

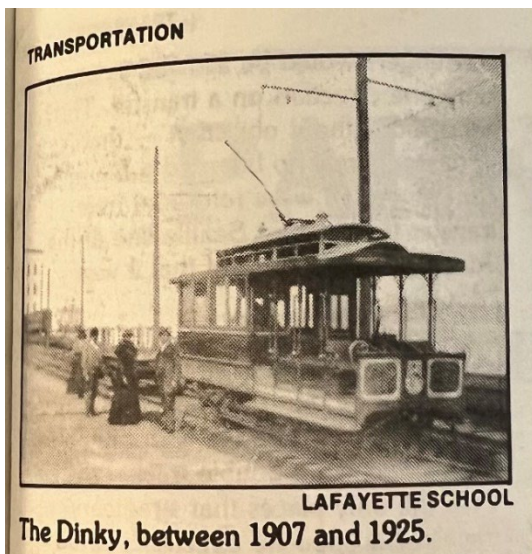
West Seattle Streetcars: A History of Connections

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The history of West Seattle and the history of its streetcar system are intrinsically tied. West Seattle developed into the community it is today because of the streetcars. From its origin in 1890 to its end in 1940, this mode of transportation shaped the lives of the people living in the community. The story of streetcars in West Seattle shows that public works engineering not only shapes the lives of its communities but is shaped by them as well.

Streetcars in West Seattle began in 1890. The West Seattle Land and Improvement Company developed the City of West Seattle, centered on the modern-day Admiral District. They ran the ferry between modern day Seacrest Park and downtown Seattle and built a cable car that ran from the current 47th and Admiral to the ferry. The cable car debuted on September 1, 1890, but was shut down in 1897 due to financial difficulties (West Side Story, 94-95).

When the private company shut down, the community needed another mode of public transportation. The city of West Seattle was incorporated in 1902 to meet this need and other amenities. The city was unable to find another private company to take over the streetcar. In 1904, residents voted to borrow \$18,000 to build their own streetcar railway system, the first in the country to be run by a municipality. The streetcar ran along the original route from Seacrest Park to modern day California & College. In 1905 it was extended to the schoolhouse, modern day West Seattle High School (West Side Story, 97).

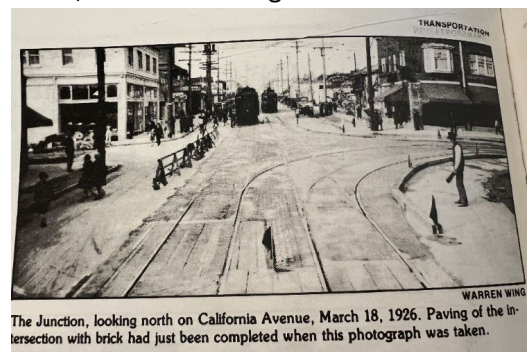


The purpose of the original streetcar was to transport commuters to and from the ferry, a service originally provided by horse drawn wagons. The cars were retrofitted cable cars from the original system built in 1890. They were converted with electric motors. The cars were much smaller than the trolleys in Seattle and earned the nickname “The Dinky” due to their size. (West Side Story, 97).

In 1906 West Seattle sold the service to the Seattle Electric Company for \$30,000. They introduced the first service across the Duwamish connecting downtown to Fauntleroy. In 1907 West

Seattle voted 325-8 to become annexed by Seattle. Improved connections to downtown came the same year when the California Avenue line was extended to connect with the Fauntleroy line, forming a junction at Ninth (modern day Alaska) and California which came to be known as *the Junction*, a name the neighborhood still holds today (West Side Story, 97). The Junction is still a thriving hub of economic and cultural activity in modern West Seattle.

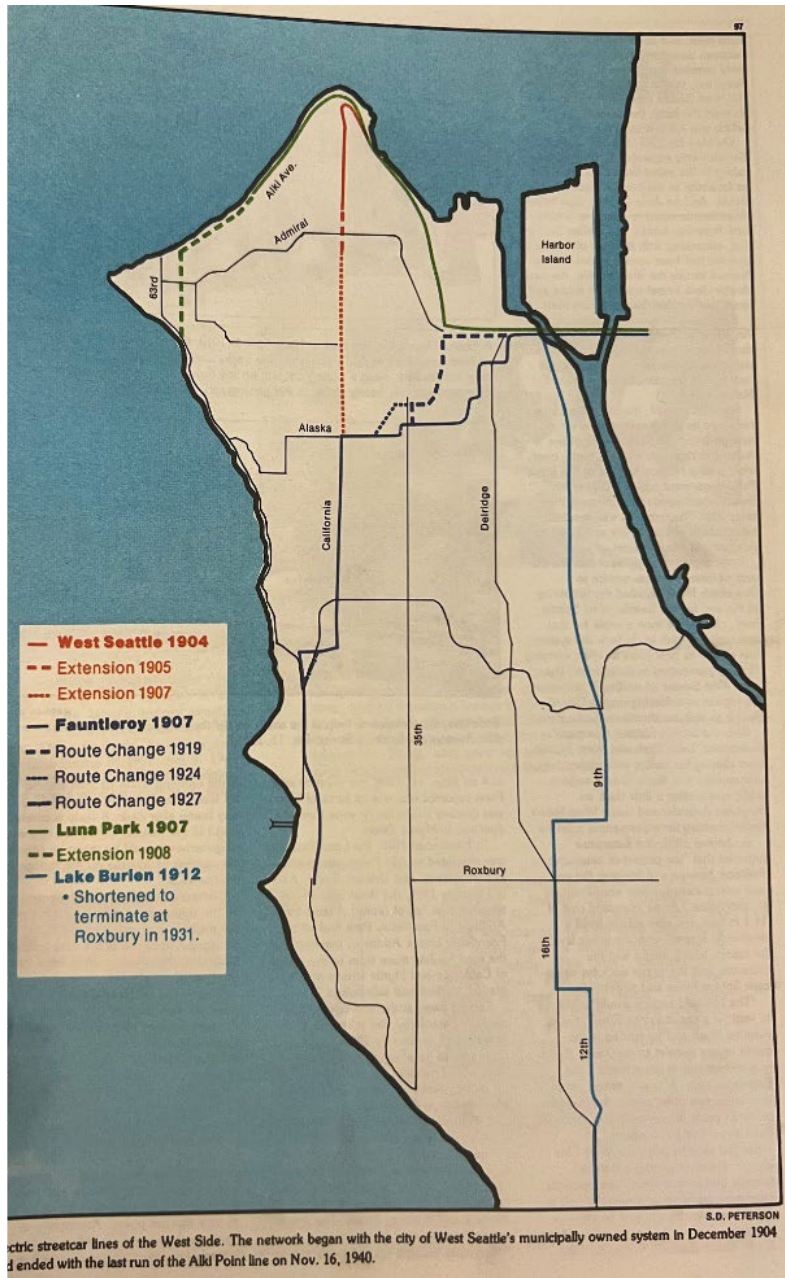
Service on the streetcar was slow. The lines ran once an hour and took an average time of 45 minutes to reach downtown. Many of the lines only had one track. According to a paper at the time



“Patrons of the Seattle Electric Company are very loud in their criticism. The cars are simply crowded all the time, and many persons who come over here with the intention of looking for homesites return in disgust on

account of the transportation system” (West Side Story, 98). A poem written in 1909 by Seattle P-I columnist Carlton Finchett described the frustration.

Promising better service, the Seattle Municipal Railway took over service in 1919, once again serving West Seattle with municipally run streetcars (West Side Story, 106). The new providers improved service by constructing an elevated streetcar viaduct from the Spokane Street bridge to First Avenue and Washington Street downtown, following the same route as the recently torn down Alaska Way Viaduct. They also expanded service along Avalon Way and abandoned a former circuitous route. The streetcar system was so much improved that the ferry service was terminated on March 14, 1921 (West Side Story 106). However, this meant that West Seattle commuters could only rely on the Spokane Street bridge which was in its 4th year of its projected 10-year service life. On April 24th, 1922, the City Council authorized construction of a permanent bridge at Spokane Street. Before this all the crossings had occurred on temporary trestles. This permanent structure was named Bridge No. 1 and was a double leaf, trunnion bascule. The permanent structure would carry cars and the streetcars would continue on the wooden trestle (West Side Story, 106).



The wooden trestle carrying the streetcars was condemned as an obstruction to river traffic by the War Department in 1927. The War Department granted an 18-month extension, but in January 1928, the Seattle Engineering Department inspectors discovered that the piling was honey-combed by piling worms and on Friday the 13th the Mayor ordered the bridge closed as it was determined that the bridge could collapse at any moment. Acting quickly, the council approved plans for a second bascule bridge identical to and immediately south of the first. An interim “shoo-fly” was constructed to carry the streetcars over Bridge No. 1 while No.2 was under construction (West Side Story, 111). When the

**The Fauntleroy Line
Year 1909**

Took a ride to Fauntleroy: hardly call
the trip a joy
Single track for most the way: journey
took me half a day.
Car would run two blocks or three,
then we'd shop and "bide-a-wee."

Car would seek a wayside shrine (lots
of 'em along that line:)
Rings the phone and says, "Hello!
Tom Murphine? Well, this is Joe.

"Got 'er parked on Youngstown hill,
motorman is solo Bill.
"Nice and sunny afternoon. Likely
sprinkle pretty soon.

"Got a fair-sized crowd on board. Bill
just butted in a Ford.
"How you feeling Tom, old scout?
How's our car line coming out?

"Bill just waved the come-on sign. Call
you further up the line."

Then we'd go four blocks at best.
Motorman then wants a rest.

Goes back aft to talk to Joe. Who is
sorting out the dough.

Cars go by but we stand still. View the
scene from Youngstown hill.

When at length the track is clear, off
we start in speedless gear.

Then we meet another booth. Joe
jumps off with joy uncouth.

Calls his girl and makes a date. Mean-
while 40 people wait.

Calls her little kitchy-koo. Just like nut-
ty lovers do.

Says it o'er and o'er again. Ten com-
muters go insane.

Calls her little honey bunch. Clever as
a transfer punch.

Have to take those booths away if our
line is going to pay.

Then we started up once more. Gee!
But I was mighty sore.

Stopped to let another pass. Motormen
they had to gas.

Reached outside and jerked a rope.
Hang himself some day, I hope.

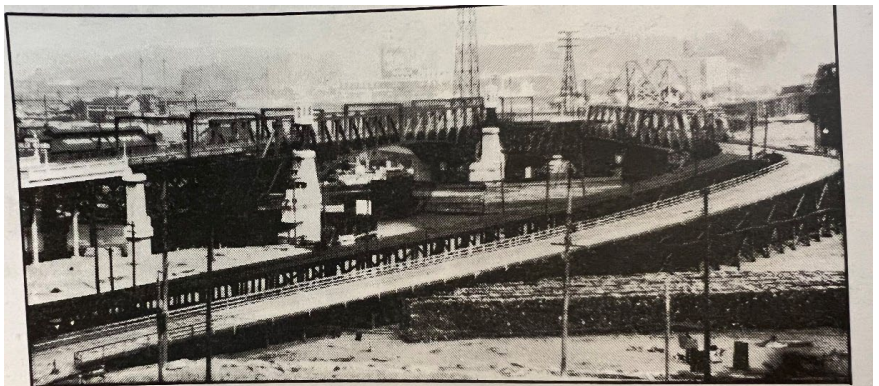
Had to wait til Hank went by. Lots of
speed. Oh me! Oh my!

Never, never going back till they get a
double track.

second bridge opened in 1930, they were both used by cars with streetcars using the far-left lane of each bridge. (West Side Story, 112).

The 1930s signaled the beginning of the end for the streetcar system. An increase in cars and buses ended service to Burien in 1931, a landslide in 1933 took out a section of track opposite Michigan Street. Additional paved roads and bridges were built in West Seattle using Public Works Administration and state gas tax funds including a new bridge over the Schmitz Park Ravine on Admiral Way built in 1937 that was hailed as the longest single span rigid frame bridge in the nation (West Side Story, 112-113). On January 8, 1937, West Seattle was the scene of the worst streetcar accident in Seattle's history. The Avalon Way line car lost its brakes and sped out of control. It jumped the tracks and flipped onto its side. Three passengers were killed and 59 were injured (West Side Story, 112).

The streetcars continued to lose money and in May 1940 the city began replacing the system with buses. The last car to operate in West Seattle was the Alki car which made its final run on November 16 ending a 50 year era. Today West Seattle residents continue to rely on buses for their public transportation needs as well as the King County Water Taxi which transports residents in the same way as the original ferry line. Planning to bring passenger rail back to West Seattle is now in motion in the form of light rail from Sound Transit expected 2037-2039. This would bring passenger rail back to the community after an almost one-hundred-year absence.



PAUL DORPAT

Recently completed Spokane Street Bascule Bridge No. 1 (left) and wooden swing bridge, looking east, 1924.



Works Cited

West Seattle Herald/White Center News. West Side Story. Seattle: Robinson Newspapers, 1987.

Seattle Municipal Archives. West Seattle. <<https://www.seattle.gov/cityarchives/exhibits-and-education/online-exhibits/annexed-cities/west-seattle>>.