced to fifteen by 1906, and even then “few if any of these parks can show credit balances at the end of the year.”\textsuperscript{96} In Richmond, the characteristic “West End Amusement Park” in Richmond was built by the streetcar companies at the turn of the century, but by 1907 it was in debt and by 1908 it was bankrupt. The city ordered the demolition of the rides two years later.\textsuperscript{97} The Richmond Traction Company spent over $100,000 to develop Westhampton Park, with the usual assortment of cafes, bowling alleys, merry-go-rounds and the like, but after the company went under the park closed and it was sold mainly as wilderness in 1910. The University of Richmond stands on its ground today.\textsuperscript{98} A number of other abandoned parks such as Idlewood, “The Coney Island of Richmond,” and Forest Hills demonstrate a similar process in other once much-beloved parks. Few residents of Richmond today who travel an hour east to Busch Gardens know that their city was once ringed with more thriving amusement parks than any contemporary city could boast.

\textsuperscript{95} Cutchins, \textit{Memories}, 95. One of the
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Street Railway Review} 16, No. 2 (1906): 88.
\textsuperscript{97} Kenney, \textit{Rails in Richmond}, 114.
\textsuperscript{98} “Westhampton Park Comes to Life,” \textit{Richmond Literature and History Quarterly} (Summer 1978): 41.
The local directors of the streetcar companies who were interested in real
estate contributed mightily to their downfall, but the five cent fare and other political
mandates certainly pushed the companies further towards the precipice. The constant
bankruptcy of the railway companies remained politically palatable because, although
the matryoshka doll corporate structures of the railways was so complex that even
Richmonders of the time had little idea who was in charge, they knew that the vast
majority of their shares were owned by outsiders. E.A. Catlin, the Richmond
Traction Company president (and real estate promoter) told the press that if the city
council wanted to investigate the ownership of street railways, “all that it has to do is
appoint another committee to investigate the question, if indeed the committee
appointed by them to count the bonds in New York did not sufficiently ascertain this
truth.”99 In a letter to a business associate, Andrew Pizzini, who was staying in New
York at the time, offered to introduce his friend to the “REAL purchasers of the
Richmond Railway & Electric Company” who apparently remained unnamed even in
correspondence.100 In 1915 the Virginia Passenger and Power Company bragged that
“of the 120,000 common shares” outstanding, Richmond owned 25% and received
the same proportion of dividends.101 and this was almost certainly a highpoint in
local ownership. The vast majority of the remainder, in this and in any time, was
owned by New Yorkers. Yet far from allowing the robbery of Southern assets, the
outsider status of investors meant that the local politicians were generally immune to

100 Some Facts About the Underground street railway system in Richmond (Richmond: Clyde W.
Saunders, 1899), 2.
appeals of financial distress from the companies.\textsuperscript{102} The maintenance of the five cent fare for over 30 years was certainly the most dramatic example of this.

But the five cent fare was not the only municipally mandated burden on the streetcar companies. Even though commuting was the least profitable aspect of the streetcar business, the city made it even less so by requiring 2.5 cent fares for factory workers and school children.\textsuperscript{103} And long distance suburban commuting was made even less profitable during crowded times after 1905 when all cars were required to stop whenever and wherever signaled, on pains of a fine up to $100.\textsuperscript{104} Richmond eventually required universal transfers between all competing streetcar lines, and these transfers became an increasingly large proportion of all riders, meaning a significant portion of riders rode free on a particular companies tracks.\textsuperscript{105} Political pressure led the companies to “buy local” products more often than they would have liked, usually from less efficient Southern manufacturers.\textsuperscript{106} Police and firemen, city councilmen “deputized” as policemen, a number of other public officials, and eventually State Corporation Commission members, received their rides free of charge due to city mandates.\textsuperscript{107} Cars were required to run from 6 or 7 in the morning

\textsuperscript{102} It is interesting to note that Richmond most fortunate native son, Thomas Fortune Ryan, achieved his success by “carpetbagging” in New York and organizing the streetcar system there, with as much opprobrium as streetcar speculators in Richmond but with notably more success. He died the 10\textsuperscript{th} richest man in America, and funded the entire Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Richmond from his own funds. Virginia Historical Society Museum, permanent exhibit. May 30, 2008.

\textsuperscript{103} See early attempts to excuse “foreign” buying in Richmond Whig May 22, 1887. Also Public Service News, September 21, 1916, elaborating on the number of locally made goods the company bought.

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Public Service News}, June 10, 1915.

\textsuperscript{105} “Protest Against Universal Transfer Scheme,” Street Railway Review 19, No. 8 (May, 15, 1908): 122. In New York City, free transfers turned the average fare of 5 cents to 3.5 cents due to the number of riders who switched cars for free. Cheape, \textit{Moving the Masses}, 65. Just like today, these transfers were also often stolen and resold.

\textsuperscript{106} Public Service News, Mar. 27, 1919.

\textsuperscript{107} Richmond Dispatch, June 10, 1902, July 6, 1902. The new 1902 state constitution actually restricted these free passes to just a few groups.
until 11 or 12 at night, and at the continual pace of a passing car every 5 to 10 minutes, no matter the demand or the hour. The late car that John Cutchins took home from the country club dance would most likely never have run without that municipal requirement. The city council inserted itself into every aspect of streetcar management and operation, most often to the companies’ detriment, and due to the Sub-Committee on Streets’ power to supervise these mandates as well as route changes, it became the “most important subdivision” of the city council.

Local civil servants also ignored streetcar requests and local politicians excoriated them in print. The State Corporation Commission was created in 1902 to pass judgment on railroad and street railway rate schedules, but the Commission resolutely refused to change the fares of the street railway companies, and even refused to reconsider the half price fare tickets for laborers on the longer, suburban Seven Pines Line. The chairman of the new Commission, Beverely T. Crump, was, significantly, also the owner of a large portion of real estate in the city’s West End fronting on the railway companies tracks, and an increase in fare would have damaged his investment. Carlton McCarthy, printer and former publisher of *Walks about Richmond*, earned local fame as editor of the independent tabloid *The Live Wire*, whose stated mission was to attack the peculations of streetcar companies. The public so loved his tough stance against the foreign-owned concerns that McCarthy rode his fame in publishing to the mayoralty within two years. Even the

108 *Compilation of Statutes*, 322.
109 *Richmond Dispatch*, July 16, 1904.
110 *Virginia Law Register* 10, No. 3 (Jul., 1904): 244.
112 *The Live Wire*, March 3, 1902.
113 Tom Johnson in Cleveland and John Altgeld in Illinois would similarly ride anti-streetcar opinion to political power. Carlton McCarthy, however, quickly disillusioned the city when he spent a significant
cop on the beat damaged the streetcar companies profitability. In many cities such as Richmond trolley companies were the first installers of traffic lights because they distrusted the fairness of individual cops “since they might share the popular distrust of transit monopolies.”

The end result of all these mandates, demands, and unprofitable suburban lines was that, as the president of the then largest streetcar operator in the city, the Richmond Railway and Passenger Company, said in 1900, “the company never made any money.” It was formed out of the bankrupt Union Passenger Power Company in 1890, but its manager, Andrew Pizzini, in that year reported a loss of over $5000. In the next year it was $70,000, after which it dropped to “only” a $40,000 deficit in 1893. In 1897 it tried to force a merger with the much smaller Richmond Traction Company, but the Traction Company discovered that the railway was “overburdened with bonded and floating debt,” and they would “not consent to wreck properties entrusted to its charge.” Many of its lines were unprofitable from almost the moment they were built. It had earlier petitioned the Committee on Streets to remove to remove the Marshall Street line because, as one executive said, “it don’t pay. Some days we don’t take in two dollars there,” but the line served a valuable constituency and nothing was done. The Clay street line was so unprofitable and so poorly

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117 John S. Williams Scrapbook. Virginia Historical Society Archives. This sort of heavily mortgaged financing became more common as time wore on. By 1910 the average transit company in America had debt equal to over 50% of total assets. Martha J. Bianco, “Technological Innovation and the Fall of Mass Transit,” *Journal of Urban History* 25 (March 1999): 356.
118 John S. Williams Scrapbook. Virginia Historical Society Archives.
maintained that Andrew Pizzini joked in meeting of the Committee of Streets that he rode the line and lived, to which the Chairman responded “you are very fortunate,” yet the line was franchised and the city forced it to remain operating. As if to further exacerbate the company’s problems, in 1900 there was even a debate on using eminent domain to buy out all the streetcar companies, but the city council instead decided to levy another substantial tax on them in another year of substantial deficit. In 1903 the Virginia and Passenger and Power Company, which bought up and consolidated all of the previous railway companies under the leadership of Frank Jay Gould, son of the infamous financier, believed for a short time that it had made an annual profit, but after examining its books more closely it was forced to inform its shareholders that the profit “had been found to be wholly fictitious and without foundation in fact.” The next year also showed a significant deficit, and the year after that it went bankrupt. The judge presiding over the bankruptcy said that the “present management [was] good,” but that “its financial condition and embarrassed plight have not been improved by a reduction of its many obligations or by an adjustment of the complications in which it is involved.” The company went into receivership for five long years, before being bought by a similar gang of New Yorkers. By 1917 and 1918 the new Virginia Passenger and Power Company was in deficit again, in the later year by $105,323.16, and soon it was sold to a consortium of Northern investors who operated similar operations in Texas. They would

119 Some Facts Concerning, 12.
120 Richmond Dispatch, Jan. 5, 1900.
121 Virginia Passenger and Power Company: Annual Report of the President to the Board of Directors and Stockholders for the year ending Dec. 31st, 1903. Library of Virginia Archives.
122 Richmond Dispatch, July 31, 1904.
oversee a decade of continually declining ridership before the depression. As this history shows, the streetcar companies were monumentally terrible investments, yet they somehow managed to form the basis for many Richmond family fortunes.

John A. Cutchins, scion to a wealthy and established Richmond family, remembered the first time his boyhood home had direct contact with a streetcar: “there came right past our house in 1897 the first electric streetcar. Few thrills have ever equaled that one.” Later his family followed the streetcar out of the city, because “Richmond was rapidly growing westward.” His family stayed on the same street, but moved from a lot located a mere block from the state capitol to one eighteen blocks, or over a mile, further west. He would eventually become a significant investor in that growing west end. His immediate experience of the streetcar made him to understand its revolutionary implications, and this allowed him to profit from it. In the process, he succeeded in further transforming the Richmond of his birth. Robert Munford, a local historian, devoted all 230 pages of his 1936 book Richmond Homes and Memories to the “houses of old Richmond” by which he meant the city in the 1880s and early 1890s, before the streetcar came and changed everything. The streetcar made the city of only forty years ago seem suddenly old.

The city appeared old because the electric streetcar not only allowed the city to expand, it allowed it to expand in a new way. Previously Richmond had, like other “walking cities,” spread gradually across the land, with new homes being built along

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deficits understate the loss because the electric power division by this time was subsidizing the railway division.

124 Cutchins, Memories, 19.
125 Cutchins, Memories, 105.
126 Munford, Richmond Homes.
the same streets on the closest available land. The city surveyor ensured that each new street aligned with the general rectilinear town plan. Now, however, the city grew by leaps and bounds. Miles of unimproved country land was ignored while massive mini-cities were created out of whole cloth. The explosion of these real estate opportunities by the streetcar led the real estate industry to organize for the first time. Richmond’s first Real Estate Exchange was founded in 1888, the year of the streetcar’s inauguration, and the group pledged to “place [the industry] upon a foundation of influence and permanency,” which it quickly succeeded in doing. While in the pre-streetcar era land outside the city limits was ignored by investors, in 1899 The Science of Real-Estate and Mortgage Investment claimed that “[u]nimproved Suburban property for purely speculative purposes is one of the most attractive forms of real property not yielding an income,” and newly organized Richmond real estate brokers applied themselves diligently to exploiting this opportunity.

128 Richmond Dispatch, August 2, 1888.
129 Homer Reed, The Science of Real-Estate and Mortgage Investment (Kansas City, M.O.: Hudson Kimberly Publishing Company, 1899), 77. Reed also noted that “it is free from city taxes and special assessments if outside the city limits, and this is particularly desirable.” This freedom allowed speculators to buy the recommended large blocks and hold them without selling them piecemeal to pay increasing tax rates as values increased. In contradistinction they cited the effect of city taxes on property, “Often taxes will use up an entire estate of unimproved city property in a few years.” Suburban Reflections, noted that the taxes on Ginter Park property outside Richmond were almost a third of that in the city, 11.
The combination of large developers and street-car companies permitted for the first time the formation broad-based yet exclusive communities, composed of the neighbors and homes and businesses that the buyers preferred. This had profound ramifications on the shape of the city. In the old city there was no escape from a new factory or an obnoxious neighbor. In the outside suburbs things were different; people shopped for communities as well as homes. *The Science of Real-Estate and Mortgage Investment* also noted their concern that new lots thrown open to speculation had a tendency to devalue in price: “the tendency as soon as one suburb is platted to open up others beyond is a strong leveling force,” but this tendency had a very special caveat, one future speculators made note of: “unless they are guarded by restrictions and protected from the encroachment of factories, grocery stores, or other
detracting influences, and even then a large territory must be controlled by an investor." The assembling of large lots by a new breed of investor (the "developer," usually in the form of a "Land Improvement Company") made these suburbs into unified wholes and encouraged homogenization. While homes or lots were once advertised individually, neighborhoods became the subject of interest. A representative ad declared "Monumental Floral Gardens" to be "RICHMOND'S most beautiful subdivision," without even mentioning the lots or the houses contained therein.

These neighborhoods worked to maintain their character. The promotional pamphlet for the Ginter Park subdivision elaborated six reasons why settlement in the suburbs would be beneficial for families. The last two were: "It will be impossible for commonplace residences or business enterprise to find lodgment there," and "Conditions are such that one will have only the best of neighbors." The problem was that not everyone in Richmond agreed who the best of neighbors were. The pamphlet assured potential lot buyers that "Members of the Caucasian race shall have the exclusive privilege of buying."

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130 Homer Reed, *The Science of Real-Estate*, 76.
133 Taylor, *Suburban Reflections*, 12. The date of this pamphlet, only ascribable to the pre-World War I era, would make it one of the earlier uses of racial covenants in the U.S. As Robert Fogelson says in *Bourgeois Nightmares*, most real estate agents, even racist ones, didn't bother with restrictive covenants until the post World War I period. Fogelson does not, however, focus on covenants in the South. Robert M. Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 97. Thomas Hanchett, however, found several race restrictive covenants as early as 1901 in Charlotte. Hanchett, *Sorting the New*, 148.
In 1903 a Richmond policeman was called upon to arrest Sam Scott “(colored),” who was “endeavoring to whip the motorman and the conductor of [a] trolley car.” After being beaten with a club, he was tied up and led off the trolley, yet he was “still so ferocious that he swore and spat blood at his captors.” He later claimed that “if he had a few more blacks like himself he would show them d-----d pale faces that they could not run RICHMOND.” But the pale faces of Richmond were determined to show Sam Scott that they could do exactly that, and the streetcars became the focus of their efforts.

The change in white attitude was noticeable. Before 1890, whites in the South had advertised their paternal affections towards blacks and contrasted this with the icy unconcern of the North, but in the last decade of the nineteenth century the South began advocating distance in the place of paternalistic control. As one white preacher proclaimed in nearby Petersburg, it was “found much easier to maintain a perfect theory [of compassion] at a distance, than a corresponding practice in actual and constant contact with the inferior race.” The streetcars were, almost from their inception, the most disturbing example of that “actual and constant contact,” and such

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134 *Richmond News Leader*, June 16, 1903.
135 C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow. 2nd Revised Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) – It is worthwhile to note that 1890 represents the first year of Jim Crow legislation in the South as well as the seminal year in streetcar development.
contact led to friction and the desire for more distance.\(^{137}\) It was the year of Sam Scott's miniature rebellion when the drive for Jim Crow in the streetcars began. This end result would prove as burdensome on the streetcar companies as the failing suburban lines and the five cent fare.

An early streetcar segregationist bill was defeated in the city council, and the editor of the African American newspaper *The Richmond Planet*, John Mitchell, pointed out that "it should not be forgotten that the defeat of this 'Jim Crow' Car Bill was not due to either the colored people or the principles involved, but to the street railway companies, which could ill afford the expense and inconvenience which its operation would impose." He joyfully proclaimed "Farewell [to] the "Jim Crow" streetcar bill!" seemingly for good.\(^{138}\) But since the passage of the 1902 Virginia state constitution blacks had been effectively denied the vote, and the white streetcar customers were insulated from effects of rising costs due to the mandated schedules and the five cent fare, so within a year they pushed a bill through the Virginia legislature which allowed the segregation of streetcars, and the Virginia Passenger and Power Company caved to local white sentiment and enforced a segregation order.\(^{139}\) The *Richmond Planet* denounced this as an "unnecessary innovation," and a mass meeting of black leaders, led by John Mitchell, organized a boycott against the company, even though it had earlier been the most strenuous resisters of segregation.

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\(^{137}\) Earlier horse-cars had tried segregation beginning in 1867, *New York Times*, May 2, 1867, but black opposition and the small size and low speed of the cars prevented effective segregation from taking root and it was discontinued at some point in the 1870s.

\(^{138}\) *Richmond Planet*, July 18, 1903.

\(^{139}\) One reason the company relaxed their earlier opposition is that they certainly knew where the political winds were blowing. The Virginia state legislature made segregation a statewide requirement just two years later. August Meier and Eliot Rudwick, "The Boycott Movement against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South 1900-1906," *Journal of American History*, 69 (Mar 1969): 757.
legislation.\textsuperscript{140}

Now the company, against its wishes, was forced to bear the costs of both segregated streetcars and a boycott among some of their most profitable riders.\textsuperscript{141} It had other reasons for disliking the segregation order. It interfered with their policy of segregating smokers of all races in the rear of the cars, and this "integration" of smokers in the cars occasioned many complaints. Some of their more affluent riders also complained that it forced them to sit with lower class whites.\textsuperscript{142} Even after the segregation order, the streetcar companies stood up for the rights of black patrons when few others bothered. They tried to remind whites and conductors that: "No colored person can be denied a seat if the rear seats in the car are occupied by white people, while seats further up are unoccupied."\textsuperscript{143} But for three months after the order, the \textit{Planet} kept up a constant drumbeat of peppy news about the successful boycott, and continued to attack the streetcar company even as it urged a non-violent, law-abiding resistance.\textsuperscript{144} The \textit{Planet} was soon reporting that the "stock-holders, bond holders or creditors of the [company were] praying for the appointment of a receiver," because of the financial burden of the boycott.\textsuperscript{145} They were correct. A judge soon declared the Virginia Passenger and Power Company "utterly insolvent,"

\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Richmond Planet}, April 4, 1904.
\textsuperscript{141} Jennifer Roback notes that streetcar company resistance to segregation was almost universal, and that the cost of segregated cars, as well as the problems with segregating smokers, were the prime reasons for that opposition. Jennifer Roback, "The Political Economy of Segregation," \textit{Journal of Economic History} 46, No. 4 (Dec., 1986): 893-917.
\textsuperscript{142} Meier, "The Boycott Movement," 896-897.
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Public Service News}, Sept. 2, 1915.
\textsuperscript{144} "COLORED FOLKS YET WALKING- THE RULE VERY ANNOYING," \textit{Richmond Planet}, June 7, 1904.
\textsuperscript{145} \textit{Richmond Planet}, June 2, 1904.
and yet another Richmond streetcar company passed into a fraught receivership.146

But restricting black use of the streetcars was only the beginning. The Richmond Real Estate Exchange, which had earlier had no explicit policy on the matter, began “discourag[ing] the selling to Negroes of property in white districts, realizing that this practice is inimical to harmonious relationships between the races.”147 The covenants instituted by Ginter Park have already been mentioned, and other streetcar subdivisions took this example to heart. A new subdivision created in the northern outskirts, Wright’s Park, advertised surreptiously: “RESTRICTIONS SAME AS GINTER PARK.”148 Other inducements were even more nebulous. Barton Heights recommended that before house buyers selected a site, they should be careful to “ascertain what manner of people live in the neighborhood,” and noted that of course its people were of the highest caliber.149 The Highland Park Company, on the other hand, was more explicit and advertised “no sale or lease to a tanner, [and] no sale or lease to a colored person under any circumstances.”150 Even at the time, social reformers were aware that the new streetcar developments outside the city were more restrictive of black immigration than older sections. One study wondered why there were almost no blacks in the newer West End of the city, and concluded that “this last section is a comparatively recent development as a white residential section and property owners are zealous in guarding against encroachments by the

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146 Richmond Dispatch, July 31, 1904. In a typical part of the traction company bankruptcy story, within just six months one of the company’s investors, Metropolitan Trust Company of New York, sued the appointed receivers for mismanagement. Richmond Planet, December 3, 1904.
148 The Richmond Virginian, June 9, 1912.
149 Barton Heights, 10.
150 Prospectus: Highland Park Company: Henrico County (189?). Library of Virginia Archives.
Negro….Deeds to property, in some instances, contain clauses restricting the future ownership of property in certain sections to whites.\textsuperscript{151} The new land opened up by the streetcar allowed a new relationship to one’s own community, and in that new community, homogeneity was a point of pride and a point of sale. Soon restrictive covenants were not enough to maintain white homogeneity. White residents who were living along the Clay Street streetcar line became angered by increasing black migration to their area, and their complaints ultimately led the city to pass an ordinance restricting racial migration to any area where that person’s race was not in the majority.\textsuperscript{152} Although the U.S. Supreme Court struck this law down in 1918, local courts were still dealing with government enforcement of it restrictions late into the 1920s.\textsuperscript{153} It was the most glaring example of the increased demands for segregation in the electric streetcar era.

The net result of these restrictions is that blacks became increasingly confined in an inner city ring surrounding the downtown while whites increasingly escaped to the suburbs. One advertisement for in the \textit{Richmond Planet} highlights the nature of the divergence. It offered a special “Chance for All Home-Builders and Speculators.” There were then available “24=Centrally Located Lots=24…overlooking C.O.R.R. shops, Locomotive Works and other Large Manufacturers,” all ready for sale to enterprising young men.\textsuperscript{154} Every part of this description, from the inducement to speculators to the central location of the lots to the proximity to manufacturers, would have been anathema to most white buyers in the streetcar suburb era, but the options

\textsuperscript{151} Knight, \textit{Houses}, 36
\textsuperscript{152} Hoffman, “Behind the Façade,” 335.
\textsuperscript{154} \textit{Richmond Planet}, May 16, 1902.
and incentives for blacks in Richmond were different. Streetcar lines rarely went into black areas and when they did they had spotty service at best. The ad’s “Cheap Lots in the city center” were only “one block from the 5th street car line,” but this had only a single track while all nearby white neighborhoods had double tracks and its cars ran every twenty minutes instead of the usual five or ten.\(^{155}\) Even without emergent segregationist sentiment in the suburbs, the possibility of black escape from the inner city was consequently limited. As late as 1927, when whites were riding into the suburbs to distance themselves from the noxious effluents of the factories, one study done by the University of Virginia claimed that “[c]onvenience to employment has been a principal factor governing the location of Negroes.”\(^{156}\) The electric streetcar even allowed domestic servants, whose place in the homes of whites once forced both races into constant contact, to abandon white houses and commute to a variety of different jobs through the electric car. One woman living in the Fulton section of the city did laundry for different white families in both the Ginter Park and Highland Park suburbs, which she could only reach by streetcar. Another lived in Jackson Ward and took the streetcar to her employer’s home in the West End.\(^{157}\) An enduring relationship between a single family and their servants was replaced with a fleeting relationship between a number of different families and a single servant who was more efficient yet less intimate because of the street railway. This paradoxically


\(^{156}\) Knights, *Houses*, 36.

forced blacks into a further concentration in the inner city because it provided the easiest point of access to the variety of different suburbs.

This concentration had its price. While white working families paid an average of 11 percent of their income in rent, black families paid 14.5 percent of their income for smaller, more decrepit homes.158 And although blacks paid 2 percent more for typical business loans, they paid 7 percent more on mortgage loans (14 percent on average).159 This high cost was exacerbated because new uniform restrictions on buildings downtown required all buildings over three stories to be made of brick and to have fire escapes. This was not a problem for most large businesses, or those suburbanites outside the downtown zone where the law applied, but for the blacks trapped in the inner city ring, as John Mitchell pointed out, it was severely burdensome.160

In the midst of the furor over the Jim Crow car laws that transformed race relations in the city, the Richmond Planet published a telling fable, called “the merry-go-round.” The story, in the form of a poem, described black men “who patiently wait for their turn,” for a ride on the merry-go-round “though snubbed and insulted they be.” The poem then asks:

158 Society, Report on Housing and Living Conditions, 12.
159 Hoffman, Race, Class, and Power, 147.
160 Michael B. Chesson, Richmond After the War 1865-1890 (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981), 180. There were two notable attempts to establish black streetcar suburbs. In 1905 “Woodville” was formed on a streetcar line and deemed “the colored man’s paradise,” but it was composed of only a few houses. More substantially, Frederick Douglas Court was laid out in 1919 along a streetcar line, yet it hardly represented an escape from the inner city, since it was attached to the local black theological university and was directly north of Jackson Ward. It was also overpriced and relatively few houses of its speculative houses were built. Selden Richardson, Built by Blacks: African American Architecture & Neighborhoods in Richmond, VA (Richmond: The Alliance to Conserve Old Richmond Neighborhoods, 2007), 72-75.
Why buy yourselves an unwelcome place
Amongst those who your presence astounds?
Go run your own business your banks and your stores,
And ride your own Merry-Go-Rounds.\textsuperscript{161}

Published right below a story on the streetcar boycott, the connection was obvious. Segregation on the streetcars and in the new streetcar suburbs intensified the desire to form an economically powerful and independent black community. In response to ostracism from whites, blacks in the ghetto formed their own communities, associations, and companies. The fraternal and benefit societies there were so ubiquitous that a long time Church Hill resident recalled at least one society parade a week around the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{162} The black middle class who serviced and ran these fraternal and benefit societies became increasingly defined by them, and these societies in turn were increasingly defined by real estate enterprises focused on building up the inner city. Giles B. Jackson, in his \textit{The Industrial History of the Negro Race}, published in 1911, discussed the area “set apart especially for the habitation of the colored people, namely, ‘Jackson Ward.’” Although the ward was created in the pre-streetcar era as a means of segregating blacks politically, it was not until the early twentieth century that it became an exclusively black enclave. Giles, though, did not disparage its creation; he celebrated it. It was the new home of black civilization. He noted that the “Grand Fountain United Order of the True Reformers,

\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Richmond Planet}, June 2, 1904.
\textsuperscript{162} Brown, “Mapping the Terrain,” 309.
an organization, owning in its own name real estate to the amount of $700,000, holds its annual sessions in the hall bearing its name located in this ward.” And it was only one of the most prominent of the benevolent associations allowed by black urban concentration.\textsuperscript{163} Giles’s work also featured “the Grand Reformers hotel, one of the largest colored hotels in the United States” as well as “several hundred grocery stores, among them one wholesale grocery store, conducted by the True Reformers.”\textsuperscript{164} John Mitchell, besides running the \textit{Richmond Planet}, also ran the “People’s Real Estate and Investment Company,” which bought a theater on Broad Street and absolutely refused to sell to whites.\textsuperscript{165}

Cut off from outside financing, Jackson Ward did an astounding job of financing its own construction, but almost all this financing was directed towards real estate and most was from non-profit institutions. The total of all the real estate owned by the private “colored” part of Richmond in 1911 totaled $2,102,006, while all the charitable companies and churches associated with that “colored” part had holdings totaling $2,714,356.\textsuperscript{166} The desire for social justice that arose from the segregated streetcar battle was one of the prime motivators for this non-profit expansion. It is worthwhile to note that the idea for a black bank in Birmingham, similar to those incorporated by fraternal societies in Richmond, and created to “encourage the habits of thrift and industry,” was actually formed during the “constant contact” of the streetcar. Mr. Pettiford, the bank’s founder, told the Negro Business League, “I was riding on the electric railway in a suburb of Birmingham… I had not gone far when I

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{164} Giles B. Jackson, \textit{An Industrial History of the Negro Race} (Richmond, VA: Negro Educational Association, 1911), 101-110.
\textsuperscript{165} Hoffman, “Behind the Fa\‘ade,” 315.
\textsuperscript{166} Jackson, \textit{An Industrial History}, 111.
\end{footnotes}
was shocked by seeing a woman among the crowd on the car drinking whiskey. I spoke to her but though I was a minister and she knew me, I found I had no influence over her. It was at that time that the thought came to me that there should be some sort of business to take care of the money of that class of people.” The capital for the bank was provided by Mr. W.W. Browne of Richmond’s True Reformers.167

These non-profit reformers certainly benefited the community, but they, too, exacted a toll. The black community became increasingly dominated by personalities in control of semi-monopolistic charitable enterprises with intensely interlocking directorates.168 Surveys of the black middle class in 1900 and 1920 found that the clergy, while always the largest component, made up an increasingly large percentage of that middle class as time wore on (from 24.9 percent to 39.5 percent). Black real estate professionals went from zero to twelve individuals over the same period (surpassed in growth only by the intimately related field of insurance, which went from zero to fifty-two professionals).169 This newly powerful and supposedly purely benevolent elite also ending up encouraged dependence and reliance on inner city elites. During the migration of the First World War, black community leaders asked whites to help them retain their black constituency that had been escaping to the North. Giles Jackson led the effort, and received money from the white Chamber of Commerce to, as he said, “put a stop to the Negro exodus from the South (this

167 Washington, *The Story of*, 226. This interestingly mimicked an influx of white Richmond capital into that city as this period.
168 One example of the increasing power of these black elites comes from the description of the New Grand Fountain Building in 1892. It featured a concert hall, at the very center of which was “a large portrait of the founder and manager Grand Worthy Master and President Rev. W.W. Brown. Silver stars added to the ornament.” *Richmond Planet*, September 10, 1892.
vicinity particularly)" and to “help some who had gone North to return to their homes.” In this instance, the goals of the black elites and white segregationists aligned.

In 1860 Richmond had been rated by the census as the most integrated city in America. But by the mid-1920s the black and white sections of Richmond were completely unambiguous. Racial violence and riots were “rampant,” and a study from that era confidently concluded that, “[t]he Negroes of Richmond are located in seven very definitely defined major areas.”

![City Engineer’s Map of the “Negro Sections of Richmond,” (shaded) in 1923, which are here clear enough to be mapped for the first time. Outlying black sections in Manchester and Fulton represent previous black-predominant villages swallowed by Richmond expansion. Most areas, however, border the “ribbon” downtown along Broad and Main streets which stretches from the Northwest to the Southeast. Courtesy Library of Virginia](image)

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170 Hoffman, “Behind the Façade,” 158.
171 Knight, Houses, 36.
THE CHARACTER OF THE DOWNTOWN

When the streetcar era began, Richmond’s downtown had seemingly settled into a permanent mold. The 1889 guide to *Richmond, Virginia and the New South* tried to put the best face on this state of affairs. “The ground along the principal business streets, particularly along Main Street, is so well improved, has such a character of income-producing property on it, to put it plainer, that but few changes are made in ownership.”

Despite the recent invention of curtain walls and skyscrapers in Chicago, Richmond’s downtown looked set to grow neither up nor out. And despite the chorus of praise surrounding Sprague’s revolutionary new electric streetcar system, the introduction of the trolley at first contributed to certain unwelcome aspects of the downtown. In the beginning, the noise of the engines was significantly worse than the slow clop of horse-cars. One engineer called it “simply appalling,” before partially ameliorating the problem by replacing gears with oil containers in the early 1890s.

The new farrago of electric wires was also terrifying for pedestrians.

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172 Morrison, *Richmond, Virginia*, 71
Their sudden ubiquity in the heart of the previously unfettered downtown would prove a constant source of contention for Richmond pedestrians. One early engineer marveled at every aspect of Sprague’s new system, “except,” of course, “the unsightly appearance of poles and wires.”

Cities colonized by streetcars were said to be in the “thrall of Deadly, Hideous Wires,” where “Human Life and valuable Property [were] Sacrificed.” The poles were compared to witches’ broomsticks that impeded travel and disrupted telephone conversations. There were concerns of fire, and of the blockage of firefighting equipment. Many cities, including Richmond, put even more wires, “guy wires,” underneath the electric wires to keep them aloft in the case of a cut or collapse. The stretches of deadly wires contributed to the downtowns’ questionable reputation, and they contributed mightily to the residential flight from the center city. Historian Robert Fogelson showed that the only substantial cities with residents still living in the downtown in the 1890s were

174 Schatzburg, “Culture and Technology in the City,” 69.
175 “New York World Reports” Street Railway Review 6, No. 11 (Nov., 1892), 660.
Richmond and a few other medium-sized Southern cities, but that these downtowns quickly depopulated in the early part of the next century.\textsuperscript{177} The wires and the noise and the danger introduced by streetcars were a major factor in that migration. Yet the introduction of the streetcars also led the city to begin an unprecedented change in the nature of downtown streets, from places of general enjoyment to business thoroughfares. It was in the beginning of the streetcar era that the city council finally abandoned the ancient practice of roping off the streets to traffic when a person in one of the houses along the street was seriously ill.\textsuperscript{178} Andrew Pizzini, the streetcar manager and council member, also worked to change some of the quaint old street names to numbered avenues to facilitate easy navigation.\textsuperscript{179} The council soon prohibited roaming hogs on the streets.\textsuperscript{180} As mentioned earlier, boys who were accustomed to play openly in the uncluttered streets now needed to find other places of recreation, and their families often moved to the borderlands where this was possible.

Yet all of this did not discourage the downtown merchants on the streetcar. They saw the potential for a purely business expansion shaken freed from the confines of carping residents. In a debate before the Richmond Sub-Committee on Streets in 1900, Mr. Meredith of the Richmond Traction Company introduced a petition to encourage another street railway line on Main Street, signed by “seven thousand …nearly every merchant on Main Street.”\textsuperscript{181} Merchants understood that the

\textsuperscript{178} \textit{Richmond Whig}, May 3, 1887.
\textsuperscript{179} \textit{Richmond Dispatch}, March 6, 1888.
\textsuperscript{180} Chesson, \textit{Richmond After the War}, 173.
\textsuperscript{181} Proceedings of the Subcommittee on Streets, November 7, 1900. Valentine Richmond History Center Archives: Folder-Transportation –Street Cars – Odds and Ends.
growth of streetcars and streetcar suburbs was coterminous with the growth of the downtown. A 1903 book on the *Principles of City Land Values* stated the already truism that “street railroads have wrought a revolution in the structure of cities, scattering population over a wide area, adding value to the circumference by making it accessible for residences,” but it also noted that they added value “to the center by concentrating traffic within it.” Much of real estate, though, is a zero-sum game, and the book stated that “a part of the value” added to the center and peripheries was “removed from the intermediate zone,” where the black community was trapped.

In fact, retail concentration in the center city was thought to be an obvious and socially beneficial effect of the streetcar. T.C. Martin thought a primary benefit of the streetcar was the “encouragement of retail trade,” in the downtown which could “thereafter [be] more legitimately restricted to business occupancy.” While residential communities always aimed to put tracks “one street over,” merchants lobbied constantly for more tracks and cars coming right up to their door. One book on *City Growth and Land Values* claimed that “all corners with street railway intersections are potentially business corners and should be valued as such.” The city council encouraged this, and the streetcar companies claimed that their law requiring streetcars to stop whenever signaled was merely for “accommodation of some local storekeeper on the corner.” The law requiring universal transfers also

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183 Hurd, *Principles*, 94.  
185 Stanley L. McMichael and Robert F. Bingham, *City Growth and Land Values* (Cleveland: The Stanely McMichael Publishing Organization, 1923), 242. They do note that while most retail establishments tended to enjoy a street railway line, the tonier shops, such as the “carriage trade” on Fifth Avenue, New York City, avoided mass transit.  
186 *Public Service News*, June 10, 1915.
benefited corner merchants because, as one analyst put it, “Transfer points, owing to concentration of daily streams of people and consequent opportunity for shops, are strategic points in a city’s area, creating business sub-centers, whose prospects for increasing values are limited only by the number and quality of the people likely to utilize them.” All retail merchants wanted to be on those downtown streetcar corners, and they encouraged the streetcar companies to build up such intersections in the center of the city, despite the traffic, the noise, and the wires. As seen in a map created by J. Thompson Brown in 1913, who at this point was also interested in downtown real estate, the longest commuter lines all converged at intersections along the two principal streets (Broad and Main) which formed a “ribbon” downtown, even while steam railroads were being pushed outside the city or being forced into tunnels. Streetcars going East and West were given right-of-way over streetcars going North and South.

Figure 7. The electric railway system (shaded) showing the preponderance of intersections in the downtown, unlike the railroads which were forced out of the city by law. Courtesy Valentine Museum.

The flat fare that suburban real-estate interests championed was also a force towards commercial and industrial centralization. The Federal Electric Railway Commissioner noted that “a flat fare” seemed to “have the tendency to centralize industries.” Streetcar companies also liked servicing those workers in centralized factories because, as opposed to finicky middle-class suburban commuters because “older or off-season cars can often be used to handle [this] business. The factory employees [sic] do not demand the luxuries of equipment.” They could even use the open “summer” cars in the winter. The rides were also shorter and less expensive. While residences were escaping the municipal boundary of the city, the Virginia Railway and Power Company advertized to outside investors to “Bring Your Plant to

Richmond – We want you to be a resident (we want your POWER BUSINESS). We can supply you with ELECTRIC POWER cheaper than you can make it. Our service is guaranteed by THREE large generating stations.” The Richmond Railway and Power Company did its part to cement the dominance of the downtown by building one of the first, and by far the largest, skyscraper in the city on 7th and Franklin in 1913. Later, streetcar companies would create special “Shopper’s Passes” for those travelling to the downtown, which gave discounts to downtown stores for riders.

The escape of potential customers to the suburbs didn’t impinge upon downtown profits. As already mentioned, early suburbs restricted almost all business occupancy, so purchases continued to be made in the old city, and since tracks converged in the center of the city, downtown merchants accrued even more market power. One early consideration on the electric-car even reversed the typical suburban perspective and said that the “purpose” of streetcar expansion in larger cities was to “enable[e] the business streets to be reached from the suburbs.” The streetcars also began hauling purchases and freight from the downtown to the suburbs. One of the first women who moved to the Ginter Park subdivision remembered the streetcar as her “connecting link to the city of Richmond.” She could “often call the grocer in

193 “Shopper’s Passes” dated 1942. Odds and Ends Folder. Valentine Richmond History Center Archives. While in the 19th and early 20th century downtown was less crucial to the streetcar lobby than the suburban real estate interests, in the late 20th century, by far the largest financial supporters to rapid transit campaigns were the downtown real estate owners and stores. Alan Altshuler and David Luberoff. Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), 176-218.
town, order something for supper, and then wait until the streetcar rolled around to deliver it.”

The companies urged riders to “Start your Christmas shopping now. Shop by trolley if you want to save time, the cars are convenient to the shopping district and the cost is too small to talk about.” The growth of the suburbs and the growth of the downtown went hand-in-hand.

In his memoirs John Cutchins wrote an entire chapter on “Downtown Richmond in 1905” and elaborated on “what might be called the main business district.” Indeed, even at this date the district described is almost entirely commercial. “Starting on Broad and Fourth” there were music shops and confectioners, while the entire subsequent block “was the locale of the most popular and well-known dry goods stores.” Beyond on South Broad were the “two great department stores,” and then past that “the Men’s Furnishing store.” And so on. Even at that early date the only residences mentioned were on Grace Street. Tellingly, “further downtown” there was the newly “segregated district.” Once the Chamber of Commerce had talked merely about the “principal streets” of Richmond, fifteen years later the whole center of the city had acquired the character of a “downtown business area.”

And in this new city segregated into district, the downtown concentration spawned another “segregated district” adjacent to it, which operated to service it. In 1905 the police cordoned off, for the first time, a red-light district just east of Capitol

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195 Richmond Times Dispatch, November 24, 1935.
197 Cutchins, Memories, 110-119.
Square, where prostitutes could ply their wares to downtown office workers in relative peace.\textsuperscript{198} Even sex had a district now.

When a strike occurred on the streetcar lines in 1903, the nature of this districted city was revealed. A reporter for the \textit{Richmond News Leader}, studying the pathways of the now footloose workers, was shocked to find that “instead of the great scattered bee hive of the city’s industries” that once pulled Richmond’s workers in every direction, it in fact “looked as though all of Richmond was…making for some central place.”\textsuperscript{199} The momentary lack of the electric streetcars demonstrated the city’s increased dependence on them, and it demonstrated the absolute necessity of downtown employment created by them.\textsuperscript{200} When realization of the electric-car stoppage spread, “quickly…the pedestrians bent their footsteps downtown.”\textsuperscript{201}

Yet just as the strike demonstrated the city’s dependence on streetcars, it also demonstrated streetcars’ precarious dependence on the city. Beset by high costs and low fixed fares, the streetcar companies were teetering on the edge of bankruptcy just as they were incurring the most invective from labor groups. The 1903 streetcar strike was in fact the only period of significant labor unrest in early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Richmond, and the companies’ peculiar political and financial position meant they had to shoulder the consequences.\textsuperscript{202} While most other companies in Richmond

\textsuperscript{199} \textit{Richmond News Leader}, June 17, 1903.
\textsuperscript{200} The effect of this was noted by a modern historian: “as the strike dragged on through July, downtown merchants began to feel the pinch of reduced sales.” Silver, \textit{Twentieth Century Richmond}, 47.
\textsuperscript{201} \textit{Richmond News Leader}, June 17, 1903.
\textsuperscript{202} Silver, \textit{Twentieth Century Richmond}, 48. Nationwide, the hatred for streetcar companies and their awkward position as both a public service and a private corporation meant that streetcar strikes in this
enjoyed relative labor peace, the strike brought out unparalleled animosity from workers and citizens. Three thousand people gathered at one point to pelt a car with “mud, eggs, and filth,” other crowds ambushed or fired shots into the cars. Bridges were burnt, and debris was piled on the tracks. One city councilman even impotently attacked a car with a block of ice, in a symbolic show of harmony with his constituent.203

This sort of animosity from workers and their supporters is surprising because the streetcar companies were relatively forward-thinking about labor policy. As early as 1892 the Street Railway Review stated that “the rights of labor are conceded by all fair minded men.” It also “conceded the right of labor to organize, and believe that labor unions properly conducted will work to the advantage of employee and employer.” The trade papers even reported favorably on the eight-hour Law in Melbourne Australia, because it gave streetcar conductors and motormen more time for leisure during which they could pay for streetcar rides!204 But the streetcar strike and its demands were yet another impossible burden on the fragile companies, and were a significant contribution to the Virginia Passenger and Power company’s bankruptcy the following year.


203 Silver, Twentieth Century Richmond, 47.
CONCLUSIONS

The first recorded description of the electric car is found in the fourth verse of the second chapter of Nahum: 'The Chariots shall rage in the streets; they shall jostle one against another in the broad ways; they shall seem like torches; they shall run like lightening.' – *Street Railway Review*[^205]

Woe to the bloody city! It is full of lies and robberies...There is a multitude of slain, [and] they stumble upon the corpses. – Nahum: 3:1-3

The speaker before the American Street Railway Association neglected to mention that the Nahum quote he used to conjure up the magic of this new technology was only one part of a larger jeremiad against a wicked and irredeemable city. While the owners of the massive new companies would marvel at the streetcar with all the wonder of a Nahum, they would also soon have reason to curse the cities they poured their money into, and the cities themselves would need to deal with the myriad of unforeseen consequences of a city built on the new technology.

Previous scholars have found the origins of the very peculiar progressive-era city in one of two causes. Some, like Thomas Hanchett in his study of Charlotte, North Carolina, ignored technology and focused on the groups of citizens which reacted or over-reacted to the new political threats of the late nineteenth century, and who thereafter strived to create new districts where their politics could be nurtured and protected. Others, like Sam Bass Warner, have emphasized the profound effects of the technological revolution in that era in crafting a new urban form on the outskirts.

[^205]: *Street Railway Review* 6, No. 10 (October, 1890), 326.
In this story technology is certainly central, but the technology alone, or even the technology with the assistance of private capital, would not have created the vast majority of the treasured and picturesque suburbs around Richmond that now form one of the most beloved parts of America’s built heritage, nor would they have emphasized a segregated black inner city, and a concentrated downtown. It was the peculiar political economy of that technology, susceptible to the machinations of real estate interests, demands by local politicians, and the ire of segregationists, that created the twentieth-century city, just as it ruined the agent of that transformation. The research here shows that the streetcar inspired fantasies from a wide variety of local groups, and those groups which had the political power to use the streetcar for their own ends succeeded in reshaping the life of almost everyone in the metropolis.\(^{206}\)

By the end of the nineteen twenties the Richmond that the streetcar helped create was almost unrecognizable to people who remembered it from just forty years before. For all residents, travel to far flung sections of the city was easy and enjoyable thanks to the new invention, but somehow classes and races were further apart, physically and socially, than ever before, and the streetcars that created it all were far into the extenuated senesce that would lead to their total collapse. They were decrepit and ruined before their time. Unwittingly and unwillingly, they had worked to make themselves obsolete.

\(^{206}\) Marshall McLuhan’s concept of technology, and specifically electricity, as an “extension of the human nervous system” is an apt metaphor for the transformation here.
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