

From Red Car to Purple Line:

West LA VA's Links to Rail

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[On its Dedication Day in 1901](#), the National Soldier's Home – later to become the West Los Angeles VA – the then President, William McKinley arrived by a steam train on tracks that ran adjacent to the property on what now is Wilshire Boulevard. These same tracks later used by the Red Car until 1933 when the line was no more. Now, 90 years later, this train service will return to VA once again.

If, as has been said, [nobody walks in L.A.](#), there was a time when nobody had to. (Putting aside the 8,000 years of Native Tongva history as they walked the land, pre-contact. It would be their causeways that served as templates for the 405 Freeway, Wilshire Boulevard, and others.) That is because, once, Los Angeles was the bona fide King of the Rail Towns. The [Los Angeles public trolley system](#), the Pacific Electric – better known to the transit riding public as the Red and Yellow Cars – allowed Southern Californians to easily travel from the mountains to the beaches. Routes went up to San Fernando, down to Newport and Balboa, east to Upland and points in between – before the era of the automobile. At their peak, trolleys in Los Angeles covered more mileage than even New York City does today by as much as 51 percent. Depending on whom you believe, this covers more than 1,100 or 1,300 miles of track: that's more track than London, Paris, Seoul, and Beijing combined.

The Purple/D Line extension, scheduled to open in less than five years, will bring a train station to VA grounds – once again, at last. [President Biden spoke on the VA grounds](#) on October 13th to convey the importance of what this line extension could mean to both VA and the city. The money for the line extension is to be a part of his legacy-making investment in national infrastructure. In his speech, Biden claimed that the Purple/D Line extension will be a part of the largest set of public works projects since the Interstate Highway System began in the 1950s during the Eisenhower administration.

Railtown Pt 1: The Rise and the Beginning of the Fall

In 1898, 28-year-old entrepreneur Henry Huntington would buy the biggest transportation system in the city, the Los Angeles Railway – known as the Yellow Car. When Huntington's business and railroad tycoon uncle Collis Huntington died, Henry, who'd worked under him,

inherited Collis' interest in the Southern Pacific. Collis was considered one of the [Big Four railroad magnates](#) behind the Central Pacific – America's first transcontinental railroad. After Collis' death, the Central Pacific Railroad's board would force the young Huntington out and bought his interest for \$15 million – the equivalent of \$400 million today. With this, Henry would form the Pacific Railway System, later known as the Red Car, as a way of connecting potential buyers to his sprawling property developments. Henry would essentially build the world's largest urban railway system out of his own pocket. To compare in today's dollars, construction costs for the Purple/D Line extension are [currently estimated at \\$800 million a mile](#); others have suggested more (see below).

[By 1906, 90 percent of urban trips were by trolley.](#) (The last new tracks were laid by 1910.) At the time, most street traffic consisted of horse-drawn carts. Given that, Huntington's railway still ran at a considerable loss. (However, his freight line was highly lucrative.) Add to this the considerable profitability of his hundreds of subdivisions, Huntington could afford the losses. Eventually his properties were so sprawling and widespread, the Red Car couldn't effectively serve them. After ridership peaked in 1920, by 1925 less popular rail lines were already being converted into bus routes.

Railtown Pt 2: Jitney, the Ur-Uber & Death by Cars

The first Los Angeles rail line opened in 1875, following the demise of the horse-drawn streetcar – AKA horsecars. By 1902, the first Red Car began operation. For the next nearly 50 years, Los Angeles' electric railways were the only transit option. But even for a tycoon, operating public transit as a private enterprise is problematic. Besides the unprofitability, there were bouts with organized labor – including strikes and boycotts – the expense of maintaining infrastructure, including the roads where trains had rights-of-way. When automobiles became affordably priced for the masses in the 1920s, a period that also coincided with an explosive growth in the local population ([doubling in a decade](#)), ridership dropped steadily. During the War years, when the public experienced resource limitations and forced rationing, ridership would spike again briefly. In the post-War era, with even fewer riders returning, streetcars fell into disrepair. Tracks were torn up and freeways were considered the model of modernity. But the problems may've begun long before – at the start of World War I in 1914.

When the Jitneys came to town:

The rise of cars also gave rise to a subculture of free-range entrepreneurs, much like Uber would 150 years later. These entrepreneurs began ridesharing their own vehicles – from passenger cars, converted trucks, and autobuses. And much like Uber and Lyft at their start, with no municipal oversight or regulation.

As legend has it, the Jitney phenomenon began in Los Angeles when an intrepid entrepreneur conveyed his first passenger a short distance for a nickel in 1914. Because of the stresses of the

recession/depression economy at the time, the Jitney concept spread quickly – all across the country. Local papers picked up on the story and soon chauffeur licenses were being minted at a rapid rate. It wouldn't take long before Los Angeles' railways were losing \$600 a day in lost fares – at 5¢ a ride, that's 12,000 lost fares. California lines were losing \$2.5 million a year in revenue – the equivalent of over \$84 million today. (Also note, these were losses to a private company, not government subsidized entities like trains today.) As a result, motormen and conductors faced layoffs and car repair and replacement, as well as track and road maintenance, were all curtailed. Jitneys charged the same fare as the trolleys – the word jitney was slang for a nickel – and Jitney drivers would often poach passengers at streetcar stops.

Nationally, the train industry saw [Jitneys as a “menace” and a “malignant growth.”](#) In some cities, train companies attempted to create their own Jitney services; none were profitable. As it turned out, the Jitney problem would be a short-lived phenomenon: mechanically, the cars of 1915 couldn't handle the weight of extra passengers, and with the frequent starts and stops, etc., the 5¢ fare was completely inadequate for the far greater expenses entrepreneurs incurred. In Los Angeles, the average driver operated for only 60 days. Still, the railways sought protection from their municipalities and they got it, quickly. And for drivers looking for a side hustle, the rules became too many and onerous.

By the end of 1915, the hiccup of the Jitney was over. In the end, revenues generated by Jitneys exceeded the losses of trolleys. To analysts, it was clear that there was more to the story. By 1920, the era of the trolley had peaked and glimpses of shadows drawing on the end of Railtown were growing ever longer.

Railtown Pt 3: Post-Classic Period

By the 1930s, at a time when New York City was seen as the model of public transit, the Pacific Electric Red Car transitioned into buying bus lines. As trolleys had to share congested urban roadways with cars, train travel got slower. For the busy Santa Monica Boulevard line, trains were clocked at an average speed of 13 mph.* As a new system of freeways for the city was being planned, they would include right-of-way down the center for trains. By the time they were built, there were no trains. As the number of cars and traffic increased, trains were seen as the problem, not the solution.

**By contrast, the 9-mile extension of the Purple/D Line is projected to take 15 minutes. The entire trip from downtown to VA station terminus should take 28 minutes with an average speed of 24-35 mph, top speed 55-65 mph.*

By the early 1940s, many train lines were being discontinued. A bus company purchased Yellow Car lines only to stack them in a scrapyard. Train routes were given to buses. By the 1950s, transportation money was earmarked only for freeways. The last of the train lines were bought by private bus companies and decommissioned. This led to private companies monopolizing

public transit systems. In some cases, car and tire manufacturers and oil companies were the ones doing the buying. Not just limited to Los Angeles, these same companies were buying transit lines in New York City, Oakland, Baltimore, St. Louis, and Philadelphia. This led to the [General Motors Streetcar Conspiracy](#). In 1948, the [Supreme Court ruled](#) that there was indeed a conspiracy to collude and create a monopoly.

When the death knell came, no one should've been surprised: Because they didn't require rails, electric feeder cables, or other infrastructure, buses were less expensive to operate and far less costly overall. The last of the trains were in such disrepair they were called "slums on wheels." Municipalities and the public agreed – streetcars were considered obsolete and the trend was national: by 1937, over 50 percent of cities in the US were using buses only. At last, in 1961, the Red was dead.

Back to the Future: The Return of Trains

A feasibility study was ordered for a 45-mile-long monorail system in Los Angeles. The proposed system would also include a 2-mile-long tunnel below downtown. The order came in 1951, 7 years before the city would take over the remnants of the Pacific Electric Railway, and 10 years before the last of the trains had stopped running altogether. The monorail never went beyond the study stage.

With scaled-down ambitions, the Southern California Rapid Transit District, later RTD, was formed in 1964. It began by purchasing 11 failing bus lines and proposing building a 62-mile rail transit system across the county. A half-cent gas tax was brought to voters to finance improvements to the city's transit. It was voted down. Nine years later, there was a major international gas crisis and Los Angeles' first Black mayor was elected. Tom Bradley campaigned on bringing a new rapid transit system to Los Angeles and promised to start breaking ground within a year of taking office. Many starts and stops followed, a tunnel was being dug from Union Station, but the hopes for a new train line in Los Angeles didn't break ground until 1985. It would be the Blue Line – now the A Line – running from Long Beach to downtown. It opened to the public in 1990.

The Blue/D Line light rail ran on what was mostly abandoned Pacific Electric rights-of-way. This "at-grade" section of the railway came at a cost of \$877 million – \$1.82 billion in 2021 dollars. (In 2014, a 6-year \$1.37 billion [adjusted for inflation] overhaul of the Blue Line was begun.) Thirty-two years after the first Metro Line opening, Los Angeles currently has 97.6 miles of track including 4 light rail lines and 2 subway lines with more on the way.

Purple/D Line Extension: Where It Began, Where It Is Now

In 2008, ballot [Measure R](#) was passed by LA County voters to allocate funding for an expansion of Metro lines; six years later an Environmental Impact Report was issued and two years after that a [Draft Master Plan](#) would describe what a Purple/D Line extension to terminate across the

street from the West LA VA Medical Center. In the plan, Metro is given authority and responsibility for operating and maintaining the station on VA property as a resource for the Veteran community that receive medical services at the West LA VA.

Eight years after Measure R, [Measure M](#) is passed by voters using sales tax revenues to accelerate development. In 2019, Congressman Ted Lieu introduced a bill to guarantee that funds collected from easements for a Metro station can be used for renovations and maintenance for VA projects. In January of 2020, finalizations of licensing of a “Perpetual” easement agreement commenced and construction began. Also, in accordance with the easement agreement, Los Angeles Metro will fund and construct new parking as mitigation for spaces displaced by new construction. This includes an 809 stall parking structure, traffic mitigations, valet parking, and a shuttle bus to connect train passengers with other services. VA has worked to protect Veterans from any adverse impact of the construction on VA operations and seeks to provide additional services for the specific benefit of Veterans. (For more information, go to the [FOIA Reading Room](#) and [Master Plan website library](#).)

D Line Station at West Los Angeles VA

VA’s Metro station is scheduled to open in 2027. The Purple/D Line extension will have the West LA VA property as the train’s terminus and will include new stations at UCLA and Museum Row on mid-Wilshire. The D Line subway construction costs have been budgeted to be \$800 million a mile. [The construction contractor’s website for the project](#) claims the Purple/D Line extension’s costs will be \$9.3 billion for 9.3 miles of track. (Construction includes tunneling and reinforcing passages that cross a seismic fault.) For Veterans, VA staff, and other riders of public transit, this train will mean travel from downtown to VA grounds will take less than 30 minutes.

The opening of the D Line will also be paired with a coordination of connecting bus routes. Buses and shuttle service will allow Veterans access through out VA’s grounds, to the surrounding business districts, across town, and subway access to points beyond via the D Line. Metro refers to these hubs as *first/last mile connections* and VA grounds will have three of these hubs. From the train’s origin downtown, it’ll make stops at the Los Angeles’ Library’s Main Branch, City Hall, the Music Center and Broad Museum, MacArthur Park, Museum Row Arts District and the Wilshire Corridor, The Wiltern Theater, Century City, UCLA, and the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System and grounds.

Overall, the D Line will also offer West LA VA better access and opportunity to a deeper pool of staff and resources, human and otherwise. It will allow Veterans, on and off campus, better connections to VA services – healthcare, behavioral health, housing, case management, job training, and more.