Streetcars, Jitneys and Automobiles

Streetcars helped Columbia grow but ultimately were put out of business by the arrival of automobiles. The first streetcar line appeared in 1888 when mules and horses pulled 800 passengers that year. People rode the streetcars to shop, to work, to school and to pursue entertainment. By 1894, streetcars were powered by electricity that was distributed by a local light and power company that eventually became South Carolina Electric & Gas.

By 1917, Columbia had a network of over 25 miles of rails that streetcars traveled to carry passengers around town. Over ten million passengers rode the streetcars in one year. Real estate developers depended on streetcar service to carry customers from town to their investment properties to buy lots and to build houses. One of the streetcar lines ran from Main Street to Shandon, Columbia’s first planned suburb. Shandon was named for Peter J Shand who was rector of Trinity Church (later, Trinity Cathedral) from 1822 until 1884. Another streetcar line went out Devine Street and turned left on Kilbourne and on to Camp Jackson (later, Fort Jackson). There was a line going up Saluda Hill to Wales Gardens, which is why the median is so wide on Saluda. There were lines going to Elmwood, to Waverly, to Colonial Heights and Blanding.

The power company promoted streetcar travel by building pavilions at the end of streetcar lines and sponsoring dances and concerts. As Camp Jackson grew, more streetcars were added to that line and there were express cars from the fort to town; the trip took 25 minutes. Female students at Columbia College packed the Colonial Heights streetcars on Sunday for their trip to church. There was talk of expanding the streetcar service to Lexington and Sumter and Camden; however, automobiles doomed the streetcar system.

Automobiles arrived in Columbia in 1900 and Alexander Mason Gibbes bought one of the first cars and became a car dealer. In 1909 the Gibbes Machinery Company sold 387 cars in Columbia and in 1915 the South Carolina Legislature appropriated over one million dollars to build permanent highways.

By 1920, streetcars were in financial trouble. Residents of the suburbs bought cars. The fixed streetcar schedules became a liability. Passengers in Wales Gardens had to be at their stop at 22 minutes or 52 minutes after the even hour and had to be at the transfer station to go back to Wales Gardens at 10 minutes or 40 minutes after the even hour.

With the automobile came another service: jitneys. Jitneys were unlicensed taxis. Jitneys drove around town picking up passengers and taking them to the front door of their businesses and homes. They charged less than streetcars and were much more convenient. Some jitney drivers even drove in front of the streetcars to pick up waiting passengers. Streetcar riding that was so convenient and fun no longer was either.

The power company that owned the streetcar company shut down the system in 1927 after years of taking up tracks and curtailing schedules to reduce usage of the money-losing streetcar system. The United States Supreme Court ruled in 1931 that public utilities could not abandon a public franchise. The power company was forced to run the streetcars from 1931 until 1937 when they replaced them with buses and dismantled the tracks and removed the electric wires.

*John Hammond Moore died on September 2, 2017 at age 92. He was a prolific writer who wrote many fine South Carolina books including his classic 1993 local history, Columbia & Richland County. This article about streetcars could not have been written without access to John’s book. He did the heavy lifting of research. John Hammond Moore will be missed.*

David Gregg Hodges is a lifelong resident of Columbia. He sells life, disability, and long-term care insurances with MassMutual Carolinas; frequently adds to his book collection; and takes regular field trips around South Carolina looking for interesting stories.