

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

L.A. Once Had Cable Cars, Too

Nathan Masters | December 27, 2012

Although best known today for whisking tourists up San Francisco's hilly streets, cable cars were once a widely used public transit solution in cities across the United States, including Los Angeles. Here, they replaced the city's first generation of streetcars -- horsecars -- and brought real estate development to previously inaccessible terrain, encouraging the growth of the city's first streetcar suburbs.

When it opened on October 8, 1885, the Second Street Cable Railway was L.A.'s first mechanical street railway. In a city that had never seen a streetcar move without hearing the clip-clop of horses' hooves, the new cable cars were a technological marvel. Based on the design of a London-born engineer named Andrew Hallidie, who founded San Francisco's Clay Street Hill Railway in 1873, the railway used a 75-horsepower engine to pull a constantly moving steel cable. The cars moved by gripping the cable, which was hidden in a conduit beneath Second Street. To stop, they released it.

Cable cars offered several advantages over horse-drawn streetcars. They were clean and quiet; since their motive power came from a remotely located engine, the only noise they emitted was the high-pitched ring of the cable moving through its conduit. Horses tended to foul the streets and were spooked easily. More importantly from a development perspective, cable cars could scale the steep slopes of Bunker Hill and other hilly terrain that had previously boxed in the city's growth. Horses struggled to pull streetcars from a complete stop even on slight grades.

It's no surprise, then, that the driving force behind L.A.'s first cable railways were real estate speculators invested in hilly land. Hilltop subdivisions could be the city's most profitable, but only if prospective residents could rely on easy transportation between their houses and the city center below.



The Second Street Railway extended west from Spring Street to housing subdivisions beyond Bunker Hill. This 1889 view looks west down Second from Broadway. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

After purchasing a large tract of land west of Bunker Hill, the Los Angeles Improvement Company financed construction of the Second Street Cable Railway as a means of promoting its Crown Hill subdivision. To build the railways, workers extended Second Street beyond Hill Street, where it had previously come to end at the foot of a steep cliff. Deep cuts through the rolling hills helped moderate the slope, but the line still boasted the steepest stretch of cable car railway in the nation.

Starting at Spring Street, the line ran west to Crown Hill, located near the present-day intersection of Second and Glendale. To move some 1,400 lots, the Los Angeles Improvement Company advertised "Pure Air - No Fogs - Cheap Lots in the Western Addition of the Cable Road." Mechanical problems plagued the line, though, and it closed for good after an 1889 storm buried part of the railway in twenty feet of mud.

The city's second mechanical streetcar line, the Temple Street Cable Railway, opened on July 14, 1886. Backed by land speculator Prudent Beaudry, who first developed Bunker Hill in the late 1860s, the Temple Street line extended 8,725 feet between Spring Street and Belmont Avenue. There, the streetcar line fueled the growth of Angeleno Heights (today spelled "Angelino Heights"), an early suburb promoted by Beaudry and his brother Victor. "Have a house in the hills!" encouraged the Beaudrys' marketing materials, which advertised the subdivision's street railway link. "Stop paying rent in the Valley!"

A third cable car system, the Los Angeles Cable Railway, arrived in 1889. By far the most ambitious of the three, the railway included two separate lines that snaked through much of the city. The first featured a soaring viaduct over the Los Angeles River and Southern Pacific railyard, stretching from East Los Angeles (today, Lincoln Heights) to Jefferson and Grand. The other extended between Westlake (today, MacArthur) Park and Boyle Heights.

Although a marked improvement over horse-drawn streetcars, cable cars soon became obsolete after engineers perfected an even newer streetcar technology: the electric railway. Whereas cable railways constantly ran their engines at full power -- regardless of how many cars were active on the line -- to pull the heavy steel cables, the newer railways delivered electricity directly to motors located on the streetcars themselves. Cables lasted only a few years before needing replacement and were costly to bury; overhead catenary wires were inexpensive by comparison.

By 1896, much of the city's cable car trackage had been converted to electricity and incorporated into a growing electric railway network. In 1902, a mere 16 years after the city hailed its first cable railway as a technological wonder, the last of L.A.'s cable cars rolled down Temple Street and into obscurity.



The Second Street Cable Railway ascending the west slope of Bunker Hill, near Second and Flower, circa 1885. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.



The Second Street Cable Railway's western terminus was Crown Hill, a real estate development pictured here circa 1885. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.



The Second Street Cable Railway's powerhouse in Crown Hill, circa 1890. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.



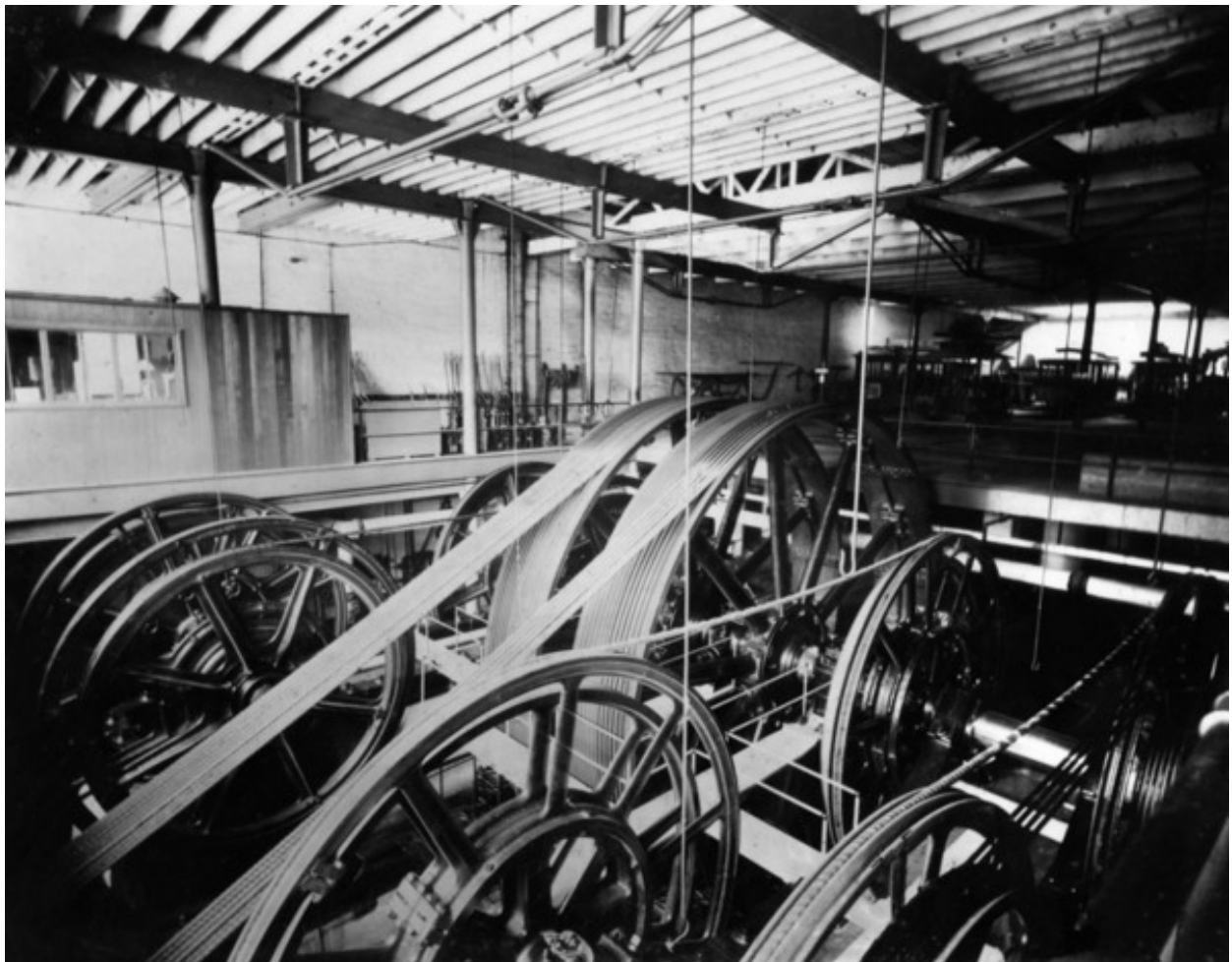
The Temple Street Cable Railway's powerhouse in Angeleno Heights, circa 1890. The station was located at the northwest corner of Temple and East Edgeware Road. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



Frederick Wood and John Fowler of the Temple Street Cable Railway pose with a sample piece of cable car railway roadbed. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.



Workers installing cable car tracks in Boyle Heights. The tracks to the left were used by horse-drawn streetcars, which cable cars replaced. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.



Interior of the Los Angeles Cable Railway powerhouse at Seventh Street and Grand Avenue. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



Powerhouse of the Los Angeles Cable Railway, since renamed the Pacific Cable Railway, at Seventh and Grand. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.



Residents celebrated the 1889 opening of the Los Angeles Cable Railway's line to East Los Angeles. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.



A soaring viaduct carried the Los Angeles Cable Railway's tracks over the Southern Pacific railyard and Los Angeles River on their way to East Los Angeles (today, Lincoln Heights). Courtesy of the William C. Barry Collection of Los Angeles Area Photographs, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.



Workers dig up abandoned cable car railway tracks on Second Street. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

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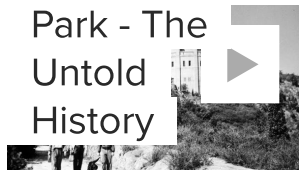
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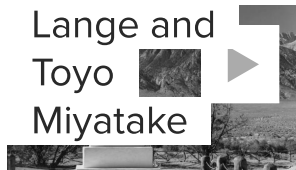
Nathan Masters is host and executive producer of *Lost L.A.*, an Emmy Award-winning public television series from KCET and the *USC Libraries*. The show explores how rare artifacts from Southern California's archives can unlock hidden and often-surprising stories from the region's past. Nathan's writing has appeared in many publications, including *Los Angeles Magazine* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

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