

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

Many L.A. Boulevards Began as Trolley Lines

By Nathan Masters

February 21, 2014



History & Society

History



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Why do some Los Angeles boulevards like Venice or Santa Monica seem to wander across the **street grid**? What explains the oversized median dividing Culver Boulevard? And why are there two San Vicentes?

The answer behind these curiosities lies in these roads' origin as streetcar lines. In the decades that bracketed the turn of the 20th century, several electric rail lines stretched out from downtown Los Angeles toward the sea, meandering across the coastal plain to serve the scattered settlements of the time: **Colegrove**, **Sherman**, The Palms.

“As the metropolis grew around trolley tracks, interurban rail lines morphed into automobile boulevards.”

When it first opened in 1897, the Santa Monica via Sawtelle Line offered passengers wide-open vistas of bean fields and citrus groves from its electric cars. As the metropolis grew around the tracks, the rail line morphed into Santa Monica Boulevard – complete with a sudden course correction in West Hollywood where the tracks once turned toward the



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A consistent pattern governed the evolution of these interurban rail routes into city streets. First, construction crews laid tracks and erected wooden poles that held aloft the overhead electric wires. A dirt path might run parallel to the rails, but only later would a real estate company construct paved automobile lanes on either side of the tracks – making the rail line the new boulevard's median. Finally, as the Red Car system slowly died (**don't believe the conspiracy theories**), the overhead wires came down and landscaping, bike paths, or new traffic lanes took over the median, erasing any trace of the boulevard's origins as pioneer rail lines.

In 1906, Santa Monica Boulevard (seen here at Western Avenue in Colegrove) was little more than a narrow rail right-of-way doubling as a dirt road. Courtesy of the USC Libraries - California Historical Society Collection.

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1907 view of Venice Boulevard, looking west from Western Avenue. Courtesy of the Photo Collection - Los Angeles Public Library.

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A viaduct over La Brea Avenue at San Vicente separated streetcar from automobile traffic. 1936 aerial photo courtesy of the Automobile Club of Southern California Archives.

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Many streetcar boulevards cut across the street grid at odd angles, creating complicated intersections, like that of San Vicente, Fairfax, and Olympic, seen here in 1936. Courtesy of the Automobile Club of Southern California Archives.

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Electric railway tracks once ran down the median of Santa Monica Boulevard, shown here in West Hollywood in 1951. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

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A Pacific Electric car on Santa Monica Boulevard at Canon in Beverly Hills, 1954. Photo by Alan K. Weeks, courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

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In 1955, a Culver City auto dealership used the abandoned median of Venice Boulevard as a storage lot. Courtesy of the USC Libraries - Los Angeles Examiner Collection.

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The landscaped median of San Vicente Boulevard, seen here circa 1970 at Montana Avenue in Brentwood, once carried the Pacific Electric's Westgate Line. Courtesy of the USC Libraries - California Historical Society Collection.

Why two San Vicentes?

Both boulevards follow the path of the Pacific Electric's Westgate Line. The developers of Westgate (better known today Brentwood) first dedicated a San Vicente Blvd. in 1905, borrowing the name from the area's Mexican land grant, Rancho San Vicente y Santa Monica. Early plans envisioned this boulevard extending through Hollywood all the way to downtown L.A. These grand plans were never realized, but in 1922 the developers of the Wilshire Highlands and Carthay Center subdivisions resurrected the idea of an elongated San Vicente. Building an automobile boulevard along the tracks of the Westgate Line between Wilshire and Venice boulevards, they named the new street San Vicente Blvd. – presumably in reference to the original, several miles to the northwest.

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

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