

THE TROLLEY PROBLEM

The Demise of the Streetcar in New Haven

The replacement of trolley systems by buses, a process which fundamentally reshaped America's urban landscape, has long been viewed as inevitable. However, in this paper, I look beyond arguments of financial necessity to show that, in New Haven, Connecticut, a massive engineering and publicity campaign coordinated between business, government, and media was necessary to overcome structural factors favorable to the trolley and accomplish its seemingly inevitable removal.

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New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad Station (1966)
Source: Library of Congress

“The trollies [sic] fought hard for existence... but finally succumbed to the march of progress in transportation,” opined *The New Haven Sunday Register* on the streetcars’ last day of operation.¹ The article, September 26, 1948’s local lead story, struck a decidedly more optimistic note than the rest of the political and international news on the front page. Atop the article sat a panoramic photograph of the new buses ready to ply their routes—buses dubbed “sleek, streamlined vehicles” by the caption.² While readers’ outlook on the nation and the world may have remained uncertain, their own city’s transit future had to be secure, or so the front page would have it. A second article buried in the inner pages, however, revealed residents’ discontent. The previous day, football game traffic had threatened to overwhelm the system, with fans clogging the bus turnstiles at the Yale Bowl. Amid cries of “We want the trollies!” and “What a mess!,” some in the crowd even rushed a police line guarding the loading zone.³ But despite the chaos, the change could not be reversed. Soon, tracks were to be torn out and trollies set aflame, as if a *damnatio memoriae* of New Haven’s half-century-old streetcar system.⁴ “The march of progress in transportation,” however uneasily, rolled on.

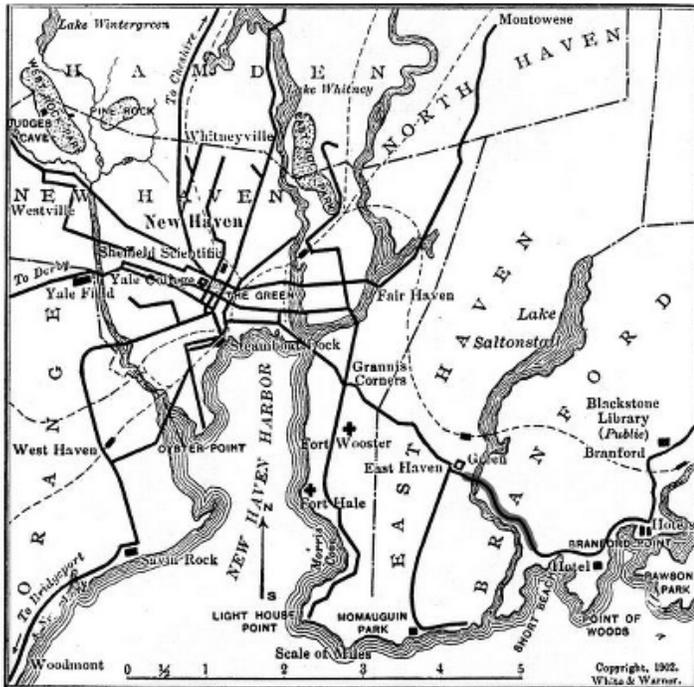
Before 1948, trollies traversed the streets of New Haven on the longest-sustained and best-supported system in the region, until their eventual conversion to bus routes. Mike Schreiber, archivist at the Shore Line Trolley Museum in East

Haven, Connecticut, summed up the reasons for the replacement of streetcars: “One word—money.”⁵ New Haven proved no exception to this blunt economic reality, but the anomalous circumstances surrounding the trollies’ 1948 retirement hint at a more nuanced explanation. The Elm City’s streetcars survived for roughly a decade longer than any other system in the state, holding out through the Depression and World War II due to the city’s part-structural, part-idiosyncratic trolley dependence. The significant efforts that concerned parties like the Connecticut Company made to undermine the trolley’s fixity, even to their economic disadvantage in some cases, demonstrate that the conversion to buses was not a natural, unforced transition. Beyond simplistic explanations about the cost of trollies, a massive engineering and publicity campaign was required to make the switch, which, in the process, dramatically reshaped the built landscape of the city. To be sure, larger forces like fixed-fare agreements, burgeoning suburbanization, and the overall rise of the automobile doomed the streetcar in cities nationwide, New Haven included. Yet if the demise of the trolley in New Haven was very likely inevitable eventually, the specific date of its disappearance was instead due to a concerted effort to overcome the trolley’s entrenchment. From structural factors like its radial layout, relative profitability, and factory service to unique facets like the Yale Bowl and area amusement parks, New Haven had aspects that allowed it to postpone a national trend. This deceptively minor qualification in fact reveals much about the power structure, governance, and internal discord of the American city and its transit companies.

The choices of trolley companies themselves receive little attention in the historiography of bus conversion. Histories of the trolley instead tend to ascribe its demise either to deterministic economic failings and excessive government regulation or, more sinisterly, to a General-Motors-led conspiracy. Along with recounting how railroad companies ignored warning signs, historians like Stephen Goddard have described a monopolistic agreement between the Fitzgerald Brothers and GM to buy out trolley lines and replace them with buses. Others, like transit administrator Brian Cudahy, have dismissed the conspiracy charge, citing fixed fares, Depression-era cutbacks, and other operational constraints as factors in the streetcar’s inability to stop the bus’ success.

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Between the two camps, however, the role of transit companies themselves has received scant attention. Whether from a conspiracy, overregulation, or simple profit motive, the inevitability of the trolley's disappearance has obscured any role for the companies and their allies, particularly in small cit-



Map of New Haven trolleys and Branford Electric Railway (1902)
Source: Shore Line Trolley Museum

ies. Cudahy's book details trolley company efforts to develop new streetcar technology, but not their moves into the bus business itself. A transit outfit, like New Haven's Connecticut Company, however, had years of experience experimenting in other modes of transportation, leveraging its connections in government and business to do so. Coupled with downtown business owners, who were willing to take drastic steps to keep business, as urbanist Alison Isenberg has argued, the Connecticut Company actively sought to switch to buses.⁶

“THE MARCH OF PROGRESS IN TRANSPORTATION[?]”⁷

For a rail company, the New Haven Railroad had always shown a definite interest in leaving the traditional confines of the tracks. Founded in an 1870 through the consolidation of regional rail lines, the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad—popularly known as “the New Haven”—monopolized long-distance transport in New England. Soon after, the New Haven purchased almost every trolley system in lower New England and established a subsidiary, the Connecticut Company, to run them.⁸ From its beginnings, the New Haven Railroad attempted to branch out anticipatorily into other modes of transportation, often at great financial risk—foreshadowing their later move to a comparatively cheaper system, buses.

Even before the Depression arrived, the Connecticut Company sought to switch to buses. In 1921, the first year the state allowed such a program, the Company began auto service. While track mileage hit a profitable peak in 1924, the Company began conversion of trolley lines to bus routes that year. In fact, the Company moved prematurely, shutting down New Haven's first bus line after the trolley outcompeted it. But after the Depression struck, bus changeover accelerated, especially after the New Haven declared bankruptcy in 1935 and sold the Connecticut Company to the local power company. By the late 1930s, buses offered the company a number of advantages, even for a firm founded to run streetcars. At least twice as cheap as a trolley, a bus offered flexible routing, lacked the clatter of streetcars, and required no large investment to extend into the suburbs. The city required the Company to pave and plow large sections of streets with trolley tracks, an obligation avoided by bus operation. On top of all this, the process of trolley-to-bus conversion offered an ideal opportunity to raise fares. The transition to buses thus seemed economically sensible. With car ownership nationally almost tripling between the trolley's heyday and its demise and with the Company facing deep losses, the situation did call for drastic action. However, the Connecticut Company's efforts to change even before buses became obviously more profitable suggested a long-standing, concerted effort to eliminate streetcar service before its time. By the onset of World War II, buses had long since replaced trolleys in every Connecticut city but New Haven.⁹

That last city, though, clung to its trolleys. A great number of factors sustained the streetcar in New Haven, all of which would have to be overcome to transition to buses. Home of the Connecticut Company's headquarters and its largest, most profitable streetcar system, the Elm City was scheduled last for conversion. Structurally, the city's track network converged downtown near major businesses, not at the main train station as in some other cities, a design that helped local commuters. Moreover, as urbanist Douglas Rae elucidated by analyzing business records and mapping shop locations, the city and its commercial interests relied heavily on the streetcars for both freight and passenger deliveries. New Haven's centralized downtown had for decades benefited from the trolleys' fixed design of radial, “hub-and-spoke” lines. Manufacturers, then a large part of the city's economy, appreciated that trolleys stopped right at the factory doors.¹⁰

The trolley held out for more than just economic reasons. Every weekend in the fall, the colossal Yale Bowl stadium filled with tens of thousands of football fans, most of whom took the streetcar. For Bowl games, the Company employed upwards of eighty open trolleys—streetcars without side walls—so that the travelers could climb aboard along the car's whole length and feel cooled by the breeze. Single-door, un-air-conditioned buses would not have sufficed, leaving the Company as one of the last operators of open trolleys nationally. The New Haven area also featured amusement

parcs like Savin Rock and Momauguin Park, which relied on trolleys for customers and on the electric company that ran them for power. Even into their later years, the streetcars provided a sense of thrill and vacation for amusement-park and Bowl-game travelers.¹¹ While other cities shared some of these factors, New Haven held a unique reliance on the trolley. Buses may have made economic sense for the Connecticut Company, but for New Haven, their loss would necessitate a dramatic change in city life.

While the rest of the state had converted to buses, the Connecticut Company's preparations in New Haven ended abruptly with the onset of World War II. Due to gasoline rationing and material shortages, the Connecticut Company could not buy new buses to meet the increased demand caused by spiking factory employment. The Company, despite wanting bus conversion, had to press many old cars into service and reactivate abandoned lines. As a result, the streetcars turned a greater profit than they had in years. However, despite a federal prohibition on further bus conversion, the Company began to lay the groundwork for the postwar transition even as the war escalated. The streetcars brought out for wartime service received only minimal repairs, leading to increased noise complaints and frequent power shutdowns. Resources that could have been used for trolley refurbishing instead went to track removal—not as part of bus conversion, the Company claimed, but for recycling as war salvage. Meanwhile, the state granted the Company approval to run new bus routes out to suburban war factories. Though the buses were only allowed to transport factory workers, the Company managed to increase its bus network in the New Haven area during the war. Continued shortages after the war delayed bus conversion further.¹² Nevertheless, the Company's actions during a time of national crisis demonstrate both how much preparatory work was needed for bus conversion and how determined the Company was to retiring New Haven's streetcars.

“SO THAT... THE OPPOSITION COULD BE DEALT WITH”¹³

After the war, the Connecticut Company hoped their trolleys had reached the end of the line. The Company, freed from the constraints of wartime service and rationing, remained eager to rid itself of the streetcars. However, given the city's postwar manufacturing strength and its increase in carless residents like Yale students, the trolley appeared to have at least a few more good years ahead of it. To overcome this inertia and escape the duties of its trolley franchise agreement, the Connecticut Company and its allies needed decisive action. The city's growing traffic woes provided them with a perfect opportunity. In 1947, the New Haven Chamber of Commerce's Traffic and Parking Committee, whose members included a Mr. Bennett of the Connecticut Company, conducted a volume survey of rush hour traffic and site tours of “bottleneck” spots.¹⁴ Their results suggested a traffic crisis, a problem that had plagued New Haven's old streets since the

mid-1920s. In response, traffic engineer Edmund R. Ricker presented a drastic plan to the Committee in 1948: to convert almost every street in downtown to one-way traffic. While New Haven had converted individual streets one-way on a limited basis before, Ricker suggested the systematic overhaul of the city's entire traffic pattern.¹⁵

At first glance, restricting traffic on major urban thoroughfares to one direction would seem to do little to ease congestion. Ricker and others countered that one-way streets would help segregate cars moving through downtown from those travelling to and from it. Traffic would form “a directed stream,” the *Yale Daily News* surmised.¹⁶ But hidden from public view, the meeting minutes of the Chamber of Commerce's committee reveal another, private reason for a one-way street system: it would necessitate the removal of the trolleys, whose two-track, bidirectional operation would become incompatible with the new traffic patterns. Buses, however, could easily adjust their routes to one-way streets. The Committee's records do not indicate that Ricker designed his plan specifically to rid the city of trolleys. From the start, though, every member of the Committee knew that trolley removal was a necessary and integral part of the plan. “Ricker told the Committee that he definitely planned to install one-way streets in the downtown area as soon as the trolleys are removed,” the minutes from the Committee's August 5th meeting noted.¹⁷ The minutes do not reveal if trolley removal was an effect or a cause of the one-way plan, yet regardless, bus transition had long been a goal of the Committee's assembled business leaders. For instance, earlier that year, one member pressed Bennett of the Connecticut Company to decommission some of its few remaining trolley lines as quickly as possible. Like the cars Ricker planned to redirect, the Committee itself planned to travel in only one direction: away from the streetcar.¹⁸

While the Chamber of Commerce's Traffic and Parking Committee unanimously agreed to implementing one-way, trolley-free streets, the support of the rest of New Haven's downtown business community remained in doubt. “Ricker stated that it is imperative that the idea be sold to the merchants,” the Committee's minutes recounted, “for without their agreement, the plan would be impossible.”¹⁹ The backers of the proposal therefore did not take business owners' acquiescence for granted. After all, the immovable, hub-and-spoke design of the streetcar lines funneled almost all riders downtown and dropped them off right in front of the department stores of Chapel Street's central business district. Without the certainty of customers that the trolleys provided, businesses feared a flight to the suburbs, a worry the Committee recognized.²⁰

When Ricker announced his plan, the Committee immediately set to work persuading business owners on its merits. The previous year, Chairman Hale and other members of the Committee had met with the most influential business

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owners; Ricker and the rest of the Committee now redoubled their efforts.²¹ Ricker soon met with members of the New Haven Retail Board of Governors, while Hale wrote to the full Chamber of Commerce, claiming that the proposal was “vital to the continued health of our commercial center.”²² Businesses initially responded unenthusiastically. As the minutes paraphrased, the Retail Board members agreed to the plan only out of “the belief that some move is better than none.”²³ But as the date of the conversion drew near, businesses began to embrace the switch—some accepting the need to accommodate cars, others believing buses to be equivalent to trolleys. On the day of the change, an advertisement in the *Register* trumpeted, “It’s a One-Way Street to Malley’s...and to relieve the confusion of the new traffic regulations, effective this morning, get your free pocket map.”²⁴ Downtown businesses moved toward full support, even attempting to profit off the conversion itself.

Committee and the Connecticut Company never considered shared rights-of-way or other compromise solutions, instead viewing a city with trolleys as incompatible with a motorized downtown. Parking on the Green, ultimately never realized, might indeed have helped customers reach department stores, but here, it represents the lengths the concerned parties were willing to go to retire the streetcar.

With businesses behind the plan, the Committee moved to secure support of the town’s elected and appointed officials. The Connecticut Company and its affiliated electric company paid franchise fees and provided power to the town, thereby establishing a close relationship with city government. Supporting this link, the related New Haven Railroad employed one of the town’s largest workforces. So when the Company decided to make its final move away from trolleys, the city and Mayor William Celentano gladly complied. While au-

“... the Connecticut Company may have advertised their new bus system as sleek, but its implementation ended up anything but smooth.”

But the businesses’ backing came at a price. As Trolley Museum archivist Mike Schreiber summed up, the commercial elite would only give up trolleys if accommodation was made for new car drivers in the process.²⁵ Without trolleys, drivers would need many more places to park in a city with very little space left free downtown. Recognizing this problem, the Committee offered businesses an extra incentive: a promise to create more downtown parking. Roughly eighty-one percent of drivers surveyed found New Haven’s parking inadequate, so in September 1946, the Committee requested money from the town to study possible new parking lot locations. Within the next four years, the Committee acted on bids to demolish a building on Orange Street and pave over the wide median of Broadway for parking lots; the latter improvement was requested directly by the businessmen lining the avenue. Parking still remained scarce, but the Committee unanimously rejected as impractical a proposal to create lots in peripheral city areas instead of downtown, as was done in Hartford.²⁶

Instead, the Committee investigated a bold redesign of the very heart of New Haven. Mr. Johnson of the Chamber of Commerce, at the Committee’s urging, sought an estimate for “(a) a closed underground garage underneath the Green; or (b) an open pit garage.”²⁷ Rather than working to refurbish the trolley, the most preeminent business figures in the city considered digging up New Haven’s colonial commons for parking spaces. Though the proprietors of the Green flatly vetoed the idea, Mr. Arpaia of the Traffic and Parking Committee suggested taking the fight public.²⁸ The

authority over New Haven’s traffic matters technically rested in the city’s Police Board, the town’s Traffic Commission decided most planning decisions. A city body of businessmen, engineers, and aldermen for a time chaired by Yale transportation professor Kent Healy, the Commission became the site of the Connecticut Company and Chamber of Commerce’s maneuvering around the trolley’s retirement.²⁹

In the saga of New Haven’s bus transition, business interests made public decisions, for all practical purposes. The Traffic Commission and the Chamber of Commerce’s Traffic and Parking Committee worked closely before on small-scale one-way street conversions and the citywide parking study. But when Ricker proposed on behalf of the Chamber that the whole downtown become one-way, the two bodies’ partnership became an overlap. In order to oversee so dramatic a change in the city’s landscape, the Commission appointed Ricker to sixty days as New Haven’s official traffic engineer, set a date for the conversion, and denied minors change to the plan. The Celentano Administration could not have sent a clearer message as to where the city stood on trolley replacement. In fact, in the years after the streetcar’s demise, the city bought rights-of-way from the Connecticut Company and tore out tracks using municipal funds.³⁰ The effort to change over to buses, ostensibly the decision of a private company, actually entailed massive government involvement.

With the city’s power brokers united behind the plan, the concerned parties launched an all-out publicity blitz to convince the public of the plan’s merits. At the August meeting

of the Traffic and Parking Committee, the members resolved to publicize the proposal as soon as possible, via a story and map in the *Register*. “The idea behind this move,” the minutes acknowledged, “was to present the plan to the public early in the season so that, by September, all complaints that are to be expected will have been registered and the opposition could be dealt with.”³¹ Therefore, Chairman Hale developed a list of “recognized opinion molders in the city” who could help sway mass sentiment.³² One of the foremost “opinion molders,” Mayor Celentano, sounded “a tone of defeat” in his 1947 State of the City address concerning the “sustaining technologies (most of all, trolleys) that were all but dead,” noted Rae.³³ Meanwhile, even before this effort, the Connecticut Company had been attempting to prime the public for conversion. Mr. Gaffney, an executive with the Connecticut Company during the relatively profitable war years, emphasized to the *Yale Daily News* that, in comparison to buses, “the street car business has fallen off quite a bit.”³⁴ Now, the Company threw itself into the effort, creating pro-bus illustrations, advertisements, and a logo featuring a bus and the tagline “The modern way to downtown areas is by bus—safer—easier—less expensive.”³⁵ The press joined as well, publishing a full-page spread of Ricker’s maps and arguing on the front page that trolley rails should be melted down to solve the metal shortage. Of course, not all of the anti-trolley press was part of this coordinated effort—for instance, the *Yale Daily News* independently advocated burning the trolleys to end their constant noise.³⁶ Nevertheless, the significant public relations campaign launched by the Connecticut Company and its allies demonstrates that the public could not be counted upon to take trolley removal for granted.

A “BIG EXPERIMENT”³⁷

On the morning of September 25, 1948, a shiny fleet of seventy buses rumbled down Derby Avenue. Yale played Brown in the season opener that day at the Yale Bowl, and the Connecticut Company expected heavy traffic. Almost a year earlier, at the 1947 Harvard-Yale Game, customers had packed into the traditional open trolleys for their “farewell run”; this year, spectators would learn to ride the bus to the game.³⁸ While football may have been just another Saturday tradition in New Haven, an unprecedented change in the way people moved was occurring. Less than three months after Ricker presented the one-way proposal to the Traffic and Parking Committee, the plan was slated to go into effect at midnight that night. The city entered a state of frantic, overnight change, with workers uncovering streets signs, engineers installing traffic lights, and police directing traffic.³⁹ All the work Ricker, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Connecticut Company had invested was about to culminate in a “Big Experiment”: the removal of streetcars once and for all.⁴⁰

The problems began at the football stadium. Used to boarding the open trolley cars along their whole length, the crowds shoved at the turnstiles and small doors of the new buses. Police arrived in force to keep the fans orderly. Meanwhile,

Chapel Street businesses lost access to the street as the Connecticut Company converted two downtown blocks into a loading zone without getting police permission. That night, even with light traffic, issues with the new system continued. Crowds from late-night restaurants and trolleys running late forced the city to postpone the midnight one-way traffic deadline by two hours. “Considerable confusion” reigned the next day, wrote the *Register*, especially for those reliant on the new buses.⁴¹ While Sunday traffic seemed no worse than normal, come the work week, New Haven’s major intersections faced serious crowding from commuters and storegoers. “New Traffic Plan Meets Difficulties in Inaugural,” trumpeted the *Register*’s headline, a sentiment not lost on the Connecticut Company.⁴² “We realize that there are a number of difficulties to be corrected,” admitted Charles Dempsey, manager of the Connecticut Company’s New Haven operations.⁴³ In the end, the city returned to a sense of normalcy. However, the transition required a huge investment from the city and the Company, and still turned out far from seamless.⁴⁴



A fifteen-bench car owned by the Connecticut Company (2004)
Source: Frank Hicks (Wikimedia Commons)

For all the faults of the transition, the Connecticut Company and its allies remained upbeat, with their cheaper buses now secured. Of the trolleys, a Connecticut Company official freely told the *Yale Daily News*, “[w]e are glad to see them go”; *The Hartford Courant* described the Company as sighing with relief.⁴⁵ After the conversion, the Company made no secret of the fact that the one-way streets and the bus conversion were inexorably linked, advertising as much in the *Register*. Spokesmen for the Company assured the press that all difficulties would end as soon as the public became accustomed to the new system.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, public officials joined in praising the new buses and traffic patterns. Chief of Police Henry Clark said of the transition, “it couldn’t go any better,” while Mayor Celentano simply termed the system “wonderful.”⁴⁷ The press itself proved the most vociferous cheerleader for the buses. The “city took [the] changeover in stride,” as-

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Postcard of The Square in Westport, CT (c. 1907)
Source: Unknown (Wikimedia Commons)

sported the editorial page of the *Register*, while the *Courant* contrasted the “last, lumbering...trolley car [that] clattered across the city” with “buses [that] purred along.”⁴⁸ In fact, the *Register* suggested that the walk signs for pedestrians at intersections be replaced with run signs, given how fast the traffic could now move through downtown. Minimizing the conversion’s pitfalls, the press and the local elites it covered presented a narrative of a smooth, almost deterministic change, a narrative at odds with many of the occurrences that very week.⁴⁹

According to the newspapers and officials, the public largely accepted the trolley’s retirement, and whatever concerns existed during the transition ended soon thereafter. “Almost forgotten... trolley service will end without ceremony or recognition,” the *Register* reported.⁵⁰ Not even the Traffic Commission mentioned the streetcars in their meeting immediately before or after decommissioning. Chief Clark stated matter-of-factly, “The public has readily accepted it”; those who did complain came to accept the disruption as distasteful but ultimately necessary medicine, the *Register* analogized.⁵¹ Nevertheless, some did mourn the trolleys. Enthusiast John Beers rented a special trolley to travel the lines one last time, the final car to return to the barns. In the weeks to come, others offered more active resistance, via word-of-mouth grievances around town. By the following February, public complaints rose to such a level that the Traffic and Planning Committee resolved to generate another round of positive publicity, in the form of prepared press stories. In fact, the Committee decided to address future press releases from the Committee as a whole, not from City Engineer Rick-

er or Chief Clark—a move implying the unpopularity of each in the wake of the traffic plan.⁵² That said, while the press and elites exaggeratedly downplayed the opposition, antagonism never did escalate beyond mutterings. The streetcars had always been a nuisance to the increasing number of drivers in the city. As for transit commuters, Schreiber paraphrased their attitude: “You’re standing on the corner; you get on the first thing that comes along.”⁵³ Nonetheless, in order to reach this stage of popular acceptance, the backers of trolley replacement felt it necessary to disclaim any discontent and engage in multiple rounds of publicity generation.

As the trolley faded into memory, reactions varied from frustration to nostalgia to acceptance. Breaking with the otherwise pro-bus tone of the *Yale Daily News*, opinion columnist John Geismar offered the following plea: “Heck! They gotta bring the open-air trolleys back. Even an ignoramus can see they did no harm.”⁵⁴ Some aficionados went beyond wistful reminiscences, founding the Branford Electric Railway Association to preserve and run trolley cars at their museum in East Haven. Resentment lingered, however, even at the highest levels. Kent Healy, the Yale professor so dedicated to transit that he started a group of protégés called the Yale Transportation Fraternity, quit the Traffic Commission two years after the trolley conversion. His resignation, in which he did not even bother to spell Mayor Celentano’s name correctly, cited waste, poor organization, and lack of control over the city’s traffic engineers.⁵⁵ No effort of protest, however, could restore the trolleys. Under the caption “Scrap metal and ashes are all that remain of an old tradition as efficiency takes over,” the *Daily News* ran a series of photos of scrapped

trolleys in flames, on top of which was overlaid a cartoon of a smiling bus.⁵⁶ After all the effort the Connecticut Company and its allies had invested, the streetcars' funeral pyre burned brightly, illuminating a city whose very pattern of mobility had changed.

THE TRACK AHEAD

After the trolley, New Haven could no longer withstand the forces of decentralization. Between 1940 and 1950, the number of resident-owned homes, indicative of suburbanization, grew by a third just within the city limits proper, while rental properties only increased two percent. Concurrently, downtown stores and manufacturers closed or moved out to the suburbs, with only a single department store left in 1962. While the car initially enabled decentralization, the bus also followed the ever-expanding footprint of the population and furthered the new suburbs better than the trolley. The business community reacted differently to these trends. Some business owners believed the dominance of the car inevitable enough to be worth embracing. Malley's, the same downtown department store which ran the pro-one-way advertisement in the *Register*, partnered with the Connecticut Company on a new shuttle to the Green in 1963, a desperate move to restore the customers the trolley had once carried right out front. Other businesses, however, had plans to move out to the suburbs all along, and thus supported a change-over to suburb-supporting buses.⁵⁷ At least partially facilitated by the bus, the whole layout of a metropolitan area changed almost irrevocably.

The way people travelled shaped the American city, nowhere more than in New Haven. Larger forces of suburbanization and automobility worked against almost any form of mass transit, both buses and trolleys included. However, in New Haven in particular, a variety of factors coalesced to create a

centralized town dependent on the streetcar. Thus, the transfer to buses does not merely represent a shift from rails to tires. The effort the Connecticut Company and its allies expended to retire the trolley reshaped an entire city. To view the transition as a profit-driven business decision, while strictly true, ignores the massive collaboration between business interests, the press, and the government which enabled the conversion. Throughout the short-term chaos and long-term success of the bus transition, the city's public and private power brokers operated under a close partnership necessitated by preexisting hurdles. The trolleys' demise may have been inevitable, but the rocky way it came about in New Haven reveals counterintuitive incentives: a streetcar company ridding itself of streetcars and a city eliminating one of the last barriers to suburbanization. Overall, the Connecticut Company may have advertised their new bus system as sleek, but its implementation ended up anything but smooth.

In the past few years, various local advocates and urban design groups have proposed constructing light rail in New Haven. Only a single line, the plan would be a far cry from the immense system which once covered the streets of the Elm City. However, the Board of Alders voted against a study in 2011, citing the poor economy.⁵⁸ If numerous obstacles to eliminating the trolley existed in the 1940's, just as many exist now to restoring it. Unlike then, though, the backers of the trolley this time lack the political and business connections of the Connecticut Company. Indeed, in 2011 as in 1948, what seems like a mere change of vehicle could entail large-scale urban restructuring. Thus, if New Haven is any guide, major transit decisions may be prompted by economic necessity, but cannot come to fruition without concerted publicity, politicking, and pressure from businesses. In other words, the wheels of the engine of progress often need a little grease. 

Endnotes

- [1] “City’s Center under One-Way Traffic System: New Plan to Face First Test Tomorrow When Stores, Plants Open,” *New Haven Sunday Register*, Sept. 26, 1948.
- [2] *Ibid.*
- [3] “New Buses Get First Test in Bowl Traffic: Turnstiles Cause Jam as Crowds Leave Game—Two Autos Collide,” *New Haven Sunday Register*, Sept. 26, 1948.
- [4] “Buses Replace Ancient Trolley along Bowl Route; Recent Change Expected to Speed Transportation,” *Yale Daily News* (hereafter *YDN*), Sept. 22, 1948.
- [5] Michael Howard Schreiber, interview with author, Mar. 25, 2014.
- [6] Brian J. Cudahy, *Cash, Tokens, and Transfers: A History of Urban Mass Transit in North America* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1990), 151-79, 187-91; Mark S. Foster, *From Streetcar to Superhighway: American City Planners and Urban Transportation, 1900-1940*, Technology and Urban Growth, ed. Blaine A. Brownell et al. (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press: 1981), 116; Stephen B. Goddard, *Getting There: The Epic Struggle between Road and Rail in the American Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 52-3, 64, 120-37; Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People who Made It*, Historical Studies of Urban America, ed. Kathleen N. Conzen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and James R. Grossman (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004), 1-12; and Robert C. Post, *Urban Mass Transit: The Life Story of a Technology*, Greenwood Technographies (Westport, CT, Greenwood: 2007), 88, 149-54.
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