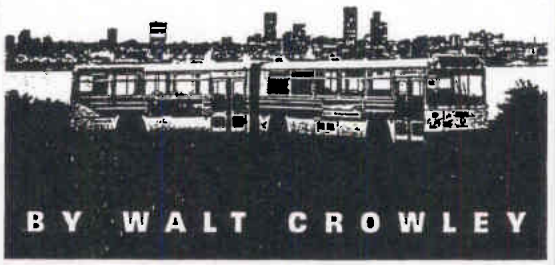
Final Manuscript: July 9, 1993

ROUTES

AN INTERPRETIVE HISTORY OF PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION IN METROPOLITAN SEATTLE



BY WALT CROWLEY

Commissioned by Metro Transit

on the Occasion of its 20th Anniversary

1993

Prepared by Crowley Associates, Inc.

Foreword

by

James R. Ellis

Different participants often see different views of the same chain of events. Walt Crowley writes his excellent history of Metro Transit as a journalist, sifting through newspaper accounts, public records and personal interviews to record "all sides" of the events. On the other hand, I look at Metro Transit through affectionate glasses and happily confess a pro-Metro bias. As an activist at the creation and a co-worker during development, I watched dedicated people build a fine regional transit system. It was an awesome achievement of which we can be very proud.

Metro Transit was born in a time of dying suburban systems and declining Seattle ridership. Citizen activists tried in four elections to break the jurisdictional and funding barriers to a public transit system for the metropolitan area. Regional transit was rejected in the first vote to create Metro and again four years later. In 1966 the Forward Thrust Committee launched a major effort to consolidate private and public bus and trolley lines into a single bus/rail system serving the metropolitan area. Legislative gains were made, but the plan failed twice to receive the 60 percent yes vote required for property tax bonds. Still citizens persisted, and on the last day of the 1972 legislative session a local option sales tax bill was passed. Then, in September of that year -- to the surprise of many -- the voters authorized Metro to build a regional all-bus system funded by local sales and motor vehicle taxes. The persistent effort by citizen activists was recognized in two All American City awards.

With a voter mandate in hand, the Metro Council and staff worked day and night on a crash program to prepare for the new system. On a cold January day in 1973 stickers were pasted on old buses and trolleys acquired from several systems, and a regional transit system rolled into reality.

For many years, city boundaries had stopped transit buses from taking metropolitan commuters where they wanted to go. The Metro Council pulled those barriers down and began to serve the whole area. Despite heavy attacks, the funding plan stood its ground and became the key to survival for all transit systems in the state. The new areawide mission energized everyone.

The people who worked on Metro Transit for the next 20 years were highly motivated. Councilmembers and employees alike dedicated themselves to building the best bus system in the country. The results were impressive. Transit passenger trips rose from 31 million in 1972 to 75 million in 1992. New equipment and service improvements replaced industry habits that had downgraded transit for a generation. Articulated buses were successfully introduced here from Europe and now constitute the backbone of many

large bus fleets in the United States. Improved access for the handicapped was undertaken before federal mandates required such action. A popular Ride Free Zone was established in downtown Seattle. The first bus tunnel for dual-powered vehicles in America was opened ahead of schedule in 1990.

Through all their efforts to expand service and improve performance, Metro Council and staff were challenged by a desire to do each task "better than promised." Much of the citizen enthusiasm that propelled the creation of Metro Transit became ingrained in the organization.

Twice in the last ten years Metro was cited by the American Public Transit Association as the best bus system of its size in North America. In 1991 and 1992 Metro won the coveted William T. Coleman award for transit safety. A consistently good safety record was made even better when the new tunnel separated buses from other vehicles and reduced pedestrian accidents. High standards of performance were set for the entire organization. Quality customer service and results-oriented management became ideas to live by and examples for other governments.

Of course, in such a large enterprise there were problems and mistakes. "Investigative reporters" gained front-page status by portraying minor problems as major ones and isolated mistakes as pervasive conditions. To anyone familiar with public procurement, hundred-dollar overcharges in multimillion dollar contracts are items to be routinely audited and corrected. Mountains of press outrage were generated by items that had been discovered and were being corrected by Metro. Most large enterprises have struggled to tailor new computer technology to their special needs, but Metro's computer difficulties received front-page treatment. Throughout difficult times and unfair attacks, Metro employees performed at the highest levels. The new tunnel was opened a full year ahead of schedule and carried more riders than had been originally estimated.

Few agencies have shown more courage in trying new technologies, systems and ideas. A willingness to break old barriers for better results was instilled by all Metro executive directors and transit directors, by all the chairs of its Transit Committee, and by the chairs of its council.

Public elections approved each Metro transit tax plan. These basic policy directions were voted directly -- one person, one vote. The council and staff responded by carrying out voter directions and delivering first-rate service as promised.

If the quality of a public effort is judged by the results achieved, Metro Transit is a success story, plain and simple.

One small memory sticks in my mind. In 1973 bus routes were extended to a senior citizen apartment complex that had not been previously served. During opening ceremonies an 80-year-old resident said to me: "Now I can travel anywhere. Metro has opened a new world."

Indeed, Metro Transit made new opportunities accessible to citizens of all incomes and physical conditions. The people who opened these doors deserve our gratitude and applause.

James R. Ellis was chairman of the Metropolitan Advisory Committee that drafted the Metro Enabling Act in 1956-1957, chaired the Mayor's Committee on Rapid Transit in 1964-1965 and the Forward Thrust Committee from 1966-1973. He served as general counsel for Metro from 1958-1979.

(July 9, 1993: Final Manuscript)

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An Interpretive History of Public Transportation in Metropolitan Seattle

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An Interpretive History of Public Transportation in Metropolitan Seattle

Introduction:

Like the cast metal figures standing in Richard Beyer's famous Fremont sculpture, *People Waiting for the Interurban*, the citizens of metropolitan Seattle seem frozen between a transportation past that never quite departs and a future that never quite arrives. Every debate over transit seems haunted by things that were, might have been and could yet be.

The ghosts who ride Seattle's buses and once-and-future urban railways are many and mischievous: visionaries and entrepreneurs, capitalists and bureaucrats, workers and managers, conservers and developers, city dwellers and suburbanites, elitists and populists, engineers and enthusiasts, natives and newcomers.

They have vied and squabbled while each generation of metropolitan Seattle citizens engaged in its own great debate over the shape and future of its public transportation system, beginning with the construction of the first streetcar line in 1884. We are now in the middle of the sixth major cycle of deliberation over the future of our metropolitan transportation system, and the phantoms of previous debates are as loud and unruly as ever.

The reason is that public transportation is rarely if ever discussed as an end in and of itself. Each historical cycle of planning and investment in public transportation reached a conclusion driven chiefly by seemingly tangential concerns: real estate and economic development, growth management and urban design, public versus private control, and conflicting social values and civic ideals. Thus, transit decisions have done more than plot railways, roads and bus routes, they have shaped what we are and what we will become as a metropolitan community.

This history was commissioned by Metro Transit to help mark its 20th, and as it turned out, final anniversary. The Municipality of Metropolitan Seattle -- or Metro for short -- was formed as a public water quality agency by King County voters in 1958 and authorized to take over transit services in 1972. Due to a 1990 federal ruling, which found Metro's federated Council to be unconstitutional, and a 1992 election on its reorganization, Metro will "merge" with King County government on January 1, 1994. Twenty-one years to the day after it began operations, Metro Transit will cease to exist as an independent entity.

Preserving a convenient and accessible record of the events leading up to Metro Transit's creation and its two decades of investment, innovation and service is a primary aim of this document. Metro recognized that relating only its 20-year chapter of the public transportation story could not be enough. The transition to County administration and the simultaneous debate over creation of a new Regional Transit Authority to build and operate a rapid transit system in the Puget Sound basin also make the present moment particularly appropriate for some reflection on how we got here and what our next destination might be.

The reader will note that this document is dubbed an "interpretive history." That may strike one as redundant since all history is interpretive to some degree. Some histories are more interpretive than others, or at least they are more candid about it.

I came to this project with a broad prejudice in favor of public transportation as an essential component of any successful city and an ordering principle of civilized life. I also felt great respect and appreciation for the integrity and public spirit of the people of Metro Transit, many of whom I have known and worked with. In short, I liked my subject.

But this history is offered as neither apology nor eulogy. I have had occasion in the past to criticize Metro Transit policy and practice, and I have occasion to do so again in these pages. To Metro's credit, it never attempted to influence or edit such views, and has confined its comments to issues of fact. Despite Metro's review, I take full responsibility for any errors of omission or commission as well as all conclusions and opinions expressed in this essay.

Public understanding of this subtext is essential to making informed and intelligent choices about our transportation system. If this history helps citizens better weigh alternative courses of action, it will have accomplished its purpose.

I want to express my deep appreciation to Metro Transit and the Regional Transportation Project for the opportunity and privilege of preparing this "base line" essay, which will be printed for limited distribution to elected officials, interested citizens, and King County's public libraries. Metro Transit's current plans call for publication of a highly condensed version as an illustrated booklet to mark its 20th anniversary.

Many people deserve special thanks, beginning with Seattle City Council President George

Benson, who inspired and encouraged this project; Metro Transit Community Relations Supervisor Lew Ligocki, who patiently guided me through the research and editing; the officials and staff of Metro Transit and Regional Transportation Project officials and staff, who helped in so many ways; the dozens of individuals who submitted to interviews, offered suggestions, provided documents, and reviewed drafts; and the staffs of the Metro Library and Seattle Public Library, who assisted my efforts beyond the call of duty.

Finally, I must acknowledge my debts to the historians and scholars who preceded me. With only nine months available for writing this narrative, I relied on them heavily. A full bibliography of sources is attached, but I am especially grateful for the meticulously detailed rail and transit histories of Warren Wing, Leslie Blanchard, Ira Swett, and Harre Demoro; and I commend to every citizen Richard C. Berner's encyclopedic *Seattle in the 20th Century*, volumes I and II, which led me through the region's titanic public/private power struggles which framed the beginnings of public transportation in our region.

The truth is, they never ended.

Walt Crowley
July 1993

Routes

Part I: Waiting for the Interurban

The First Century of Public Transportation, 1850 to 1950

Which came first: the trail or the cabin? The turnpike or the town? The port or the city? The streetcar or the skyscraper? The freeway or the suburb? The bus tunnel or the highrise office building? The light rail system or the urban village?

Like the riddle of the chicken and the egg, the construction of these questions allows no satisfactory answer. The truth is that each is not possible without the other. Ultimately, their sequence is irrelevant for they are mutually defining elements, like black and white, yin and yang.

The earliest transportation policies had little to do with transportation per se. Transportation was a means to other ends: real estate development, electrification, urban planning and an increasingly bitter struggle between the public and private sectors for control of key utilities and resources.

The dialectic of transportation and location has played out for more than 150 years in the Puget Sound region. Our hope is that the past will offer a map to the future by illuminating which transportation decisions were wise and which were foolish -- which ones just laid an egg, which ones actually hatched, and which ones came home to roost.

Commuting by Canoe

Puget Sound's first transportation system was not planned. It was in place before any people arrived. It is Puget Sound itself and its tentacles of river, slough and lake. Water was the primary determinant of the pattern of human settlement on Puget Sound from the very beginning.

The Northwest's first residents were coast and river dwellers. They were skilled boat builders, fishermen and naval raiders. The ease of water transportation and the bounty of the Puget Sound basin's shores and rivers gave the natives little incentive to penetrate the interior. Thus, the factor of mobility was dominant in guiding the concentration of villages on or near

water.

Water was equally influential in steering the vector of European contact. As has often been remarked, Europe's early interest in our region was motivated almost entirely by the fable of a Northwest Passage between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Ideas of settlement and exploitation took the fore only after Juan de Fuca's tale of a great transcontinental channel had been exposed as a false hope or, worse, a Greek seaman's hoax.

The luxurious pelts of the sea otter attracted American and British trappers after the explorers had come and gone, leaving little behind except their names on charts. The Hudson's Bay Company established the region's first trading post at Nisqually on the south Sound in 1833.

Farmers, merchants, missionaries and entrepreneurs soon followed and began to inch northward along the Sound's shoreline. As these immigrants were almost entirely U.S. citizens, they staked a de facto claim on the area. In 1846, Britain and the United States settled their border dispute over parallels 54-40 or 49 without a fight, and settlement of the new Oregon Territory and Puget Sound accelerated. The census of 1850 enumerated 1,049 whites north of the Columbia River; the population exceeded 4,000 three years later and was concentrated on southern Puget Sound.

Most of these new citizens were farmers, drawn to the area by the fertile soil of its river valleys. The early monopoly of the Puget's Sound Agricultural Company drove settlers northward from the lands around Nisqually, and Olympia began to grow into a sizable town. Inevitably, some people began to feel crowded there as well, so a teenage John Holgate paddled up to Elliott Bay to scout for acreage. He found what he wanted a few miles upstream from the Duwamish delta, and word of its lush bottom land soon attracted more homesteaders. The first to settle and farm within Seattle's future city limits were Luther Collins, Harry Van Asselt and Jacob and Eli Maple and their families, who arrived September 15, 1851.

Lee Terry, John Low and David Denny followed a week later and explored the area on behalf of a total party of two dozen, most of whom waited for word in Portland. This group ignored the Duwamish and preferred the wind-swept beach at Alki Point. Their goals were far grander than mere farming: they were going to build another "New York, By and By."

Low trekked to Portland to summon the rest of the party. He returned aboard the schooner

Exact with Arthur Denny, Carson Boren, William Bell, Charles Terry and their families, who disembarked at "New York Alki" on November 13, 1851. They spent a miserable winter on the exposed beach. In December, the gloom momentarily brightened when a brig dropped anchor and its captain asked if the settlers might supply him with timber to carry back to San Francisco. Seattle's economy was born.

Shipborne trade demanded a better anchorage than Alki, so the pioneers explored the eastern shore of Elliott Bay. They found that its steep dropoff provided a superb natural harbor. The location's drawback was the equally steep ring of hills which hemmed the bay and blocked easy transport inland. The water won out over the land, and the village transplanted itself on February 15, 1852, under the watchful but tolerant eyes of the Duwamish and their great tyee, Seattle (or Sealth, as traditionalists prefer).

Chief Seattle had already come into extensive contact with whites and learned the value of their manufactured goods, which led him to meet an Olympia storekeeper-surgeon named Dr. David S. Maynard during a shopping expedition. Seattle urged "Doc" Maynard, who was already known to both natives and whites as a charitable liberal in business and politics, to move his store north. This act of aboriginal boosterism was motivated both by Maynard's reputation and the fact that it took Seattle and his tribesmen four days to commute by canoe to the nearest store in Olympia.

Maynard took Seattle's advice in March 1852 and returned the favor by soon convincing the village to rename itself in honor of its native host. Maynard performed an even greater service by personally donating the land on which Henry Yesler located Puget Sound's first steam-powered sawmill. Soon, the steady parade of ox teams dragging raw logs down the ridge to Yesler's mill earned the path the nickname Skid Road (later Mill Street and now Yesler Way). By the end of 1853, the year Congress created a separate Washington Territory, Seattle was supplying pilings and lumber for construction throughout the Sound and as far distant as San Francisco and Hawaii.

The forests began to retreat. A rickety jumble of piers and plank roads spread along the central waterfront and out across the Duwamish mud flats. Houses, shops and churches multiplied in the town proper, along with other evidence of civilization: churches, saloons and brothels. Farmers cleared more and more fields outward from the center, and discovered coal south and east of Lake Washington. All of these activities were linked by the Sound and the natural highways provided by sloughs and rivers. It was not long before they were clogged with steamboats of every

size and description.

From Mosquito Fleet to State Ferry System

Steam-powered navigation arrived in the Northwest in 1835 in the form of the 100-foot *Beaver.* Imported by the Hudson's Bay Company to ply the Columbia River, the little paddle wheeler's two 35 horsepower engines proved unequal to the current. She was reassigned to Fort Nisqually and later Vancouver, B.C., and operated in Northwest waters for 53 years.

The first American steamboat on the Sound was the *Fairy,* imported from San Francisco by an Olympia entrepreneur in 1853. She was not a great success and sank off Steilacoom in 1857. A few other boats came and went over the period until the appearance of the large if slow (nine knots) *Eliza Anderson* finally ushered in the Age of Steam on Puget Sound in 1858.

This was the beginning of the "Mosquito Fleet" which would establish an efficient regional transportation system on the water long before rails and roads made overland travel convenient. At its height around 1920, this swarm of ubiquitous steamers flitted among some 350 ports of call with goods and people. The runs and vessels ran the gamut from pre-floating-bridge shuttles across Lake Washington to commuter "Flyers" racing between Seattle, Tacoma and Everett in little more time than it takes today on Interstate 5, to multi-day coastal voyages north to Canada and Alaska and south to Oregon and California.

In recalling the early days of Seattle, historian J. Willis Sayre notes, "All transportation, at first, was by water; there was not even a horse in Seattle. There were, of course, no roads. Travel across Lake Washington in the fifties was in canoes owned and paddled by Indians." Sayre adds that there was no road to Tacoma, and all regional travel was by early steamboats, which could penetrate as far south as Auburn on the Duwamish and White Rivers. The Black River (since drained) provided a more or less reliable passage for shallow-draft steamers and barges from the south end of Lake Washington to to Elliott Bay via the meandering Duwamish.

For a time it seeemed everyone operated a ferry. Early street railway entrepreneurs ran a shuttle between downtown and West Seattle, and this was later taken over by the Port of Seattle. Even Boeing dipped a toe into the pond when airplane manufacture lagged between the wars. It built a car ferry for Vancouver, B.C, along with yachts and speedboats (which were esteemed by local rum runners during Prohibition). Boeing returned to the sea in the 1960s with its hydrofoil

program, but ironically, its high-speed ferries never found a local market.

Some early ferry operators were motivated more by real estate profits than passenger fares. Charles C. Calkins developed housing at Leschi and a resort hotel on Mercer Island (which he dubbed "East Seattle") and launched a ferry to link the two. She came complete with a steam calliope, which serenaded President Benjamin Harrison during his 1891 visit to Seattle.

Other ferry operators initiated cross-lake service between Seattle, Bothell, and Renton and Newcastle via the Mercer Slough. Historians Mary Stiles Kline and G.A. Bayless note that these early ferry routes "helped build up the various lake communities, always providing service ahead of public need." Kline and Bayless cite pressure from the residents of Lake Washington's eastern shore, who were few but affluent, for impelling King County to become the first local government to get into the ferry business.

The County Commissioners decided on a route between Madison Park and Kirkland. Their first ferry, *King County of Kent,* promptly ran aground when it was launched at Madison Park on March 8, 1900. The boat was refloated but the County budget began to sink beneath annual losses of as much as $100,000 as it slashed rates to compete with private ferries.

The target of this kamakaze run was Captain John L. Anderson. Hired as deckhand on Calkin's Mercer Island ferry, Anderson became an accomplished builder and operator of local ferries, and consolidated control of private ferries on Lake Washington in 1906. Competition from King County nearly scuttled his company by the end of World War I, but instead of getting mad, Anderson got even: he negotiated to run the County's ferry service and was named County Superintendent of Transportation in 1919. That same year, King County initiated ferry service to Vashon Island. At about this same time, it took over ferry service between Downtown Seattle and West Seattle from the Port of Seattle.

Overextended and underfunded, King County despaired of managing a ferry system in 1922 and leased its fleet to Anderson. This alliance was a constant source of scandal and controversy. It ended in a lawsuit when the County abrogated Anderson's contract in advance of the opening of the Lacey V. Murrow Memorial Bridge on July 2, 1940. The new floating bridge and King County's expanding system of paved roads did not quite end ferry service on Lake Washington: the City of Kirkland operated a shuttle to and from Madison Park until 1950.

As the foregoing squalls demonstrate, metropolitan Seattle's ferries constituted a "fleet" in name only. They were owned and operated by many private companies and the occasional local government, all of which competed fiercely with each and rarely cooperated to rationalize routes and schedules. A rapidly growing region could not long afford such chaos, and as with so much early industrial development, a virtual monopoly was acquired over time by one firm. In this case, the ultimate winner was Joshua Green's Puget Sound Navigation Company, operators of the Black Ball Line originally founded by Charles Peabody.

Credit goes to Captain Anderson for building the Northwest's first auto ferry, the *Issaquah*, in 1914. Black Ball also had the foresight to recognize the importance of the automobile early on. By the 1930s, the little passenger-only Mosquito ferries had been all but replaced by larger car transports which served as floating highways across the Sound.

Although private ferry ownership was able to meet the challenges of transporting workers and vehicles during the feverish days of World War II, postwar fare increases and frequent labor disputes fueled a consumer revolt against Black Ball. As maritime historian Jim Faber noted, "For once the ferry riders united -- for state ownership." The state government purchased the fleet in 1951, and the present Washington State Ferry system was born.

Beyond bringing a measure of political accountability to the management of ferries, state ownership also created a new opportunity to coordinate development of highways and water linkages. This was not always exploited, however, owing to the state's predilection for capital-intensive solutions such as bridges which did not entail the ferry system's high operating costs.

At the same time, many residents of outlying areas resisted (and continue to resist) the certain growth that would follow construction of cross-Sound bridges. Thus, many plans for bridges to replace current ferry routes have foundered in political storms while the ferries floated along.

The evolution of private waterborne transport into a monopoly and ultimate government ownership -- and the ensuing battles over budget priorities and growth impacts -- were also played out on the land in the development of street railways, interurban rail services, highways and modern mass transit. These shore-side events, however, made the passage of ferries from private to public control look like a calm sail in a duck pond.

A Sidetrack on the Coming of Rail

After water, rail was the next great transportation determinant of 19th Century urban development. Trains could exceed steam ships in speed and provide farmers and manufacturers with direct links to markets inland and on the far East Coast. Wherever tracks were laid, towns and cities sprang up in their path, and early railroad profits had more to do with the value of land along the routes ("liberated" from the natives and donated by the federal government as an economic incentive) than with freight and passenger revenues. But rail was also extremely capital-intensive.

This set the stage for a do-or-die competition among Puget Sound's fledgling cities to win the hearts of East Coast tycoons and capitalists. Seattle's early monopoly in steam-powered milling disappeared before the Civil War and steam boats gave every port on the Sound equally convenient access. Only rail, specifically a terminus for a transcontinental railway, could tip the balance in favor of one city over the others.

Tacoma won the early advantage when financier Jay Cooke chose it for the western terminus of his Northern Pacific Railroad in 1873. Tacoma declared itself "The City of Destiny," but a national recession that same year wiped out Cooke's fortune. A spur between Tacoma and Kalama was completed, but Destiny would have to wait a full decade before it could buy a transcontinental train ticket to Tacoma. The NP added a spur from Tacoma to Seattle in 1884, but it was so stingy that it did not build a turntable in the northern town, so southbound trains had to back up all the way. It took three hours to cover the thirty miles to Tacoma, and shippers and passangers paid exorbitant rates for intermittent service. With substantial investment in Tacoma real estate, the NP saw no reason to promote development in Seattle.

Seattle was bitterly disappointed by the NP's favoritism toward Tacoma, so local citizens resolved to build their own railroad to the east.. The most ambitious of which was the Seattle and Walla Walla, which aimed to cross Snoqualmie Pass and link Seattle's harbor with the farms and orchards of Eastern Washington. Constructin began with great fanfare in 1874 began construction and reached Renton in 1877, which established a lucrative link between the new coal fields and the central waterfront. That same year, the locally-owned Seattle, Lake Shore and Eastern line ntroduced service as far north as Fremont and Union Bay, whence ferries transferred passengers to Houghton and Juanita.

A later rail extension pushed as far east as Lake Sammamish and Issaquah, and line was extended north to Sumas where it linked with the Canadian Pacific and pushed east as far as Snoqualmie Pass. Thanks to the political acumen of Judge Thomas Burke, the SLSE secured exclusive access to the central waterfront (via a plank "Railroad Avenue" now filled in as Alaskan Way). This right-of-way was turned over to the Northern Pacific in the hopes of luring better service; it didn't and NP's control greatly complicated future railroad development.

Seattle's energy impressed James J. Hill, who was then pushing his Great Northern line west across the United States' northern tier. Hill built his railroad without benefit of federal land grants (Congress had awarded the Northern Pacific 50 million acres of Northwest timberland!), but he was not shy about asking for the equivalent in local largesse through his Seattle agent, the same Judge Thomas Burke. The Seattle City Council granted generous franchises, and it was rewarded with the city's first direct transcontinental link in 1893. Hill went on to acquire control of the NP in 1901, which improved Seattle's service but also put it at the mercy of a monopoly.

The arrival of the Great Northern coincided with collapse of the national economy following the "Panic of 1893," when it was revealed that the federal treasury was virtually empty. Seattle slumped into a local depression that did not begin to revive until July 17, 1897, when the steamship *Portland* dropped anchor in Elliott Bay with "a ton of gold" on board. The Klondike Gold Rush was on, and Seattle became its base camp.

The Great Northern, which approached Seattle from the north via Everett, sought its own waterfront right of way parallel with the Northern Pacific rails. In a rare demonstration of municipal spine, the City Council resisted walling off the business district from its waterfront. City Engineer Reginand H. Thomson convinced Hill to bypass the waterfront and bore a mile-long tunnel beneath downtown Seattle instead.

Locals joked that the tunnel was the world's longest, stretching all the way from Virginia to Washington -- streets that is. It was daunting enough without such exaggeration. The project took three years and was completed in 1906, when Hill opened his "Union Depot" (now King Street Station) to serve the Great Northern and Northern Pacific, as well as passengers riding on the Canadian Pacific, Burlington and other railroads. Five years later the Union Pacific's Oregon & Washington Railway and Navigation Company completed its own Union Station next door. The Union Pacific shared this depot with The Milwaukee Road, whose arrival, although officially terminating in Tacoma, gave Seattle a total of four direct transcontinental connections.

The race for regional hegemony had not gone to the swift. Despite its early success in securing the NP terminus, Tacoma's population fell further behind Seattle's during the 1880s and never caught up. Seattle even surpassed the older, more affluent Portland by 1910, when it counted nearly a quarter million residents within its limits.

Many theories have been offered for Seattle's eventual success in the competition for metropolitan supremacy on the Sound. Most historians agree that its "secret weapon" was its early economic diversity. Unlike other proto-cities, Seattle did not rely on a single resource such as timber but worked from the beginning to attract the merchants, mechanics, bankers and skilled workers who could build a balanced local economy. The willingness of early leaders such as Maynard and Denny to donate land for civic improvements, take on business partners and stake newcomers proved to be the defining difference.

Seattle's founders were, after all, city-builders from the beginning. Their success meant that there were now a lot of people who needed to get around among jobs, shops and home. With roads still primitive, they needed a public transit system, and so a semblance of one obligingly evolved.

The Beginnings of Public Transit

In 1871 an enterprising teamster and livery stable owner named Robert Abrams offered weary pedestrians a once-a-day lift in his wagon up and down the precipitous Skid Road (now Yesler Way) and all the way to Lake Washington. The fare was 50 cents -- a day's wages in those days -- and shanks' mare likely remained the preferred mode of public transportation. Abrams persevered and was soon offering stage service to Georgetown and Renton. Other teamsters entered the trade and by 1880 a horse-drawn jitney offered rides between present-day Pioneer Square and Belltown. Other wagons clattered along First Avenue between Yesler and Denny every two hours. The fare was one "bit" -- 12 and one-half cents.

In 1879, one Irving Ballard approached the Seattle City Government with a more refined proposal: a street railway powered by horses and mules. City Ordinance 198 granted Ballard a franchise along Front Street (now First Avenue) and stipulated a top speed of eight miles per hour for public safety, but the plan was never implemented. City ordinance also forbid the use of oxen, which were deemed too slow.

Another four years passed before a serious street railway developer appeared on the scene in the form of Boston transplant Frank Osgood. With backing from such distinguished citizens as Seattle founder Arthur Denny, Judge Thomas Burke and George Kinnear, Osgood proposed a horse-powered street railway on Front Street. When merchants protested that rails would disrupt traffic (a theme to be heard again in downtown transit debates), Osgood shifted his franchise to Second Avenue where, not coincidentally, he and his backers owned many parcels of undeveloped land.

Just before construction was to begin, the City Council discovered that the authors of Seattle's 1869 Charter had omitted the regulation of street railways as a legal municipal activity. A quick amendment gave Osgood the green light to lay rail from Occidental to Pike Street along Second.

On September 23, 1884, the first passengers tendered their nickel fares for rides on the "Seattle Street Railway." It was the first such system in Washington Territory and one of a handful on the Pacific coast. Despite problems with runaway teams and the occasional tip-over, Osgood's "hayburners" were such a hit that he extended it to the south shore of Lake Union in 1886.

Cable Cars Arrive

Seattle's "seven hills" and numerous ridges and bluffs presented often impassable barriers to horse-drawn wagons. San Francisco faced similar problems, which led to the introduction of its first cable cars in 1873. These vehicles are pulled uphill by gripping steam-powered cables strung beneath the street. The success of this new technology was not lost on Seattle entrepreneurs as they sought to develop their properties beyond the steep slopes which blockaded the city center against the east.

J.M. Thompson, a pioneer in San Francisco's cable car lines, joined forces with Fred Sander and other local investors as the "Seattle Construction Company" to win the franchise for Seattle's first cable railway. It required an impressive feat of engineering to rise along Yesler Way from Occidental Street to the crest of First Hill, descend an 18 degree grade via giant trestles to the shore of Lake Washington, then return up the same slope on Jackson Street to complete the loop.