

HIST 116J: Roads and Cars in American Life
Professor David Spatz

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Jacob L. Wasserman

The Trolley Problem: The Demise of the Streetcar in New Haven

by Jacob L. Wasserman

“The trolleys fought hard for existence...but finally succumbed to the march of progress in transportation,” opined *The New Haven Sunday Register* on the streetcars’ last day of operation.¹ The article, September 26, 1948’s local lead story, struck a decidedly more optimistic note than the tense news from Berlin and negative campaigning from Dewey with which it shared the front page. Atop the article sat a panoramic photograph of the new buses ready to ply their routes—dubbed “sleek, streamlined vehicles” by the caption.² While readers’ outlook on the nation and the world may have remained uncertain, their own city’s transit future had to be secure—or so the front page would have it. A second article buried in the inner pages, however, revealed residents’ discontent. The previous day, football game traffic had threatened to overwhelm the system, with fans clogging the bus turnstiles at the Yale Bowl. Amid cries of “We want the trolleys!” and “What a mess!,” some in the crowd even rushed a police line guarding the loading zone.³ But despite the chaos, the change could not be reversed. Soon, tracks were to be torn out and trolleys set aflame, as if a *damnatio memoriae* of New Haven’s half-century-old streetcar system.⁴ “The march of progress in transportation,” however uneasily, rolled on.

Mike Schreiber, archivist at the Shore Line Trolley Museum in East Haven, Connecticut,

1. “City’s Center under One-Way Traffic System: New Plan to Face First Test Tomorrow When Stores, Plants Open,” *New Haven Sunday Register*, Sept. 26, 1948.

2. Ibid.

3. “New Buses Get First Test in Bowl Traffic: Turnstiles Cause Jam as Crowds Leave Game—Two Autos Collide,” *New Haven Sunday Register*, Sept. 26, 1948.

4. “Buses Replace Ancient Trolley along Bowl Route; Recent Change Expected to Speed Transportation,” *Yale Daily News* (hereafter *YDN*), Sept. 22, 1948.

recently summed up the reasons for the replacement of streetcars: “One word—money.”⁵ To be sure, New Haven proved no exception to this blunt economic reality, but the anomalous circumstances surrounding the trolleys’ 1948 retirement hint at a more nuanced explanation. The Elm City’s streetcars survived for roughly a decade longer than any other system in the state, holding out through the Depression and World War II due to New Haven’s part-structural, part-idiosyncratic trolley dependence. The significant efforts that concerned parties like the Connecticut Company made to overcome the trolley’s entrenchment, even to their economic disadvantage in some cases, demonstrate that the conversion to buses was not a natural, unforced transition. Rather, a massive engineering and publicity campaign was required to make the switch, which, in the process, dramatically reshaped the built landscape of the city. In retrospect, the demise of the trolley, both in New Haven and across the nation, was very likely inevitable, but the specific date of its disappearance was not. This deceptively minor qualification in fact reveals much about the power structure, governance, and internal discord of the American city and its transit companies.

Histories of the trolley tend to ascribe its demise either to economic failings and excessive government regulation or, more sinisterly, to a General-Motors-led conspiracy. Along with recounting how railroad companies ignored warning signs, historians like Stephen Goddard have described a monopolistic agreement between the Fitzgerald Brothers and GM to buy out trolley lines and replace them with buses. Others, like Brian Cudahy, have dismissed the conspiracy charge, citing fixed fares, Depression-era cutbacks, and other operational constraints as factors in the streetcar’s inability to stop the bus’ success. Between the two camps, however, the role of transit companies themselves has received scant attention. Whether from a conspiracy, overregulation, or simple profit motive, the inevitability of the trolley’s

5. Michael Howard Schreiber, interview with author, Mar. 25, 2014.

disappearance has obscured any role for the companies and their allies, particularly in small cities. Cudahy's book details trolley company efforts to develop new streetcar technology, but not their moves into the bus business itself. A transit outfit like New Haven's Connecticut Company, however, had years of experience experimenting in other modes of transportation, leveraging its connections in government and business to do so. Coupled with downtown business owners, who were willing to take drastic steps to keep business, as urbanist Alison Isenberg has argued, the Connecticut Company actively sought to switch to buses.⁶



For a rail company, the New Haven Railroad had always shown a definite interest in leaving the traditional confines of the tracks. Founded in an 1870 consolidation of regional rail lines, the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad—popularly known as “the New Haven”—monopolized long-distance transport in New England. Even before its trains had achieved dominance, though, the New Haven and its predecessors branched into canals and, later, steamships. The burgeoning field of trolley transport became the New Haven's greatest gamble. Though it built few of its own lines, the New Haven, under the oft-maligned management of J. P. Morgan ally Charles Mellen, purchased almost every trolley system in lower New England. Vastly overspending the railroad's resources, Mellen used his connections in government and finance to get a stake in the streetcar industry's growth. Both to feed the main line and to provide additional service, in 1906, the railroad established a trolley subsidiary, the Connecticut Company. At the same time, it leased the right to operate the pre-existing streetcar

6. Brian J. Cudahy, *Cash, Tokens, and Transfers: A History of Urban Mass Transit in North America* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1990), 151-79, 187-91; Mark S. Foster, *From Streetcar to Superhighway: American City Planners and Urban Transportation, 1900-1940*, Technology and Urban Growth, ed. Blaine A. Brownell et al. (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press: 1981), 116; Stephen B. Goddard, *Getting There: The Epic Struggle between Road and Rail in the American Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 52-3, 64, 120-137; Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People who Made It*, Historical Studies of Urban America, ed. Kathleen N. Conzen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and James R. Grossman (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004), 1-12; and Robert C. Post, *Urban Mass Transit: The Life Story of a Technology*, Greenwood Technographies (Westport, CT, Greenwood: 2007), 88, 149-54.

system in New Haven from the power company that built it, Connecticut Railway and Lighting.⁷ From its beginnings, then, the New Haven Railroad had always attempted to branch out anticipatorily into other modes of transportation, often at great financial risk—foreshadowing their later move to buses.

The Depression hit the New Haven and the Connecticut Company hard. But even before then, the Connecticut Company sought to switch to buses, perhaps prematurely. In 1921, the first year the state allowed, the Company began auto service; in 1924, the year track mileage hit a profitable peak, the Company began conversion of trolley lines to bus routes. In fact, the Company shut down New Haven's first bus line, begun in 1921, after the trolley outcompeted it. But with the onset of the Depression and increased auto competition, bus change-over accelerated, especially after the New Haven declared bankruptcy in 1935 and had to sell the Connecticut Company back to Connecticut Railway and Lighting. By the late 1930's, buses offered a number of advantages, even for a company founded to run streetcars. At least twice as cheap as a trolley, a bus offered flexible routing, lacked the clatter of streetcars, and required no large investment to extend into the suburbs. Moreover, the city required the Company to pave and plow large sections of streets with trolley tracks, an obligation avoided by bus operation. On top of all this, the process of trolley-to-bus conversion offered an opportunity to raise fares. From an economic standpoint, the transition to buses seemed sensible. Additionally, with car ownership almost tripling nationally between the trolley's heyday and its demise and with the Company facing deep losses, the situation called for some sort drastic action. However, the Connecticut Company's efforts to change even before buses became obviously more profitable

7. Douglas W. Rae, *City: Urbanism and Its End* (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 2003), 107-8; Michael Howard Schreiber, interview with author, Apr. 8, 2014; R. Patrick Stanford, *Formation and History of the Connecticut Company and the Connecticut Railway and Light Company*, rev. ed., ed. Robert J. Ryer (n.p.: n.p., 1975), 1-9; J. W. Swanberg, *New Haven Power, 1838-1968: Steam, Diesel, Electric, M.U.'s, Trolleys, Motor Cars, Buses, and Boats* (Medina, OH: Stauffer, 1988), 6, 24, 28, 53, 306; and John L. Weller, *The New Haven Railroad: Its Rise and Fall* (New York: Hastings House, 1969), 53-68, 71-95.

suggest a long-standing, concerted effort to eliminate streetcar service before its time. As such, by the onset of World War II, buses had long since replaced trolleys in every Connecticut city but New Haven.⁸

That last city, though, clung to its trolleys. A great number of factors sustained the streetcar in New Haven, all of which would have to be overcome to transition to buses. Possessing the Connecticut Company's largest, most profitable streetcar system and its corporate headquarters, the Elm City was scheduled last for conversion. Structurally, the city's track network, built before takeover by the New Haven Railroad, converged downtown, not at the main train station, making it more valuable for local commuters. Moreover, as urbanist Douglas Rae elucidated by analyzing business records and mapping shop locations, the city and especially its commercial interests relied very heavily on the streetcars for both freight and passenger deliveries. Positioned around the town's Green, the centralized nature of New Haven's downtown had for decades reciprocally caused, and benefited from, the trolleys' fixed hub-and-spoke design. Manufacturers, then a large part of the city's economy, appreciated that trolleys stopped right at the factory doors. Beyond downtown, trolleys played an essential role in the operations of the Yale Bowl and area amusement parks. Every weekend in the fall, tens of thousands of fans converged on the colossal Yale Bowl stadium for college football, most of whom took the streetcar. For Bowl games, the Company employed upwards of eighty open trolleys—streetcars without full walls on the sides—so that the huge crowds could climb aboard along the car's whole length and feel cooled by the breeze during the ride. Single-door, then un-

8. Louis P. Cain, "Motor Vehicle Registrations, By Vehicle Type, 1900-1995," in *Historical Statistics of the United States*, ed. Susan B. Carter et al, Millennial ed., series Df339-342 (N.p.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), "Connecticut Co. May Run 'Busses: Will Operate On Trolleyless Streets if Legislature Consents," *Hartford Courant*, Aug. 19, 1920; "Conn. Co. Will Quit Leased Lines Monday: Railway & Lighting Co. to Resume Operation on Dozens of State Bus and Trolley Routes," *Hartford Courant*, Nov. 14, 1936; Cudahy, *Cash, Tokens, and Transfers*, 190-1; John D. Somers, *Yale Bowl and the Open Trolleys* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance, 1996), 31; Stanford, *Formation and History*, 9-12, 14-62; Swanberg, *New Haven Power*, 302, 306; "Trolley Tracks Are Fast Going Out Of Service: 'New Haven' Reorganization Speeds Change to Buses By Conn. Co.," *Hartford Courant*, Aug. 1, 1936; and Weller, *New Haven Railroad*, 68-70.

air-conditioned buses would not have sufficed, leaving the Company as one of the last operators of open trolleys nationally. Similarly, the New Haven area featured amusement parks like Savin Rock and Momauguin Park, which relied on the trolley for customers and on its parent electric company for power. Even into their later years, the streetcars provided a sense of thrill and vacation for amusement park and Bowl game travelers.⁹ While other cities shared many of these factors, they all combined to give New Haven a unique reliance on the trolley. Buses may have made economic sense for the Connecticut Company, but for New Haven, their loss would necessitate a dramatic change in city life.

With the rest of the state converted to buses, the Connecticut Company's preparations in New Haven ended abruptly with the onset of World War II. Due to gasoline rationing, materiel shortages, and spiking employment in factories, the Connecticut Company pressed into service many old cars and reactivated abandoned lines. As a result, the streetcars turned a greater profit than they had in years. However, despite a federal prohibition on further bus conversion, the Company began to lay the groundwork for the postwar transition even as the war escalated. The streetcars brought out for wartime service received only minimal repairs, leading to increased noise complaints and frequent power shutdowns. Resources which could have been used for trolley refurbishing instead went to track removal—not as part of bus conversion, the Company claimed, but for recycling as war salvage. Meanwhile, the state granted the Company approval to run new bus routes out to suburban war factories. Even with the limitation that buses could only be used to move war factory workers, the Company managed to increase its bus network in the

9. Jacob Anbinder, "Streetcar Played Vital Role for Yalies Past," *YDN*, Sept. 28, 2010; Branford Electric Railway Association (hereafter BERA), *New Haven Streetcars*, Images of Rail (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2003), 18, 55-9; Charles Rufus Harte, "Handling the Crowds at the Yale-Harvard Football Game," personal report, 1936, in *Branford Electric Railway Journal* 32, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 3-6; Charles Rufus Harte and Michael Schreiber, "Trolley Express," *Branford Electric Railway Journal* 33, no. 1 (Spring and Summer 1989): 3-15; Rae, *City*, 87-96, 107-8, 112; Schreiber, interview, Apr. 8, 2014; Shore Line Trolley Museum, April 8, 2014; Somers, *Yale Bowl and Open Trolleys*; Stanford, *Formation and History*, 66; Swanberg, *New Haven Power*, 302; and *Trolley Trips Through New England and Hudson River Valley*, selections, 1914 ed., ed. Michael H. Schreiber and Marilyn Schreiber (N.p.: Trolley Press of Hartford, 1914), in *Branford Electric Railway Journal* 34, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 3 ff.

New Haven area during the war. Continued shortages after the war delayed bus conversion further.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Company's actions during a time of national crisis demonstrate both how much preparatory work was needed for bus conversion and how determined the Company was to retiring New Haven's streetcars.



After the war, the Connecticut Company hoped their trolleys had reached the end of the line. The Company remained eager to rid itself of the streetcars, freed from the constraints of wartime service and rationing. However, with the city's manufacturing strong immediately after the war and its population of carless residents, like Yale students, increasing, the trolley appeared to have at least a few more good years ahead of it. To overcome this inertia and escape the duties of its trolley franchise agreement, the Connecticut Company and its allies needed decisive action—and the city's growing traffic woes provided the opportunity. In 1947, the New Haven Chamber of Commerce's Traffic and Parking Committee, whose members included a Mr. Bennett of the Connecticut Company, conducted a volume survey of rush hour traffic, codifying their earlier anecdotal discussions and site tours of "bottleneck" spots.¹¹ Their results suggested a traffic crisis, a problem that had plagued New Haven's old streets since the mid-1920's. In

10. Associated Press (hereafter AP), "Trolley Trouble Cause Sought in New Haven," *Hartford Courant*, Nov. 26, 1945; "Bids Opened for Trolley Rail Salvage: New Haven Concern Makes Lowest Offer; Three Firms Seek Contract for City Tracks," *Hartford Courant*, Jun. 25, 1942; BERA, "The End of the First Age of the Branford Elec. Ry.," *The Shore Line Trolley Museum: Membership Website*, last modified March 10, 2005, <http://www.bera.org/articles/bery100p4.html>; Connecticut Company, "A Message of Importance to Every Connecticut Company Patron," advertisement, *New Haven Evening Register*, Sept. 27, 1948; Public Utilities Commission, *Finding: In the Matter of Application for Authority to Operate Motor Bus Route in War Transportation Service*, certificate no. 200T-7, July 23, 1942; Public Utilities Commission, *Finding: In the Matter of Application for Authority to Operate Motor Bus Route in War Transportation Service*, certificate no. 200T-9, July 1, 1942; Public Utilities Commission, *Finding: In the Matter of Application for Authority to Operate Motor Bus Route in War Transportation Service*, certificate no. 200T-15, October 20, 1942; Schreiber, interview, Apr. 8, 2014; Somers, *Yale Bowl and Open Trolleys*, 29; and "Trolley Noise Increase Blamed on War Crisis," *YDN*, Apr. 12, 1941.

11. V. M. Reynolds, "Traffic and Parking Committee," meeting minutes, Jul. 24, 1947, "New Haven Traffic Commission" Folder, Box 6, Kent Tenney Healy Papers, MS 653, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven, CT (hereafter Healy Papers). Except where otherwise noted, all subsequent cited material from the Healy Papers is also from the "New Haven Traffic Commission" Folder, Box 6.

response, traffic engineer Edmund R. Ricker presented a drastic plan to the Committee in 1948: he proposed to convert almost every street in downtown New Haven to one-way traffic, outlining his plan in a detailed map. While New Haven had discussed and implemented one-way conversion of individual streets on a limited basis, Ricker suggested the systematic overhaul of the city's entire traffic pattern.¹²

At first glance, restricting traffic on major urban thoroughfares would seem to do little to ease congestion. Ricker and others countered that one-way streets would help segregate cars moving through downtown from those travelling to and from it. Traffic would form “a directed stream,” *The Yale Daily News* surmised.¹³ The one-way street system offered another benefit stated only in meeting minutes: it would necessitate the removal of the trolleys, whose two-track, bidirectional operation would become incompatible with the new traffic patterns. Buses, however, could easily adjust their routes to one-way streets. The Committee's records do not indicate that Ricker designed his plan specifically to rid the city of trolleys, but every member of the Committee knew from the start that trolley removal would necessarily result. “Ricker told the Committee that he definitely planned to install one-way streets in the downtown area as soon as the trolleys are removed,” the minutes from the Committee's August 5th meeting noted.¹⁴ The minutes do not reveal if trolley removal was an effect or a cause of the one-way plan, yet bus transition had regardless long been a goal of the Committee's assembled business leaders. For instance, earlier that year, when Bennett had updated the Committee on the Connecticut

12. *Ibid.*; Alexander C. Fisher, “When Normalcy Never Came: Coming Home to a Changed University,” *Yale Historical Review* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2012), 67; Peter P. Hale to Board of Directors of the New Haven Chamber of Commerce, New Haven, Aug. 19, 1948, Healy Papers; Mary G. Morrissey, meeting minutes of the New Haven Traffic Commission, May 14, 1947, Healy Papers; Rae, *City*, 226; Edmund R. Ricker to Kent T. Healy, New Haven, Aug. 3, 1948, Healy Papers; W. Ogden Ross, “Meeting of the Traffic and Parking Committee,” meeting minutes, Jul. 8, 1948, Healy Papers; Schreiber, interview, Apr. 8, 2014; and “Volume Tally on Whitney Avenue between Bradley Street and Sachem Street,” volume study, Dec. 2, 1947, Healy Papers.

13. “New Haven Traffic Lanes Rerouted; Most Streets Designated One Way: Elm City Engineers Aim to Eliminate Congestion on Main Thoroughfares,” *YDN*, Sept. 22, 1948.

14. W. Ogden Ross, “Meeting of the Traffic and Parking Committee,” meeting minutes, Aug. 5, 1948, Healy Papers.

Company's state appeal to decommission some of its few remaining trolley lines, one member had pressed Bennett to make sure the removal occurred as quickly as possible. Thus, like the cars Ricker planned to redirect, the Committee itself planned to travel in only one direction: away from the streetcar.¹⁵

While the Chamber of Commerce's Traffic and Parking Committee unanimously agreed to the idea of one-way, trolley-free streets, the rest of New Haven's downtown business community needed to support the plan for it to be viably implemented. "Ricker stated that it is imperative that the idea be sold to the merchants," the Committee's minutes recounted, "for without their agreement, the plan would be impossible."¹⁶ The backers of the proposal therefore did not take their acquiescence for granted. After all, the immovable hub-and-spoke design of the streetcar lines funneled almost all riders to the Green downtown and dropped them off right in front of the department stores of Chapel Street's central business district. Without the certainty of customers that the trolleys provided, the businesses feared a flight to the suburbs, a worry the Committee recognized. "Believing that the large holders of downtown property have a stake in this problem," the Traffic and Parking Committee's minutes stated, "the Committee decided to hold a meeting to acquaint them with...what would happen to their holdings if the business district decentralizes."¹⁷ Thus when Ricker announced his plan, the Committee immediately set to work persuading business owners on its merits. The previous year, Chairman Hale and other members of the Committee had met with the most influential business owners; Ricker and the

15. *Ibid.*; "One-Way Street Setup Begins Here at Midnight: Police to Unveil 178 Signs, 28 New Traffic Lights as Sweeping Change Goes into Effect—Trolleys to Make Final Runs—70 Buses Available for Bowl Game," *New Haven Evening Register*, Sept. 25, 1948; "New Haven Traffic Lanes Rerouted"; Vincent M. Reynolds, "Meeting of the Traffic and Parking Committee," Oct. 2, 1947, Healy Papers; Ross, "Meeting," Jul. 8, 1948, Healy Papers; and Stanford, *Formation and History*, 66.

16. Ross, "Meeting," July 8, 1948, Healy Papers.

17. Vincent M. Reynolds, "Traffic and Parking Committee," meeting minutes, Aug. 8, 1947, Healy Papers.

rest of the Committee now redoubled their efforts.¹⁸ Ricker soon met with members of the New Haven Retail Board of Governors, while Hale wrote to the Chamber of Commerce's overall board, claiming that the proposal was "vital to the continued health of our commercial center."¹⁹ Businesses initially responded unenthusiastically. As the minutes paraphrased, the Retail Board members agreed to the plan only out of "the belief that some move is better than none."²⁰ But as the date of the conversion drew near, businesses began to embrace the switch—some accepting the need to accommodate cars, others believing buses to be equivalent to trolleys. On the day of the change, an advertisement in the *Register* trumpeted, "It's a One-Way Street to MALLEY'S...and to relieve the confusion of the new traffic regulations, effective this morning, get your free pocket map...at Malley's."²¹ Downtown business, then, moved toward full support, even attempting to profit off the conversion itself.

The businesses' support came at a price. Schreiber condensed how the commercial elite felt about the trolleys: "They wanted them until people decided [it would be] easier to drive when [going] shopping."²² With a shift in focus from trolleys to cars, though, drivers would need many more places to park in a city with very little space left free downtown. Recognizing this problem, the Committee offered businesses an extra incentive to join with them against the streetcar: a promise to create more downtown parking. At the time, roughly eighty-one percent of drivers found New Haven's parking inadequate. Therefore, in September 1946, the Committee requested money from the town to conduct a study of possible downtown parking lot locations. Within the next four years, the Committee acted on bids to demolish a building on Orange Street and pave over the wide median of Broadway for parking lots, the latter of which was requested

18. *Ibid.*; BERA, *New Haven Streetcars*, 18; Rae, *City*, 87, 96, 107, 236, 296; Ross, "Meeting," July 8, 1948, Healy Papers; Ross, "Meeting," Aug. 5, 1948, Healy Papers; and Stanford, *Formation and History*, 66.

19. Hale to Board of Directors of the Chamber of Commerce, Aug. 19, 1948, Healy Papers.

20. Ross, "Meeting," Aug. 5, 1948, Healy Papers.

21. Malley's, "It's a One-Way Street to MALLEY'S," advertisement, *New Haven Sunday Register*, Sept. 26, 1948 (emphasis original).

22. Schreiber, interview, Apr. 8, 2014.

directly by the businessmen lining the avenue. Parking still remained scarce, though, but the Committee unanimously rejected as impractical a proposal to create lots in peripheral areas within the city limits instead of downtown, as was done in Hartford.²³

Instead, the Committee investigated a bold redesign of the very heart of New Haven. Mr. Johnson of the Chamber of Commerce, at the Committee's urging, sought an estimate for "(a) a closed underground garage underneath the Green; or (b) an open pit garage."²⁴ Rather than working to refurbish the trolley, the most preeminent business figures in the city considered digging up the colonial commons of New Haven's founding for parking spaces. Moreover, though the proprietors of the Green flatly vetoed the idea, Mr. Arpaia of the Traffic and Parking Committee suggested taking the fight public.²⁵ The Committee and the Connecticut Company never considered shared rights-of-way or other compromise solutions, instead viewing a city with trolleys as incompatible with a motorized downtown. Parking on the Green, ultimately never realized, might indeed have helped customers reach department stores in an increasingly crowded downtown, but here, it represents the lengths the concerned parties were willing to go to retire the streetcar.

With businesses behind the plan, the Committee moved to secure support of the town's elected and appointed officials. The Connecticut Company and its parent enterprise paid franchise fees and provided power to the town, thereby establishing a close relationship with city government. Supporting this link, the New Haven Railroad employed the town's second or third largest workforce, not even counting the Connecticut Company. So when the Company decided

23. Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1961), 139; Mary G. Morrissey, meeting minutes of the New Haven Traffic Commission, Jan. 1, 1947, Healy Papers; Mary G. Morrissey, meeting minutes of the New Haven Traffic Commission, Nov. 8, 1950, Healy Papers; Ross, "Meeting," Aug. 5, 1948; and W. Ogden Ross, "Meeting of the Traffic and Parking Committee," meeting minutes, May 27, 1948, Healy Papers.

24. Reynolds, "Traffic and Parking Committee," Aug. 8, 1947, Healy Papers.

25. W. Ogden Ross, "Meeting of the Traffic and Parking Committee," meeting minutes, Jan. 8, 1948, Healy Papers.

to make its final move away from trolleys, the city, then led by Mayor William Celentano, gladly complied. While authority over New Haven's traffic matters technically rested in the city's Police Board, the town's Traffic Commission decided practical planning decisions downtown. A city body of businessmen, engineers, and aldermen for a time chaired by Yale transportation professor Kent Healy, the Commission became the site of the Connecticut Company and Chamber of Commerce's maneuvering around the trolley's retirement.²⁶

In the saga of New Haven's bus transition, business interests made public decisions, for all practical purposes. As such, the Traffic Commission and the Chamber of Commerce's Traffic and Parking Committee worked closely together in the years leading up to the replacement. The two bodies had previously agreed to small-scale one-way street conversions and had co-sponsored the citywide parking study along with the state. But when Ricker proposed on behalf of the Chamber that the whole downtown become one-way, the two bodies' partnership became an overlap. In order to oversee so dramatic a change in the city's landscape, the Commission, on behest of the city clerk, appointed Ricker to sixty days as New Haven's official traffic engineer, set a date for the conversion, and denied even a minor change to the plan. The Celentano Administration could not have sent a clearer message as to where the city stood on trolley replacement. In fact, in the years after the streetcar's demise, the city bought rights-of-way from the Connecticut Company and tore out tracks using municipal funds.²⁷ The effort to change over to buses, ostensibly the simple economic decision of a private company, actually entailed massive government involvement in order to occur.

With the city's power brokers united behind the plan, the concerned parties launched an

26. Dahl, *Who Governs?*, 50; Hale to Board of Directors of the Chamber of Commerce, Aug. 19, 1948, Healy Papers; Kent T. Healy to William C. Celentano, New Haven, Nov. 20, 1950, Healy Papers; Kent T. Healy to City Plan Commission, New Haven, Jun. 15, 1950, Healy Papers; Mary G. Morrissey, meeting minutes of the New Haven Traffic Commission, Jan. 11, 1950, Healy Papers; Mary G. Morrissey, meeting minutes of the New Haven Traffic Commission, Jun. 14, 1950, Healy Papers; Morrissey, meeting minutes, May 14, 1947, Healy Papers; and Mary G. Morrissey, meeting minutes of the New Haven Traffic Commission, Sep. 15, 1948, Healy Papers.

27. *Ibid.*

all-out publicity blitz to convince the public. At the August meeting of the Traffic and Parking Committee, the members resolved to present the plan to the public as soon as possible via a story and map in the *Register*. “The idea behind this move,” the minutes acknowledged, “was to present the plan to the public early in the season so that, by September, all complaints that are to be expected will have been registered and the opposition could be dealt with.”²⁸ Indeed, the Committee launched a concerted effort to pave over all obstruction before it could develop. Though the minutes do not specify how opponents planned to assail the plan, the few hints given in the *Register* suggest that complaints would come from average trolley riders, not from bigwigs with press power. As such, Chairman Hale developed a list of “recognized opinion molders in the city” who could help sway mass sentiment.²⁹ One of the foremost “opinion molders,” Mayor Celentano, thus sounded “a tone of defeat” in his 1947 State of the City address concerning the “sustaining technologies (most of all, trolleys) that were all but dead,” noted Rae.³⁰ Meanwhile, even before this effort, the Connecticut Company had been attempting to prime the public for conversion. One Mr. Gaffney, an executive with the Connecticut Company during the relatively profitable war years, emphasized to *The Yale Daily News* that, in comparison to buses, “the street car business has fallen off quite a bit.”³¹ Now, the Company threw itself into the effort, creating pro-bus illustrations, advertisements, and a logo featuring a bus and the tagline “The modern way to downtown areas is by bus—safer—easier—less expensive.”³² The press joined as well, publishing a full-page spread of Ricker’s maps in anticipation of the changing traffic patterns and arguing on the front page that trolley rails would be most valuable melted down to solve the metal shortage. Of course, much of the negative press around the trolleys represented

28. Ross, “Meeting,” Aug. 5, 1948, Healy Papers.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Rae, *City*, 228.

31. “Executive of Connecticut Company Gives Inside Story on Trolley Cars,” *YDN*, Nov. 15, 1941.

32. Stanford, *Formation and History*, 30.

unprompted indignation—for instance, a *Yale Daily News* editorial advocated burning the trolleys to end their constant noise.³³ Nevertheless, the significant public relations campaign launched by the Connecticut Company and its allies demonstrates that the public could not be counted upon to take trolley removal for granted.



On the morning of September 25, 1948, a shiny fleet of seventy buses rumbled down Derby Avenue. Yale played Brown in the season opener that day at the Yale Bowl, and the Connecticut Company expected heavy traffic. Almost a year earlier, at the 1947 Harvard-Yale Game, customers had packed into the traditional open trolleys for their “farewell run”; this year, spectators would learn to ride the bus to the game.³⁴ While the football game may have been just another Saturday tradition in New Haven, an unprecedented change in the way people moved through the city was occurring. Less than three months after Ricker presented the one-way proposal to the Traffic and Parking Committee, the one-way streets plan was slated to go into effect at midnight that night. Though it had likely been in the planning stages for longer, the plan had moved forward with incredible speed. Now, the city entered a state of frantic, overnight change, with workers uncovering streets signs, engineers installing traffic lights, and police directing traffic.³⁵ All the work Ricker, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Connecticut Company had invested was about to culminate in a “Big Experiment”: the removal of streetcars

33. Connecticut Co., “Message of Importance,” advertisement, *New Haven Evening Register*, Sept. 27, 1948; Mary G. Morrissey, meeting minutes of the New Haven Traffic Commission, Jun. 12, 1946, Healy Papers; “New Buses Get First Test”; New England Transportation Company, “Complete Schedule,” bus schedule, c. Jan. 28, 1934, unlabeled folder, Box 10, Healy Papers; “On Burning Trolleys,” editorial, *YDN*, Oct. 25, 1947; “One Way Traffic Effective Today,” *New Haven Sunday Register*, Sept. 26, 1948; and “State Street Paving Job is Killed Again: Board Rejects Plan to Resurface City’s Worst Road for a Second Time,” *New Haven Evening Register*, Sept. 25, 1948.

34. Stanford, *Formation and History*, 28.

35. AP, “Era Ends for Yale Football Crowds as Open Trolleys Make Last Rides,” *Hartford Courant*, Nov. 23, 1947; “City’s Center”; “One-Way Street Setup Begins”; Ross, “Meeting,” Jul. 8, 1948, Healy Papers; Somers, *Yale Bowl and Open Trolleys*, 23-8; and Stanford, *Formation and History*, 28-9.

once and for all.³⁶

The problems began at the football stadium. Used to boarding the open trolley cars along their whole length, the crowds shoved at the turnstiles and small doors of the new buses. Police had to turn out in force to keep the fans orderly. Meanwhile, Chapel Street businesses lost access to the street as the Connecticut Company converted two downtown blocks into a loading zone without getting police permission. That night, even with light traffic, issues with the new system continued. Crowds from late-night restaurants and trolleys still returning to their barns forced the city to postpone the midnight deadline for one-way traffic by two hours. A general sense of “considerable confusion” reigned the next day, especially for those reliant on the new buses. While Sunday traffic seemed no worse than normal, come the work week, New Haven’s major intersections faced serious crowding from commuters and store customers.³⁷ “New Traffic Plan Meets Difficulties in Inaugural,” the *Register* headline concluded, a sentiment not lost on the Connecticut Company.³⁸ “We realize that there are a number of difficulties to be corrected,” admitted Charles Dempsey, manager of the Connecticut Company’s New Haven operations.³⁹ In the end, the city readjusted to a sense of normalcy. However, the immediate transition required a huge investment from the city and the Company, yet still turned out far from seamless.⁴⁰

For all the faults of the transition, the Connecticut Company and its allies remained upbeat, with their cheaper buses now secured. Of the trolleys, a Connecticut Company official freely told the *Yale Daily News*, “We are glad to see them go;” *The Hartford Courant* described

36. “One-Way Street Setup Begins.”

37. “New Traffic Plan Meets Difficulties in Inaugural: Morning Rush Reveals Defects—Bus Riders Confused by Route Changes—System Awaits First Real Test with Heavier Travel due Tomorrow When Central Stores Reopen,” *New Haven Evening Register*, Sept. 27, 1948.

38. *Ibid.*

39. “New Buses Get First Test.”

40. *Ibid.*; “City’s Center”; “The Elm City Clarion,” *New Haven Evening Register*, Sept. 28, 1948; “New Traffic Plan Meets Difficulties”; “One-Way Traffic Operation Begins: Last Trolley Enters Barns; Calhoun Celebrates Demise,” *YDN*, Sept. 27, 1948; and Stanford, *Formation and History*, 29.

the Company as sighing with relief.⁴¹ Indeed, the Company made no secret of the fact that the one-way streets and the bus conversion were inexorably linked, advertising as much in the *Register*. Spokesmen for the Company assured the press that all difficulties would end as soon as the public became accustomed to the new system.⁴² Meanwhile, public officials joined in praising the new buses and traffic patterns. Chief of Police Henry Clark said of the transition “It couldn’t go any better,” while Mayor Celentano simply termed the system “wonderful.”⁴³ The press itself, however, proved the most vociferous cheerleader for the buses. The “city took [the] changeover in stride,” asserted the editorial page of the *Register*,⁴⁴ while the *Courant*, running an Associated Press story, contrasted the “last, lumbering...trolley car [that] clattered across the city” with “the buses [that] purred along.”⁴⁵ In fact, the *Register* suggested that the walk signs for pedestrians at intersections be replaced with run signs, given how fast the traffic could now move through downtown. Minimizing the conversion’s pitfalls, the press and the local elites it covered presented a narrative of a smooth, almost deterministic change, a narrative at odds with many of the occurrences that very week.⁴⁶

According to the newspapers and officials, the public largely accepted the trolley’s retirement, and whatever concerns existed during the transition ended soon thereafter. “Almost forgotten,...trolley service will end without ceremony or recognition,” the *Register* reported.⁴⁷ Not even the Traffic Commission mentioned the streetcars in their meeting immediately before or after decommissioning. Summing up popular sentiment, Chief Clark stated matter-of-factly, “The public has readily accepted it”; those who did complain about the disruption treated it like

41. “One-Way Traffic Operation Begins.”

42. AP, “Trolley Cars Run No More in New Haven: Era Ends as Buses Take Over; New Traffic Rules Put into Effect,” *Hartford Courant*, Sept. 26, 1948; Connecticut Co., “Message of Importance”; and “New Buses Get First Test.”

43. “New Traffic Plan Meets Difficulties.”

44. “The Elm City Clarion,” *New Haven Evening Register*, Sept. 27, 1948.

45. AP, “Trolley Cars Run No More.”

46. “City’s Center” and “Elm City Clarion,” Sept. 28, 2014.

47. “One-Way Street Setup Begins.”

distasteful but ultimately necessary medicine, the *Register* analogized.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, some did mourn the trolleys. Enthusiast John Beers rented a special trolley to travel the lines one last time, the final car to return to the barns. In the weeks to come, others offered more active resistance, via word-of-mouth grievances around town. By the following February, public complaints rose to such a level that the Traffic and Planning Committee resolved to generate another round of positive publicity, in the form of prepared press stories. In fact, the Committee resolved to address future press releases from the Committee as a whole, not from City Engineer Ricker or Chief Clark—a move implying the unpopularity of each in the wake of the traffic plan.⁴⁹ That said, while the press and elites exaggeratedly downplayed the opposition, antagonism never did escalate beyond mutterings. The streetcars had always been a nuisance to the increasing number of drivers in the city, while, as for commuters, Schreiber paraphrased their attitude: “You’re standing on the corner; you get on the first thing that comes along.”⁵⁰ Nonetheless, in order to reach this stage of popular acceptance, the backers of trolley replacement felt it necessary to disclaim any discontent and engage in multiple rounds of positive publicity generation.

As the trolley faded into memory, reactions varied from frustration to nostalgia to acceptance. Breaking with the otherwise pro-bus tone expressed by the *Yale Daily News*, opinion columnist John Geismar offered the following plea: “Heck! They gotta bring the open-air trolleys back. Even an ignoramus can see they did no harm.”⁵¹ Some aficionados went beyond wistful reminiscences, founding the Branford Electric Railway Association to preserve and run trolley cars at their museum in East Haven. Resentment lingered, however, even at the highest levels. Kent Healy, the Yale transportation professor so dedicated to transit that he started a

48. “New Traffic Plan Meets Difficulties.”

49. *Ibid.*; “City’s Center”; and W. O. Ross, “Traffic and Parking Committee,” meeting minutes, Feb. 10, 1949.

50. Schreiber, interview, Apr. 8, 2014.

51. John L. Giesmar, “Leaves of Grist,” *YDN*, Nov. 19, 1949.

group of protégés called the Yale Transportation Fraternity, quit the Traffic Commission two years after the trolley conversion. His resignation, in which he did not even bother to spell Mayor Celentano's name correctly, cited waste, poor organization, and lack of control over the city's traffic engineers.⁵² No effort of protest, however, could restore the trolleys. Under the caption "Scrap metal and ashes are all that remain of an old tradition as efficiency takes over," the *Daily News* ran a series of photos of scrapped trolleys in flames, on top of which a cartoon of a smiling bus was overlaid.⁵³ After all the effort the Connecticut Company and its allies had invested, the streetcars' funeral pyre burned brightly, illuminating a city whose very pattern of mobility had changed in the process of sparking it.



After the trolley, New Haven could no longer withstand the forces of decentralization. Between 1940 and 1950, the number of resident-owned homes, indicative of suburbanization, grew by a third just within the city limits proper, while rental properties only increased two percent. Concurrently, downtown stores and manufacturers closed or moved out to the suburbs, with only a single department store left in 1962. While the car initially enabled decentralization, the bus, unlike the trolley, could and did easily follow the ever-expanding footprint of the population, supporting and furthering new suburbs. The business community reacted differently to these trends. With regard to the trolley conversion, some business owners may have been short-sighted or simply believed the dominance of the car inevitable enough to be worth embracing. Malley's, the same downtown department store which ran the pro-one-way ad in the *Register*, partnered with the Connecticut Company on a new shuttle to the Green in 1963, a

52. "Ancient Trolleys Find Haven in Branford; Railway Club Opens Tram Line to Public," *YDN*, Oct. 3, 1949; Healy to Celentano, Nov. 20, 1950, Healy Papers; Kent T. Healy to members of the Yale Transportation Fraternity, New Haven, Jan. 18, 1943, "Replies from Transportation Fellows to Letter of Jan. 18, 1943" Folder, Box 10, Healy Papers; and "Old Trolley Car Gets New Lease on Life," *Hartford Courant*, May 3, 1947.

53. "Buses Replace Ancient Trolley."

desperate move to restore the customers the trolley had once carried right out front. Other businesses, however, had plans to move out to the suburbs all along, and thus supported a change-over to buses which could easily reach their new locations.⁵⁴ At least partially facilitated by the bus, the whole layout of a metropolitan area changed almost irrevocably.

The way people travelled shaped the American city, nowhere more than in New Haven. Larger forces of suburbanization and automobility worked against almost any form of mass transit, both buses and trolleys included. However, in New Haven in particular, a variety of factors coalesced to create a centralized town dependent on the streetcar. Thus, the transfer to buses does not merely represent a shift from rails to tires. The effort the Connecticut Company and its allies expended in the process of retiring the trolley reshaped an entire city. To view the transition as a profit-driven business decision, while strictly true, ignores the massive collaboration between business interests, the press, and the government which enabled the conversion. Throughout the short-term chaos and long-term success of the bus transition, the city's public and private power brokers operated under a close partnership necessitated by preexisting hurdles. The trolleys' demise may have been inevitable, but the rocky way it came about in New Haven reveals the counterintuitive incentives of a streetcar company ridding itself of streetcars and of a city eliminating one of the last barriers to suburbanization. Overall, the Connecticut Company may have advertised their new bus system as sleek, but its implementation ended up anything but smooth.

In the past three years, various local advocates and urban design groups have proposed constructing light rail in New Haven. Only a single line, the plan would be a far cry from the

54. Douglas Rae, "Businesses, New Haven, 1913-1998 by Product, Address, CEO," *Historical New Haven Digital Collection*, c. 2005; Schreiber, interview, Apr. 8, 2014; Isenberg, *Downtown America*, 252; Stanford, *Formation and History*, 29, 66-7; U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Census Tract Statistics: New Haven, CT," vol. 3, chap. 35 in *U.S. Census of Population: 1950*, ed. Howard G. Brunsmann (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952), *United States Census Bureau*; U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Statistics for Census Tracts," in *U.S. Census of Population: 1940* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, n.d.), *Historical New Haven Digital Collection*.

immense system which once covered the streets of the Elm City. However, the Board of Alders voted against even a study in 2011, citing the poor economy.⁵⁵ If numerous obstacles to eliminating the trolley existed in the 1940's, just as many exist now to restoring it. Unlike then, though, the backers of the trolley this time lack the political and business connections of the Connecticut Company. Indeed, in 2011 as in 1948, what seems like a mere change of vehicle could entail large-scale urban restructuring. Thus, if New Haven is any guide, major transit decisions may be prompted by economic necessity, but cannot come to fruition without concerted publicity, politicking, and pressure from businesses. In other words, the wheels of the engine of progress often need a little grease.

55. Anbinder, "Streetcar Played Vital Role," and Thomas MacMillan, "Streetcars Named Undesirable," *New Haven Independent*, Oct. 25, 2011.

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