

# View from The Overlook



THE PUBLICATION OF THE CLEVELAND HEIGHTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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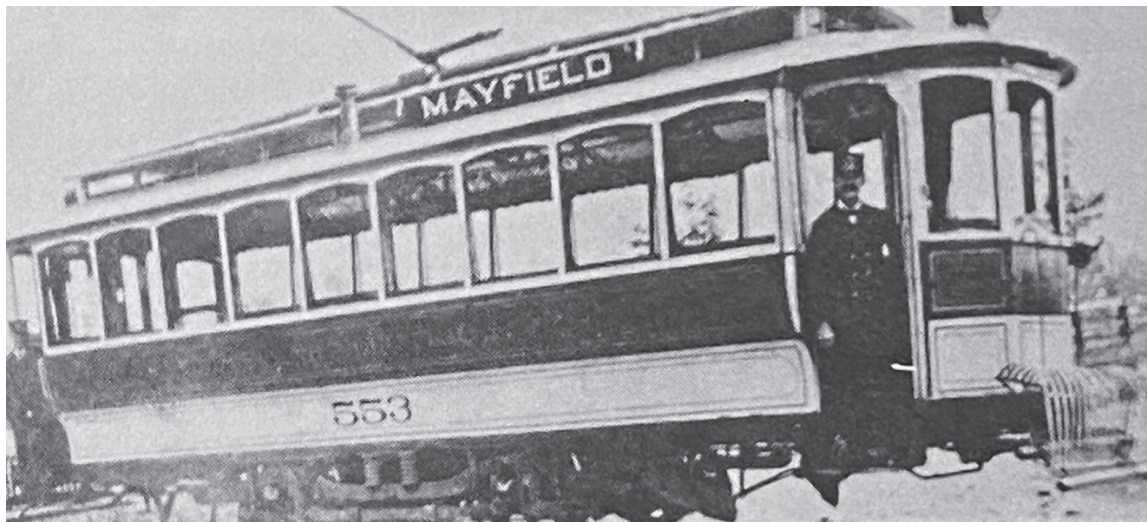
[www.clevelandheightshistory.org](http://www.clevelandheightshistory.org)

## The Electric Transit Era in Cleveland Heights

From the Early Days to the Remaining Vestiges

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*By Steve Kish, Member, CHHS*



Mayfield Road dinkey in 1894 (Harry Christensen Collection, Cleveland State University, Michael Schwartz Library, Special Collections)

# The Cleveland Heights Historical Society



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The Cleveland Heights Historical Society,  
founded in 1983, is a state-chartered, 501 (c) (3),  
not-for-profit organization.

## *Our Mission*

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is  
dedicated to preserving and promoting the diverse  
character and traditions of Cleveland Heights.

As a community-based historic organization,  
the Society encourages and facilitates greater  
knowledge, understanding and awareness of the  
heritage of Cleveland Heights.

## **From the President...**

This journal returns us to the type of subject matter we were dealing with some years ago – early public transit options from before Cleveland Heights was established until the years in Cleveland Heights when modern buses became our sole public transportation option. You may be surprised to learn of all the many stages there were to transport people into and out of “the Heights” from farming and hamlet days on, with the fact that much of our community was always “up the hill” and requiring transportation that could handle the connecting inclines between the main centers of Cleveland activity and our community. We were, indeed, a textbook example of an American streetcar suburb.

The migration from our first website ([chhistory.org](http://chhistory.org)) to our current site ([clevelandheightshistory.org](http://clevelandheightshistory.org)) has been completed so please visit the current one regularly. As I’ve been posting on our Facebook page, most of the basic material has been brought over but much has been edited – corrected and updated when appropriate. Duplicate articles – e.g. those found on the old website in both the “Featured Stories” section and the *View from the Overlook* journal section – were identified and in such cases the “Story” version removed. If you have ideas for new material just let us know!

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society continues its advocacy for the saving of beloved Horseshoe Lake. A major geographic feature, partially in Cleveland Heights, it was constructed as a mill pond by the local Shaker settlement in 1852 and later became one of the foci of a nationally renowned residential enclave known for its great beauty and architectural significance. Our Board is content in knowing we are the local historical society doing “the right thing” in regard to this important local controversy.

**— Ken Goldberg**

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**L**IKE MANY OTHER BURGEONING SUBURBS IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY, Cleveland Heights grew up and flourished around streetcar lines that ran along the major roads of the city. At a time when internal combustion vehicles were primitive and paved streets were non-existent or made of planks or bricks, electric streetcars running on steel rails provided a reliable, comfortable, and relatively speedy journey from the “Heights” to the commerce, institutions, and amenities of the central city on the plain below. This monograph will explore the history of electric transit in Cleveland Heights from the early days to abandonment in the mid-twentieth century and look at the vestiges of the streetcar era which remain today.

### **The Evolution of the Electric Streetcar**

Until the 1880’s, intracity public transit consisted of horse-drawn streetcars or cable cars. Both types of conveyance operated in the City of Cleveland in the nineteenth century. In 1884, the first commercial electric streetcar line in the United States opened in Cleveland, running from Kennard Street (East 46<sup>th</sup> Street) to Lincoln Avenue (East 83<sup>rd</sup> Street) via Central and Quincy Avenues but reverted to horse cars less than a year later, primarily because of safety. With heavy rain the electric power cable, contained in a wooden trench located between the rails, would “electrify” the street. Snow and slush would also clog the trench, preventing the brass contact suspended from the streetcar above from contacting the power source below.

In 1888, as inventors across the country experimented with different methods of electric propulsion, a reliable and practical, electric transit system was installed on the streets of Richmond, Virginia. Frank Sprague designed an electric streetcar with two motors mounted on wheel-bearing trucks that could ascend the steep hills in the city.

Sprague also invented a swiveling “trolley” pole installed on the roof of the car that would securely glide along a power wire safely suspended above. The Richmond streetcars were a tremendous success and soon electric streetcars began to appear on streets of cities all across the country.

### **The Spread of Electrified Streetcar Lines in Cleveland**

In Cleveland, electrification of streetcar lines proceeded rapidly. By 1891, the majority of the routes in the city were powered by electricity with the remainder utilizing either horse or cable cars. Six different electric street railway companies were providing service within the city, and to the east trolley lines now extended along Euclid Avenue well beyond the campuses of Western Reserve University and Case School of Applied Science.

As the end of the nineteenth century approached, the escarpment to the east of the central city was home to a growing community of residents and attracted many visitors. The suburban enclaves of Ambler Heights and Euclid Heights — to the south and north, respectively, of Cedar Glen —



Sightseeing trolley at Cedar Glen, ca. 1905 (Harry Christensen Collection, Cleveland State University, Michael Schwartz Library, Special Collections)

featured large homes built and owned by wealthy Clevelanders fleeing the increasing congestion and air pollution in previously fashionable areas of the “Millionaire’s Row” along Euclid Avenue and its side streets. Real estate speculators were amassing tracts of farm land in what is now Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights, in anticipation of future development. Park land encompassing the Shaker Lakes area, deeded to the City of Cleveland by John D. Rockefeller for the enjoyment of present and future generations, beckoned citizens of the increasingly crowded urban area to the west. Thousands of visitors yearly were paying homage to the martyred President Garfield at his elaborate tomb constructed in 1890 in Lakeview Cemetery, and increasing numbers of the rich and middle class were utilizing this beautiful, garden-style resting place accessible from both Euclid Avenue and Mayfield Road. With the current and projected future growth of the Heights, expansion of electric transit into the area was now economically viable.

## The Penetration of Electric Transit into the Heights

The first penetration of electric transit “up the hill” was modest. In 1891, a shuttle or “dinkey” running on a single track began operation from the area of Euclid Avenue and Coltman Street (now Coltman Road), proceeding along Mayfield Road east to Lee Road. At about the same time, another dinkey began running on Coltman Street, jogging south across Mayfield Road to Murray Hill Road, then turning up Cedar Hill to Euclid Heights Boulevard, then, proceeding on Coventry Road north to Mayfield Road. A popular, two-hour-long sightseeing trolley excursion, beginning just after the turn of the century and costing twenty-five cents, took riders through downtown and the east side of Cleveland, up Mayfield Hill to the Garfield Monument, then, a bit further east to Coventry Road, finally, back towards the city on Euclid Boulevard (now Euclid Heights Boulevard) and through Cedar Glen.

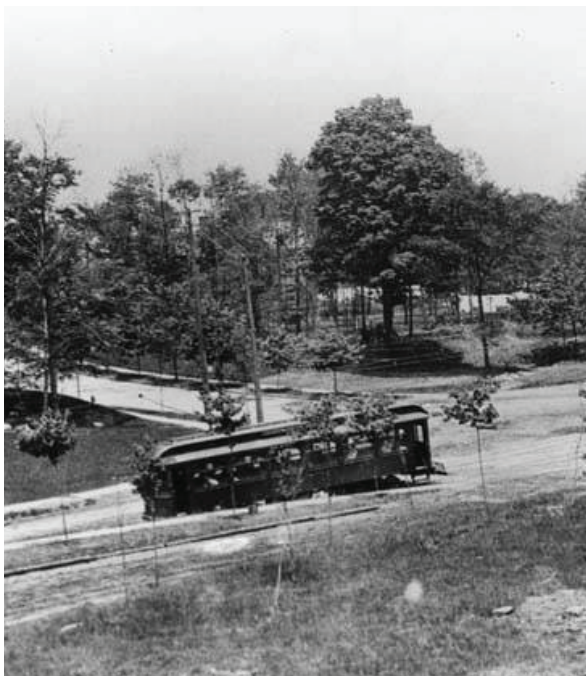


In 1897, a more substantial expansion of trolleys into the Heights commenced when the Cleveland Electric Railway, a company formed in 1893 by the merger of five independent streetcar companies, began running streetcars on double tracks up Cedar Hill onto Euclid Boulevard. The Cleveland Electric Railway had contracted with the Euclid Heights Realty Company the year before to extend service from the area of Euclid Avenue and Fairmount Street (East 107<sup>th</sup> Street), up Cedar Glen to the new residential area. The new route began at University Circle, aptly named for a traffic circle installed at Euclid Avenue and Stearns Road, where the streetcar tracks split into two branches extending to the northeast along Euclid Avenue and to the southeast along Stearns Road. From Stearns Road the new tracks continued to Cedar Avenue where the line ascended the hill to the median strip of Euclid Boulevard ending in a circle or “loop” at Edgehill Road.

## **Interurbans Come to Northeast Ohio and Cleveland Heights**

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, electric transit was also revolutionizing intercity travel. Networks of intercity electric trolleys or “interurbans” were radiating out from American cities carrying both passengers and freight, including packages, industrial goods, fish, and fresh produce from farms. These interurban lines expanded rapidly and were quite profitable, especially, in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Cleveland was a hub for several lines including the Lake Shore Electric Railway, extending to the west to Toledo and Detroit with connections beyond; the Southwestern System, with track to Berea, Medina, and Bucyrus with connections to Columbus; and the Northern Ohio Traction and Light Company, with lines to Akron, Canton, Warren, as well as connections to the east and south.

In the summer of 1899, the Cleveland and Eastern Railway Company began operating from the end of the dinkey at Mayfield and Lee Roads to Chardon and, later that same year, started through service from Public Square. Shortly thereafter, the route was extended along a new branch to Middlefield thru Burton with connections beyond. Between the first stop at Lee Road and the seventh stop at Warrensville Center Road, the interurban stopped at several side streets in what was to become the City of Cleveland Heights. In 1901, the Cleveland and Eastern Railway Company and the Cleveland and Chagrin Falls Electric Railway merged to become the Eastern Ohio Traction Company — thus providing service to a large area east of the central city.



Interurban car near the top of Cedar Hill, ca. 1920  
(City of Cleveland Heights, Cleveland Heights Historical Center at Superior Schoolhouse)

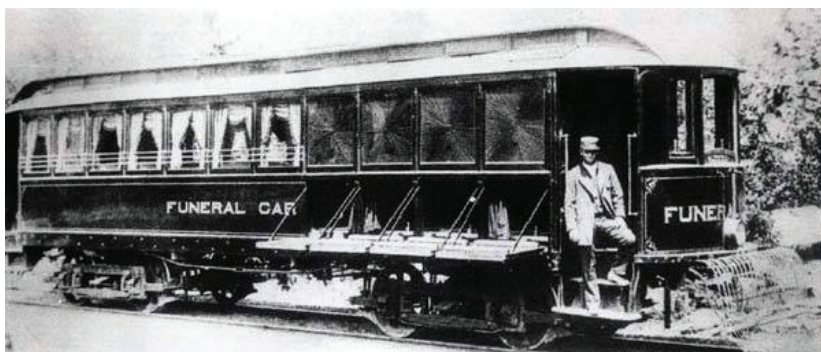
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## Expansion of Streetcar Service in Cleveland Heights and the End of the Interurban Era

In 1906, the Cleveland Electric Railway Company extended the Euclid Heights line, to the northeast along the median strip, north on Coventry Road, and east on Mayfield Road, ending at Lee Road where a “wye” (a place where a car would back in, then pull forward to reverse direction) was built. The dinkey lines originating from Coltman Street were then discontinued except for a short stretch west from Coventry Road ending in a spur at the Jewish Mayfield Cemetery on Mayfield Road. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many cemeteries in Cleveland and the surrounding areas were serviced by specially designed and outfitted “funeral” streetcars, which would transport the casket of the deceased as well as the family and mourners from a car stop in the city, usually near a worshiping place, funeral parlor, or home of the deceased, to the cemetery, then back to the location where the original group boarded. By the early 1920’s, the use of funeral cars faded away as motorized hearses followed by a procession of automobiles carrying family and friends became the norm.

One more dinkey existed in Cleveland Heights, running in the median strip along Washington Boulevard from Coventry Road to Lee Road, from 1915 to 1923. Not connected to the Cleveland Railway Company tracks, the line was owned by a real estate company hoping to stimulate sales of its properties along the boulevard. When all of the lots were sold, the real estate company had no further need to maintain the shuttle and halted service along the line.

In 1907, streetcar service came to the southern portion of present-day Cleveland Heights with the opening of a Shaker Lakes (later renamed Fairmount) line extending from Cedar Glen onto Cedar Road for a short distance, then, southeast and east, on what was to become Fairmount Boulevard, to a wye at Lee Road. As along Euclid Heights Boulevard, the route on Fairmount Boulevard occupied a median strip. The line was built with financial assistance to the railway company by the Van Sweringen brothers who, a few years before, had formed a real estate operation in what was to become parts of Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights. In order to further develop the properties that they owned, in 1913, a branch of the Fairmount line was opened extending onto the median strip



Cleveland Railway Company funeral car, ca. 1920 (*City of Cleveland Heights, Cleveland Heights Historical Center at Superior Schoolhouse*)



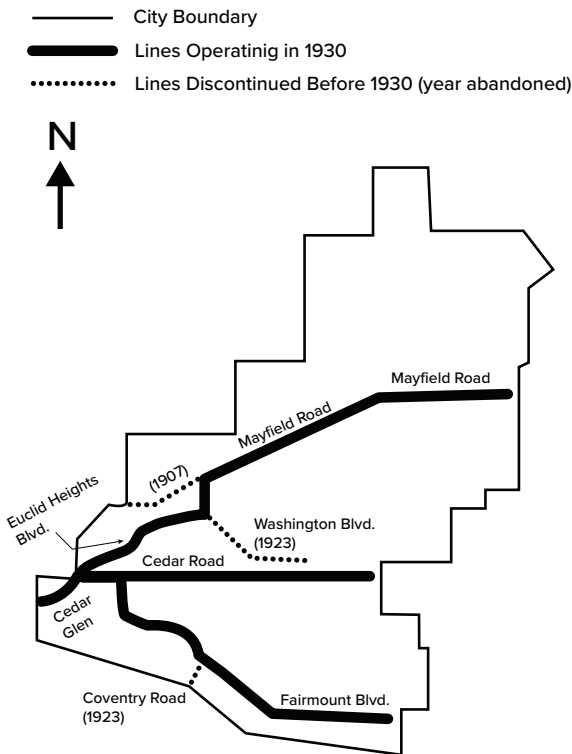
Car running on the Shaker Lakes (later renamed Fairmount) line before construction of boulevard, 1913  
*(City of Cleveland Heights, Cleveland Heights Historical Center at Superior Schoolhouse)*

of Coventry Road, turning east on the median strip of Shaker Boulevard, then, terminating at a wye on Fontenay Road. In the early 1920's, the Coventry line was discontinued when rapid transit service was instituted from the Village of Shaker Heights via the Kingsbury Run ravine to downtown Cleveland.

In 1918, the Cleveland Railway Company, which had been formed by a merger of Cleveland Electric Railway Company with another, much smaller, streetcar company in 1910, started trolley service along Cedar Road to Lee Road. Initially, the line had a dinkey; through service began in 1922. In

1921, the company started dinkey service over the interurban track on Mayfield from Lee Road to Warrensville Center Road; however, the shuttle was discontinued in 1925 when the interurban petitioned for abandonment. With the increasing use of automobiles, buses, and trucks, the freight revenue and ridership of the Eastern Ohio Traction Company and its successor holdings, the Cleveland & Eastern Railway and the Cleveland, Youngstown & Eastern Railway, declined precipitously in the early 1920's leading to a cessation of operations. The demise of this interurban foreshadowed the end of

# THE STREETCAR LINES OF CLEVELAND HEIGHTS



intercity electric transit in the region. By 1938, all of the interurban lines connecting to Cleveland, except for one, had stopped operations. That year, the Lake Shore Electric Railway, the last of the survivors, also halted service.

Although the 1920's were a bad time for interurban systems, the Cleveland Railway Company system continued to enlarge. In 1929, the Mayfield, Cedar, and Fairmount lines were all extended to the city limits of Cleveland Heights with wyes for the three lines built at Oakwood Drive, Hampstead Road, and Canterbury Road, respectively. During the

latter part of decade, the system bought nearly two hundred new streetcars, believing that the electric trolley remained the preferred choice for mass transportation in the region. By 1930, the Cleveland Railway Company was operating streetcars on over 300 miles of track.

## The Waning Popularity of the Streetcar

However, during the 1930's, the future for electric transit in Cleveland and its suburbs began to look less certain. After peaking in 1926, ridership on the Cleveland Railway Company system began an overall decline, exacerbated by the Great Depression. From 1926 to 1936, annual streetcar miles run on the system dropped over 10%. In spite of the Depression, by the early 1930's, automobile registrations in Cuyahoga County had over quadrupled compared to twenty years before with growing numbers of city and suburban residents opting to commute and shop in the more costly, but more convenient and flexible, as well as increasingly comfortable and reliable automobile. Developers both in the peripheral areas of the city as well as in the expanding adjacent suburbs were more frequently building houses with garages and, often, with space for two automobiles. No longer were real estate renters and buyers insistent on the presence of nearby electric transit. Motor buses, also much improved, were now commonly being used to provide transportation in places such as University Heights, beyond where the Cedar and Fairmount lines terminated, either as a connecting service or with through rides to downtown Cleveland. Some of suburban bus lines were operated by private companies, and others were owned and operated by municipalities.

No new streetcar lines were built in the 1930's and no significant extensions of trolley service were made after 1932 on the Cleveland Railway Company



system; instead, tracks on the streets began to disappear during the latter half of this decade. In 1936, the company converted the Hough Avenue line to a “trackless trolley” route by adding a second wire to the overhead system above to power electric buses running on rubber tires. The City of Cleveland that year had embarked on a major repaving project on the avenue, and the railway company, which had always been responsible in the city for maintaining the rails and the pavement between and immediately outside the rails, would face a large investment if new tracks were installed. Thus, the company opted to convert the line to trackless trolleys avoiding the substantial cost of laying new tracks in the roadway. Unlike streetcars, a trackless trolley could go around an automobile ahead making a left turn but, like a streetcar, could travel no further if a road was completely blocked. Streetcar routes which were converted to motor bus service in the late 1930’s included the West 14<sup>th</sup> Street, Central Avenue, and

Wade Park lines although, interestingly, the Wade Park line converted to trackless trolley operation later. Motor bus lines were less expensive to operate than both streetcars and trackless trolley routes as not only were there were no rails or pavement in the roadway to maintain but also there were no overhead electric trolley wires, electric feeder lines, trolley poles, or power substations to install and operate.

### **Municipal Takeover and a Transit Plan for the Future**

During the late 1930’s, The Cleveland Railway Company was encountering increasing financial difficulties as well as friction with the City of Cleveland over its transit franchise. As the new decade began, two additional streetcar lines, on East 30<sup>th</sup> and East 79<sup>th</sup> Streets, were converted to more profitable, motor bus routes. In April 1941, the City Council authorized the City to purchase the company and, later that same year, the stockholders of the

Connecting  
bus meeting  
the streetcar  
at the end  
of the Cedar  
Road line,  
1926 (James  
Spangler  
Collection,  
Cleveland State  
University,  
Michael Schwartz  
Library, Special  
Collections)





**ABOVE:** CTS 4070 operating on the Fairmount Boulevard line near the Barton Deming house, 1947 (Gerald E. Brookins Collection, Cleveland State University, Michael Schwartz Library, Special Collections)

**RIGHT:** Mayfield line streetcar on wye with connecting bus, next to Heights Beverage Company at 3962 Mayfield Road near South Noble Road, ca. 1947 (City of Cleveland Heights, Cleveland Heights Historical Center at Superior Schoolhouse)



company approved the purchase. The City, then, issued bonds to finance both the purchase of the company and improvements to the system. In 1942, the Cleveland Transit System began operating.

With the onset of World War II, leading to the wartime industrial boom, gasoline rationing, and the migration of factory workers into the city from Appalachia and the South, and with many women now working in previously male-only occupations, streetcar ridership exploded to all-time highs. Beginning during the war, discussion began among politicians and city planners about how to modernize regional transit. One plan proposed a downtown subway connected to heavily patronized streetcar lines radiating from the central city with “feeder” buses in the inner-city and in the suburbs. Another plan proposed a hybrid rapid transit system to route existing lines over rights-of-way paralleling railroad tracks from the central city out to distant points, such as Cedar Glen, where the streetcars would return to the roads. However, the plan that was finally approved, in 1946, was for a single rapid transit line to be built, utilizing high-platform cars, running from Windermere Street in East Cleveland to West 117<sup>th</sup> Street, fed by a network of buses. Charles E. DeLeuw, the Chicago transit consultant who designed this plan, recommended that streetcar service be discontinued in Cleveland and adjacent suburbs, as the ridership did not warrant its capacity and cost. The end was now in sight for streetcar service in Cuyahoga County including Cleveland Heights.

## **The End of Electric Transit in Cleveland Heights**

After the war ended, as ridership dropped and automobiles returned in droves, Cleveland City Council and CTS approved the DeLeuw plan, and,



CTS streetcar travelling down Cedar Hill  
(Bill Vigrass photo, 1946)

with that, the Cleveland Transit System accelerated the conversion of trolley lines to buses. Many lines within the City of Cleveland were converted to trackless trolley. Many of the lines outside the city limits were changed to motor bus service. On June 16, 1945, even before final approval of the rapid transit plan, trolley service on Cedar Road, east of the intersection with Fairmount Boulevard, was discontinued and replaced by express buses.

On July 31, 1948, the last streetcar ran on Fairmount Boulevard. The last streetcar on Euclid Heights Boulevard, Coventry, and Mayfield carried passengers on September 6, 1949. Along the Madison Avenue line in Cleveland, on January 24,







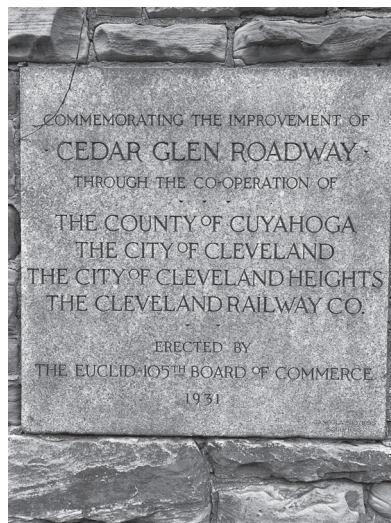


**RIGHT:** Cedar Glen commemorative plaque

*(Steve Kish photo, 2022)*

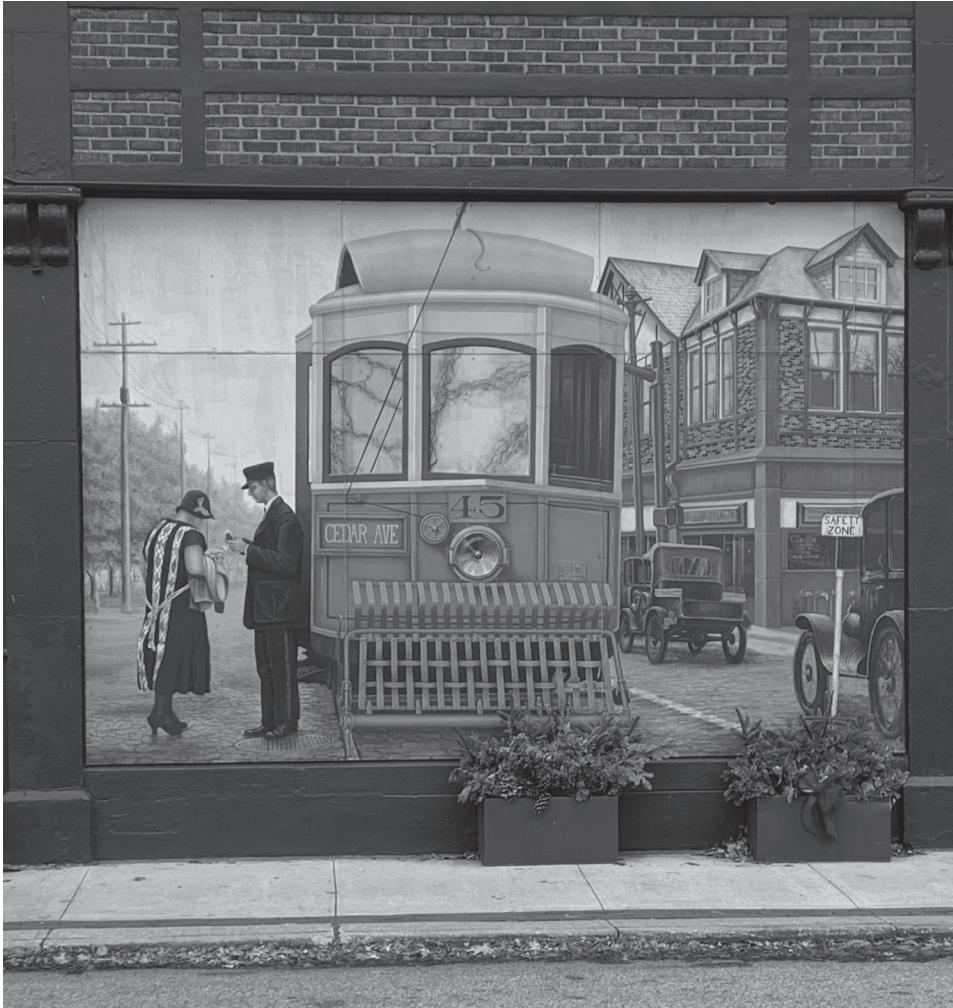
**LEFT:** Heights electric substation

*(Steve Kish photo, 2022)*



1954, the last streetcar to operate on the Cleveland Transit System made its final run.

For a while, it appeared that the Fairmount streetcar line might be spared. CTS and Shaker Heights Rapid Transit had discussions about connecting the line via Coventry Road, Fairhill Road, and North Moreland Boulevard along the respective median strips to the rapid transit at Shaker Square, less than a mile in distance. Trolley poles were already in place on the median strip of the three streets carrying 600 Volt power lines from the Heights electric substation on Woodland Avenue at East 130<sup>th</sup> Street, both north to the Fairmount line and south to the rapid transit. A short extension of the line also was proposed to Fairmount Circle and John Carroll University to increase ridership. Although the price tag for the extension and connection was relatively modest, the Shaker Heights system did not have sufficient funds to turn this idea into reality.



Mural on  
Heights Center  
Building at  
Surrey and  
Cedar Roads  
(Steve Kish photo,  
2022)

## Vestiges of the Streetcar Era Remaining in Cleveland Heights

Over seventy years have passed since the last streetcars travelled over the roads and boulevards of Cleveland Heights. Few traces remain of the existence of these lumbering vehicles that catalyzed the development and growth of the city. The grassy median strips, now populated with mature

trees, still grace Euclid Heights, Washington, and Fairmount Boulevards and Coventry Road. Many of the trolley poles still remain on the median strip of Fairmount Boulevard and continue to march south and east from Cedar Road to the city limits, but the poles, instead of holding brackets and trolley wires, now carry streetlights. Cleveland Railway Company medallions, located seven or eight feet



above the ground, continue to adorn some of these poles. With time these remnants of the trolley era will become rarer; as rust takes its toll, the city is gradually removing the poles and installing wooden replacements. The Heights electric substation on Larchmere Boulevard (formerly Woodland Avenue), made obsolete by more modern equipment powering the Shaker Heights Rapid Transit, still stands but now houses a fitness studio. A commemorative plaque on a stone retaining wall, midway down Cedar Glen, attests to a joint engineering project, improving the roadway and streetcar right-of-way, completed in 1931 by the cities of Cleveland and Cleveland Heights, the Cleveland Railway Company, and Cuyahoga County.

One can only imagine what transportation will be like in Cleveland Heights in the year 2150, about the same time in the future from the present day as from the year when electric transit started “up the hill” to the current time. Perhaps a somewhat whimsical mural, depicting a transit scene in 2023, will appear on a Heights building, then, like the artwork that decorates the Heights Center Building at Surrey and Cedar Roads today.



**ABOVE:** Trolley poles on Fairmount Boulevard  
(Steve Kish photo, 2022)



**RIGHT:** Cleveland Railway Company medallion  
(Steve Kish photo, 2022)

**The following books provide more information about the transit history of Northeast Ohio:**

*Trolley Trails Through Greater Cleveland and Northern Ohio (from the beginning until 1910), Trolley Trails Through Greater Cleveland and Northern Ohio (from 1910 until today), and New Northern Ohio's Interurbans and Rapid Transit Railways* all by Harry Christiansen; *Cleveland and Its Streetcars* by James Spangler and James Toman; and *Horse Trails to Regional Rails* by James Toman and Blaine Hays.

**To see and ride vintage streetcars and rapid transit cars,** visit the Northern Ohio Railway Museum at 5515 Buffham Road in Westfield Township, Medina County, Ohio between Chippewa Lake and Seville.

Website: [www.northernohiorailwaymuseum.org](http://www.northernohiorailwaymuseum.org) telephone (330) 769-5501 (Open seasonally)

**To see more streetcar and transit photographs online,** visit the Cleveland Memory Project at [www.clevelandmemory.org](http://www.clevelandmemory.org)

## *Join Today!*

All members receive the benefit of knowing that their membership dues help advance historic preservation opportunities for Cleveland Heights. Memberships are tax deductible.

# The Cleveland Heights Historical Society

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