

## Some notes on transportation on West Main Street, Rochester, New York

By James Dierks, Trustee, New York Museum of Transportation

In the mid-1800s, public transportation on Main Street consisted of a variety of privately run horse drawn vehicles of varying quality and reliability. Uncomfortable, these cramped vehicles bounced over the rutted thoroughfare that was muddy in rainy weather, dusty when dry, and impassable in heavy snow. As railroads built their way across western New York, their efficient concept of iron wheels on iron rails led to development of horsecar lines in cities. The Rochester City and Brighton Railroad was formed in 1862, rails were built in the streets, and the ability to move farther and faster helped the city expand and grow.



*Restored horsecar number 55 paraded through Rochester streets as part of the city's centennial celebration on August 12, 1934. Horsecars such as this one carried about a dozen passengers at 5 cents a ride. The driver stood on an open platform, winter and summer, his left hand holding the reins and his right hand grasping the large, brass brake lever.*

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A horsecar line began operating in 1863 on West Main Street, Buffalo Street (as the street was named from the Erie Canal to Bulls Head) and beyond on West Avenue; other lines provided service throughout the city as well. While horsecars offered a convenient mode of public transportation, they were prone to service disruptions from injuries and diseases among the horses, and they added to the considerable problem of animal waste in the streets. So it was with enthusiasm that cities like Rochester embraced the idea of electric powered streetcars soon after the introduction of electric lights and the power distribution systems that made them possible.

Rochester's horsecar lines were electrified starting in 1890, and all were electrified by 1893. However, a snag developed. The horsecar line on West Main Street-Buffalo Street-West Avenue passed by a West Avenue property whose owner did not want electric cars on the street. An injunction was served preventing operation of electric cars there. The result was a city-wide electric railway that for a time required passengers wanting to continue on to West Avenue to transfer to a horsecar. The injunction was eventually lifted in 1895, and Rochester Railway Company was finally able to complete the electrification of its system.

An electric car drew its power from 600-volt overhead wires. Making contact with the wires was by a spring loaded pole on the roof of the car, at the end of which was a flanged wheel that rode along the underside of the wire as the car moved. Overhead rolling devices in factories are called trolleys, so with this arrangement, the term "trolley car" came into use. The cars were also more generally known as streetcars, a generic term that applied to the now-defunct horsecars as well. The first trolley cars were not much larger than the horsecars they displaced, short in length and riding on a 4-wheel truck. But as the service grew in popularity and Rochester itself grew in size and commercial activity, larger and more powerful cars were added, riding on pairs of 4-wheel trucks and accommodating dozens more riders.

*An example of Rochester Railway Company's early electric cars is number 155, signed for North & West Avenues in 1894. The spring-loaded pole can be seen reaching from the roof to the overhead wire. The car affords greater passenger comfort than a horsecar, but isn't much larger.*

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Electric streetcars operating on the tracks on West Main Street west of present-day I-490 eventually included cars that traveled over various city streets on several lines. The lines changed over the years as the city grew, but some early examples would be:

1885: North Avenue and West Avenue

1904: N. Clinton and Jefferson; North and Genesee; Central Park and West

1916: Parsells and Genesee; Central Park and Jefferson; Main St. E. and West Ave

Streetcars traveling from the city center on West Main Street had to deal with traffic interruptions from the often cantankerous bridge over the Erie Canal until November 29, 1919. On that date, the canal was closed for the season and the portion through the city was closed permanently as part of the rerouting of the new Barge Canal to its present location south of Rochester.



*This circa 1905 slushy, overcast view looking east is at the intersection of West Main Street, Buffalo Street, Caledonia Street and the Erie Canal. West Main Street is on the left, and this being winter, the bridge is in the down position and thankfully will stay that way until the canal is reopened in the spring.*

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With the relocation of the canal, downtown was left with an empty canal bed and its many associated bridges. Ideas had been floated over the years in anticipation of the canal being moved, with a leading one being to convert the canal right of way to a limited access trolley line. The City of Rochester purchased the land for \$1.5 million in 1921, and construction of the Rochester Subway was completed in 1928. With the Subway operating below street level, the option presented itself to cover the line between South Avenue and Brown Street, creating a much needed additional crossing of the Genesee River: Broad Street.



*Large, modern "Peter Witt" streetcar number 1214 waits at a traffic light in front of Sibley's department store before continuing its run from Thurston and Genesee to Parsells Avenue on the city's east side. This route ran in part on West Main. An early bus shows its face just behind the 1214 in this circa 1926 photo.*

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With the introduction of the automobile, motor bus development soon followed. While early buses were not as spacious and comfortable as streetcars, they offered flexibility to modify routes and extend service to outlying areas such as on Chili Avenue, East Avenue and Ridge Road. These were all important streets that lacked streetcars for most or all of their lengths. Ironically, while streetcars originally drove the expansion of the city, suburban growth now brought service demands that could not be met economically by electric rail lines. In the 1920s, as streetcars aged and the tracks and overhead wires needed more maintenance and repair, the abandonment of lines began, and replacement service was provided by buses. Streetcar operations on the West Main Street tracks west of Broad Street lasted until December 24, 1940 with the end of service on the Thurston-Main East line.

*Two of a series of new Fageol Twin Coach city buses have arrived in 1946 as part of a post-war modernization program for Rochester Transit Company's service.*

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Since then, the portion of West Main Street from Broad Street to Bulls Head has continued to enjoy public transit service as buses ply one of the routes formerly served by streetcars. The RTS Genesee route is number 4, as it was for the University-Arnett streetcar line 90 years ago. Route 4 buses depart from the downtown RTS Transit Center and follow West Main, Genesee, Thurston and Arnett just as the electric streetcars once did, but now the bus route also extends to provide service to Strong Hospital.

A few representative photographs from the archives of the New York Museum of Transportation are included in this document. The large variety of streetcars, buses and paint schemes can best be seen in color artwork by Robert Northrup that are owned by Rochester-Genesee Regional Transit Authority. One of many sources for viewing these illustrations is the RGRTA Annual Report for 1982-1983, pages 9 and 10.