



LOS ANGELES



Pacific Electric "red cars" share the street with horse carts on Broadway in Downtown LA around 1905. | Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection

HISTORY

Old photos show the evolution of transportation in LA

From horse-drawn wagons to subway cars

By **Hadley Meares** | Updated Dec 4, 2019, 11:05am PST | **9** comments

Part of

The beginner's guide to Los Angeles

Angelenos spend a substantial amount of their lives traveling (or attempting to travel) from one place to another. Over the past three centuries of LA's modern existence, we've used various modes of transportation to get us where we are going with various levels of success.

Join us as we take a tour of some of the key phases of LA's [transportation](#) history. Trust us, it will be more fun than being stuck in rush hour on the 405.



View of decorated stage coach in an undated photo.

Wagons and stagecoaches: ‘The dust was terrible’

Before the extension of the Southern Pacific’s transcontinental railway to Los Angeles in 1876, immigrating to Southern California was a dangerous, deadly trip. If you were lucky, you traveled by boat. But most early pioneers came by horse or wagon train. They followed bumpy, primitive, cholera-ridden trails including the [Old Spanish Trail](#), the [California Trail](#), and the legendary [Oregon Trail](#).

In the 1850s, [stagecoach travel](#), exemplified by the famous [Butterfield Overland Mail](#), became a popular new method for transporting passengers across the West. But stagecoach travel came with its own set of problems. “The motion made the passengers seasick,” traveler Katie Leng [remembered](#). “And the dust was terrible.”

With the arrival of trains in the West, transcontinental migration became immeasurably easier and safer. The [Southern Pacific](#) followed its first transcontinental route with an eastern route in 1881, and the [Santa Fe](#) followed in 1885. Interestingly, most of these trains followed trails established by Native Americans, Mexicans, and Spanish centuries before.



Horse-drawn carriages on the sand in Long Beach in 1892.

Horse power

Once early settlers arrived in Los Angeles, they found a pueblo of dusty dirt roads, many laid out by the Spanish decades before. Transportation was powered by a variety of animals, including horses, mules, ox, donkeys, and [even goats](#). With settlers spread out across ranchos and farms, every family and business of means needed a carriage or cart to haul themselves and their goods around town. According to historian [Nathan Masters](#):

For a time, nearly every vehicle on an L.A. roadway—the streetcars and omnibuses of the city's first public transit lines, the hacks and cabs of its for-hire services, the carts and wagons of its farmers and freight haulers, the buggies and carriages of wealthier Angelenos—moved only because of the horses attached to them. This dependence on equine power profoundly affected land-use patterns. In 1900, 8,065 horses called Los Angeles home, one for every 12.7 people. Inside the city, stables, saddlers, and blacksmiths occupied prime real estate along L.A. streets. Outside the city, farmers planted countless acres with the oat and alfalfa that fueled these animal engines.



A streetcar rolls along Vermont Avenue in the 1940s | Metro Library and Archive

The marvelous streetcar

The advent of the streetcar would transform Los Angeles. The first electric streetcar appeared [on a stretch of Pico Street 1887](#). These efficient people movers were a huge boon to developers, since they enabled people to live farther and farther away from Downtown Los Angeles.

[A map from 1906 shows](#) the entire city and its growing suburbs connected by a sophisticated number of electric streetcars and railways.

“By 1911, Southern Pacific consolidated the entire electric interurban streetcar network of Los Angeles and operated it as the Pacific Electric Railway Company, whose cars were known as ‘Red Cars,’” a historian for the website [usp100la](#) writes. “Around the same time, the Los Angeles Railway operated a local system of streetcars in central Los Angeles, known as the Yellow Cars.”

“For a half-century thereafter, the streetcar was the model and the marvel of the nation's urban mass transit,” *Los Angeles Times* historian [Cecilia Rasmussen writes](#). “For the price of a nickel, a dime or two bits, the trolley whizzed over more than 1,100 miles of tracks connecting the Balboa Peninsula in Newport Beach to the San Fernando Valley, and from San Bernardino to Redondo Beach. Tourists rode from downtown to the heights of Mt. Lowe in the San Gabriel Mountains.”

By the 1920s, Los Angeles had the best public streetcar system in the country.



The Pasadena Freeway jammed with cars. | Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection

The car changes everything

In 1897, “a group of men in Los Angeles built what was likely Southern California’s first home-grown horseless carriage, in a shop on West Fifth Street,” journalist Mark Landis

writes. “The four-cylinder, gasoline-powered carriage built by J. Philip Erie and S.D. Sturgis was tested on the city streets of Los Angeles in preparation for a trial run to San Bernardino.”

Due to mechanical problems, the car never made it to San Bernardino. But nothing could stop the coming of the automobile age.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, private ownership of cars in Los Angeles grew steadily. The arrival of the horseless carriage prompted the improvement and pavement of local roads, and again facilitated the increasing sprawl that would come to define Los Angeles. The city’s roads became crowded with automobiles, street cars, horse-drawn carts, and bikes.

According to journalist Matt Novak, it was in the 1920s that car ownership in Los Angeles truly exploded. “L.A.’s population of about 600,000 at the start of the 1920s more than doubled during the decade,” he writes. “The city’s cars would see an even greater increase, from 161,846 cars registered in L.A. County in 1920 to 806,264 registered in 1930. In 1920 Los Angeles had about 170 gas stations. By 1930 there were over 1,500.”



Belmont Tunnel opening in 1926.



Inside the Subway Terminal Building.

The old Hollywood subway

With the arrival of the automobile age, central Los Angeles—particularly Downtown—grew increasingly gridlocked. To combat traffic, Pacific Electric built LA’s first subway.

Known at the time as the “Hollywood Subway” or the Pacific Electric Subway, the mile-long concrete and steel tunnel began in a Downtown terminus below the massive new Subway Terminal Building, designed by the firm of Shultze and Weaver, at 417 South Hill Street. It resurfaced near where Glendale Boulevard intersected with First Street and Beverly Boulevard in Westlake.

Upon exiting the tunnel, Red Cars (which served as Pacific Electric’s above and below ground trolley cars) entered the Toluca Yard and split onto multiple tracks connecting to

the long running Glendale-Burbank, Hollywood, Santa Monica, and San Fernando Valley lines. By bypassing Downtown traffic and eliminating local stops, it was estimated the subway could cut between 12 to 15 minutes off daily commutes.

In 1926, the Subway Terminal Building opened, along with the subway, to great fanfare. The little subway ran until 1955. The subway tunnel was used “for storage of impounded autos and some microfilm storage in the downtown train shed—which was also stocked with a certain amount of foods, first aid material and other requisites for use as a disaster shelter," for several years.

Portions were then filled in once it became clear it was structurally unsafe. The portion that remained, known as Belmont Tunnel, became a haven for street artists and is now part of a small park. Today, the Italianate-Renaissance Subway Terminal Building is known as Metro 417. It is a multi-use building that includes luxury apartments.



With the Pacific Electric strike paralyzing the Southland's vast transportation system, this defense worker tries to thumb a ride to work in 1943.

The Great Strikes

Due to Pacific Electric's vehement anti-union stance, operators and conductors would strike repeatedly during the first half of the 20th century. The most famous strike came

in 1919, when operators were joined in solidarity by track-layers. [A riot broke out](#) in Downtown Los Angeles, streetcar wheels were greased, and some cars were even overturned. The result was a pay increase for workers, but the company remained an open shop. This meant periodic strikes continued, particularly during the 1940s.



The freeway came to completely define Los Angeles transportation. | Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection

Here come the highways

As early as the 1930s, it became clear that the growing metropolis of Los Angeles would need more than streetcars and regular city roads to facilitate traffic. City planners began playing with the idea of a series of freeways that would link the greater Los Angeles area. [According to historian Nathan Masters](#), the first real Los Angeles highway was the Arroyo Secco Parkway;

The \$6 million, 6.8-mile road followed, as the Times wrote, "nature's river route" between Pasadena and Los Angeles, through [Highland Park](#). As [Kenn Bicknell notes on the Metro Library's Primary Resources blog](#), the parkway largely followed the route of the California Cycleway and

grew out of an earlier proposal by Olmsted, Bartholomew, and Cheney for a motorway that would provide "a great deal of incidental recreation and pleasure" along the Arroyo Seco. Its extensive landscaping and meandering path preserved elements of the parkway concept, but its banked curves and signs directing slower traffic to the right lane signaled that a new breed of highway had arrived. The first Highland Park segment opened on July 20, 1940, with no posted speed limit. Motorcycle officers, instructed only to prevent "reckless driving," told the Times that the highway "may actually prove too fast for older machines not made for sustained high speed."

The passage of the [Collier-Burns Highway Act](#) in 1947 kicked off an era of massive freeway construction in California. These freeways were built partially with funds from a 1.5 cent fuel tax enacted by the law.

Soon, the freeway would come to completely define Los Angeles transportation. "The freeway experience... is the only secular communion Los Angeles has," [Joan Didion once wrote](#). "Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway. The mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over."

The construction of the freeways signaled the death of the streetcar system. The last red car ran in 1962. Two years later, [the last yellow car](#)—which primarily serviced central Los Angeles only—made its final ride. While many believed (including, at one time, the U.S. government) that General Motors and other big car companies single-handedly killed the street car system, historian and journalist Cecilia Rasmussen explains [it was more complicated](#) than that:

The giant corporations with a stake in cars and buses were prosecuted half a century ago by the federal government for conspiring to deep-six the region's streetcars. The consortium of General Motors, Standard Oil, Firestone Tire & Rubber, Phillips Petroleum and Mack Truck Manufacturing Co., in turn, blamed the Red and Yellow cars' demise on Angelenos' love of their automobiles, arguing that residents had grown increasingly irate over the streetcars' overcrowding, high fares, aging equipment, accidents and inadequate routes into the new suburban reaches of Los Angeles.

Although it's tempting to believe that evil forces must have been to blame, most historians agree that GM and the other mega-companies only helped to speed the end of the railway, which

already was deep into red ink. There were mixed court verdicts, with fines levied that were considered a drop in the bucket.

Today, Los Angeles is attempting to recreate the public transportation wonderland of 1920s Los Angeles with subway, light rail, and more efficient bus systems. Until then, at least we have it better than the pioneers bumping in their wagons over the Old Spanish trail.

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