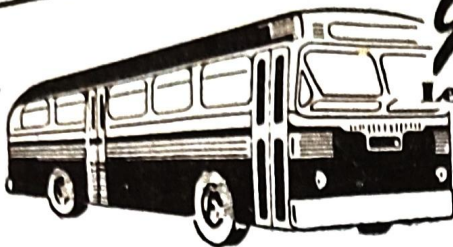


Transit Topics



Go by Bus

Leave Worries Behind

Virginia Transit

VIRGINIA TRANSIT COMPANY

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Norfolk's Transit History Is Traced From 1870 to 1951

(Editor's note: This special edition of TRANSIT TOPICS is published with a two-fold purpose. One is that 900 of them will be presented to the Norfolk Public Schools for use in classroom study. The second is a part of VTC's celebration, along with other companies throughout the nation, of National Transit Progress Day. This year marks the 100th anniversary of public transit service becoming of age as a national industry.)

By JULIAN C. HOUSEMAN

Abraham Brower . . . Charles Van Depoele
Frank J. Sprague . . . William and Frank
Fageol. These names mean little or nothing
to the average city dweller, but their contri-
bution to the growth of the modern Ameri-
can cities was as great as many other Ameri-
cans who, through their inventive genius and
aggressiveness, developed the automobile, the
radio and the steam engine.

These five men, Brower, Van Depoele,
Sprague and the Fageol Brothers, made as
great a contribution to the development of
modern public transit service as any other
group of men who might be chosen.

Abraham Brower might be called the
father of public transit service, for he was
the first person to recognize the real business
opportunity. He commissioned a coach-mak-
ing firm of Wade and Leverich in 1827 to
build a horse-drawn coach which would seat
twelve persons. It had open sides and was
divided into two sections, with two seats

facing each other in each section and each
seat providing space for three persons.

One Shilling Fare

Brower aptly named his vehicle "The Ac-
commodation" and it was operated up and
down Broadway for a flat fare of one shil-
ling. Two years later he built a second
vehicle and named it "The Sociable".

Van Depoele constructed a streetcar system
in Montgomery, Ala., but it was left to
Sprague, a young navy lieutenant, to put
into operation in Richmond in 1887-88 the
first successfully operated overhead streetcar
system in the United States.

The Fageol Brothers' contribution did not
come until 1920, with the advent of the
motor bus. These two men designed the
first built-for-purpose bus and six years later
designed the modern bus body with the
engine under the floor or in the rear.

While these men made their contributions

to the development of transit on a national scale, Virginia can boast of being the birthplace of the first successfully operated overhead street electric railway in the nation. Sprague designed and built the system in Richmond in 1887-88 and some parts of this system of tracks continued to be used until the conversion to an all-bus system in 1949.

Norfolk's Beginning Stormy

Norfolk's transit history, like that in virtually every other city, is steeped in romance, heartaches and difficulties. In fact Norfolk's first railway company went through a four-year period of legal and financial entanglements before the first streetcar was operated.

John B. Whitehead, who was to play such an important part in Norfolk's transit history, Thomas Corprew and Cicero Burness organized the Norfolk City Railroad in 1866 with \$100,000. The company was granted permission by City Council to stretch a track of not more than six miles along Church Street from the west end of Main Street to the old fairgrounds. Later the limit of six miles was extended to 20 miles and the company was ordered by City Council to maintain not only the track area but also two feet on either side of the flat rails.

The local newspapers, after nothing was done toward the construction of the railway system, began to ask some embarrassing questions. The questions became even more embarrassing when it was revealed that some Northern capital had been invested in the company. Finally in April, 1870, after four years of negotiations, the first rail was laid.

First Horsecar in 1870

August 12, 1870, the first horsecar went into operation. Five ornate cars had been delivered earlier from Wilmington, Del., and had been stored in the company's depot in Huntersville awaiting the track construction. The fare was 7 cents and the cars seated 20 persons. The success of a month's operation induced the owners to buy 5 more horsecars, and they were ordered in September, 1870.

Even from the first, the cars were looked upon not only as a medium of transporting people but also for advertisement. Car cards

were plastered on the cars shortly after they began operation. Even so, in the Spring of 1871 the owners were crying that there was not enough revenue. Shortly the company went into bankruptcy and the cars were stored.

The company was reorganized in January, 1872, and the fare was reduced to five cents. People began to ride the cars and it looked as if the company was set to keep going. But disaster struck hard. The first fatality was recorded within a month after the cars started running again. The driver of one vehicle leaned out to fix a broken trace and fell under the wheels of the car. Then in October an epidemic struck down 33 of the 35 head of horses and left the system practically inoperative. Teams of laborers were employed to pull the cars to keep the system going.

Financial Troubles Again

Then in January, 1873, while some of the pipes for Norfolk's first water lines were being laid, several of the cars ran into the open ditches. A strike of the workers for back wages the next month and the cries of creditors failed to keep the system stopped long. In March, the cars began running again, only to head for the storage barns in December because of further financial complications.

Whitehead got the company back on its feet with some further financial investment in 1875 and from that time on the cars remained in operation. Some economies were introduced such as rebuilding the two-horse cars for one-horse operations and a system of packaged change meant more money coming to the company rather than going into the pockets of the drivers. Such innovations as stools for the drivers to sit on during their 14-hour workday and straw on the floor to keep the passengers' feet warm in the winter were introduced. Then as financial success came, more cars were purchased and more track was laid.

Other men thought they saw opportunity and organized some more companies, but apparently they could not meet the competition offered by the revitalized Norfolk City Railroad Company. One company started a line to Brambleton, but as Hal Reid ex-

pressed it in a recent story in a local paper, the company "dropped from the scene with amazing rapidity." In February, 1888, the first horsecars started operations to Berkley.

Ocean View Line Starts

Then came a period of merging companies. Whitehead again got into the scene by organizing a company and obtaining a charter from the General Assembly to run a line to Ocean View where a hotel was to be built. The line to Ocean View had been talked of from the beginning, but no action on the track construction had been started. Finally all financial details were worked out and a steam locomotive began pulling coaches to Ocean View daily. The locomotives were built in Norfolk and the first one to run was named "W. H. Taylor" in honor of one of the owners. Whitehead had the second named for him. They burned wood.

In December, 1889, the City Railway Company obtained permission to use electricity for power and in 1894 the first electric cars operated. Within six months after the first electric cars began, all the horses were retired and the system was completely electrified. The electrification was a great step, but one of Norfolk's chief problems was not solved until well into 1900. That was the fact that not all of the tracks would accommodate a streetcar of a common gauge. It was not until 1917 that all of the track was made to the five-foot two inch gauge.

After the inauguration of the electric car system, Norfolk's transit service began to really grow. Extensive double-tracking was done and lines were extended or new ones built to various sections. However, the story of the development of the service is capsuled in a statement appearing in a report made by A. Merritt Taylor and Charles B. Cook after a study of the railway system. They wrote: "The Virginia Railway and Power Company is the outgrowth of 45 years of development and of consolidation by purchase or lease of 51 companies; some railway, some light and power and some combinations."

Norfolk, Portsmouth Merged

The Norfolk-Portsmouth Traction Company came into being in 1906 and assumed operating control over the transit systems in

the two cities. The officers of this company were R. Lancaster Williams, of Baltimore Md., president; Caldwell Hardy and G. Serpell, of Norfolk, vice-presidents and V. Kehl, secretary-treasurer. The capital stock of the new company was \$6,000,000. In 1911, the Virginia Railway and Power Company extended operations from Richmond and took over the systems of the two cities. Since that time the three cities have been operating under the same management.

Norfolk's first buses came in August, 1927, when the Virginia Electric and Power Company purchased 36. This was the date of Norfolk's initial move to all-bus transit service. The introduction of the buses caused the discontinuance of some car lines, the last being Edgewater in 1927.

The Virginia Transit Company took over the transit operations in Norfolk December 29, 1944. On July 1, 1945, the Virginia Transit Company, operators of the Richmond and Norfolk systems, pooled its resources with the Portsmouth Transit Company, Youngstown (Ohio) Municipal Railway Company, the Akron (Ohio) Transportation Company, the Springfield (Illinois) Transportation Company, the Southern Coach Company, operators of the Chattanooga and Nashville, Tennessee, systems, and the Baton Rouge (Louisiana) Transportation Company to organize the United Transit Company.

Motor Bus Plans Start

In September, 1947, VTC inaugurated a modernization program by converting the Naval Base streetcar line to buses and the program was completed in July, 1948, the Ocean View Main Line being the last streetcar line to operate in Norfolk.

Since 1946, VTC has purchased 168 buses at a cost of \$2,618,715. The company paved the streets where there were car tracks and removed the rail from all the private rights-of-way.

In 1950 VTC rode 32,220,239 passengers and the revenue was \$3,728,048. From the revenue the company paid \$1,709,390 in wages and salaries to 542 employees and spent \$877,458 for materials and supplies. The company's tax bill for the year was \$628,688, of which the Municipal government

received \$208,839; the State government, \$266,269, and the Federal government, \$153,580. Nearly 2 cents of each fare collected is paid in taxes.

In September, 1951, Norfolk was served by a fleet of 218 buses operating over 23 routes. These buses travel 22,277 miles daily and each year use 2,404,469 gallons of gasoline and 134,893 quarts of oil.

Norfolk has surely experienced ups and downs in the 81-year history of its transit operations, particularly during the early years. However, since 1925 its problems have been few and far between and the city now has a system that is modern in every respect.

New York Had First U.S. Elevated Railway

The first elevated railway in the U. S. was built in New York City. The original section was half-a-mile long, and was opened in 1868.

The cars were pulled by cable operated through steam engines at points along the route. Later it was converted to steam locomotive power, and by 1876 had 40 trains a day running from the Battery to 59th Street and return.

Subway Operation Begins In London

The subway was first put into operation in London, Eng., in 1863, and the first one in the U. S. was opened in Boston in the Fall of 1897. It used street cars that formerly ran on the surface of Tremont Street, under which the subway was built.

Louis XV Solved Traffic Tie-ups on Paris Streets

Transit and city authorities are not in the fortunate position of Louis XV who readily solved the problem of accidents and congestion on the streets of Paris caused by noblewomen driving their own carriages. Louis and his ministers passed an edict forbidding every woman under 30 years of age from driving. Since no woman would admit she was over 30, all women ceased driving.

Norfolk's Progress In Modernization

In putting into effect its modernization program, VTC purchased a total of 168 buses at a cost of \$2,618,715. Most of these buses were used to replace streetcars; the others replaced war-worn vehicles which were used during World War II.

In addition to scrapping the streetcar system, VTC removed tracks and paved the streets from which the tracks were removed. VTC also took up tracks on the private right-of-way on Granby Street and in other places.

The following is a chronological listing of the delivery of new buses and the replacement of streetcars with new buses:

September 8, 1947: The new WILLOUGHBY-COTTAGE line bus route began operation.

September 14, 1947: The first substitution of buses for streetcars on the NAVAL BASE line occurred. The day before 30 new hydraulic buses were displayed to public view when they carried some 300 persons on a pre-view run of the new line.

December 15, 1947: It was announced that buses would soon be substituted for streetcars on the OCEAN VIEW-GRANBY and RIVERVIEW lines. After the change the old streetcar line known as OCEAN VIEW-GRANBY would be known as the GRANBY EXPRESS line.

July 11, 1948: Buses replaced streetcars on the OCEAN VIEW MAIN LINE (via Fairmount Park).

Cablecars Introduced In San Francisco

The cablecar was first introduced in San Francisco during 1873. It operated by means of a gripping clamp extending from the car down through a slot in the pavement. The clamp was made to seize or let go of the cable moving continuously through a conduit on rollers.

Several cablecars are still in operation in San Francisco due to popular demand for retaining them as sightseeing attractions.

EVERYBODY RIDES TRANSIT

It is estimated that the average man, woman and child who lives in city areas rides a transit vehicle about 250 times a year.