

Adria Katz

A short summary of the evolution of the trolley lines of Providence

The history of the lines of transportation in Providence is nuanced, and has passed through many stages in accordance with the development of technology. The progression was dictated by the evolution from horse power to electric power to diesel engine, as in many other urban settings. The routes that have been delineated through the city of Providence have stayed fairly consistent, while the means of transport has changed. However, a brief history of this evolution is necessary in order to expose the ways that the lines themselves adapted to the city as it changed.

Earliest transportation involved horse-drawn stages and then omnibuses, which were also powered by horse, but bore en masse, in a three-walled carriage, members of the public for small change. This was the start of local mass transit. These omnibuses eventually began to run regular lines. Interestingly, these lines are strikingly similar to the lines of RIPTA's buses today. In 1865, the omnibus and the stagecoach were first replaced with the horse car, which differed only in that the cab ran on two metal tracks, which augmented comfort, but limited flexibility. The drivers would, in order to switch lines, literally lift the cabs off their tracks and place them down in the grooves of the next track over. In fact, it was a practice to simply take short cuts off the tracks and to redefine the route by driving off-track. The first track to be laid connected Market Square in Providence to Gineyville.

Electrification came in 1888, and brought about the type of trolley car that we would recognize today. In this year, the local independent car line company in Woonsocket, RI, electrified an old horse car – it ran a short distance, smoothly and without calamity, but many people feared the new “lightning cars,” imagining that they would be dangerous and uncontrollable. Still, in 1891, the first entire line was electrified in Providence, succeeded by the significant Broad Street line between Pawtuxet and Providence in 1892. By April 24th, 1894, the last Providence line, between Chalkstone Avenue and Elmwood Avenue, was converted to electric power.

At about this time, the local independent railway companies, who had until now been experimenting with electric cable lines, were unified one by one by the statewide Union Railroad Company. In 1891, this corporation invested in the Providence Cable Tramway Company and from this foothold, spread out to incorporate all the smaller city-wide establishments. In the following years, three major players of the Providence politic formed, first, in 1889, the Rhode Island Suburban Railroad Company, and later in 1893, its successor, the United Traction & Electric Company. These men were Nelson W. Aldrich (who later became an RI senator), Marden J. Perry and William G. Roelke. They absorbed the properties of the former Union Railroad Company. In 1902, the company leased individual lines to the Rhode Island Company, RICO, which for years was the key company charged with operating the lines.

It was not until 1921, after quelling the piqued interest of JP Morgan and Charles Mellen, respectively controller and president of The New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad, that the property of the lines changed hands again. Morgan and Mellen owned transportation systems throughout New England, including the boatlines between New York and Fall River. They had aspirations to buy the Rhode Island Company in order to monopolize Rhode Island transport, but were prevented by the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Instead, the company was entitled to the federal government, and designated federal appointees operated RICO until 1919. Surviving the petitioning of the company to a new triumvirate, and a nineteen-day-long strike by the workers, in 1921, the United Electric Railways Company, UER, consolidated RICO and the United Traction and Electric Company, so that the operational and ownership facets of the transportation system could be unified legally and financially.

In the 1920's, the success of the electric trolleys began to decline due to dwindling patronage, and by the Depression, they fell out of use as an extra unaffordable expenditure. In an effort to keep public transport a viable option, RICO made a grand effort – beyond its means monetarily – to modernize the trolleys. They were converted to trackless trolley and bus lines. By the forties, the war brought renewed interest since low wages forced mass transit as opposed to private automobiles, and electrified trolleys avoided the gas rations. However, the demise was eminent with the advent of cars, since the trolleys were becoming out of date, and every American had an eye towards automobiles. On June 21st, 1940, the oldest trolley line in Rhode Island, the one that spanned from Providence to Pawtuxet, was abandoned, and the process continued as such, until 1948 marked the swift decline of all the remaining used tracks. The UER, while strengthened on the surface by increased clientele, also suffered significantly due to the effect of the war. The demand for steel forced

the UER to forfeit miles of unused track to be scrapped. In the year of 1942 alone, the WPA pulled up 100,000 miles, just in Providence. In the spring of 1948, the critical Broad Street trolley was abandoned, and only 29 of the original 711 trolley cars still ran. By May of that year, on the 14th, the last trolley symbolically left Dorrance Street and ran along the Butler Avenue-Swan Point line. The overflow of spectators had to be accommodated by three additional trolley cars because of the overwhelming interest.

The era of diesel fuel buses and the Rhode Island Public Transportation Authority, RIPTA, began shakily, attributable to the car-crazy public. However, the blizzard of 1978 seemed to be just the reminder necessary to convince the people of Rhode Island of the benefits of public transportation after twenty years. Car owners were forced to ride the RIPTA buses, since they were equipped with traction wheels. Twenty years earlier, after the war, the system struggled to stay afloat – it was sold and bought repeatedly through the fifties. Under the ownership of What Cheer Association, the UER became the United Transit Company, which endured the last trackless trolley, in 1955, and the workers' strike in 1964, and sequential loss of service to Woonsocket. Conversions to diesel buses angered both patrons and drivers, since the gas had a horrific smell and the air in the summer made conditions unbearable. In addition, the new buses were not perfected, and were prone to breakdowns, were cold in the winter, were slow to acceleration, and were difficult to steer. When, in 1966, RIPTA claimed the rights to the transport lines and the UTC operations, service to Woonsocket was revived, and over time extended service to Newport, Barrington and Narragansett. Since its inception, the RIPTA fleet has doubled in size.

The trolley paths were set down early before trolleys arrived in Rhode Island. They followed the routes most defined by use. Certain stagecoach routes became obsolete, and as they were transcribed into public transportation routes, they were unsuccessful. Longer suburban routes, such as the Danielson-Providence line, the Narragansett Pier and Wakefield-Providence line, though promoted in advertisements for their beautiful vistas along the way, were not lucrative, since so few lived along the line. These lines were not substantiated by fares of daily commuters. The more local lines to Warren, Barrington, and Bristol also had minimal patronage as public use of the trolleys in general declined. In the 1920s, these lines all were abandoned by the electric trolleys, and the tracks were left unused until they were scrapped during the war. By the 1930s, more lines had been abandoned, as the industry faltered, including the lines connecting villages of Pawtuxet Valley, such as Hope, Clyde, Washington and Crompton, to downtown Providence. Aside from local Providence lines, the last remaining line, the age-old Buttonwoods line that existed since 1874 as a steam line, was abandoned in 1935. RICO centralized its resources at this point, to city lines, converting the electric trolleys to trackless trolley and bus. Eventually RIPTA was able to reinstate many of these lines, however, excluding just a few outdated lines, such as the Dexter and Ocean Street Lines, and a portion of the Eddy-Edgewood line. Downtown, there are only minimal changes to the original lines.