

Railway Coastal Museum History e-Bulletin: Volume XIV

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The Streetcars of St. John's

This winter has been a hard one on the streets of St. John's. Heavy rain and fluctuating temperatures have played havoc with the asphalt, and cracks and potholes can be found throughout the city. But the uncertain weather has brought a largely forgotten piece of St. John's history back to the surface, if only for a little while.

If you've driven on Water Street West in the past few weeks, you may have noticed the rusty metal tracks showing through the pavement near the intersection with Patrick Street. These tracks were once part of the streetcar system in St. John's.



Photo taken by author of pothole showing streetcar tracks on Water Street in February 2008.

The streetcars in St. John's came about as a result of the 1898 Reid contract, which set out the terms under which Robert Reid and the Reid Newfoundland Company were to maintain and operate the Newfoundland Railway. It also provided that Reid was to build an electric streetcar system in St. John's and pave Water Street. It was agreed that government would provide the paving stones and Reid would carry out the work, for the sum of \$140,000.

The first streetcar rails were laid on August 8, 1899, and the first streetcar ran on May 1, 1900. The original streetcars were built of oak and ash,

upholstered in green plush with brass rails, by A. C. Lariviere of Montreal.

When complete, the St. John's Street Railway covered Duckworth Street East as far as Holloway Street. The streetcars would then turn down to Water Street, where they ran to the far west end. The cars also covered Queen's Road and Military Road, connecting again with Duckworth Street at Ordnance Street in front of the present-day Fairmont Hotel. Originally, there were tracks covering New Gower Street and Hamilton Ave, and Military Road as far as Lemarchant Road, but these two lines were discontinued in 1902.



Close up of Street car rail in pothole

One of the more interesting aspects of the streetcar system was its power source. The streetcars required a lot of electricity to operate, more than was available at the time. To address this problem, the Government granted to Reid the use of Petty Harbour Pond to build a hydroelectric generating station, although they slipped in a clause that required Reid to also build a water main to the west end of Water Street for the use of the St. John's Fire Department. Not surprising, given that less than a decade had passed since the Great Fire of 1892, which had dramatically demonstrated the lack of adequate water supplies for fighting major fires.

The generating station at Petty Harbour became operational on April 19, 1900. Over 3500 feet of penstock and tunnels carried water from Petty Harbour Pond to a 1500 horsepower Westington generator. It was the first hydroelectric generating station in Newfoundland. Frank Wing, an employee, had the dubious honour of becoming the first person electrocuted in Newfoundland when he was killed on April 11, 1901.

Once operational, the streetcar ran four or five times an hour, ensuring that patrons didn't have long to wait to go about their business in downtown St. John's.



In addition to the passenger cars, which of course made up the bulk of the traffic on the streetcar rails, there were other types of cars to be seen as well. These included sweeper cars, which helped to remove snow from the tracks, and sprinkler cars, which would travel along the tracks spraying water in the summer time, to keep down the dust on the still mostly unpaved streets.

The streetcars didn't always run smoothly. There were incidents from startled horses to derailments. The Daily News of May 1, 1925 carried the following ad: "Every time you ride in a street car you take a chance. Ring Percie Johnson & Son about that accident policy now."

Photo taken from [The Street Cars of Old St. John's](#) by William Connors 1989, page 35. Caption reads: "Street cars at the junction of Adelaide Street and Water Street. The section of Water Street shown escaped the great fire of 1892, so that architecturally it is a good example of the whole of old Water Street since the fire of 1846 which destroyed most of downtown St. John's". Photo original property of the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland.

Despite the occasional mishap, the streetcars of St. John's gave good service for almost fifty years, transporting longshoremen along the length of Water Street, clerks and lawyers to their offices, and carrying soldiers on leave to the taverns. But the automobile finally displaced the streetcar as the preferred mode of transport, and on September 15, 1948, the streetcar made its last run. The rails were abandoned, and the streetcars were sold.

But the exposed tracks at the intersection of Water and Patrick Streets can still be seen today however, and can make one wonder: what else does the city hide beneath her streets?

Most of the information in this e-Bulletin comes from William Connors' book "The Streetcars of Old St. John's: A Photo History," published by Creative Publishers in 1989. It contains many interesting photos of the old streetcars and of St. John's in the first half of the twentieth century.

Anyone with memories or recollections of the streetcars in St. John's (especially those who recall the streetcar's exact routes and directions) are invited to share them with the Railway Coastal Museum. Any information is appreciated!

**Do You Have an Interesting Story
About the Newfoundland Railway?
We'd Love to Hear it!**

**Send Your Story to the Railway
Coastal Museum!**

**We Also Appreciate any Feedback
or Questions You May Have.
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