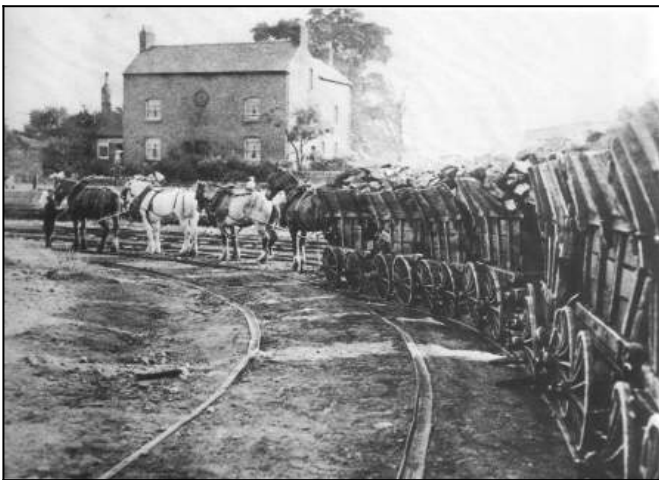


# New Bedford's Forgotten Public Transport Systems; The Omnibus, Streetcar & Trolley

The earliest forms of land transportation in the region were Amerindian foot trails. The Amerindians originally used these footpaths not only as ways to travel to and from settlements, but many were game trails or direct routes to water for fishing, sustenance, and travel. Rivers were the original highways of the old world. Since these paths were already deforested and served as unobstructed traffic lanes, they were simply re-used by the first European settlers. The first Europeans walked these paths just as the Amerindians did, and occasionally used horses. As the population burgeoned, the footpaths were broadened to allow horse-drawn carts.



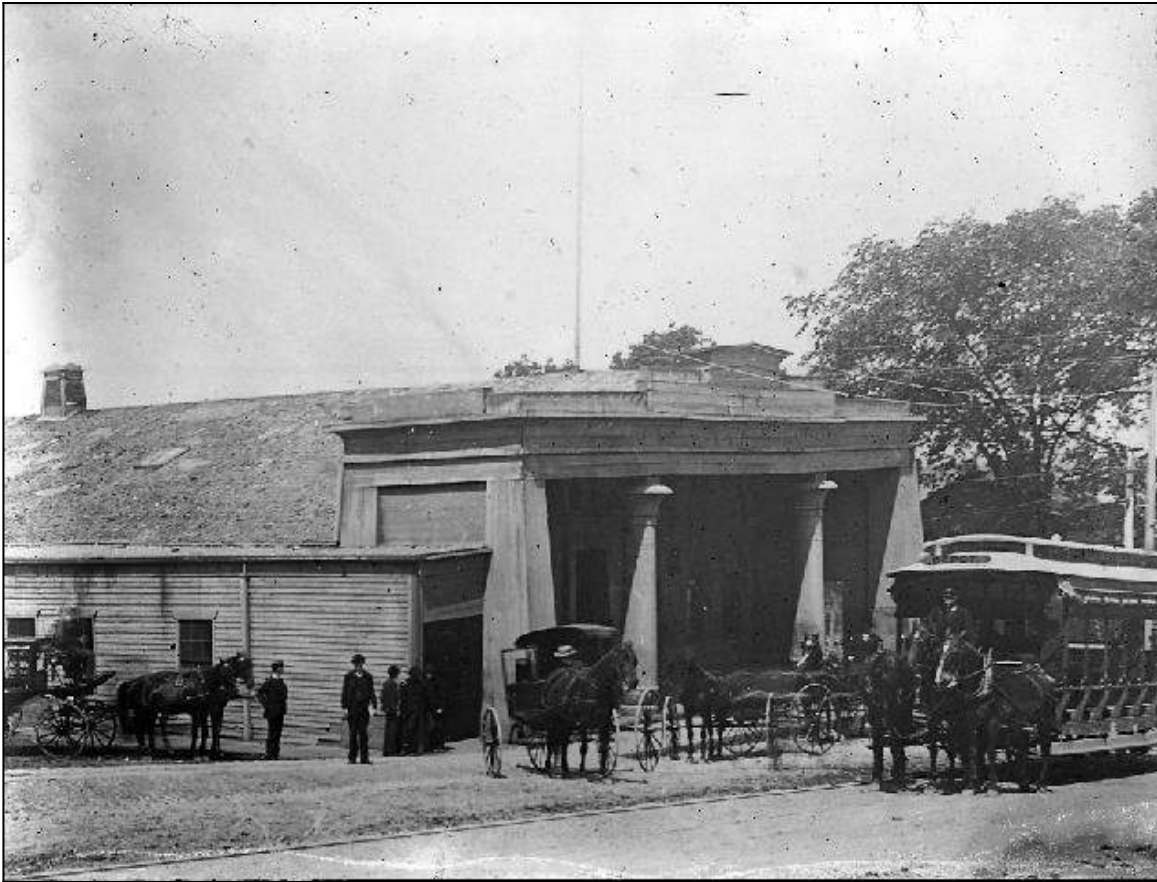
*One of the first forms of transportation: the Wagonway*

Since the 16th century, Europe had been using a wagonway system to assist in hauling mining payloads. Within a hundred years a wooden flange was added to these routes to keep the wheels on track and this system was the precursor of the stream powered rail system that was to come. The clear, unobstructed path that contained a flange or rail allowed

horses to draw wagons with freight of 10-13 tons per trip without worry. In the 18th century, these wooden flanges were taking quite the beating, so as a matter of course they were covered with a sheathing of iron. As payloads increased the wagon "technology" had to keep up. Wheels were made out of iron to handle the heavier loads. Iron on iron also lessened the friction allowing a quicker pace and return. Since the payloads increased, the rails were replaced with completely iron flanges or they would simply collapse. The setting for the steam-powered rail and trolley systems of the future were now in place. By the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the 1820s, a modern, mechanized rail system was up and running utilizing these tracks in parts of Europe.

### **The Omnibus; Precursor to the Autobus or Bus**

Also in the 1820s, we saw the advent of the *Omnibus*, which was a rather elongated horse-drawn carriage that served as the earliest form of public transport. The abbreviated version of this word, *bus*, is still in use today. This first mode of public transport was rather simple. There were no designated "stops." A would-be passenger simply stood somewhere on the omnibus' route and flagged the driver with a wave of his or her hand. Today, when a passenger wants off the bus, he pulls a cord that alerts the driver electronically. During the era of the omnibus, that cord was tied directly to the driver's ankle. The omnibus was a popular mode of transportation until around 1905.



Russel Warren's Egyptian Revival Pearl Street Depot;  
Omnibus (Whaling Museum Photo)

Since profitability is the name of the game for any business, the early Omnibus companies sought ways to carry more passengers in a day. Since the mules and horses that drew the omnibus were taxed as much as they could possibly be, they thought in terms of speed. Even adding one extra trip a day would translate to added profits. The aforementioned tracks were the solution. Unpaved streets created too much drag or friction, and iron wheels on iron rails carried far less friction. This would allow speedier routes and return.

### **The Novel Streetcar**

In 1832, North America's first streetcar lines opened in New York City. Alongside this development of inner-city transit was the progress of the rail. In 1840, eight years after the first streetcars were running in America, the New Bedford-Taunton-Boston railroad was completed as was New Bedford's first train station, Russel Warren's [Pearl Street Depot](#). The

streetcar was a slight improvement over the omnibus since they took advantage of using the rails that allowed faster travel than unpaved roads would. These streetcars were typically managed by two individuals, a conductor and a driver. The driver, would of course, control the reigns of the horses and the brake handle. The conductor who rode in the rear, would collect fares, alert the driver when everyone was “on board”, and generally help passengers on and off the streetcar.



Trolley crossing the New Bedford/Fairhaven Bridge  
(Whaling Museum Photo)

These technologies all converged into the creation of the streetcar system. The omnibus concept was taken from the unpaved road to the rail system utilized by the streetcar, which had proven to be far more practical and efficient. Streetcars were originally drawn by horses and mules. While this seemed like a “greener” and cleaner method of transportation, horses and mules left a fair share of manure as they navigated their routes. The manure would not only make

travel by foot adventurous to say the least, it was simply unhealthy and unhygienic. The odor was surely a powerful one. A typical horse can produce up to 30 lbs of manure per day. The men responsible for the clean up duties were called “dirt-carters”, one of the [forgotten occupations](#) of yesteryear. “Dirt” was a euphemism for poop, crap, manure. It was akin to calling a garbage man a “sanitation manager.”

### **Of Vintage Exhaust**

Regardless, where feces and unsanitary conditions mix with the general populace, disease typically follows. What was needed was an alternative way to drive these vehicles. In 1871, San Franciscan Andrew Smith Hallidie patented the first cable car. While much of the nation and world began to phase out the use of animals to draw their streetcars from the 1860s-1890s, New Bedford was one city among others that continued to use them. Part of the reason for this reluctance may have had to do with the sheer logistics of a transition. A ditch would have to be dug between the rails and under each street that was to use a cable car. Within the ditch would be placed a cable that would actually pull it along the street. Within this ditch, a chamber, called a vault, would have to be dug to house the machinery -a steam engine and pulleys- that mechanically pulled this cable. Perhaps, the massive logistics behind the cable car prevented New Bedford from wholly switching over.





Dartmouth/Westport Trolley (Spinner Publications Photo)

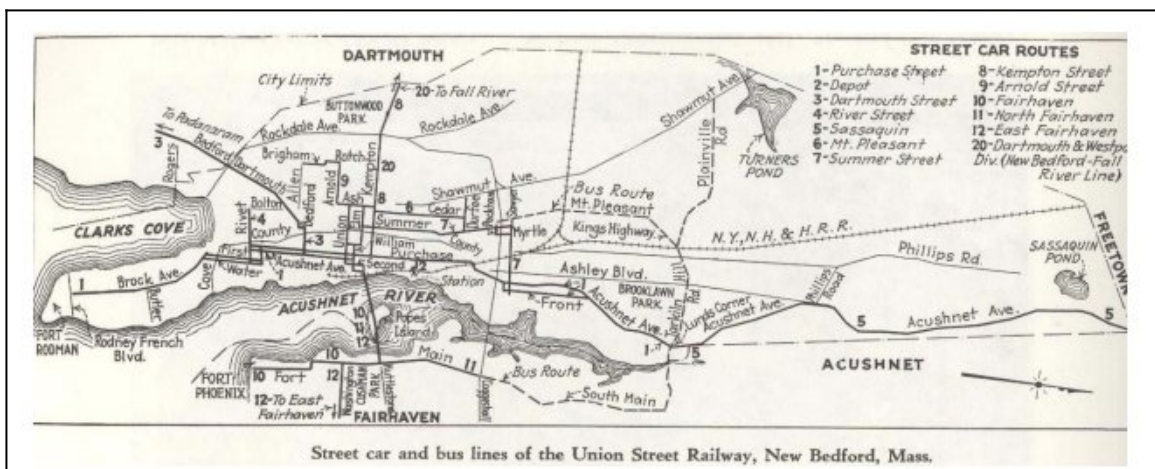
In 1872, the New Bedford and Fairhaven Street Railway Company was first incorporated. At this time the rail was still drawn by horse. In 1887 it consolidated with the Acushnet Railway company under its new name, the Union Street Railway Company. This company built a repair station in 1897 at 1959 Purchase Street, called the Union Street Railway Car barn. If this sounds familiar, it should as the apartment complex that sits there today still retains its name "The Car barn."

The region was exploding in population and commerce. Using animals was quickly becoming an impractical method. In 1888, Richmond, Virginia led the world by setting a precedent and introducing a city-wide electric trolley system. The logistics behind setting up the electric system was far less than that of the cable car system. Regional powerhouses with steam engines and generators were set up to provide the electricity needed. Specifically, the power for New Bedford's trolleys came from the first electric light company in New Bedford, the Edison Electric Light Company united with the New Bedford Gas

Company and Edison Light Company in 1890. They had stations on Coffin Street and South Water Street. Electric wires would leave the powerhouse and thread throughout the city. The trolleys would connect to this grid through a pole that contacted one of the overhead wires.

## The Advent of the Electric Trolley

In the 1890s, New Bedford began to catch up with the rest of the world and began to phase out the use of animals and replace it with the electric system. However, as late as the 1920s, New Bedford was *still* using animals for some of the streetcars. The Mayor at the time, Morgan Rotch had an intense dislike for the concept of overhead electric wires and claimed that horses would “Never, never become accustomed to the sight of electric cars.” Many other naysayers voiced concerns that fallen wires would electrocute people. In spite of this, by October of 1890, the first streetcar made its run.



## Streetcar Routes in New Bedford

From 1901 to 1927, the New Bedford & Onset (NB&O) company serviced the region with electric trolleys. One route went from New Bedford to Wareham then to Onset with occasional stops in Fairhaven, Marion and Mattapoisett. Another went from Middleboro to Wareham, and Onset. After the canal was built between Massachusetts Bay and Buzzards Bay in 1916, NB&O extended their tracks to include Monument Beach and surrounding towns.

Unfortunately for the NB&O, scientific and technological advances, brought us the automobile and the autobus, or bus. In 1925, buses began to become an increasingly more popular mode of public transportation. Slowly routes were replaced one by one with the bus. By 1933, most routes were replaced, and in May 1947 the trolley system had been completely replaced.

### **Trolley Today**

Besides the obvious Car barn on Purchase Street, there are still remnants of the old trolley system. Some of the buildings where the stations and waiting rooms sat, still exist. The corner of William and Purchase Streets where Cafe Arpeggio is today was a waiting room. Three "trolleybuses" run by the Harbor Development Commission (HDC) service New Bedford today and bring mainly cruise ship tourists to various points of interest including the Rotch-Jones-Duff House and Garden Museum, the New Bedford Whaling Museum and back to the ship. They are also used on special occasions like for the transportation of national and foreign dignitaries. Group rates are available from the HDC. More info can be had by contacting Debbie Yuille at 508.979.1456 or [dyuille@newbedford-ma.gov](mailto:dyuille@newbedford-ma.gov).

For those of you interested in seeing the early streetcars in action, you'll enjoy this video by the icon ML Baron. Mr. Baron restored this film that was produced by the Union Street Railway Co. You will see Mayor Charles Ashley, take a ride down Purchase Street and see familiar landmarks, see Lincoln Park as it was in 1921, and even Fort "Phoenix" when it had a wharf, main house, and water slide. Interestingly, Ashley grants a free year's worth of transportation to Edwin B. Macy who is the oldest living veteran of the first streetcar trip in New Bedford. The fare at that time in 1921, was the same as it was in 1872: 5 cents.

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### **Photo Guide (From Left to Right)**

- #01: Waiting Room at William & Purchase Streets. Now Cafe Arpeggio. (Spinner Pub. Photo)
- #02: Dartmouth and Allen Street Trolley. (Spinner Pub. Photo)
- #03: Fort Phoenix horse-drawn streetcar. (Whaling Museum Photo)
- #04: Fort Rodman Trolley in 1907. (Spinner Pub. Photo)
- #05: Trolley on Purchase and Union Streets. (Spinner Pub. Photo)
- #06: Fairhaven Horse-drawn Trolley #51 on Purchase Street & William. Cummings Building. (Whaling Museum Photo)
- #07: Acushnet Park, Fort Rodman. (Whaling Museum Photo)
- #08: South Water Street at Division Street. (Whaling Museum Photo)
- #09: Trolley Interior. (Spinner Pub. Photo)
- #10: Trolley passing over New Bedford/Fairhaven Bridge. (Whaling Museum Photo)
- #11: Random shot. (Whaling Museum Photo)
- #12: Trolley #607 on Acushnet Avenue. (Spinner Pub. Photo)
- #13: USRC Trolley #76 on Ash Street. (Spinner Pub. Photo)
- #14: Waiting Station at Lincoln Park. (Spinner Pub. Photo)