

Transit Towns: Fitchburg & Leominster

In towns all around New England, trolleys and transit lines provided transportation to and from major cities, as well as between smaller shipping and business centers in less urban areas. In and around the city of Fitchburg, public transit provided a means of transportation for business, necessity, and recreation for local residents. Though the heyday of trolleys and trackless trolleys has long passed, the influence of public transit on these communities has been felt through present day, with the legacy of Whalom Amusement Park and current bus operations as examples of public transit's lasting effects on northern Worcester County.

– The Fitchburg Railroad –

One of the most important forms of transportation in Fitchburg, the railroad has provided both freight and passenger transportation to, from, and through the city for well over a century. Once providing through service to New York state and Vermont, the line through Fitchburg has undergone numerous changes in services over the years, as well as numerous service providers.¹

Emerging from original routes in Charlestown and East Cambridge, the Fitchburg Railroad Company was chartered in 1842 to expand the line west.² The Fitchburg Railroad was brought through Waltham, Lincoln, Concord, Acton, Littleton, Ayer, Shirley, Leominster, and ultimately Fitchburg by 1849, linking central Massachusetts to the trading port that was the Charlestown Navy Yard.³ As demand increased, the line was

¹ Thomas J. Humphrey and Norton D. Clark, *Boston's Commuter Rail: The First 150 Years* (Cambridge, MA: Boston Street Railway Association, Inc., 1985), 87.

² Humphrey and Clark, 87.
Ronald Dale Karr, *Rail Lines of Southern New England* (Pepperell, MA: Branch Line Press, 1995), 204.

³ Humphrey and Clark, 87.

extended across the Charles River to Boston in 1848, to a new depot building at Causeway and Beverly Streets – the first predecessor building of what is today known as North Station.⁴ Several branches were soon built off of the Fitchburg main lines, including routes to Watertown and Lexington, however local ridership remained unsteady.⁵

In 1875, a four-and-three-quarter mile tunnel was opened through the Berkshire mountains in western Massachusetts.⁶ The Hoosac Tunnel was soon obtained by the Fitchburg Railroad, and it offered them a direct rail link from Boston to Troy, New York, via Fitchburg. Though the tunnel offered a glimpse of hope for successful long distance freight operations on the Fitchburg, such visions would never quite be fulfilled, largely due to a lack of connections and other competing routes.⁷

In terms of commuter traffic from Fitchburg to Boston, the train, at times, offered decent service, but it wasn't until the 1980's and 1990's that service would achieve true commuter frequency and ridership levels.⁸ Until this time, various service cutbacks truncated service at Waltham, Concord, and South Acton, among other points, and schedules were often too infrequent to entice commuters to utilize the line on a regular basis.⁹ Upon the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's takeover of railroad management, service was extended from Fitchburg to Gardner, but this service would

⁴ Humphrey and Clark, 87.

⁵ Humphrey and Clark, 87.
Karr, 203-204.

⁶ Humphrey and Clark, 87.

⁷ Humphrey and Clark, 87.
Karr, 170-172.

⁸ Humphrey and Clark, 88.

⁹ Humphrey and Clark, 88.

only last a few years, with a struggling era of service to follow through the 1970's and 1980's.¹⁰ By the 1990's, full service was restored to Fitchburg from Boston, and it would slowly be increased as ridership warranted, leading to the present-day, near full-time operation of trains to Fitchburg, with two express trains scheduled each day.¹¹

– Trolley Towns in Worcester County –

Through the first half of the 20th century, trolleys had taken over in most major cities across the country. Boston, Springfield, Providence, and Hartford were among the major cities in New England that boasted large-scale systems.¹² In addition to these systems, a growing network of smaller, but in some cases more expansive, trolley lines began to spread through the suburbs. Between Fitchburg and Boston, the Boston Elevated Railway, Eastern Massachusetts Street Railway, Middlesex & Boston Street Railway, and the Concord, Maynard & Hudson Street Railway all operated in their respective regions, and in many cases, connecting with one another at the edges of their service areas.¹³ In central Massachusetts, the Worcester Street Railway connected

¹⁰ Humphrey and Clark, 88.

MBTA Commuter Rail Timetables (Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, 1970's–1990's).

¹¹ MBTA Commuter Rail Timetables (1990's–2007).

¹² Bradley H. Clarke, *Streetcar Lines of the Hub: The 1940s* (Cambridge, MA: Boston Street Railway Association, Inc., 2003).

Bradley H. Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of Rhode Island* (Cambridge, MA: Boston Street Railway Association, Inc., 1983).

D. Scott Molloy, *Rhode Island Transit Album* (Cambridge, MA: Boston Street Railway Association, Inc., 1978).

¹³ O.R. Cummings, "Concord, Maynard & Hudson Street Railway" *National Railway Historical Society Transportation Bulletin*, no. 74 (1967).

Clarke, *Streetcar Lines of the Hub: The 1940s*.

the area surrounding that city to its business and residential centers, and Fitchburg was home to the Fitchburg and Leominster Street Railway Company.¹⁴

The Fitchburg Street Railway was incorporated in 1886, originally constructing a three-and-one-half mile horse car line, running from Goodrich and Summer Streets in downtown Fitchburg to Sanborn and Westminster Streets in West Fitchburg.¹⁵ The Fitchburg Street Railway grew quickly, buying the Leominster Street Railway in 1892 to become the Fitchburg and Leominster Street Railway Company.¹⁶ Of significance was the fact that regular transportation was now available between the two cities, with the first streetcar running such a route in 1892, which was also the first electric streetcar to run on the system.¹⁷ Whalom Park was soon purchased by the Fitchburg & Leominster, and streetcars began to run to the amusement park in 1893.¹⁸

By 1912, the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway was operating on over 30 miles of track in Fitchburg, Leominster, Lancaster, Lunenburg, Shirley, Harvard, and Ayer, some of which under a subsidiary, the Leominster, Shirley & Ayer Street Railway. There were several other companies also operating within the Fitchburg & Leominster's service area, most notably the Gardner, Westminster & Fitchburg, the Leominster & Clinton, and the Fitchburg & Suburban Street Railway Companies. These companies accented the services offered by the Fitchburg & Leominster, and while they were

¹⁴ Stephen P. Carlson and Thomas W. Harding, *Worcester Trolleys Remembered* (Worcester, MA: Worcester Regional Transit Authority, 1985), 5-6.

Bradley H. Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.* (Cambridge, MA: Boston Street Railway Association, Inc., 1975).

¹⁵ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 5.

¹⁶ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 5.

¹⁷ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 5.

¹⁸ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 5-7.

competitors, all worked together in terms of the creation of a network of public transit lines covering north central Massachusetts.¹⁹

As the 1920's arrived, the age of the automobile had begun, and a reduction in dependence on public transit took its toll on the lines in greater Fitchburg. In addition to automobile competition, rising operating costs and maintenance requirements were eating away at the Fitchburg & Leominster's funds. By 1930, only six streetcar lines remained, with three additional routes being run by buses, and the footprint of the Fitchburg & Leominster had been greatly reduced. In 1931, the company had even considered selling off its signature property, Whalom Park. Such an idea was considered catastrophic to the company, so they soon made the decision to terminate operation of electric streetcars, replacing them with an economical, relatively new, but well-tested, form of public transportation.²⁰

– Going Trackless –

Trackless trolleys, sometimes known as trolleybuses, have been an integral part of public transit throughout North America and the world. Cities like Philadelphia, Seattle, Vancouver, Dayton, Ohio, and Boston have all developed successful trackless trolley lines that survive to this day. But before Boston began its trackless trolley operations, the twin cities of Fitchburg and Leominster would jump on the technology to save their streetcar lines from extinction.²¹

¹⁹ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 7.

²⁰ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 7.

²¹ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 7.

In the 1930s, the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Company began to seriously consider the conversion of its remaining streetcar lines to trackless trolley lines, something that would prove both economical and practical compared to both streetcars and traditional buses. In terms of finances, the estimated cost of upgrading the Fitchburg & Leominster's streetcar lines for continued streetcar operation was \$170,000, while the cost of complete conversion to trackless trolley operation, including new vehicles and overhead wire, came to about \$190,000, with the added reduction of yearly operating costs by nearly \$9,000 compared to operation of streetcars. The struggling Fitchburg & Leominster jumped at the opportunity, and in doing so became the first trackless trolley operator in the state.²²

In addition to the cost benefits, trackless trolleys offered operational bonuses. For example, while streetcars experienced delays due to long stretches of single-track operation (not to mention deteriorating track conditions), trackless trolleys could pass in both directions due to easier mobility and dual overhead wires. The hilly terrain of Fitchburg was also challenging to gas buses, while trackless trolleys could negotiate Cleghorn's slopes with relative ease. Also, compared to streetcars, trackless trolleys used considerably less voltage of electricity per car, freeing up power, increasing vehicle performance, and reducing power related issues.²³

In 1932, trackless trolley service was launched on the Fitchburg & Leominster.²⁴ Riders immediately noticed the calmer, more relaxing ride of the trackless trolleys versus the old streetcars – there were now no wheel clatter or track inconsistencies to

²² Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 5, 7.

²³ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 7-8.

²⁴ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 15-16.

rough up the ride, and the lack of a gas engine made it infinitely more enjoyable than a traditional bus.²⁵ Less than a week after service began, the *Fitchburg Sentinel* declared the trackless trolleys a publicly-decided success, noting all the positive aspects of the new vehicles.²⁶ The Fitchburg & Leominster trackless trolley system consisted, generally, of several routes that serviced locations across its service area. A main line ran from Waites Corner in Fitchburg to Leominster, with another from Cleghorn in Fitchburg to Whalom Park in Lunenburg.²⁷ Service to Monument Square in Leominster was also provided, all of which gave access to many of the most populated and important parts of the cities.²⁸ The system provided access to the major business districts of the day, downtown, and the train depot, as well as Whalom Park for those seeking weekend amusement.²⁹

The Fitchburg & Leominster would enjoy relative success for about a decade, with trackless service running solidly through the end of the 1930's.³⁰ By this time, trackless trolleys had arrived in Boston, but in that city, would wait until the 1950's to steal the streetcar's thunder.³¹ In Fitchburg, though, the trackless would face some problems it could not overcome. Operating costs had skyrocketed, especially in 1943 after storms damaged the Fitchburg & Leominster's infrastructure.³² Bus routes had grabbed a hold of the area, and as they expanded, the viability of the trackless trolley

²⁵ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 19-20.

²⁶ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 19.

²⁷ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 21-23.

²⁸ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 21-23.

²⁹ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 21-23.

³⁰ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 39-45.

³¹ Clarke, *Streetcar Lines of the Hub: The 1940s*.

³² Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 39.

became weaker and weaker. New buses were delivered through the decade, and as traffic and demand warranted, trackless trolley runs were made with regular buses, leaving the tracklesses to Whalom Park runs. Almost sixty years after the beginning of horsecar operations in Fitchburg, a notice of final abandonment was made for the trackless lines, and buses would carry the area through the rest of the 1900s.³³

– A Whale of a Time –

The Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway was among the majority of regional transit lines in Massachusetts that operated its own amusement park on one of its transit lines. Whalom Park, built in Lunenburg on a lake, featured a ballroom, carousel, and various amusements, and would ultimately feature a roller coaster, water ride, and other amusements.³⁴ The idea of an amusement park on a transit line was devised as a way for the transit companies to take in weekday-levels of revenue on weekends and holidays, largely from families traveling to and from the man-made attractions.³⁵ This formula had been duplicated, with varying degrees of success, in communities like Lexington (Lexington Park on the Middlesex & Boston Street Railway), Newton (Norumbega Park on the Commonwealth Avenue Street Railway), and Salem, New Hampshire (Canobie Lake Park on the Massachusetts Northeast Street Railway).³⁶ Though many of the parks experienced limited life-spans, the two most successful parks

³³ Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 41-45.

³⁴ Jenna Russell, "Coasting to a Stop at Whalom Park," *Boston Globe*, October 19, 2006, 3rd edition. Fitchburg State College Library database, <http://www.fsc.edu:2358>

³⁵ Russell.

³⁶ Cummings.
Stephen P. Carlson with Norton D. Clark, *From Boston to the Berkshires: A Pictorial Review of Electric Transportation in Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: Boston Street Railway Association, Inc., 1990).

of this type in the region were Canobie Lake Park and Whalom Park – the only ones to see the close of the century.

Whalom Park, aside from its amusements, became a cultural center in the early- to mid-1900s, offering summer theater productions and concerts featuring local and national stars of the day, including Edward Everett Horton, Mae West, Gloria Swanson, and Tallulah Bankhead.³⁷ For many in the area, Whalom Park was an integral part of growing up. A childhood destination, a teenage hangout, and an adult gathering place – Whalom Park offered it all to local residents, and as such was an emotional part of the community.³⁸ Emotional connections, however, can not always help an old-fashioned park compete with modern themed destinations, and Whalom Park would struggle to see the turn of another century.

– A New Century of Transit –

In 1978, the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) succeeded the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway in transit operations in the two cities. Routes were scaled back over the years, ultimately leading to today's ten-route bus operation, along with several special services offered to local residents and students. MART's buses make stops in Fitchburg, Leominster, Lunenburg and Gardner, and loosely mimic the routes in the heyday of transit in the region. The original trackless trolley routes survive today as modern bus routes, with extensions to malls, retail and business parks, schools, and other attractions.³⁹

³⁷ Russell.
Clarke, *Trackless Trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway Co.*, 7.

³⁸ Russell.

³⁹ Montachusett Regional Transit Authority.

Railroad operations in Fitchburg have rebounded, and currently the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's Commuter Rail provides frequent, reliable train service to and from Boston, along the original routing of the Fitchburg Railroad.⁴⁰ Freight service is also regularly routed through Fitchburg, with additional hubs in Ayer and Leominster. The Hoosac Tunnel continues to serve freight railroad needs, with trains passing through the historic tunnel on a daily basis, bound for points west.⁴¹

For Whalom Park, the 1990's would lead to a sharp decline in visitors and revenue. Youngsters had been enticed by the likes of Agawam's Riverside Park, and even Whalom's fellow trolley park at Canobie Lake in Salem, New Hampshire. Whalom's old-world charm carried it through most of the 20th century, but by this time modern technologies had gone too far out of reach of the aging park. In the summer of 2000, it became apparent that the season would be the park's last. Local supporters made attempts to save the park, but it was sold in August. As the fall approached, adults from around the region made one last trip to the place they visited in their youth, with hopes that it would somehow make it through another winter. A reprieve would never come, however, and Whalom Park would sit vacant for six years before succumbing to the bulldozer.⁴²

⁴⁰ Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, official website, <http://www.mbta.com> (accessed November 24, 2007).

⁴¹ Karr, 170-172.

⁴² Marie Szaniszlo, "Whalom Park could be on its last ride," *Boston Herald*, September 3, 2000. Fitchburg State College Library database, <http://www.fsc.edu:2358>

– The Future and The Legacy –

Fitchburg and Leominster remain transit hubs of Worcester County. Though no longer the centers they once were, they still offer residents and visitors adequate transportation alternatives to driving. Many industrial and local workers continue to utilize the bus routes to get to and from work, and locals also utilize the routes to get to and from retail and housing districts. Train service is becoming increasingly popular, and talk of extensions has resurfaced as a result of increased ridership. Whalom Park remains, albeit in location only – after a series of fires, the remaining park structures were demolished in 2006 to make way for a proposed condominium development.⁴³

Though it was no longer operated by a transit agency at its end, Whalom Park will go down as one of the great New England transit casualties of all time, alongside the likes of Boston's Washington Street Elevated, and the East Boston Ferry – relics of past transit glory that, while out of practical relevance, will remain in the lives of residents and visitors, in stories and memories, living on as great things that once were. Likewise, the whistles of Boston & Maine steam engines, the squeal of streetcars of the Fitchburg Street Railway and the whirr of trackless trolleys of the Fitchburg & Leominster Street Railway have been etched in the framework of the communities, and will forever echo throughout Northern Worcester County.

⁴³ Russell.
Cornellier.