



Lost LA

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From Rail to Roads and Back Again: The Rebirth of L.A.'s Public Transit

By Ethan Elkind

March 16, 2022



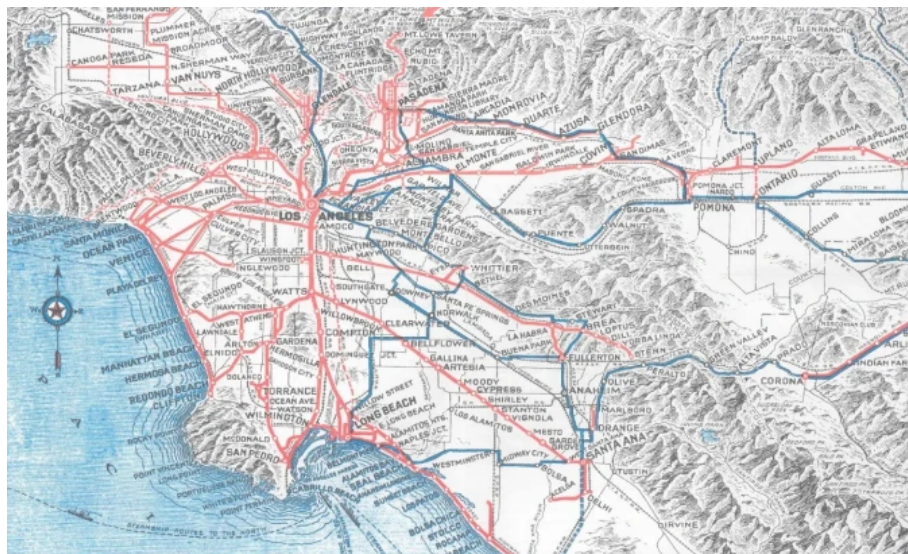
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History

In this episode of "Lost L.A.," "Who Killed the Red Car?," host Nathan Masters investigates what happened to one of the greatest rail transit systems in the nation. Watch this preview.

19th Century to 1961: From Streetcar Paradise to Automobile Dominance

What modern Angelenos think of as the auto-oriented sprawl of Los Angeles actually began with the first streetcar trolley system in Los Angeles. The original real estate developers in the city, exemplified by Henry Huntington, built the first electric-powered streetcar lines on dedicated tracks at the end of the nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth century to encourage the growth of single-family home subdivisions. The streetcars enabled new residents to live far from the city center and take the trains to work and to services downtown.

Huntington consolidated these trains into the Pacific Electric system, known as the Yellow and Red Cars. At its height, the region featured over one thousand miles of tracks, allowing residents to travel by streetcar from the beach to the mountains and everywhere in between.

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But these tracks were soon threatened by a new technology: the automobile. It quickly came to dominate Los Angeles as the "disruptive technology" of its day. While automobile sales increased in cities across America at the time, cars were particularly popular in this sprawling metropolis built on flat land in pleasant weather. Angelenos adopted the car en masse in the 1920s, which coincided with a time of enormous population growth.

As a consequence, the streetcars began falling out of favor. Compared to automobiles, they were slow and less desirable, and they often moved slowly and got stalled in car traffic on city streets. The streetcars began losing ridership and money, and voters refused to rescue them — a pattern played out in many cities across America at the time. Ultimately, the last Red Car stopped service in 1961, on the route from downtown Los Angeles to Long Beach. Buses replaced the streetcar lines and became the dominant form of transit.

Concrete Fantasy: When Southern California's Freeways Were New (And Empty)

1961-1979: Sprawl, Traffic and Early Rail Boosters

The new car culture encouraged more far-flung development across Los Angeles, creating complex and disorganized travel patterns. Businesses spread out to meet employees where they lived. These places usually had lower land costs and easier parking and vehicle access. Commuters in Los Angeles began traveling in different directions from jobs to services to homes. The car dependency also exacerbated racial inequality in Los Angeles, as low-income African American and Latino residents without cars now had to travel longer distances to dispersed job centers, often by slow-moving and crowded buses.

Ironically, the extensive streetcar system helped create the foundation for the region's predominate auto-oriented sprawl, which originally clustered around the spokes of the old streetcar network. This growth occurred haphazardly, driven by real estate interests rather than well-planned urban spaces. Essentially, sprawl filled in the gaps between streetcar-oriented suburbs.

“This growth occurred haphazardly, driven by real estate interests rather than well-planned urban spaces.”

Ethan Elkind

But many Angelenos hated to see the Pacific Electric system die. As traffic and air quality worsened throughout the 1950s and 1960s, nostalgia for the rail system became widespread, particularly in the urban core. Downtown businesses lobbied to get a new rail network started, out of fear that downtown would become a hollowed-out economic wasteland due to competition from suburban job centers.

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1980: A Barebones Campaign and the First New Rail Lines

Los Angeles County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn tried again in 1980. He decided to put his own sales tax measure on the ballot, modeled on an Atlanta plan that split the sales tax revenue among rail, buses and local road improvements.

The original Los Angeles County Proposition A rail rapid transit system map (1980). | Los Angeles County Transportation Commission

In November 1980, Los Angeles County voters narrowly approved the measure with 54% in favor. With money now in hand, Hahn worked to ensure the first rail line served his district in South Los Angeles. Rail transit leaders obliged and approved the first line from downtown to Long Beach along the route of the last Red Car. Hahn wanted a light rail train (powered by overhead lines at a cheaper cost than "heavy rail" technology with power from a third rail below) due to its lower cost to build. Construction on what became the Blue Line began in 1985.

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A 1984 map of the Blue Line to Long Beach from Downtown Los Angeles as presented in a draft supplemental environmental impact report from the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission. | Los Angeles County Transportation Commission

While Hahn's light rail plans progressed, downtown subway backers faced disagreements over the proposed route from downtown along the Wilshire corridor, the most densely populated part of Southern California. Homeowners were concerned that a subway would "change the character" of their neighborhoods, this worry was evident particularly among residents of Hancock Park and along Fairfax Avenue.

Then in March 1985, a methane gas explosion at a Ross Dress For Less store at Fairfax and 3rd Street became an excuse for then-Congressman Henry Waxman to partner with Republicans in Congress to withhold federal funding for the entire subway based on phony safety concerns. At the last minute, local officials persuaded him to accept a compromise route that would take the subway south of his district. Construction finally began in 1986 on the first four-mile section from Union Station to Wilshire and Alvarado.

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In 1990, rail leaders proposed another sales tax initiative to add more local revenue for public transit, including rail. That same year, Proposition C barely passed with 50.4% approval. Armed with more money, transit leaders promised multiple rail routes. They built light rail along a dedicated right-of-way available in the median of the new Century Freeway, though due to funding challenges and opposition from the Federal Aviation Administration, the newly named Green Line missed LAX airport and headed south to serve the soon-to-be-decimated aerospace industry. State and local leaders also worked to ensure Pasadena got a new rail line. The Gold Line opened in 2003 to limited success, due to lower-than-expected ridership and slow travel times.

A Gold Line Eastside extension began construction in 2004, passing through Little Tokyo and Boyle Heights. Light rail to Culver City and Santa Monica also began construction via the Expo Line from downtown to Culver City and an extension to Santa Monica.

2008-2022: Measure R, Measure M and the New Rail Boom

By 2008, a coalition of environmental groups, downtown business leaders and construction unions decided to place another sales tax measure on the ballot. Despite an economy in free-fall, Measure R won an overwhelming two-thirds majority that November. New rail lines soon followed from the passage, including the completion of the Expo Line to Santa Monica, the \$4 billion, nine-mile Purple Line subway extension down Wilshire.

The Metro Purple Line's current western terminus lies underneath the intersection of Wilshire and Western. | Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive

Flush with cash, especially after another 2016 sales tax measure passed, transit leaders completed an 11-mile Gold Line Foothill extension to Azusa in the San Gabriel Valley, with a second 12-mile phase from Azusa to Montclair in the works. Meanwhile, the \$2 billion, 8.5-mile Crenshaw line began construction in January 2014, with a hoped-for opening in 2022. The line will link the Green Line to the Expo Line, providing a missing north-south connection and providing rail access to LAX airport through an automated "people mover" tram. Transit leaders also began a light rail Regional Connector to link the Blue and Gold Lines through downtown, also slated to open in 2022.

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densely populated parts of the county, but with construction underway on crucial lines, that lack of service will be remedied in the coming decade.

With the ongoing rail transit boom, rail planners now need to improve the land use policies and development opportunities around station areas to boost ridership and create more convenient and affordable rail-oriented neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, city leaders often fail to promote this kind of development, and many homeowners typically fight it through litigation, restrictive land use policies and referenda. Ultimately, the prevention of this development limits ridership gains and undermines both housing access and affordability and rail ridership.

Los Angeles began as a series of streetcar suburbs, then inspired the world with a glamorous vision of an auto-oriented life, and now has emerged as a modern rail transit leader. The region has begun to reinvent itself with rail-oriented neighborhood successes. But the process of urban reinvention will require building more of these transit-oriented neighborhoods to complement new transit service. For that resurgence to happen, the backbone infrastructure is an echo of the past rail service. Rail is slowly transforming key parts of Los Angeles once again back into a railtown.

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These Historic Clock Towers Kept Los Angeles in Time

In the mid-1800s, public clocks served as type of civic authority as they centralized the town's time while introducing the idea of organizing days around the hours and minutes of clock time.

Warships, Canneries and Floating Cranes: Melancholy Memories of the Terminal Island We've Lost

The socially and historically complex Terminal Island has become a mono-culture of standardized, containerized commerce. Writer D.J. Waldie recounts a personal history of a once scruffy seaside that is now the nation's top cargo port.

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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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