



Civil Engineers: Designers and Builders of the Quality of Life

HHC's Spotlight on Early Minnesota Streetcar Lines

Update of past article from History & Heritage Committee

For this article, we focus on the early history of streetcar lines in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. From the late 1800's and into the 1940's, streetcars provided a link for people around the bustling downtown areas and out to the residential neighborhoods. Lake Minnetonka had attracted tourists since the late 1870's, and by 1900 the lake was drawing local people who came there for the day in the summer months. People also lived on its shores, and this permanent population was growing.

Construction of the streetcar system in Minneapolis began in 1875 when track was built beginning at Washington and Hennepin Avenues in downtown Minneapolis. In 1879, a line ran from Minneapolis to Lake Calhoun along Nicollet Avenue and 31st Street. In 1880, the line was extended to Lake Harriet and to Excelsior on Lake Minnetonka in 1882. In those early days of horse-drawn carriages and dirt roads, the lakes were popular resort and tourist destinations.

Following the steam-powered cars of the 1880's, the first electrically powered streetcars were introduced in 1889. Minneapolis and St. Paul were linked by 1898 with the "Como-Interurban-Harriet" line from Lake Harriet to Lake Como following Hennepin Avenue, 4th Street, 15th Avenue, Como Avenue, past the fairgrounds and through Como Park, to downtown St. Paul.

TCRT #1300 owned and operated by the [Minnesota Streetcar Museum](#) on the Como-Harriet Streetcar Line

By Ben Franske, CC-BY-SA-3.0- via Wikimedia Commons





In 1904, line owners saw an opportunity to provide transportation for local residents of the Lake Minnetonka area. Much of the original steam railway right-of-way was resurveyed and regraded for “high-speed” operation.

By 1906, track was laid from the end of the Lake Harriet line to Excelsior. Lines to Deephaven and Tonka Bay were also added. The rail company also maintained an amusement park on Big Island and a fleet of steamboats that provided service on Lake Minnetonka until 1926. One of these, the Minnehaha, has been raised from the lake bottom and is operated today by the [Museum of Lake Minnetonka](#) from the docks in Excelsior and Wayzata. By the 1950’s, the lines were all but abandoned for economic reasons and the goal of complete conversion to buses by 1958 was announced. [Como-Harriet Streetcar Line](#) is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and a portion of the line still operates through the cooperation of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board.



Express Boat “Hopkins” on
Lake Minnetonka,

Postcard circa 1907, Public domain

Minnesota is once again linking our communities together by [light rail and commuter rail](#). Is it a good thing for civil engineering? Definitely! Will it be as beneficial to society as it once was? That remains to be seen. Regardless, the rail lines of a past time are an important part of our history and have helped to form part of our infrastructure that is continuing to be created by Civil Engineers: Designers and Builders of the Quality of Life.