

Finding our old streetcars

So, you like trains?

Streetcars used to criss-cross our Northeast Portland neighborhoods all day long, taking kids to school and families to work and to play.

Your house is probably just a few blocks from what was once a busy streetcar line. Do you know which streets it traveled? Which route came closest to your house? Where you'd go to catch it? How much it cost to ride, or where you could go? They were loud, clunky and cold in winters. But people loved them.

Let's find out a few things about the streetcars that ruled our neighborhoods until the 1940s.

Food for Thought

Every morning, hundreds of electric streetcars fanned out across Portland, rumbling on rails right down the middle of residential streets picking up riders and taking them where they needed to go. The streetcar was an essential part of life in these neighborhoods at a time when there weren't many cars and people got where they needed to go on foot or on bike (with the help of busy streetcars). Can you imagine what your neighborhood would feel like with no cars? Lots more room for basketball!

The companies that laid out our streets and built our houses also built the streetcar lines because they knew in order to get people to move to these new neighborhoods, they needed a dependable way to get around. And remember: no cars.

Here's a quick list of the streetcars that served some of our neighborhoods.

The **Alberta Streetcar** went north on NE Martin Luther King Blvd. (then called Union Avenue), turned right on Alberta all the way out to NE 30th, then left down to Ainsworth.

The **Beaumont Streetcar** traveled up the Wisteria hill to NE 41st and Klickitat.

The **Broadway Streetcar** came out Broadway, turned north up NE 24th, then up the hill on Regents to NE 29th and Mason. Returning, it went south on NE 22nd.

The **Woodlawn Streetcar** went north up MLK and turned right at Dekum then all the way east to NE 24th.

The **15th Avenue Streetcar** went straight up NE 15th all the way to Prescott.

Some kids took the streetcar to school: you could buy a book of 25 rides for \$1. Some kids rode the streetcar just for fun. You could get on here in the neighborhood and ride all the way to Eugene if you didn't mind making a few transfers. And of course, you could get just about anywhere in the Portland area.

But the popularity of the automobile changed a lot about Portland and every other city in the United States. Portland's streetcar system was the envy of many other cities, but by the late 1930s, some of the streetcar routes were replaced with buses, and by 1948, all of the routes here in our neighborhood were abandoned. The rails were paved over and most of the streetcars were destroyed. The auto was more convenient, it was different than riding an old noisy streetcar, and everyone wanted their own cool, fast car.

Activity Suggestions & Curiosities

Using the interactive map and the links below, see if you can figure out the answers to these questions:

1. Find your house on the map. What streetcar route was closest to your house? What year was it built and when did it stop operating?
2. Draw a picture of your streetcar.
3. Draw a map from your house to the nearest streetcar stop.
4. What streetcar routes would you need to take if you were going from your house to go see a Timbers game (if you could still ride one of the old streetcars today)?
5. Can you find a clue along one of the routes that the streetcars used to exist?
6. It's possible to line up in the footprints of history with an old picture. Can you find where this picture from 1948 was taken? The houses in the background look the same!



7. With a parent or friend, go walk (or ride your bike along) the route the Broadway Streetcar traveled through the neighborhood today (take your whole family). There are a few clues from the past if you look closely, and it's just a nice walk. Check out our [walking guide to the Broadway Streetcar route](#).

On-Line Resources

Here's an outstanding interactive map that allows you to zoom right in and see the location of all of Portland's streetcar lines overlaid on a map of today. Find where you live and the nearest streetcar. Kudos to Portland-based designer Cameron Booth for this great tool:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=16Jn9IzKpSkxh8NkjD1Sab4Xm1Cs&ll=45.5509911542613%2C-122.63680219305934&z=13>

A great listing of all of Portland streetcar routes with a short description and simple route map, with thanks to Richard Thompson (click on the menu item marked "Historic Trolley Line Maps" for a snapshot of each route and its one or two letter abbreviation).

<http://vintagetrolleys.com/>

OPB's Oregon Experience produced a great 29-minute video about Portland's streetcars (including some photos of the old Broadway Streetcar that traveled through the heart of northeast Portland neighborhoods).

<https://www.pbs.org/video/oregon-experience-streetcar-city/>

The Oregon Encyclopedia has a great article on streetcars:

https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/portland_streetcar_system/

Here are some articles we've written about streetcars:

[The Broadway Streetcar](#)

[The Alberta Streetcar](#)

[Broadway Streetcar Stick-up](#)

[An old man and his dog](#)

Home History School is a collection of activities for kids of all ages to experience and connect with neighborhood history in Northeast Portland, Oregon. This is one of a dozen "lesson plans" on a variety of local topics. The collection—which we're adding to each Monday this spring—can be found at www.alamedahistory.org. For more information or other ideas, contact Doug Decker, doug@alamedahistory.org / 503-901-5510.