

A History of the Trolley :

The Correlation Between Charlotte Trolleys and Growth or Do You Want to Build a Streetcar?

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photo: Ellen Gurley



The exact date is lost to the annals of time, yet, in January of 1887 a team of horses was harnessed up and began pulling Charlotte into a new era. These were not celestial steeds, mounts of Olympus, traversing higher dimensions with our fair burg in tow. Rather, they were common *Equus Caballus*, descendants of the horses brought by the conquistadors horses indigenous to North America died out during the last ice age, and as they trotted down the centers of Trade and Tryon streets that winter day their payload was a car operated by Charlotte Street Railway Company. While this may not sound particularly grandiose in our modern world of the future present, this infrastructure was developed in a time when the overwhelming majority of the state's roads, some forty thousand miles, were still unpaved. Even Los Angeles was still operating horse drawn streetcars at the time the CSRC began operations in the Queen City. Mules quickly replaced the horses and the lines soon numbered four total, but things didn't really get moving on the rails until Edwin Dilworth Latta took control of Charlottean trolley transit by way of his Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company.

Latta and his 4C's quickly set to work powering the rail system with the energy sensation that had shocked the public imagination into a frenzy, electricity. A crony of Thomas Edison, Edwin obtained a contract for \$40,000, approximately one million with inflation applied, and set to work on the electric transit line began in march of 1891. In a handful of months the 4C's had completed two lines running along Trade and Tryon streets and, in doing so, brought trolley transport to the heart of a century old city bustling with growth. On a side note, the term trolley is a colloquial derivative of troller, the four-wheeled device hoisted above the streetcars that dragged along the electrified cables; cue the "the more you know" star. Anyhoodle, on May 18th, 1891 the first Charlotte trolley departed on it's the inaugural voyage out of Independence Square, the intersection of Trade and Tryon. As an industrialist of the era, Edwin Latta had seen the tycoons of the north in there exodus out of urban density to suburban developments and saw profit and progress in introducing the model to up and coming Charlotte. Thus it should come as no surprise that, just two days later on May 20th, service alone these initial lines extended to Charlotte's first suburbs, Dilworth and Latta Park.

Economic and residential development, catalyzed by the trolley system, steamrolled forward for nearly a decade before the next expansion to the network was implemented in September of 1900 and, for the subsequent two years, additional lines continued to be opened. By 1903 the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company's electrified light rails connected to a new streetcar suburb, Piedmont Park, and serviced the Elizabeth College

corridor. Not only would the Elizabeth expansion of the rail become the first leg of the modern revival of trolley transit in Charlotte, but the initial opening of this line allowed for rapid development of, what was at the time, farms along Providence Road. With all this growth, the trolley lines brimmed with traffic; in 1907 the rails carried approximately two million passengers. To put that figure in perspective, the population of the city at that time was to the tune of 34,000 residents. Those figures shake down to nearly 60 rides annually for every man, woman, and child in Charlotte. Soon, new players emerged in the development of Charlotte and, in 1911, George Stephens founded a real estate firm dedicated to transforming the Myers farm into another prosperous suburb and a streetcar line was at the top of the to-do list. On the first of September, 1911, trolley service extended into the Myers Park neighborhood. Service continued until the late Thirties and while, as the kids say, 'the rest is history,' two echoes of this era still resonate directly in the forms of trolley wait stations at the corners of East Fourth Street and Queens as well as Hermitage Road and Queens.

Charlotte's initial foray with electrified light rail ran from May 18 of 1891 to March 14 of 1938, and many of the streetcars found new use in applications ranging from hot dog carts, to lake houses, and some were even sold to Bogotá, Colombia to be used in their new trolley system. The last car to ever run on the initial system can still be viewed by the public, appreciating that particular streetcar, however, takes a little context. After its final flight in mid-March, car 85 was stripped of its seats and sold to the Air National Guard, where it served as office space at the Douglas Airport. Some time later it was transported to Caldwell Station and used as a convenience store and diner through the 40's. Not much is known about the next few decades of the old 85's whereabouts but it resurfaced in 1986, when it was part of a house slated for demolition before it was recognized. Over \$200,000 was raised to rescue and restore the car and it was displayed in the Atherton Mill complex, a modern development of one of the earliest streetcar stops. Car 85 actually saw modern employment from 1996 to 2010, when it ran as the Heritage Streetcar along the former Norfolk Southern Right of Way. The last car to ever run the first trolley lines in Crown Town can now be visited at Charlotte Trolley on Camden Road.

The first implementation of streetcars to the final lap of the initial iteration spanned only half a century yet, in this time, played an integral role in the growth and development of our city. Charlotte's population when the lines first opened was a meager 11,557, operations ceased the population was 100,899; this represents an 873% growth in population in a handful of decades. So, to those feeling frozen about the modern implementation of light rail in the Queen City, I ask, "Do you want to build a streetcar?"