

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, March 27, 2017

Electric Trolley Lines around Wilmington: While many of the suburban trolley lines had failed before I grew up, trolleys were the only means of public transportation in most cities including Wilmington (Delaware). Trolleys were everywhere, and one of the tests for obtaining an auto driver's license was to know when a driver was allowed to pass a standing trolley car. I first saw a "trackless trolley" in Dayton, Ohio, in 1936. These rubber-tired vehicles looked like a conventional Diesel trolley bus, but they were slightly smaller, much quieter, and there were no fumes or odor. Delaware Power and Light Company (DP&L) owned the trolley lines around Wilmington, and they converted to trackless trolleys almost overnight in 1939. They still required overhead wires and flexible catenaries to allow them to pull close to a curb.

Previously, when the tracks were in the street there was a loud hum when the trolleys were in motion, changing in pitch as the car picked up speed. A screeching of the flanges on the rail took place as they rounded sharp curves at 90-degree intersections. In Wilmington, 10th Street and Delaware Avenue were double-tracked from Market Street to Union, as were Market Street from Front Street to 15th, and Fourth Street from 3rd Street Bridge to Union. Except for Market Street (which was not wide enough), these double-tracked streets were equipped with "islands" for passengers to wait safely for the next trolley. Other vehicular traffic could always pass between the island and the curb, with the two parallel tracks being in the middle of the street inside the islands. Two-inch-high round markers with reflectors in the pavement outlined three sides of these islands, and cars and commercial vehicles could not drive on the track side if anyone was standing in the island.

Many of the other streets had a single trolley track down the middle. On one-way streets, trolleys traveled in the same direction as other traffic. For example, trolleys ran west on 6th Street, east on 7th, and west on 8th, all west from Market Street in center city. Some of the 6th Street trolleys ran via Elsmere to Price's Corner and returned on 7th Street (this was a part of the old Peoples' Railway Line to Brandywine Springs Park). There was a trolley on Washington Street from Delaware Avenue to about 40th Street, and the Market Street line ran single-tracked to Shellpot Park (owned by DP&L), and continued on Hillcrest Avenue to Brandywine Boulevard in Bellefonte. This line originally ran to Claymont and Chester with connections to Philadelphia. In the days of the river boats, a trolley line ran from downtown Wilmington to the Gordon Heights steamboat pier. The Fourth Street line continued single-tracked east and south to New Castle, with a spur to the Marine Terminal, where it connected with the Penns Grove Ferry that crossed the Delaware River.

Outbound trolleys on the Delaware Avenue line followed on a single-tracked West 17th Street and turned left just before Tower Hill School to their most distant point along Pennsylvania Avenue at Rising Sun Lane. Returning, they followed west 18th and then Delaware Avenue before reaching the double-tracked section again. The trolley barn was along Delaware Avenue near DuPont Street and the B & O Railroad's passenger station. At the barn, now the location of Trolley Square, cars were stored when not in service and regular maintenance was performed.

The trackless trolleys, that eliminated the rails in the street and the islands for boarding, followed most of the old routes and were still restricted by the supply of power from wires overhead. In the Wilmington area, they lasted from 1939 until about 1954, when polluting Diesel buses took their place, and the heavy copper wire in the overhead cables was scrapped by the Delaware Coach Company, a fully-owned subsidiary of Delmarva Power.