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L.A.'s First Public Transit Was Horse-Powered

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Nearly fifty years since the ringing of trolley bells last echoed off the buildings of Los Angeles' historic core, voters approved of a funding measure that will likely **return streetcars to downtown Los Angeles**. The campaign has brought forth many **fond memories** of the local yellow cars of the Los Angeles Railway and the interurban red cars of the Pacific Electric Railway among L.A. downtowners, but the city's very first

streetcars -- diminutive, horse-drawn cars that spawned L.A.'s first suburbs -- are much lesser known.

More Transit History

Photos: When the Red Car Rolled Through Orange County

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multiethnic L.A.

When Trolley Tracks Ran Through Southland Beaches

Public transportation was slow to arrive in Los Angeles, a city whose farthest reaches were still accessible by foot in the 1870s. But as the city began to stretch out over the surrounding landscape, some form of regular, wheeled transportation around town

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a popular beer garden and fairground located far south of the central city at Washington and Main.

But muddy streets pocked with holes plagued the line, which closed in 1875. The forerunner to today's buses would have to wait until the advent of paved roads and rubber tires to become a force in the city's public transportation. L.A.'s transportation history would be fixed to iron rails for several decades.

Though they required a hefty capital investment as well as strong connections to municipal power-brokers, street railways could provide faster and more reliable service than omnibuses by riding on tracks sunken into the city's streets.

L.A.'s first streetcars ran under horsepower. Steam locomotives were considered too dirty and dangerous for use on city streets still teeming with easily spooked horses, and cable car technology was still new and expensive. Electric-powered traction railways, meanwhile, remained more than a decade off.

On July 1, 1874, the modest, horse-drawn cars of the Spring and Sixth Street Railroad became the first streetcars to roll down Los Angeles streets. Founded by lawyer Robert M. Widney, the Spring & Sixth operated a regular schedule, running cars hourly on weekdays between 6:30 a.m. and 10 p.m. For a ten-cent fare, passengers could ride the one-and-a-half-mile route from the intersection of Temple and Spring south to Sixth, and then west to Figueroa.

Exactly one year later, another street railway joined the Spring & Sixth. Financed by John Downey, Isaias Hellman, William Workman, and others, the Main Street and Agricultural Park Street Railroad connected the city's business district near Temple Street to **Agricultural Park, a haven for gamblers and vice-seekers**. The park, outfitted with a racetrack, saloon, and brothel, was rechristened Exposition Park in 1913.

Soon, L.A.'s streetcar network expanded as **new railways** opened and existing lines extended their tracks across the city. The Plaza functioned as a central hub for the city's growing streetcar network, with lines radiating out in several directions.

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When L.A. Was a Horse-Powered Town

The Lost Bridle Paths of Beverly Hills

Country Life in the Big City

Later, East Los Angeles, **since renamed Lincoln Heights**, and Boyle Heights became L.A.'s first streetcar suburbs. The tracks of the Spring & Sixth reached East Los Angeles in 1876 and those of the Los Angeles and Aliso Avenue Street Passenger Railway arrived in Boyle Heights following year, making it practical for residents to relocate in the fledgling towns across the river from the central city.

This close relationship between street railway construction and real estate development -- evident in the city's very first streetcar line -- prefigured a pattern that guided the city's growth in the succeeding decades, as the founding of each far-flung suburb often coincided with the arrival of a streetcar or interurban railway line.

Horse-drawn streetcars remained the primary mode of public transportation through the 1880s, at their peak rolling through much of the booming city of Los Angeles. But technological innovation would doom the horse-powered street railway.

Cable -- and later electric -- railways offered a clear advantage over horse-drawn streetcars. Horses fouled up the streets and struggled on even slight grades, meaning



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Bunker Hill, opening up the city's western reaches to development. Newer technology promptly replaced many of the city's horse-drawn streetcars. Los Angeles' last horse railway, the Main Street and Agricultural Park Street Railroad, traded in its horses for electric wires in 1897.

A horse-drawn streetcar of the Spring & Sixth railway in front of the Pico House. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

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A Main Street and Agricultural Park horse-drawn streetcar rolls past St. Vibiana's Cathedral on Main Street in 1884. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

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In this circa 1880 lithograph, streetcars from three competing railways cross in front of the Downey Block. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

1880 drawing of the Pacific Hotel next to the Southern Pacific depot, showing an East Los Angeles-bound streetcar. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

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Circa 1875 view of Main Street, showing the tracks of the Main Street and Agricultural Park Street Railroad. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

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Two horse-drawn streetcars travel on Spring Street between First and Temple in 1885. Courtesy of
Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

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Two horsecars pass each other in a blur on Main Street between First and Second streets, circa 1889.

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A horse-drawn streetcar in front of the Los Angeles post office on Main Street, circa 1892. Courtesy of the Security Pacific National Bank Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

Workers pose with a Main Street and Agricultural Park Street Railroad car shortly before the line was electrified in 1897. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

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Highlights at the Archives Bazaar: 10 Fascinating Southern California Collections and Historical Organizations

Every year, Southern California museums, libraries and archives come together at the annual Archives Bazaar to exhibit historic items and artifacts. Here are 8 collections and historical organizations whose archives tell a fascinating story of L.A.

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The history of commercial avocados in California comes from a collection of chance discoveries, Indigenous heritages exploited and improbable survivals that were ultimately hitched to the power of California's industrialized agriculture.

Lost Cemeteries of Early L.A.: The Forgotten Burial Sites of the City's Earliest Settlers

The deaths of early Angelenos didn't always lead to eternal rest. When the first Catholic, Jewish and Protestant cemeteries in Los Angeles were abandoned by 1910, the displaced dead were scattered to other cemeteries — but not all were found and reburied.

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