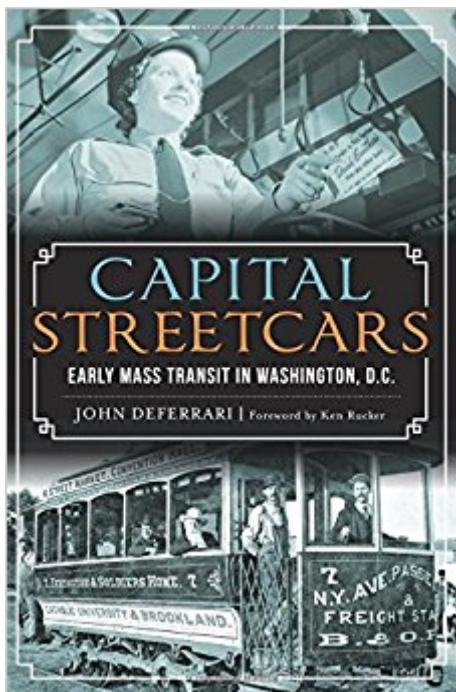


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# Capital Streetcars: (General History)



## Synopsis

Washington's first streetcars trundled down Pennsylvania Avenue during the Civil War. By the end of the century, streetcar lines crisscrossed the city, expanding it into the suburbs and defining where Washingtonians lived, worked and played. One of the most beloved routes was the scenic Cabin John line to the amusement park in Glen Echo, Maryland. From the quaint early days of small horse-drawn cars to the modern streamliners of the twentieth century, the stories are all here. Join author John DeFerrari on a joyride through the fascinating history of streetcars in the nation's capital.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[DeFerrari's] chronology includes enough technological information to satisfy the most diehard transportation enthusiast, but his easy style, entertaining facts, and dozens of historical maps, and other images offer more than enough to keep the rest of us riveted." - Karen Lyon, Hill Rag  
"A new book recounts the history of Washington's streetcar, warts and all." John Kelly, Washington Post

John DeFerrari, a native Washingtonian with a lifelong passion for local history, pens the Streets of Washington blog and is the author of *Lost Washington, D.C.* (The History Press, 2011) and *Historic Restaurants of Washington, D.C.: Capital Eats* (The History Press, 2013). He has a master's degree in English literature from Harvard University and works for the federal government. Currently serving as curator and director of administration, Ken Rucker has volunteered at the National Capital Trolley Museum in many capacities for forty-six years. Professionally, he taught social studies subjects for

thirty years at Atholton High School in Columbia, Maryland.

The history of streetcars in Washington, D.C. has been approached before, but never in narrative format, and never by a gifted writer. This is the story of rail-bound public transportation in the nation's capital, told on a time line that begins with the Civil War and ends (for now) during the Kennedy administration. As in any North American city, streetcar lines shaped settlement patterns in Washington. And as in most other cities, diverse people's tolerance for the communal nature of public transit put social dynamics to the test. But this is not just any city. From its inception, Washington has been a unique federal enclave subject to Congressional oversight with limited home rule. Dynamic population growth combined with rapid technology evolution ensured that Washington, D.C.'s streetcar riders participated in mash-up of sociology, politics, and a dash of corporate greed as well. The history of streetcars in Washington, D.C. is really a reflection of American civilization refining itself, and the reader is treated to a front-row seat. A generous collection of photos, maps, and other ephemera make this a very entertaining read.

John DeFerrari has put out another fascinating work: the history of streetcars in the nation's capital. Long before subway systems like Metro, cities built streetcars for mass transit. DC's system operated for exactly 100 years: from 1862 to 1962. It looks at the waves of technology that the various streetcar companies rolled out, from horse-drawn cars to underground cables to overhead wires. You'll learn the amazing story of how cars had to be pulled up Capitol Hill with special teams of horses, and how thin profit margins were that inevitably led to inferior service. DeFerrari tackles the myth that streetcars were shut down by the automobile manufacturers: this was patently false. Rather, changing consumer sentiment and the popularity of buses and cars made the streetcar's decline inevitable in cities around the country. Streetcars were inflexible and noisy, and many welcomed their demise. The book ends with the stalled rejuvenation of a streetcar network in DC; at this point, only one short line on H Street, NE has reopened, and its long-standing engineering difficulties may harken the demise of any further expansion. Interested in urban history, development and transit? Then you'll love this book. As with DeFerrari's other books, it's exceptionally well researched and written, and he captures the heart of the story for why mass transit matters.

Thoroughly enjoyable historical perspective of the Washington, DC traction system until its demise.

Excellent. Could have been better if it had listed more information about the Chevy Chase line and

the route down Connecticut line that went over the Calvert street bridge. Photos along this route would really be something. That's why I'm only giving this 3 stars.

Good book.

DC history is always a great read

John Deferrari's book, "Capital Streetcars: Early Mass Transit in Washington, D.C." (2015) offers a thorough, readable overview of the history of streetcars in the nation's capital from the Civil War through the final streetcar run in January, 1962, and beyond. I didn't live in Washington, D.C. during the streetcar era; I lived in Milwaukee and, when young, witnessed the end of streetcars in that city which as in D.C., also took place in 1962. I have kept my love for the streetcar while my love for my adopted city has grown with the years. I welcomed the opportunity to learn about the D.C. streetcar system. Deferrari is a native Washingtonian who has written extensively on local history. The book begins with a short discussion of pre-Civil War Washington, D.C. and moves to the development of horse-drawn streetcars through the end of the nineteenth century. It includes an excellent discussion of the transition from horses to mechanized transportation, including cable and then electricity. The different technologies and their histories are described in terms easily understandable to a lay reader. Deferrari describes how the Washington, D.C. system was unique, due in part to Congressional control over the city. The use of trolley lines was forbidden early in the central part of the city. Streetcars operating downtown had to rely on underground power in a system called conduits. Deferrari describes how the system worked and how it interfaced with trolley lines in the areas outside the central part of town. The book describes the rise of the streetcars in the early years of the 20th century and the competition they faced almost immediately from automobiles. The streetcar had a resurgence in the years of WW II but began their inevitable demise soon thereafter in the 1950s. Many people, myself included, have a great nostalgia for the streetcars. The reasons for loving the old cars comes through well in this book. But Deferrari is no sentimentalist. He points out the many difficulties of streetcar transportation, the noise, crowded conditions, expense, safety hazards, erratic schedules, interference with other traffic and more. In contrast to some lovers of traction, Deferrari has little doubt that the era of the streetcar properly came to an end. Yet, the book shows how streetcars in their long day were an integral part of urban America and of Washington, D.C. as people rode for work and for pleasure and as the city expanded along the routes of the cars. This book is particularly valuable for placing streetcars in the context of

urban history. Deferrari discusses events closely intertwined with the streetcars' history, including a large fire in downtown Washington, D.C. in the late 1880s which doomed the use of cable, a severe race riot in 1919, discrimination against African Americans in employment with the streetcar companies, and the use of women as conductors and as operators during WW II. I learned a great deal about local history from this book. Deferrari also describes the economics of the public transit business and the history of corporate greed in operating mass transit systems in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere in the country. The book is thoroughly researched with a comprehensive bibliography and endnotes. The text includes many quotations from newspapers, streetcar patrons, and observers over the years that greatly enhance the text. Some of the chapters begins with short poems that give contemporary responses to streetcar travel. The book includes many photographs which offer views of streetcar travel and of Washington, D.C. during the streetcar era. There is a large inset of color photographs in the middle of the book. The book concludes with a discussion of the possible limited revival of streetcars in Washington, D.C., including the on again off again history of the D.C. Streetcar project. After the publication of this book, the long-awaited D.C. Streetcar began operations on a line of about 2.5 miles from D.C.'s Union Station down Benning Road, a historic D.C. Streetcar route. I have ridden on the D.C. Streetcar and loved it. Still, the streetcar probably does not have a promising future as a form of Washington, D.C. transportation. Deferrari's book also includes an introduction by the president of the National Capital Trolley Museum, a local non-profit educational organization designed to foster understanding and appreciation of the streetcars and their history. "Capital Streetcars" will help keep streetcars and their history alive. I enjoyed reading this book and learning about and reliving my passion for streetcars. Robin Friedman

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