

## **Public Transportation in Cleveland: The Golden Era (1859-1963)**

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Today northeastern Ohio urban planners are once again discussing extensions to the existing rapid transit system and the redevelopment of commuter rail lines. Their plans unfortunately draw little public attention or debate, because for the last third of a century Greater Clevelanders have by and large stopped thinking about public transit. The private automobile became the undisputed king of the road. That was not always the case. In 1859 when the city's first franchises for horse-drawn street railway lines were being authorized, citizens welcomed public transit. They also welcomed each advance in transportation technology, from the first electric streetcars in 1888, to the interurbans, to the rapid transit, and even to those hybrid electric trolley buses which ran until 1963. During those golden years of public transit, Cleveland played a leading role in transit technology and operations, and transit planning was bold and visionary. But after World War II, the "modernization" virus infected the local transit agency, outside consultants provided the direction, and the verdict was that the dependable and comfortable electric fleet had to be replaced by a "more flexible" gasoline and diesel bus operation. Unfortunately, the faster the conversions came, the more rapidly riders became drivers. And inevitably, as transit patrons dwindled, planning became

circumscribed, and service was cut. Operating within the budget became the guiding principle. Cleveland missed some golden transit opportunities in those salad electric days. Tomorrow's transit improvements, if indeed they come, will surely be welcome, but to the transit historian they will also seem like *deja vu*.