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Tampa's Trolleys: Innovation, Demise, and Rediscovery

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In the late 1800s and early 1900s, a desire to escape the clamor of a city's downtown for the serenity of its surrounding neighborhoods sent people spilling out into the countryside. Immigration and a general population surge, propelled by the pursuit of the American dream, led to this mobility, and the streetcar facilitated this dynamic.

The decision to bring the streetcar to Tampa was an easy and initially profitable one. Cigar factories, an active port, and a phosphate industry fueled Tampa's growth, and the social and cultural dynamics of the population intensified. The streetcar brought opportunity and a transportation revolution. At its peak in the 1920s, the trolley cost a nickel to ride, crisscrossed areas of Hillsborough County with fifty miles of track, and carried twenty-four million people each year.2

By the mid-1940s, transportation became increasingly dominated by buses, cars, trucks, and taxis. A booming post-World War II economy, the promise of interstate highways, and the proliferation of corporate enterprise all contributed to the abandonment of the trolley system. After years of neglect and competition with the auto industry, Tampa's trolley system was simply outdated and losing money. By comparison to the trolley, automobiles and buses provided quicker and quieter transportation. Automobiles, dramatically increasing in size and number, vied for space with trolleys that barreled down the center of the city's major thoroughfares. Already a city of neighborhoods where residency depended upon race, class, and religion, Tampa's racial and ethnic divisions promoted the development of suburbs (many restricted) and unincorporated enclaves; these reached further and further beyond the city's center.3 The ever-increasing distance between city and suburb coincided with a shift in the perception of the automobile: cars quickly changed from a luxury commodity to a daily necessity. Profit and convenience drove the decision to close the trolley lines, and on August 3, 1946, the era of the nickel ride became a memory.4

The transition from trolleys to cars and buses marked an extraordinary shift in civic, social, and cultural sensibilities amid the changing identity of a nation. Labor tensions, politics, and the waking giant of corporate influence all contributed to the transition. Recently, there has been a romantic return of Tampa's trolleys that adds another dimension to the discussion. To understand these dynamics, we must look at the history of Tampa's streetcars.

Both the beginning and the end of the trolley system speak to Tampa's aggressive commercial ambition. Predating the electric lines, the first street railway system in Tampa began in 1885. The Tampa Street Railway Company, incorporated (in part) by one of Tampa's most diligent pioneers, John T. Leslie, operated "a wood-burning engine with several cars over a narrow gauge track from downtown, along Franklin Street, to the adjacent town of Ybor City."5 The passenger cars consisted simply of scaled-down railroad cars. The tracks ambled from downtown Tampa, through the
sparsely settled “Scrub” area northeast of the city, and ended at the newly established cigar-making center, Ybor City. Vicente Martinez Ybor, who founded Ybor City in 1886, also held a stake in the Railway Company. Although primitive compared to the labyrinthine systems of some other cities, the Tampa Street Railway Company's line connected two vastly different communities: the conservative white mainstream city of Tampa and the politically radical, ethnically diverse enclave of Ybor City. Intricably tethered to one another through local politics and economy, the cultural distinctiveness of Ybor City and Tampa were prescient indicators of the ability of the trolley to connect and yet forever separate.

As a result of the innovations of Frank Sprague of Richmond, the electric streetcar was born in 1887. Sprague developed a four-wheeled prototype that was pulled along by an overhead wire that transmitted electricity to the cars. Originally called a “troller,” the more affable name “trolley” was quickly adopted. As word of this new technology spread, commercial enterprise kicked-in, and electric companies made haste to consolidate, merge, expand, and diversify, all to exploit the new invention. Private companies now entered the transportation business on a grand scale. Like the railroad magnates that controlled the travel and trade of a nation, local companies or regional conglomerates influenced the expansion patterns and internal transportation needs of a city. These influences not only affected the development of neighborhoods and suburbs, but also affected individual careers and employment, commercial trends and industrial growth, the success of local vacation destinations, and how people spent their leisure time.

In 1892, the Tampa Street Railway system combined with the Florida Electric Company to form the Tampa Street Railway and Power Company. That same year, Peter O. Knight joined the competition for the trolley market. Forseeing the potential profits, Knight formed the Tampa Suburban Company. The company sought to take advantage of the growing commercial interests in Tampa, principally the magnificent new Tampa Bay Hotel, opened in 1891. Knight also understood the role of the first
suburbs in realizing, for many Tampans, the American dream. Like the much later developments of cookie-cutter homes and retention ponds beyond the school districts of inner cities, the suburbs of the 1890s offered the middle class an escape. Just far enough to escape the grit of downtown Tampa, these neighborhoods depended on the streetcar to connect residents with work, school, shopping, and recreation. However, the Tampa Street Railway and Power Company was not ready to surrender its share of this growth market to Knight. The company immediately secured an injunction to stymie further operation of its new rival’s lines. While the appeal was pending, Knight restructured the company to organize a new corporation, selling stock to Tampa citizens. In 1894, the Consumers Electric Company, Knight’s new company, emerged as the dominant streetcar system, winning a rate war against its adversary and buying them out on June 18 of that year.

Tampa’s earliest suburbs were developed at the discretion of the streetcar stockholders with consideration for prominent local merchants and builders. Many prominent businessmen resided in Tampa Heights and Hyde Park, places served by the first streetcars. Access to new areas facilitated expansion of the lines, increasing the financial gain of investors. Bayshore Boulevard denizens Chester E. Chapin and his wife, Emelia, played major roles in the development of that area. Since the Chapins were significant contributors to the Consumers Electric Light and Power Company, that service quickly answered the ardent requests of these benefactors and laid tracks from downtown Tampa along Bayshore Boulevard to Ballast Point. The line gave Mrs. Chapin the perfect opportunity to ride her personal trolley car, “Fair Florida,” into town. The company also created an amusement park at the line’s terminus in Ballast Point. Hugh MacFarlane, a principal in the West Tampa Latin cigar making community, and his associates helped the Consumer Electric Light and Power Company to finance a streetcar service to West Tampa. The streetcar lines had truly begun to shape and reconfigure the city of Tampa.

The trolley system continued to grow, forging new paths or simply following the
demographic patterns of Tampa's soaring and diverse population. Problems arose, companies formed and dissolved, and competition was fierce. Consumer Electric's Ybor City line proved the most disruptive in its tactics. With lines running parallel to those of the Tampa Street Railway Company, a rate war was instigated by Consumer Electric, which dropped streetcar fares on the Ybor lines to two cents. Unable to compete with the strong financial backing of Consumer Electric, Tampa Street Railway Company declared bankruptcy and was purchased by Consumer Electric in 1894. Although Consumer Electric itself went into receivership in 1899, Peter O. Knight reorganized the firm, this time as Tampa Electric Company (TECO). Later, in 1907, the Tampa & Sulphur Springs Traction Company entered the competition, first forming a line to Sulphur Springs to promote the area as a tourist spot and soon establishing lines across Tampa. By 1911, Sulphur Springs Traction Company had declared bankruptcy and Tampa Electric picked up the company's lines in 1913. TECO then owned all of the streetcars and lines, and became the sole provider for both electricity and public transportation in the Tampa area.

Trolley use would reach its peak in the 1920s and fluctuate thereafter, hitting a spiraling after World War II.

Peter O. Knight, was and is considered a monument to the trolley's legacy. A man of many talents and responsibilities, Knight served as legal counsel for Tampa Electric Company, as its vice president, and then as its president from 1924 to 1946. He was also the lawyer for the Florida Central and Peninsula Railroad (FC&P), the Seaboard Air Line Railway, and the Tampa Northern Railroad. Knight organized or sponsored an impressive and diverse array of companies including the Ybor City Land & Improvement Co., Tampa Phosphate Co., Tribune Publishing Co., Florida Brewing Co., Tampa Shipbuilding & Engineering Co., Exchange National Bank of Tampa, and the Tampa Gas Company. Needless to say, his interests were stretched thin and they sometimes conflicted, but most locals agreed that his influence in Tampa went far and wide, ranging from politics and promotion to industry and public utilities.

Decades later, following the last day of streetcar service in Tampa, the Tampa Daily Times extolled Knight as “one of the city's greatest and best-loved builders.” Despite his role as an early advocate and organizer of the trolley system and a former president, with a twenty-year tenure, of Tampa Electric Company, Knight met the streetcar’s end with surprising silence. The Tampa Daily Times described Knight's reticence to respond to the end of an era: “Like the older motormen, some with as much as thirty years' experience on the streetcars, who stopped by the [streetcar barn that day] to say goodbye, the small, white-haired man had little to say. He sent word that he had no formal statement to make on the abandonment of the trolley.” Having given up the Tampa Electric presidency the previous year due to illness, Knight died in 1946, a few months after the death of the trolleys in Tampa. He had once told friends, “I have been highly privileged to have lived in a Golden Era. I lived to see Tampa and Florida grow to tremendous proportions, undreamed of before. I am sure they will grow in the same way in the future.”

Tampa's change-over to bus public transportation came at the end of World War II, a time of incredible transformation,
with those in power geared towards the growth of Tampa and their own financial success. Political scientist Robert Kerstein describes the period: "the governing coalitions were generally narrowly based, including white business and professional interests and politicians who constituted a growth-oriented, cohesive regime and gained electoral support from much of the white middle class, while excluding African-American concerns and, more generally, those of the lower income population."19 Those who depended on the trolley and its populist five-cent fare, particularly those in lower income brackets, now relied on Tampa Transit Lines, owner of the bus lines.

Controversy had dogged Tampa Electric Company, which Knight founded in 1899. During the late 1930s, the city formed the Tampa Utility Board (this responsibility was eventually transferred to the state under the Florida Railroad Commission, later renamed the Florida Railroad and Public Utilities Commission) to regulate utility rates, a major point of contention dating back to the turn of the century. A protracted legal battle finally ended in 1941 with the Florida Supreme Court upholding the Tampa Board's decision to force Tampa Electric to lower rates by thirty percent. In 1943, a judge ordered the company to refund overcharges to customers.20 Some of these excess funds had subsidized the trolley's operation, and now made the system a liability.21 Later, in 1945, an attempt to make Tampa Electric a publicly-owned company failed, but only after considerable debate and powerful political influences tugging at either side of the issue.22 Through it all, TECO remained a formidable force. The decision to replace the trolleys with buses and to remove TECO from the transportation industry eliminated some facets of the empire and assuaged a few critics. Ultimately, however, the change did little more than usher in a new era of complicity between TECO and the automotive industry. Some observers suggested the converse: that complicity with carmakers ushered in a new era of transportation.

Clearly, by 1946, the streetcar system was a misplaced cog in Tampa Electric's corporate wheel. In 1945, the company derived its greatest source of income from the...
sale of light and power. Street railway revenues dropped by over $60,000 and usage had decreased by over a million passengers by 1944, but the electric company continued to grow reporting an increase of 3199 customers from 1944 to 1945, and another 1117 customers in the first months of 1946. To continue operation of the trolley, TECO claimed that it would have to invest $2,700,000 in new cars and equipment. “Except during [World War II], the streetcars [had] been operating at a loss for more than ten years.” The city grew and the demand for electricity increased, yet fewer rode the rails. Some felt the streetcars were too old and unreliable, and TECO neglected to build new routes to reach the city’s outermost suburbs. Buses took the place of trolleys in the distant suburbs; these could easily reach those areas without the expense of laying new rail.

Tampa Transit Lines first entered the scene in 1940 on a small scale in collaboration with the Jacksonville Transit Company. “Jacksonville had buses; they had gotten rid of their streetcars. It was the trend—it was Tampa’s turn.” A.B. “Tony” Grandoff spoke these words decades after he first leased four small buses on a mileage basis, operating on a route stretching through downtown from Jackson Heights and Palma Ceia. Tampa Transit Lines culled its drivers from Grandoff’s other business venture, Economy Cab. Grandoff promptly wanted to expand, but Tampa Electric effectively lobbied to block the permits to do so. Grandoff remembers, “With Tampa Electric’s clout, I was turned down when I applied for the Florida Avenue permit. We already had the buses for the run in Tampa, so I ran an ad in the Tribune about the turn-down of the application and asked the citizens of Florida Avenue to accept a free bus ride to City Hall during the next City Council meeting. They flooded the Council Chambers, but to no avail; we were turned down again.” However, Grandoff’s following did not let him down, increasing their numbers at the following meeting where he finally received his first permit. He ran the company until September 1941 when he was bought out by a Chicago-based operation, National City Lines, that ran the system under its trade name Tampa Transit Lines for the next thirty years, wielding considerable political “clout.” Although the company had no “visible connection” to General Motors, the director of operations came from a GM subsidiary, Yellow Coach, and members of its Board of Directors hailed from Greyhound, which was founded and controlled by General Motors. In fact, Greyhound provided the funding to start National City Lines. By 1946, the company controlled public transportation in eighty-three cities. Investigated for antitrust violation by the U.S. Department of Justice for twenty-five years, General Motors added another dimension to controversy over the shift from trolleys to buses.

The buses won the transportation war in Tampa, as they did in most cities across the country. Since 1940, the electric company in Tampa had been trying to sell the streetcar lines, and on April 24, 1946, after months of meetings and proposals, the official announcement was made. Both Tampa Transit Lines and Tampa Electric “stated that negotiations in process for the last two years have been closed between [both companies], whereby streetcars will discontinue operations on [August 1] and buses will begin giving complete service to all areas now served by both companies.” The announcement sparked months of fervent debate colored with political intimidation and coercion. Signed by both F. J. Gannon, president of TECO, and Robert H. Farrell, of Tampa Transit, the agreement still needed the approval of the Florida Railroad Commission, the City of Tampa, and other government authorities. The companies agreed that the trolleys would continue to operate until the August 1 date settled upon, and Tampa Transit paid $85,000 for the cars to be stored in Tampa Electric’s car barns until eventually sold to foreign markets. Farrell made only vague references to job security and transferable seniority, and, when asked about the five-cent fare, he replied simply that his company would “give it a fair try.” Although the news of the deal surprised no one, consumers feared price hikes and lost or forgotten routes once the tracks vanished. Tensions mounted between bus drivers and streetcar motormen, both represented by the same union. Many locals simply mourned the loss of the romance of the trolley and the memories it evoked.

Customers remembered their rides on the streetcars with great fondness. It was the “main source of transportation,” recalled one man, years later. Recalling his
days riding the streetcars as "a joy," Bob Martinez, the former mayor of Tampa and former governor of Florida, added that they were "safe and reliable transportation. Most people lived within reasonable walking distance of a streetcar line. They were built to follow the cigar factories and other job markets. It caused businesses to locate along with them." Before World War II, people walked or rode the trolley. Most began riding the streetcar alone as a teenager. It represented independence, much like the automobiles of later years. Perhaps more importantly, the neighborhood lines also supported the concept of community. Many of the open-air cars were a source of neighborhood gossip, virtually showcasing the working and the jobless, who sat with whom, and who came home later than they should have. Typically for neighborhood fixtures, trolleys often fell victim to schoolboy pranks. Artist Ferdie Pacheco recalled in his memoir *Ybor City Chronicles* that greasing the trolley tracks rendered the car a "stationary target." "We would take a small brown paper bag, fill it with loose grey Tampa sand, mix in Tampa sandspurs, tie the top, and fling it with all our might at the four parallel black iron railings of the streetcar. The bags would break, the sand would spill all over the passengers, and we would run through the neighborhood back alleys to our secret hiding place." Trolleys carried people to the amusement park in Sulphur Springs, the Oriental pavilion at Ballast Point, and the recreation area at Palmetto Beach. For many Tampans, their best memories included the streetcars.

Memories of the streetcars were not limited to the reveries of passengers or recollections of adolescent pranksters. Former employees also expressed feelings of loss at the streetcars' demise. E. G. Perez, a transportation inspector for Tampa Electric, worked for the company thirty-three years, starting at age twenty-two. He said, "I like to see Tampa progress, but I hate to see streetcars go. After all, I have been working with them during the best part of my life." W.H. Brown, a streetcar operator starting in 1915, said, "I'll feel lonesome without streetcars." Other workers articulated sim-
ilar sentiments, but future employment remained the dominant concern for most. “Progress” now seemed irrevocably bound to the new bus system.32

Just prior to the announcement of the sale, the streetcar drivers had finally received a ten-percent pay increase. The increase brought them to the “same top rate, eighty-eight cents an hour, as the Tampa Transit Lines bus drivers.”33 The decision came a week after the bus drivers had received their eight-cent raise, and two days before the official announcement of the abandonment.34 All the operators initially belonged to the same union, the Amalgamated Association of Street Electric Railway and Motor Coach Employees of America under the American Federation of Labor (AFL). A provision in the agreement between TECO and Tampa Transit stipulated that the bus company would employ as many of the motormen as qualified for that position, in addition to any others the company could “reasonably make use of.”35

This ambiguous promise failed to ease the worries of men without pensions, and ignored the issue of recognizing the employees’ established seniority. Some men had driven the streetcars for decades, up to thirty years. Many of these “old-timers” doubted they would be hired on by the bus line, agonizing over their mortgages and other expenses. Gannon, the president of TECO, called these men “victims of obsolescence.” The electric company had no pension plan but, as their deadline approached and several months had already passed, the company tried to work out a plan of relief for those men deemed unqualified by the bus lines. Gannon commented, “We didn’t want to promise anything until after we found out how many would be without work after the streetcars are abandoned, because we thought some might be reluctant to apply for bus jobs if they knew they would get a pension from us.”36 He also revealed his attempts on three occasions to sell the streetcar company to the union for one dollar, and further insisted that the workers knew for years about the company’s intention to sell the system. The president of the union, G. A. Fox, maintained that the union, like the company, would not have been able to sustain the trolley system.37 Seniority remained a poignant yet unanswered question.

A schism over seniority rights grew between the bus drivers and the streetcar operators in the union. Drivers from both companies wished to maintain their current status. Older streetcar operators, whose seniority far surpassed those of bus drivers, threatened the status of the Tampa Transit employees when they transferred to the company. Amidst nationwide railroad strikes, Tampa’s transportation woes reached a fevered pitch. On May 30 – two days before the expiration of the unions contract with Tampa Transit – members called a vote to strike in demand for seniority. Only a “handful of bus drivers” attended. While the streetcar operators voted to strike if Tampa Transit failed to meet their demands, bus drivers looked for new representation. A. F. Steele, special representative of Amalgamated Association of Street Electric Railway and Motor Coach Employees of America AFL, said, “I understand that the bus drivers have joined the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen (BRT), which has promised them that the streetcar drivers would get no seniority rights.” Steele and a group of the streetcar operators organized a picket line in front of the bus station that effectively blocked off both the streetcar and the bus lines. Even as the union began to splinter, Steele remained confident that bus drivers, out of a sense of union solidarity, would not break the picket line.38 A representative from the U. S. Conciliation Service arrived to begin negotiations between Tampa Transit and the streetcar workers’ union, easing tensions and delaying the possibility of a strike.39

However, the employment status of the streetcar workers complicated matters. Not yet Tampa Transit employees, the operators feared a strike might diminish their chances in an increasingly competitive qualification process to become bus drivers.40 On July 20, Raymond Sheldon, state senator and attorney for the streetcar workers’ union, filed a petition with the Florida Railroad Commission opposing abandonment of the railway system, and claiming that Tampa Transit had not acted in good faith according to their original agreement to hire the trolley operators. Because abandonment of the streetcar system under present provisions, would leave some TECO employees in “a worse position of employment or rights,” [Sheldon] contended, the public interest would be damaged, and he reminded Commissioners that it was part of
their duty to see that public interest [was] protected." Witnesses testified that they considered the hiring procedures unfair. However, the commission remained skeptical of their complaints.

Ultimately, all but one of the Tampa Transit bus drivers quit the streetcar union and joined the BRT. Tampa Transit hired seventy-five of the over one hundred streetcar drivers, bringing to 185 the total number of bus drivers. C. J. Helbing, Tampa Transit Manager, commented, "Thirty-one TECO employees who applied for bus jobs failed to qualify for physical reasons, but some will be hired after their ailments have been corrected. A few were rejected because they did not know how to drive automobiles. The age limit was waived for streetcar motormen, but they were given the same training course as any other applicants." In a showing of postwar gender equality, four women, two of whom transferred with the streetcar operators, were hired as bus drivers. By August 3, the last day of scheduled streetcar service in Tampa, the seniority issue remained unresolved, but no strike was on the horizon.

While labor struggled with their bosses, the bosses proceeded to ready the city for the transition and the city planned for the future. Immediately following the announcement of the abandonment, Tampa Transit petitioned to end free transfers on its bus lines. Already sensing the end of competition, the application read, in part, "Privilege is serving no useful purpose: is expensive for petitioners to maintain; produces much daily confusion and overcrowding of the buses in a manner detrimental to their orderly operating and that discontinuance will not only foster operating economies but will permit the petitioned to furnish fast and more satisfactory service to bus riders in the City of Tampa." Hillsborough legislator Sheldon again rallied to the cause, insisting that the Tampa Utility Board fix the rates. However, this time Sheldon used his support of rate reductions as part of his reelection campaign; his perceived pandering brought him into the crosshairs of election-year crossfire. Frank R. Crom accused the senator of supporting
special interests and ignoring the legislative control over transportation rates until after Tampa Electric sold its streetcars. Other critics insisted that the power to govern transportation lie in the hands of city representatives and the state remain out of the matter. “The State Senate has no control over buses, but if it does I will fight for five-cent fares and free transfers, too. The power lies with your own City Representative,” claimed Hugh L. McArthur, another political opponent of Sheldon. The Utility Committee of the Board of Representatives eventually approved the ban on free transfers, and Tampa Transit expected a three to four percent increase in revenue. The company also made plans to spend $800,000 on new bus services, including sixty-five new buses, to take on their new routes. To keep the buses running smoothly, Tampa Electric pledged to tear up the bumpy railway tracks. “Gleefully, Mayor Hixon announced that the city soon will undertake its most extensive street repair program in history as the Tampa Electric Co. carries out its obligation to rip up miles of street car rails and replace the nine-foot strip in the middle of the streets with smooth pavement.” By May of 1953, the last of the tracks finally disappeared in a massive project to remove all traces of the streetcar from Tampa. On July 31, TECO’s last hurdle was cleared when the Florida Railroad Commission granted its request to “abandon and discontinue” the railway service.

With the bus companies moving ahead, city leaders planned for a smooth transition from the old trolley system to the new bus system. Parking measures that aimed to provide restrictions and assign reserved
spaces for the buses were discussed. Officials analyzing traffic surveys publicly gushed at the possibilities of “super-roads.” Editorials delighted in the decision to end the trolley’s long run in favor of the buses, claiming that public transportation had long been “inadequate and inconvenient” and had supported a flourishing taxi cab industry. The *Tampa Morning Tribune* ran a week-long series acquainting readers with Tampa Transit’s new bus lines, which now covered “113 miles of city and adjacent suburban thoroughfares” and would travel 92,313 miles weekly.

But did the citizens of Tampa want buses? On the last day of the streetcar’s run, Senator Sheldon filed a reply to the Florida Railroad Commission, “pointing out that no evidence [had] been offered, other than by officials of Tampa Transit and TECO, to show that the public favored the elimination of the streetcars.” Sheldon’s statement also claimed that seating capacity declined by 1,580 seats in the transition. Indeed, during the morning rush of the first day of operations, the buses filled to overflowing, resulting in the confusion and frustration predicted by opponents of the new system. Yet, the customers seemed impressed by the speed, while City Traffic Director, Captain Hamm, foresaw a lessening in traffic problems with the coming of the buses. All in all, there was little apparent reason to protest. No one wanted to take on the responsibility of operating the streetcars any longer, the mayor delighted in the removal of the tracks, the city was growing and spilling into the countryside, and people needed a reliable way from home to work. Although some workers were left behind, Tampa Transit employed a majority of the former streetcar workers. Dr. Gary Mormino writes that the streetcars were “victims of neglected maintenance, postwar affluence, and collusion between Detroit automakers and utility companies.” Many felt this was simply progress. Moreover, Americans, recovering from the sacrifices of depression and war, wanted cars.

With all these changes in Tampa transportation, one thing remained constant: the segregation of the transportation lines. In 1923, all cars operated by Tampa Electric were equipped “with Bennett Adjustable Race Separation Signs,” implementing a policy that all blacks must sit behind the sign and all whites in front. Up until that point the trolleys filled up from the back and front with blacks and whites respectively. The State Railway Commission insisted upon the signs in accordance with state law. Interestingly, in an ad issued by Tampa Electric, Manager T. J. Hanlon, Jr. distanced the company from the decision by blaming it on the complaints of “one, Scott Leslie.”

Dependent on the patronage of all races, particularly in the racially diverse community of Ybor City, Tampa Electric practiced caution in its observance of state segregation laws. In 1904, the company removed its race separation signs after a series of disturbances and a “delegation of colored citizens urged that the regulation be withdrawn.” One such disturbance occurred when a white man, Theodore Kennedy, complained to a black woman about where she was seated. The women replied with what the *Tampa Morning Tribune* called a “torrent of abuse.” According to the report, the woman told Kennedy that “she was as good as he was” and “that the company gave her as much right on the cars as the ‘white trash’ and that she wouldn’t allow any ‘cow-faced cracker’ to throw off on her.” The incident culminated in Kennedy striking the woman and both being arrested, although Kennedy bore the burden of the larger fine. While the removal of the signs marked a victory for Civil Rights before the term was coined, the even greater successes of Jim Crow laws and disenfranchisement proved effective in securing public and corporate policies on segregation. The tide changed in the 1940s and 50s as federal rulings began to chip away at Jim Crow laws, but Florida remained one of the last states to relinquish these remnants of the “peculiar institution” of slavery.

Overall, the excitement of transportation progress veiled lurking conspiracies, forgotten streetcar workers, and the passing of a social institution. At 2:30 a.m. on August 3, 1946, the last of the 168 streetcars that had traveled 9,000 miles a day over 53 miles of track came to a halt and was stored in the trolley barn, along with others, along Hillsborough River in Tampa Heights. Tampa Transit stripped the cars and sent most of the hardware to South America. The gutted shells were divided and sent in different directions. Some were simply tossed in scrap yards, some were torched, others became chicken coops or even apartments, and six went to Pensacola to become...
Fading into history, the cars resurfaced in 2002 in what would become a divisive move by the city to encourage tourism through revival of the streetcars. A single line once again connected Ybor City to downtown Tampa. Instead of bringing workers to and from work and home, the new trolley lines connected a festive entertainment, arts, and shopping district via a refurbished channel district to a struggling downtown area (still awaiting its commercial and cultural facelift.) Neither a necessity nor a regular option for most Tampans, the $53 million project sparked debates over pragmatism versus romance. Romance won with the indefatigable industry and lobbying by the Tampa & Ybor Street Railway Society. The Society, founded in 1984, was backed at various times by influential politicians such as former mayors Bob Martinez and Dick Greco, and relied on the fundraising support of local artist Ferdie Pacheco. While the city laid trolley tracks through Ybor City for the second time in its history, low-cost public housing was torn down a few blocks away. This was replaced by facilities that house a significantly smaller number of people, displacing the poor. Funding for more housing and social services remains relatively low. Not without continued debate, the city embraced the revitalized streetcar and the heritage tourism it plays to — both requiring large-scale funding support from municipal sources.

From innovative technology to inconvenient relic to romantic memory to restored artifact, the streetcar either captained growth or anchored the city to its past. The growth of Tampa (and most cities) drives its decisions from era to era. Tampa’s ventures into tourism and a general re-evaluation of its image have intensified and rekindled interest in the city’s past, and the streetcar embodies the link between that past and the city’s future. Whether a product of the self-interested dreams of commercial developers or a genuine reminder of local history, the trolley now guides Tampans into an era of rediscovery.

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ENDNOTES


8. Canning.
12. Kerstein, 120.
15. Kerstein, 120.
17. Kerstein, 120.
18. Ivey, 94.
21. Complete statistics quoted in the article: "Revenue from the street railway department was $1,052,100, a decrease of $63,500 from 1944. Streetcars carried 21,282,252 passengers excluding transfers, 1,265,974 fewer than 1944." However, the company "had 59,683 electric customers at the end of 1945, a gain of 3,199 over 1944, and reported an additional 1,177 customer during the first three months of 1946.
23. "Due to the difficulties, the company "had 59,683 electric customers at the end of 1945, a gain of 3,199 over 1944, and reported an additional 1,177 customer during the first three months of 1946.
29. Kerstein.
34. "Bus Drivers Get 8-Cent Increase," Tampa Daily Times, 13 April 1946.
35. "Railways to End Half Century of Service."
37. "TECO President Replies to Union," Tampa Daily Times, 14 May 1946.
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46. "Salem Dunn, "Bus Fare Stand of Sheldon Rapped," Tampa Daily Times, 1 May 1946.
49. "First Order of Business for Bus Lines is Service," Tampa Daily Times, 1 August 1946.
50. "Street Cars to Quit Here Next Sunday," Tampa Morning Tribune, 29 July 1946.
57. "Cornman.