



# Mutual Benefits and Close Connections

## *Baseball and America's Streetcars in the 19th Century*

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Mark Twain characterized baseball as “the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming 19th century” (1). Throughout its formative decades, America’s national pastime came to signify more than just a game involving a bat and a ball. The sport reflected and represented the increasingly industrialized, rough-and-tumble, entrepreneurial phase of American history.

Businesses of the era used baseball to promote products—a marketing trend that took root after the Civil War and expanded dramatically by the 1880s. Some products—such as the bats and uniforms manufactured by the sporting-goods industry—were easily identified with baseball. Other products—such as food and beer—also would become strongly linked with the game. Additional economic interests—for example, those involving tobacco, drugstores, jewelry, and dry goods establishments—had less immediate connections with the sport but sought to capitalize on its popularity.

Streetcars had obvious and unique links with baseball. In the late 19th century, public transit via streetcars regularly intersected with baseball, with mutual

Outside South Side Park in Chicago, players in the American League’s Chicago White Sox take part in a parade celebrating the team’s 1906 World Series championship. Visible on the left side of the image are streetcar tracks, with a streetcar in the background.

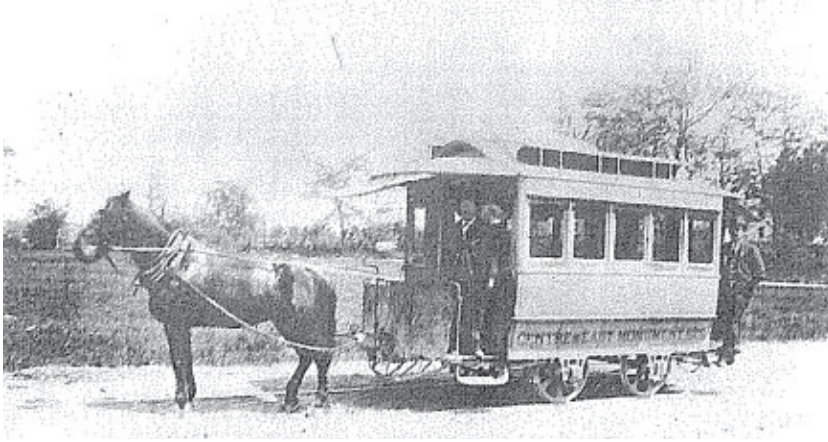


The speed, capacity, and low price of streetcar transportation intersected with the public attraction of baseball games in a way that provided mutual benefits.

benefits. Unlike many other enterprises, streetcars served a practical purpose for baseball—delivering large numbers of people to the games easily, quickly, and cheaply (2). Collaboration between baseball and streetcars therefore was consequential for both.



PHOTO: CHICAGO DAILY NEWS NEGATIVES COLLECTION, CHICAGO HISTORICAL MUSEUM



Like other forms of transportation in the mid-nineteenth century, early rail cars were horse-drawn. The rails allowed the cars to travel quickly and offered a smoother ride.

### Steady Evolution

Streetcars grew in quality and scope during a time when baseball was steadily evolving. The origins of the streetcar in the United States can be traced to 1827, when a horse-drawn carriage that could carry a dozen passengers was introduced in New York City. This type of carriage became known as the omnibus.

The stagecoach-like means of transportation proved popular but had some conspicuous flaws—for example, shaking noisily over cobblestone streets and getting stuck in mud. The flaws were addressed in 1832, when a horse-drawn rail car began running in New York City between Prince Street in Lower Manhattan and Harlem. Riding on steel rails in the middle of the street, the vehicle provided a quieter and more comfortable ride. The rails also allowed the cars to travel at a faster pace.

Although more promising as a form of mass transit, the rail cars left much to be desired. The rail car needed fewer horses than the omnibus did, but the reliance on animals was still problematic—horses were expensive to sustain, usually lasted no more than 5 years on the job, were susceptible to illness, and posed sanitary challenges. The Civil War underscored the vulnerability of an animal-dependent transportation system when many railway horses were hauled away for military use.

### Alternative Power Sources

People started looking for alternative, preferably mechanized, ways to move the nation's streetcars. In 1873, the cable car debuted in San Francisco. The system operated on extensive steel cables placed underground between the rails. A large steam engine in a central powerhouse kept the cables moving.

This conveyor-belt operation was an improve-

ment over the use of horses, and cable cars were a good fit for cities like San Francisco with steep grades and mild climates. Cable cars, however, were not as well-suited for cities with different topographies and less temperate weather. Moreover, the systems were expensive to build, and a single cable break could strand passengers on the entire line.

In the 1880s, several efforts focused on harnessing electricity to mobilize streetcars. Inventor Leo Daft introduced the first-ever commercially operated electric streetcar in 1885. With a power unit, Daft supplied electricity through a third rail between two riding rails on a track in Baltimore. The electric current allowed a locomotive to pull former horsecars forward along the track.

### What's a Trolley?

A greater breakthrough, however, occurred in 1888. Frank J. Sprague, an inventor who had worked for Thomas Alva Edison, installed a system of electric streetcars in Richmond, Virginia. The streetcars relied on overhead wires for electricity. The current originated at a central station and traveled from the wire to the car's motor via a long pole. The pole was outfitted with a small wheel called a shoe, which rolled along the wire. The wheel also was known as a trolley, a word soon used to describe that type of streetcar.

Sprague's electric streetcar experiment in Richmond proved a huge success. The overhead wires were more reliable than the third rail for moving the vehicles. The electricity-powered motors were efficient and strong enough to sustain climbs up steep inclines, to operate safely over bumps, and to ensure a smoother ride.

By providing a major city like Richmond with an entire network of state-of-the-art streetcars, Sprague opened a new world of public transit possibilities. He revolutionized a mode of transportation throughout the United States. Many municipalities, large and small, soon adopted the Richmond-based streetcar model.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Electric streetcars, introduced in 1888 in Richmond, Virginia, by Frank J. Sprague, used an electrical current traveling through overhead wires to the car's motor via a long pole and small wheel called a trolley. The new "trolleys," as the streetcars came to be called, were a great success.



Public Domain Photo

An experimental electric locomotive Ampère, built by Leo Daft in 1883. In 1885, Daft introduced the first-ever commercially operated electric streetcar.



A view of Richmond's trolley streetcars. Municipalities across the United States quickly adopted trolleys as a form of public transit.

## Streetcar Systems

By 1890, approximately 200 electric streetcar systems were operating in the United States. The growth continued at a dramatic pace—according to an article published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1898, “A decade has worked wonders in the evolution of the electric railway, as in many other modern things....It has grown from an experiment to a universal institution” (3).

Nationwide, streetcars were found to be dependable, operating in almost any weather condition; were easy to keep clean; and were relatively inexpensive to construct. In addition, the average streetcar fare of five cents was affordable for many. The vehicles significantly trimmed the travel time from one point to another. A person could travel the distance of a half-hour's walk in 10 minutes via streetcar.

The electric streetcar, or trolley, had other major advantages. Steam locomotives could be louder, grimmer, more cumbersome, and less comfortable than streetcars, which therefore were considered better suited for urban settings. Streetcars also offered accessibility to areas that were often beyond the immediate reach of railroads. This accessibility led more people to start riding streetcars during the 1890s to work, school, worship, and other vital activities.

## Expanding Patronage

Looking to expand this patronage, streetcar companies sought other compelling destinations to encourage ridership and to maximize profits. The companies needed to keep the operating and administrative costs down without increasing fares. To continue extending the transit lines, streetcar executives needed the largest possible customer base to justify new investments in infrastructure and electricity.

Streetcar companies therefore increasingly promoted the recreational opportunities along their routes, especially during evenings, weekends, and holidays, when traditional ridership was low. Sum-

mer was seen as a lucrative time for travel to recreational pursuits, and some streetcar lines ran only in the summer months to accommodate the extra traffic. People were encouraged to use streetcars, which normally operated with their sides open at that time of year, to enjoy leisure activities near and far—for example, sightseeing tours in the country, shopping sprees in the city, picnics, day-trips to the seashore, and attendance at concerts and theater matinees.

As part of this outreach, streetcar companies devised other incentives to lure riders onto trolleys. Some companies set up recreation areas at the end of streetcar lines. The areas became known as “trolley parks” and typically included such diversions as roller coasters, carousels, and other amusement attractions. In May 1896, the *Street Railway Journal* reported that at least 100 companies had opened their own trolley parks in the previous 10 years (1).

By establishing the parks and facilitating access to other entertainment venues, streetcar executives did much to make the thirst for recreation an integral feature of the trolley experience. “The American people—or at least a very large part of the American people—[have] become a pleasure-loving folk,” proclaimed *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. “Is there a more festive-looking vehicle than the open electric car, with its happy-faced occupants?” (3).

## Baseball Synergy

Baseball became an important way of filling streetcars with “happy-faced occupants.” The comparatively



In the 1890s, electric streetcar systems gave travelers a quick way to access areas that were too far to walk and too close to take the train.



The “Loop the Loop” ride at Coney Island, New York, ca. 1903. The popularity and expansion of streetcar systems led companies to devise marketing plans—such as trolley parks and other recreational activities—that would attract riders.



League Park I in Cleveland was built in 1891 by streetcar magnate Frank D. Robison, who also owned the Cleveland Spiders baseball team. The ballpark was located near two of Robison's streetcar lines.

young sport had mushroomed in popularity, and streetcar companies grasped that providing access to the games could enhance their own business. One streetcar executive commented that it was important “to keep in with the baseball people” (1).

Earlier in the century, railroads had established a pivotal relationship with baseball. Trains made it possible for teams to travel hundreds of miles to compete and to bring the games to an expanding pool of spectators. Streetcars, however, could offer a transportation benefit that steam locomotives could not, by carrying spectators directly to the ballparks, further expanding the fan base for games.

The up-and-coming relationship between streetcars and baseball was not coincidental. An estimated 15 percent of the nation's business leaders in the 19th century were transportation executives. Moreover, transit companies serving a total of 78 cities had



In smaller municipalities, streetcar companies often were one of the few sources of local capital able to maintain a professional team.

some financial stake in professional baseball (2).

Albert L. Johnson, a streetcar executive who was also a baseball magnate, gave an unsentimental but candid explanation of the synergy. He characterized his own considerable efforts to link streetcars with baseball in Cleveland as a “good investment” and freely admitted to “visions of millions of dollars of profits” (1).

Johnson's comments exemplify the unvarnished financial approach taking hold of the business of baseball. More specifically, he voiced the view that capitalizing on baseball was a logical extension of other business interests. Streetcar companies found that their engagements with baseball strengthened their ties with government. The companies could watch over more closely—and safeguard—their stakes in local property values, rights-of-way, and long-term leases (2).

## Riding the Trends

Johnson and his colleagues addressed a burgeoning grassroots need. The middle and upper-lower classes still had their share of hardscrabble times in the late 19th century, but generally they enjoyed more discretionary income and leisure time than before. Consequently, more of them rode streetcars bound for the ballpark (1, 2).

The streetcar companies worked to advance and sustain the trend. They built ballparks and leased playing grounds. Several companies subsidized baseball clubs—in the South, Augusta, Birmingham, Charleston, Macon, Mobile, Montgomery, and New Orleans received significant financial backing from companies that sponsored teams. In smaller municipalities as well, streetcar companies often were one of the few sources of local capital that were able to maintain a professional team and became important benefactors.

Streetcar executives in the 1890s, therefore, promoted the construction of ballparks near transit lines. Frank D. Robison, owner of the Cleveland Spiders, built a new park for his team in 1891 at Lexington Avenue and East 66th Street, after the previous park, in another location, was destroyed by fire. The new park—remembered today as League Park I—was situated conveniently near a couple of Robison's streetcar lines (1, 2).

Another major league baseball park of that era readily accessible to streetcar lines was Baltimore's Union Park at 25th and Barclay Streets. Home to the Baltimore Orioles for most of the decade, the ballpark may have owed its name to a streetcar company, the Baltimore Union Passenger Railway, which is believed to have paid for some of the ballpark's construction.

## Competing for Teams

Many streetcar executives were willing to support a baseball team even at a financial loss, expecting to offset the loss in the long term with an increase in ridership on their vehicles. The best gauge of executives' economic enthusiasm for baseball, however, was the competition to promote ball clubs. During the 1890s, streetcar executives knew that if their company did not sponsor an area ball club, a competing line was ready to do so (2).

One-upmanship was common among competing companies. In 1892, the Atlanta Street Railway financed construction of a ballpark for the Southern League Crackers team in the southern part of the city. The venue was named Brisbane Park in honor of the company's executive. Two years later, the company's main rival, Consolidated Railway, built a larger park—known as the Athletic Grounds—in another part of Atlanta. The Consolidated Railway officials then enticed the baseball team away from Brisbane Park, boasting that their line could deliver a passenger from downtown Atlanta to the new ballpark in five minutes (2).

Another ballpark swap involving streetcars took place in New York City. The Brooklyn Grays—nicknamed the Bridegrooms because several players had married in quick succession—played home games at Washington Park in the Red Hook section of north-west Brooklyn in the early 1890s. A group of community leaders from Brownsville—a residential area in eastern Brooklyn—orchestrated the move of the team to Eastern Park. One of the chief financial backers of the move was streetcar executive Wendell Goodwin, who hoped that a team in Brownsville would encourage more people to use his transit lines.

The move proved to be a bad decision. The rent for the ballpark was steep. In addition, many team fans found the park difficult to reach, and the manner in which Goodwin's transit lines were set up made that trek challenging. To get to the park, fans



PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION

A baseball card featuring Brooklyn Dodgers player Bob Caruthers. After the Brooklyn Grays' move to Eastern Park, the team's nickname changed from the Bridegrooms to the Trolley Dodgers, because of the hazards of crossing trolley tracks to get to the ballpark.

and players had to cross over the tracks carefully, keeping on the lookout for approaching streetcars.

## Making a Name

Goodwin's Eastern Park transit lines may not constitute the most positive example of streetcar service during that era, but they are the source of a lasting baseball legacy. The team's nickname was changed from the Bridegrooms to the Trolley Dodgers, because of the hazards of crossing the tracks and avoiding streetcars to get to the ballpark. The moniker eventually was shortened to Dodgers and remains the team's official name, even after the move from Brooklyn to Los Angeles.

When the Eastern Park lease expired in 1897, the team returned to the safer venue of Red Hook. A new version of Washington Park was built directly across the street from the original. Two streetcar companies with routes passing through the area subsidized construction of the new park. The companies jointly purchased the lot for \$15,000 and leased it to the team for \$5,000—one-third less than the lease in Brownsville (2).

Over the course of the decade, streetcars took on other roles and cultural references with links to base-



PHOTO: MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Baltimore's Union Park at 25th and Barclay Streets, one-time home of the Orioles, may have been partially financed by the Baltimore Union Passenger Railway.



PUBLIC DOMAIN PHOTO

Advertising schemes often brought trolleys and baseball together. In the late 1890s, Cleveland Spiders fans could purchase a game ticket and trolley fare package for 60 cents.

ball. A trolley league of baseball teams that relied exclusively on streetcars to get to and from games sprang up in New England, circa 1899. Many streetcars on ballpark routes carried signs advertising games. In the late 1890s, fans of the Cleveland Spiders could buy 60-cent tickets that included round-trip streetcar fare and admission to the ballpark. The service was popular because fans were spared long waits at the ballpark box office (1, 4).

### Expressing the Bond

A defining experience of the bond between streetcars and baseball occurred in Baltimore on the night of Thursday, October 10, 1895. The Orioles had beaten the New York Giants the previous month to win the National League pennant for the second year in a row. In the postseason Temple Cup series, however, the Orioles were not faring well against Cy Young and his Cleveland Spiders teammates. The series had opened in Cleveland, and the Orioles were down three games to none (1, 2).

Back in Baltimore for the remaining games, the Orioles were treated to a parade by their loyal fans. Ostensibly a belated celebration of the pennant win, the parade also served as a morale-boosting exercise

for a team that was now down on its luck. The nighttime parade consisted of a procession of approximately 40 streetcars winding along tracks through the city's streets. The next morning's edition of the *Baltimore Sun* proclaimed, "A man passing over Baltimore in a balloon last night might have imagined that a fiery serpent was creeping through the streets" (4).

The streetcars that made up the serpent were festooned with lights and adorned with baseball-themed decorations. The cars leading the parade carried the Orioles, their families, and veteran players from earlier Maryland baseball clubs. Enthusiastic crowds lined up for what the *Sun* called a "trolley party" and "electric parade" (4).

Although the Orioles lost the Temple Cup series to the Spiders, the parade in their honor showcased the substance and symbolism of the streetcar–baseball relationship. The streetcar industry, and the role of streetcars in taking fans to baseball games, would continue to grow in the early decades of the 20th century. Eventually many of the vehicles would be supplanted by other mass-transit options, like subways and motorized buses. Still in its infancy in the late 19th century, the automobile likewise would become a formidable competitor.

### Sociocultural Force

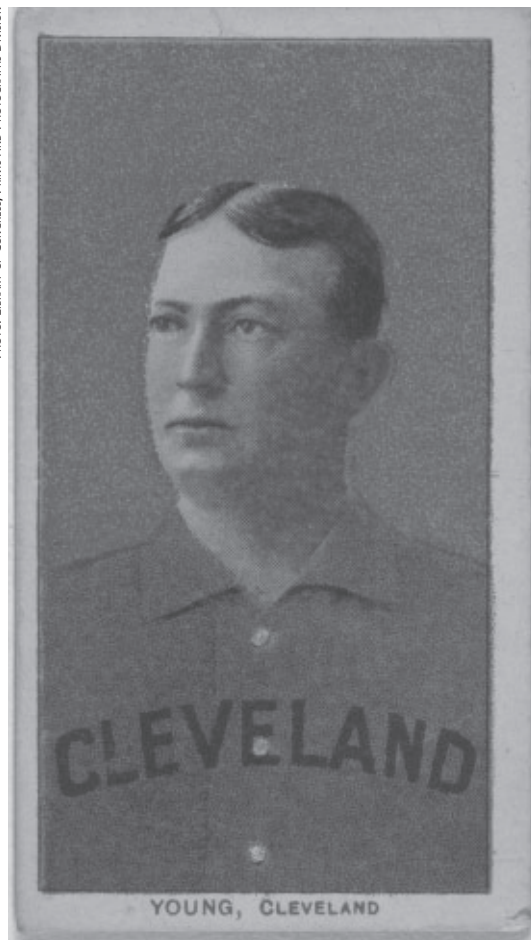
Nonetheless, the streetcar deserves recognition as the forerunner of those more modern modes and for its crucial contribution to bringing previously far-flung locales closer together. For baseball, streetcars played an important role in diversifying the attendance at games. In addition, hefty investments of money and infrastructure by streetcar executives contributed in the long term to establishing ballparks as permanent fixtures on the American landscape.

These contributions underscore the lasting impact of streetcars on baseball's growth as a sociocultural force, even though the clang and clatter of a trolley is no longer instantly and widely associated with the crack of a bat and the cheers of a crowd rooting for the home team. The study of streetcars in the 19th century illustrates transportation's time-honored influence not just on destinations, such as ballparks, but on everyday life.

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PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION



Cy Young led the Cleveland Spiders to a Temple Cup victory against the Baltimore Orioles in October 1895. Back home, Orioles fans staged a streetcar parade in the team's honor as a morale booster.